

THE CHURCH AND ITS MEMBERS

I Corinthians 5

Paul indicated to the Corinthians that, the Lord willing, he would visit them in the near future. He inquired of them, "Shall I come unto you with a rod?", meaning a rod of discipline. He asked them if they wanted him to come as the representative of the Lord to chastise them for their bad behavior, or to come in the spirit of meekness so that they and he might sit down together over the Word of God and enjoy the precious things of Christ. If they desired him to come in this last way, there were some things to be settled first, and he did not hesitate to tell them what they were. In doing so he discusses two things in this chapter, which I now bring to your attention.

I. Scandal In The Church. I Corinthians 5:1-5.

Disorder in the church at Corinth was more than intellectual. It was distinctly moral. It was moral dereliction and delinquency, not on the part of one only, but on the part of the whole church, because of the one. It was not the case of some secret sin, but bold, brazen and publicly accepted vice. It was incestuous immorality involving a son and his stepmother.

This was not merely a matter of gossip on the part of some long-tongued individual, but it was reported commonly and widely known. How quickly bad reports fly! Evil deeds usually travel on the wings of the wind. They pass from lip to lip, until it seems they never stop. Good news travels very slowly, and when people hear it they frequently refuse to believe it. Not only had the report reached Paul, but the matter was talked about among all of those in the church at Corinth. It was a notorious case. It appears that this relationship between the son and his stepmother was entered into as something lasting.

After Paul named the particular case, he turned to the attitude of the church in that regard. The almost unbelievable part of this affair was the attitude of the church. This is true especially when we recall that this particular crime was forbidden by the law of Moses and by Roman law. Moreover, it was an abomination in the sight of God, but the members of the church at Corinth had not recognized the wickedness of it.

Instead, they rather prided themselves on the breadth and liberality which enabled them to go on with a thing like that. Paul reminded them that they were puffed up when they should have been broken-hearted over it. They were so busy in their contentions and so puffed up in their own opinions that they had neither place nor disposition to deal with the awful thing that was eating as a cancer at their spiritual vitals. So far had their carnality led them into senseless contentions that their spiritual senses were stunted and dwarfed. Their self-complacency and pride rendered them insensible both to the scandal created among the outsiders and to the damage done to the whole assembly. Seemingly, they had no sense of shame, no sorrow and no aching hearts. Perhaps they had the mistaken notion that free grace was a license to licentiousness. And, just to think, the sin in the Corinthian Church was even worse than would have been tolerated among the unbelieving Gentiles. That which shocks us is the fact that those who were pagans, and outside the Christian faith, would not tolerate a case of depravity so definite, flagrant and outstanding. Notwithstanding the fact that they were tolerating in their church which even the heathen abhorred, they were elated with the conceit of their good estate. The Corinthian Christians were actually trying to win pagans to Christ and living more loosely than the heathen among whom the very word "Corinthianize" meant to live in sexual wantonness and license. The very least they could have done was to mourn for shame.

The trouble with the Corinthian Church grew out of the wrong attitude toward evil. They took a tolerant attitude toward sin. Paul pointed out the fact that the danger of sin is its potentiality. If the oak lies in the acorn, so the flagrant sin lies in the so-called respectable and little sin. Sin is of such a nature that it multiplies on tolerance.

We should view this incident in the life of the church at Corinth with deep concern. It may be nearer to us than we think. Sensuality is not far from carnality. In that church were carnal Christians. They were following their lower natures. This led to their jealousies, quarrelings and boastings. It also led to the gross sin of sensuality, which required severe dealings. This incident should constitute a very solemn warning that carnality can very easily lead to sensuality.

The preservation of the power of the church at Corinth lay in restoring two things. It required the restoration of its unity and of its purity.

II. Discipline In The Church. I Corinthians 5:6-13.

Notice that Paul did not reprove the pastor for the neglect of discipline, but he reprovved the church in its organized capacity. Paul did not hesitate to tell the church that her members had failed to do their duty. Furthermore, it is well to note that Paul did not attempt to usurp the prerogatives of the local church. He did not presume to do the disciplining himself, for that was a task which belonged to the church. With justifiable wrath and indignation, he did declare the course that should be pursued.

Paul rebuked the Corinthians by saying, "Your glorying is not good." They were exulting in a false conception of liberty. There was a party of Antinomians in Corinth who were polluting the purity of Christianity with a brazen air. "Antinomian" is a name applied to such as claim freedom from all legal restrictions and liberty to live according to personal pleasure. They said that since Christians are under grace, there is no law to prohibit the unhindered exercise of desire. Since there is no law, there is no wrong, they contended. This is a perversion of the truth. And it is as un-Christian as it is untruthful. Grace imposes a higher purity and a higher culture than was ever levied by the law.

Evidently, the woman in the case was not a church member, as Paul's disciplinary proposals were directed exclusively against the man. He taught the Corinthians that, after considering the case of the sinning brother, he was to be excommunicated. He told them that he ought to be placed outside the fellowship or excluded. It was their duty to cast him out into the realm of Satan for buffeting and chastisement. This severe punishment was not in hatred, nor cruelty, nor an attempt to consign the sinner to final reprobation. Back of it were the hope, desire and prayer that it might bring such conviction as to induce repentance and restoration.

An act which was an offence to pagan society ought to have shocked Christians. And mind you, the sin of a man having his stepmother as a concubine was condemned by Greek, Roman and Jewish opinion. What a pity when those who profess godliness live blacker lives than the general run of the ungodly!

A Christian Chinese lady came to the United States for Bible instruction. She was asked if she would not be happy to have her brothers come over to study, as they also were in Christian work in China. She held up her hands, and with horror in her face said: "No, no, I would not want them to come and see the way American Christians live!"

Observe, if you will, the power of evil. Paul pointed to the action of leaven. Leaven is the same as our yeast. A little leaven in a lump of dough transforms it gradually into its own nature. Leaven is used in the scriptures always as a type of evil; never of good. It speaks of "a little leaven," meaning a little evil. When one wicked person is allowed to go unrebuked and undealt with after his wickedness has been manifested, the thing will go on like an infection working, working, working to the ruin of others and to the harm of the testimony of the whole church.

Lack of discipline weakens the testimony of any church, and gives a false sense of security to the wrongdoer. A church does not have any right to tolerate evil on the ground of broad-mindedness. Church history reveals the fact that the church that

is pure is powerful, whereas the church that is tolerant towards evil is paralyzed. There is great need for the exercise of discipline. A church cannot be strong and Christ-honoring that does not maintain both doctrinal and moral purity. There are two words which cannot be separated without fatality to both. One is "orthodoxy" and the other is "orthopraxy." The former means "straight thinking" and the latter means "straight living." It is a travesty to contend for the faith in doctrine while one is unfaithful in life.

When sin is allowed to remain in a church, the sinning one will lead others to sin. Any person who runs around with the wicked will become partaker with them in their evil deeds. That is why Paul said, "I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators." Then he added, "Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat."

Notice that he couples covetousness with fornication. "The love of money is a root of all evil," and covetousness, reaching out and grasping for wealth, is just as vile a thing in God's sight as indulgence in unholy lust in other lines. He does the same thing with railing. What is a railer? It is a person who has a tongue loose at both ends and on a pivot in the middle, a vicious talker, an evil speaker, one who can destroy the reputation of another just as the murderer drives a dagger into the heart and destroys a life. A railer is a wicked person in the sight of God. "Oh," somebody says, "I don't mean any harm, but I am so careless with my tongue." What would you think of one who goes around with a machinegun and keeps firing away on this side and that, and some one says, "What are you doing?" "Oh," he replies, "I don't mean any harm, but I am so careless with this machinegun." A character assassin is as wicked in the sight of God as one who would take another's life.

In this list of sinners we find the drunkard. No drunkard shall inherit the kingdom of God. If you young people, who live in these vicious days, never want to be drunkards, do not fall in with the current idea of thinking it is fashionable for everybody to drink. Nobody ever became a drunkard who was not first a moderate drinker. Somebody may say, "I do not believe that. I can take a little and it does not do me any harm." But it may do your brother harm, and Paul said, "If meat make my brother to offend, I will eat not flesh while the world standeth." I Corinthians 8:13.

Then he mentions the extortioner. An extortioner is one who squeezes others, and the poor in particular. Maybe he tries to cover up his sin in this way: he squeezes the poor and makes some extra money, and then on Sunday goes to church and says, "I want to give a hundred dollars for missions." God says, "Keep your dirty money, you got it in the wrong way." God wants holy money to use in His service.

Here is God's standard: "If any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner: with such an one no not to eat."