Church Discipline - Comments on 1 Corinthians 5

5:1-5 - Paul now turns to another problem in the Corinthian church: gross immorality (incest) in the life of a member. Corinth had a very immoral environment and the Christians there faced more constant temptation than most. In the next chapter Paul deals with immorality in general, but the case in chapter 5 is exceptionally bad.

It is actually reported (by those from Chloe's household? - 1:11) that there is sexual immorality [KJV: fornication] among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. From Paul's wording, she was probably the offender's step-mother rather than his mother. Still both Greek and Jewish law recognized this as incest, the sin of sexual relations with a near relative - Leviticus 18:8; Deuteronomy 22:30; 27:20. Pagan society had deteriorated to the point of accepting homosexuality, but incest was still abhorrent to them (as witnessed in the Greek tragedy Oedipus Rex). Incest is an increasing problem in our times, with parents sexually abusing children and the children abusing each other. This is a sign of how far moral decay has progressed.

And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? Such behavior was an outrage against Christ's moral standards. How in the world could the Corinthian Christians be proud of the situation? Probably they were proud of being tolerant and broad-minded, of allowing "Christian liberty" - compare 6:12,13. Actually immorality is an abuse of Christian liberty. We are under grace but that never means lowering God's moral standards. Grace should produce more obedience to God than law does. God does not approve when we keep flagrant sinners in the fellowship of the church. Such sin contradicts the very nature of the church.

Paul explains God's will for such a case. Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I am present. Apostles were given the authority to "bind and loose," to forgive and to condemn - John 20:23; 1 Timothy 1:19,20; compare Matthew 18:18 where the church is given the same authority in cases rightly judged. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus (in the authority given to you by him) and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present - This shows how terrible and real this action is; the Lord actually participates when the church puts a member out of fellowship. Compare Matthew 18:15-20, particularly verse 20.

The whole church must be assembled and must act as one. Church discipline cannot have its saving effect if some members are for and some against the offender. A case of church discipline tests the unity of a congregation to its limits. In order for discipline to function as scripture intends, three things are necessary: 1) The church must be well-taught about the necessity, purposes and process of scriptural church discipline before a case actually comes up, so they can understand and act together. 2) The elders must be united and well-qualified and must lead in a way that will keep the respect and trust of the whole congregation. If they always work on their relationship to the church, it will enable the church to hold together and follow their lead in times of crisis. 3) The unity of the church must be constantly maintained and fine-tuned, with tensions and cracks taken care of before they grow serious. If there are "two congregations under one roof" as in some places, a case of discipline may tear the church apart. To avoid division, leaders may be tempted to ignore Paul's command in this chapter.

hand this man over to Satan [NASB: deliver such a one to Satan]. As sure as the things we believe in are real, this is one of the most fearful things that can happen to a Christian. Normally, in the fellowship of the church, a Christian is protected by God from many things Satan would like to do to him/her. God will not allow us to be tried beyond our ability - 1 Corinthians 10:13. As God put fences around Job beyond which Satan could not go, so he protects the Christian. But here a man is handed over to Satan for Satan to do his worst. The writer of these notes heard of a case in Africa where a week after a man was disfellowshiped, he was dead. The church did not pray for this, but it happened. Our God is gracious but he is also awesome and terrible. He cannot be mocked or his holiness treated lightly. Compare 11:27-34 where many of the Corinthians were ill and some had died because they abused the
Lord's Supper. Compare also 7:14; 11:10; 3:16,17.

so that the sinful nature [NASB: his flesh; NIV margin: his body] may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord (the day of final judgment). Paul hopes that the man's rebellious nature may be removed by the discipline of Satan's attacks and by the disapproval he feels from the church. The physical and emotional torments of Satan may humble the sinner and bring him to repentance. Hymenaeus and Alexander of Ephesus were delivered to Satan by Paul "to be taught not to blaspheme" - 1 Timothy 1:20.

The first purpose of excommunication is to save the soul of the offender by bringing him/her to repentance. It apparently worked in this case at Corinth - see 2 Corinthians 2:5-11.

5:6-8 - Your boasting is not good (you should have mourned). Don't you know that a little yeast [NASB, KJV: leaven] works through the whole batch of dough? Scripture uses yeast as a picture of spreading influence--sometimes evil influence as here and in Matthew 16:6, and sometimes the saving influence of the gospel - Matthew 13:33. If sinful people remain in the church, it will appear that the church accepts such behavior, and others will be influenced to sin. Compare 15:33 - "Bad company corrupts good character." The second purpose of excommunication is to protect other Christians.

Paul has in mind the Old Testament feast of the Passover and Unleavened Bread, in which all yeast was removed from the households of the Israelites to signify the removal of evil from their lives - Exodus 13:3-7; 12:19; Deuteronomy 16:1-4. Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast:-as you really are (that is your true nature and calling as Christians). For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Jesus died at Jewish Passover time. He was the Lamb that takes away the sin of the world - John 1:29; Isaiah 53:7. His blood covers and takes away our sins and saves us from God's wrath, just as the blood of the first Passover lamb on the Israeli door posts caused the death angel to pass over their houses and spare their firstborn.

Therefore let us keep the festival (not the Old Testament Passover itself, but Lord's Supper, or perhaps the whole celebration of Christian fellowship), not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness (such as the present case of incest), but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth. Compare John 4:24 - "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." Compare also 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1.

5:9-11 - I have written you in my letter (a letter now lost) not to associate with sexually immoral people--not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave the world. The Corinthians may have misunderstood Paul's meaning in the first letter and he clarifies it here. In fact, we must have some contact with outsiders if we are to win them to Christ. But inside the church it is a different matter. Our association with a sinful brother or sister would communicate approval.

But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy [NASB: covetous], an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. The greed mentioned here would be that which is strong enough to drive a person to do wrong. We are to tolerate each other's ordinary human weaknesses, but the sins listed here are extreme. One who continues in them is not sincerely following Christ. Just as there are things a person will not tolerate within his own household, so there are things which the church, the household of God, cannot tolerate. They are contrary to the whole nature of the church. For other teaching on excommunication and similar action, see Matthew 18:15-20; Romans 16:17,18; 2 Thessalonians 3:10-14; Titus 3:10.

with such a man do not even eat. Eating together is a sign of social acceptance and fellowship. For church discipline to be effective, it must be done by the whole church in unison and the offender must feel the withdrawal and disapproval of all. If his fellow Christians continue to eat with him and associate as if nothing were wrong, the discipline will be a mere formality and will fail in its purpose.

The command to withdraw fellowship from a sinner is one of the hardest in the New Testament for
Christians to obey. It is against our nature. We like to ignore such problems and hope they go away. We
want to “rock the boat” or confront people or cause pain. But we must realize that the withdrawal
commanded here is an act of love. Sometimes love has to be tough. It takes the greatest love to do the
hardest but necessary things. Excommunication is to be dreaded and avoided except as a last resort. It
is like amputating an arm to save the rest of the body, but sometimes it is the only saving thing left for the
church to do.

5:12,13 - What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those
inside? God will judge those outside. This may have a bearing on the question of whether Christians
should get heavily involved in social activism. Are we to picket or boycott stores which sell pornography,
or to demonstrate at abortion clinics? While this passage is saying that our primary focus is to be on
keeping purity in the church so that it can continue to light the world, it probably does not exclude all
efforts to fight evil in our communities. Even if I were not a Christian but believed in morality, I would feel
obligated to improve community standards as much as possible. The writer of these notes would not
want to support with his business a company that is undermining our nation morally and so helping to
destroy it. At the same time, it is certainly a mistake to give most of our time and attention to worldly
battles against evil while neglecting the gospel work which alone will change society in any lasting sense.
Christians will differ in judgment about how much to get involved in activism, and we need to be tolerant
of those who differ with us on the question.

God judges the outsiders through the authorities he has placed over them (Romans 13:1-7), through his
temporal judgments from time to time, and in the final judgment. "Expel the wicked man from among you"
purity and discipline from his people in every age. This command is Paul's bottom line, his last word on
the issue. There is nothing else the church can do if it is to survive morally and spiritually, if it is to be the
church.

The third purpose of excommunication, not specifically mentioned in this chapter, is to preserve the
witness of the church. If outsiders see the church full of wickedness, they will not take our preaching of
the gospel seriously. Unbelievers may not be ready to change their own lives, but they expect professed
Christians to. They watch us closely. If the church does not maintain Christ's standards, then lifestyles
and attitudes in the church will deny the gospel we preach and undermine the church's credibility.

In the churches the writer of these notes is closest to, we have almost ceased to obey Paul's command in
this chapter. Part of it may be that our whole society has lost the concept of discipline and the backbone
to do what has to be done. Part of it may be an over-reaction to a time in our brotherhood history when
excommunication was abused. There was a time when members were disfellowshipped not for clear
scriptural causes but for personal disagreements with leaders, or for differences over matters of opinion.
Such abuse is to be avoided, but we must understand that the repentance of sinners, the security of other
Christians and the success of the gospel depend on the proper use of church discipline.

Finally, we need to remember that church discipline involves far more than just putting people out of the
church. Excommunication is only a small and rarely-used part of it. Discipline involves our public and
personal teaching about right and wrong. It involves warning people about sin and encouraging them to
do right. It involves coming alongside people when we know that they are going through temptation,
noticing when they are missing at church. It means getting involved as shepherds in people's spiritual
struggles before their lives deteriorate and things get too bad to fix. It means helping people who have
marriage and family problems. It involves approaching people about their problems in some cases before
they ask for help. It involves investigating reports and grievances and helping wrongdoers to repentance
so they won't have to be put out of fellowship. Where shepherding and teaching and the lesser forms of
discipline are faithfully practiced, the church seldom has to excommunicate a member.