

Gospel Confidentiality

The Apostle Paul was concerned about his upcoming visit to the church in Corinth: “For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish...that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder” (2 Corinthians 12:20). Two thousand years later, people are still wary of things like gossip and slander in their churches! How can Tabernacle be a church where our words are used properly—to share the Gospel instead of gossip?

What is gossip? James 5:16 tells us to “confess your sins to one another and pray for one another...” Someone once described gossip as confessing other people’s sins (instead of our own) to one another. Can you imagine Jesus gossiping? “Mary, did you hear about that terrible thing Martha did?” Jesus didn’t expose our sins; He covered them (Proverbs 11:13).

The church is supposed to be a place where we confess our own sins to one another, while keeping confidential the sins of others. When we hear someone’s confession, that person is trusting us to represent Jesus, “who blots out your transgressions...and remembers your sins no more” (Isaiah 43:25). How sad it is when we remember those sins before others! Instead, we need to remind each other of the Gospel.

That said, there are occasions when the circle of confidentiality must expand. We still guard against gossip, but Jesus tells us there are times when other people must be invited into the conversation about someone else’s sin for their benefit (not harm), in order to lead them to repentance. Matthew 18:15-17 outlines Jesus’ three-step process:

1. “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.”
2. “But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.”
3. “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

Just to clarify, we believe that Jesus intends the third step initially to involve only those who represent the church, the elders. If there is still no repentance after their efforts, only then is it appropriate to tell the rest of the church, so that they can now know to regard this person as outside the church. The goal of expanding the circle of confidentiality is not to share some juicy gossip. Instead, it is designed to restore the one who is unrepentant. It is intended to build them up, not tear them down.

The elders work very hard to maintain healthy confidentiality as a session. As you might expect, they hear a lot about what is going on in the lives of our church family. We want to assure you that:

- Anything shared with an elder will be kept confidential, according to this summary.
- For reasons of counsel, prayer, and in pursuit of congregational health, an elder may share personal information with another elder or with the session.
- If a member is uncomfortable with an elder potentially sharing a personal matter with the session, they may alert the elder to this fact.
- Elders do not share personal information with their wives, with deacons, or with anyone else without your permission.

Lastly, there is one other time when it is appropriate to expand the circle of confidentiality. If you learn that someone's behavior has harmed another person, or that someone might do harm to another person (or to themselves), then you need to tell someone in authority, or even call 911 in an emergency situation. We have an obligation to protect victims. If the leadership of Tabernacle learns of any episode of physical or sexual abuse, we are compelled by law and conscience to report such incidents. Our denomination's periodical, *byFaith*, says it well: "Victims need to know they have a place to turn where someone will listen. And the world needs to see that the church is serious about protecting the vulnerable" (Q2, 2018; #60, p. 47). Jesus covers our sins, but the Gospel is not an excuse to cover up abuse. Getting help is not gossiping.

So, what are you allowed to share about other people? The world would be a much better place if we all could glory in people's successes more than their failures. Brag on people! Share "good gossip"! But what about sharing other people's struggles? A good rule of thumb is that if the information is personal, sensitive, or detracting, then you should keep it to yourself. If you think it is important for other people to know, then get permission to share it. Ask yourself, "Would I be offended if someone shared this information about me without my permission?" Don't try to baptize your gossip as a prayer request. Don't break someone's trust if you can help it.

Paul exhorted Timothy to warn people against "going about from house to house...[as] gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not" (1 Timothy 5:13). Apparently, Timothy had his share of gossip to contend with too. As long as there is sin to confess, there will be gossip and there will be Gospel. Let us keep the Gospel in front of each other, and let us keep gossip far away.

Please contact us if you have any questions.



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