

# Clean Out The Old Leaven

From high atop the Acrocorinthus, Aphrodite gazed down from her temple upon the city that loved her. While it is true that “an idol is nothing in the world” (I Cor 8:4), the mire of sensuality and fornication which flowed down the Acrocorinthus and polluted the streets of Corinth was certainly real.

Corinth was a crossroads of the Roman world. The shortcut across its narrow isthmus spared a treacherous sailing around Cape Malea and brought enriching commerce, making it “the Vanity Fair of the Roman Empire, at once the London and the Paris of the first century”.<sup>1</sup> But Corinth offered more than safe anchorage for cargo vessels. The vagabond virtues of sailors and merchants found a welcome embrace in the arms in the goddess of love, and her faithful adherents filtered from the flow of humanity all that was sexually impure.

Perhaps shocked by the enormity of Corinth’s wickedness, possibly disheartened by the recent resistance of the Athenians, Paul had entered this neo-Sodom “in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling” (I Cor 2:3). Encouraged by a vision from the Lord (Ac 18:9-10), Paul preached the simple message of a crucified Savior and erected a temple of God to rival that of Aphrodite (I Cor 2:2; 3:16-17). Now, a few years later, Paul has learned that some of the Corinthian brethren have revived their affections for their once-beloved goddess. One situation in particular poses a grave threat to the entire church, and Paul boldly confronts it in chapter 5.

## Two Interrelated Sins: I Corinthians 5:1-2

**The Sin of Incest.** Not only is fornication present among the Corinthians, two attendant factors make the sin particularly horrendous. First, it is a brand of fornication which offends even the numbed sensibilities of the unenlightened, unprincipled Gentiles: “a man has his father’s wife.” Thus, the whole nature and purpose of the church is reduced to absurdity: “The Corinthian Christians were actually trying to win pagans to Christ and living more loosely than the Corinthian heathen among whom the very word ‘Corinthianize’ meant to live in sexual wantonness and license.”<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, the incestuous relationship was not clandestine but common knowledge among the brethren. “Actually reported” conveys the idea of open discussion of fact rather than the whispering of groundless rumor or innuendo. Everyone knew about it but nothing was done, and it is the inaction of the Corinthian church against such a heinous crime which is of greatest concern to Paul.

**The Sin of Tolerance.** It would have been bad enough if the Corinthians were merely indifferent toward the incestuous relationship among them. This would have been somewhat understandable, given the fact that they had lived for so long with relaxed and untrained consciences. The rigors of moral judgment demanded by the law of Christ might have wearied and discouraged them, causing a relapse into a non-judgmental outlook. But Paul censures them not for *indifference* but *arrogance*; they are “puffed up,” so much so that they are tolerating the intolerable. “Their morbid self-importance, which made them so intolerant of petty wrongs, made them very tolerant of deep disgrace”.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the epistle, Paul cites pride as a contributing cause of many of the Corinthians' problems. Their regard for the wisdom of the age led to an inordinate esteem of men and consequent factionalism (I Cor 1:18-25; 2:6; 3:18; 4:6). On the other hand, that same pride caused some to denigrate Paul and scoff at his apostolic authority (I Cor 4:8-10, 18-19). Others were arrogant due their knowledge (I Cor 8:1). The spiritually-gifted were especially conceited, leading Paul to point out in the midst of his discussion on gifts that "love ... does not parade itself, is not puffed up" (I Cor 13:4).

In all of these manifestations of pride, one characteristic is readily observed: *pride distorts reality*. All things are measured by the subjective standard of Self rather than the objective standard of God's word. The Corinthians, therefore, had a distorted view of the importance of men, apostolic authority, idols, spiritual gifts, and, in the case of the incestuous affair, sin. Oblivious to the deadly and infectious nature of sin, especially sexual sin, the Corinthians were happily tolerating that which not only defiled God's temple in Corinth but could completely destroy it if left unchecked.

It is difficult to be very precise in evaluating the underlying cause of this arrogance. Several possibilities are worthy of consideration. Perhaps it was a result of their own experience with sin. Most people grieve over their past sins, but others are quite proud of them. A sinful past can lend an air of sophistication and mystique to a person, a ploy disgustingly overused by Hollywood. Such a person can be patronizing toward those who have lived more pure and godly lives, and they might consider a strong aversion to sin as naive overreaction. Tolerance thus becomes a token of experience with sin.

It is also possible that the Corinthians were persuaded to tolerate the situation by their spiritual richness. This is a trap into which "prominent" Christians occasionally fall, especially preachers. Sinful behavior is often overlooked in favor of one's perceived contribution to the kingdom. Maybe the achievements of the Corinthian church became the basis for excusing the sin. One can almost hear the echoes from Corinth over the centuries: "After all, an apostle started our congregation, and one of the most eloquent preachers of our generation [Apollos - Ac 18:27-28; I Cor 3:6] has worked with us!"

Some postulate that the Corinthians had adopted a type of antinomian doctrine which exempted them from prohibitions against fornication. Possibly, as with the later doctrine of Gnosticism, the spirit was considered so elevated and sanctified by the gospel that the activities of the body did not affect it. Paul does point out in the next chapter that "the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord" (I Cor 6:13), and it is unacceptable for one belonging to Christ to be joined to a harlot (I Cor 6:15-16). Thus, a "spiritual arrogance" might have tolerated such extreme immorality because it was considered of no consequence to the spirit.

The real motive, however, for the Corinthians' behavior might have been more simple than the foregoing suppositions. Perhaps their pride could no longer endure rejection. Perhaps they just wanted to be accepted by a society which once approved of them but from which they were now estranged. Undoubtedly ridiculed for their worship of an executed "criminal," castigated for their strict scruples, ostracized for being narrow-minded, self-righteous bigots, the Corinthians may have wanted to relieve some of that pressure. One way to do it was to show the world that

they could tolerate its behavior. This weakened resolve even comes with its own built-in rationalization: “We’ll never be able to convert people unless we can gain the respect of the community.” Surely this is not such an unfamiliar feeling, is it?

But the world is never so depraved that it cannot recognize hypocrisy. While the world may persecute a Christian for his convictions, it will thoroughly despise a hypocrite. Those who desperately try to be something other than what they are become caricatures, misfits of unnatural exaggeration. The aging man who parts his hair just over his ear in order to cover his bald head, who misuses slang in an attempt to sound hip, who dresses in the contemporary fashions of a teen-ager becomes an object of ridicule. By countenancing behavior considered repugnant even by a godless society, the Corinthians were making hypocritical spectacles of themselves, something quite different from the spectacle the apostles were making of themselves before angels and men (I Cor 4:9).

God’s people in Corinth had retreated from the high ground of distinctive morality, forfeited the respect earned by consistency of conviction and behavior, and dulled the edges of the sword of truth. How the immoral pagans must have derisively scorned the Jesus whose name these people invoked! How the heathens must have comforted themselves and justified their debauchery in the face of such a hollow exercise of religion! And how Aphrodite must have smiled upon it all from her perch above the city!

However we evaluate the social causes of the Corinthians’ pride, we can summarize it in Paul’s words: “Your glorying is not good” (I Cor 5:6).

**The Proper Attitude Toward Sin.** When one understands the true nature of sin - the defacing of the image of God in the sinner, the tragedy of eternal condemnation, the cost to God of reclaiming those ensnared by it - the proper response is grief and sorrow rather than some warped form of arrogance. Paul scolded the Corinthians, “And you are puffed up, and have *not rather mourned* ...” (I Cor 5:2a).

Contrast the Corinthians’ cavalier attitude toward the incestuous affair and Paul’s later reflection upon his own feelings as he confronted the situation: “For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you, with many tears ...” (II Cor 2:4). Paul understood clearly both the magnitude of the sin and the danger which it posed to the congregation, and it was this understanding which caused him to firmly oppose the practice in an epistle which he feared would alienate these beloved brethren. Paul went on to say that his distress over their potential reaction to the epistle was so great that he left a fruitful work in Troas in order to search for Titus and receive news of how the Corinthians had responded (II Cor 2:12-13). Furthermore, he recalled that “when we came to Macedonia, our flesh had no rest, but we were troubled on every side. Outside were conflicts, inside were fears” (II Cor 7:5). This agony of heart was not relieved until Titus was found and he related the favorable response of the Corinthians to Paul’s letter (II Cor 7:6-7).

Paul’s agitation is attributable to his godly attitude toward sin. Had he been as self-centered as the Corinthians, he would not have put his reputation at risk by writing such a confrontational epistle. He, too, could have rationalized inaction: “If I make them mad, then I will lose my influence among them.” But Paul refused to put personal considerations above the welfare of the

Corinthian brethren. Knowing fully the deadly nature of sin, his only option was to confront the brethren and pray that they would be brought to their senses and repent.

But the mourning which should have been evoked by the brother's immorality is not mere sentiment; it is emotion leading to action: "you ... have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be *taken away from among you*" (I Cor 5:2b). "A proper Christian instinct would have led them to have expelled the guilty person in irrepressible horror at his conduct."<sup>4</sup> Their failure thus serves to introduce the remedy which Paul now prescribes for the congregation.

### **"Deliver Such A One To Satan" - I Corinthians 5:3-5a**

The command which Paul issues is filled with urgency. The neglect of the Corinthian brethren to administer milder forms of discipline such as study, prayer, exhortation, admonition and rebuke, has left them with only the harshest alternative. (**Note:** It is not within the scope of this study to consider in detail the broader subject of preventive discipline or earlier stages of corrective discipline.) If one were to walk into a room and see a small child looking down the barrel of a gun, it would not be the time for a reasoned discussion on firearm safety. The only course of action would be to remove the gun from his pudgy little hands as quickly as possible.

The situation in Corinth was so clear that Paul could make an accurate assessment from a distance (I Cor 5:3); there were no extenuating circumstances that justified denial or delay. Paul first invokes the authority of heaven to substantiate his command: "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ ... with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Cor 5:4). Thus it is affirmed that: 1) Paul is not abusing his apostolic authority, giving his opinion, or pursuing a personal vendetta, 2) any church which properly disciplines does so with the approval of Jesus, and 3) when called for, the action must be implemented with urgency.

In complying with this command, the congregation is to act publicly and collectively: "when you are gathered together" (I Cor 5:4). Several coordinate phrases describe the nature of the action to be taken: "taken away from among you"; "deliver such a one to Satan"; "purge out the old leaven"; "not to keep company with"; "put away from yourselves that wicked person" (I Cor 5:2, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13). This action of the congregation has no impact upon the sinner's own relationship with God; it merely acknowledges that a change of relationship has already occurred and enjoins the individual members to act accordingly. In this case, the man's well-known actions are *prima facie* evidence that he is not in fellowship with God, for fornicators have no inheritance in the kingdom of God (I Cor 6:9-11). There is, therefore, no basis for the extension of spiritual fellowship by other Christians to him.

Paul's "deliver such a one to Satan" is similar to Jesus' "let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector" (Mt 18:17). Jesus was speaking of an obstinate brother who refused to correct his sinful behavior at the urging of the congregation. If a man insists upon living by Satan's dictates, then God will allow him to do so and treat him accordingly. But he cannot have it both ways. One cannot have one foot in God's kingdom and one foot in Satan's. Therefore, God forbids His people to extend spiritual blessings to the determined sinner which are reserved for the saint.

## The Purposes of the Command - I Corinthians 5:5b-8

**Two Implied Effects.** The disciplinary measure enacted by the church seems to have two benevolent by-products. First, it would have a deterrent effect upon others who might contemplate similar behavior. The absence of swift and painful punishment is an encouragement to sin (Ecc 8:11). Conversely, certain retribution for misconduct is an added incentive to do what is right.

Secondly, the expulsion of the offender would send a message to the community, even as the former tolerance had sent a message. Admittedly, the punishment of sin would be a weaker message than if the sin had not happened. But in trying to salvage the best of a bad situation, the unbelieving community might learn by such a response that the congregation does not hypocritically overlook its own faults while condemning the same in others.

**Two Stated Objectives.** First, Paul stated that this action should be undertaken “for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (I Cor 5:5).

**Listen carefully:** God is telling us that sin can gain such a hold on a person that the *only chance* to reclaim him or her is to confront them with the full weight of congregational rejection. If there was a more effective way to affect repentance, then surely God would have advised it. The fact that such an action is gut-wrenching, embarrassing, shameful and downright unpleasant is *not* a reason to oppose it. Quite the opposite in fact; those are the very feelings that God intends disfellowship to produce. Punishment must be unpleasant if it is to have any corrective value: “Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but grievous; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Heb 12:11).

But what is meant by “the destruction of the flesh?” Nearly every modern commentator interprets this as physical affliction of some sort brought on by apostolic power. This is unacceptable for many reasons, three of which are: 1) it wouldn’t require expulsion in order to strike the brother with disease or ailment, 2) it is inconsistent with the spiritual weaponry with which Christians are to fight a spiritual battle, and 3) it would not be available today. The command of Christ in Mt 18:17, the admonition of Paul in Rom 16:17, and the instructions in II Thes 3:6-15 all stress *disassociation*, not disease. Those who advocate the view of bodily affliction give it too much credit. Physical pain and suffering are powerless against cherished convictions.

Withdrawal graphically forces the sinner to face what he is choosing. By definition and example, the action necessitates a removal of what presently is enjoyed; that is, the sinner is in continual association with and receiving the approval of Christians even as he sins. By losing the fellowship of Christians, the sinner is given a tangible taste of losing fellowship with God. Did the incestuous brother *feel* separated from God? Probably not, such is the deceptive power of sin. But he would certainly feel being excluded from worship, unable to sing with his brethren, to pray with them, to meditate with them upon the Lord’s death. No more Bible studies, no more encouraging words to lift the spirits, no more supportive family to help fight against the encroachments of the world.

“Well, I can do without those things,” says the sinner, “I’ve still got my fishing buddies and the pot-lucks and my season-tickets to the Isthmian games.” No, says Paul to the wayward brother,

you don't have that either. "But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother ... not even to eat with such a person" (I Cor 5:11). It is the pain of social isolation and spiritual deprivation that God hopes will cause the sinner to think about what he has done.

The "destruction of the flesh" is an attitude of godliness among those who have been washed, sanctified, and justified in Christ (I Cor 6:11). Paul said, "Those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal 5:24). In baptism, "our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin" (Rom 6:6). Thus, the Christian repudiates sin and does not allow its continual presence in his life: "Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts" (Rom 6:12). To summarize the Christian's relationship with sin, Paul said, "And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin" (Rom 8:10). This determination to conquer sin and devote one's life to Jesus body and soul is the key to living a righteous life. The motivation for such a life springs from the forgiveness which Christ made available by His sacrifice: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal 2:20). Christians live in a fleshly body, but body doesn't rule the soul.

The incestuous brother in Corinth had forgotten his commitment to Christ, his resolve to crucify the flesh, his cleansing of former sins. The only recourse is to plunge him fully back into the dominion of darkness in hope that he will recapture the spirit of his initial conversion. This appeal to the inner man is the only hope for salvation, not the imposition of some ache, pain, or threat of physical death. If reflection upon lost fellowship with brethren and with God will not bring one to genuine repentance, then nothing else within man's power will do so.

The second stated objective of the discipline, and one that is often underemphasized, is to preserve the purity of God's church: "that you may be a new lump" (I Cor 5:7). Paul alludes to the Jewish Passover in order to stress this point. The Jews did not merely omit leaven from the dough but, realizing powerful effect of just a little yeast, meticulously searched and cleaned their homes in order to remove every last particle of it. The Corinthians were ideally to be an unleavened lump of dough (v 7), but Paul says they were yet contaminated with leaven and the sacrifice had already been offered (Jesus - I Cor 5:7b).

But what is meant by "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?" ? To what does the leaven refer? It is possible that the incestuous man is still under consideration, and Paul is using an old adage to assert that continued toleration of this man's behavior would erode the morality of the whole congregation. Thus, to "purge out the old leaven" would be to expel the contaminant before it spreads.

God was greatly concerned to maintain the distinctiveness and purity of Israel under the Law of Moses. God had told Israel, "you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people ... and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex 19:5-6). In view of this special status, the Law of Moses was laden with purification rites. Various regulations addressed the priesthood, the offering of sacrifices, the temple and its furniture, contact with the dead, warfare, body functions and other aspects of ceremonial uncleanness. Further, God enacted laws which strictly governed moral behavior and spiritual allegiance. The penalty for contaminating the

congregation was harsh, indeed. Some were isolated from the community: “you shall put them outside the camp, that they may not defile their camps in the midst of which I dwell” (Num 5:1-4). Others were put to death: “So you shall put away the evil person from among you” (Dt 13:5; 17:7, 12; 19:19). The death penalty was particularly applicable to sexual violations (Lev 20:10-16).

In spite of this, Israel was historically susceptible to sexual immorality in conjunction with idolatry. Examples of this abound, but Paul in I Cor 10:8 mentions the incident wherein Israel committed harlotry with the women of Moab and sacrificed to Baal of Peor (Num 25). On that occasion God smote Israel with a plague and 24,000 died before Phinehas’ intervention. While all sins are the same in terms of guilt before God, not all sins are identical in effect. It seems that sexual sins are particularly potent and contagious, and an atmosphere of tolerance encourages the infection to quickly spread.

But there is an additional aspect to Paul’s concern about the whole lump becoming leavened. This refers to the *attitude of tolerance itself* which allowed the incest to go unpunished. If the Corinthians were willing to abide such flagrant immorality, is there any sin which they would oppose?

Paul amplifies this in I Cor 5:8 when he urges the Corinthians (and us) to “keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” What is the implication of this admonition? Paul says that tolerance of sin, however the Corinthians may have rationalized it, is born of *malice and wickedness*.

Undoubtedly, they had convinced themselves that they were operating on nobler principles. Isn’t that one way in which sin deceives? Tolerance of evil is called “loving” and “kind.” On the other hand, as seen in contemporary politics, making moral judgments and punishing lawbreakers is labeled “the politics of hatred.” “Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness ...” (Is 5:20).

The toleration of sin is always hurtful. In this case, the incestuous brother has been abandoned in his sin. He, along with his stepmother, is doomed if not brought to repentance. Also, the entire congregation has been placed in jeopardy, and this shows contempt for the spiritual welfare of all the brethren as well as the unconverted in Corinth who will remain in darkness if the lampstand is removed. Finally, more consideration has been given to status among the Corinthian society than to maintaining the honor of God, His church, and His truth. This is the ultimate wickedness of all. *Sincerity and truth* are missing when discipline is missing. The congregation which allows sinful behavior to go unchecked does not practice the truth regardless of its stand on institutionalism, Calvinism, premillennialism or any other -ism.

Expelling the sinful brother would purge the leaven of the evil practice, and it would purge the leaven of the wicked disposition toward laxity which was destroying God’s temple by neglect.

### **A Further Clarification - I Corinthians 5:9-13**

Because of the Corinthians’ misunderstanding of a previous epistle, Paul clarifies the issue of association with the heathen and with brethren. Paul said that Christians are not to be

“conformed to this world” (Rom 12:2); John said Christians are not to “love the world” (I Jn 2:15); James says that he who “wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (Jas 4:4). Even so, the Christian cannot avoid incidental contact with people who have no appreciation for spiritual things, “since then you would need to go out of the world” (I Cor 5:10). Wisdom would dictate that we approach these associations cautiously, realizing their potential to do us harm, while constantly strengthening our inner resistance to sin.

However, Christians can control to a great degree associations which are based on spiritual fellowship, “with anyone named a brother” (I Cor 5:11). The list of sins mentioned indicate that the recommended solution regarding the incestuous brother was not a unique procedure reserved only for the most egregious crimes. Congregations must be vigilant in recognizing sin in whatever form it may appear (I Thes 5:22), diligent in implementing corrective measures, and, failing correction, courageous in putting both the sin and the sinner out of its midst.

Unfortunately, it is easy to reverse the principle of association. We can creatively justify tolerating the worst scoundrels among our brethren while we assiduously keep “those dirty heathens” outside the realm of *our influence upon them*. The grounds of association go beyond baptism, attendance at public worship, knowledge of the Bible and reputation. Godly character and purity of life are the determining factors of whether or not “one named a brother” is fit for fellowship with God’s people.

### **A Disciplining Congregation in Today’s Society**

**The Indirect Influence of the World.** The most vocal critics of congregational discipline today are brethren, themselves. Some of the reasons given for opposing withdrawal from wayward Christians is evidence that our popular culture is having a bigger impact upon attitudes than God’s revelation.

1) “*You send me one of those letters and you’ll be hearing from my attorney.*” This threat comes from the brother who feels no obligation to the local church, who views himself as something of a rogue whose membership in the congregation exists solely at his own discretion. He boasts that he is not answerable to any man but he perceives himself as answerable to God. In truth he ignores God’s words about congregational responsibility (I Cor 5) and taking brethren to court (I Cor 6). Such an attitude is gross arrogance at its worst.

2) “*How could you do such a mean thing to my family?*” This is the plaintive cry of one whose emotions have clouded the issue. Yes, it is a painful thing to see our family members reclaimed by the world and our brethren publicly acknowledge it. It is embarrassing and grievous. These emotions are legitimate, but God has always expected His people to subordinate their emotions to reasoned obedience. Too, this response demonstrates how we have learned from society to shift blame upon others. The *church* isn’t at fault, the *unfaithful brother is!* Finally, inflicting pain is not always born of meanness. Doctors do it to save lives, parents do it to train their children, coaches do it to produce better athletes. Churches should do it with the hope of saving a soul.

3) “*You have no right to judge someone else’s life.*” Immediately after this statement, of course, comes the quotation of Mt 7:1. But I Cor 5:12-13 is conveniently omitted: “Do you not judge



those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore, ‘put away from yourselves that wicked person.’” Apparently, Christians **can** judge a man or woman to be wicked, and a congregation **does** have the right to judge on proper grounds to whom it will extend fellowship. Our society has developed a passionate hatred for moral judgments. “You have no right to judge” is the cry of a nation intent on searing its collective conscience in order to pursue an agenda of unrestrained evil. *But this is precisely the function and duty of Christians in the world.* “And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them” (Eph 5:11).

4) “*We don’t want to run anyone off.*” This timid soul has lost sight of the whole purpose for which the church exists. It resembles the glut of useless middle managers which collected in the economic boom of the middle 1980s as business became a numbers game rather than a fiscally responsible enterprise. Admittedly, it is hard to compete with the whole-life counseling, exotic retreats, celebrity hobnobbing, and other fleshly titillations slickly marketed by sticky haired and sticky fingered hucksters. But Christianity is not a numbers game. Jesus had said to Paul, “I have many people in this city” (Ac 18:10), and Paul’s response was “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase” (I Cor 3:6). The increase of God are those souls who are willing to submit to Him on His terms, who desire eternal life more than anything else, who love Jesus more than anyone else, who treasure truth more than their own lives. Men pay attention to numbers; God looks at the heart.

5) “*Why bother? It doesn’t work anyway.*” Since when did we “antis” get so pragmatic? We’ve been telling the institutional folks for decades that what matters is not what “works” but what is “authorized.” This same principle works in the reverse. But is the observation true? God’s disciplinary procedures **always** work; what is flawed is our conception of “work.” When the sinful brother is removed the church is *always* purified. When a congregation makes a strong stand for purity there will *always* be a deterrent effect. When a church refuses to tolerate evil there is *always* a public declaration of respect for the word of God. When a church faithfully discharges its duty toward an erring brother there is *always* obedience to God. This, by the way, is the underlying issue behind Paul’s command to the Corinthians: “For to this end I also wrote, that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things” (II Cor 2:9).

But what this person means by “it doesn’t work anyway” is that the disciplined brother is rarely restored. Does preaching “work” even when no one is baptized? Are we not in the business of giving opportunity and incentive for others to obey? We have already established that expulsion of the sinning brother is the *best possible* course of action under the circumstances; otherwise, God would have commanded a more effective approach. Therefore, congregational discipline is *always* the best way to induce repentance. We cannot force someone to repent; neither can God. All we can do is bring moral suasion to bear in an attempt to encourage a reappraisal of spiritual standing.

Incidentally, the discipline of the Corinthian brethren apparently “worked”: “This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man” (II Cor 2:6). This, I believe, is attributable to the fact that the man was still in fellowship with the brethren (though not with God) when he was expelled. This is probably the primary reason that many today have concluded that church discipline doesn’t “work”; “withdrawal” is usually the reading of a letter about a brother in absentia who has long since abandoned even the vaguest pretense of

association with the congregation. This is not to criticize such an action but simply to suggest that congregations might be guilty of waiting so long to act that there is no punitive element to the withdrawal. In sports vernacular, “no pain, no gain.”

6) “*It’s not my problem.*” This attitude is a cousin to #3. Harsh criticism for interfering in other people’s lives has produced an “I don’t want to get involved” generation. In some cases this attitude is pure apathy. A “go to church” mentality has replaced genuine sharing and caring, and far too often a brother’s struggle with sin is answered with a stony, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”. In other cases, concern for one in need is present but overridden by selfish considerations. “I don’t want to risk losing a friendship,” we might tell ourselves. “I have problems of my own; I don’t have time to deal with someone else’s.” But one cannot sanitize and customize relationships to suit himself. The *agape* love that governs the heart of a Christian **must** take into account the needs of others. We face a powerful Adversary who knows our weaknesses and effectively exploits them, who taunts and tempts and torments until we sometimes don’t know which way to turn. We don’t need Cain for a brother or Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar for friends. We all need brethren on whom we can lean, who will care for us, pray with us, listen to us, and advise us on how we can overcome the enemy. Paul said, “Bear one another’s burdens, **and so fulfill** the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2). When an individual Christian or congregation stands idly by while a brother or sister is reclaimed by the world, they repudiate the very nature and law of Christ.

7) **The Direct Influence of the World.** The social and political climate of the United States is increasingly hostile to the free exercise of religion. Lawsuits have been successfully waged against churches for implementing disciplinary measures. Pressure is growing against practices deemed discriminatory. Just how distant is the possibility of a class-action lawsuit against churches of Christ for refusing fellowship to practicing homosexuals or women who demand leadership roles?

### A Final Note

I am confident that most brethren appreciate the “what” of I Corinthians 5 and are willing to act as God commanded when faced with a clear case of ungodly behavior. But the practical question of “when” is more difficult to answer. Some sins, admittedly, are harder to detect than others, such as covetousness (I Cor 5:11). Bob Bunting, in a personal discussion on this subject, made this thoughtful observation: “It *is* harder to define some sins than others, but if we would just take care of the obvious ones, we would be a whole lot better off.” Have too many congregations compromised the ideal of purity and distinctiveness by conceding that sinful behavior as inevitable? Have some churches abandoned timely discipline in all but the most flagrant cases being hesitant to confront sin in its less offensive forms? Neglect is a deceptive form of disobedience.

Christians in every society must beware of unconsciously adopting the philosophies of their age. Exercising congregational discipline will not put us in good standing with a society which coddles criminals and denounces spanking as abuse. Are we up to the task of being a “holy nation” in an unholy society?

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<sup>1</sup> Farrar, F.W., *The Life and Work of St. Paul*, p. 556.

<sup>2</sup> Robertson, A.T., *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Vol. 4, p. 111.

<sup>3</sup> Robertson and Plummer, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 97.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*