



Growing into Church Discipline Pt 7: Immorality and Excommunication in Corinth August 20, 2023

Holy Text: 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

Last week we were reminded from Revelation 1:9-20 that:

1. Christ is the Alpha and Omega...First and Last. This is a statement concerning His supreme authority. (vv.11, 17)
2. Christ knows and cares about His churches. He knows them by name. (v.11)
3. Christ holds the *angels of the churches*¹ in His right hand, and a sharp two-edged sword flows from His mouth. (vv. 16, 20)
4. Christ dwells in the midst of the churches (seven candlesticks, vv.13, 20)! He sees all, knows all, and cares about all that occurs!
5. Christ is (and must be) glorious in the midst of His churches! (v.16) This is best demonstrated by a loving, obedient church.

We were also instructed by our LORD on how to handle being sinned against in the church, on God's punishment for lying in the fledgling Jerusalem church, and the resulting fear of the LORD.

Today, through the Apostle Paul, we'll take a look at a particular and very severe instance of apostolic, ecclesiastical correction in Corinth. As a reminder of such authority:

Ephesians 2:19-22 (KJV) *Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; **20** And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; **21** In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: **22** In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.*

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (KJV) *All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: **17** That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.*

2 Peter 3:14-16 (KJV) *Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless. **15** And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; **16** As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.*

The City of Corinth

1. By all accounts, Corinth was a very wicked city:

¹ Each church was addressed through their "angel," a word that can mean an angelic being but can also mean "a messenger." Since angelic beings do not lead the church nor can they ensure the sort of correction the LORD insists upon in these chapters, I agree with John MacArthur, John Gill, Matthew Henry and others that the "angel" in question would be the "pastor" or most prominent elder.

- Corinth was situated along a major trade route by land and water, on an isthmus between mainland Greece and the Peloponnesian Peninsula. It was known to be a place of great wealth, trade and a source of information.
- Unfortunately, Corinth was also infamous for its corruption and sexual immorality.
- Religion in the city was dominated for a time by the worship of Aphrodite, the goddess of “love”, whose priestess-prostitutes at one time numbered 1000, and whose temple was on the highest mountain peak.
- Prostitution was a driving force of the city’s prosperity. It was so bad, to “Corinthianize” became a way of saying “to practice immorality.”



2. Paul first arrived in Corinth during his 2nd missionary journey in the early 50’s. First Corinthians was likely written some time in 55 A.D. from Ephesus, however, this was not the first letter Paul ever wrote to this new church (1 Cor 5:9) According to Acts 18, Paul planted this church and nurtured it for 18 months.
3. Apparently, not only was this church unable to remain “without spot” (Eph 5:27; 2 Pet 3:14) in the midst of all this carnality, but there was some sense of wickedness in their midst being tolerated...perhaps even celebrated...

Verse by Verse:²

1 Corinthians 5:1 (KJV) *It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife.*

- This verse expresses the apostle’s incredulousness over this gross sin, seemingly tolerated in the church!
- Like Corinth, we are in a world where sin is tolerated, celebrated, legislated, and only the prophets who cry out against it are castigated!
- We see in this one verse, a sense of shock, astonishment, and bewilderment from Paul. Yes, the sin itself was bad...an abomination. That the woman as a stepmother didn’t matter. In the Old Testament, this sin was punishable by death:

Leviticus 18:7-8 (KJV) *The nakedness of thy father, or the nakedness of thy mother, shalt thou not uncover: she is thy mother; thou shalt not uncover her nakedness. 8 The nakedness of thy father's wife shalt thou not uncover: it is thy father's nakedness.*

Leviticus 18:24 (KJV) *Defile not ye yourselves in any of these things: for in all these the nations are defiled which I cast out before you:*

Leviticus 18:29 (KJV) *For whosoever shall commit any of these abominations, even the souls that commit them shall be cut off from among their people.*

² <https://calvaryreformationchurch.org/sermons/2014/5/8/the-purity-of-the-church-pt-4-1-corinthians-5-verse-by-verse>

- We too should consider whether any sin is “casual” based upon the sacrifice and overwhelming love of our LORD in saving us! We must not become “past feeling” (desensitized) concerning unrighteousness. (Eph 4:19)
- But the reaction of the church to the sin was just as bad...

1 Corinthians 5:2 (KJV) *And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you.*

- This thought concerns the Corinthian’s attitude about the man and his sin in their midst. It was pretty opposite of what it should be. Instead of pride (Puffed up!), there should have been mourning.
- John MacArthur writes, “This sin was so vile that even the church’s pagan neighbors were doubtless scandalized by it. The Corinthians had rationalized or minimized this sin which was common knowledge.”
- We should consider our attitudes about our own and other’s sin in light of Christ’s atoning blood, bodily sacrifice, and birthing of His church. We should attempt to see sin in the light of His mercy, love, and grace in dying for us. It should impact us powerfully when we displease Him.

1 Corinthians 5:3-4 (KJV) *For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, 4 In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ,*

- The terms “present in spirit” and “my spirit” do not mean Paul’s spirit was actually there! In our view, it is a way of saying that his authority as the church founder and as an apostle still governs or presides over that church. Therefore Paul’s Holy Spirit inspired words and judgment was final.
- We too must submit ourselves to the Scriptures. Remember, when we share similar contexts, God’s Word to them is God’s Word to us. (2 Tim 3:16-17) Also, although not on the level of the Scriptures themselves, a duly constituted church has a measure of apostolic authority to lovingly “enforce” biblical mandates.

1 Corinthians 5:5 (KJV) *To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.*

- The offending man was to be *excommunicated*: literally removed from the fellowship and spiritual protection of the church. In Paul’s view, doing so was to turn the man over to the power of Satan.
- “The destruction of the flesh” is a frightening phrase. Satan, right now, remains the “prince of the power of the air,” with worldly influence and evil power. (Eph 2:2) He is the archōn (chief prince) over a hellish kingdom with millions enslaved to him.
- One example in Scripture shows the destructive power of the Enemy when allowed by God: Job. (Job 1-2) Job lost his wealth, his children, and his health.
- Nonetheless, to deliver one unto Satan, presumably, would be to remove him from the protection of the Body for the purpose of chastisement and affliction (physical and spiritual) that the sinner might learn obedience and cry out to God in repentance.
- Some say that such a thing was a unique power granted to the apostles (see also 1 Tim 1:20). But we think that regardless if the “destruction” is akin to apostolic times, removing one from the fellowship of a duly constituted Christian church in every age accomplishes the same affect according to God’s sovereign hand.

- While we must be careful to not overstate the case, the local church IS important to your spiritual growth and protection. Beloved, DO NOT live outside the authority of the church! Find a reasonably healthy church, join, and serve!
- Finally, William MacDonald says on the latter part of this verse:

*In any case, we should remember that the discipline of believers is always calculated to bring about their restoration to fellowship with the Lord. Excommunication is never an end in itself, but always a means toward an end. The ultimate purpose is **that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.***

- Just as Job was eventually restored, so the heart of even severe church discipline is restoration as well.

1 Corinthians 5:6 (KJV) Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?

- Let's call this *The Principle of the Leaven*. It describes the tendency for sin to spread. Like an unchecked disease, "just a little" sin eventually takes over and destroys everything.
- Leaven can be defined as any agent added to a flour mixture or liquids to produce a state of fermentation. The action of leaven (like yeast, Ex 12/Deut 16:3) was to spread and cause a chemical change in the dough, causing it to rise.
- Therefore a little leaven "infects" the whole lump! So here is an obvious application: Don't play with sin! Kill it!
- The thought here is just as the individual must do this, so must a local body of believers.

1 Corinthians 5:7-8 (KJV) Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: 8 Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

- Contextually the saints at Corinth needed to remove cultural thoughts, patterns, and common iniquities. And like all Christians, they needed to crucify the "old man" with his affections and lusts. (Gal 5:24)
- Just as every Israelite household was to slaughter a year-old male, unblemished lamb and eat unleavened bread for seven days to celebrate the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Exodus 12-14), likewise the church was to remove all spiritual "leaven" in her weekly celebrations of the True Passover Lamb, Jesus!
- Critically, the motive was the Passover Lamb! He has been sacrificed once and for all! Therefore the ongoing celebration of the church (fellowship, worship, preaching, prayers, discipleship, ordinances) could and should be reflective of the Lamb's purity and propitiation!

1 Corinthians 5:9-10 (KJV) I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: 10 Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world.

- In a previous, unknown letter, Paul gave this instruction.
- The command wasn't to avoid ALL sinful people; that is antithetical to the commands of Christ to seek and save the lost! (Luke 19:10; Matt 9:13, 28:18-20; Mark 16:15, Acts 1:8)
- The command was to avoid *professing* Christians who lived this way.
- This is akin to "shunning" or "avoiding" professing believers who are comfortable with their sin...who aren't broken and repenting and accountable.

1 Corinthians 5:11 (KJV) But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat.

- **1 Corinthians 15:33-34 (NLT)** Don't be fooled by those who say such things, for "bad company corrupts good character." **34** Think carefully about what is right, and stop sinning. For to your shame I say that some of you don't know God at all.
- Again, the Christian should avoid rebellious and unrepentant "believers" within the local church who are deceived into thinking these behaviors are acceptable.
- Paul goes as far as to give some detail: not even sharing the intimacy of a meal with them so as to possibly affirm their attitude and actions.

1 Corinthians 5:12 (KJV) For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within?

- Many people say, without contextual qualification, "Judge not, that ye not be judged." (Matt 7:1)
- But a careful reading of the context indicates that we must not judge without first judging ourselves. Indeed Christ says a few verses later, "Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye." (Matt 7:5)
- According to Christ and the apostle, the church has a responsibility to "judge" sinful actions (not hearts) according to Scripture, and move to help the sinning brother! (Matt 18) James wrote:

James 5:19-20 (KJV) Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; **20** 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.

- William MacDonald said:

Paul's two questions in verse 12 mean that Christians are not responsible for the judgment of the unsaved. Wicked men in the world about us will be brought into judgment by the Lord Himself in a coming day. But we do have a responsibility as far as judging those who are inside the confines of the church. It is the duty of the local church to exercise godly discipline.

1 Corinthians 5:13 (KJV) But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.

- We are to preach the gospel to those outside the faith, if they do not respond in repentance God will be their judge.
- However to make the point again, judgment must happen inside the faith. The very act of excommunication is in fact a judgment in the church!
- CRC, God is greatly concerned about the purity of his local assemblies!
- Consequently, that "wicked person," that is, the one who refuses to be corrected, is severely disciplined by being put out of the church and turned over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.
- Again, from MacDonald:

Paul explains that God will take care of the judgment of those who are outside, that is, of the unsaved. In the meantime, the Corinthians should exercise the judgment which God has committed to them by putting away the evil person from among themselves. This calls for a public announcement in the church that this brother is no longer in fellowship. The announcement should be made in genuine sorrow and humiliation and should be followed by continual prayer for the spiritual restoration of the wanderer.

A Final Thought:

A humble, loving, and faithful church that practices such discipline cultivates an atmosphere of holy fear. The mere thought that such discipline is even possible serves to strengthen the saint in holiness!

May it be so in our midst oh LORD!

Amen!