

United in Christ: Overcoming the Challenges of Diversity
Studies in 1 Corinthians
Divisions over Immorality (The Actions of Church Discipline)

Intro: In our lessons so far we've seen that the Corinthian church was divided because they were being influenced by values that were a part of their culture. Because they weighed the wisdom of their teachers by human standards (what they knew and how they spoke) they had resorted to comparing teachers and divisions resulted from their loyalty to those who had taught them. Paul has methodically and powerfully laid the groundwork to correct their mistaken perspective and to urge them to unite upon the gospel of the cross.

As we move into the next section of 1 Corinthians, we see Paul turning his attention to other behaviors of the church, in this case the toleration of a brother guilty of incest. (We'll look at the chapter in three lessons: the action of church discipline, the reason for church discipline, the subjects of church discipline.)

The erring brother and the church's improper response

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. (1 Cor. 5:1)

Paul had heard of the Corinthian divisions through Chloe's people (1 Cor. 1:11). Perhaps they were also the source of this information as well, or perhaps those who had come to visit Paul passed along this troubling report (1 Cor. 16:17).

Implicit in the Corinthians' calling was repentance from sexual immorality; yet there was a man apparently co-habiting with his father's wife (probably his step-mother). Such a practice was a clear violation of the sexual norms God had revealed in the Law:

Cursed is he who lies with his father's wife, because he has uncovered his father's skirt. (Deuteronomy 27:20)

But such a practice also went beyond even the typical sexual norms of the Gentiles who were notorious for sexual immorality. Hays gives an interesting quote from Cicero condemning this practice and suggesting its rarity in Roman culture (Hays, 81). Winter thinks that Paul language hints at the idea that the man's father was still living, making the sin even more reprehensible, even to Gentiles. Apparently in this case the woman was an unbeliever and would not be a subject of the church's judgment.

but what was even more shocking than the misbehavior of this disciple was the response of the church to his practice.

And you have become arrogant, and have not mourned instead, in order that the one who had done this deed might be removed from your midst. (1 Cor. 5:2)

Here and in verse 6 we see again that pride becomes a factor in the Corinthians' actions toward this sinning brother. Just as it had fostered

divisions over their teachers, now it results in toleration of manifest immorality.

Did they Corinthians pride themselves in their tolerance or open-mindedness?

Was their pride manifest in the belief that they could not be affected by this man's sin?

Did some harbor this sinner because he was a part of one of the divisive groups we've already studied about?

Whatever the basis for the pride, their tolerance was wrong.

The erring brother and the church's proper response

First the church should have mourned the spiritual death of a brother.

And you have become arrogant, and have not mourned instead, in order that the one who had done this deed might be removed from your midst. (1 Cor. 5:2)

The Corinthians' response to this sinning brother was not spiritual, but carnal. Paul says they should have "mourned." He uses the word commonly used for the action of a family who has lost a loved one. If a man had physically died among them, they would have mourned his death and removed his dead body; but in this case, a spiritual death had taken place and they neither mourned the loss nor removed the "corpse." The implication is clear that this man's immorality was intolerable and necessitated his removal from among the congregation.

Second the church should have removed the man from among them.

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. In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. (1 Cor. 5:3-5)

Note that this man's behavior should have solicited the same response from all the members. Though Paul is not a part of the Corinthian church, he did have a responsibility to respond to the sin of this disciple. And he made clear his condemnation of the man's behavior as if he were there; and he affirmed his apostolic support of the Corinthians' actions toward the man.

Likewise all the members of the church should unite in judging this man for his sinful conduct and acting as one to remove him from their midst.

This united action was to take place in the assembly of the church.

It was to be done "in the name of the Lord Jesus" and "with the power of the Lord Jesus." These phrases suggest that the church's action is authorized and approved by Christ.

The sinning man was to be “*delivered unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh that his spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.*”

But what is the meaning of this puzzling phrase?

The expression “deliver unto Satan” is ambiguous, but amplified by parallel statements in the text such as “judge,” “remove the man from among yourselves,” and “do not associate with.”

I take it then the expression is intended to acknowledge that since the sinning man has lived according to Satan’s instructions, he should be handed over to Satan as his Lord and the one with whom he sought fellowship in his evil doing.

The Corinthians would not have had the luxury of comparing Paul’s statement with other letters written to others like we do; but it can be helpful here.

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. (2 Thes. 3:6) And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame. And yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother. (2 Thes. 3:14-15)

These verses command similar actions against deliberate sin among the membership. Take note of the sinning person, refuse association with him so that he might be ashamed of his conduct, and admonish him to repent.

The result is powerful positive peer pressure in which the sinning brother must choose between the common associations of faith and the separation that comes from living in sin. I.e. he can’t have it both ways!

The expression “for the destruction of the flesh that the spirit might be saved” has also been variously understood.

“God could permit Satan to attack the offender’s body so that the sinning believer would repent and return to the Lord.” (Wiersbe)

The best idea seems to be that this united action by the church would destroy the propensity for sin in the man and lead him to repentance, just as the sinning brethren in 2 Thes. 3 would be put to shame and be motivated to repentance.

What lessons can we learn from this text?

First it reveals God’s desire that saved people live like saved people.

We are not saved to continue in sin, but to live in holiness.

As we have seen clearly taught in Romans, salvation by grace through faith produces a life of obedience resulting in sanctification.

Second it reveals that we should see a sinning brother who has broken faith with the Lord as spiritually dead and lost.

Let me be clear. We are all sinning brethren, which we regularly acknowledge in our prayers. For such sins we continue to plead God's mercy as we acknowledge them. Such sins are generally private and do not harm the church's reputation. They are corrected as they are committed.

This brother was living in willful and defiant transgression against known truth, not sincerely seeking to follow Christ in faith. His actions jeopardized the integrity of the church's message and mission.

Third it reveals the need to act decisively against open transgression. The church shares responsibility in the sins of its members.

It is more than a matter of a private act involving "consenting adults" (Hays, 82). The Biblical teaching grows out of the tradition that the acts of the individual have impact upon the community of which he is part.

The church is affected by sin in its midst and must act to restore the erring and protect its reputation.

Conclusion: Traditionally church discipline has been generally neglected. It has not been practiced because there were not incidents of overt transgression like that of the sinning man in Corinth. Sometimes loyalty to people we like can prevent us from dealing firmly with them in their transgression. Faith in Christ requires better of us. In the lessons to follow we'll continue to fill out the picture of God's commands in this area.