

What Do You Do With Immorality?

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When the apostle Paul heard that there was immorality in the Corinthian church, he was shocked. The brand of immorality was of such a kind that the sensibilities of the pagan world would even be offended—“a man has his father’s wife”. But his amazement was mostly because the *church* tolerated it as a badge of honor. The church had so distorted the meaning of love that it was proud of its acceptance of such persons. “And you are arrogant. Ought you not rather to mourn?” exclaimed Paul.

This revealing episode in early church history, found in 1 Corinthians 5, could not be more relevant.

As Paul said, “Your boasting is not good.” The idea that some associations of professing Christians actually lead out in the fight for same-sex unions, homosexuality in the priesthood, and other practices mitigating against sexual purity and the bond of marriage, would certainly evoke Paul’s righteous indignation if he were alive today.

The church is not a volunteer club made up of people of any persuasion or behavior, an amorphous entity, accepting anyone who wishes to enjoy join in the fun and excitement. It is a serious society with boundaries. It is for those who have been given life from God, have confessed that change openly through baptism, and are committed to walking in obedience and repentance all the days of their lives. It is a union full of love, but not mere sentimentality. It is a love that demands holiness. (2 Tim. 1:9; Gal. 5:13; Rom. 6:1)

Paul lists some of the boundaries of a Christian fellowship in this passage. Among those the church should remove and “not associate with” are “. . . anyone who bears the name of brother [that is, a ‘so-called brother’], who is guilty of sexually immorality, or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler . . .”

So what should we do when we find immorality in the church? There really cannot be any mistaking the answer:

- “Let him who has done this thing be removed from among you.”
- “you are to deliver this man to Satan [that is, by removing him you are to leave him in the world and under Satan’s control]”
- “Cleanse out the old leaven.”
- “I am writing to you not to associate with anyone . . . who is guilty of sexual immorality, greed,” etc.
- “[you are] . . . not even to eat with such a one.”
- “Purge the evil person from among you.”

In the case of such notorious sins as immorality, church discipline is to be done quickly and decisively. Why?

“Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?” is the explanation. The longer leaven (yeast) remains in a lump of dough, the more it spreads. Paul uses the Old Testament Passover feast to make his point. At that feast all leaven was to be taken out of the home since it was a symbol for sin. Paul says that the Passover Lamb has been slain (that is, Christ has been crucified). We as the church should “celebrate the feast” (that is, live out our lives to the full in Christ) without the old leaven of evil.

Paul passionately argues for the purity of the church. On the one hand we discipline because it is the best for the individual. It is really the only loving thing to do. To allow a church member to continue in sin is like allowing a child to abuse himself and his siblings without correction. But on the other hand, we discipline because God has called the church to purity.

When a chicken becomes rotten and maggot-infested, are you able to make it better by putting a fresh chicken in the same bag with it? Of course not. The infested and rotten always spoils the fresh, not the other way around. As Paul wrote in the same letter, “evil company corrupts good morals.”

Have you fallen for this old Corinthian problem of boasting in indiscriminate toleration?

One pastor said, “I could never lead our church to discipline its members. There are so many immoral people among us at present that it would cause a huge conflict.”

This mindset is precisely the reason why so many churches are ineffective in changing the culture and in bringing people into a lifestyle that is radically different.

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