

The Harvester



Preparing Souls

To Serve The Lord



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Paul's Concern About Tolerating Sin (PART 1)

By Brian R. Kenyon

Since shortly after the sixth day of creation, sin has always been a problem (Gen. 3:1-6). God's people have dealt with sin's consequences and how to solve its blight (Gen. 3:7-24). Although God graciously provided the remedy for sin through the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ (Gen. 3:15; Mt. 1:21, 23; Jn. 3:16; Heb. 2:9), God's people have not always availed themselves of His sure prescription for remission of sins. Sometimes they even tolerate sin in fellow "followers" of God. Such was the case in the church at Corinth. Examining Paul's instruction on how the Corinthians were to deal with sin in the church (1 Cor. 5:1-13) and applying its principles will keep the church in good standing with God, even today.

The Fact of Fornication

Paul described the problem in Corinth,

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

This infamous case of fornication was known throughout the Corinthian community. "Reported commonly [actually reported, ASV]" denotes something that was repeated everywhere by many people (Winters 60). The fornication present in the church at Corinth was such that even the pagans would disapprove. "Not so much as named among the Gentiles [not even among the Gentiles, ASV; not tolerated even among pagans, ESV]" does not mean that it

never occurred, but that even pagans in general considered it wrong (cf. Israel's laws, Lev. 18:8; 20:11; Deut. 22:30; 27:20). "Father's wife" (literally, "wife of the father") may be interpreted various ways, but probably refers to his stepmother rather than his biological mother (cf. Lev. 18:7-8).

Rather than mourning over the individual who was lost in such sin, the Corinthians were arrogantly proud and boastful of their toleration of it. They seemed to have had the "live and let live" attitude often heard today: "Let people live how they want as long as they aren't hurting anyone else." The term "puffed up [arrogant, NAS]" refers to arrogant pride (cf. 1 Cor. 4:6). The Corinthians thought more highly of themselves than they should have for tolerating such sin in their midst. Even though they may not have been personally involved in this fornication, the mere approval of it by letting it remain in the church was sinful (cf. Rom. 1:32).

The fact that they were "puffed up" and "have not ... mourned" revealed their weak spiritual state. The first two character traits of the kingdom given by Jesus were not present in the Corinthians, which means the remaining character traits of the kingdom could not exist. Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted" (Mt. 5:3-4). The Corinthians were the opposite. "Puffed up" is the antithesis of "poor in spirit" and "have not ... mourned" is the antithesis of "mourned," which means to lament, as if for one dead. In the context of the Beatitudes, this refers to being filled with grief

over sin (cf. Jas. 4:8-10). Rather than arrogantly tolerating fornication in their midst, the church at Corinth should have withdrawn fellowship from the fornicator as Paul will further instruct.

Today's culture is very arrogant in its toleration, even promotion, of many sins, including this sin crippling Corinth. "Fornication [sexual immorality NKJ]" (from *porneia*, πορνεία) is basically defined as "prostitution, unchastity, fornication, of every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse [i.e., interaction]" (Bauer 693). Fornication is an "umbrella term" that includes every kind of "unlawful" (by God's standards) sexual activity, such as adultery, pre-marital sex, and homosexuality. Because society is so accepting of these sins, it becomes easier for Christians to be deceived into thinking there is virtue in tolerating sin in the church. While many churches of Christ would not openly tolerate a man living in fornication with his mother or stepmother (though a few might), there are far too many congregations that tolerate adulterous "remarriages" (in violation of Matthew 19:9). Unfortunately, a person can find a church of Christ somewhere that teaches just about anything. However, what a local church of Christ teaches is not the standard of right or wrong. God is the standard, and what He reveals in the Bible is the truth that should be practiced (2 Tim. 3:16-17). No human, no matter how sincere or "loving," can change that (Gal. 1:6-9 cf. Rom. 3:4)!

Disfellowship Demanded

Paul's absence did not prevent him from determining the proper action for this situation:

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, ⁴In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁵To 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. (1 Cor. 5:3-5)

Paul could not be with them physically, but his heart, mind, and judgment were with their situation (cf. Col. 2:5). Paul's handling of it does not merely reflect his opinion, but the teaching he received from the Lord (cf. 1 Cor. 14:37). It does not take the physical presence of an apostle to know what is unscriptural and how to correct it! The standard is God's word (Col. 3:17), which does not change (Jude 3).

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The fornicator was to be turned over to Satan (1 Cor. 5:4-5). This was to be done by the authority (“in the name”) of Christ (1 Cor. 5:4a). This was also to be done during the assembly (1 Cor. 5:4b). “When you are gathered together [assembled, NAS]” may refer either to a regular church assembly or to a special assembly called to deal with this situation (cf. Mt. 18:15-20). In either case, the action was to be taken before the entire congregation (cf. Mt. 18:17). Not only would this action be done with Paul’s mental involvement (1 Cor. 5:3), but also, when done, it would actually be Christ’s action, working through His church (cf. 2 Cor. 2:10).

Withdrawing fellowship was to publicly acknowledge that the offender belonged to the realm of Satan (1 Cor. 5:5). Withdrawing fellowship being described as “to deliver ... unto Satan” (1 Cor. 5:5a cf. 1 Tim. 1:20) shows that to be excluded from the fellowship of the church is to be delivered into the realm outside of God’s fellowship, the realm where Satan rules (cf.

Eph. 2:12; Col. 1:13; 1 Jn. 5:19). “For the destruction of the flesh” (1 Cor. 5:5b) best refers to the intended result of withdrawing fellowship—repentance and the destruction of the fleshly relationship between this brother and the woman (cf. 1 Cor. 6:16-18; Rom. 6:6, 12-13). Some take it to mean physical sickness or death inflicted either by Satan (cf. Job 2:6-8; 2 Cor. 12:7), or by apostolic power (cf. Acts 5:1-10; 13:8-11), but such seems out of harmony with God’s purpose (cf. Lk. 9:51-56). The purpose of delivering to Satan is to save the soul (2 Thes. 3:14-15)!

Withdrawing fellowship from church members living in sin does not seem to be a common practice today. If the reason were because very few church members lived in sin, there would be reason to rejoice. However, the present culture’s tolerance for sin influencing the church seems to be the main factor. The church should be influencing society (cf. Mt. 5:13-16; Jn. 17:20-26), but too often society’s influence wins over the church. People continue to have a “live and let live” attitude, thinking, “Let people live how they want as long as they aren’t hurting anyone else.” Wrong! Paul showed next that tolerating sin in the church *does* hurt others—the entire church!

Eliminating Leaven

Paul gave another reason for withdrawing fellowship: the fornicator’s sin can infect and corrupt the entire congregation:

Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? ⁷Purge 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: ⁸Therefore 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. (1 Cor. 5:6-8)

Proud toleration of sin is not good (cf. Rev. 2:14-15, 20)! Sin, like leaven, will negatively permeate the entire congregation (cf. Mt. 13:33; Gal. 5:9). The “old leaven” of sin, therefore, must be cleaned out. As Israel was instructed to remove all leaven from their houses on Passover eve (Ex. 12:15, 20; 13:6-7), so the Corinthians must completely remove the sinful influence. Paul’s reference to “a new lump ... unleavened” demonstrated that the church is not a body of worldly people, but is a body of people “recreated” in purity, without the old leaven of sin (cf. 1 Cor. 6:11; 12:13; 2 Cor. 5:17).

Paul further stated that since Christ, the Christian’s Passover, has already been sacrificed, it is past

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time for all “leaven” to be removed (cf. Ex. 12:15; 13:7). Christ died as the Passover sacrifice (cf. Jn. 1:29; 1 Pet. 1:18-19; Rev. 5:6, 12), yet the Corinthians had not removed from their midst the “leaven” of sin. “The feast” Paul mentioned here is figuratively the new, perpetual “Passover” feast, established by the sacrifice of Christ, in which no “leaven” of sin is to return (cf. Rom. 6:1-14; 2 Cor. 5:17). The “old leaven” is characterized by “malice [hateful feelings] and wickedness [evil, ESV],” but the “unleavened bread” is characterized by “sincerity and truth.”

Christians today must not think they can let sin hang around their lives! The wise man rhetorically asked, “Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned?” (Pr. 6:27). Paul later told the Corinthians, “Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners,” or “Evil company corrupts good habits” (1 Cor. 15:33, NKJ). Whether the sin itself or those who practice it, Christians will be negatively impacted by tolerating sin. Like permeating leaven, a little bit of sin allowed consistent exposure in the life of a Christian will spiritually bring him or her down! We must constantly be on guard for the deceptive devil who seeks to devour (1 Pet. 5:8).

Conclusion

Sin is a problem (Rom. 3:23; 6:23). It will wreck an individual as well as a congregation (Rev. 2-3). God has graciously provided the way for individuals to be saved from sin (Mk. 16:16; Acts 2:38) and the way to keep individuals saved from sin (1 Jn. 1:6-10). The local church consists of individuals who have been saved (Acts 2:47). However, when the local body of saved people tolerate individuals in their midst who do not follow God’s plan of staying saved, they jeopardize the entire congregation. Paul’s inspired instruction of withdrawing fellowship, when practiced will keep the congregation in a right standing with God.

In Part 2, consideration will be given to the limits of withdrawing fellowship. The potential abuse of disfellowship as discipline will also be addressed.

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