

11. Describe what you believe to be the role of confidentiality in biblical counseling. What kind of commitment to confidentiality should a biblical counselor make? What biblical and practical considerations limit confidentiality? What is the responsibility of a biblical counselor to report to civil authorities on matters of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and other illegal matters? How should biblical counselors cooperate with the authorities about these things?

- **Overview**

- Introduction
- The Role of Confidentiality in Biblical Counseling
- A Biblical Approach to a Commitment to Confidentiality in Biblical Counseling
- What Biblical and Practical Considerations Limit Confidentiality?
- A Biblical Counselor's Responsibility to Report on Matters of Domestic Violence, Sexual Abuse, or other Illegal Matters.
- A Biblical Approach to Cooperating with Authorities in Legal Matters.

I. Introduction

A. Confidentiality is a cornerstone of secular counseling. This key concept establishes trust between the counselor and the counselee, allowing the counselee to reveal themselves in an extremely vulnerable way with the knowledge that no one will ever find out.

1. Lambert "In secular counseling, confidentiality is at a premium. It is almost sacrosanct. . . You do not ever divulge any information about a counseling conversation except in certain and very limited and very extreme situations."¹

II. The Roles of Confidentiality in Biblical Counseling

A. ACBC "Biblical counselors must maintain and communicate the biblical standards for confidentiality. Trust grows in relationships where all parties have clear expectations regarding the confidential nature of private information. Biblical counselors seek to maintain trust and integrity by keeping personal information as private as possible. Biblical counselors protect the reputation of their counsees by avoiding reckless and unnecessary disclosures of personal information. Biblical counselors must also make clear to their counsees that a commitment to biblical authority requires the disclosure of certain kinds of information to certain parties. A biblical commitment to protect counsees from harm as well as commitments to the authority of the home, church, and or state may require disclosure of information that counsees would otherwise prefer to remain private."²

B. Mack "Biblical confidentiality is essential in building a relationship of trust between counselor and counselee. . . The kind of relationship we want to develop with our counsees can exist only when they know that we are genuine and honest."³

¹ Heath Lambert & Sean Perron, *Counseling and Confidentiality*, from the Podcast "Truth in Love 164," delivered on July 23, 2018.

² ACBC Standards of Conduct, X.B. The Commitment to Integrity. Available at: <https://biblicalcounseling.com/about/beliefs/positions/standards-of-conduct/>

³ Wayne Mack, "Developing a Helping Relationship with Counsees," in John MacArthur, ed., *Counseling: How to Counsel Biblically*, 109.

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- C. The role of confidentiality in biblical counseling is secondary to obeying the Word of God. The Word of God repeatedly instructs us to keep private matters private. It warns us against becoming a gossip or a slanderer (Prov 11:13; 20:19; 1 Tim 5:13; Titus 3:2).
- D. Lambert “. . . When you are doing biblical counseling, confidentiality is not at a premium. It is important, it is often valuable, but it’s not the most important reality.”⁴
 - 1. Lambert “. . . confidentiality is not at a premium because helping people is at a premium. Our favorite way to help people is by letting their personal information remain as private as possible. Sometimes helping people requires the disclosure of more information to more people than we would otherwise want to do, but helping them requires that disclosure.”⁵
 - a. **Matthew 18:15-17** *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. 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. 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.*

III. A Biblical Approach to a Commitment to Confidentiality in Biblical Counseling

- A. Lambert “We love confidentiality and value it, but as much as we love it and value it, that is placed underneath the command to obey God and His Word and is placed underneath the command to love our neighbor as ourselves. Sometimes, loving our neighbor as ourselves requires the disclosure of information.”⁶
 - 1. Adams “The implication of this biblical requirement to seek additional help in order to reclaim an offender is that Christians must never promise absolute confidentiality to any person. Frequently in is the practice of Bible-believing Christians to give assurances of absolute confidentiality, never realizing that they are following a policy that originated in the Middle Ages and that is unbiblical and contrary to Scripture (there is not a scrap of evidence in the Bible for the practice).”⁷

⁴ Heath Lambert & Sean Perron, *Counseling and Confidentiality*, from the Podcast “Truth in Love 164,” delivered on July 23, 2018.

⁵ Heath Lambert & Sean Perron, *Counseling and Confidentiality*, from the Podcast “Truth in Love 164,” delivered on July 23, 2018.

⁶ Heath Lambert & Sean Perron, *Counseling and Confidentiality*, from the Podcast “Truth in Love 164,” delivered on July 23, 2018.

⁷ Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member*, 30.

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B. A biblical approach to a commitment to confidentiality in biblical counseling is multifaceted. The biblical approach includes upfront honesty, respect for private intimate details of someone's life, a sincere desire to help the counselee, and an insistence to obey the Word of God as the ultimate authority in the counseling process.

1. **Upfront Honesty:** When we begin a counseling case, it's important to let the counselee know that throughout the counseling process there may necessitate a disclosure of private information. These would include seeking advice, contacting a church or church leaders, and/or beginning the process of church discipline.

Our counsees may have an unspoken expectation that whatever is spoken in the counseling room is completely confidential. No such commitment of absolute confidentiality is biblical, nor should it ever be made. As biblical counselors, our desire should be to help our counsees restore the right relationship with God. At times, there must be a disclosure of information, such as in the process of church discipline.

2. **Respect for Private Information:** It takes a lot for a counselee to open up about and share intimate details about their lives. This is especially true for details that may be humiliating, which is often the case in biblical counseling. Therefore, counselors must seriously and sincerely respect this courageous act and do what they can to keep private matters, private, only disclosing information when essential for the counseling process, when commanded by the Word of God, or when cooperation with the governing authorities is necessary.
3. **Sincere Desire to Help the Counselee:** Our counsees have sought counseling because they want help. An unnecessary or unbiblical disclosure of private information during the counseling process is a serious matter. This type of disclosure undermines a counselor's ability to help the counselee, as the trust and respect that is established may be erased.
 - a. Adams ". . . the consistent theme of church discipline is concern for the offender. His repentance and reclamation are always to be a hoped-for expectation, and much of the effort expended in properly conducted discipline is directed toward that end."⁸
4. **Submission to the Word of God as the Ultimate Authority in the Counseling Room:** During the counseling process, the Word of God may require disclosure of information, such as in the case of church discipline.
 - a. Mack "A final way to show respect to counsees is to guard their reputations as much as possible without disobeying God. Unfortunately, confidentiality is not always possible (or desirable) in light of Jesus' commands."⁹

⁸ Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member*, 18-19.

⁹ Wayne Mack, "Developing a Helping Relationship with Counsees," in John MacArthur, ed., *Counseling: How to Counsel Biblically*, 109.

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- C. An example of a statement on Confidentiality in Biblical Counseling from a Consent to Counsel form:
1. “Confidentiality: Although confidentiality is often one aspect of the counseling process and we intend to guard the information you entrust to us, **absolute confidentiality is not scriptural in all circumstances**. There are many situations when **it may be necessary (as determined by us in our sole discretion) for us to share information with other** and/or to take protective measures. These may include situations (1) When we are uncertain how to address a particular problem and **need to seek advice from another** pastor, educator, counselor, professional, or Christian; (2) when a **counselee attends (or attended) another church**, and we believe it is important to talk with his or her pastor, elders, or others at that church and/or leadership; (3) when there is a clear indication that **someone may be harmed** unless others intervene or are consulted; (4) when a person **refuses to renounce a particular sin** and confess it to those impacted and it becomes necessary to seek the assistance of others in the church to encourage repentance, confession, and reconciliation (see Proverbs 15:22; 24:11; Matthew 18:15-20); (5) when **criminal activity** has occurred, and the counselee refuses to bring it to the authorities; and/or (6) if we believe that a person is in need of **protective services** or that a person of **familial authority** needs to be informed (e.g., wife/husband, or child/parent). Information also may be shared for **education/training** purposes. Nothing shall impose an obligation or legal duty on a counselor to disclose or maintain confidential and particular information.”¹⁰

IV. What Biblical and Practical Considerations Limit Confidentiality?

- A. Within the counseling process, confidentiality should be extended as far as the Word of God allows. Fostering a counselor/counselee relationship on the foundation of trust, respect, and biblical confidentiality will offer every opportunity for your counseling case to be successful. Any and all unnecessary disclosures of private or sensitive information should be avoided, as this undermines a foundation of trust and respect, as well as violates the Scriptures (Psalm 101:5; Prov 11:13; 20:19; Eph 4:29).
1. **Psalm 101:5** *Whoever slanders his neighbor secretly I will destroy. Whoever has a haughty look and an arrogant heart I will not endure.*
 2. **Proverbs 20:19** *Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with a simple babblers.*
 3. **Proverbs 11:13** *Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered.*

¹⁰ Todd Sorrell, “How to Avoid a Lawsuit,” in Dale Johnson & Edward Wilde, ed., *Legal Issues in Biblical Counseling*, 178.

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- B. During the counseling process, a counselor may encounter a situation in which he or she may need to seek advice from other biblical counselors, or from the leadership of the church. We need to balance the command to not be a gossip with the necessity of seeking advice from others. There are instances in which the situation might call for a Matthew 18:15 approach, of bringing one or two others, but you just aren't sure. Seeking advice from a trusted and respected source, such as another counselor, a church leader, or a pastor, would seem to be very wise. Just be careful not to disclose information unnecessarily, as the situation may be dealt with at the lowest level.
1. **Proverbs 15:22** *Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed.*
 2. **Proverbs 18:13** *If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame.*
- V. **A Biblical Counselor's Responsibility to Report and Cooperate with Authorities on Matters of Domestic Violence, Sexual Abuse, or other Illegal Matters.**
- A. Submission to the Governing Authorities
1. Lambert “. . . the command in Romans 13 that we submit to the governing authorities means that we would want to disclose any information to the governing authorities about, say, abuse. If someone is being abused, most people are required to disclose that information to the authorities, and so following the law and helping the weak would require disclosure.”¹¹ (See Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17)
 - a. **Romans 13:1-2** *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.*
 - b. **1 Peter 2:13-17** *Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the Emperor.*
 2. ACBC “Biblical counselors must help their counselees submit to the authority of the state as it is discharged righteously. God has provided government as a blessing for all people in order to preserve order and righteousness. When this authority is discharged righteously and in keeping with God's law all people benefit from it. Wherever possible, biblical counselors work to obey the laws of the legal jurisdictions in which they serve, and urge their counselees to do the same.”¹²

¹¹ Heath Lambert & Sean Perron, *Counseling and Confidentiality*, from the Podcast “Truth in Love 164,” delivered on July 23, 2018.

¹² ACBC Standards of Conduct, IX. The Commitment to Authority. Available at: <https://biblicalcounseling.com/about/beliefs/positions/standards-of-conduct/>

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B. Mandatory Reporting

1. “Many churches and church-related enterprises have failed on the matter of reporting known or suspected abuse. The most famous of these stories concerned the Roman Catholic Church, but subsequent stories have implicated a number of protestant churches. An expose in the *Houston Chronicle* related a horrifying number of Southern Baptist Convention congregations that had failed to report or had covered up instances of physical and sexual abuse. Such a problem will begin with a report; it might even be a mere rumor at first. You hear that a child is being or has been abused. Either you or the counselor under your direction fails to report the abuse to the authorities. If you failed to report the abuse, it would not only subject you to potential criminal penalties from the state; it will also subject you to a civil action for negligence.”¹³
 - a. Biblical Counseling Coalition “We have a moral, legal, and biblical obligation to report all cases of physical and sexual abuse to the proper authorities regardless of our fears or our feelings about it. We cannot and must not set ourselves up as the arbiters of justice in these cases; that is not our job! As biblical counselors, we are to walk alongside the victim and the family, and when possible the perpetrator, to help them grapple with the consequences that come from such heinous sin.”¹⁴
2. Although mandated reporting is routinely associated with child or spousal abuse, it also includes suicidal or homicidal ideation (thoughts of killing themselves or others). In the event, your counselee confides in you that they are having thoughts of suicide, of hurting themselves, or others, you have an ethical, legal, and biblical obligation to report it to the governing authorities. That is, to call 911 and report it. As in cases of abuse, the counselee may become upset and even storm out of the counseling session, but you must report it.

VI. Suggested Reading

- A. **Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline*, 18-19, 30.**
- B. **Dale Johnson & Edward Charles Wilde, *Legal Issues in Biblical Counseling: Direction and Help for Churches and Counselors*, 178-179.**
- C. **ACBC Standards of Conduct, IX. The Commitment to Authority and X. The Commitment to Integrity. Available at: <https://biblicalcounseling.com/about/beliefs/positions/standards-of-conduct/>**
- D. **John MacArthur and the Master's College Faculty, *Counseling: How to Counsel Biblically*, 109.**

¹³ Edward Wilde, “Business Formation and Insurance of Your Counseling Ministry,” in Dale Johnson & Edward Wilde, ed., *Legal Issues in Biblical Counseling*, 105.

¹⁴ Biblical Counseling Coalition, *When Your Counselee Confides Abuse: Our Obligation*. Found at: <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2015/05/28/when-your-counselee-confides-abuse/>