**The Church at Corinth**

**A Church Facing Inner Problems – #13**

**Incest and Association with Sexually Immoral Persons: Part I Corinthians 5:1-13**

***Corinthians 5:1*** *It is widely reported that there is sexual immorality in your midst, and of such a kind found not even among pagans: a man living with his father’s wife.* ***2*** *And you have become arrogant! Should you not rather have grieved, so that the one who has done this should be removed from your midst?* ***3*** *I, for my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged that on the one who has committed this deed, just as if I were present.* ***4*** *When you are gathered together in the name of [our] Lord Jesus and (with) my spirit,* ***5*** *hand this man over with the power of our Lord Jesus to Satan for the destruction of the flesh so that the spirit may be saved on the Day of the Lord.*

***6*** *Your boasting is not a good thing. Do you not realize that a little leaven ferments the whole batch of dough?* ***7*** *Clear out the old leaven so that you may become a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb has been sacrificed.* ***8*** *Let us, then, celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, or with the leaven of wickedness and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.*

***9*** *I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people,* ***10*** *not at all meaning the immoral people of this world, or the greedy and swindling, or idolaters, since then you would have to leave this world.* ***11*** *But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother, if he is sexually immoral or greedy or an idolater, slanderer, drunkard, or swindler; do not even eat with such a one.*

***12*** *For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those within, you are to judge?*

***13*** *God will judge those outside. “Drive out the evil one from among you.”*

**Notes and Study**

1. Paul turns to another problem concerning Christian behavior, about which he has heard (5:1). It may have been reported to him by the same people of verse 1:11; or it has been recounted by the delegates from the community mentioned in 16:17, Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus; or perhaps by those who brought the letter to be mentioned in verse 7:1. In verse 9, Paul reminds them that he has already written in a previous letter (no longer extant), “*not to associate with sexually immoral people*.” Having counseled the Corinthians once about such a topic, he is now scandalized to hear of disregard of such advice.

2. The scandal has been made by a specific case of “sexual immorality”, a man living with his father’s wife. This is the best reading of the main complaint. Paul is annoyed that the Corinthian Christian church has tolerated such a way of life and allowed it in their midst. Paul is reacting against both the individual Corinthian Christian as well as against the image the Corinthian community is projecting. Are the Christians of Roman Corinth really aware of themselves as an assembly that meets in the Lord’s name (5:4)? More fundamental is the arrogance (5:2) and even “boasting” (5:6), which in his view is “*not a good thing*”. Paul is concerned with the life of each believer because it does affect the whole community. Each as a Christian may be free, but each has obligations to the whole, because they are all insiders (5:12).

3. This situation has developed in the Corinthian community because they may have been exposed to the teaching of Gnostic sects who lived round most of the churches in the apostolic period. These Gnostics with their haughty self-consciousness seeking higher knowledge in a kind of Pagan Mysticism may have been these “*trouble makers*” who were seeking a philosophical style of life based on knowledge rather the love-faith teaching of the Gospel.

4. Paul instructs the Corinthian Christians that, when they gather together *“in the name of the Lord Jesus*” (and he is with them in spirit), they are to “*hand this man over to Satan*” in order that the good name of the community may be restored. The Corinthian Christians are to function as a faith-community. This is why Paul says that he is with them in spirit. Despite the specific case mentioned in verse 1, serious though it may be, Paul’s main concern is the condition in which the Corinthian community finds itself because Paul realizes that the church has been tolerating in its midst many other immoral persons. Paul cannot understand how they can allow this to be. So he tells them “*to clear out the old leaven*” (5:7), which is nothing else but “*wickedness and evil*” (5:8). They are to “*drive out the evil one*” from among them (5:13). The basis for this advice is Paul’s recommendation not to associate with a fellow Christian, the one who bears the name of brother and shares the same faith and the same life of the community but leads an immoral life such sexual immorality, greed, idolatry, slander, drunkenness and swindling. He insists that members of the community should not even eat with them (5:11). We shall look at eating later on.

5. Paul reminds the whole community:

a. The judgment on the Day of the Lord (5:5)

b. The preparation of the celebration of Passover and making bread without Yeast, a bit of leaven ferments the whole batch of dough. Immorality like any other evil is catching and infectious to some. As Jews used to clear out of their houses on the eve of Passover of leavened bread, so Corinthian Christians must now clear out of their midst the “old leaven,” that they may celebrate the Christian Passover, and also that they may become “unleavened.” The motivation for this cleansing is Christ himself, who is called “*our Passover Lamb*,” and who has been sacrificed (5:7). Hence Christians should celebrate their Passover not with “*the leaven of wickedness and evil*,” but with “*the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth*” (5:8).

6. Returning to Christ is Paul’s fundamental answer to the problems of boasting and over-confidence of the Corinthian Christian community. Paul is really concerned about their faith in the risen Christ and the conduct of Christians. Paul looks at the problem in a more systematic way:

a. “*It is widely reported* …” (5:1)

b. There is an offense: “*a man living with his father’s wife*” (5:1)

c. There is a verdict: “*the one who has done this should be removed from your midst …* ” (5:2-5)

d. There is a community decision: “*Clear out the old leaven so that you may become new dough*” (5:7).

**Did Paul Teach Excommunication of an Offender?**

This term “excommunication” belongs to a later period. Paul did not use this highly “canonical” term but he recommends that “*the one who has done this should be removed from your midst*” (v 2-5), and that Corinthian Christians should not associate with immoral fellow Christians (verses 9-11).

The roots of such a practice are found in the OT.

1. A person could be cut off from Israel or the assembly of God’s people for violation of Passover regulations (Exod 12:15, 19), sacrificial rules and the eating of blood (Lev 17:4, 9–10, 14), defilement of the sanctuary (Num 19:20), or a marriage with a foreign woman (Ezra 10:2–3, 8).

2. This exclusion was part of the corporate responsibility of Israel. If the wrongdoer were not cut off, as in the prayer of Moses and Aaron in (Num 16:22), “O God, God of the spirits of all flesh, (if) one man sins, will you be enraged against the whole congregation?” That is why Paul ends his discussion with a modified quotation of (Deuteronomy 17:7).

3. Although Paul borrows an expression from LXX (Septuagint) Leviticus 18:8 ***gynaikos patros***, “father’s wife,” his argument against this evil that has been done is not based on the Torah or any OT teaching; it is rather governed by what “pagans,” think. Corinthian Christians should have “mourned,” confessing their corporate sin of tolerating such an errant fellow Christian.

4. This exclusion is related also to the punishment in Roman law, which punished an adulterous couple with ***relegatio***, the sending of them off to separate islands or to an Egyptian oasis (in the Western Desert). In Paul’s day Roman law would have been the common standard of a good social life. According to the Roman Law, adultery was a crime, and not a mere civil offense. In the Roman provinces such a crime fell under the jurisdiction of a proconsul (the local imperial governor), who had supreme administrative power,” which included war and peace, interpreting and executing laws, and inflicting the death penalty (remember Pontius Pilate). A criminal case of adultery would have entailed a formal trial before the proconsul and was regulated specifically by the Law that was in place since the reign of Augustus in 18 B.C (See *Roman Marriage* by [Susan Treggiari](http://www.amazon.com/Susan-Treggiari/e/B001H6SFBM/ref=sr_ntt_srch_lnk_3?qid=1357559753&sr=1-3) 1993, pp 277–90). That law decreed that a husband who knew of his wife’s adultery had to divorce her, and he or her father had to prosecute her within 60 days of the discovery of the crime. Her punishment would be the loss of half of her dowry, a third of her other property, and exile to some island. The adulterous partner could be prosecuted too and lose half of his property and be exiled to a different island. The husband who failed to prosecute his adulterous wife was considered “a pimp.” A wife, however, could not prosecute her husband for his adultery with a married woman.

**Is Incest Adultery?**

Paul mentions in this passage what would have fallen under such Roman legislation as adultery. This makes it all the more serious that the Christian community was not reacting properly to the evil that existed among them.

We have to read chapter 5 discussed in chapter 6 (lawsuits) together to recognize the connection. Paul is asking for “unity” and demanding from the church to void what can destroy “unity. Moreover, the sexual offense mentioned in 5:1-13 would not have been a matter for “petty courts” (6:2), because Roman Law can deal with incest and adultery. This Law was in force in Corinth of that time.

**Study of the Verses**

**Verse 5:1 –** *It is widely reported that there is sexual immorality in your midst*.

Literally, “*it is heard everywhere*,” or possibly “*it is actually heard.*” Paul addresses his exhortation not to the wrongdoer personally, but to the Christian community in “*whose midst*” such sexually immoral conduct has been tolerated. “*Midst*” means in the midst of the Christian community, and it finds its parallel expression in the following clause, “*not even among pagans*.”

The Greek noun ***porneia*** *(“sexual immorality”)* occurs for the first time, twice in this same verse. It will appear again in vv 6:13, 18; and 7:2. A person is called ***pornos*** (adulterer) in vv 5:9, 10, 11; and 6:9. There is distinction in Hebrew between “fornication” and “adultery,” a distinction that may be traced back to Greek. The word was used widely in both biblical and extra-biblical Greek for many kinds of unlawful sexual intercourse. In the OT, adultery has had its metaphorical meaning of “idolatry” (*Theological Dictionary of the Greek NT*, 6:580–90). In this verse it carries the generic sense, “sexual immorality,” but in the following clause it is used of a specific kind of it. In using the word twice, Paul spells out the kind of sexual offense that was not found even among pagans: a man living with his father’s wife. Literally “*and such immorality, which not even among the nations: that someone has the wife of the father*.”

**Verse 5:1 (continued) –** “*a man living with his father’s wife.”*

Generally, commentators refuse to understand “***tina gynaika tou patros echein***” as directly “a son’s marriage with his mother,” because Paul would have written “his own mother.” Such a marital union not only was forbidden in Jewish Law (Lev 18:7), but was equally unacceptable in the Greco-Roman world.

It has usually been understood as a form of incest, that is intercourse with a stepmother (by R. E. Brown, Y Collins, Conzelmann, Deming, Fee, Murphy-O’Connor). If we speculate, this might mean that after the father’s death his son has married the widowed second wife; however, much more likely that the son has entered into a continuous union with his father’s second wife, while the father is still alive. Hence it would be a case of adulterous incest, which was a blatant violation of the ***Lex Iulia*** in Roman law (Lex Julia or Lex Iulia, plural: Leges Juliae/Leges Iuliae) is an [ancient Roman law](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_law) that was introduced by any member of the [Julian family](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julii). Most often, "Julian laws", *Lex Iulia* or *Leges Iuliae* will refer to moral legislation introduced by [Augustus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augustus) in 18-17 BC, or to a law from the [dictatorship](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_dictator) of [Julius Caesar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julius_Caesar), and also emperor Gaius (*Institutiones* 1.63). The text says, “Likewise [it is not allowed to marry] her who was once to me a mother-in-law or daughter-in-law or stepdaughter or stepmother”). (Cf. Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 37–39, 281). In the Roman world, of which the Corinthian Christians were living and were aware of its Law, supplied Paul with his argument and judgment this this kind of evil is “found not even among pagans.”

The son was a Christian, because Paul so refers to him in verses 2, 3, 5, whereas the stepmother undoubtedly was not, and that is the reason why he says nothing about her. Paul seems to treat her as an “outsider” (5:12-13).

This kind sexual union was strictly forbidden in Jewish Law (see, LXX Lev 18:8, “*you shall not uncover the nakedness of your father’s wife*”). The LXX does not speak of it as ***porneia***, but “the uncovering” suggests an idiom for sexual union (also Lev 20:11; Deut 23:1; 27:20). Philo mentions that Jewish law does not permit the son of a first marriage to marry his stepmother because she is a “mother.” The later rabbinic condemnation (m. Sanhedrin 7:4; m. Kerithoth 1:1;50), where death by stoning is prescribed in such a case. Josephus (Ant. 3.12.1 §274), however, calls intercourse with one’s mother the “greatest evil” and says that union with one’s stepmother is punishable by death.

When Paul says that such adultery is not found among pagans, he does not mean that no pagan has ever committed it, but that even pagans did not tolerate it. Paul is undoubtedly aware of the severe penalties of Roman law, which had no leniency for such conduct. That is the reason why pagans are used in his argument with the Christian community of Roman Corinth, and why no appeal is made to the Mosaic Law.

**Verse 2 –**  *And you have become arrogant!*

Literally “become puffed up,” this is the pride of some Corinthians, who were apparently considering themselves different or superior to such conduct. The incestuous union was not carried out secretly or out of weakness, but was known among many otherwise reputable members of the Corinthian community. They may have become a “new creation” in Christ (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15) and claimed Christian freedom from the Mosaic Law, but that would hardly mean license in behavior or even a boastful attitude tolerant of such a criminal act, with something like the attitude expressed in 6:12, “*All things are permissible for me*.” But not all things are good.

**Verse 4 –** “*When you are gathered together in the name of [our] Lord Jesus and (with) my spirit.*”

This is what unites all Christians because they experience this union in baptism *“in the name of Jesus*” as a new freedom. However, would a Christian son having illicit intercourse with his stepmother invoke the name of Jesus to justify his actions? Consequently, Paul immediately writes the following “*when you and my spirit are gathered together*”.

Paul is instructing the Corinthians that they assemble in Jesus’ name, as in (Matt 18:20), and realize that his authority and sponsorship are with them, which is more important than the presence of Paul. “In the name of (the Lord) Jesus” occurs elsewhere in various forms (6:11; Col 3:17; 2 Thess 3:6; Acts 2:38; 16:18).

**Verse 5 –** *“Hand this man over with the power of our Lord Jesus to Satan.”*

Literally “to hand over such a man as this … ” Paul has already judged that such a person is to be handed over to Satan, and in v4 Paul is urging the Corinthian community to join him in so judging. The expression “such a man,” merely repeats “the one who has done this” (5:2). The verb “(to) Hand” is predicated of God allowing his agent, Satan, to test Job (2:6, LXX “*I hand him over to you*”).

The phrase “*with power of the Lord Jesus*” means that this person has been transferred (as in 1 Tim 1:20) from the life and salvation under the Lordship of Jesus Christ to the realm and authority of Satan; the wrongdoer is “*severed from Christ*” (Gal 5:4), and this is to be done “*with the power*” of the Lord himself. It thus connotes the exclusion of the person from the Christian community—what later came to be called excommunication. Although Paul will teach that Christ through his death and resurrection has “destroyed every dominion, authority, and power” (15:24), he now gives this man to Satan’s authority in order to exclude him from the influence of the risen Christ.

Satan is a Hebrew name and means “adversary.” As a common noun it often denotes a human or heavenly figure sent to a wrongdoer (Num 22:22, 32; 1 Kgs 11:14, 23; 1 Chr 21:1). In (Job 1–2 and Zech 3:1–2). It is applied as a name to one of “the sons of Elohim,” the accuser or prosecutor in God’s heavenly tribunal. There the LXX translates it as “***Diabolos***”, “accuser,” which becomes in time “devil.” Paul mentions Satan several times (1 Thess 2:18; 1 Cor 7:5; 2 Cor 2:11; 11:14; 12:7, Rom 16:20). Satan does not always appear as an enemy of God, but sometimes as His agent, but never appears in the letters to the Galatians, Philippians, or Philemon. (Cf. 2 Thess 2:9; 1 Tim 1:20; 5:15). A concentration of references to Satan occurs in the Corinthian correspondence.

The immediate goal of this action that the Corinthian community is to take is to rid it of the evil that it has been tolerating. Here “ruin, destruction,” is found again (1 Thess 5:3; cf. 1 Tim 6:9) but it is not said to be “eternal destruction,” as in (2 Thess 1:9). The problem is the meaning of ***sarx***, “flesh,” which is taken to be a synonym for ***soma***, “body” (as in 2 Cor 7:1, 5; Gal 4:13–14). Paul may be using here the contrast of “flesh” and “spirit” in the sense in which he does elsewhere (e.g., Rom 8:5–8; Gal 5:17), but the contrast of ***sarx*** and ***pneuma*** (spirit) is stated absolutely. In using ***sarx***, however, Paul seems to be speaking of bodily suffering, but scarcely of death. It seems that Satan must be given his due, but can claim no more; if he has the flesh he has no right to the spirit, even of a sinner. In (I Corinthians 11:30–32), Paul explains himself, “*Since we are being judged by [the] Lord, we are being chastened that we may not be condemned along with the world.*”

**Verse 5 (continued) –** *“So that the spirit may be saved on the Day of the Lord.”*

The spirit is certainly the spirit of the wrongdoer spirit (See, RSV, NRSV, NAB, NIV, ESV),

**Verse 6** – “*Your boasting is not a good thing.*”

Paul sees the underlying difficulty to be that the Christians of the Roman Corinth have been too self-satisfied in their way of thinking and reacting to this scandalous situation that they have permitted to exist among them. Such “boasting” echoes v4:7 and is the result of the arrogance mentioned in v5:2.

**Verse 6 (continued) –** “*Do you not realize that a little leaven ferments the whole batch of dough?*”

Cf., the Lord’s saying in Luke 13:20–21 and Matthew 13:33. Paul quotes a common popular proverb, as also in Galatians 5:9. This is a proverb of common sense. The appeal to common sense suggests that it takes only one small instance of improper sexual conduct to contaminate the whole community; cf. the proverb cited in I Corinthians 15:33, “*Bad company corrupts good habits.*”

**Yeast**

The Greek word ***zyms***, though often – and wrongly – translated “yeast,” was actually old, sour dough that had been subjected to fermenting juices and stored away (see Luke 13:21) until it was to be used in new dough as a rising agent, to make the new bread light and palatable. Moreover, only a small amount of leaven was needed to impregnate the whole batch of new dough. Such old dough, however, could easily be contaminated and could infect dangerously the whole batch of new dough into which it was introduced; hence the yearly Jewish practice of destroying all old leaven before the celebration of Passover. From that came the further connotation of “old leaven” as something “undesirable” or “not good.”

***To be continued next week – 1 Corinthians 5:7-13***

***Pope’s Notes***

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