

## Ecclesiastical Discipline in I Corinthians

*It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you,  
and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate:  
A man is sleeping with his father's wife.  
And you are proud!  
Shouldn't you rather have gone into mourning  
And have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this?*

With that ... Paul launches out into a prolonged passage  
that is passionate and powerful,  
loud, and lingering, and will not let up until he is done.  
It is at first seemingly disparate,  
it goes in several directions at once,  
maybe even desperate,  
certainly unrelenting and unflinching.

He harangues and harrows,  
threatens and intentionally troubles.

Paul is angry.  
He shows signs of being bewildered,  
at his wits end.

Then with a turn of a phrase, the pause of a breath,  
Paul teaches.

Then we begin to read carefully disciplined words arguing ...  
for Church Discipline.

Since then, throughout the centuries,  
whenever Christians seriously considered church discipline  
they have studied and stewed on this passage –  
as passionate and as careful as it is.

At the beginning, as we consider this,  
we must put away a common thought  
which have led so many, so often, so far off  
what the apostle centrally teaches us.

This passage is not first and foremost about sexual immorality.  
It names it, and will not flinch in condemning it.  
But it does not dwell on it.  
Its presence, is not the “it” in the passage.

But there is something more here – more central, more critical.  
There is great offense here – great offense.  
The passage is about exposing and remedying that offense.

It is not the offense of the discovery of sexual immorality.  
The pagans live like pagans.  
Without reference to God or to his will or word,  
they have long been led astray, and lost their way.  
“All we like sheep...”, says the Prophet, whom Paul will quote.  
“Such were some of you...”, Paul will say.

Paul will teach elsewhere that it could and should be worse,  
except that God is by his common grace protecting the world  
not only from the consequences of its persistent wantonness,  
but also from the worst of its preferences for wickedness,  
the world would have died long ago.  
Think Noah and the flood.  
Remember who has preserved us so far, all along,  
though we did not ask, or know to ask.

The pagans act like pagans.  
Nor is the offense that a Christian man has been sexually immoral.

Paul will, over and over again in the Corinthian correspondence,  
name and deal with a wide variety of persisting problems  
left over from their pagan days.

They are recent converts.  
Some of it is troubling.  
Some of it ... they should know better, even by now.  
Some of it ... he has gone over it with them before.  
And...Yes  
Some of it is exasperating to Paul;  
exhausting for Paul to continually confront and correct.  
But he will – one at a time – chapter by chapter.  
All in good time.

Remember: the theme verse in the Corinthians correspondence is:

*If anyone is in Christ, that one is a new creation.*

*The old has gone; the new has come.*

The old was going, but slowly and painfully.

The new was here, but not yet shining and thriving.

No. Once again. To be clear:

It was not pagans living as pagans,

or even a new Christian man yet living in old ways

that so agitated and irked Paul.

It was the church.

The whole church.

Paul will not speak to the pagans, who are all around this incident,

nor will he address any of his comments to this offending man.

Paul will speak to the church,

the whole church.

And...

It was not what was present -

sexual immorality

reliance on secular courts to arbitrate sacred matters -

that offended Paul.

It was what was not present that offended Paul.

Church discipline.

For that critical absence to be exposed, and then to be amended,

Paul must speak to them all.

It will take all of them to correct this.

Church discipline is church discipline.

What does Paul tell them, what does he teach?

## Sin is communal.

This man sinned, but you, you all, tolerated it.

Not surprising, that a man sins.

Common enough occurrence.

But your tolerance of it,

makes the whole guilty of what the part did.

[The story of Achan; Judges 7]

Israel defeats Jericho, a great city. No one dies.

God tells then not to plunder or enrich, as do others,

but to claim the land long ago promised to Abraham.

Achan disobeys: plunders, and hides the goods.

This destroys the witness. The witness of the whole.

Israel goes up against Ai next; a small city, unlike Jericho.

36 men lose their lives in the battle. God does not go out with them.

All of Israel mourns.

God points to their harboring the sinner, who is harboring his ill-gotten goods.

Achan is cast out.

Israel – all of Israel - goes from victory to victory after that.

Note: Israel mourned.

The loss was communal, shared.

Paul asks the Corinthians shouldn't you be mourning?

When the Prophet Jeremiah contemplates the woes of Israel soon to come  
for sins of which he himself is innocent but Israel as a nation is guilty,  
he weeps.

When the Savior contemplates the sin of the Holy City,  
into which he will now enter and gives himself,  
he weeps – he weeps over the city.

Sin has entered in and resides with in the fellowship in Corinth.

The appropriate response of the faithful when sin is discovered among them ... is to mourn.

Mourn for him.

Mourn for the whole.

Weeping is well when we acknowledge sin among us.

The Psalms of confession are sung with tears.

Church Discipline recognizes that wholeness does not return to the whole, until the part is repaired.

This is not about the mere instance or an isolated incident of sin;  
a simpler repentance is invited in that case,  
a reconciliation is ready.

This is about the prolonged lingering of sin,  
probably made possible by the whole's tolerance of it,  
and an unwillingness to give it up, or give him up.

If the man will not cast it out of himself, a difficult act of self-discipline, to be sure,  
then to be separate of it, the whole must cast it out.

When Paul says things like "these things should not be named among you" – the "you" is plural.

Casting out is not so much casting out the man,  
but ridding out the immorality from within the church.

What the man does may be idiosyncratic – only he did it - justified by him alone,  
but if the Corinthians permit it, they have done it, the whole.

Tolerance, whether for the good or the bad, is embrace.

Casting out is the only remedy.

**Sin is communal.**

**Discipline is remedial.**

This may be the only matter, in all the errors of the Corinthians,  
I am tempted to give them the benefit of the doubt.

I think Paul did too.

Apparently, in time, the Corinthians expelled the man.

Whether they did it on apostolic authority,  
or wanting to take, what to some might be, an easy route,  
or in their divided fellowship, they did what weakened an adversary,  
or understanding church discipline, now in part,  
for whatever reason, they let him go.

And they thought they were done. They were only half done.

But they did not know this.

I will give them the benefit of the doubt that it was not an intentional ignorance.

Paul is so clear on this first half - know and name and cast out the sin –  
that it is easy to miss the second half.

Later, Paul when writing to them again, will need to advise them further on church discipline.  
He is clear.

Referring to the man cast out, Paul writes to the Corinthians:

*If anyone has caused grief,  
he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you to some extent—  
not to put it too severely.*

*The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient.*

*Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him,  
so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.*

*I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.*

*Another reason I wrote you was to see  
if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything.*

*Anyone you forgive, I also forgive.*

*And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—*

*I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake,  
in order that Satan might not outwit us.*

*For we are not unaware of his schemes.*

And with that, Paul announces that no matter  
how harsh was the casting out,  
and how hard it was to hear him out on this,  
and how hard it was for them to decide it,  
and how hard it was for the man to endure it,  
it was not punishment, it was remediation.

All divine discipline is remedial.

Correcting. Amending. Altering. Pruning.  
Shaping. Forming. Re-forming. Transforming.

You did this with your children.

You, at your best do this with your closest friends.

We are to do this with each other in the church.

Church discipline is mutual accountability.

The bible knows no accountability that is not mutual.

It is for the sake of the whole, by the whole.

It is remedying for the whole, the man included.

**The Lord be with you.**