

Ted Kirnbauer

I Corinthians 5

5:1 It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife.

With 5:1 Paul addresses a new topic - an immoral relationship that was being tolerated in the church. Allowing such behavior was another expression of the church's arrogance (4:18; 5:2) and a concrete proof that the church lacked the power of the Spirit (4:20; 5:4).

"Immorality" was a word in Greek that meant "prostitution" (as in the sense of going to a prostitute and paying for sexual pleasure). But the word had been picked up by the Jews and used to cover any extramarital sin including homosexuality (Fee, 200). In particular, the immorality spoken of here was that a man had his father's wife (Lev. 18:7-8). "'To have,' when used in sexual contexts, is a euphemism for an enduring sexual relationship, not just a passing fancy or a 'one night stand'" (Fee, 200). In this case it is either incest between a mother and her son or the woman could have been the man's stepmother, for Paul doesn't actually call it incest (Barrett, 121).

Sexual immorality had been a part of the Corinthians' previous lifestyle (6:9-10) which was carried over into their new Christian life. But this kind of relationship was something that even the Gentiles with their relaxed ethics considered immoral. Shouldn't it have also been obvious to the church?

5:2 You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst.

Although gross sin was in the church, the people in their arrogance still saw themselves as spiritual, just as many Christians do today. They may have even thought that their tolerance was Christian liberty. They should have mourned over the man's sinfulness and expelled him from their fellowship. But they did neither. They were truly blinded.

In a similar way, the modern church has adopted an ungodly tolerance for sin. In many churches homosexual relationships are not only tolerated but also believed to be acceptable to God. Couples who live together are never confronted. Tolerance is thought to be a good thing, a loving response to people who believe and behave differently than we do. The apostle Paul did not think so. He was horrified

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by the fact that such sins continued to exist among redeemed people, for people who love a Holy God would naturally have an intolerance for sinful behavior in their midst.

5:3 For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present.

5:4 In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus,

Though Paul was not physically present with the Corinthians, he knew enough of the situation to act *as if* he was (Barrett, 124). He was with them "in spirit" (cf. Col. 2:5). That is, Paul envisioned his presence and his apostolic authority in the church. He had already determined that the man was guilty and needed to be disciplined. Now the church needed to act as if Paul was among them. They should assemble in the name of the Lord (act by the virtue of Lord's authority, as His representative) and remove the man from their midst with the power of the Lord (i.e. in dependence upon the Lord's power to act; see note on 4:20 - the kingdom of God is power).

5:5 I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

The actual judgment that Paul passed is now specifically given; the church was to deliver the man over to Satan (cf. I Tim. 1:20). Isolated from the church, he would be cut off from the edifying gifts and loving concern of believers. "This man is put back out into the world, where Satan and his "principalities and powers" still hold sway over peoples' lives to destroy them" (Fee, 209).

Paul said to hand him over "for the destruction of the flesh." This is the result, not the purpose, of delivering him over. The purpose in delivering him to Satan is so that he may be saved.

In the context the meanings of "the destruction of the flesh," and "salvation" need to carefully be considered. There is impressive evidence that "flesh" refers to the physical body. If this is in view, Paul would be telling the church to deliver the person over to Satan for physical suffering and even death (cf. Job 2:4-10). However, if the goal is the individual's salvation, it is hard to imagine how death would be remedial. Furthermore, Paul never speaks of a believer

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whose body is judged and spirit is saved, but sees salvation encompassing the total person (see his comments on the resurrection in chapter 15). In scripture, "flesh" can also refer to the whole person or to the carnal nature that is opposed to God. If this is what Paul intended, then his hope is that Satan's work will result in the destruction of the fleshy stance, the self-sufficiency, of the individual (Thiselton, 396). Without the benefits and blessings of the Christian community, the man would desire to be "reinstated" into fellowship and be purged of his fleshy acts. In other words, Satan's work would be the remedial process that will destroy the man's carnal nature and lead him to repentance and salvation.

When Paul says that "his *spirit* may be saved" he is contrasting the whole man as oriented toward the world (the flesh) with the whole person oriented toward God (Fee, 212). "*May* be saved" does not necessarily imply that this man is not saved, rather, Paul is viewing salvation from the perspective of its full realization or culmination. Salvation can be spoken of as a present experience (we are saved) or as future event (we will be saved). However, it should also be noted that the immoral person is not specifically called a believer in 5:1 though he is present in the assembly of Corinth. Although he may have professed Christ, his behavior calls the reality of his faith into question. His open immorality has caused Paul to wonder if he is a Christian at all. This is why Paul clarifies what he means by alluding to a letter he had written to them previously, "I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people . . . [but] I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world. . . [I meant] not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person" (5:9-11). A "so called" brother implies that he may be a brother in name only. Through re-exposure to Satan, it is hoped that the man would be delivered from his sinful ways, restored to fellowship, and that his salvation would be proven to be real when he meets Christ at the judgment.

The above interpretation may have its weaknesses but whatever interpretation is held, the church's action is the same. The person involved in gross sin needs to be expelled from the church (cf. II Thess. 3:6-15).

By way of application to the present day church, a number of observations could be made:

- 1) The person's sin was blatant and well known to everyone in the church.

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- 2) The church as a whole, not an individual, was to act in expelling the man
- 3) The purpose for the church acting is twofold: (1) to bring about the person's repentance assuring his salvation and (2) to prevent the sin from contaminating the whole church (5:6).

This process of discipline in America is greatly hindered since the disciplined person just goes down the street to another church. People often have a "take it or leave it" attitude toward the church instead of feeling a deep impact of being removed from their church family.

5:6 Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?

5:7 Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are *in fact* unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed.

5:8 Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

In verses 5-8 Paul supports his actions with some spiritual principles drawn from the Passover celebration. He begins with the Corinthian's boasting. How foolish to even pretend to be spiritual when there are such obvious things that are wrong. Tolerance of sin would not only hinder the man's salvation, his sin would also contaminate the whole Christian community. This is illustrated through the imagery of leaven in dough.

Leaven, when placed in dough, permeates the whole lump. In the same way, sin spreads wherever it is found (cf. Gal. 5:9). Although leaven was not always a symbol of evil (Lev. 23:17; Matt. 13:33; Lk. 13:20-21), it was often used as such (Exo. 12:14-20; Mk. 8:15ff; Lk. 12:1). Had the church been sensitive to the contaminating effects of sin, they would have seen the urgency in getting rid of the contaminant (i.e. the immoral man). Paul tells them to "clean out the old leaven (get rid of the immoral man) so that you may be a new lump" (one without the corruption of sin). But then he says, "just as you are in fact unleavened." Although Paul seems to be contradicting himself, he is reflecting a common line of reasoning found throughout the NT- Christians are to become what they are; Christ's sacrifice has made them holy, they now needed to act holy. Without action, the

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power of the kingdom of God which is found in the gospel was being quenched (see notes on 1:18, 24; 2:4-5; 4:19-20; 5:4).

The latter part of verse 7 and verse 8 are allusions to the Jewish festival of Passover (see appendix 2 - notes from Fausset/ Brown) which Paul obviously assumes that his gentile readers would understand. During Passover the Jews removed all leaven from their homes (Exo. 12:15) as a symbol of holiness. But the most important event of Passover was the sacrifice of the Paschal lamb (Exo. 12:6). It was the sacrifice of that lamb, not the removal of the leaven that made the Jews into a new unleavened loaf. In the same way, the Corinthians were a new loaf because Christ, the Passover lamb, was slain.

Verse 8 brings this part of his argument to a logical conclusion. Christ, the Passover lamb, has made them holy. This is the foundation for changed behavior. They have become a "new lump of dough" which should motivate them to act as one by removing the immoral man.

Just as the Jews celebrated an ongoing seven-day feast in which they had nothing to do with anything leavened, Paul tells the church "let us celebrate the feast." Christians are to celebrate the death of their "paschal lamb" by cleaning the leaven of sin (malice and wickedness) out of their house and replacing it with "the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."

The church is thus the temple of God (3:16), the unleavened dough (5:7) and the participants in a new Passover Feast (5:8).

5:9 I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people;

5:10 I *did* not at all *mean* with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world.

5:11 But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler-- not even to eat with such a one.

Paul is still dealing with the church's failure to disassociate themselves with the immoral man mentioned in verse 1. The key word is "associate." In II Thessalonians 3:14 Paul told the church in Thessalonica "If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter (i.e. about idlers and busybodies), take special note of

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that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame." The verb originally meant to mix up together or to associate closely with someone. Paul's warning is not to associate with those who claim to be Christians but have ungodly behavior. He is not talking about disassociating with all ungodly people since they would have to leave the world to accomplish that. That would only isolate their lives from those who needed to see Christ in them.

Verse 11 explains what he means in more specific terms. Christians are not to associate with those who profess Christ but conduct themselves as unbelievers do - they are "not to even eat with such a person."

Commentators interpret this in two ways. Some see it as a command forbidding any type of social interaction with them. Others see it as forbidding them to participate in the love feast (- i.e. communion - 11:17-34; Jude 12). Although not allowing them to partake of communion is an obvious step in disassociation, it doesn't seem like "not even" would be necessary if communion was in view.

5:12 For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within *the church*?

5:13 But those who are outside, God judges. REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES.

Though instruction about the immoral man is over, the theme of judging continues. In 5:1 Paul said that he has already judged the individual and that the church needed to judge him as well. These verses conclude the church's role in judgment and its limitations.

Paul asks two rhetorical questions about whom the church does and does not judge. In 6:2 Paul says that believers will participate with God in judging the world, but that is not their present concern. They should be focused on those within the Christian community who will pollute the church, not those outside of it.

Some have found Paul's teaching difficult to harmonize with his comment in 4:3 and Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7:1-5 about *not* judging others. But Paul's principles are not complex. He allows believers to associate with those outside the church for God judges them, but he insists that the church does not allow itself to

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become conformed to the world. This involves expelling worldly influences from within.

The judgment that Paul is calling for is that believers exercise discernment. The Bible often exhorts us in this way (Jn.7:24; I Cor. 5:5; Gal. 1:8, 9; Phil. 3:2; I Jn. 4:1). In Matthew 7:1 Jesus is not forbidding us from discerning what is evil, but is forbidding a judgmental spirit, or a critical, condemning attitude toward others (Gal.6:1-5; Ro. 2:1-8; 14:1-12). The person who is critical of others usurps the place of God who alone is judge (Ro. 14:10). It is this person who will in turn be judged by God. Among Christians, critics are not needed. But when someone is humble and judges himself first (I Cor. 11:31), thus removing the plank from his own eye, he then has the responsibility to help remove the speck from his brother's eye (18:15-20; al.6:1).

Any thoughtful reader can't help but see how today's church has flip-flopped Paul's teaching - believers isolate themselves from the world and judge it, and allow unrepentant believers free access to all the benefits of the Christian community.