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November 12, 2005

A Position Paper on
PASTORAL CONFIDENTIALITY

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INTRODUCTION

1. The Significance of Confidentiality In All of Life

Confidentiality is a requirement by no means unique to the pastorate. Nor is it always more crucial to the pastorate than to other professions. Doctors and hospitals who deal with the sick must keep many medical secrets. Lawyers and those in law enforcement dealing daily with laws and crime must keep their legal secrets. Bankers and businessmen have their financial secrets, journalists their news sources, politicians and soldiers their snares and strategies, writers and composers their original creations, and so forth. Not one of these professions could function without honoring secrets.

Within every family and individual, there are private matters — sins, aspirations, hopes, suspicions, and so forth — never to be revealed at large without causing the breakdown of personal trust and relationship among people, so that, indeed, all society relies on the judicious practice of confidentiality.

This by no means belittles the significance of confidentiality for the pastorate and eldership. (For simplicity, I will combine the role of elders with that of pastors and only refer to the latter in this paper.) Clergy deal daily with sinners, and therefore have much to conceal, for there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not (Ec. 7:20). And because men sin in all that they do, the confidentiality of the pastorate must encompass all the doings of men.

THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

2. Confidentiality Commanded

Words are never just air and sound. They constitute a great portion of our actions and carry eternal significance, either for great good or for great evil.

— Matthew 12:31-37 Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come. Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt: for the tree is known by his fruit. O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things. But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall

speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.

In everyday life, our tongues are the devil's busiest, most powerful instruments, causing pain and strife with lies, slander, and even truths that ought not to be said. This God abominates.

— Prov. 6:12-19 A naughty person, a wicked man, walketh with a froward mouth. He winketh with his eyes, he speaketh with his feet, he teacheth with his fingers; frowardness is in his heart, he deviseth mischief continually; he soweth discord. Therefore shall his calamity come suddenly; suddenly shall he be broken without remedy. These six things doth the LORD hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: a proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, an heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, a false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren.

— James 3:2-10 For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body. Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body. Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth. Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell. For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: but the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.

How you use your tongue is a major part of your sanctification and speaks a great deal about your eternal state.

— Psalm 15 LORD, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in thy holy hill? He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness, and speaketh the truth in his heart. He that backbiteth not with his tongue, nor doeth evil to his neighbour, nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbour. In whose eyes a vile person is contemned; but he honoureth them that fear the LORD. He that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not. He that putteth not out his money to usury, nor taketh reward against the innocent. He that doeth these things shall never be moved.

Confidentiality is strictly commanded when we find ourselves at odds with our neighbors. We are to deal with that party alone with whom we have an issue as we seek resolution.

— Proverbs 25:9-10 Debate thy cause with thy neighbour himself; and discover not a secret to another: lest he that heareth it put thee to shame, and thine infamy turn not away.

— Matthew 18:15 Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.

When that principle is violated and many unrelated people are informed or become involved, the strife spreads and inflicts permanent harm. Misunderstanding and antagonism between two people is difficult enough to undo. But when that spreads exponentially by word of mouth, as everyone tells only their best friends, it becomes nearly impossible to repair every perspective and relationship that is damaged or affected.

— Proverbs 26:20-22 Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth. As coals are to burning coals, and wood to fire; so is a contentious man to kindle strife. The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly.

— Proverbs 17:9 He that covereth a transgression seeketh love; but he that repeateth a matter separateth very friends.

— Proverbs 20:19 He that goeth about as a talebearer revealeth secrets: therefore meddle not with him that flattereth with his lips.

There is no easier way to sin against others than by the words you say to them or about them. Consequently, we are repeatedly commanded to bridle our tongue, to be deliberate in what we say, calculating the effects of our words, and holding our peace whenever necessary.

— Proverbs 10:19 In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin: but he that refraineth his lips is wise.

— Proverbs 12:23 A prudent man concealeth knowledge: but the heart of fools proclaimeth foolishness.

— Proverbs 17:27-28 He that hath knowledge spareth his words: and a man of understanding is of an excellent spirit. Even a fool, when he holdeth his peace, is counted wise: and he that shutteth his lips is esteemed a man of understanding.

The Bible has much more to say about holding tongues, but I believe the point has been made sufficiently clear, that we are commanded to keep secrets, to conceal knowledge, and to refrain our lips from gossip or slander. Both the unthinking, uncontrolled babble of the fool and the malevolent, destructive slander of the wicked is forbidden. Even truths about fellow sinners.

3. The Dishonesty of Secrets Justified in Relation to the Nature of God

Perhaps I am not alone in feeling possible theological tension here. There is a God in heaven that revealeth secrets (Dan. 2:28). Shall we His people conceal a thing? He cannot lie (Titus 1:2). Shall we deceive? How can people of the light righteously hide the truth? How is it not inconsistent with the nature of the God of truth that we are commanded to sometimes do so?

There is much about Himself and His intentions which God does not reveal to us (Is. 45:15). To take only one example, I am sure we could not live life righteously nor lovingly had He revealed to us from the beginning who was elect and who was not. How could we love our unchosen neighbors, or how could we constrain the elect from sin? Indeed, we would not have the passion for evangelism nor the motivation for sanctification. It is not that God is wrong to do what He does, to choose whom He wills, but that we sinners could not handle the truth if He gave it to us.

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. What need have we for faith if we see? But blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed. Thus, for our own sakes, to test us, to train us, to sanctify us by our obedience in faith, God gives us His Law (revealed will) yet conceals His Providence (hidden will). The secret things belong unto the Lord our God; but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of the law (Dt. 29:29).

Moreover, lay aside sinfulness, there are still things He deems good to hide from us (2Kg. 4:27; Mt. 15:23). Neither a man's benevolence nor his wisdom grants him the right or need to be informed. To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under the heaven. Unfallen Adam was tested in the garden knowing he would die if he ate of the forbidden fruit, yet understanding little of what death was. Christ was a sinless man, yet God left Him ignorant of the timing of the tribulation (Mk. 13:31). Yet, in time, both matters were revealed.

Ours is a mysterious and paradoxical God who glories in His obscurity (Is. 55:8-9), yet invites us to discover it. We will never fathom Him but will forever enjoy the cosmic hide-and-seek, finding honor in ever knowing Him better (Pr. 25:2). Thus, the beauty of divine Mystery is not in its sheer puzzle but in its eternal discovery. What is a mystery that can be fathomed? What is a mystery that cannot be known? One is a door locked forever. The other is a door that opens into an enclosed chamber. But true mystery is the unlocking of door upon door, each opening unto a world more wondrous than the last. Eternal appetite, eternal satisfaction, eternal newness. But I digress.

I hope I have made clear that God conceals. He does not overwhelm us at once with His glory. Thus, it is not right to perceive Him as simply the God of truth and light, but too the God of expanding truth and brightening light, a Light that shineth more and more unto the perfect day (Pr. 4:18) — according to our capacity to perceive Him. In that sense, it is not God who expands

but we. He created us small lamps that we might grow like the dawn (Cant. 6:10) and be transformed from strength to strength (Ps. 84:7) from glory to glory (2Cor. 3:18). And so, if we treat children as children, and immature as immature, even as God does us, we do Him no wrong. Sinners cannot be told everything, and certainly not all at once. So, by properly keeping secrets from them, we live in accordance to the actions and nature of the God of (expanding) truth. Remember, it is always only a matter of time. God is good, and He will withhold no good from His children.

— Luke 8:16-17 No man, when he hath lighted a candle, covereth it with a vessel, or putteth it under a bed; but setteth it on a candlestick, that they which enter in may see the light. For nothing is secret, that shall not be made manifest; neither any thing hid, that shall not be known and come abroad.

— Psalm 84:11 For the LORD God is a sun and shield: the LORD will give grace and glory: no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly.

5. Discretion Commanded

Earlier, I demonstrated that the Bible commands us to keep secrets, to restrict to a minimum the number of people involved in personal conflicts. If one woodenly applied the lesson about wise silence, he might seal his mouth and never speak. But utter silence is not the solution. Confidentiality is never absolute. The International Standards Organization (ISO) defines it as "ensuring that information is accessible only to those authorized to have access." The Bible commands us to discretely divulge secrets for the sake of righteousness when it is necessary to obtain counsel, give counsel, or seek judgment.

These verses command us in general to speak wisely and value counsel.

— Proverbs 10:19-21 The tongue of the just is as choice silver: the heart of the wicked is little worth. The lips of the righteous feed many: but fools die for want of wisdom.

— Proverbs 11:14 Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety.

— Proverbs 15:22-23 Without counsel purposes are disappointed: but in the multitude of counsellors they are established. A man hath joy by the answer of his mouth: and a word spoken in due season, how good is it!

— Proverbs 20:18 Every purpose is established by counsel: and with good advice make war.

— Proverbs 25:11 A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.

The New Testament church put these proverbs into practice early on.

— Acts 15:6 And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter.

More specifically, secrets must be shared when biblical procedure requires the attention of the proper authorities. When a personal problem cannot be resolved between the parties directly involved, the matter must come before church elders.

— Matthew 18:16-17 But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.

— 1 Corinthians 6:1-5 Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints? Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life? If then ye have judgments of things pertaining to this life, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church. I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren?

At times, it is proper to be unfaithful to another person and give away his secrets in order to be faithful to God. Jonathan righteously broke his evil father's trust to be faithful to David, whom he acknowledged as God's anointed.

— 1 Samuel 20:1-2 And David fled from Naioth in Ramah, and came and said before Jonathan, What have I done? what is mine iniquity? and what is my sin before thy father, that he seeketh my life? And he said unto him, God forbid; thou shalt not die: behold, my father will do nothing either great or small, but that he will shew it me: and why should my father hide this thing from me? it is not so.

At times, it is proper for one in authority to demand someone to hide nothing from him. When Eli the high priest required it of Samuel, Samuel obediently related to him all that God had said. And of course God did not allow the just-fallen Adam to keep his little secret.

— 1 Samuel 3:16-18 Then Eli called Samuel, and said, Samuel, my son. And he answered, Here am I. And he said, What is the thing that the LORD hath said unto thee? I pray thee hide it not from me: God do so to thee, and more also, if thou hide any thing from me of all the things that he said unto thee. And Samuel told him every whit, and hid nothing from him. And he said, It is

the LORD: let him do what seemeth him good.

— Genesis 3:8-11 And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden. And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou? And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself. And he said, Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?

Most strangely, God Himself humbly teaches us how to seek and heed counsel by Himself receiving the counsel of mortals. He does not do this for His own benefit, but to put us on the spot and force us to consider matters more deeply.

— Genesis 18:17 And the LORD said, Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do?

— Deuteronomy 9:13-14 Furthermore the LORD spake unto me, saying, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people: let me alone, that I may destroy them, and blot out their name from under heaven: and I will make of thee a nation mightier and greater than they.

— John 15:15 Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you.

God even calls upon us to judge, both in history as His delegates on earth — as parents, elders, magistrates, and so forth — and at the end of history to judge the world.

— Genesis 9:6 Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man.

— Zechariah 3:6-7 And the angel of the LORD protested unto Joshua, saying, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; If thou wilt walk in my ways, and if thou wilt keep my charge, then thou shalt also judge my house, and shalt also keep my courts, and I will give thee places to walk among these that stand by.

— Matthew 19:28 And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

— 1 Corinthians 6:2-3 Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life?

5. The Dishonesty of Secrets Justified in Human Relations

If God withholds information from us, we can reason that it is possible for us to righteously withhold information from one another. When children are young, no parent attempts to give them the whole truth about anything, but only so much as they can handle at the time. And as their understanding and capacity increases, so does the amount of truth that their parents impart. This follows the pattern described earlier of God gradually revealing Himself in degrees to man. (The progression of the covenants of which some people speak is precisely this.)

Our sinfulness sharply decreases our capacity for truth. This is true especially when people are in conflict, the direct result of sin in one or more parties. Sinners use knowledge to sin, and thus, that knowledge must often be denied them.

Thus, it was righteous of Michal to deceive her father Saul when he was seeking David to kill him (1 Samuel 19:11-17). When Abraham deceived Pharaoh with a half-truth, telling him Sarah was his sister without mentioning that she was also his wife, God punished Pharaoh for taking Sarah and only blessed Abraham for all his actions (Gen. 12:11-13:2). It was foolish of Samson not to conceal from Delilah the source of his strength (Judg. 16:5-22). In order to save his own life, the prophet Jeremiah lied as King Zedekiah commanded him.

— Jeremiah. 38:24-27 Then said Zedekiah unto Jeremiah, Let no man know of these words, and thou shalt not die. But if the princes hear that I have talked with thee, and they come unto thee, and say unto thee, Declare unto us now what thou hast said unto the king, hide it not from us, and we will not put thee to death; also what the king said unto thee: then thou shalt say unto them, I presented my supplication before the king, that he would not cause me to return to Jonathan's house, to die there. Then came all the princes unto Jeremiah, and asked him: and he told them according to all these words that the king had commanded. So they left off speaking with him; for the matter was not perceived.

It is perhaps most clear from Rahab's story that using outright deception to keep secrets from enemies can be the righteous thing to do (Jam. 2:25). She was delivered from death among the Canaanites for it and became ancestor to the Christ.

The average pastoral counseling session will not involve such evil that outright deception would be necessary. However, we are still dealing with sinners here, and there is still constantly the need to withhold information to prevent it from being mistaken, misunderstood, or misused.

How does a pastor honestly avoid disclosing to people that he knows something? Having established that it is not always immoral to lie or withhold information, I will add that he is not lying by his silence when from the outset he openly admits that he conceals what he must conceal. He might not be open about all that he knows, but he is honest so long as he states his

policy honestly and does not claim to say everything. (This is something we do daily. Certainly no one considers you immoral if you do not express your opinions to everyone you find distasteful or unattractive.) And even if he deems it necessary in a particular situation to give away a secret, he has not broken his word so long as he never promised absolute confidentiality, only discrete confidentiality.

Honesty and faithfulness to the truth is essential in gaining trust and in bringing about righteousness and peace. Though it might be thought of at worst as righteous misleading to hide the extent of your knowledge, proper silence is not dishonest by any means, no more than God is dishonest when He does not reveal to us the hour of our death.

THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF CONFIDENTIALITY

We see that we are commanded to keep secrets and yet that there are times when we ought to speak. What is the guiding principle of discrete confidentiality? How do we know when to speak or to whom?

In pastoral confidentiality, our basic premise and driving principle is the same as it is for the rest of life. Among the several different ways it can be summed, here are three prominent examples. 1) Pastors are to handle sensitive personal information to the glory of God (1Cor. 10:31). 2) Everything related to confidentiality must be motivated by love for God first, and for our neighbors second (Mt. 22:37-40). 3) Throughout the task of ministry, pastors must seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness (Mt. 6:33).

As vast and abstract as they may sound, these principles have very specific applications. For example, because our love and loyalty is first to God, any promise of secrecy we make to men must be overridden by faithfulness to God's righteousness. We must seek God's glory in all that we do, which is accomplished by executing His righteousness, even when it brings shame to fellow church members.

In the following section, I will consider how we are guided by the purpose of confidentiality, and by the basic eye-for-eye justice of reciprocity. A pastor dealing with sensitive matters, must have a clear purpose — both ultimate and immediate — for every word he states, a concrete connection between that purpose and his words, and an understanding of their consequences, without which careless or self-deceived comments with ulterior motives are all too easy to make. Moreover, he cannot be solely concerned with minimizing conflict or damage. The penalty must match the crime, and what wrong is wrought in public must be righted in public.

6. Purposeful Edification

God is purposeful. He created nothing without meaning; everything works wondrously together to His glory and our blessing. The irreducible complexity of microbiology, the codependence of every element in the ecosystem, the beauty in functionality — all things in the universe testify to God’s purposefulness. And He requires the same of us, that we be therefore purposeful, even as our Father which is in heaven is purposeful. Just as all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works (2Tim. 3:16-17), even so are we to image the Words of our God in our words, so that no corrupt communication proceeds out of our mouths, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto our hearers (Eph. 4:29).

Because of God’s purposeful nature, everything done and spoken in His universe has consequences, either good or bad. Thus, righteousness itself requires us to be deliberate and mindful, to say nothing that we will not mean or accomplish.

— Ecclesiastes 5:2-6 Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few. For a dream cometh through the multitude of business; and a fool’s voice is known by multitude of words. When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay. Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error: wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thine hands?

— Proverbs 15:28 The heart of the righteous studieth to answer: but the mouth of the wicked poureth out evil things.

Simply speaking the truth is far from enough. Someone who claims to state facts because they are true is either naive or dishonest. As I said earlier, all actions have consequences, for good or for ill. If one speaks truths or half-truths with an intent to deceive or destroy, he may easily do so. Much evil has been wrought in the name of truth. “Yea, hath God said ...?” “If Thou be the Son of God” Did the devil care for truth, even while he appealed to it? It is not enough to believe and tremble. Neither is it enough to speak the truth.

Speaking the whole truth is also far from enough. Our whole subject concerns how not to speak some truths the way God does. The whole truth to the wrong person or to the right person at the wrong time could lead to terrible problems in the courtroom, on the battlefield, or in the church and family. And such times it is forbidden by scripture, as we saw earlier.

Again, it is simply impossible to give the whole truth. The whole truth before man is a Myth. There are no complete collections of facts which can be delivered without bias or intent. (Police investigators may seek such a collection from a witness, but only because they want to be the ones to select the relevant information.) Information is always selective. Something is told and something else withheld. How one chooses what to tell and what not to tell depends on his purpose, what consequences he seeks. If he self-consciously seeks to edify, then he will choose to say those words and share that information which edifies his hearer. At this point, a discussion of the substance of edifying speech would be beneficial, yet is a greater task than I am presently willing to undertake. It will be partly involved in later sections of this paper, and that must suffice.

If a slogan would edify, here it is: that we speak the truth in love. Because love edifieth (1Cor. 8:1).

— Ephesians 4:15-16 Speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: from whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

— John 14:6 Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

There is a difference between speaking the truth and speaking the truth in love, between complete openness and benevolent honesty. Honesty or openness about one's policy does not necessitate complete openness about everything. Confidentiality with one counsellor means concealing things from the counter-counsellor (in those circumstances where the latter exists). Many observations, suspicions, and sentiments are not edifying if expressed out loud. Love serves as a sort of filter, or better yet, as a direction and purpose. If you aim at nothing, you gain nothing. Love, aim to edify, and it will teach you how to speak.

Do not identify truth with mere facts. Truth is personal. If you would speak the truth, you must speak Christ. You must speak as Christ spake. Unless you speak in love, as He spoke in love, you do not speak the Truth. If you speak the Truth in love, though you choose to omit certain facts, yet do you speak Truthfully. And no one omits as many facts as God does. Confidentiality is not just about keeping people's secrets for them. It is part of the Christian way of life, way of relating to other persons, of being like Christ, being divine.

— 1 Peter 4:8 Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.

— 1 Corinthians 16:14 Let all that you do be done in love.

Why should private sins ever be kept secret? Because all that we do must be done in love, and because love covers a multitude of sins. From the start, loving sinners is not easy. The more hypothetical and abstract their sinfulness, the easier it is to love them. But when their specific sins are revealed, it takes far greater, deeper love to love despite them. By not exposing each other's sins, we make it easier for us to love each other. The pastor must love Christ's flock no matter what he knows. Christ knows more and loves more. Seeing them all, God blots out all our iniquities (Ps. 51:9). That same burden need not be imposed on the entire congregation. Humanly speaking.

But divinely speaking, it is far more important that, whatever the burden, we love each other the way God loves us, forgiving one another even as He has forgiven us (Mt. 6:12). After the due process of human justice is complete, we commit the perfect judgment of their sins to God and the cross of Christ and embrace them as holy brothers. Which means we seek no retribution by means of gossip or by constantly, needlessly calling old sins into remembrance. Repeating a matter tears down; love builds up.

— Isaiah 43:25 I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.

Because of the complexities of the process of human justice in relation to forgiveness, I will allow me to digress for a moment as I explain myself. (The next few paragraphs are something of a thought experiment, so please empty your minds.) When a brother sins against us, we immediately forgive them, even prior to their repentance, because of their corporate identity with redeemed humanity under Christ. This act could be described as a part of corporate forgiveness. Christ died to save humanity, and on this earth we approach each human as a member of that redeemed humanity. Not until heaven and hell do we know for sure who is and who is not elect. So till then, we proclaim to them the salvation of the world, of all who believe, and offer them the forgiveness which Christ offered on the cross. Which is to say, in a broader temporary way, we extend this corporate forgiveness to all the unsaved as well.

— 2 Corinthians 15:22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

Yet, corporate forgiveness does not mean overlooking. If the sin requires it, they are still to be called to justice, properly, not with bitterness or gossip. But if they confess and repent and yield to judgment, they receive another level of forgiveness, specific to the object of their repentance. I will call this individual forgiveness. This is what requires no more remembrance, as in no more unnecessary reminders or attempt at retribution.

— 1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Here ends the thought experiment.

As much as bad examples can teach us, they tend to tear us down. It is discouraging to see the sinfulness in one another let alone ourselves. We ought to follow in Christ's footsteps who left for us the best sort of example, a perfect example.

— Hebrews 10:24 And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds,

— 1 Peter 2:21-22 For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth:

— Romans 15:14 And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another.

Discrete confidentiality encourages us by concealing others' sins and bringing out and emphasizing the good in others. Not that we should create heroes and naive followers. But we should search for what is most Christ-like in others, how they followed Christ in their life contexts, that by following them who are closer to us, they may lead us to Him. The search for what is most Christ-like in them is a critical process, for it necessarily involves distinguishing their good traits from their bad.

— Hebrews 6:9-12 But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way. For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints. And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you will not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Confidentiality promotes peace which goes hand in hand with edification and love. It must be considered in conversation whether or not what is about to be spoken furthers peace or strife.

— Proverbs 26:22 Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth.

— Romans 14:19 Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.

You may rightly question what good is a peace or a love attained through ignorance. I believe I have answered it partially already. It must be remembered that whatever is hidden is hidden only

temporarily. Eventually, when the time is ripe, everything will be both revealed and judged.

— Luke 12:2-3 For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known. Therefore whatsoever ye have spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light; and that which ye have spoken in the ear in closets shall be proclaimed upon the housetops.

— Ecclesiastes 12:14 For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.

Also, the level of intimacy, just how much one deserves to know about another, depends on their relationship. The Son knows all that the Father knows (Jn. 5:20). They hold all knowledge in common between them. As we grow into the love and image of God, we also grow in knowledge and intimacy with Him.

— John 15:15 Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you.

Even so must we grow into love, intimacy, and knowledge with our brethren. So long as sin hounds us, this is not perfectly possible. But even on earth, we work towards the eternal Kingdom. And as our love and trust grow amongst us, we will be able to share more and more of ourselves with one another. Yet, it is more important now that we love our brothers than that we know them in all their sins, and we must not be unprofitably curious nor overly hasty in seeking intimacy.

There are some plain circumstances when the desire for the edification and good of others must lead the pastor to betray someone's confidence. With knowledge comes responsibility. If a pastor can prevent a grievous sin, he is guilty of it if he does not. Adam sinned first when he did nothing to prevent Eve from eating the forbidden fruit. This is a principle throughout the Bible.

— Exodus 21:29 But if the ox were wont to push with his horn in time past, and it hath been testified to his owner, and he hath not kept him in, but that he hath killed a man or a woman; the ox shall be stoned, and his owner also shall be put to death.

— Ezekiel 3:18-21 When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life; the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Yet if thou warn the wicked, and he turn not from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul. Again, When a righteous man doth turn from his righteousness, and commit iniquity, and I lay a stumblingblock before him, he shall die: because thou hast not given him warning, he shall die in his sin, and his righteousness which he hath done shall not be

remembered; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Nevertheless if thou warn the righteous man, that the righteous sin not, and he doth not sin, he shall surely live, because he is warned; also thou hast delivered thy soul.

Like Ezekiel, the pastor has received the Word of God with the task to feed it to His sheep.

Another circumstance is when a church member refuses to repent. Jesus commands that he be exhorted before one or two witnesses, and if he still remains unrepentant, that he be brought before the church elders (Mt. 18:16-17). Excommunication is always public in that it involves the entire church and must be explained and justified before all its members. However, if the erring brother repents at any stage of this process, from that point there is no more gain in telling any additional people.

— James 5:19-20 Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.

It also happens that at times a pastor will face a case which requires knowledge he simply does not have, and it will be necessary for him to seek advice from others, whether that be from fellow pastors or from experts such as doctors, lawyers, or accountants. This is not forbidden but rather instructed by the Bible. Where there are a multitude of counsellors, one counsellor knows something that another does not, one is gracious where another is firm, one is cautious where another is bold. By pooling their knowledge and talents, they are able to more closely approach the wisdom and righteousness of God.

— Proverbs 19:20 Hear counsel, and receive instruction, that thou mayest be wise in thy latter end.

— Proverbs 11:14 Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety.

7. Reciprocal Publicity

Regarding sin, the basic biblical principle is that we are to maintain maximum confidentiality. That is to say, as much as we are to live peaceably, we are to keep others' secrets, if possible, so far as it depends on us (Rom. 12:18). Just as we must sometimes war for righteousness and peace's sake, we must also divulge secrets sins.

By "reciprocal publicity," I mean the biblical principle of dealing with private sin in private and public sin in public — eye for eye applied to confidentiality. If someone is falsely accused in

public, they must be vindicated in public, exonerated, which generally implies that the perpetrator of the wrong is truthfully accused and convicted in public. Thus, the harm he sought to cause for the victim is completely undone and turned back upon himself.

— Deuteronomy 22:13-19 If any man take a wife, and go in unto her, and hate her, and give occasions of speech against her, and bring up an evil name upon her, and say, I took this woman, and when I came to her, I found her not a maid: then shall the father of the damsel, and her mother, take and bring forth the tokens of the damsel's virginity unto the elders of the city in the gate: and the damsel's father shall say unto the elders, I gave my daughter unto this man to wife, and he hateth her; and, lo, he hath given occasions of speech against her, saying, I found not thy daughter a maid; and yet these are the tokens of my daughter's virginity. And they shall spread the cloth before the elders of the city. And the elders of that city shall take that man and chastise him; and they shall amerce him in an hundred shekels of silver, and give them unto the father of the damsel, because he hath brought up an evil name upon a virgin of Israel: and she shall be his wife; he may not put her away all his days.

Of course, private sins will often have public aspects. A drunk driver may have to publicly pay restitution for a fence he broke without confessing to the world what internal suffering had caused him to drink in the first place. Accordingly, public sins will often have private aspects which remain private. A rapist might publicly confess and be punished without his victim being made known.

PRACTICAL PITFALLS

There are many practical pitfalls for a pastor as he deals with sensitive information and sinful people. Here are a few of them as they relate to confidentiality.

8. Absolute Confidentiality

One of the easiest mistakes to make is to promise too much, to promise absolute confidentiality, that is, to keep a secret from everyone else, whatever happens, whatever the secret turns out to be. Firstly, among men, there is nothing absolute. There are times when marriages must end, children must be disowned, friendships broken, vows annulled, when lives must be taken. In everything we do, in all that we promise, we say, aloud or implied, *Deo volente*, "If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that." (Jam. 4:15) Our will is ever subordinate to His will and righteousness. He is our sole absolute.

Thus, if something is revealed which must, according God's righteousness, involve others, that obligation to God supersedes any made to a human. For example, if a church member sins gravely and secretly but is consistently unrepentant, he must be exhorted before multiple witnesses —

which exposes his secret to them — and if he does not hear them, then before the church elders (Mt. 18:15-17). In such circumstances, God requires that that secret sin be revealed to others, and that requirement does not change even if an initial promise of absolute confidentiality had been foolishly given. Yet for honesty's sake, the absolute priority of God's law must be clear between a pastor and anyone about to share a secret with him.

These principles may be quickly accepted in theory, but once on the pastoral field — a person is in pain, has been gravely wronged, and cannot bring herself to share her story unless the pastor promises to never, ever tell anyone — it is all too easy for the pastor to sympathize with the person he is with against the one who is absent, and to promise her more than he should, trying to win her trust so she will let him help her.

Secrets are secret for a reason, and the reason is often that it contains a shameful sin. Sometimes, God's word requires that that secret be exposed, to some or even to all. Thus, despite Romanist misconceptions, the promise of pastoral confidentiality must always include discretion, reserving the right to talk when obligated to by God's superior law. The job of a pastor and the proper use of speech, honoring God and edifying men, entails positive action. If life were simple, wisdom in confidentiality would mean silence, and all secrets would be kept. However, in biblical discrete confidentiality, learning how to hold one's peace is only a fraction of the game; one must also learn when to talk, what to say, how much to say, how to say it, to whom, and why. But if the pastor fails to discern any one of those factors, he is in danger of slipping into gossip.

9. Gossip

Gossip involves talking about other people's personal matters, just the sort of thing about which a pastor would have an arsenal of knowledge. He knows all sorts of juicy little secrets about people's lives and is armed to be a very interesting gossip. Therefore, he must have the clearest understanding of what constitutes gossip, and all the more be strong to resist and shun it.

What are the marks of gossip? How can we distinguish it from fellowshiping or counseling? One clear mark is that gossip is not edifying. It does not aim to build up either the speaker, the hearer, or the person spoken about. It is idle or even counterproductive, tearing people down, something we are explicitly commanded not to do.

— Proverbs 14:23 In all labour there is profit: but the talk of the lips tendeth only to penury.

— Leviticus 19:16 Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people: neither shalt thou stand against the blood of thy neighbour: I am the LORD.

— 1 Peter 4:15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a

busybody in other men's matters.

It is often speculative or hearsay, and sometimes downright false or dishonest. Such we are not only commanded not to do but to draw away from.

— 2 Thessalonians 3:6 Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us.

However, it would be a mistake to lump together all negativity towards people as gossip. There is plenty of negative speech in the Bible by righteous people directed at those who deserve it.

— Mark 12:38-40 And he said unto them in his doctrine, Beware of the scribes, which love to go in long clothing, and love salutations in the marketplaces, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and the uppermost rooms at feasts: which devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayers: these shall receive greater damnation.

— 1 Timothy 1:20 Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme.

— 2 Timothy 4:10 For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica

— 3 John 9-10 I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church.

What makes gossip gossip is its purpose. Saying bad things about bad people can have its constructive purpose. It can serve to warn others to stay away from them and their ways. Sharing stories can be in order to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice and to pray intelligently for those who need it. Or it can be to share thoughts and perspectives to gain balance and wisdom from others, such as spouses or church elders do for one another. But when information about other people is shared unnecessarily without good purpose, without intent to edify its hearers, it is in danger of being gossip.

There are various reasons which make gossip tempting and tricky to avoid. The pastor might feel pride that he is well-connected and that people confide in him, that he is in the know and has superior knowledge. That pride might prod him into giving unnecessary, unedifying hints at his superior knowledge. To avoid falling for this, the pastor must completely, self-consciously abandon all prideful, selfish desire for honor from men and instead seek their edification in all

things. God knows when he pastors well, and he should seek his praise from above.

Anger, hidden resentment, or feeling the need to vent may also cause one to slip into gossip. Here, the pastor must be aware of his spiritual state, his attitude towards others, and purify them often and regularly before God, blessing them that curse him, doing good to them that hate him, and praying for them which spitefully use him.

10. Blunders

Many people have done it before at many levels, inadvertently leaked secret information. Pastors are full of secret information and are for that more likely to give it away unless they are that much more careful than others.

Every word a pastor utters must be thoughtful and deliberate. When he permits himself to be hasty, or angry, or emotionally out of control, he loosens his tongue and increases his words to his hurt and others.

— Ecclesiastes 5:2 Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.

— James 1:19-20 Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.

— Psalms 39:1 I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue: I will keep my mouth with a bridle, while the wicked is before me.

Leaks often happen, not because a pastor talked to the wrong person, but because the right person he talked to got emotional or impatient and told the wrong person. Because of this, whoever he is talking to at the moment, the pastor should be aware of the ramifications if the absent party heard his words, and he must measure his words almost as if he expected them to be leaked. This makes for a great exercise in equity and propriety.

It is so easy to slip up that if a pastor does not mean to talk about something, he should not talk around it either. He should avoid the whole neighborhood, without hinting at, without dancing around the subject. Indeed, it were best if he did not even think about it around others.

— Ecclesiastes 10:20 Curse not the king, no not in thy thought; and curse not the rich in thy bedchamber: for a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter.

11. Flattery

Getting flattered is a direct and dangerous threat to confidentiality. Whether or not the flattery was intentional, if a pastor is effectively flattered on his end, his guard is significantly lowered. When someone displays trust or favor, particularly by opening up his heart and spilling it all out to the pastor, the pastor may find himself inclined to reciprocate and feel it more difficult to contain himself, to stay true to God alone and not return more favor or trust to those who show it to him. Yet, this urge must be resisted by all means. God shows no partiality in judgment, neither allows His earthly judges any.

— Deuteronomy 25:15 But thou shalt have a perfect and just weight, a perfect and just measure shalt thou have: that thy days may be lengthened in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.

— 1 Timothy 5:21 I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou observe these things without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality.

It helps to remember that a pastor's task is to hear and to advise, not always to share himself, and especially not the part of himself that overlaps with the secrets of others. The person in front of him baring his heart is no reason for the pastor to feel obliged to bare himself in like manner.

When people are at odds, siding with one side will at least keep you some friends. But acting impartially may often distance you from both. It is a rare occasion when one party in a controversy is absolutely blameless, and admitting that someone's enemy is correct in some accusation is a short cut to losing friends. Taking the straight path often means siding with neither, with the danger that both might feel betrayed. But God will bless faithfulness to Him. It is better to lose man's trust, no matter how pleasant it was to have it, than it is to keep it by betraying Another's trust and violating His just standard. We are on no side but God's. All the pleasant flattery in the world must not change that (Pr. 7:4-27).

Flattery is so potent, so persuasive, so destructive, that when someone flatters, do not think you can hold your ground and dodge every dart. Shut your ears to him.

— Proverbs 2:16, 18 To deliver thee from the strange woman, even from the stranger which flattereth with her words For her house inclineth unto death, and her paths unto the dead.

Moreover, a flatterer cannot be trusted. He uses words as tools and weapons for dishonest manipulation to seek his own gain. He says what he needs to say to accomplish what he wants. And when he turns about and leaves you, everything you revealed to him will have become more weapons to use on others. So shut your mouth to him.

— Proverbs 20:19 He that goeth about as a talebearer revealeth secrets: therefore meddle not with him that flattereth with his lips.

Of course a pastor still hears what he must hear and says what he must say for the edification of the church, as the burden of the truth and Gospel requires. But no more than that around a flatterer.

12. Exaggeration

There is both honest and dishonest exaggeration. By honest exaggeration, I mean the attempt to reproduce in someone else the same sentiments that one holds himself, being “honest to the feeling” instead of “honest to the facts,” so to speak. When you “had to be there” to fully appreciate it, the storyteller can make up for the absence of his hearers by enhancing the story. In the same way, if a counsellee is worked up over something, he will often exaggerate and stress selective facts in order to get his pastor as worked up as he is. This is “honest” exaggeration (in the language I have chosen to use). A man feels in a way he believes is right, and he wants others to feel the same way.

By dishonest exaggeration, I mean the attempt to produce in another person feelings beyond or different from one’s own. This is deliberate manipulation. Yet, honest exaggeration is also a sort of manipulation. The man who tries to give others the same opinions, impressions, emotions, or sympathies as himself by tweaking truths is not allowing others to make their own judgments. He says what he needs to say, how he needs to say it, so that they will come to see things the way he does. The fact that he is sincere in his perspective does not change the fact that he is still manipulating.

Such things happen constantly to the pastor. People try to manipulate his judgments by how they present the truth. This danger is especially true when he is dealing with secrets. Secret opinions and memories are often very one-sided and warped precisely because they have been kept secret and have not been moderated or corrected by interaction or criticism. Because they are not in danger of being refuted on the spot, people in private counsel feel more free to express their indignation, mistrust, or any other negative feeling when they are speaking in private.

— Ecclesiastes 7:21-22 Also take no heed unto all words that are spoken; lest thou hear thy servant curse thee: for oftentimes also thine own heart knoweth that thou thyself likewise hast cursed others.

A pastor must know when to level down or put into perspective what he is told. He must be especially alert to do so when the someone is confiding to him in private. This does not mean to

take people less seriously, but rather to be more serious about understanding what is behind and beneath their words.

CONCLUSION

13. Consequences of Confidentiality Misused or Maintained

There is nothing unique about the principles of pastoral confidentiality as opposed to the confidentiality exercised in the family or among friends. However, as a rule, the repercussions of their violation are greater for pastorate because of the responsibility placed upon a pastor's shoulders and in his mouth — his central instrument. The pastor brings the Word of God to the people, both the teaching of the special Word inspired directly by the Holy Spirit and the general word as applied from the scriptures, to feed them and tend after them (Jn. 21:15-17). His task depends on the trust the people place in his words to them and in his love and care for them. He is the angel of God, messenger, and prophet (Is. 6). His mouth is in God's service. By it he delivers not only others but himself.

— Ezekiel 3:17-21 Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me. When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life; the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Yet if thou warn the wicked, and he turn not from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul. Again, When a righteous man doth turn from his righteousness, and commit iniquity, and I lay a stumblingblock before him, he shall die: because thou hast not given him warning, he shall die in his sin, and his righteousness which he hath done shall not be remembered; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Nevertheless if thou warn the righteous man, that the righteous sin not, and he doth not sin, he shall surely live, because he is warned; also thou hast delivered thy soul.

Thus, it is absolutely critical that his words be truth in love, that they be of God. Else he is a false prophet and a hireling (Dt. 18:22, Jn. 10:12). To be unfaithful in speech undermines not only the people's trust in their pastor but also their trust in the Church, God's ordained instrument of His love and care on earth, injuring their understanding of His Word and ways, and crippling the Church in its divine calling — than which there is scarcely a greater crime. Such sinful speech is always finally self-destructive.

— Psalm 7:14-15 Behold, he travaileth with iniquity, and hath conceived mischief, and brought forth falsehood. He made a pit, and digged it, and is fallen into the ditch which he made.

— Psalm 12:1-6 Help, LORD; for the godly man ceaseth; for the faithful fail from among the children of men. They speak vanity every one with his neighbour: with flattering lips and with a double heart do they speak. The LORD shall cut off all flattering lips, and the tongue that speaketh proud things: who have said, With our tongue will we prevail; our lips are our own: who is lord over us? For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, now will I arise, saith the LORD; I will set him in safety from him that puffeth at him. The words of the LORD are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times.

Moreover, the volume of sensitive information, the frequency with which it must be dealt with, and the fact that a pastor must pass judgment on it all serve to make confidentiality a major issue in his vocation. Let him learn to be discrete.