"A Time to Speak"

—When?

MARY works as a medical assistant at a hospital. One requirement she has to abide by in her work is confidentiality. She must keep documents and information pertaining to her work from going to unauthorized persons. Law codes in her state also regulate the disclosure of confidential information on patients.

One day Mary faced a dilemma. In processing medical records, she came upon information indicating that a patient, a fellow Christian, had submitted to an abortion. Did she have a Scriptural responsibility to expose this information to elders in the congregation, even though it might lead to her losing her job, to her being sued, or to her employer’s having legal problems? Or would Proverbs 11:13 justify keeping the matter concealed? This reads: “The one walking about as a slanderer is uncovering confidential talk, but the one faithful in spirit is covering over a matter.”—Compare Proverbs 25:9, 10.

Situations like this are faced by Jehovah’s Witnesses from time to time. Like Mary, they become acutely aware of what King Solomon observed: “For everything there is an appointed time, even a time for every affair under the heavens: . . . a time to keep quiet and a time to speak.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 7) Was this the time for Mary to keep quiet, or was it the time to speak about what she had learned?

Circumstances can vary greatly. Hence, it would be impossible to set forth a standard procedure to be followed in every case, as if everyone should handle matters the way Mary did. Indeed, each Christian, if ever faced with a situation of this nature, must be prepared to weigh all the factors involved and reach a decision that takes into consideration Bible principles as well as any legal implications and that will leave him or her with a clear conscience before Jehovah. (1 Timothy 1: 5, 19) When sins are minor and due to human imperfection, the principle applies: “Love covers a multitude of sins.” (1 Peter 4:8) But when there seems to be serious wrongdoing, should a loyal Christian out of love of God and his fellow Christian reveal what he knows so that the apparent sinner can receive help and the congregation’s purity be preserved?

Applying Bible Principles

What are some basic Bible principles that apply? First, anyone committing serious wrongdoing should not try to conceal it. “He that is covering over his transgressions will not succeed, but he that is confessing and leaving them will be shown mercy.” (Proverbs 28:13) Nothing escapes the notice of Jehovah. Hidden transgressions must eventually be accounted for. (Proverbs 15:3; 1 Timothy 5:24, 25) At times Jehovah brings concealed wrongdoing to the attention of a member of the congregation that this might be given proper attention.—Joshua 7:1-26.

Another Bible passage: Viticus 5:1: ‘that he has had a witness or I know of it, if he must anawlic cursing” with my. Rather, if one who had any potential justice, while from Jehovah yet identified, was a form of Any witnesses who had suffice have a reason to establish guilt have to anaw Jehovah.”

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Another Bible guideline appears at Leviticus 5:1: “Now in case a soul sins in that he has heard public cursing and he is a witness or he has seen it or has come to know of it, if he does not report it, then he must answer for his error.” This “public cursing” was not profanity or blasphemy. Rather, it often occurred when someone who had been wronged demanded that any potential witnesses help him to get justice, while calling down curses—likely from Jehovah—on the one, perhaps not yet identified, who had wronged him. It was a form of putting others under oath. Any witnesses of the wrong would know who had suffered an injustice and would have a responsibility to come forward to establish guilt. Otherwise, they would have to “answer for their error” before Jehovah.

This command from the Highest Level of authority in the universe put the responsibility upon each Israelite to report to the judges any serious wrongdoing that he observed so that the matter might be handled. While Christians are not strictly under the Mosaic Law, its principles still apply in the Christian congregation. Hence, there may be times when a Christian is obligated to bring a matter to the attention of the elders. True, it is illegal in many countries to disclose to unauthorized ones what is found in private records. But if a Christian feels, after prayerful consideration, that he is facing a situation where the law of God required him to report what he knew despite the demands of lesser authorities, then that is a responsibility he accepts before Jehovah. There are times when a Christian “must obey God as ruler rather than men.”—Acts 5:29.

While oaths or solemn promises should never be taken lightly, there may be times when promises required by men are in conflict with the requirement that we render exclusive devotion to our God. When someone commits a serious sin, he, in effect, comes under a “public curse” from the One wronged, Jehovah God. (Deuteronomy 27:26; Proverbs 3:33) All who become part of the Christian congregation put themselves under “oath” to keep the congregation clean, both by what they do personally and by the way they help others to remain clean.

Personal Responsibility

These are some of the Bible principles Mary likely considered in making her personal decision. Wisdom dictated that she should not act quickly, without weighing matters very carefully. The Bible counsels: “Do not become a witness against your fellowman without grounds. Then you would have to be foolish with your lips.” (Proverbs 24:28) To establish a matter conclusively, the testimony of at least two eyewitnesses is needed. (Deuteronomy 19:15) If Mary had seen only a brief mention of abortion, she might have decided conscientiously that the evidence of any guilt was so inconclusive that she should not proceed further. There could have been a mistake in billing, or in some other way the records may not have properly reflected the situation.

In this instance, however, Mary had some other significant information. For example, she knew that the sister had paid the bill, apparently acknowledging that she had received the service specified.

*In their Commentary on the Old Testament, Keil and Delitzsch state that a person would be guilty of error or sin if he “knew of another’s crime, whether he had seen it, or had come to the certain knowledge of it in any other way, and was therefore qualified to appear in court as a witness for the conviction of the criminal, neglected to do so, and did not state what he had seen or learned, when he heard the solemn adjuration of the judge at the public investigation of the crime, by which all persons present, who knew anything of the matter, were urged to come forward as witnesses.”

THE WATCHTOWER—SEPTEMBER 1, 1987 13