

SCANDAL IN THE CHURCH

by Ray C. Stedman

One of the growing problems the church is facing today is what to do about the frightening increase in sexual immorality among Christians. I do not think a week goes by but we hear reports of churches struggling in this area. We hear of Christian leaders who have forsaken their wives, run off with the secretary, fallen into homosexuality, or are facing some kind of a moral crisis in their churches. Many are properly concerned about this, and wondering why this should be.

In the section we have come in First Corinthians, Chapter 5, we find the Apostle Paul dealing with that very problem here in Corinth. These great Greek cities, such as Corinth and others, were given over to the casual acceptance of sex outside of the marriage relationship. As you know, there was in Corinth a temple devoted to the worship of sex, the temple of Aphrodite. Therefore, it was the common thing for Christians to be tempted in this area. Many of them had indulged themselves in constant sexual liaisons before they became Christians and it was difficult for them to break these habits. If we think we have difficulty in these areas living in California today, we are no different at all than these Corinthians.

The Christians in Corinth also were expected to meet the same demands for chastity and purity that we are called upon in the Scriptures to meet today. It was more difficult for them in some ways than it is for us, and yet the demands were the same. God has not changed; the world has not changed; and as we read this passage we can see that we are dealing with a very up-to-date problem. This is why I call these letters "1st and 2nd Californians," because we are dealing with the same problem.

Chapters 5 and 6 introduce a new section of the letter to us. Previous to this, the apostle has been dealing with pride and its consequences in the Corinthian assembly, and what a terrible thing was happening there because of the love of human wisdom and the love of human status. Now he turns to a related theme, but one that is somewhat different: Lust and its problems. In these chapters, this will be the theme.

In the opening words of Chapter 5, the apostle describes the specific nature of this problem in Corinth:

It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans, for a man is living with his father's wife. {1 Cor 5:1 RSV}

This is what we would call today, "incest." And incest is increasing in frequency in our country with frightening rapidity. Not long ago I was shocked to read in the *San Francisco Chronicle* a plea by a woman pediatrician advocating incest for children, and saying that a father's incest with his daughter was a healthy thing for the child. Now that kind of attitude reflects the terrible moral degradation of our own times, and it was something like this that Paul was troubled about.

The woman mentioned in this letter, of course, was not the actual mother of the man but his step-mother, his father's wife, and this was, therefore, a clear-cut case of adultery. But the additional element of the marriage relationship turned it into something even worse -- it was incest. Paul is disturbed by this -- I would not say he was shocked because I think at this stage of his career he was probably beyond shock. He had run into everything. When he says, "It is actually reported," he is not reflecting shock. It should more accurately be translated, "It is commonly reported among you," i.e., this matter was notorious in Corinth.

He is disturbed that it was so widespread. That is part of his concern about them. As he points out, this was something that even that pagan environment would not look upon lightly. It is rather interesting that even in our own day the most degrading epithet that anybody can apply to another is to suggest that he is sleeping with his own mother. That shows how still today incest is regarded as a terrible thing even in the pagan world.

But the only ones in Corinth who were not shocked by this were the Christians in the church, and this is what

bothers Paul the most. They were taking it lightly; they were even proud, boasting in their attitude toward this and how they were handling this problem.

Paul describes in Verses 2-5 what they were doing and what they should have been doing about this matter:

And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

For though absent in body I am present in spirit, and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment, in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled, and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. {1 Cor 5:2-5 RSV}

They were boasting and glorying in their tolerance of this condition, as many people do today. They have a mistaken feeling that, rather than showing condemnation and judgment on this, the church ought to express understanding of the pressures and the difficulties of living in a world like we have today, and to say nothing about this: Let the individual work it out on his own. This is what was happening in Corinth. They thought they were showing love and understanding by their attitude of casualness toward this.

I have met church boards like this. I remember one church that I was involved with briefly where the young pastor had been involved in immorality. The board of the church was very casual about it. I reminded them of this very passage, and the chairman of the board said to me, "Well, he's a young man and, after all, boys with be boys." That reflected something of the attitude that was going on here at Corinth.

Now I know that attitude of tolerant acceptance is often a reaction to another wrong approach which is stern, hard, censorious judgment -- self-righteous condemnation that reacts with horror and shock and usually, because of offended pride, cuts the individual off and has nothing to do with him anymore. That is wrong too, and there is nothing of that in what Paul expects of this church in Corinth. Many Christian churches have reacted that way. I have met people who have been deeply hurt and terribly injured by the harsh, critical judgment of boards and leaders who have cut them off without any degree of understanding of the pressures they were facing. One is a reaction to the other.

Paul now shows us what the true attitude of a church ought to be when immorality rears its head: It ought to be grief. "Ought you not rather to mourn?" he says. There ought to be shock and hurt, not only for the persons involved in this, but also for the church, and for the Lord himself, that the cause of Christ is damaged in the eyes of the community by these deeds.

The reason this was so hurtful in Corinth was because the church was permitting it to happen. They were, therefore, participators in this evil thing, and the church ought to therefore mourn that such a thing can happen in its midst and that there is not more help and protection afforded for it. So Paul says there ought to have been sorrowful prayer about this.

This is surely what he means when he writes to the Galatians and says in the matter of the individual handling of a case like this, "... if a man be overtaken in a fault, you which are spiritual, restore him in the spirit of meekness, considering yourself, lest you also be tempted," {cf, Gal 6:1}. That is facing the fact that you could be involved in something like this too. So the proper attitude in handling a situation like this is never one of "Well we would never do a thing like that," but rather one of "Yes, we understand the pressures; we know what you have been up against; we are tempted ourselves; we could fall under the right circumstances. We do not trust ourselves any more than we trust the flesh in you, but nevertheless we cannot permit this to go on this way." So there must be a right attitude.

There are four clear, definite, practical steps to take here when immorality is present:

The first one is: There must be a right attitude. We must mourn and feel grief instead of harsh, critical judgment or tolerant, casual love.

The second step is: There must be a right basis for discipline. Notice what the apostle does not say. He does not say to these elders, "Now you elders get together there and decide among yourselves what you ought to do about this. Whatever you feel is right, you carry it out. If you decide that he ought to be excommunicated, if you decide he ought to be fined a certain amount, well, that's fine. Whatever you decide to do is all right." No, it is never left on the basis of an individual judgment as to what to do. What Paul clearly indicates is that you have already been told what to do -- just do it. He speaks of "in the name of the Lord Jesus ... by the power of our Lord Jesus ... by my spirit present with you." In other words, apostolic and divine authority has already spoken in these areas -- follow it through.

In Matthew 18 the Lord Jesus tells us what to do in cases like this:

1. "If your brother sins against you," he says, "go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone," {Matt 18:15a RSV}. That is step number one. Do not spread it around; do not ask for prayer about it; do not talk about it; go to the one who is doing the wrong. This is not something that is a matter of personal injury; this is not something that you have been offended by or that they have not acted the way you think they ought to act.

Here Jesus is talking about things that the Word of God has already said are definitely wrong; certain actions (and they are very limited), that the Word of God has already judged. You are to "go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone." If he hears you, "you have gained your brother," {Matt 18:15b RSV}. That is enough; it does not need to go any further; no one else needs to know about it.

2. "And if he does not hear you," Jesus says, "take one or two others and go and tell him his fault again, and discuss it among yourselves," {cf, Matt 18:16a}. (You need two or three in order to avoid that syndrome that often develops when two people argue, and say, "I said to you already this and this." The other fellow says, "No you did not say that at all, you said this and this.") But two or three are there as witnesses that what was said was exactly what was said. This is an attempt to help somebody see what he is doing and if he listens that is the end of it.

I want to tell you that that kind of thing goes on in this congregation all the time. I do not think a week goes by but somebody is not doing this among us, and properly so. No one ever hears about it, but hundreds of cases of incipient immorality have been nipped in the bud, as it were, by Christians who faithfully go to somebody and tell him that what he is doing is wrong. That is the most healthy thing that a church can do, and that Christians can do with one another. It saves scores and scores of cases like this that would come to ultimate heartbreak if they were allowed to proceed.

3. But the Lord goes on to step three. He says, "If he refuses to listen to them [the small group that has come to him], then tell it to the church," {Matt 18:17a RSV}. Then it must become public; the individuals involved must sense the censure of the church, the feeling that this is not acceptable behavior to other Christians.

Now again this is not to be done in the spirit of self-righteous complacency, smugness, or critical judgment or censoriousness, nothing of that. It is to be done in a loving statement that this is wrong; it is unacceptable behavior; it cannot be allowed to continue even though you understand the pressures and the problems involved in it. Therefore, it is to be told to the whole church and everyone in the church, then, becomes responsible to try to help that individual to recover from this terrible situation.

4. Step four is the final one: If he will not hear the church then "Change your attitude toward him," the Lord is saying, "let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector, as a sinner," {cf, Matt 18:17b}. In other words, let him be unto you as though he is not a Christian at all. He has declared himself not to be a Christian by his actions -- even though he claims yet to be a Christian by his words. You are to treat him as one who is not yet a Christian, but that does not mean with scorn, or with judgment, or with any kind of retribution. Recognize that he has deceived himself, and he is not really born again. Understand that he does not know the basis for purity yet and that he needs to be born again.

This is what Matthew 18 is saying, and clearly this is a parallel passage to what we have here.

Paul knows by this time that this is a well known matter. It has gone beyond Steps 1 and 2; it has come now to the place where it ought to be dealt with by the church, and since the church has been involved in this whole process of acceptance, of toleration for this, it has now come to Step 4 itself. That is what Paul means when he says there is to be a proper basis for action -- it is on the basis of what the Lord has said and not what the individuals themselves may feel.

I know many people have struggled over Jesus' words, "Judge not that you be not judged" {Matt 7:1 RSV}, and they apply it to a situation like this. But our Lord is clearly talking there about individual judgment of another on the basis of what offends you, whereas here he is talking about something he has already judged. And the church is responsible to carry out that judgment, as Paul will make crystal clear throughout this passage.

So step number three in this passage we are looking at is: There must be a right action. There must be a right attitude; there must be a right basis for discipline; and there must be a right action taken. Here it is:

When you are assembled, and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. {1 Cor 5:4b-5 RSV}

Three times in this passage the apostle says very clearly what action is to be taken. You have it in Verse 2, "Let him who has done this be removed from among you"; you have it in Verse 13 (the last verse of the chapter), "Drive out the wicked person from among you." Those two words, which sound rather harsh and almost seem to describe a kind of physical exclusion, are softened and corrected and amplified by this central statement here in Verse 5, "deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh." Now that helps us to understand what this action means because, as we read in Matthew 18 and also here, the Scripture always regards the world as Satan's dominion.

There are two kingdoms at work in life: The kingdom of Satan and the kingdom of God. And they intermingle; they are working all the time, everywhere, and though you cannot separate them by sharp lines of demarcation from the standpoint of geography or personality, nevertheless they are sharply separated in their philosophy. What Paul is saying here is that the church is to put them back, in its thinking, into the realm of Satan's control. They have never left it; their persistence in evil has demonstrated that they have never really left Satan's world. Therefore, the church is to think of them as back under that control, and publicly the church is to recognize that they are not Christians. They are, as Jesus says, like Gentiles, tax collectors, sinners, unregenerate people, and therefore they are not to be treated any longer as though they were Christians.

Now I realize that when you come to a public action like this there is always great pressure not to take it.

People are offended by being made a public example or when any kind of public statement is made about them. When our church here has had to do this on several occasions, we have been actually threatened with lawsuits if we took a public stand in this direction. This is why the apostle adds the words, "take this action with the power of our Lord Jesus." You are not taking it as a group of people, an organization voting on one of its disobedient members. You are taking it as the church of the living God, among whom the Lord Jesus is present as he said he would be, with power to control the results, and to guard and protect if you will be obedient to him. Therefore, the church is to act, regardless of what the threat may be, because the church acts by the power of the Lord Jesus.

This does not mean physical ejection. The individual may continue to attend, but he is to be treated and regarded in a different light. Usually, however, this almost invariably means that the individual, feeling the censure of the church, withdraws himself, and, if so, then he is to be allowed to go. There is no punishment ever assessed; there is no ceremony of excommunication to be carried out. That kind of a thing is a misunderstanding of this passage.

So there are three of the steps: a right attitude; a right basis for action; and a right action to be taken. Now there

is one more, and Paul indicates it in Verse 5: it should be for a right purpose, "... that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." Why does the church take this action? Well, not just to get rid of a troublemaker or not merely to show itself clean in this regard, but, rather, in order to reach the individuals involved, and so deal with them that eventually they will see their wrongdoing and repent. And all judgment ends at repentance; all discipline ceases when repentance occurs. Therefore, the hope here is that when you put someone back into the world, as it were, under Satan's control, that he will learn what worldlings will learn if they live long enough -- that the philosophies they are following are delusive, empty and vain, and when they find themselves drained, jaded, satiated and empty of heart, they will turn back to the living Lord and their spirits will be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. When he comes or when they meet him in death, their spirits will be saved even though their lives have been wasted. This is the hope and that is the purpose for church discipline.

Now, the apostle follows with an explanation for the severity of this kind of action. When a church is involved in this sort of thing, many people raise the question of why this should be, why the church should act so severely. Here Paul gives three very excellent reasons why the church must take action. Verse 6:

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us, therefore, celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. {1 Cor 5:6-8 RSV}

The imagery is clearly borrowed from the Feast of the Passover when the Jews, remembering their deliverance from Egypt, would take the blood of a lamb and sprinkle it over their doorposts so the angel of death would "pass over." Then they would gather and eat the meat of the lamb that had been roasted. Before this they would go through the house with a candle and search out all the leaven that was in the house, for the Lord had said they must never eat the feast with leaven.

Leaven is yeast, and even today Jews will go through their houses and look for any form of leavened bread that may be present before they celebrate the Passover. This is a symbol here: Leaven is consistently used throughout the Scriptures as a symbol of evil. Paul says the problem is that "a little leaven leavens the whole lump." Therefore, the first reason action must be taken is to arrest this tendency to spread the infection throughout a whole congregation.

I have mentioned that we have had to take action like this on two or three occasions. Though it was painful and hurtful and there was great grief involved in it, the effect was an almost instantaneous cessation of the spread of evil throughout the congregation. People think twice before they begin to get involved in extramarital affairs or consider divorce or fall into homosexuality or other sexual sins. Sexual sins, of course, are not the only ones that call for judgment though they are probably the most common form today. This is the first reason why the church must act, lest the infection begin to spread and "the little leaven leavens the whole lump."

The second reason is that judgment makes possible the demonstration of reality. As Paul says here, "Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are;" The community was getting a wrong idea of the church. It did not see them as having solved the problem of how to handle sexual drives. It saw them as much a part of the problem as they themselves were, and, yet, as Paul will say in the next chapter, Christ had cleansed them, he had changed them: "And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ," {1 Cor 6:11 RSV}. But that is not evident while this toleration of evil is going on. The world has no idea that there is any way to escape the power of sexual drive. "Therefore," he says, "it is necessary that the church judge this kind of thing that it might be evident what you really are -- that there has been given to you a power to handle these kinds of drives and to be pure and chaste in the midst of immorality. For that is what you really are."

Then the third reason: Judgment permits the celebration of Christian deliverance and liberty. "Let us, therefore, celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." "Celebrate!" he says. That is possible in a church when it begins to live on this basis, in the eyes of the community, and before the Lord. There comes an element of joy into their midst, a sense of freedom, a sense of wholeness and cleanliness and you begin to celebrate and feel it.

I have noticed that congregations that refuse to act along these lines are always grim affairs. Their worship is dull and grim and there is little joy. What brings joy into a congregation is not the sense of having achieved some degree of morality on its own, but of having been washed, cleansed, freed by the grace of God. All the ugliness of the past is washed away; it disappears from your midst and that allows for a free spirit of celebration and of joy.

Now, the concluding section of Chapter 5 describes the limits of church discipline. Verse 9:

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with immoral men; not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But rather I wrote to you not to associate with any one who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber -- not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. "Drive out the wicked person from among you." {1 Cor 5:9-13 RSV}

In Verse 9, Paul refers to a letter that he had written to them, a letter that is lost to us. No one knows what it said other than this reference to it. Yet, in it, Paul had evidently said something about not associating with immoral people, and the Corinthians had taken it to mean (as many Christians seem to feel today), that they were not to have anything to do with worldlings who lived on an improper level of life.

I am amazed at how that very attitude which Paul was attempting to correct here in this letter has pervaded the evangelical world. I meet people who refuse to have anybody come into their homes who is not a Christian -- people who want nothing to do with anybody who lives in a way that is offensive to the Lord.

I remember in my early pastorate going to a couple and asking them to open their home for a Bible class. The lady looked horrified and said, "Oh! I could never do that." I asked, "Why not?" "Why," she said, "people who smoke would come in. My home is dedicated to God and I am not going to have any smoking going on there."

Well, that is a misunderstanding of the very thing Paul is talking about. We cannot avoid the world -- we were sent into it. The Lord Jesus said to his disciples, "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves," {Matt 10:16 KJV}. That is where we belong. Their habits may be offensive to us, but that is understandable. We do not have to pronounce judgment on them; God will do that, Paul says here. We are to love them and understand that they do not have any basis of knowledge for a change. We are not to demand it of them before we begin to show friendship and love and reach out to them to help them to see their need, to see the One who can answer the hunger of their hearts. No, we are not to judge the world, but we are to judge the church, Paul says, and we are to do it on a clear-cut basis.

By the way, in pointing out the world here, Paul uses three characteristic sins that are very revealing: "... not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, [that is really one phrase taken together, the greedy and grasping] or idolaters." There you have the world characterized for you:

- The sins of the body (immorality),
- The sins of the mind or heart (the attitudes, greedy and grasping), and
- The sins of the spirit (idolatry, another god.)

The offense against yourself, the offense against your neighbor, and the offense against God himself -- those are the characteristics of the world.

What we will offer them is the gospel, not condemnation but the good news. But when it comes to the church, we are to judge the church for specific wrongdoings. Notice how Paul lists them. It is not because they are hard to live with or they are impatient people or they are obnoxious Christians -- you are not to judge them on that basis. But if they are immoral, or greedy, or idolaters, or revilers (i.e., constant critics, running everybody down), or drunkards, or robbers then they are to be judged by the actions of the church in the way he has

indicated, even to the point of social pressures: "Do not even eat with them," he says. If they will not listen, then withdraw from them. It comes at last to ultimate exclusion, as he has indicated in this passage.

What health would return to the world, and to the church, if the church would begin to behave this way! The reason the world is going downhill rapidly is because the church lets it by not maintaining the standards that God has given to us here. The purpose of a passage like this is to call us back in all honesty to what God has given us, and to recognize the unique position the church holds in the world today -- when it begins to walk in the beauty of holiness and enjoy the privileges that God has given to us.

When we live in victory over the forces that destroy others, then people begin to see that there is meaning and purpose and reason for the salvation we profess to have.

Prayer

Thank you, our dear Father, for your honest statement of what is the truth about us. How we love you, Lord, because you are the God of truth. You do not spare us, and you do not condemn us either. You do not wipe us out; you do not threaten us with whips; but you do tell us the truth. We see behind it, Lord, your loving father's heart of concern. Help us as a church and as individuals to judge our lives in these areas according to your Word, and to walk in the light and the power of it. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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