

The problem page: 1 Corinthians 5.1-13.



What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness? It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans: for a man is living with his father's wife. And you are arrogant! (4.21-5.2)

When I pick up a magazine, I'm always drawn sooner or later to the problem page — other people's problems are always so interesting! (And sometimes — who knows? — they might shed light on your own.)

The next three chapters of this letter deal with a series of problems — largely but not exclusively to do with sex — and all linked in one way or another with the call to holiness (1.2). They're quite tough to read — but in many ways they're three of the most important chapters in Paul's letters. Here we can see at first hand how hard it is to work out a Christian definition of "holiness" on the ground. This is a community which is trying to figure out what it means to be God's holy people, while working with (and living with) friends and family who have no such commitment. They also give us a fascinating insight into Paul "doing theology on the hoof," responding to letters and rumours in a situation that was changing all the time.

We already know a lot of positive things about this church. We know that they're "called to be holy" (1.2); that they're rich in spiritual gifts (1.5); that they're built on the "foolishness" of the preaching of the Cross (1.18-25); that Jesus Christ is the foundation of their lives together (3.11). They may be a motley collection of nobodies meeting in the back streets of Corinth, but they are the dwelling place of

God's Holy Spirit: *Do you not know that you are God's Temple, and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple (3.16-17).*

But what does it actually mean, to be God's dwelling-place in pagan Corinth? The background to Paul's thinking here is the Old Testament concept of the people of God as a holy community. **Holiness is where God is:** so the primary meaning of holiness is **set apart for the service of God**. Look at Exodus ch. 19, where the people have to be "consecrated" (= "made holy") before they can approach the glory and terror of Mt. Sinai. The book of Leviticus describes a whole complicated system of consecration, in which certain people, places, and objects are set apart for God's service. And this isn't just about the priests. Leviticus extends that holiness to the whole people: *You shall be holy to me; for I the Lord am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine (Lev.20.22-26).*

This is the background to Paul's harsh words in chapter 5. We don't know quite what was going on in the church in Corinth — but it's clear that Paul took it extremely seriously. We can guess that this was an affair between a grown-up son and his father's second wife (who might well be closer in age to the son than the father) — which could easily happen an age when many women died young in childbirth, and many men had wives much younger than themselves. It was an offence against OT law (5.1 cf. Lev.18.8) — and one that Roman writers like Cicero and Catullus found equally abhorrent. Abuse within the family is a shocking violation of the basic principles of trust that make family life possible — inside or outside the church.

Paul's whole manner of dealing with the offence is rooted in the OT understanding of the holy community. "Delivery to Satan" (5.5) recalls the penalty of exclusion from the community and the scapegoat ritual (Lev.18.29; Lev.15.20-22). Paul uses the analogy of the Passover ritual (vv.6-7): just as the camp has to be cleansed from *chametz* (leaven or yeast: Exod.12.15-20) before celebrating the feast of redemption, so the ransomed community has to be cleansed from sin. According to Wikipedia, "leaven" is "old, fermented dough usually containing lactobacillus and yeast" which is saved from each batch of dough as a starter for the next one (if you've ever made your own yoghurt, you'll know the procedure). In other words, it's the closest the ancients got to understanding the concept of bacteria.

This all sounds very defensive, as though holiness is something that has to be protected by drawing lines around the holy community, to fence it off from the corruption of the world around. It looks as if Paul has already warned the Corinthians of this danger in a previous letter (v.8). But appearances — as so often

in this letter — are deceptive. The problem isn't about mixing with ordinary everyday sinners in the world where you live (v.10). You can't avoid that kind of risk without cutting yourself off from the world altogether, like the covenanters of the Dead Sea Sect who withdrew into the desert to set up an exclusive enclave of holiness — and that's NOT what I meant, says Paul. What is dangerous -- and Paul's strong words make it clear that he took the issue very seriously -- is sin inside the community, unacknowledged and undetected (5.11-13). It's the church's complacency ("boasting", even — 5.2, 6a) that allows the infection to take hold and corrupt the community from within.

Just as a healthy immune system can shrug off any amount of infection in the working environment, so the church need not fear everyday contact with pagan society (5.9-10). Christians are meant to live in the world — to be a light shining in a dark place (Matt 5.16; Philippians 2.15) — and you can't do that by withdrawing into a holy huddle. That isn't what Jesus did, and it isn't what his followers are called to do. We need to take sin and its destructive power seriously — but we also need a much more positive and dynamic concept of holiness. Not all bacteria are destructive (Matt 13.33)!

God bless,
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21st September 2020