

1 CORINTHIANS 3-5 A CASE OF FORNICATION AND THE SOLUTION



We are studying 1 Corinthians, arguably the most difficult Church in the New Testament that Paul had to pastor. This is why God wants us to see the inner workings of the First Century Church, learn the lessons and realize people and leaders come and go, but it is God's biblical truths that remain and should be the main reason we are here – of having *the love of the truth* (2 Thes. 2:10).

In 1 Cor. 3, Paul, after dealing with the problems of a “party spirit” in the congregation, partly based on the spiritual gifts they received (chap. 14) says it has led many to pride and being puffed up. He urges them to *develop a humble attitude* before God and men, saying, “Let no one deceive himself. If any of you thinks he is *wise in this age*, let him become a fool, that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, ‘He catches the wise in their own craftiness.’ And again, ‘The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile. Therefore *let no one boast in men*. For all things are yours: whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's” (verses 18-23).

In order to have them understand these biblical principles, Paul uses analogies they can relate to, such as a farmer caring for his field or a builder constructing a house to describe the relationship between members, the ministry, and God.

Now, in chapter 4:1-2, he gives them two more illustrations so they can grasp the true role of the ministry—that of an *under-rower* and a *steward* to emphasize the need for humility. He reminds them, “Let a man so *consider us*, as *servants* of Christ and *stewards* of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required in stewards that one be found *faithful*.”

As *Wiersbe's Commentary* explains, “Paul answered *the leaders of the various factions in the Church* when he called Peter, Apollos and himself ‘ministers of Christ.’ The word translated ‘ministers’ [in the Gk. *huperetas*] is literally “under-rowers” of Christ. It described slaves who [laboriously] rowed the huge Roman galleys or ships. [Paul is expressing a truth], ‘We are *not* the captains of the ship but only the *galley slaves* who are *under orders*. Now, is one slave greater than another?’” We are a team.

Believer's Commentary brings out, “If one Christian teacher is more gifted than another, it is

because God made him so. Everything he has, he received from the Lord. In fact, it is true of all of us that everything we have has been given to us by God (James 1:17). That being the case, why should we be proud or puffed up? Our talents and gifts are not the result of our own cleverness.” This is the way ministers should see themselves in the Church.

His next analogy is that of a humble steward, (Gk. *oikonomos*), a slave placed in charge of his master's house.

Wiersbe's Commentary continues, “Paul wanted his readers to understand how God measured and evaluated a Christian's service. 1 Cor. 4:6 explains Paul's purpose: ‘That no one of you be puffed up for one against another.’ A steward is a servant who manages everything for his master, but who himself *owns nothing*. Joseph was a chief steward in Potiphar's household. The Church is the ‘household of faith’ (Gal. 6:10), and ministers are *stewards* who share God's wealth with the family (Mt. 13:52). Paul called this spiritual wealth ‘the mysteries of God.’

“So, the main issue is not, ‘Is Paul popular?’ or, ‘Is Apollos a better preacher than Paul?’ The main issue is, ‘Have Paul, Apollos, and Peter been faithful to do the work God assigned to them?’ If a servant of God is faithful in his personal life, in his home, and in his ministry of the Word, then he is a good steward and will be adequately rewarded. But a servant is constantly being judged. There is always somebody criticizing something he does.

“Paul...did not get upset when people criticized him, for he knew that his Master's judgment *was far more important*. The phrase ‘man's judgment’ is literally ‘man's day.’ This is in contrast to ‘God's day’ of a *judgment yet to come* (1 Cor. 1:8; 3:13).”

Paul then answers his critics, saying, “But with me it is *a very small thing* that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, *I do not even judge myself*. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but *He who judges me is the Lord*. Therefore, judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the *counsels* of the hearts. *Then each one's praise will come from God*” (1 Cor. 4:3-5).

Paul continues focusing on their need of humility, explaining, “Now these things [their criticisms]...I have figuratively transferred to myself

and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us *not to think beyond what is written*, that *none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other*. For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? You are already full! You are already rich! *You have reigned as kings without us*—and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we also might reign with you!” (1 Cor. 4:6-8).

With pastors like Paul and Apollos not present, some members had taken advantage of the situation to take charge and make wrong decisions that affected the congregation. That is why Paul ironically says to them “without us you reign.” Now he will have to correct those decisions and send a faithful minister, Timothy, to repair the damage.

He says to them, “I am not writing this to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have ten thousand instructors [self-appointed leaders of the congregation], you do not have many fathers [he was the initial minister who started the Church there]; for I have *begotten* you in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Therefore, I urge you to imitate me [that is, follow the mature, spiritual attitude Paul has]. For this reason, I have *sent Timothy* to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church. Now *some are puffed up*, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills, and I will know, *not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power*. For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power. What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod [the pastoral authority to correct], or in love and a spirit of gentleness? [which Paul preferred]” (1 Cor. 4:14-21)

Now, in chapter 5, Paul focuses on the first wrong decision they had made in his absence and now corrects it. He points out: “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father's wife! And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be *taken away from among you*” (verses 1-2).

As *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* points out, “The issue concerned a Corinthian Christian who was carrying on an incestuous affair with his

stepmother, a relationship prohibited...in the Old Testament (Lev.18:8; Deut.22:22) and Roman law. The fact that Paul said nothing about disciplining the woman suggests she was not a Christian.”

Incidentally, here is an example of how the term “fornication” or *porneia* in the Greek, can mean *illicit sexual relations in general*. As the Greek scholar Robertson says, “*Porneia* is sometimes used to mean *sexual sin in general* (Acts 15:20, 29) and *not just among single people*, while *moicheia* is technically ‘adultery’ on the part of married people (see Mark 7:21).” So, instead of repudiating this sin and removing the sinner from the congregation, they were tolerating his presence at Church, thinking only compassion was needed to be applied.

Paul is outraged by this misapplied tolerance and tells them that such a sin cannot be permitted in the congregation. He says, “For I indeed, as absent in body [not being there] but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 5:3-5).

Here we see that pastors do have the authority to suspend a member guilty of immorality. He must return to the world, where he will no longer have access to the Church until he repents of his sins.

William Barclay comments: “Paul is dealing with what, for him, was an ever-recurring problem. In sexual matters the Gentiles did not know the meaning of chastity. They took their pleasure when and where they wanted it. It was so hard for the Christian Church to escape the infection. They were like a little island surrounded on every side by a sea of paganism. They had come so newly into Christianity and it was so difficult to unlearn the practices which generations of loose-living had made part of their lives. Yet, if the Church was to be kept pure they must say a final good-bye to the old [pagan] ways.”

“Paul's verdict is that the man must be dealt with. In a vivid phrase he says that he must be handed over to Satan. He means that he must be excommunicated. The world was looked upon as the domain of Satan just as the Church was the

domain of God. Send this man back to Satan's world to which he belongs, is Paul's verdict. But we have to note that even a punishment as serious as that was not vindictive. It was in order to humiliate the man, to bring about the taming and the eradication of his lusts so that in the end his spirit should be saved. It was discipline, not exercised solely to punish, but rather to awaken; and was a verdict to be carried out, not with cold, sadistic cruelty, but rather in sorrow as for one who had died. Always at the back of punishment and discipline in the early Church there is the conviction that they must seek not to *break* but to *make* the man who has sinned."

Since the dates of Passover and Unleavened Bread were near, Paul uses the spiritual symbols of these Feasts to explain the principles behind this expulsion. In fact, in chapter 11, he gives precise instructions on how to properly observe the coming Passover ceremony.

He tells them, "Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that *a little leaven leavens the whole lump*?" (1 Cor. 5:6).

Harper's Commentary states, "In the Jewish community, leaven was a symbol of sin... and Paul uses this metaphor to explain that, just as a little leaven leavens a whole lump of flour, so one corrupt member left unremoved can corrupt the entire congregation."

The Jewish N. T. Commentary adds: "Unleavened bread was used in the temple sacrificial system, and the offerings *had to be absolutely pure. Anything leavened was considered unclean because it had fermented, or soured.* Therefore, *unleavened bread was a symbol of purity.*"

Now he uses the symbols of God's Feasts to remind them of what leaven represents—sin. Just as they would soon remove the leaven from their homes, so they must remove their sinful ways from the Church and their lives.

He thus tells them, "Purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us. Therefore, let us keep the feast, not with the old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness [as was the sin of fornication], but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Cor. 5:7-8).

Such prominent commentators as Conybeare and Howson, in their famous book, *The Life and*

Epistles of St. Paul, admit: "The festivals observed by the apostolic church were at the first *the same with those of the Jews*; and the observation of these was continued, especially by the Christians of Jewish birth, for a considerable time...We see no difficulty in supposing that *Gentile Christians joined with Jewish Christians in celebrating the Passover and abstaining from leaven*...Moreover, we see that Paul still observed 'the Days of Unleavened Bread' (Acts 20:6)..." (pp. 346, 390).

The Encyclopedia Britannica also acknowledges, "There is *no* indication of the observance of the Easter festival in the New Testament, or in the writings of the apostolic Fathers...The first Christians *continued to observe the [biblical] festivals*, though in a new spirit, as commemorations of events which those festivals had foreshadowed" (11th edition, p. 828).

Paul then clarifies a misunderstanding they had in a previous letter sent to them. He says, "I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly *did* not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person. For what *have I to do* with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore 'Put away from yourselves the evil person'" (1 Cor. 5:9-13).

Here we have an example of the principle Jesus gave—that members are "in the world" but "not of the world" (John 17:11, 14).

This is why the concept of monasteries and convents, where monks and nuns separate themselves from the world is not biblical.

God did not tell us to leave the world, but rather to avoid being defiled by the world.

Therefore, he rules they were to remove the member of the congregation who was committing fornication, but they were not to judge the affairs of fornicators in the world at large, for God will judge them.