

I CORINTHIANS 5:1-13
"THE RECOVERY OF DISCIPLINE"

Church Has Distinct Character/Mission: Holiness

1) vv.1-2 CHURCH & PAGANS, COMMAND TO REMOVE OFFENDER (PAUL'S AUTHORITY)

1 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality (*porneia*) among you, 1:11(Chloe's People), 16:17 (Stephanus)?
and of a kind that is not found even among **PAGANS** (non-Jews); Paul Is Horrified, Illegal: Roman Law
for a man is living with (lit. *has*) his father's wife. Similar Age Range, Later Wife, Not A Believer, Adult Incest

2 And you are arrogant (puffed up)! Compounds The Sin, Is. 3:9, Jer. 6:15, 8:12, Share His Guilt
Ought you not rather to mourn? Church Approved! Complicit, 4:6, 18-19

Let him who has done this be removed from among you. Doing Damage, Community Responsibility, 2 Cor. 2:6
Not Trained In Western Individualism, Voluntarism, Titus 3:10

2) vv.3-5 SPECIFIC DISCIPLINE FOR SPECIFIC OFFENDER IN 2 PARTS.

3 a For I, on the one hand, This Letter Is Paul's Proxy, His Presence
absent in body but present in spirit, Paul As Christian Prophet, Prophetic Act
already have pronounced judgment, as present, on the man who has done such a thing
4 in the name of the Lord Jesus. 4:19-20, 2:16b, Clear Apostolic Authority
Effect Of Expulsion Is Spiritual Exposure To Evil

b When you (all) are assembled, and my spirit is present, Col. 2:5, Acts 18:15
with the power of our Lord Jesus, Church Court//Synagogue, High Drama, 4:19-21
5 you are to **deliver this man to Satan** for the destruction of the flesh, I Tim. 1:20, Gal. 5:24
that the spirit may be saved 2 Cor 2:5-11 For Good Outcome, 2 Cor. 7:10, New Life
6 in the day of the Lord Jesus. Day Of Judgment, Hope Of Repentance, Forgiveness Follows, Mt. 18:15-22
Motive Is Pastoral/Restorative, Not Penal

3) vv.6-7c PASSOVER IMAGERY: OLD AND NEW LEAVEN.

6 Your boasting is not good. Apostolic Correction
Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Sin Corrupts Whole: 12:14-26
7 **Cleanse out the old leaven** Yeast Spreads, Ex. 12:15, Act Like Israel
that you may be a new lump, Church Is One Lump, 12:14-26
as you really are unleavened. Well Being Of Church Is Uppermost, In Danger
Indicative Related To Imperative

4) v.7d CHRIST OUR PASSOVER SACRIFICE. Passover = Broken Oppression

For our Passover has already been sacrificed, Christ! Ex. 12:3-7
Israel As A Distinct, Holy People, Created By God

3') v.8 PASSOVER IMAGERY: OLD AND NEW LEAVEN.

8 Let us, therefore, celebrate the festival, Passover
not with the **old leaven**,
the leaven of malice and evil, Allegorical Interpretation
but with the **unleavened bread** of sincerity and truth. Vices & Virtues In Pairs
In Jewish Practice Cleansing Leaven Preceded Sacrifice Of Lamb

2') vv.9-11 GENERAL DISCIPLINE FOR ALL MORAL OFFENDERS IN 2 PARTS.

9 a *I wrote* to you in my (previous) letter **not to associate** with immoral men (women); Letter Before I Cor.
10 not at all meaning the immoral of this world, 1 Thess. 4:12, Lost People, Prophetic Counterculture
or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, In But Not Of The World
since then you would need to go out of the world. He Corrects Their Misunderstanding, Not Isolationist
Unlike Covenanters At Qumran

11 b But rather *I wrote* to you not to associate with any one who bears the name of brother Discredits The Family
if he is guilty of immorality or greed, Vice List (4 + 2 From Deut.: Death Penalty)
or is an idolater, *reviler* (slanderer), Dt. 22:21-22, 30; 13:1-5, 17:2-7, 19:16-19, 21:18-21;24:7
drunkard, or robber (kidnapper?)— OT Reasons For Exclusion From Covenant Community
not even to eat with such a one. No Eucharist, Social Isolation, 5 of 6 Are Non-Sexual
Holiness Of The Church Is Matter Of Internal Discipline

1') vv.12-13 CHURCH & OUTSIDERS, COMMAND TO DRIVE OUT (OT AUTHORITY).

12 For what have I to do with judging **OUTSIDERS**? See Mt. 7:1, Often Misunderstood As Unlimited Tolerance
13 Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? Internal Quality Control, Discipline, Mt. 18:17
God judges those outside. Our Tolerance Is Actually Indifference
Sinful Behavior Cannot Be Allowed To Corrupt Community

"Drive out the wicked person from among you." God Speaks, Deut. 13:5b, 17:7, 22:21-24, Church As Israel
Dt. Text Referred To Capital Punishment, Synagogues Allowed By Rome To Banish

THE RECOVERY OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

“Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?”

Just the opposite of current practice and modern prejudice.

I C O R I N T H I A N S 5 : 1 2 b

We live in insane times, crazy times, unstable times, times that teeter on judgment. That is the only way I know how to describe current events in the church. It makes me dizzy, fearful, sometimes even nauseous when I think of what is ahead. This battle was not part of my ministerial career plan thirty years ago. I had thought the church was a safe place for the practice of Christian faith and morality. Here is a summary of reports from the last week:

- * Senior Bishops of the Church of England have proposed approving marriages between gay priests under the condition they remain celibate within such mock marriages.¹ Yea, right! We have terrorism in the tubes of London and insanity at Lambeth palace, home of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Our mother in the faith, the church of John and Charles Wesley, is not doing well. And, sad to say, the British Methodists are not far behind.
- * The Lutherans will meet in Orlando this week to decide whether or not to perform gay marriages and bless non-celibate clergy. It is not yet clear which way they will go.² Martin Luther is not happy. A mighty fortress could easily become a crumbling relic.

¹ “Church of England May Allow Homosexual Clergy to Marry with Vow of Abstinence,” accessed at ucmpage.org, August 6, 2005.

² “Background of Current ELCA Crisis over Sexuality,” at www.ird-renew.org;; John Darr, “Decision Time for ...Lutherans,” *Christian Century*, Aug. 9, 2005, 12-13.

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- * A faithful United Methodist pastor in Virginia is put on a year's involuntary suspension without pay because he would not receive into membership a choir member who was living in an openly gay relationship. The associate pastor, who was of a different opinion, turned him in to the Superintendent!³ John Wesley is not happy! He wonders what happened to church discipline and to the Methodist vision to spread scriptural holiness across the land.

- * On Labor Day weekend the national United Methodist gay advocacy group will meet at Lake Junaluska, NC with seven of our bishops in attendance giving visible episcopal cover for their agenda.⁴ We win the votes at General Conferences, then lose in the interim because we do not have adequate mechanisms for enforcement of church law. When the appeal is to church advertising slogans of "Open hearts, open minds and open doors" rather than to official church teaching on the issue, we are on a slippery slope.

Who knows how long the West will be locked in protracted conflict with radical Islam? Some say at least a hundred years. And who knows how long the churches will be locked in internal combat over issues of biblical morality versus radical contemporary understandings of sexuality? It could be a long time and at a very high cost. There is no place to hide from this issue, and pastors who remain silent for the sake of keeping peace are leaving their churches intellectually and spiritually unprepared.

But these issues, hard as they are to talk about, are just the most recent fruit of a much deeper root. The 1960's gave us some wonderful gifts, among them the Civil Rights movement with its call to the nation to live up to its moral and political ideals and remove the legal structures of racial discrimination. It was based on respect for human dignity and moral structure. The achievements of the women's movement, particularly in its Christian appropriation, have also been many. Women as equals in the public sphere and in the church is a clear advance, the details of which we are still working out.

The biggest downside of that decade and what followed was the throwing off of sexual restraint and a widespread return to hedonism. Sex was trivialized, commercialized, and spoken of as *casual* and *recreational*, like a friendly game of tennis, which it never is by God's design. The consequences are always serious; the intimate and permanent bond established between a man and a woman is not easily broken, however casual the connection. The two do become one at many levels. In that decade shame was banished and modesty labeled naive and unsophisticated. Lewdness went public. The slogan was, "If it feels good, do it." We bought Freud's thesis that *happiness* is the result of a sudden satisfaction of physical desires that have been bottled up with moral repression, with the church as the chief culprit.⁵ The now-discredited studies of Alfred Kinsey gave us further encouragement to throw off restraint and indulge our appetites because, after all, everyone already

³ See the thread of articles at www.ucmpage.org.

⁴ *Idem*.

⁵ Charles Colson, "Freud's Children," www.breakpoint.org, June 7, 2005.

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was. The *Playboy* philosophy of a lapsed Methodist, Hugh Hefner, captured the popular imagination. Gone was any sense of the inherent dignity and moral depth of the union of a man and woman as a physical symbol of a lifelong commitment to one another. So intoxicating and seemingly sophisticated was this new wave of erotic freedom that the church first resisted, then stood by and watched, then cheered, then all but capitulated. We still expected and occasionally enforced higher standards for our clergy, but on the whole we dropped our moral boundaries and began to wink at immorality around our edges and in our midst as if it was an innocent and harmless thing. Sowing wild oats? Yes, and look at the ugly harvest. Our children picked up the messages we were sending.

Amidst the rapid social change of that turbulent decade the church was stunned, and, not wanting to be left behind by the cultural progressives, essentially caved in to the world's agenda. Having traded in our doctrinal discipline a generation or two earlier, we now traded in our moral legacy. We believed the lie that you can maintain distinctly Christian behavior without clearly Christian beliefs on which to ground them. We stopped preaching biblical standards of sexual morality because we in fact quit believing it was the best way for life to work in a sinful world. The world had a better idea and an easier way. Psychology and sociology replaced biblical theology and long pastoral experience. This is why we face what we face today. We lost many battles before we faced the current one, and to hold the line here after so many decades of retreat will not be easy. Those who charge us with moral hypocrisy have good reasons. The only honest answer is the humble one, "Yes, I agree, but we were wrong then and hypocrites, but now we are repenting because we do not like the results of our foolishness. We intend to forgive our forebears, not to repeat their mistakes."

According to the Census Bureau, in 1970 there were one million people in unmarried partner households, what we used to call *shacking up*. That number grew steadily to 3.2 million in 1990 and soared to 11 million by the year 2000, a thousand percent increase in thirty years. Half of all Americans aged 35 to 39 have lived with someone outside marriage.⁶

Hooking up is now the standard form of pre-marital relationship, but the long term consequences are anything but good. It raises the divorce rate of those who live together and then marry from 50 to a 100 percent higher than those who do not cohabit. It is not practice marriage but practice divorce. And it is bad for kids. Seventy-five percent of all children born to cohabiting parents will experience their parents' separation by age 16.⁷ How do we now raise our voices and hope to recover lost ground after thirty years of guilty silence and easy compromise? Our salt has lost its savor and our candle is flickering low. If you want to see what happens when the church lets the world set the agenda for what we believe and how we behave, look at America today! Look at our own United Methodist Church. Look at our soft self-indulgence and our moral corruption. Look at the tens of millions of abortions we have sanctioned. Look at the steep rise in out of wedlock births. Look

⁶ Mark Creech, "Thou Shalt Commit Sexual Immorality," agapepress.org archives, June 20, 2005.

⁷ *Idem*.

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at the falling marriage rates. Look at the epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases, particularly AIDs. Look at the voracious national appetite for pornography. Look and you will see what happens to a culture at large when the church surrenders its vision of happiness linked to holiness and becomes a chaplain to an alien agenda. Perhaps some of you should go to Junaluska as observers and bring us back a first hand report. I promise you will be offended.

But there is a still deeper issue that has been researched by historians. Where once we Methodists saw ourselves standing together *over against* the American culture as a clear alternative, we little by little traded in our distinctive identity and became absorbed into the larger whole.⁸ We thought we had fought the war and won the culture to our side. We gained respectability. We gave up the discipline of the class meetings with their strict accountability for something more educational and less confrontive, i.e. the Sunday School. We drank in large doses of voluntarism and American individualism. We bought into the idea of privacy, that no one has the right to inquire into my life or ask hard questions. Sin and hell and a holy God were traded in for less disturbing concepts. We aimed at niceness and amiability instead of holiness. You may differ with me on the details, but the trend is clear. Without a deep sense of belonging to Jesus Christ and to belonging to him together in covenant with one another, there is no meaningful accountability, no real encouragement, no watching over one another in love, and no significant discipline. When the bond of faith with Christ and the bond of love with one another is loosened, we soon lose a sense of being church and become a hodge-podge of individuals who happen to meet in the same religious space for an hour before we scatter to our private concerns. The fact that you may not know the people on your pew or have eaten a meal with them is a symptom of the problem. That you think one hour a week of worship can keep you substantially Christian is another. Before the current crisis over homosexuality there was already the loss of a genuinely Christian sex ethic in the church, *before that* a minimizing of our doctrines, and *before that* a loosening of the bonds of love and discipline that held us together in our identity as a people seeking the happiness that only comes with holiness.

It is no wonder that we do not seem to have the moral fiber and the courage of conviction to stand up to the current assaults on what remains of our church. We are like an army that forgot how to fight. We heard there were disturbances at our borders and went out to see about them. What we found was an opposing army, and our noses were blooded by their tactics and sophistication, so we retreated to regroup. The next battle was lost inside our borders. Again we backed up. Now the moral barbarians are within the gates of the holy city asking for the keys and the treasury. They demand our surrender, that we apologize for our many sins, and that we change our faith to line up with their new sources of divine revelation. Some of their officers wear our own United Methodist insignia. They grew up in our churches and attended our seminaries. We created them, and they are the founders of a new religion feeding on the legacy of the old.

This current conflict did not happen all of a sudden. No, it was preceded by gradual losses on several

⁸ Jennifer Tait, "Where Wesley's Followers Went Awry," Christianitytoday.com, posted August 5, 2005.

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issues, and if there is to be a recovery it will not be enough simply to work on the crisis front of sexual ethics. What we must have is an outpouring of the Holy Spirit across the length and breadth of the church and across the whole of our heritage.⁹ We must cry to God for help. Fasting is in order. Our repentance must be deep and long, and since we have forgotten how to repent as a people, it will be extremely awkward. This will mean a recovery of our doctrines, a new sense that we are indeed a community centered around Jesus Christ and not just an assembly of individuals, and finally a fresh awareness that we can only be for the world by standing over against it as a genuine, and often confrontive, alternative. The recovery of church discipline where there are flagrant infractions is dependent on a recovery of meaningful church membership. Church discipline without loving community can quickly degenerate into petty moralism and being a busy-body. That is not at all what we want. What we want is enough of a respectable boundary to hold us together as we watch over and help one another move deeper into the truth and love and hope that is in Jesus Christ. What we are *for*, which is a real community that makes genuine disciples, is more important than what we are *against*, which is the doctrinal neglect and moral corruption of our church. But if we do not tend to the latter, we will not get to do the former. We must work at the boundaries and at the center at the same time. There is no quick fix; this struggle will outlast my ministry, even my lifetime. I am a United Methodist, and I intend to stand for the best in our tradition. God help me not to be a fool.

All I have said thus far has been prompted by keeping my eyes open, to the world around me and to the alternative world I find presented in today's text from 1 Corinthians. That this passage has not been included in the table of Scriptures that guides much current preaching throughout the church year means that most United Methodists will never hear this difficult passage read in worship.¹⁰ Preachers who use the lectionary exclusively will never have to deal with it. It goes against the grain. That it deals openly with sexual sin, that it affirms belief in Satan, that it is morally rigorous, that it deals with heaven and hell and judgment, that it says that a backslidden man's eternal destiny is worth fighting for, and that it recommends excommunication to preserve the church from spiritual cancer are all offensive notions to us. Our response shows how thoroughly modern we are. It is hard for us to imagine a church being this serious about its own integrity and witness to the surrounding culture. And that is precisely why we need to hear what it has to say. It is, after all, the Word of God written and preserved by the Holy Spirit for our instruction. And in these days, the more offensive to our conventional ways of thinking, the better for us all. We need a shock and a sharp slap across the face to wake us up.

The challenge to the church in our day is just this, *not* to adjust our ethical standards downward to the

⁹ For a proposal, see the last chapter of William Abraham, *The Logic of Renewal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

¹⁰ Richard Hayes, *1 Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 88-89. His reference is to the ecumenical lectionary which preserves the snippet of 5:6b-8 as a reading for Easter evening. A review of the UM lectionary in our *Book of Worship* shows that the passage is absent altogether. How selective is our operative canon!

level of our post-Christian culture but to clarify and maintain them internally so that we can maintain our distinctive witness as the people of God. When the sin-sick world comes looking for a cure, it offers no hope if we are as ill as they are. There must be medicine preserved the cabinet. This is why we say *No* to gay marriage and ordination, why we say *No* to heterosexual pre-marital sex and adultery, why we say *No* to pornography, and why we say an exuberant *Yes* to lifelong fidelity and *hot monogamy* within marriage. Celibacy in singleness and fidelity in marriage is our ethic, and it is good for God's people. We really do know a better way or men and women to live, which is why we must without apology present and explain our views before the world and within the church, especially to our own children. And we must start in our own back yard, as Paul did. We are not so much to fret ourselves with the sorry state of the world so much as the sorry state of the church. We have been comfortable for too long; now is a time for discomfort.

PROMPT ACTION IN A CRISIS (vv.1-5)

Paul was not present in Corinth, else it would not have happened. That it happened in his absence tells me that the leaders he left behind were not doing their job of holding the people under moral control. When the cat's away, the mice will play; and here the mice were the Corinthian church and the cat the Apostle Paul. A member of the congregation was having an affair with his father's wife. Not his mother but a subsequent wife who may have been about his age since many Greeks married younger the second or third time around.¹¹ Dad was likely dead; the son may have lived as an unmarried man in the same household with the young widow, and the rest does not take much imagination. We know that she was not a Christian because Paul addresses only the man. Christian discipline is not for outsiders but for insiders, not for the lost but for those who claim to be found. Paul expected pagans to act immorally but not believers. The sin was first lust, which then lead to incest. That it was consensual does not lessen the crime. And it gave the step-mother every right to dismiss the step-son's alleged faith. Might it be that at the last judgment many Christians will have to ask forgiveness of the pagans to whom we have given a bad witness?

It was considered incestuous and intolerable for both Jews and Greeks or Romans to engage in such behavior.¹² Paul is horrified that the standards in the church have fallen below that of the pagan world. He first uses the generic Greek term for *sexual immorality (porneia)*, and then describes behavior so scandalous that it is hard to speak about, "It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and of a kind not even found among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife." Apparently the man had created a convenient theology to justify his behavior. We know this because he garnered support from at least some members of the church. They were proud of his bold use of Christian freedom to demonstrate that he was spiritually superior to the old moral law. As a Christian he was *above it all*. Paul was flabbergasted, "And you (the church) are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn?" You are happy for him! Ought you not be sad? He was guilty of

¹¹ Craig S. Keener, *1-2 Corinthians* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge Press, 2005), 48-49.

¹² R.C. Collins, *First Corinthians* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 207.

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the offense, but the church shared in his guilt since they cheered him on. This is precisely what is happening nationwide in sectors of the United Methodist Church. Church leaders have become cheerleaders and promoters of sexual immorality. They are wrong; that they are happy about it is even worse. We live in different moral and spiritual universes.

Our reconstruction of this man's thought process is skimpy at best, but our best guess is that his experience of the power of the Holy Spirit at conversion and baptism convinced him that he was in some way already living in the new age and that what he did with his body was of no ethical significance. Being free in Christ meant throwing off moral restraint. And besides that, it felt good. It was not a good witness to the woman and not an example for the church. It was a cancer that would spread if not quickly removed, as Paul commanded in verse 2: "Let him who has done this be removed from among you." Paul was unwilling to leave the situation *as is* until he could come and deal with it personally. It was that serious. One of the church fathers, John Chrysostom, makes this perceptive comment:

"Just as the sin of one person contaminates many, if it is not dealt with once it is known, so also does the sin of the many who know what is happening and either do not turn away from it or pretend that they have not noticed it. Sin does not look like sin if it is not corrected or avoided by anybody."¹³

The man was wrong; so was the church for letting it continue. Their refusal to act contaminated them all. Remember this principle: what you tolerate you get more of, and a church that tolerates public, flagrant immorality will soon be thoroughly corrupted. Same with drunkenness or crime of any kind or easy divorce or racism or dishonest business practices. We hear of such scandals from time to time, but before they go public there is always a long history of compromise by leaders who did not have the courage to act.

But weren't they two consenting adults? And how did it hurt anyone else? And who has the right to butt into someone's private life? And aren't we all sinners? And who are we to judge, anyway? Any of these questions going through your head? Then you show yourself to be a modern individualist who does not understand the first thing about how Christians are bound to one another in the one body of Christ. In the creed we confess that we believe in the *communion of the saints*, meaning that we are profoundly interdependent. What I do affects you, and what you do affects me. We are separate organs in the same body, and if the liver gets the flu, then so do the lungs. In baptism we are invisibly grafted into the one body of Christ and thus vitally linked with every other Christian believer. What you think of as *private sin* has *public effects* in the church. So if the service is sometimes lifeless and dull on Sunday, don't always blame me or Mary Ruth. Maybe it's your secret sin that has caused major blood loss and weakened our corporate pulse. What you do all week, whether of virtue or of vice, is heaped up in this sanctuary each Sunday. So when you are tempted, see in your mind's eye your own hand lacerating the body of Christ and opening it to infection. It may help you

¹³ Gerald Bray, ed., *1-2 Corinthians, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 1999), 47.

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turn away from what you have considered a private matter.

Let me say this without being overblown or misunderstood. Because I am appointed here by the Bishop I have certain spiritual authority in the church to act for its welfare and to guard the faith. It is not an easy job, and I fail more than any of you know. I am guilty of cowardice and timidity for which I am embarrassed. I do not like calling people to account. Under God I have both a high level of accountability and significant authority. But Paul, as an apostle, had even greater authority. Although absent in body, he was present in spirit, and in the spirit had already pronounced a judgment on the offender in the name of the Lord Jesus. That is the clear meaning of verses 3 and 4, as much of a mystery as the specifics are to us. From hundreds of miles away in Ephesus Paul was performing spiritual surgery on the church under the watchful eye of Jesus. And when the church came together they were to carry out the sentence. Whether or not they obeyed was the test of how far the disease has spread. A church that can wake up and act decisively is still alive; a church that continues to sleep through flagrant, public sin is as good as dead already.

If it is a mistake to think that my private actions as a Christian do not have public consequences for the church, it is also an error to think that you can survive as a believer outside the church. To reduce the church to one more voluntary civic organization is blasphemy. There is incredible spiritual protection when you are faithful to a relatively healthy local church. Satan has a harder time deceiving you because you read the Scriptures and hear them preached. You are regularly strengthened through the sacraments. A web of friends prays for you and asks about you. Your tithes and offerings are like an invisible insurance policy covering all you own because your source is in God. The care and counsel of a pastor is there for difficult times and hard decisions. But when you neglect the church, or when you are involuntarily removed as this man was, the invisible protections are removed and you become free bait for the Evil One. You are on Satan's turf without the protective shield of the church, and so none of us should be surprised at what happens to dropouts, backsliders, and those who see the church as an optional extra if they have nothing better to do that weekend. We should not be surprised at their troubles. If you feel weak after not being here for a few weeks, there is a reason! With these thoughts in mind, see if verse 5 makes more sense now: "When you all are assembled, and my spirit is present, with the power of the Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." The experience of expulsion for gross and unrepented sin was designed to shock the offender back into his senses. Think of going to the circus and the difference it makes sitting outside the lion's cage at a safe distance. But what if they threw you into the cage and you had no protection? That is what it means to be outside the church on enemy territory. Someone is out to get you!

This kind of tough love troubles us, but it is very Methodist. It's in our DNA. What made the early Methodist movement such a powerful tool of the Holy Spirit was Wesley's insistence that faith in Christ must lead to a disciplined life of accountability and holiness. The system of societies and class meetings was set up for that very purpose. Every week people were asked probing questions: What known sins have you committed since our last meeting? What temptations have you met with? How were you delivered? What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not? Have you nothing you desire to keep

secret?¹⁴

The year was 1787, the place Dublin, Ireland. The eighty-four year old John Wesley was making his rounds of the societies. They knew he was coming and the questions he would ask. For some it would be a joy, for others pain. In Wesley’s *Journal* we read of his tough love and loving discipline: “I began visiting the classes, which employed me to the Thursday evening. We found it necessary to exclude one hundred and twelve members; there remain eleven hundred and thirty-six.”¹⁵

What were the offenses worthy of dismissal? The following list is taken from one of Wesley’s letters concerning the society at Newcastle:

“Two for cursing and swearing. Two for habitual sabbath breaking. Seventeen for drunkenness. Two for retailing spirituous liquors. Three for quarreling and brawling. One for beating his wife. Three for habitual, willful lying. Four for railing and evil speaking. One for idleness and laziness. And ninety-nine for lightness and carelessness.”

We live in a permissive age and in a hyper-tolerant church that has grown so used to debilitating sin and so comfortable with the ways of the world that we do not realize how spiritually weak and ineffective we have become.¹⁶ We are like the Alzheimers patient in the nursing home who has forgotten what health used to look lie.

A NEW PASSOVER IN THE CHURCH (vv.6-8)

Every year in the Spring the Jews went through a series of carefully prescribed rituals which reenacted the events of the Passover and the exodus from Egypt under Moses. They left in such a hurry that the bread did not have time to rise. Each year they purged their homes of all the old leaven as a symbol of removing sin and starting afresh. Then the Passover lamb was killed according to the ritual and eaten. This is the imagery Paul draws on in verses 6 through 8. “Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?” A small piece of yeasted dough can soon make a much larger lump rise. It is powerful stuff, as is sin. Insert a little, and it can change the whole character of a church. It simply takes over.

Paul’s logic is a little hard to follow, “Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, *as you*

¹⁴ “Do You Desire to be Told of Your Faults,” ChristianityToday.com, July 29, 2005.

¹⁵ *Journal*, VII, 294.

¹⁶ See A.J. Conyers, “Rescuing Tolerance,” *First Things*, No.115, August/September, 2001, 43-46.

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really are unleavened.” I thought we cleansed out the old leaven in order to make the new lump unleavened, and that, by analogy, we purged the church of sin in order to make it holy.” No. The church is *already* holy; that is God’s gift. Our job is to work with the Lord to maintain the unity and holiness he has already given. The holiness of the church, its distinctive character as a people set aside for God, is not something we work *towards* as a human achievement but something that we work *from* as a divine gift. As the Nicene Creed says, “I believe in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.” We can spoil the holiness of the church, but we did not create it, and we cannot finally destroy it. The church is what it is because Christ has made it so. The work is his, the cooperation ours. At the center are these words, “For our Passover has *already* been sacrificed, Christ!”

For the Jews it was *first* cleanse the leaven and *then* sacrifice the lamb; for us it is just the reverse. Because Christ has offered himself first and broken sin’s power, we can celebrate the festival by rooting out the residues of sin and learning to live in sincerity and truth instead of malice and evil. In the church we do not deal with sin in order to earn forgiveness. It is because we have already been forgiven and set aside as a holy people that we deal with flagrant sin when it inevitably appears and becomes visible. Paul’s radical solution of removing the man from the church was rooted in the story of Israel. The old leaven must go. How we live together and what we tolerate makes a difference, and there can be no lasting renewal of the church without a recovery of loving discipline and tough love. We must rebuild the boundaries between us and the world, not in order to isolate ourselves behind walls but to recover our sense of being a distinct community centered in Jesus Christ that refuses to accept the world’s corruption. And nowhere is that more needed in our day than in the area of sexual practices and their meaning about which the world around us is so thoroughly confused and in such enormous pain. Anne Widdecombe, member of the British House of Commons, put it this way:

“Let’s face it, we are not a happier society as a result of the liberalization of the seventies. We have record rates of divorce, record rates of suicide, record rates of teenage pregnancy, record rates of youth crime, record rates of underage sex. We should invite people recognize that the Great Experiment has failed. You cannot have happiness without restraint.”¹⁷

A NECESSARY CLARIFICATION (vv.9-13)

I take some comfort in the fact that Paul’s letters were capable of being misunderstood. Same with my sermons. I write one thing; you hear another. He wrote that they should not associate with immoral men, and they began to cut themselves off from immoral people who were not believers. Carried to its logical conclusion this would require the whole church to leave the city of Corinth and live in isolation as hermits. This tells me that the church at Corinth was ethically naive. They saw the problem as *out there* and not *in here*. They were holy, and all the sinners were outside the church. It is called *isolationism*, and some churches still practice it. Each foray outside their holly huddle is a threat to their fragile purity. Verses 9 and 10: “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 or robbers

¹⁷ *Electronic Telegraph*, April 3, 2000.

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or idolaters, *since then you would need to go out of the world.*” Not an option. The holiness of the church is not preserved by hiding from the world. That’s not the way Jesus lived; he mixed it up with all sorts of people.

The clarification is given in the next verse, “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, slanderer, drunkard, or robber- not to even eat with such a one.” This is a family matter. The six vices Paul lists here are not just a random catalog of bad behavior. They are taken from the Book of Deuteronomy; each brought the death penalty and was followed by the formula, “So you shall drive out the evil person from among you.” The people of Israel had boundaries, and so does the church as its successor. And note that only one of the six is sexual, namely *immorality*. The other five also put the integrity of the community in jeopardy and must be dealt with. Incest is serious, but so is greed, the worship of other gods, slander, drug and alcohol addiction, and theft. These are cancers that left unaddressed will corrupt the church and prevent its mission of offering Christ as Lord and Savior and a safe haven in the church. The Christian psychiatrist Louis McBurney agrees with Paul. He writes:

“Sexual sin has a more painful personal impact than other sins, because it touches something deep inside each of us. It threatens us and stirs in us a great deal of anxiety. But there are lots of sins that can create as much havoc: judgmentalism, hypocrisy, gossip- even speeding, which can kill people.”¹⁸

There is an invisible battle going on inside each of us, and we are unaware of it. At this moment your immune system is attacking bacteria, rendering viruses powerless and going after cancerous cells in a million mini-skirmishes. As long as that defensive system operates correctly, you stay well. But occasionally, something gets through the first line of defense. An infection sets in; a tumor begins to grow. Symptoms appear, and you seek help from a doctor. The bad news is that you have cancer; the good news is that it is still small enough to be removed by surgery. Same with the church. We are resisting intrusions every day, but when one of our own cells goes haywire and refuses with the help of the community to change, then they are to be disciplined in love. The patience of the church with flagrant and dangerous sin is not infinite. That we cannot even imagine such a thing shows how naive we have become about the infectious nature of sin and evil, how much we have embraced the world’s understanding of tolerance, and what a low regard we have for the holiness and integrity of our local churches. We are not a civic club; we are not the religious version of the Rotarians; we are the people whom God has called to salvation through Jesus Christ, and we are to live as a counter cultural witness to the world around us. If we are no different than the world, what good are we?

So where does that leave us? Simply with *free association* outside the church and *selective association* within it. We expect sin in the world, but we are not to tolerate it in one another. The holiness of the church as a distinct people set apart for God and the gospel is not something we created. Christ alone did that in his

¹⁸ *Leadership*, Vol. 13, No. 1.

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self-offering. And what he created, we are to maintain, and when necessary, to restore by decisive action. Scripture gives us the reason and the nerve to do so. Paul could not have been more clear than in his two closing rhetorical questions, “For what have I to do with judging *outsiders*?” Expected answer: Nothing. Second question, “Is it not those *inside* the church whom you are to judge?” Expected answer: Yes. Then a second reminder, “God judges those outside.” So I am neither offended nor surprised by the wickedness and violence in the world around us. That’s how lost people behave. This is how ignorant sinners under the tutelage of Satan act. They are accountable to God, but they cannot change on their own. What offends me is to find that same stuff *inside the church* and to admit to myself in moments of honesty that I am capable of it all. It makes me fear God again, lest I should be the one to bring public shame on the name of Christ and be ejected from the ministry.

Now some of you are no doubt quoting your favorite verse, the words of Jesus, “Judge not, that you be not judged,”¹⁹ which in our day is wrongly interpreted as I-promise-to-leave-you-alone-if-you-promise-to-leave-me-alone-so-no-one-will-criticize-anybody-and-we-will-all-then-have-good-self-esteem. For Jesus it was a warning that we will be judged by the same standards we apply to others; it is not an excuse for having no standards at all. To believe in Jesus Christ and to be baptized into his church is a commitment to live in a disciplined community of love where we care too much about each other to let sin have its ugly way without consequences. We care for one another, but we care for the church as a whole even more. It is fearful; it is rare; it is a spiritual therapy of last resort; it ought to make us weep and engage in deep self-examination, but it is sometimes a necessity, “Drive out the wicked person from among you.” And if they repent, then they may return, be freely forgiven and welcomed back into the family with joy that the prodigal has come home. Until that time we pray and leave them to the infinite creativity of God’s wrath.

CONCLUSION

There is something in this text and in this sermon to offend everyone, me included. *Philosophical liberals* will gag at the idea of clear and enforceable moral standards that are given by God and not up for a vote. They don’t know what to do with divine revelation. *Persons with a secular mind set* will rebel at the notion that Satan is a personal spiritual being with relative freedom to nurture evil in the world and attack sheep that are outside the fold. They don’t know what to do with the mystical and supernatural. *Radical individualists* will rebel against the idea that anyone has the right to tell them what to do. They don’t know what to do with community and its constraints. *Sentimentalists* (and most mothers!) will revolt at the notion of tough love in the church. They don’t know what to do with consequences. *Pastors* will resist the notion that monitoring the fence line and confronting disobedient believers is a part of our job; we would much rather adopt the techniques of modern non-judgmental counseling than the tough love techniques of God’s word. By and large we modern Methodist clergy, when compared with our circuit-riding forebears, are a pack of well-paid cowards who care more about keeping people happy than about keeping them holy. And finally, *most of us* will resist the radical idea that our private actions have public consequences for the vitality of the church because we are indeed one

¹⁹ Matthew 7:1.

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body in Christ. We don't know what to do with the church as defined by the New Testament. At heart we are rebels who want to do what we want to without anyone having the right to call us to account. And when the church is weak and undisciplined because of neglect, as we are today, is it any wonder that the culture around us doesn't take notice of us because we are so much like them? We have been rendered so nice and inoffensive that we are impotent before the onslaught of hedonism and barbarianism which is becoming mainstream America.

I am not calling today for some massive and overblown project of national moral renewal as if wishing it could make it so. I desire something much more modest, and that is for the church to be the church, a people who belong to Christ and who work out the full implications of that faith with the tested tradition of Scripture and the light of the Holy Spirit.

God help the church. God help the pastors. God help me.

Phil Thrailkill
Duncan Memorial UMC
August 7, 2005

