

United in Christ: Overcoming the Challenges of Diversity
Studies in 1 Corinthians
The Reasons for Church Discipline

Intro: In our last lesson, we saw Paul turning his attention to other behaviors of the church, in this case the toleration of a brother guilty of incest.

In the first section we find the action of church discipline.

The church at Corinth had responded improperly, being puff up rather than having mourning the spiritual death of this man. Paul urged them out of genuine sorrow to remove the sinful man from among their association in order to destroy his fleshly desires and save his spirit. Such an action may seem extreme in our tolerant world; but for God the action is necessary.

We see in the second section additional reasons for church discipline.

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Cor. 5:6-8)

Paul's exhortations are based upon the Corinthians understanding of the Jewish laws of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Israel's Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread

The Passover was a meal in which each Jewish household shared a lamb sacrificed to provide protection from the tenth plague. Not only did the Passover prepare the way for Israel's redemption from bondage, it became a memorial meal to commemorate from year to year God's great deliverance.

In connection with the Passover was the Feast of Unleavened Bread. On the day of the Passover all leaven was to be removed from the household and for the next week Israel was required to eat unleavened bread as a reminder of their hasty departure (or the speed with which God delivered them.)

Students of Scripture could discern that these rituals had significance beyond their immediate application. They were to portray in types the great deliverance that God would provide through His son, Jesus Christ. Thus Paul makes the application to:

Spiritual Israel's Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread

Christ, our Passover has been sacrificed.

For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. (1 Cor. 5:7)

Jesus gave His life on the cross to redeem or deliver us from bondage to sin. It is intriguing to compare the sacrifice of Jesus with the sacrifice of the Jewish Passover.

A "Lamb" slain

A perfect specimen
Prepared by “fire”
Even the Passover lamb had to be attached to a stake; was this coincidence?
One offering for the whole family; thus not a bone broken
Once offered for all
To save us from death
Must stay in the house covered by blood
For those who might want to explore these comparisons more fully, I preached a lesson on this a few years ago that I can share.

We too celebrate a “Feast of Unleavened Bread.”

Just as the Jews in connection with the Passover sacrifice, put away leaven from their houses, so God’s spiritual Israel must also put away spiritual leaven. Paul calls this leaven:

“the old leaven”

“the leaven of malice and wicked”

In addition we celebrate our Passover with the “unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”

Sincerity

Truth

In view of this comparison Paul:

Exhortation to remove “leaven” from the congregation

Paul grounds his exhortation on two important truths

Toleration from sin is inconsistent with the life we have been called to live.

The disciple’s redemption by Christ calls upon him to leave the bondage of sin and live in the holiness to which he called through Christ’s death.

We are not to live in sin that grace may abound, but die to sin and live to God.

Toleration from sin results in its spread throughout the congregation.

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. (1 Cor. 5:6-7)

Since Paul is using figurative language he can move fluidly from the idea that the church celebrates the feast to the idea that the church is the bread that must not be mixed with leaven. The point of Paul’s illustration is that in celebrating our Passover the “leaven” must be removed.

Whatever the source of the Corinthian’s pride, it was causing harm to the spiritual body at Corinth, i.e. “your boasting is not good.” (a litotes for saying, “it’s bad!”) They were missing an important point. If they continued to tolerate him, the influence of this brother would spread like leaven to others.

Because of Christ those who made up the church at Corinth had been cleansed from sin. They were in that sense “unleavened.” But the rebellious practice of this incestuous brother among them would change that. Thus Paul exhorts them to “clean out the old leaven that you may be a new lump.”

The picture is one of removing all leavened dough and starting afresh with pure unmixed dough.

The “old leaven” refers to the sin of the way of life they had before they became Christians. Paul will later give a list of the kinds of things that could be called “old leaven.”

Application to Us

The reasons why Paul urged the Corinthians to act are also reasons why we should act to judge and remove the wicked person from among us.

We too have been redeemed by Christ’s sacrifice. He is our Passover too!

We too are to “celebrate the feast” not by living as we once did as non-Christians nor by resisting the teaching of God on this topic; but by living a holy life from day to day.

One of the consistent messages of Scripture is that God’s people are to be a holy people. We were saved to live sanctified lives.

Conclusion: I hope we never have to make use of this means of discipline; but if we do, we will have good reasons to do so—because Christ gave His life to redeem His people from a life of sin. We owe it to Him to live above the sins that caused Him to give His life.