

LIPSCOMB UNIVERSITY

PURITY AND COMMUNITY:
CHURCH DISCIPLINE IN 1 CORINTHIANS 5:1-13

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Occasion of the Letter

"Everything is permissible for me" (1 Cor 10:13) -- this one simple phrase perhaps sums up the attitude of Corinth. One of the most diverse cities of the ancient world, Corinth was home to people of all nationalities, socioeconomic statuses, and religious expressions.¹ This overview of Corinth helps readers better understand the issues that went on in the church as a result of their cultural context, for it was within this context that Paul founded the church of Corinth. However, the church did not retain its set-apart identity; Gilmour writes that "there was no necessary association in Greco-Roman paganism between religion and morality," and because of this, the Christians in Corinth sometimes failed to recognize the necessary moral implications of their faith.² They allowed the "anything goes" mentality of society to contaminate their faith community. As a result, a few years after its founding,³ Paul received reports of the church's errant behavior and deemed it necessary to write to them for the sake of correction and clarification.

Setting the Stage (5:1)

As we have seen, then, the main issue at hand in the writing of 1st Corinthians is concern for the purity of the church. This manifests itself clearly in chapter 5, when Paul deals with the expulsion of an unruly member who "had his father's wife", believed by most scholars to be his mother-in-law.⁴ As Paul himself points out, this was a practice considered immoral even among the pagans; Thiselton cites several ancient sources condemning such sexual practice, including Cicero and a Roman jurist Gaius.⁵ As one might expect, something so heinous as to be frowned

¹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 2-3.

² S.M. Gilmour, "First Letter to the Corinthians," IDB 1:684-92.

³ Scholars differ on the exact date of 1st Corinthians, but most place it between A.D. 53-55.

⁴ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 196

⁵ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 385.

upon in a city like Corinth is even more decidedly condemned in the Law. It is mentioned in multiple places in the Old Testament; one such example is Deuteronomy 27:20, where anyone who perpetrates such an offense is to be cursed.⁶

Paul is clearly incensed about the matter, and due to the consternation with which he addresses it, de Boer and Thiselton believe that he was already writing the letter when additional news came from Chloe, causing him to take up his pen again with a more urgent tone. Had he known of this shameful incident before he began the letter, he most likely would have addressed it at the outset.⁷ Supporting this view is the fact that he begins with the phrase, "It is actually reported..." (1 Cor 5:1), which could signify that a second message had been received. It is within this setting that Paul begins his rebuke of the Corinthians and details his instructions for handling such a matter.

The Pride of the Corinthians (5:2)

After bringing the issue to light, Paul utters incredulously, "And you are proud!" This phrase is left hanging without a clear explanation of what they are proud of, or how such pride has been displayed. Scholars differ on the interpretation of this phrase. Thiselton suggests, according to A.D. Clarke, there are three common opinions on its meaning.⁸ The first considers that the Corinthians are proud specifically of this man's action, having an arrogant misconception that it signified their freedom in Christ – that they were enlightened above "Jewish law and Gentile convention alike."⁹ Other scholars believe that the church's pride lay not in the man's sin but rather in his status and eloquence, as it is assumed that he taught in the church.¹⁰ Garland

⁶ Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 286.

⁷ Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 240.

⁸ Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 288-90.

⁹ F.F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 54.

¹⁰ Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 389.

writes that the man's influence is a likely reason that the church ignored his indiscretion; to them, the issue was more sociological than theological.¹¹

It is worth noting that the Greek phraseology includes a perfect participle, denoting action in the past which continues into the present. An English equivalent might be, "You have been proud," or, as Thiselton chooses to translate it, "You remain complacent."¹² Because of the Greek construction, it does not seem plausible that their pride was a snapshot action reflecting this particular incident. Rather, it seems to support the idea that the issue was an ongoing attitude of pride in spite of their shortcomings. Paul references this arrogance elsewhere in 1st Corinthians, which seems to indicate that it was a larger problem.¹³ The best interpretation, however, especially in light of the perfect tense "remain complacent," is that "the Corinthians were not boasting because of the immorality among them but in spite of it"¹⁴ – that they were continuing to boast although such blatant sin was perpetrated in their midst. They were not proud of the sin itself, but rather too arrogant to see its sinfulness.

Paul goes on to tell the Corinthians that instead of being proud, they should have mourned. The Greek word used for mourning seems to signify more than a feeling; rather, it is a call to take action in response to sin.¹⁵ Paul uses this sense of the word in 2nd Corinthians 12:22. In this case, he mentions a fear that when he comes again he will have to mourn over their sin, which will "lead to...drastic measures to rid them of these sins."¹⁶ Therefore, their sorrow should lead them to enforce consequences.

¹¹ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 162.

¹² Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 387.

¹³ 1 Cor 4:7; 1 Cor 4:18; 1 Cor 8:1; 1 Cor 13:4

¹⁴ Ciampa, *First Letter to the Corinthians*, 202.

¹⁵ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 163.

¹⁶ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 163-4.

Spiritual Presence (5:3-4)

The spiritual presence to which Paul refers in verses 3-4 is problematic in several ways. First, there is the question of how Paul can be "present in spirit." There are two basic views of this spiritual presence. The first is that Paul means this idiomatically, using it as a phrase equivalent to "my thoughts are with you."¹⁷ Garland and Thiselton, however, believe it to be a deeper reality than being with them in his thoughts.¹⁸ Elsewhere in the letter, Paul explains that whoever is united with the Lord is one with Him in spirit (1 Cor 6:17). Thus Garland concludes that Paul, being united with Christ in spirit, is present with them through Christ.¹⁹ Although there is a slightly more radical view suggesting that Paul has an out-of-body experience similar to what he describes in 2nd Corinthians 12:2-4,²⁰ there is not much evidence supporting this conclusion. The best interpretation, therefore, seems to be that Paul considers himself present as their leader through the unifying Spirit of the Lord.

However Paul means this ambiguous statement, although he is not physically present, he has cast a definitive verdict as he declares with authority, "As one who is present...I have already passed judgment." The Greek verb here also takes the perfect tense, signifying that Paul has already made the decision without the input of the Corinthians. The continuous action of the perfect also implies that Paul's judgment has not been retracted, and he makes no allowance for excuses; rather, "he fully expects [the church] to confirm that judgment and to seal it with immediate and decisive action when they next assemble."²¹

Due to the difficult word order of the Greek in this passage, another point of controversy regards the placement of the prepositional phrases found in verses 4 and 5. Ciampa provides a

¹⁷ Ciampa, *First Letter to the Corinthians*, 204.

¹⁸ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 165; Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 391.

¹⁹ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 165.

²⁰ Ciampa, *First Letter to the Corinthians*, 205.

²¹ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 165.

literal interpretation useful to the non-Greek scholar: "For I, though absent in the body but present in the spirit, have already passed judgment, as present, on the one who has done this thing, *in the name of our Lord Jesus*, when you have gathered together, and my spirit with the power of the Lord Jesus..."²² This is obviously a problematic construction. A detailed explanation of each interpretation is beyond the scope of this paper, but I will briefly examine the most relevant positions and their support.

An interesting interpretation, but one without adequate evidence, is that the man actually committed his indiscretion *in the name of the Lord Jesus*, meaning that it was a misguided boast of freedom in Christ.²³ This could explain Paul's emphasis on boasting, but if this were the case, it is more likely that Paul would have attacked them on the grounds of misusing Christ's name. Garland rejects this view because Paul fails to address the man's theological motives; it was the act itself that was of import, not the rationale behind it.²⁴ Others contend that the phrase refers to the church's assembly *in the name of the Lord*; Thiselton cites ancient scholars such as Chrysostom, who have used Jesus' words in Matthew 18:20 to support the idea of a church gathering in Jesus' name.²⁵ The view for which Thiselton argues, however, explains that the phrase *in the name of the Lord* refers to Paul's judgment, as his authority for such a verdict, and then that *the power of the Lord* provides validation for the execution of such judgment.²⁶ I tend to agree with this interpretation, especially in light of evidence that the name of the Lord is elsewhere used in Scripture to cast judgment on someone (2 Thess 3:6).

²² Ciampa, *First Letter to the Corinthians*, 206

²³ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 166.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 393

²⁶ Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 394.

The Destruction of the Flesh (5:5)

Here we come to one of the most widely debated aspects of the passage. First we will examine Paul's instruction to "hand over to Satan"; then what is meant by "the destruction of the flesh"; and finally how "his spirit will be saved" through this act.

A popular interpretation of the surprising phrase "hand the man over to Satan" contends that Paul borrowed his language from ancient curse formulae. James T. South writes a fascinating article critiquing the curse/death interpretation of verse 5, in which he explains that although ancient curses sometimes involve the "handing over" of an individual to a supernatural power, they were only invoked as revenge against one's enemy, and never envisioned the ultimate good of the one handed over, as Paul seems to do. There is one other place in Scripture where this phraseology is mentioned, in which Paul says that he has "handed [Hymenaeus and Alexander] over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme" (1 Tim 1:20). Here, too, the action seems to bear some salvific purpose. This leads South to conclude that "delivering the man to Satan meant putting him outside the sphere of God's protection within the church and leaving him exposed to the Satanic forces of evil in hopes that the experience would cause him to repent and return to the fellowship of the church."²⁷

Some scholars believe that the Greek word used for "destruction" is strong enough that it must connote physical death. On the other hand, there are multiple Scriptures that speak of "putting to death" the flesh in a context that obviously refers to the sinful nature rather than the physical body.²⁸ South holds the view that "the flesh to be destroyed is thus not his physical body

²⁷ James T. South, "A Critique of the Curse/Death Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 5:1-8," *NTS* 39 (1993): 539-61.

²⁸ Rom 8:13; Gal 5:24; Col 3:5

but his fleshly lusts."²⁹ This view is widely held among many scholars,³⁰ especially in light of the man's salvation, to which we will now turn.

Those who believe the destruction of the flesh refers to the man's physical death must come up with an alternate interpretation of the man's anticipated salvation, for in their thinking it cannot refer to his ultimate restoration to the church community. Thus several interpretations have been proposed. Ciampa and Garland mention that some Jews believed that death could atone for sin when linked to repentance;³¹ however, Paul makes it clear elsewhere that only the sacrifice of Christ can atone for sin (Rom 3:25). South discusses another common interpretation that his death will be prolonged, rather than immediate, to allow time for repentance.³² This explanation seems contrived, however; if his suffering will lead to repentance, what would then be the purpose of his inevitable death?

An even more radical explanation is that Paul's concern is not for the individual at all, and by saying that "the spirit might be saved" he is referring to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church.³³ South refutes this notion, however, saying that Paul would never speak of the salvation of the Holy Spirit, as the Holy Spirit itself is God's agent of redemption.³⁴ Garland also argues against this interpretation, saying that Paul only ever uses the verb "to save" in reference to humans.³⁵ To speak of saving the Holy Spirit would be unprecedented in Scripture. The best interpretation, therefore, is that the shock of expulsion and the resulting isolation would be a rude awakening for the man and elicit godly sorrow and repentance.

²⁹ South, "Curse/Death," 545

³⁰ Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 396; Ciampa, *First Letter to the Corinthians*, 208; Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 170.

³¹ Ciampa, *First Letter to the Corinthians*, 209; Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 171.

³² South, "Curse/Death," 558.

³³ Adela Collins, "The Function of Excommunication in Paul," *HTR* 73 (1980), 251-63.

³⁴ South, "Curse/Death," 557.

³⁵ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 174

Leaven and the Passover (5:6-8)

Paul speaks of the purity of the church metaphorically in his discussion of leaven and the Passover. In a literal sense, leaven was a portion of the old batch of dough that was left to ferment and act as yeast for the new batch. Because it acted as an agent of fermentation that affected a whole batch of dough, the concept of leaven came to be used in a figurative way as "something small that, when added to another entity, produced major change, whether good or bad."³⁶ However, if the process of setting aside a portion of the old dough was left unchecked for too long, it could begin to contaminate the subsequent batches of dough. Because of this, it was custom at the Passover to begin afresh with unleavened bread and purify the house of any contaminated leaven.³⁷ According to Paul's instructions, just as they physically remove the old leaven, they must also purify themselves from the contamination of this man's sin before it corrupts the whole church.

Paul tells them that they must get rid of the old leaven to be a new unleavened batch – *as they really are*. This paradoxical statement requires some explanation. On this point, however, most scholars are in agreement as to the interpretation. Thiselton explains that the imperative (clean out) builds upon the indicative (you really are) – that their behavior should result from their already-attained standing.³⁸ As Fee puts it, "What they must become is what they already are by the grace of God."³⁹ This passage is not the only one in Scripture where God's continuing work of grace is referred to in a seeming paradox – the author of Hebrews writes that "Christ has made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (Heb 10:14). This would seem to imply, then, that the timeless work of Christ is both now and not yet; that it has been completed, but is

³⁶ James C. Vanderkam, "Leaven," *NIDB* 3:627.

³⁷ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 178; Ciampa, *First Letter to the Corinthians*, 213.

³⁸ Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 403.

³⁹ Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 217.

still in progress. The Corinthians are to respond in light of their eschatological status by living up to the present standard to which they are called.

Paul's reference to the Passover here is rich with symbolism. When the Israelites prepared to leave Egypt, they were to bake bread for their journey in haste, slaughter the Passover lamb, and prepare themselves to leave their old life of slavery and embrace the newness of life that God offered. Paul's point here, then, is that because Christ has been sacrificed as the Passover lamb, they are to celebrate by leaving behind their old life of sin and to *keep the festival* with the new unleavened bread rather than the contamination of the old. Bruce concisely explains it this way: "The Passover lamb has already been killed, Paul implies, but the leaven has not yet been removed; make haste therefore and remove it!"⁴⁰ In Christ, all has been made new; thus they, too, are to be made new in *the bread of sincerity and truth* rather than clinging to the base impulses of humanity – *malice and wickedness*.

Clarification of Previous Instructions (5:9-11)

In this passage, Paul refers to a letter that he has written previously to the Corinthians, in which his instructions regarding association with immoral people were apparently misconstrued and ignored. Thus, having received the report of their behavior, he now writes again with clarification. Ciampa believes that the Corinthians misunderstood Paul to mean that they must not associate with any immoral people, including those outside the church, which instruction they deemed too impractical to follow.⁴¹ Paul affirms that it is, in fact, impossible to shelter oneself from all immorality while living in the midst of a corrupt world, but he qualifies his statement to mean that they must not associate themselves with someone who calls himself a brother but is immoral. This would seem to indicate, then, that the issue is hypocrisy; it is more

⁴⁰ Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, 57.

⁴¹ Ciampa, *First Letter to the Corinthians*, 216.

about the attitude accompanying the sin than it is about the sin itself, therefore tying back into the overall theme of purity. Paul recognizes that members of the church cannot be sinless; instead, "he is concerned about those who persist in the very activities from which they have been freed through the sacrifice of the Paschal lamb."⁴² Those inside the church, because they have been purified by the sacrifice of Christ, should be held to a higher standard.

Paul instructs the Corinthians not even to eat with such people. There is some discussion about whether this refers specifically to the Passover or if it entails the broader spectrum of any social interaction whatsoever. However, the general consensus seems to be that because there is no definitive conclusion either way, regardless of the extent of individual dissociation, the main point is that the man is to be excluded from the Christian community and their fellowship meals.⁴³ Especially in light of the Festival of Unleavened Bread which Paul has just referenced, the leaven of wickedness has no place at the Passover table.

Judgment (5:12-13)

In concluding his argument, Paul makes a distinction between judging those outside the church, and judging those inside. His rationale for refraining from the judgment of outsiders is that God will judge those outside the church, presumably in the final judgment. The church, however, is another matter entirely which requires the body to take action in condemning an unruly member. Thiselton writes that "the church as a whole has a responsibility to formulate its own house rules for the preservation of its unity and holiness," and that Paul is asserting that "to become part of the Christian community is explicitly to place oneself under the discipline of a Christian lifestyle."⁴⁴ Thus, because the man had chosen to identify with the community of believers, he had voluntarily subjected himself to its authority. In the same way, because they

⁴² Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 224.

⁴³ Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 226; Ciampa, *First Letter to the Corinthians*, 218.

⁴⁴ Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 416-17.

had accepted him into the church, the Corinthians must now also accept the responsibility of carrying out the necessary discipline.

Having made this clear, Paul ends with a conclusive statement about which there can now be no dispute: "Expel the wicked man from among you." This quote is taken from the Old Testament law (Deut 17:7), where it similarly offers the final word on situations of immorality.

Purity: The Individual and the Community

The focus of 1st Corinthians seems to revolve around the purity of the church as a whole. Ciampa believes that because of the extreme diversity of the city of Corinth, Paul wrote to keep the values of the church separate from the infiltration of the city, specifically addressing two purity concerns throughout the letter: sexual immorality and idolatry.⁴⁵ This accurately reflects the concern of 5:1-13, where the issue begins with sexual immorality. As this paper has shown, some scholars maintain that this act of immorality was a misguided declaration of freedom, which seems to indicate that the Corinthians were indeed letting themselves be influenced by Corinthian culture, attempting to rationalize their actions in the context of their faith by Christianizing social values. Fee writes that Corinthian society had indeed seeped into the church, which reflected itself in inappropriate attitudes and behaviors among the believers. The purpose of 1st Corinthians, then, was to address this contamination, as it "required radical surgery without killing the patient."⁴⁶

One manifestation of this "radical surgery" was Paul's instruction to expel the immoral brother before the leaven of wickedness infected and corrupted the whole church. In our modern individualistic society, it can be difficult to understand just how threatening this sin was to the

⁴⁵ Ciampa, *First Letter to the Corinthians*, 21.

⁴⁶ Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 4.

community. Garland states plainly, "They are either leavened dough or unleavened dough."⁴⁷

The immorality could not be compartmentalized or swept under the rug. Another theme that surfaces in 1st Corinthians is that of not causing one's brother to stumble.⁴⁸ If, then, the sin is in danger of corrupting others, it must be dealt with to retain the purity and solidarity of the community. Elsewhere Paul does speak of the body of Christ as being made up of many individual parts, but even here it is inexorably tied to the common theme of unity: there are many parts, but they make up one body.⁴⁹ In light of this metaphor, it is interesting to consider the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:30 – "If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off... It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go to hell." Although the emphasis in 1st Corinthians 5:1-13 and in the letter as a whole seems to be on the purity of the community, Paul is also concerned with the individual, expressing hope that the discipline will bring him to repentance and he will ultimately be saved.

Conclusion

Discipline within the church is shown to be necessary for the twofold purpose of restoring the individual and preserving the purity of the community. The church has been given the authority to discipline its own, but how does this play out in today's culture of megachurches where members do not know each other's personal lives? A mistake that some make is to apply it individualistically, by personally ostracizing a deviant friend within the church. However, this is a serious misapplication of the passage, as it removes it from context and seeks to implement the "letter of the law" without understanding the framework surrounding it. First, Paul clearly says that this discipline is to be carried out within the assembly of the church. Second, as we have already seen, the purpose of such discipline is primarily to maintain the purity of the church. If

⁴⁷ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 181.

⁴⁸ 1 Cor 8:9, 10:32.

⁴⁹ Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 12:12-31.

the church is in no danger of being led astray by a member's wrongdoing, one must question if the passage is still applicable. In conclusion, I would argue that this passage should only be applied in similar contexts of close-knit community where explicit errant behavior would 1) affect the purity of the group as a whole and 2) act as a rude awakening to the perpetrator which could lead to repentance and restoration.

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