

Tyndale's Commentary 1 Corinthians Chapter 5

A. A case of incest (5:1–13)

1. The fact (5:1–2)

Paul draws attention to a case of incest at Corinth. He says more about the church's error in countenancing it than he does about the offender's guilt. He says nothing about the woman, which may mean that she was a pagan (v. 12).

1. The beginning is rather abrupt; Paul is not wasting time on niceties. The exact nature of the sin is not clear. Sexual immorality (*porneia*) strictly denotes the use of the harlot (*pornē*), but comes to signify any form of sexual sin. *Has* might mean 'has as wife' or 'has as concubine'. His father's wife probably does not mean 'his mother', else Paul would have said so. But whether it means that the offender had seduced his step-mother, or that the woman was divorced from his father, or that the father had died, leaving her a widow, is not clear. What is quite clear is that an illicit union of a particularly unsavoury kind had been contracted. That it does not occur even among pagans does not mean that it never occurred, but that it was infrequent and that it was condemned as evil. It was, for example, forbidden by Roman law, and, of course, by the Old Testament (Lev. 18:8; 20:11; Deut. 22:30; 27:20). Perhaps we should notice that Hurd tries to minimize the evil by seeing it as 'a real possibility' that Paul is referring to a 'spiritual marriage' (p. 278). But could a spiritual union be called *porneia*?

2. The attitude of church members to this happening had been all wrong. They were proud ('puffed up'; see on 4:6); their view of their superior standing, rather than a decent Christian humility, had governed their behaviour. Evidently they saw their Christian freedom as giving them licence for almost any kind of conduct (cf. 6:12; 10:23). Paul says that they should rather have been filled with grief. His verb (*epenthēsate*) is often, though not by any means exclusively, used of mourning for the dead. It may accordingly be a hint that the church has suffered a bereavement (cf. Moffatt, 'You ought much rather to be mourning the loss of a member!'). Paul uses the conjunction *hina*, which, in this context, may indicate contemplated result, i.e. what the result of the mourning would have been, the removal of the offender. Or it may be equivalent to an imperative, 'Let him ... be taken away' (cf. rsv, Moffatt).

2. The punishment of the offender (5:3–5)

Matters cannot be allowed to rest there. Paul proceeds to the punishment that must be given to the offender.

3. 'For' (which niv omits) links this with the foregoing; what follows arises out of what Paul has already said. It is emphatic. The Corinthians had failed in their duty, but the apostle's attitude is in sharp contrast. Those who were present and might have been expected to take action had done nothing. He who was absent, and might have pleaded distance as an excuse for inaction, was

taking strong measures. Paul has a striking description of a disciplinary assembly. He himself is not physically present, but he is there in spirit (cf. Col. 2:5). He has already passed judgment, where the perfect tense of his verb gives an air of finality to the sentence. He does not name the offender, but characterizes him from his deed.

4. Verses 3–5 are one long and difficult sentence in the Greek. The biggest problems arise from the fact that we can take in the name of our Lord Jesus and ‘with’ (which niv omits) the power of our Lord Jesus with more than one part of the sentence. Conzelmann lists six possibilities and there are others. Here are seven possible views.

1. We could take ‘in the name’ with ‘when you are assembled’, and ‘with the power’ with ‘hand over’ (‘assembled in the name ... and hand over with the power ...’).

2. Both could go with ‘are assembled’ (‘assembled in the name and with the power’).

3. Both could go with ‘hand over’ (‘hand over in the name and with the power’).

4. Both could go with both.

5. ‘In the name’ could go with ‘hand over’ and ‘with the power’ with the participial clause ‘when you are assembled’ (‘when you are assembled with the power ... to hand over in the name ...’).

6. ‘In the name’ could go with ‘passed judgment’ and ‘with the power’ with ‘you are assembled’ (‘I have passed judgment in the name ... when you are assembled with the power ...’).

7. ‘In the name’ could go with ‘passed judgment’ and ‘with the power’ with ‘hand over’ (‘I have passed judgment in the name ... with the power you are to hand over ...’).

It is not possible to rule out any of these absolutely and we can only assume that with the knowledge the Corinthians had of Paul and of the situation they knew which to choose. We do not. On the whole I favour no. 5 on the grounds that the solemn formula in the name is more likely to go with the main verb to hand over than with the subordinate participle (‘being gathered together’), and that the reference to the power brings out the solemn nature of the assembly. It is not only a gathering of a few obscure Corinthians. The apostle is there in spirit and the Lord Jesus is there in power.

5. To hand over to Satan is a very unusual expression (elsewhere only in 1 Tim. 1:20). Whatever else it means, it seems to include excommunication (see vv. 2, 7, 13). The idea underlying this is that outside the church is the sphere of Satan (Col. 1:13; 1 John 5:19; cf. Eph. 2:12). To be expelled from the church accordingly is to be delivered over into that region where Satan holds sway. It is a very forcible expression for the loss of all Christian privileges. Deissman argues, on the basis of certain heathen texts, that the words point to ‘a solemn act of execration’ (LAE, p. 303). More difficult is ‘for the destruction of the flesh’. It is not easy to see how expulsion from the church could have this effect. Two solutions have won support. One sees ‘the flesh’ as the lower part of man’s nature, and takes the passage to mean the destruction of the sinful lusts (so

niv, that the sinful nature may be destroyed; cf. Redpath, he ‘is to be given over to Satan until that principle of yieldedness to the flesh is ended’). But it is difficult to see how handing a man over to Satan would have such a purifying effect; we would expect the reverse, the stimulation of those lusts. Yet the possibility remains that Paul has in mind the effect on the offender of being severed from all that fellowship in the church means. The contrast between a present experience of the things of Satan and the nostalgic recollection of the things of God might cause a revulsion of feeling and conduct, the fleshly lusts being destroyed.

The other view is that ‘the flesh’ is to be understood as physical, the reference being to sickness and even death. The difficulty is in seeing how this could be effected by excommunication. But Paul speaks of physical consequences of spiritual failings (11:30). We see the extreme example of this in the case of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–10); cf. the blindness of Elymas (Acts 13:8–11). Paul’s own ‘thorn in the flesh’ was ‘a messenger of Satan’ (2 Cor. 12:7). It may well be that Paul envisages the solemn expulsion of this offender as resulting in physical consequences. It is the effect of being withdrawn from the secure realm of the church of God. On the whole this second view seems the more likely. Chrysostom sees it this way, but also understands the reference to the flesh ‘to lay down regulations for the devil’, which prevent him from going too far. Chrysostom cites the case of Job, where Satan could afflict Job’s body but not take his life (Job 2:6f.). Paul sees the punishment as remedial: though the flesh be destroyed it is so that his spirit may be saved. That this means saved in the fullest sense is made clear by the addition, on the day of the Lord. At the final day of judgment he expects to see the disciplined offender among the Lord’s people.

3. Exhortation to clean out all evil (5:6–8)

Paul insists that resolute action be taken to deal with the offender, for the church must not countenance evil.

6. Boasting means strictly the matter of boasting, not the activity (cf. 9:15; Rom. 4:2): ‘what you boast about is not good’. The Corinthians did more than acquiesce in the situation; they were proud. Paul borrows an illustration from the kitchen to show the dangers in their attitude. It requires only a very small amount of yeast to leaven quite a large lump of dough (cf. Matt. 13:33; Gal. 5:9). By keeping the offender within the fold they were retaining the bad influence, and it would inevitably spread. Moffatt cites Thomas Traherne, ‘Souls to souls are like apples, one being rotten rots another.’ It is also the case that by their boasting the Corinthians were admitting evil into their own lives. In time it would work through their whole being. Sin must be put away resolutely, else in the end the entire Christian life will be corrupted.

7. There is a ‘Become what you are’ situation. The Corinthians are a new batch without yeast, they really are. But really to be that new batch they must get rid of the old yeast, where Paul’s verb (ekkathairō) means ‘clean out’. Sin is dirty and defiling, and like yeast it will work until it

permeates the whole. The only remedy is to clean out the evil entirely. So Paul speaks of a new batch without yeast. The Christian church is not just the old society patched up. It is radically new (2 Cor. 5:17). The evil that characterizes worldly people has been taken away, and they are 'free from corruption' (Weymouth). Paul does not say 'You ought to be without yeast', but states it as a fact; that is what Christians actually are. Therefore they must not bring back the old yeast, which, in this context, of course, symbolizes evil.

For introduces the reason for this confident assertion. The great fact that makes all things new is that Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed (it is astonishing that several translations insert 'lamb', as niv; it is not in the Greek and it is incorrect, for the sacrifice might be a kid; Paul simply says pascha, 'passover'). Christ is for believers what the passover was for the Jews. In Egypt they had offered their sacrifice in order that the destroying angel might pass over them. They had been delivered, and a slave rabble emerged as the people of God. Paul is using this imagery to remind his readers that the death of Christ had delivered them from slavery to evil and made them the people of God. There is emphasis on emergence to new life, and here the symbolism of yeast makes an important point. Ancient Israel was commanded to remove all yeast before the sacrifice (Exod. 12:15; 13:7), and in Paul's day a feature of passover observance was a solemn search for and destruction of all yeast before the feast began. This had to be done before the pascha, the kid or lamb, was offered in the temple. Paul points out that Christ, our Passover has already been sacrificed. It is time and more than time that all yeast (i.e. all evil) was put away.

8. The Christian life is a continual Festival (let us keep is present continuous). The believer does not observe this feast according to the standards of the old life he has left. The old yeast is the yeast of malice and wickedness. Evil is characteristic of the old way of life. By contrast, the believer's perpetual festival is kept with sincerity, which refers to purity of motives, and with truth, which points to purity of action. Both are so characteristic of the Christian as to be compared to his necessary food, his bread.

4. A misunderstanding cleared up (5:9–13)

The Corinthians had misunderstood what Paul wrote on this subject in an earlier letter. He proceeds to make it clear.

9. Some take I have written as an epistolary aorist, in which case it refers to this letter. But Paul has not so far written about not associating with the sexually immoral, and anyway the Corinthians could not misunderstand this letter before it came to them (Lenski). It seems clear that Paul is referring to an earlier letter, now lost (see Introduction, pp. 25f.). The verb to associate with (synanamignysthai) is an expressive double compound, used outside this passage only once in the New Testament (2 Thess. 3:14; see note in TNTC). It means 'to mix up yourself with'; Paul has forbidden them to have familiar intercourse with sexual offenders.

10. But his directions had been misunderstood or misrepresented, as though he meant that they must have no contact with this world's evil people. This was not at all his meaning. Circumstances would inevitably arise in which they must meet with gross sinners. He adds to 'fornicators' (immoral, niv), the greedy, i.e. those possessed by the desire to have more, the spirit of self-aggrandizement. From the spirit Paul passes to the deed. Swindlers are those who seize something (harpages), robbers in any shape or form. They are linked with the greedy as one class (there is but one article, they are joined by kai, and, and separated from the rest by ē, or). Such sinners have a wrong relationship to people, and Paul goes on to idolaters (incidentally the first occurrence of this word in literature), who have a wrong relation to God. Evil people abound and it is not possible to live without some contact with them. Paul is not forbidding that. For that they would have to leave this world (cf. John 17:15).

11. There is a rather stronger case for holding that 'I wrote' is an epistolary aorist here than was the case in v. 9 (niv so takes it with I am writing). But it is not likely that Paul would use the same expression in different senses so soon and in such close connection. Even the now does not require this. The sense will be 'But now (you see) I wrote ...' ('What I meant when I wrote ...', Bruce). His point had been that they must not maintain intimate fellowship (the same picturesque word as in v. 9) with anyone who calls himself a brother, but denies his profession by the way he lives. He is not really a brother, but 'a fornicator' or the like. To the evils already castigated Paul adds two more, the slanderer (loidoros, one who abuses others, cf. Matt. 5:22), and the drunkard. That such people should be found in the church shows the background of some of the early converts. Small wonder that they found it difficult to enter all at once into all that the Christian way means. But Paul will not compromise for a moment. Believers are to have no intimate intercourse with people who continue in such practices. Do not even eat will refer primarily to ordinary meals (cf. 2 John 10), not to Holy Communion, though that, too, would be forbidden. When we reflect that Jesus ate with sinners and that Paul regards it as permissible to accept invitations to eat in heathen homes (10:27), the detailed application of this injunction is not easy. But the principle is plain. Where anyone claims to be a Christian but leads a life that belies his profession, there is to be no such close fellowship as will countenance his sin.

12. The verse begins with 'for' (which niv omits): two facts will validate what Paul has just said, judgment inside the church and outside it. There is a difference. It is no business of Paul's, or for that matter of the Corinthians, to judge outsiders, but the Corinthians must judge those inside. It was their responsibility to discipline their own members. The question looks for an affirmative answer and thus makes this responsibility plain.

13. Just as v. 12 insists that the church take action in discipline, so v. 13 limits the scope of that action. It is no part of the church's function to discipline those who are not its members. God will judge (the verb could be present or future) outsiders. Paul ends with a quotation from Scripture

(Deut. 17:7, etc.). They are to expel the offender, and leave him to God's judgment, he having now become one of those outside.

The application of all this to the modern scene is not easy. Our different circumstances must be taken into account. But Paul's main point, that the church must not tolerate the presence of evil in its midst, is clearly permanently relevant.

Morris, L. (1985). 1 Corinthians: an introduction and commentary (Vol. 7, pp. 86–93). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.