

NOTE: The following is from *Comments on First and Second Corinthians*, Leslie M. Grant, chapter 5, pp 29-32.

“But while the Lord’s supper, being the central expression of fellowship in the assembly, is specifically denied to a fornicator, yet this is not all. The saints of God were to have no fellowship with him whatever, not even to eat a common meal with him. There is a necessary distinction here, however. Fornicators of the world, covetous, extortioners, idolators, the believer is not told to avoid, for they are everywhere around. Their evil was not a direct dishonor to God, as was the case with one who was called a brother, and was guilty of a course of sinful practice. This was a denial in practice of the Lord he claimed to serve. Love for him would dictate this serious disciplinary treatment, as well as faithfulness to God, and concern for the purity of the assembly. In fact, added to this is the concern that the world itself would recognize that Christianity refuses to embrace evil, and specially in one who professes to be Christian.

“It was not Paul’s responsibility (nor ours) to judge those outside the assembly. This is entirely in God’s hand, but judgment within the assembly is emphatically the responsibility of the assembly itself, and therefore of all in the assembly. Therefore, all were called upon to be in concord in putting away from among themselves the man who is here called “that wicked person.” They are allowed no other alternative. Certainly action of this kind must be always in a spirit of brokenness and humiliation, not of mere anger or of contempt; but it must be done.”

End of extract by L. M. Grant

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Begin comments by Ron Canner:

Paul has spent the first four chapters admonishing the Corinthian assembly about their prideful, carnal dependence upon human wisdom and reasoning. Because of this they were gravitating toward divisions for trivial reasons.

He now opens a most solemn subject. This issue is so serious and dangerous that he regretted sending this letter after he wrote it. But it worked! He rejoiced greatly when he received a report back telling of a favorable reception (2Corinthians 2). He comes right to the point. The assembly was harboring a known, active fornicator. While this was apparently allowed in ignorance, ignorance was no excuse for the betrayal of the Lord’s claims on them to be a pure and holy people. And the sin was so flagrant that even the pagan gentiles of Corinth were gossiping. The Corinthians seemed to consider themselves sophisticated enough to take sexual impropriety in stride without being spiritually harmed. We need to beware of assuming we are sophisticated enough to handle “Adult Situations” we may encounter in magazines, books, TV

shows, and even “live” among our fellow workers, fellow students, neighbors, etc. of this world. They were not! We aren’t either!

In reality, their sensibilities as to Christ’s glory were so dulled that they did not instinctively react with mournful, holy desire to be rid of this defiling blot. They had missed the basic statements of the Lord in the “beatitudes” including:

*Matthew 5: Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted.*

Paul forthrightly comes to the rescue. He acts with apostolic power. He delivers the offender to Satan.

NOTE: Job was a person put in the hands of Satan, in his case even though he was upright.

Don’t be confused. This action does not condemn the soul to eternal damnation. It is not “excommunication” taught by some professing Christians. (We should avoid using that term because, to many, it implies eternal doom, though erroneously.) No, this was to allow destruction of the flesh in the here and now “that the spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” This is one of the underlying reasons for putting such a person away.

A professing believer was openly sinning. Nobody knows whether he is truly the Lord’s at this point. He certainly is not acting like it. The assembly is not called upon to determine this.

*2Timothy 2:19 The Lord knows them that are His.*

We are only responsible to act upon what we see and know.

*Matthew 7:16 Ye shall know them by their fruits*

We are to promptly put such a one away into Satan’s realm. If he repents we may learn he was either unsaved or a believer living in sin. The assembly’s responsibility and the desired outcome is the same whether saved or unsaved.

NOTE: We sometimes wonder whether delivering to Satan is something only an apostle could do or if the local assembly can do this. Does it really matter? In verse 13 the assembly is told simply to “put away from among yourselves that wicked person.” He is put outside the realm of blessing, into the world which “lies in the wicked one,” “the prince of this world.”

We are to leave one put away by the assembly totally alone. We keep out of God’s way. He works to bring about whatever that soul needs. He is in God’s hands to do what ever He deigns best. Our job is to not interfere with God, either by showing “love” and “pity” or by acting hateful and vindictive, seeking punishment or retribution.

We also note that in this case only the man in this sinful liaison is disciplined. The woman, his step mother, apparently does not profess to be a believer, so her conduct is outside the authority and responsibility of the assembly.

The way Paul carries out the necessary action is very instructive. He is not present, but he engages the whole assembly, as gathered together, as if he were there. He directs their action to be “as gathered in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.” That Name is their authority. The Lord Himself has given the assembly authority to bind and loose (Matthew 18:18). This authority was not given to individuals, except the Apostles (John 20). Here Paul applies the responsibility to bind or loose to the situation within the assembly in Corinth. It is duly recorded here in the inspired scripture for the instruction of all other assemblies of believers, down through time, that might encounter sin in their midst. The authority is not vested in elders or pastors or any hierarchy in the assembly. The decision is not “sent up the line” to some central authority. No, the authority is vested, where there are as few as two or three in a local assembly gathered unto His Name. He says, “There am I in the midst,” Matthew 18:20. The assembly, small or large, must call upon that Name seeking His wisdom, His guidance and His protection from discord and division which so easily can arise in such situations.

Note that in this case the assembly acts without investigation. The facts were well known and public knowledge. The sin was not a simple offence, private between two believers. If it were that, it should be settled privately if possible and normally not even mentioned to others, or made public, unless the offender would not repent.

At the end of the second epistle Paul fears there is hidden sin among them which was not yet repented of. He insists there that every matter is to be decided based upon testimony of two or three witnesses. At least two is a necessity but three is sufficient, 2Corinthians 13:1.

The putting away has multiple purposes, including:

- Salvation of the offender if unsaved,
- Repentance and restoration, if a fallen believer,
- Clearing the assembly before God, (purging out the old leaven)
- Upholding the Holiness of God’s House ,1Timothy 3:16,
- Warning to others with hidden sin to repent,
- Witnessing to unbelievers the Christian purity.

Some say every sin committed by a believer of an assembly leavens it. That doesn’t seem to be so. It is the publically known sins that are unchecked that leaven. An assembly which diligently investigates reports of sin and deals forthrightly with exposed sin should not be considered “leavened.” For instance, the personal offence noted in Matthew 18:15 may not even become known to the assembly. If all goes well in step one or step two it will not have

occasion to deal with sin. The assembly is not considered leavened in God’s sight unless it is aware of sin and does nothing. Nevertheless once a sin is exposed the assembly is to put away the wicked from itself, unless they repent.

But some will say that this is too severe. Yes, it is harsh, but not heartless. No doubt social ostracizing is the worst thing any society can do to a person. It may harden some wicked person’s heart or it may soften another and break them down. But, some will say, Christians are to be loving. Yes, and the Lord patiently dealt with open sinners bringing them to repentance. But He doesn’t tolerate sin. He says “go and sin no more” to the woman caught in adultery, John 8. Paul says, “Ye who are spiritual restore such a one ... considering yourself lest ye also be tempted,” Galatians 6. Yes, firm but loving action is called for when sin appears. Sometimes a gentle rebuke is enough, sometimes a sharp rebuke, sometimes avoidance of another, sometimes shunning, and sometimes putting away is needed. May we be given grace to be faithful to God , and to our brothers and sisters in Christ and to the erring one. It is only loving to do so.

The purpose given for putting one out is to purge out “leaven” so to return to an unleavened state. We learn here that the assembly is unleavened (positionally) in Christ. Throughout scripture, leaven (yeast) is always a picture of sin or evil. It can be moral or doctrinal in nature. The leaven was false doctrine amongst the Galatian assemblies (Galatians 5:9). It was moral evil in Corinth. Paul says the Corinthian assembly is leavened. And they need to purge it out. If not removed the evil will eventually affect the whole assembly. Now we know that once yeast is in the dough we can’t get it out. The baker stops the action of the leaven by baking the dough when it is ready. The heat kills the yeast, stopping its work. But the results of the yeast’s action remains. Leaven biblically illustrates the action of sin and its results in us. In the Old Testament, under the law, such offenders were stoned. That decisively removed the leaven! In this day of grace, we are to be decisive too and stop the action of sin in our midst by purging it out. (The term used here is [Grk: *ekkathairo*] “purge out” or “cleanse out.” Our English words “catharsis” and “cathartic” come from it.) We remove the offender until he or she repents. The assembly is then presentable to God as holy worshipers. The Holy Spirit, having been quenched by the allowed sin, is once again free to lead in our midst when gathered.

In the Old Testament Law we have an interesting picture of how we are to identify ourselves with the sin that becomes known, and to confess it as our own. This witnesses to the unity of the believers. The Levitical priests were to eat the sin offering,

Leviticus 6:26; 10:16-20. This indicates their identification with the sin that has required a sacrifice. Today the desired outcome is that a repentant saint will join the assembly in “eating the sin offering for his sin.” The sin offering is Christ on the cross. It is finished! There is no room for thoughts like “I would never have done that.” Rather thoughts like “there but for the grace of God go I” are more fitting. We need to realize that we are associated with any sin that is exposed in the assembly. We all, each as priests, together are privileged to approach the throne of grace acknowledging our failure as in the sin that has come in among us. If we do this we clear ourselves of the association with that sin and hold up to God the victims and the perpetrator as well. One fitting time to do this is at the beginning of the breaking of bread meeting, when we are about to remember Him and what He did on the cross. A special meeting for humbling and confession may be best in some situations. Let the Spirit lead in that meeting as well as the how and when of calling it. Again, how wonderful if the offender would repent and join us all eating the sin offering.

Now having put a wicked person from their midst they were to avoid contact of any kind. He is not merely treated as one of the unbelievers. He is a social outcast for all practical purposes. Worse than an infidel. We can have a cup of coffee or a common meal with an unsaved person (see 1Corinthians 10:27) but **not with one put away!** In Matthew 18 he who rejects the appeal of the assembly is to be treated as a “publican and sinner.” To the Jews at this time this is not merely as a Gentile but one recognized as the lowest of the low, traitorous and depraved. We are given another example in the short second epistle by John. There he deals with some who attempt to bring teaching other than the “doctrine of Christ.” Not only is the assembly to reject such a person but the individual householder is also. In this example the “woman of the house” is not to welcome such a one, not to extend normal social hospitality, or even bid him good bye. I take it that she would not even greet him on the street if their paths happened to cross. This is shunning! It’s tough. It may bring with it mocking and derision and personal attacks against our intolerance or accusations of simple “lack of common courtesy.” But it is what God calls for! Not that we are given license to rail, gossip or do vicious things to the wicked person. Simply remain silent and leave him alone, for God to deal with.

Once put out, the time for appeals and admonitions is past. The person is isolated from other believers, even to the extent practical, from unnecessary family contacts. That one is not included in family birthday parties and other get togethers. No visits,

letters, email or calls from family or friends. If married, the believing spouse of one put out is put in a particularly difficult position, but faithfulness to the Lord is called for. Certainly the innocent spouse or family member should not be expected to protect the guilty or to go on as if nothing is different. For instance they should not be party to hiding stolen goods in the home. Achan’s family died for their association with the disobedient head of the house, Joshua 7 & 8. Sapphira joined her husband in his lying hypocrisy to the Holy Spirit and died too, Acts 5:\_\_\_\_\_.

Note: The spouse of a fornicator is not required to remain in a continuing bigamous relationship. Scripture allows separation in such cases. On the other hand adultery is not an unforgivable sin.

Any case of sin exposed in the assembly creates a crisis, leading even to divisions. Sometimes family and friends see fit to rally to the defense of one whose sin is exposed. How sad! This kind of thing (nepotism) can severely shake the assembly’s unity. It pits loyalty to friend or family against loyalty to the Lord Himself. Another danger is in unresolved differences and distrust that have been allowed to persist between brethren. While hiding under cover of civility on the surface these are like time bombs waiting to go off. They can suddenly erupt into shocking contentions and discord just when unity is needed to deal with the exposed sin in the assembly. Satan loves to set these traps. We disarm them by forgiving and forbearing one another in love, settling or forgetting differences and offences quickly. We see in chapter 6 the Corinthians weren’t good at that either.

Faithful shunning by dearly loved ones will do much toward bringing one set in their way to repentance. Note it is to be shunning, in sorrow, not snubbing which is proud and spiteful snobbery. Shunning may be harder on the “shunner” than the “shunnee”. Recovery of a wayward one is never said to be easy. But it is a worthwhile effort of love which glorifies God. God will reward our faith fullness both in rejoicing in the restoration of a wanderer and later at the judgement seat of Christ.

God forbid that we should ever experience having to deal with sin in the assembly. But we should become generally aware of His principles and His mind as given in 1Corinthians 5 and other scriptures, before we find ourselves in the thick of an emotional and draining situation. May the Lord faithfully reveal any hidden sin in our lives, and in the assembly and give us the grace to faithfully deal with it in truth and in love.

By Ron Canner, February 5, 2003