

“Excommunication”

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

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Text Comment

Paul has completed the first “argument” in the *probatio*, the main bulk of the letter extending from 1:18-16:12, containing the argument of the letter. He has dealt with the disunity created by competing loyalties to different ministers fueled by false notions of wisdom and attraction to the standards of this world. Now he proceeds to the next problem and the next “argument.” Again, I’m using the term “argument” not in the sense of “proof,” but in the sense of reasons given for taking up the course of action he is recommending to them.

- v.1 The sin in view is incest. The man is living with and having sex with his stepmother. That is the sense of the verb “to have” in such a context. The sin is the sin of father and son cohabiting with the same woman. Many forms of sexual activity that were forbidden in the law of God, and so forbidden by both Jews and Christians, were not considered shameful in the Greco-Roman world. Fornication, prostitution, adultery were, in general, common and accepted. As American culture moves more and more toward a pagan view of sex and as that view is leaking more and more into the church, we are finding the situation described in 1 Cor. 5 more understandable. When Demosthenes, in one of his orations, said, “Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of the body, but wives to bear us legitimate children,” he was describing a sexual ethic utterly alien to that of the Bible. But, our culture’s sexual ethic is now also utterly alien to that of the Bible, even if not in all respects what it was in the Greco-Roman world. However, a man having an incestuous relationship with his father’s wife would have been considered inappropriate even by most pagans in Paul’s day.

Now, this specific sexual relationship was explicitly forbidden in the Mosaic law. We read in Lev. 18:8: “Do not have sexual relations with your father’s wife.” *What is of special importance is the demonstration this provides for the fact that Paul seems to take it as a matter of course that the Mosaic Law is still in force and still binding upon Christians.* The notion, still very popular among evangelicals, that the law of Moses passed away or lost its authority at the outset of the Christian era, apparently never occurred to Paul. Here he assumes that a specific prohibition found in Leviticus still must be observed. This command not to marry or have sexual relations with your stepmother is not in the ten commandments; it is in the case-law of Leviticus. Yet, it is still binding on Christians today. Some of that case law has been explicitly superceded in the teaching of Jesus or the apostles, but much of it remains in force! We still need the OT to live the Christian life!

- v.2 Paul is less worried about the sin itself than the fact that the church has seen fit to do nothing about it. It is boasting of its wisdom and tolerating evil in its midst. It is not clear whether the sin was being tolerated or actually condoned. It matters little. What is clear is that the Corinthians were still far too much marching to the beat of their pagan

culture, in which culture there was normally no shame attached to illicit sex. The church seemed to have been willing in this respect, as before in the matter of wisdom, to take its cue from the world rather than the Word of God.

- v.5 Paul makes no mention of the woman in his instructions, suggesting, in all likelihood, that she was not a Christian and so was not subject to the church.

“To hand over to Satan” is language found also in a similar context in 1 Tim. 1:20 suggesting that it was, in the apostolic era, a standard way of speaking about church discipline. It most likely meant that the man, being cast out of the church, was being returned to the world, which was Satan’s sphere. The purpose of that was to destroy what belonged to that man’s flesh, his sinful nature, and the dominion that it was exercising over his life, so that he might be renewed to repentance.

- v.6 This church is in great danger of spiritual corruption and is, instead, proud of itself. As one commentator nicely puts it: “A church exposed to corruption would do well to sing in a lower key.” [Barrett, 127]

- v.7 In the Passover ritual, which Paul is using as an illustration, all leaven was removed from Israelite homes prior to the Passover week. “As you really are...” is typically Pauline. The Christian life is a matter of “being what Christ has made us to be.”

- v.8 “Keep the festival” means not observe Passover or the Lord’s Supper, but, in the spirit of Paul’s illustration, likening the sin in their midst to leaven that must be removed lest it infect the entire body, it means live a holy life, as the following words indicate.

- v.9 Paul had apparently written to them previously. He now clears up a possible misunderstanding of what he said in that former letter. In all likelihood the congregation, given its present state of mind toward Paul, had deliberately misunderstood or misapplied Paul’s instructions, which may explain why he is so stern with the congregation and so critical of its “boasting” in this chapter. Some of the “arrogant” in the church had seized on his command not to associate with the sexually immoral to discredit Paul’s authority. In typical fashion they put the worst construction on Paul’s remarks and then pointed out how ludicrous his instructions were: why, if they aren’t to associate with the sexually immoral they can’t go to the store, they can’t work at their jobs, they can’t live in Corinth!

- v.10 The inclusion of the “greedy” among these other sinners should give us pause. Church discipline for greed is unheard of in American churches

- v.13 The citation is from Deut. 17:7. Interestingly, however, in Deuteronomy the person is expelled by execution. Here execution has become excommunication. The church is no longer a nation under the law of God. Its punishments are now more purely spiritual than spiritual and physical as during the days of the theocracy. Notice, however, how artlessly Paul assumes that Deut. 17:7 still applies, even if it must be obeyed in a very different

way in the new era. The law of God endures forever. Its application in certain respects, however, is suited to changing circumstances.

Further symptomatic of the failure of the Corinthian church to order its life according to the Word of God was the presence of a member who was living in open and scandalous transgression of the law of God. His life was so far from being lived in Christian faithfulness that it fared poorly even in the judgment of the pagans round about. “No!” said Paul. “It is as impossible for a Christian to continue to live this way as it is impossible for a Christian church to permit him to do so. I have already summarily cast this man out of the church and now expect you to ratify this judgment in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ at your next meeting. Strip from this man the name and the privileges of a follower of Jesus Christ in hopes that such a judgment on his life will awaken him to the error of his ways, the peril in which he has placed his own soul, and bring him to repentance, new obedience, and the faithful practice of a Christian.”

Now, what we have here is one of the primary New Testament illustrations of church discipline, and, in particular, of the extreme sentence of excommunication – a man being cast out of the church so that he no longer belongs to it. And, as such, it raises for us the question of the place of church discipline in our own affairs as a Christian church. Are we to do what Paul said the Corinthian church should do? And, if so, in what instances are we to act similarly? These are great and controversial questions. As a church that practices church discipline, and there are many evangelical churches in our day that do not, we may be tempted to think that this is really a simple matter of obedience to the Lord. But it is not so simple.

1. There is hardly a case of church discipline that is not complained against by someone – often by someone who regards himself as a defender of the practice of church discipline, who, nevertheless, finds this particular sentence, in this particular case, too harsh or too peremptory, or who finds some irregularity in the procedures that were followed. It is all very well to say that we are to practice church discipline after the example of Paul. It is another thing altogether to get everyone in a Christian community to agree as to how it is to be done in any particular case.
2. What is more, the entire matter of the discipline of the misbehavior of Christians is complicated by the treatment of this subject in the Bible itself. There is no “Manual of Discipline” in Holy Scripture. There are some broad principles and a few instances of case law and many questions are left unanswered. Godly elders must deal with specific cases for which there is no specific biblical instruction. What is more, characteristically, the Bible’s teaching bearing on this subject leaves us with principles that are in obvious tension with one another. For example, later in this same letter, Paul addresses the fact that there are couples in the Corinthian church who have divorced when they did not have biblical grounds for doing so. We might well have expected him to demand church discipline in these cases as he had in the case of the man living in an incestuous relationship with his step-mother, but he did not. He took a different tack with them. It is not always an easy thing to know when a sin is a frailty that must be born by the church and when it is a scandal that must be disciplined. If you had been present when the elders of this congregation worked their way – not always without disagreement – to a final decision in certain cases of church discipline, you would appreciate how difficult a matter this can be and how complicated a business it can be to apply the teaching of the Bible to a specific case.

No less a churchman than Augustine, who was a bishop and so responsible for church discipline, confessed that he found it difficult in some cases to know whether to apply Matthew 18:15, where private rebuke is sufficient if it secures repentance, or 1 Timothy 5:20, where we are told, “Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that others may take warning.”

3. And, then, on top of all that, there is the inconsistency of the church in the practice of church discipline. The maximum penalties of the law in American jurisprudence have sometimes been overturned for precisely such an inconsistency: the law is not equally applied; black men are far more likely to be executed than white men and so on. Not only has she often failed to discipline scandalous offenders – which is why once great churches are now in the hands of rank unbelievers – she has often disciplined and even excommunicated the wrong men. Some of the church’s finest sons have been excommunicated by synods, bishops, popes, and presbyteries. Chrysostom, the 4th century’s greatest Christian preacher, was deposed from the ministry twice by evil and jealous churchmen. John Huss, the early reformer, was excommunicated and then burned at the stake by the Council of Constance in the early 1400s. Martin Luther was excommunicated. Samuel Rutherford was deposed from the ministry. J. Gresham Machen, a stalwart champion of the Word of God in the early decades of the 20th century, was removed from the ministry for failing to acquiesce to the progress of unbelief in his Presbyterian Church.

And, today, the inconsistency continues even in supposedly Bible-believing churches. A person can be disciplined, even excommunicated in one congregation and be singing in the choir in another the next Sunday. I remember that years ago we excommunicated a member of this church who was found to be a thief. We discovered that he was attending another church and advised the leadership of that church accordingly. They were quite uninterested in the fact that he had been excommunicated. He was entirely welcome fully to participate in the life of their church so far as they were concerned. They were, however, as I remember, glad to be advised to keep an eye on their money.

It is not, therefore, very difficult to understand the reservations that many have concerning church discipline, against such actions as Paul required here in the case of this man. The church has done it badly very often. Nobody seems to agree much of the time even in what seem to be the most obvious cases. Perhaps we should give it up as a bad job; a good theory but one that cannot be put into useful practice. Add to this the facts that most excommunicated people are not restored to repentance and that our culture has a deep-seated prejudice against passing judgment on people, a prejudice that is going to make it very difficult for people to understand and sympathize with the practice of church discipline and so may make them less willing to hear and believe the gospel message preached in those same churches. Perhaps, in our day, we would be wise simply to abandon the practice of excommunication and even lesser forms of church discipline.

No, that cannot be right. We cannot do that. And Paul tells us why we cannot.

- I. *First, he says, the souls of the disobedient depend upon the faithful practice of church discipline.*

Paul insists on the banishment of this man from the church of Jesus Christ *precisely so as to secure his salvation*. Whatever else we may say about church discipline, even excommunication, it is clear in the Bible that its purpose is salutary. It is an instrument by which those who have succumbed to deadly sins are restored to spiritual health. It does not always have that happy result, to be sure, but that is its purpose and sometimes that is precisely its result. We have ourselves seen discipline produce that holy result in a person's life and it had that result in this case. As we learn from 2 Corinthians, the man was brought to repentance by the sentence pronounced against him. He was made to reckon with the impossibility of continuing to claim to be a Christian while living as he was living and that, in turn, led him to forsake his sinful way of life and seek forgiveness and restoration, which was then granted.

The man had to be made to see the gravity of his sin. He had to be made to understand that no man who lives the way he was living would ever stand in the judgment of the Lord. He had, apparently, been living with this woman for some time and his conscience was not troubled by it. The church's acquiescence in his behavior had put his conscience to sleep. He had to be disabused of the notions that Christ would receive him whether or not he lived a holy life and that he could sin and sin and sin and grace would only the more abound. Only his excommunication was sufficient to awaken him and make him face the truth.

All of us wish to be healthy. We eat a balanced diet and some of us exercise because we know this is an important part of good health. But sometimes we get sick anyway. When we are ill we hope that that we can be treated in some simple way, by rest or medication. But the time comes, sooner or later, when we learn that our illness cannot be treated in a simple way; that there is no way for us to recover our health but by taking a more extreme step: our body must be cut open, perhaps an important part of it removed; or it must be subjected to powerful poisons in hopes of killing the disease.

That is what Paul is saying about excommunication. It is very severe treatment, to be sure; but in some cases it is absolutely necessary and love will require it to be done for fear that a brother or sister will slip out of this world and go up to the judgment gaily unaware that he or she is about to hear from the Judge of all the earth, "Depart from me, I never knew you."

II. Second, Paul says, excommunication is essential for the health and spiritual well-being of the church.

A little yeast leavens the whole lump. This point is made in virtually all the Bible's explicit teaching about church discipline. It is to be done, the wicked are to be cast out of the church, we read in Deut. 13:11, so that, "all Israel will hear and be afraid, and no one among you will do such an evil thing again." It is not too much to say that the principle use of church discipline, according to the Bible, is not for the offender, but for the church. Richard Baxter, commenting on this teaching, quotes Seneca, the Roman moralist, who wrote, "He who excuses present evils transmits them to posterity." [Cited in *The Reformed Pastor*, 105-106] It is a principle, this principle that Paul enunciates in v. 6 that even unbelievers can understand!

If we want to ensure that the children of this congregation grow up with little zeal for living a godly life; if we want to ensure that they will live their lives as if there is little difference between Christians and non-Christians, we could do no better than to allow people who are living worldly and outwardly sinful lives to remain members in good standing and to participate in the life of this congregation. We would be telling our children, and every member of the congregation, in a manner more effective than words, that one does not need to live a holy life in order to see the Lord. That is a message every sinful heart is so ready to hear, that we can be sure it will be believed more firmly than any sermon to the contrary. Actions, as we say, speak louder than words.

We need every help to live a holy life. In particular we need the very great help of knowing that it is absolutely required in the Christian church. Not a sinless life, but a holy life. Not a life without stumbles, but a life that is the demonstration of true faith and true repentance.

The fact is, through the ages, countless multitudes have taken that sad way to hell that leads right down the aisle of a Christian church and right past a Christian pulpit. And why? Because, in many cases, they were allowed to believe that they could be Christians and have God's salvation even though they lived in and for the world. Church discipline has for its object the absolutely necessary one of putting into every Christian's bones the conviction that "without holiness, no one can see the Lord."

III. Third, excommunication is essential to maintain and preserve the honor of Christ.

That is Paul's point in vv. 7-8. Why live a godly life? Because Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us. He died that we might become holy, to free us from the dominion of sin. When Christians live in open defiance of the commandments of God, they as much as publish to the world the accusation that Jesus Christ makes no difference in a man or woman's life. He does not, he cannot transform the wicked into the righteous. Trusting him does not make a person live well. His love, his grace, his teaching, his Holy Spirit, his example, leave no mark.

No, says Paul. Christians cannot be so careless of the reputation of their Redeemer or the honor of his name. Their message to the world must rather be, Jesus Christ is so good, so pure, so full of love, so God-like in his power, that he draws men and women up into himself and makes them good as he is.

Do you remember why God said that he would punish David so severely after his terrible sins? It was not first to restore David, though it had that purpose and that result. It was not first to warn Israel, though it had that purpose and that result. But the reason God gave to David was this: "because by doing this you have made the enemies of the Lord show utter contempt..." The world judges the Lord by the behavior of his children, his servants.

When a man, even a minister, commits adultery with the wife of one of the elders in his church, when they both divorce their spouses so that they can marry one another, and when excommunicated by presbytery and by church as they should have been, they simply move down the street to another evangelical church where they soon are singing in the choir – as happened in our own denomination not so long ago – what would you think, or would you even bother to

think about a God whose people don't live any better than that, of a God who permits adulterers, impenitent adulterers, who have compounded their original crime by deserting their wives and children, to sing his praises in a church choir? My goodness! Pagan gods used to be worshiped by people like that! Is the living God no different, is his name no higher than that of Baal or Asteroth? Can his grace, righteousness, and power accomplish no more than they?

This is the point that Calvin makes in his consideration of church discipline. It must be done, he said, whether or not it has a happy effect on the sinner,

“that they who lead a filthy and infamous life may not be called Christians, to the dishonor of God, as if his holy church were a conspiracy of wicked and abandoned men. For since the church itself is the body of Christ, it cannot be corrupted without some disgrace falling upon its Head.” [*Institutes*, IV, xii, 5]

IV. *Finally, excommunication must be practiced, no matter its difficulties, because God had commanded us to do it.*

Whether we can see the reason of it or the use of it or the likely benefits of it or not, is not really the issue. For Paul, as it should be for us, what matters is what God has said in his Word. And what he said was, “Expel the wicked man from among you.”

Excommunication should be a comparatively rare thing in a well-ordered church. But, the Bible tells us to expect that it will be necessary and orders us to be ready to practice it when it is. Lesser forms of discipline exist and should also be used for the same reasons. The Dutch Reformed speak of minor excommunication and major excommunication. We speak of suspension and excommunication. And wise elders must devise the discipline to fit the situation. Paul did. He doesn't say the same thing about the sinners in 2 Thessalonians 3 that he says about this sinner in 1 Corinthians 5. When elders enforce such discipline in various ways and suitable measures, they do as wise parents who discipline their children, they do as Amy Carmichael did when she tied the pigtails of two quarreling girls together until they learned to walk in harmony. They are saying to the individual who is sinning in some defiant way, they are saying to the church who sees this sinning, and they are saying to the world that observes the church, “in the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, true faith and true love produce a different kind of life. They will, they must; if a man or woman will not live this different life, will not follow Jesus Christ in righteousness, purity, and love, then he or she is no Christian and the church must not conspire to permit him to think that he is, or she is.”

May God spare us much more of this unhappy and difficult work. But let us all agree, here in the presence of the Lord Christ, that when it is necessary we will not flinch, but do what Paul did for the reasons he did it. Let us say now, that we will never be so foolish as to think ourselves wiser than God or that there is a better path for us to follow than that to which we are pointed in the Word of God.