

LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH: 1 CORINTHIANS

Week 7: Church Discipline

ANALYSIS

I. INTRODUCTION, 1:1–9

II. A CHURCH DIVIDED: INTERNALLY AND AGAINST PAUL, 1:10–4:21

III. PROBLEMS COMMUNICATED BY COMMON RUMOR, 5:1–6:20

With 5:1 Paul clearly turns to a new problem, a case of incest that is being either tolerated or condoned within the church.

A. Immorality in the Church, 5:1–13

1. The twofold sin, 5:1–2

a. The sin of the man, 5:1

(5:1) It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate: A man is sleeping with his father's wife.

The two sides to the problem are expressed in vv. 1–2. Verse 1 indicates the nature of the sin itself; verse 2 moves to the greater issue, the church's response—or lack thereof—to this sin in the church. Paul begins on a note of horror: "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you." The horror lies in the fact that there is sexual immorality among the Corinthian church, but they are taking no action.

In this instance, the problem is not just sexual immorality in general. The form of sexual immorality they are tolerating is of a kind that was not condoned "even among pagans," whose standards were otherwise not high: "A man is sleeping with his father's wife."

The fact that the woman herself is not mentioned demonstrates that only the man was a member of the Corinthian church.

b. The sin of the church, 5:2

(5:2) And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this?

While it is a problem how anyone in the church could have committed incest, the greater problem for Paul is the fact that with this sin in their midst the Corinthians are "proud" in spite of it.

2. The twofold admonition or corrective, 5:3–8

a. For the sin of the man: excommunication, 5:3–5

(5:3) For my part, even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. As one who is present with you in this way, I have already passed judgment in the name of our Lord Jesus on the one who has been doing this. (5:4) So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present,

In contrast to the Corinthians, who because they are "puffed up" have done nothing, not even mourned the man's sin, Paul takes decisive action. But the action cannot be his alone; it is to be a church action, carried out where "you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present."

(5:5) hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.

“To hand over to Satan” means to turn the man back out into Satan’s sphere. In contrast to the gathered church of believers who experience the Spirit and power of the Lord Jesus in edifying gifts and loving concern for one another, this man is to be put back out into the world, where Satan and his “principalities and powers” still hold sway over people’s lives to destroy them.

The grammar of the Greek suggests that the destruction of his flesh is the anticipated result of the man’s being put back out into Satan’s domain, while the express purpose of the action is his redemption.

The main question to be determined is what did Paul actually expect as the result of this man being returned to the sphere of Satan’s power “for the destruction of the flesh.” One common view is that this phrase, “the destruction of the flesh,” refers to physical suffering that could lead ultimately to physical death. However, there are problems with this view.

Paul’s ultimate purpose for the man is his salvation (“so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord”), and it is difficult to see why his death would result in his salvation. Second, nowhere else does Paul express death in terms of “destruction of the flesh.” Here this phrase stands in contrast to the saving of “the spirit”; and it is simply foreign to Paul’s usage for the “flesh/spirit” contrast to refer to the body as doomed to destruction but the “spirit” (inner, real person?) as destined for salvation. Such a view stands in contradiction to Paul’s express doctrine of the resurrection of the body—the flesh is not destroyed. Third, the further instruction in v. 11, that the Corinthians are not to associate with this man, not even to eat with him, implies that no immediate death is in view.

Therefore, it seems clear that Paul did not intend for the man to die. This would not rule out, however, some form of remedial suffering. However, what we have in this verse is probably a typical Pauline contrast between “flesh” and “spirit,” where *flesh* denotes the “sinful nature” (cf. NIV84, “hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.”).

b. For the sin of the church: purging, 5:6–8

Paul now gives the theological basis for the action of vv. 1–5

(5:6) Your boasting is not good. Don’t you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?

Besides the sin of the man, Paul was primarily concerned with the sin of the church itself. He now returns to that concern by picking up the theme of their boasting from v. 2. This “boasting” of theirs “is not good.”

Paul attempts to show them the absurdity of their boasting. What they should know in this case comes in the form of a proverb: “A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough.” This saying is similar to our “A bad apple spoils the whole barrel.” In the NT leaven became a symbol of the process by which an evil spreads insidiously in a community until the whole has been infected by it (cf. Mark 8:15). So it was in Corinth.

(5:7) Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.

The proverb about “yeast” in v. 6 naturally suggests imagery from Paul’s own Jewish background, namely the two religious rituals of Passover and Unleavened Bread.

As part of the Feast, the Jews were to “clean out” or “get rid of the old leaven.” In this context, of course, this refers to the removal of the incestuous man in v. 5.

In so applying the imagery, however, Paul expresses himself in a way that is foreign to his own understanding of the doctrine of salvation. So, he immediately qualifies it with “as you really are.” Paul has many imperatives in his writings—things that we Christians must do. But even though these commands must be obeyed, they are not simply legalistic requirements through which we can gain favor with God. We obey because of God’s previous work of grace in our lives. God has done something for us—what is called the *indicative*—therefore we obey him—what is called the *imperative*. The *imperative* reminds that we are to become what we already are—the *indicative*. Cf. Ephesians 5:8, “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light.”

So, right at the point in Paul’s argument where the imperative sounds as if it comes first (“get rid of the old so that you may be new”), he reminds them that what they must become is what they already are by the grace of God—“a new unleavened batch—as you really are.”

Still keeping the imagery of Passover, but shifting over to the second ritual, Paul proceeds to explain how they became God’s “new loaf” in Corinth: “for indeed our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed, even Christ.” The slaying of the lamb is what led to the Jews’ being “unleavened.” So too with us, Paul says. Our Lamb has been sacrificed; through his death we have received forgiveness from the past and freedom for new life in Christ.

(5:8) Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Paul now brings this part of the argument to its logical conclusion. The Corinthians are to remove the incestuous man from the church, which is like cleansing the house of leaven, in order that they might become what they are, God’s “new loaf” in Corinth. What makes them God’s new people is the sacrifice of “our Passover Lamb, Christ himself.” Still keeping the imagery of the Feast (“let us keep the Festival”), Paul broadens the application of the death of Christ to the Christian life as a whole. The present tense of the verb that is translated “let us keep the Festival” speaks of a continuous celebration of the feast—the whole Christian life as a celebration of the work of Christ on our behalf.

But what is the Christian equivalent to the Jewish celebration? In its first instance, it reflects the prolonged seven-day festival, during which the Jews were forbidden to eat anything leavened. In the same way, on the basis of the crucifixion of Christ, God’s people are to keep an ongoing feast of the celebration of God’s forgiveness by holy living. They are to celebrate their new life in Christ minus the “old leaven.” This at least includes an elimination of the kinds of sexual immorality represented by the excluded man. But now the “old leaven” is further qualified in terms of “malice and wickedness.” The death of Christ has freed us from the power of sin—no longer slaves to sin (Rom 6); thus, we are to live as those who have been set free.

The Christian life, which can be called “unleavened,” is also described in terms of “sincerity and truth.”

3. A necessary explanation, 5:9–13

It might appear that Paul is moving on to a new topic in these verses because he begins to discuss a misunderstanding of a former letter written by himself to the church. But this is only partly the case. Paul is resolving an issue from a former letter, to be sure, but one that is closely related to the present concern.

a. A former letter misunderstood, 5:9–10

(5:9) I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— (5:10) not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world.

Paul is still dealing with the church’s failure to have done something about the incestuous man. These verses tell us that that failure is related to their misunderstanding of a former letter, particularly, the command “not to associate with sexually immoral people.”

We wonder how their misunderstanding arose, and especially a misunderstanding that implied that he was talking about not associating “with the people of this world”?

In any case, Paul is ready to clarify, first by telling them what he did not intend: “not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral.” To that group he also adds “the greedy and swindlers or idolater.” So, it would seem Paul’s former letter dealt with three issues. First is immorality, which he already addressed in the case of the incestuous man.

The second is the “greedy and swindlers.” The word “greed,” means not just to desire what is not one’s own, but often carries the sense of carrying through on the desire to the point of defrauding or taking advantage of someone else.

The third involves associating with idolaters, which in this case means eating meals in pagan temples.

b. A further clarification, 5:11

(5:11) But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people.

Whatever the reason for the “misunderstanding,” with his former letter, Paul will now make sure that there will be no uncertainty about his position by outlining his former position in explicit terms. “But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister” and who acts in the ways spoken of in the former letter.

To the four sins mentioned in v. 10, two more are now added —“slanderer” and “drunkard.”

The final prohibition, “do not even eat,” probably implies more than the Lord’s Table,

which would be obvious.

c. A simple explanation and application, 5:12–13

(5:12) What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? (5:13) God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked person from among you.”

With these short sentences, Paul concludes his argument. First in v. 12 there are two rhetorical questions about those whom the church does not and does “judge,” and these questions are given their appropriate responses in the two statements of v. 13. Neither he nor they are to pass sentence on the people of the world in their present existence. The reason for that is simple: “God will judge those outside.” But for now, the church takes the world as it finds it.

Exactly the opposite, however, must prevail within the Christian church itself. “Are you not to judge those inside?” This, of course, is what the entire passage has been arguing.