

# First Corinthians Five – The Necessity for Church Discipline

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St. Paul had written (in 1 Cor. 3) against the divisions that were plaguing the congregation in Corinth. Their party spirit (some claiming to follow Paul, some Apollos, some Cephas, and some Christ) was a very wrong attitude for Christians to have. Now, in the fifth chapter, St. Paul shows that there is need for division. In fact, it is the duty of every Christian congregation to expel from its midst one who continues in sin without repentance. The subject treated in this chapter is this that every congregation must take action against sin when it manifests itself openly in their midst. Sorry to say, it is inevitable that evil will break out; but the real question is, what will be the reaction of the group to the sinner?

This fifth chapter forms a natural transition between chapters 1-4 in which Paul spoke about questions and problems within the congregation and chapters 6-10 in which he addresses himself to moral questions; such as law suits, marriage, and meat offered to idols.

Verse 1)           Actually there is heard among you fornication, and such fornication which is not among the pagans: so that one has the wife of his father.

ἀκούω           hear or learn, be informed about, to perceive by the ear what is announced in one's presence.

Paul doesn't waste any time getting to the heart of the matter which he wishes to discuss. He jumps right in, thus showing the intensity of his feeling about this case. This case is a common scandal which everyone is talking about. Paul is not acting on the basis of rumor. The situation is notorious. A sinful situation that had started as a secret now was public knowledge. Whenever people hear of the Christian congregation in Corinth, they think of the fornication that was in their midst. (I take the ἐν ὑμῖν to go with the fornication, rather than the idea that this is talked about "among you.") The particular act of fornication Paul feels compelled to mention is that of the man who "has" his father's wife. We assume that no marriage had taken place. This union did not even have the outward appearance of decency. Most likely the woman was this man's step-mother, but that term is not used - the seriousness is much more clearly seen when Paul says "the wife of his father." And oh, what fornication! Even Roman law prohibited union of this kind. Such a thing is naturally abhorrent to all people. Scripture is certainly clear on the matter (Lev. 18:8; Deut. 22:30; 27:20). But you don't even need Christian principles to condemn such action. Cicero wrote about a similar case: "Oh, incredible wickedness; and – except in this woman's case – unheard of in all experience."

While remembering that sin caused this man to commit such an act, we might ask whether he thought that Christian liberty gave him a license to do as he pleased. Did he confuse liberty with license? As to why the congregation would allow something like this, we might remember that the Corinthians prided themselves on being very "broad minded". The leaders may have said something like this: "What our good brother does in his private life is entirely his affair. His doctrine is straight. He attends church regularly. He is pleasant and friendly. He obeys the golden rule. Furthermore, this affair with his stepmother might be a meaningful relationship for both of them. Our obligation is to continue to love him. Let's not be pharisaical about the thing!" (from "A Turned-On Church in an Uptight World")

2 Cor. 7:12 seems to indicate that the man's father was still alive. The way Paul speaks here in chapter 5 gives the impression that the woman was a heathen; otherwise she too would have been included when Paul later recommends excommunication.

Verse 2)           And you are (and continue to be) proud? And haven't you rather mourned so that the one who committed this deed might be removed from our midst?

These could be statements or questions. The emphasis would be the same. Even worse than the sin Paul referred to in verse one is the attitude of the entire congregation toward it. Paul now shows that this affair didn't concern only the sinner involved in the fornication, it concerned all the members. So he asks if they can still remain proud, even after this is so well known.

He can't figure out how they can avoid mourning. Don't you even mourn, to say nothing of taking action?

Is it possible for you to be proud? Even this act didn't disturb you enough to remove your proud self-satisfaction? This moral catastrophe should have opened their eyes to the terrible state into which they had fallen.

πενθέω means to conduct a mourning, as a family would for one of its members who had died. So the Corinthians should have mourned, should have felt the deepest grief and sorrow, The sin of one of their members shouldn't have produced anger or indignation, but grief and sorrow for him and his spiritual welfare. Grief should have motivated the Corinthians to proper Christian action; namely, discipline. The man ought to have been expelled, excommunicated from the Church and made an outsider. But the Corinthians were so taken up with their supposed intellectual superiority that they never got around to dealing with the sinner in their midst. They were too busy promoting their party spirit that they didn't see the need for mourning. They may have felt it was unfortunate, but they didn't view it as being so serious that they had to spend time on it. Or it could be that they were influenced by the antinomian liberty which plagued many converts to Christianity.

However, Paul is very clear in his insistence that something be done - the man must be removed from their midst. Love for his soul will demand such drastic action. He is to be expelled as an indication of the seriousness of his fornication. So deeply should the Corinthians grieve.

Paul's action is not a formal excommunication (he had no such authority), but is an announcement of what should be done. He gives the congregation a precise statement of what they must do. They have no choice but to carry out discipline against this man.

Verse 3) For I indeed, absent in the body but present in the spirit, have already judged – as one present – the one who perpetrated the deed in this way:

κρίνω separate, pick out, reach a decision (used of the disciplinary judgment to which Christians subject the conduct of their fellow believers, passing censure on them as the facts require)

οὕτως in this manner, in the manner known to all (according to the context here - so shamefully)

Although the Corinthians did not even mourn, much less carry out the action which the situation demanded; Paul didn't side step his responsibility. Even though he was many miles away physically, he was with them in spirit. Paul wrote something very similar to both the Colossians and the Thessalonians (Col. 2:5 and 1 Thess. 2:17)

With this verse Paul shows that he had reached a decision. The facts are clear! The offense must be dealt with. The structure of the sentence is very broken showing the deep emotion Paul felt in this matter. You can almost hear the sobs as you read the verse. Paul asserts that his sentence is as clear as though he were standing right there in their voters' assembly.

Paul had to do something. The shame of this case, as well as the clear command to avoid such deeds, were being ignored. Every law of God and man most emphatically prohibits such a crime and calls it incest. But God's people haven't removed such an influence! Paul states what his decision is. He says, "For I indeed have already judged." Whatever it might cost him, however the people might look at his stepping in, and whatever

personal ill-will might result for him: Paul has to act! He acts “as one present.” His heart and feelings are with them as they give attention to this matter and handle it as Christians. Paul has “already judged”. This was a case in which the only possible course of action was obvious, even to Paul way over in Ephesus. His mind was made up on what ought to be done. The Corinthians had taken no action, but Paul has already judged and the verdict now stands (perfect tense). Every aspect of the case is so clear that there is no reason at all to hesitate. The verdict is settled!

Verses 4 & 5) When you and my spirit come together in the name of the Lord Jesus and with the power of the Lord Jesus: to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that the spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord.

παραδίωμι to deliver to someone something to keep, to take care of (as when a court decrees: we hand you over to the custody of the warden or the executioner)

These two verses are a statement of what Paul had decided (cf. v.3). He records the actual verdict. When the Corinthians have called a meeting and gather to take action, they will have the influence of Paul’s thinking and his decision to direct them. Notice that they are to gather “in the name of the Lord Jesus.” Since the offense was against the holy name of the Lord Jesus, the judgment that is to be passed comes in His name. Paul used the same thought when he wrote 2 Thess. 3:6.

All of the congregation’s decisions and actions are to be in complete agreement with the revelation which Christ has given in His holy Word. At the same time, they will be armed with the authority of Christ. They gather “with the power of our Lord Jesus.” This is the special power with which every gathering of two or three “in the name of Jesus” is blessed and which it puts to work In His Interest. The sentence that is passed will also be carried out through the power Christ has given to His believers: “if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven” (John 20:23). So, the authority to administer discipline is derived from the Lord Jesus (not from Paul or Peter) and is to be exercised in His name and is to promote His honor. It is the obligation of the congregation to exercise its authority to excommunicate. They have this authority to take such drastic action because they have the power of the Lord. Excommunication should be carried out, and can be carried out, only when the congregation gathers in a properly called meeting. It can’t be done by Paul or any other individual or even by the congregation in secret.

Excommunication is pictured as delivering the sinner to Satan. When one is expelled from Christ’s kingdom, he is thereby relegated to Satan’s kingdom. There is no special power or authority involved here. Excommunication means to deprive the sinner of membership in the Lord’s family; and thus it makes him a member of the devil’s group. Notice: the delivering is a verdict that is handed down by a court, it doesn’t cause the punishment. The person’s impenitence (not even his original sin of fornication) causes him to become a part of the devil’s following! Note again that Paul is very specific about what action to take, but he doesn’t take the exercise of discipline out of the hand of the congregation. When they are gathered, they are to deliver this man to Satan. He had been permitted to continue in outward fellowship with the congregation; but that only deceived him and misled others.

Now the verdict is in: he is under Satan and Satan’s influence and not under Christ. He had done this to himself, the verdict of Paul and the congregation was a formal announcement of what had already happened.

Perhaps the most difficult part of this chapter follows. The man is delivered to Satan “for the destruction of his flesh.” Being handed over to the devil is done so that Satan may have his way with him and may reduce him to shame and utter misery. The Lord would use the devil as His tool to work a knowledge of sin and a terror for its consequences - In order to bring about a cure. We remember, of course, that Satan and suffering are not Means of Grace. The Lord can, however, use them to bring a sinner to a realization of his transgression and thus destroy his “flesh”. The word “flesh” here cannot possibly mean his body. No humans (not even a

congregation carrying out excommunication) has the right to take a life or cause one to be ended! Also, there is no salvation of the soul without the body - either both are saved or both are lost.

“To deliver to Satan” intends to destroy the fleshly, evil impulses of his nature. The consequences of sin are to awaken his conscience. This sinner’s impenitence had destroyed his Christian faith and life. Only drastic action could bring him to an awareness of his sin and led him to repentance.

Paul says that the reason for this action is “that the spirit might be saved.” Excommunication intends to save. It intends to make it possible for that person to be “blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:8). It is never carried out in anger or with the thought of revenge, but as the last possible act of love to undo the work of Satan. Some sinners must taste of the dregs before they realize what sin really is. The flesh defeats itself by running to the extreme - excess has the tendency to defeat itself. Drastic action, in order to save, is mentioned also in Prov. 23:14.

Certainly, to “save” cannot happen without the divine power of the Means of Grace being at work. Although Paul doesn’t mention them here, he and the Corinthians must have had them in mind. Their love would lead them to pray the delivering the sinner to Satan would drive him to the Gospel for forgiveness and fellowship with Christ. The intention of Paul (and of all excommunication) is not destruction but salvation. Paul brought this out in 2 Cor. 2:6-11.

The phrase “day of the Lord” obviously refers to the great day when our Lord, the Judge, will appear before all the world to render a just judgment on all.

Verse 6)       The subject of your boasting Is not good. Don’t you know that a little yeast ferments all the lump?

καῦχημα is the thing in which a person boasts – distinct from the act of boasting: it is the object of our boasting

καλόν is good or excellent in the moral sense

With verse 6 Paul moves from the specific case to the general. Immorality in the church must be treated just as yeast was in the Passover festival for the Jews.

How could people who permitted this fornication to continue in their midst imagine that they had anything to boast about. No matter how great their supposed wisdom might have been, no matter how much money they may have gathered, no matter how many works they may have been able to perform: as long as they permitted this scandal they had no reason whatsoever for boasting. James 4:16. The corruption in the Corinthian congregation ought to have led them to the deepest humility.

Paul now proves that he is not drawing an unjustified conclusion, he quotes a well-known fact. “A little yeast ferments all the lump.” Whether this was a common saying or a proverb or something he made up for this situation really doesn’t matter, the truth is obvious.

Yeast is used in the Bible in a good sense in Matt. 13:33, where the kingdom of heaven is compared to yeast. It is also used in an evil sense: for example in Matt. 16:6-12.

Here the contrast is between a “little” yeast and “all” the lump. The entire congregation is necessarily involved in this man’s sin. Not that each of them was going to run out and commit fornication that same day, but by allowing this vice the entire membership became involved in the guilt of that act.

In this connection, Dr. Luther said: “Corruption gains ground so powerfully and maintains its position so stubbornly that it cannot be eradicated again; just as yeast, no matter how little is added to the dough, eats through it” (as quoted by Kretzmann). So we note that one or more people can be an influence for evil in the church. An immoral individual, especially when others know of his deed and don’t act, can be a spiritual poison infecting all of the congregation. Jesus in Matt. 16:6 warned against such yeast. He wouldn’t have said that if yeast only affected and infected itself.

Verse 7) Thoroughly clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new lump, even as you are unfermented. For indeed our Passover, Christ, was sacrificed.

The “therefore” at the beginning of this verse in the KJV is not in the best manuscripts. Its absence makes the abruptness all the more emphatic.

Each and every individual, each and every day, is to “thoroughly clean out” by contrition and repentance all the influences and powers that are left over from the life they once lived apart from Christ.

Paul instructs all believers to remove all impurity. There must not be any mixture or ingredient that is not in complete harmony with the holiness which the Bible teaches and requires. The removal of this yeast of sin and evil is to be carried out with the same minute care that the Jews employed when observing their festivals. They gave all diligence in removing yeast from their homes, sweeping the corners, searching every part of the home with candles, etc. as Ex. 12:18-19 required. In that same way Christians are to be diligent to search out and remove all sin from their hearts and lives. They are to remove everything that savors of the old sinful nature. The result will be that we are a new lump: “new” in the sense of being something we weren’t before - as a used car would be “new” to me when I purchase it. Christian life and activity is to be an entirely fresh start.

Paul doesn’t want the Corinthians to imagine that he is accusing them of being immoral. He adds: “even as you are unfermented.” This is in agreement with the fact that he calls them “brothers” all along. Since you are already cleansed of all the old sins and their punishment; now make a new start. Jesus said: “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.” Christians are declared to be pure, unfermented, for the sake of Christ’s atonement. (II Peter 1:9). As unfermented ones, we have the faith that clings to Christ and believes in the forgiveness we enjoy through Him. Paul couldn’t have told them to clean out the old if they weren’t already new. Spiritual power is necessary for this cleaning out. For converted people yeast is altogether abnormal.

Paul adds: “For indeed our Passover, Christ, was sacrificed.” This is the motive this is the power, for Christians to proceed with their sanctification. We would ask ourselves: since the Passover, our Lord Jesus, has died for us, can we live with the yeast of sin and evil? All the beauty of that name “Passover” certainly fills us with joy and comfort. As the lamb’s blood saved the Israelites from the angel of death; so the blood of our Passover, Christ, saves us from the eternal damnation we so richly deserve.

Paul’s thought might be expressed this way: The Passover Lamb has been slain and the feast has begun, how can it be that the old yeast has not been cleaned out of the house? How can such a contradiction be allowed? On the whole, the sacrifice of our Redeemer is the strongest argument for purity and morality. With our Savior, we now die to sin and live to righteousness. As the Jews were required to remove all yeast when the paschal lamb was slain; so we, now that our Paschal Lamb has been sacrificed, want to put away all sin from our hearts and from our churches.

Verse 8) So then, let us celebrate the festival, not with old yeast nor with the yeast of wickedness and depravity, but with unfermented (bread) of sincerity and truth.

ἐορτάζωμεν is the hortatory subjunctive of ἐορτάζω, meaning to celebrate a festival or feast day

κακίας and πονηρίας are synonymous, as are εἰλικρευείας and ἀληθείας

Since the Lamb has been sacrificed for us, the Passover celebration should proceed. The expression “celebrate!” includes everything connected with the Christian life. We, as Christians, have our Savior always and so the work of sanctification must continue throughout our lives. A consecrated life naturally results from our association (by faith) with Christ.

We are not to celebrate with “old yeast,” which would include any and all attitudes or actions that belong to the ungodly spirit or to unbelief. Paul defines what he has in mind with the synonymous genitives of description. All evil or ill will and all iniquity or active evil are to be avoided. If there is any difference between the two words it would be that the first is the vicious disposition and the second is the active exercise of it. All purity and truth, all sincerity and moral quality are to be part of our very life.

Verse 9) I wrote to you in the epistle not to mingle with fornicators

γράφω is to write, to commit to writing what must not be forgotten

συναναμίγνυσθαι is to mingle, to be intimate with (a reciprocal middle = mix yourselves up with)

Here Paul refers to a directive he had given in the “lost” epistle which he had previously sent them. The fact that one of the apostles’ writings is “lost” does not in any way diminish from our doctrine of inspiration. The fact that I lost a dollar the other day doesn’t in any way affect the ten dollars I have in my billfold today.

The directive Paul had previously given, sorry to say, had been ignored by the Corinthians and so Paul needed to write this fifth chapter of this letter.

The directive not to mingle with sinners is so important that Scripture repeats it many times: such as Eph. 5:11; II Cor 6:14; II Thess. 3:6,14.

Verse 10) Not entirely with the fornicators of this world or with the covetous and swindlers or idolaters, for then you would be under obligation to leave the world.

πλεονέκταις covetous (one eager to have more, what belongs to others) (their greediness appears in their crooked actions)

ἄρπαξω swindler, extortioner (not hesitate to use violence to rob others)

ὀφείλω be under obligation (bound by duty or necessity to do something, used of a necessity imposed either by law and duty or by reason, or by the times, or by the nature of the matter under consideration)

ἄρα accordingly, a conclusion evident in the premise

ἐξέρχομαι go out (of those who leave a place of their own accord)

Paul qualifies his “do not mingle with” of verse 9 in order to prevent someone from drawing the conclusion that Christians have to avoid all contact with sinners, even to the point of avoiding to do business with them or not meeting their civic responsibility. To avoid all contact with sinners would prevent our remaining on earth. So Paul says “not entirely” to avoid - we must have contact with even obvious sinners. Otherwise how could we witness to them? The “not entirely” shows that they do not have license to unrestricted association with immoral people, but it also shows that they cannot avoid them completely. Even in the case of those outside of the church, some contacts are necessary. But Paul is forbidding social intimacy with them and warns us not to associate with them in their sin, their wickedness, and not to associate with them as idolaters. It would be pure foolishness to read into Paul, earlier directive the idea that we are not to have any contact with immoral people, But it would be dangerous to read into it the idea that we can exempt ourselves from disciplining open sin within our midst.

By listing three classes of sinners, Paul is giving the general principle, three being enough for his purpose.

Verse 11) But now, I wrote to you not to be intimate with anyone who is named a brother if he is a fornicator or a covetous person or an idolater or a reviler or a drunkard or an extortioner: with such a person do not eat!

λοιδορος reviler (one incorrigibly given to the vice of abusing the character of other people)

With this verse Paul presents a proper “double standard” which Christians are to apply. 1 Cor. 10: 27 shows that we can eat with unbelievers. But when one claims to be a spiritual brother is known to be guilty of serious sins and refuses to give them up, our attitude is much stronger than with a person committing the same sin who is obviously outside of our spiritual group. Sorry to say it will happen that someone who claims membership in the visible church with us will become guilty of one or more of the classes of sins mentioned here. Concerning these open sinners the principle to “not mingle” with them applies “entirely”. “Do not eat with them.” If we were to be intimate with them and act as though nothing were wrong we might give the impression that being such a sinner is acceptable in our Christian liberty and freedom. We might deceive not only ourselves and them, but also the outsider. We must remember that verse 5 shows the reason for this - to save!

Paul adds to the list of three classes he mentioned in verse ten and here includes also the reviler and drunkard. When these sins are committed and there is no repentance, we must declare the person guilty of them as not being part of us. He may be called a “brother” but he lacks the necessary faith to make him one of us “in Christ.” It might seem strange to call a “brother” in the faith an “idolater”. The term here would refer to someone who worships at the Lord’s altar, but at the same time supports or is part of an anti-Christian organization and refuses to break from it. With this whole verse Paul is saying that someone who professes the Christian faith and yet continues to sin against either the first or second table of the Law is to be treated differently than one who makes no claim at membership in God’s family.

Verse 12) What is it to me to judge those outside (the church)? Don’t you judge those within (the church)?

κρίνω to judge (used of the disciplinary judgment to which Christians subject the conduct of their fellows, passing censure on them as the facts require)

The facts that Paul refers to with this verse are beyond question. Using a question here is not to seek information but to make his point with greater force. What business is it to me, he asks, to judge the people who are not members of a Christian congregation? Christian rules of life and conduct apply only to Christians. Certainly we are well aware that unbelievers and impenitent sinners are under the just wrath of God and will be lost unless brought to repentance - and as we have the opportunity, we tell them this. But the real judging of them and their conduct is in God’s hands. I don’t go on witch hunts throughout Grafton to find couples living together or go into every bar to find someone who is drunk night after night so that I can tell them that their actions are unchristian.

But we do, and must, judge each other within the fellowship of believers. We judge on the basis of the evidence that comes from their lips and shows itself in their lives. It is our business to judge in order to determine who is truly one of us and who is not. No congregation can live up to its responsibilities without doing this: just as we must all judge our own hearts and attitudes in light of the clear commands of God’s holy Word.

Verse 13) But God will judge the ones outside. Remove the evil man out from among you

While we are to judge our fellow believers (verse 12), the situation is entirely different in regard to outsiders. Then God will judge. Yes, as 6:2 shows, the believers will be God's agents in doing the final judging. But here St. Paul is speaking about disciplinary judging, which is in God's hands.

Then Paul, in a very abrupt manner, returns to the case of the fornicator in Corinth. "Remove" him! The verb is very emphatic. There are to be no ifs, ands, or buts about it: act! 1 Cor. 5:2 uses the term "put out of fellowship" to express the same idea.

From all of this we see that church discipline takes sin seriously, without condoning it in any way; it aims at the salvation of the individual; and it seeks to protect others from the evil influence of the sinner.



**Theses on Excommunication and Termination of Fellowship**  
(Not Adopted by Synod; Revision May 8, 1986)

1. We use the ecclesiastical term “excommunication” for the action taken according to Matthew 18:15-18 whereby a manifestly impenitent sinner is declared to be a “heathen man and a publican.” As verse 18 indicates, this declares him to be outside the *una sancta*.
2. We use the ecclesiastical term “suspension of fellowship” or “termination of fellowship” for the action taken according to Romans 16:17 which ends the practice of fellowship without making a declaration about the presence or absence of saving faith. This is a serious testimony to the destructive nature of all error.
3. Termination (suspension) of fellowship is not an alternative for excommunication, or vice versa. Holy Scripture determines which action is to be taken according to the circumstances of the individual case. It should also be noted that by the very nature of the case, excommunication is applicable only to an individual. Termination of fellowship, on the other hand, is applicable to a group or an individual.
4. There is but one ground for excommunication: manifest impenitence (Matthew 18:15-18).
5. Repentance consists of two parts: contrition, that is, “terror smiting the conscience through the knowledge of sin”; and faith, which is born of the gospel and believes that for Christ’s sake sins are forgiven” (CA XII).
6. Whoever professes not to believe in the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of sins is manifestly impenitent. This includes anyone who openly clings to a false doctrine that denies the redemptive work of God’s Son.
7. When a person who professes to believe in the Lord Jesus sins (whether his sin is of a doctrinal or moral nature), the church must by earnest and repeated admonition from the Word of God show him the error of his way (Matthew 18:15-18).
8. Such earnest and repeated admonition from the Word will result in one of the following:
  - a. The individual may accept the admonition, confess his sin and receive absolution; or
  - b. He may reject the Word of God that has shown him the error of his way and thus reveal himself to be a manifestly impenitent sinner who is to be excommunicated (a “manifestly impenitent sinner”); or He may because of the weakness of his understanding require the continued care and concern of the church (a “weak brother”); or
  - c. He may, even after Patient and lengthy admonition, persist in his false conviction and publicly assert that his is the scriptural position of the doctrine or issue in question (a “persistent errorist”).
9. Neither the weak brother nor the persistent errorist who continues to confess the vicarious atonement of Jesus Christ for all his sins can be declared a manifestly impenitent sinner. When a Christian makes a general confession of his sins, he asks forgiveness also for his many sins of ignorance and weakness, and the Lord forgives (Psalm 19:12,13). Only the Lord can judge hearts (1 Samuel 16:7).
10. The congregation must terminate (suspend) fellowship with the persistent errorist since by making

propaganda for his error he causes divisions and may mislead others in the congregation (I Corinthians 1:10; Romans 16:17; Matthew 7:15-19). By continued fellowship the congregation would ignore the warning of Romans 16:17 and would “share in his wicked work” (2 John 11).

11. In such an instance the personal faith of the individual is not being judged (provided that his error does not overthrow the foundation of saving faith and assuming that he continues to hold in principle to all of the Bible as God’s authoritative Word); yet this action is an earnest and loving testimony to the serious nature of false doctrine of any kind and one’s accountability to God for it.