

Purify the Body of Christ [Slide 1] 1 Corinthians 5

Immorality in the church is like cancer in the body. If you don't get rid of it, it will spread and threaten the spiritual life of the church.

Chuck Colson tells the following story in his book Kingdoms in Conflict. Read pp. 88-89 Lavender book. It is not too surprising that those outside the church should think that the church has no authority over its members and no authority to hold them to any kind of moral standard. That's because they don't know the head of the church. The truth is that not only has God authorized the church to hold its members accountable, God commands the church to remove those who repeatedly commit immorality.

I invite you to turn to 1 Corinthians 5 in your Bible. 1 Corinthians is the seventh book in the NT after the four gospels, Acts, and Romans. 1 Corinthians 5. The main idea of this chapter is that the church must remove unrepentant immoral professing Christians from its midst lest evil spread in the church.

[Slide 2] Let's begin with Paul's instructions in the case of incest in verses 1-8. Read. A case of immorality in the Corinthian church had come to Paul's attention, a case so depraved that even the Gentiles or the unsaved did not normally practice it. A man had taken his father's wife, presumably his stepmother since she is not called his mother. The Greek verb used here indicates that Paul is referring to an ongoing sexual liaison, not to a one night fling.

If you recall from my introduction to the book of 1 Corinthians I stated that Corinth had a reputation as being one of the most degenerate of all Greek cities. However, here was a case where a church member was conducting himself in a way that most depraved Corinthians would not act- a real embarrassment to the church and to Jesus.

[Slide 3] The word immorality refers to any sexual sin committed outside the will of God. Normally it refers to any sexual activity outside the marriage of one man and one woman.

What was the response of the church leadership to this situation, these leaders who felt themselves so superior to the apostle Paul? They continued in their arrogance. They did not grieve the blatant and public sin of their fellow Christian. Paul says they should have mourned and they should have removed this man from their midst.

I fear that we have lost the capacity to mourn sin. We are so bombarded with sin from TV, books, music, social media, movies, particularly sexual sins, that we have lost the ability to be shocked by sin or to grieve it. That's what happens when you're inundated with sin. You become insensitive to it. The believers in Corinth lived in a city just as morally corrupt as our country and they were willing to overlook gross sin in in their own church.

It is the responsibility of church leaders to confront ongoing immorality in the church. Unfortunately, too often it is the church leaders themselves who are guilty of such immorality.

Paul says in verse 3 that he had already judged this man in the name of the Lord Jesus while Paul was away from Corinth and when the church assembled together they were to announce Paul's judgment. Paul uses the phrase "in the name of the Lord" to indicate he has the Lord's authority to intervene in this particular situation since the church leaders were doing nothing about it.

[Slide 4] What was Paul's judgment? Paul says in verse 5 that he had decided to deliver this man over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh that his spirit might be saved in the day of the

Lord Jesus. What in the world does that mean? There are a number of possibilities. One possibility is that Paul means by turning the man over to Satan that he is referring to excommunicating the man from the church so that rather than walking in the realm of the Holy Spirit he is out in the world walking in Satan's realm and subject to Satan's increased attacks on the man's body. This could be similar to what Jesus said in the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:34 where Jesus said that the master of the unforgiving servant would be turned over to the torturers (I believe demons) until the unforgiving servant had paid what he owed. In Acts 5 Ananias and Sapphira are both drop dead for lying to the Holy Spirit, but the passage doesn't explain who actually killed them. It could have been God or it could be that was an example of Peter turning them over to Satan to destroy their bodies.

Flesh could mean not the physical body but rather flesh in the sense of that part of us that is opposed to God: our sinful habits and self-dependent ways that are the opposite of relying on the Holy Spirit. Paul could mean that he is praying that Satan would so lead this man down into sin's depravity that he would hit rock bottom, feel the full painful effects of sin and, as a result, repent of his fleshly ways, in essence destroying his old fleshly ways. It probably would not be Satan's intent to get the man to repent. Satan's intent would probably be to lead the man as deeply into sin as possible, but the natural consequences of sin might jolt the man into returning to the Lord. This is similar to the kind of prayer where you ask God to let a person fall so far down that they're finally willing to look up to the Lord.

The ultimate goal of this judgment would be for the man's spirit to be preserved or saved in the day of Jesus. One goal of church discipline is that a person would repent and be delivered or saved out of the rule of sin in their life. I believe Paul is using the word saved here in the sense of delivered out of the rule and power of sin.

To summarize, I'm not sure whether flesh in verse 5 refers to the physical body or that part of us that is opposed to God and that relies on self. I'm not sure if Paul is talking about Satan killing people or so leading people into such sin that they actually repent and "kill" or put away their own fleshly instincts. If Paul is talking about Satan killing people the idea is probably letting Satan kill people so that they don't become even further enmeshed and enslaved in their sin. If he is talking about Satan inadvertently destroying a man's fleshly nature by leading him so far into sin that he repents and puts away his fleshly tendencies, then he is saved from sin's presence that way.

Ultimately it doesn't matter what Paul meant. You don't want to find out what he meant. You don't want to sin and live in such an unrepentant state that you find out what he meant. What you want is to be sensitive to any exhortations to repent so that you never face such a possible judgment.

In verse 6 Paul addresses the leaders who were boasting. I'm not sure why they were boasting. Maybe they thought they were being open-minded and gloriously tolerant of this man's sin and were boasting in their enlightened attitudes. Sound familiar? Whatever the reason for their boasting, Paul warns them that if they don't discipline this man, his continuing presence is going to corrupt the whole church.

[Slide 5] Paul uses the analogy of leaven or yeast. Put a little yeast in the dough and soon the yeast has multiplied and spread throughout the whole loaf. If you allow one person to blatantly sin without any public correction, soon others will be tempted to sin as well. People become discouraged in their own efforts to live holy lives if they see someone else sinning and not experiencing any discipline or consequences. Why should I be honest when everyone around me is dishonest? Why should I refrain from gossiping when everyone else does it? Sure, we are

supposed to live righteously simply to please God, but the reality is that we are helped by our fellow Christians. When they live godly lives we are encouraged to live godly lives and when they live ungodly lives we are discouraged to live godly lives.

Paul refers to the Passover tradition of removing all leaven from the house before Passover. Clean out the old leaven of sin so that you might be a new lump, free from all corruption. Remember Jesus was sacrificed so that we might be cleansed of all sin. Celebrate God's feast not with the old leaven of malice or wickedness but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Paul hoped that through the process of church discipline that the sinning Christian would repent, but notice that the primary rationale Paul gives for church discipline is the protection of the body of Christ from the rot that occurs when sin is not confronted.

[Slide 6] Church discipline is therefore an act of faith because it is impossible to measure its effectiveness. If a major purpose of church discipline is to protect the church from sin spreading, you'll never know how much sin you prevented by exercising church discipline. If the sinner repents you can see that result, but if the sinner doesn't repent, that doesn't mean that you have not reaped benefits from church discipline. This is one of those cases where we do it because God tells us to do it and we may not be able to prove to outsiders or even ourselves the benefits of church discipline.

[Slide 7] Paul goes beyond the specific example in verses 1-8 to talk generally about church discipline in verses 9-13. Let's read those verses. Read verses 9-13.

First, Paul makes clear that the people we discipline are professing believers in Christ. You are not to separate yourselves from immoral nonbelievers because then you would have to isolate yourself from the world. God has not called us to do that. We have no role or responsibility in disciplining non-Christians. We can proclaim what is sin and what is not, but we have no responsibility or authority to try to get non-Christians to change their moral behavior. Understand I am talking about our personal interactions with people. I am not talking about the category of passing legislation in the nation. All legislation in a nation necessarily prohibits or requires certain behaviors of both non-Christians and Christians. Christians have as much right to influence the nation's laws as does anyone else, so don't apply what I am saying to the category of legislation.

People can't stop sinning without first being saved and receiving the Holy Spirit in their lives, so our first concern with people of the world always needs to be the Gospel. They first need Jesus and then we can talk about changing behavior.

[Slide 8] Second, note that Paul has included with his category of immoral people also those who are covetous, swindlers and idolaters in verse 10 and in verse 11 he adds revilers and drunkards to the list, so Paul is not limiting church discipline to sexual sins. The way Paul describes people in terms of categories-swindler, drunkard, reviler indicates he is referring to people who so habitually commit those sins that they have become characterized by them. We are not talking about people who have committed the sin but then repented of them. We are not talking about people who are struggling to get free of the sin, but have not yet fully succeeded. We are talking about people, such as the man committing incest, who are set in their sin and showing no signs of trying to flee it.

But we also need to ask the more difficult question of whether all ongoing sins should be subject to church discipline or just certain sins. Paul doesn't answer that question and to my knowledge, nowhere in the Bible do we have a definitive answer. Should overeating or gluttony

be subject to church discipline? Should watching pornography be subject to church discipline? Should cheating at school or on your income taxes be subject to church discipline?

I think the church leadership will need to seek the Spirit's counsel on these situations, but my guess is that not all sins warrant church discipline. Given Paul's concern in this passage that the church not be corrupted by sins left undisciplined, my guess is that sins which pose no threat to corrupting the body of Christ probably do not warrant church discipline.

[Slide 9] Third, note that Paul says not to associate with any so-called brother in verse 11. The Greek word translated as so-called is a present middle participle that means "naming oneself" a brother. Sometimes we wonder whether the person committing such repeated sin is truly a Christian. We don't have to make that judgment. If the person professes or claims to be a Christian, then they are subject to church discipline. We take them at their word that they are a believer.

[Slide 10] Fourth, as an example of what Paul means by not associating with someone, he says at the end of verse 11 not to even eat with such a one. Some have said that the eating is a technical term referring to the Lord's Supper. You should bar that person from partaking in communion but not otherwise disassociating with them. Others say that not eating with them is an idiom for not fellowshiping with them at all because eating together was a common form of fellowship.

I believe Paul has the last idea in mind because he quotes a saying from Deuteronomy that appears at the end of verse 13. Remove the wicked one or the evil from among yourselves. If you go to the cross references in Deuteronomy you will find this statement a number of times after someone has been publicly executed for their sin and the text says to remove the wicked from yourselves. Physical death illustrates the complete cessation of all involvement with that person and so I think Paul has that in mind with the possible exception of meeting with the person in order to exhort them to repent.

We have had one time where we exercised church discipline and that is what the elders said to the congregation, that we did not think people should get together with those involved unless it was for the purpose of challenging them to stop their sinful choices.

In that case none of the people involved have repented of their sin, yet. So we did not see the desired effect of personal repentance. However, our congregation for many years, as far as I know, was free from those particular sins.

Let me give you an analogy that our worship planning team developed for this topic. Think of the church as this lovely rose, full of thorns and yet still a beautiful flower. Some weeds start growing in the pot with the rose. You know what will happen if you let those weeds grow without removing them? Eventually they will kill off the rose and so, as a gardener you want to remove those weeds, but you better put on some gloves, maybe some kid gloves, because once you set to remove those weeds it's possible that you will get stuck by some thorns along the way. Church discipline is usually a painful process for everyone involved: for the one sinning, for the ones confronting, and even for those observing.

[Slide 11] I have had a number of people over the years tell me how emotionally painful it was for them when we went through church discipline even though they were not directly involved. It is painful because when you are a true body you feel the pain of the victims, you feel the disappointment of how a brother or sister let you down, you grieve the negative choices of the offenders. You have to brave the thorns to remove the weeds. If you want to preserve the rose, then you have to get rid of the weeds.

In our church by-laws, Article 2 provides a detailed procedure for church discipline which if you are a member, you should have read at some point. Anyone who has become a member after those By-Laws were approved should have read them as part of the membership process. When you became a member you agreed to be a member with full knowledge of our process of church discipline so that you know the process we will use if we need to. Hopefully, that will go a long way to protecting us from what happened to the church in my opening illustration.

I want to close with an example where church discipline brought about the repentance of the offender. This is from Bob Ahlber, pastor of the Roscoe Evangelical Free Church in Roscoe, Illinois. Read.

As I said earlier, we don't always get to see the repentance, but I am convinced that God will bless a church that carries out church discipline when it is required. I believe God has blessed our church for confronting the sin in our midst. I hope we never have to do it again. Let's pray.