



COMMENTARIES ON "1 CORINTHIANS"

Chapter 5

Unfortunately, divisions and pridefulness were not the only problems in the Corinthian church: the church - influenced by the highly sexualized culture of the city of Corinth - also suffered a number of sexual problems. Chapter five introduces discusses the most shocking of these: incest. The problem was so appalling that even the non-Christian Corinthians did not engage in such a practice (5:1)! While the specific relationship was probably one of stepmother / stepson (St. Paul would otherwise have mentioned a man having his mother, rather than "his father's wife"), it was still a shocking moral failure.

Despite the fact that the offender should have been excommunicated (St. Paul says "mourned," meaning the church should have cast him out and then grieved as if he were dead), the Corinthians nonetheless continued to think highly of themselves (4:2). Because of their failure to handle this situation on their own, St. Paul renders his judgment: even though he is not physically present, his spirit will be with them when, in the name and with the power of Jesus Christ, they are to cast this individual out of the church and back into Satan's domain, destroying his flesh (i.e., his lower nature) but ultimately saving his soul (5:4-5). Theodore of Mopsuestia explains St. Paul's reasoning:

What Paul means is that the person concerned should be put out of the church and forced to live in the world, which is ruled by Satan. That way he will learn to fear God and escape the greater punishment that is to come.

The problem is that one unrepentant evildoer can destroy a fellowship of Christians (5:6). Using the Old Testament symbol of leaven - yeast - representing sin, St. Paul teaches that old leaven must be purged from a lump of dough (referring to the dough for unleavened bread, the bread eaten during the Old Testament festival of Passover). Because Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us, we should celebrate, not "with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (5:7, 8). As Fr. Lawrence Farley says, "Through baptism, they have in fact already become unleavened and participants in the new life. Now they must simply become what they are, living out the new life that has been given to them in Christ."

Interestingly, while St. Paul encourages the Christians to not allow sexually immoral people to remain within the Christian fellowship, he very explicitly says that this does not mean that Christians should therefore have no contact with non-Christians who engage in sinful lifestyles, "since then you would need to go out of the world" (5:10); as he says a few verses later, "For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside...But those who are outside God judges" (5:12, 13). Christians are not, however, to accept such sinful behavior from those who claim to be Christian (or, as Paul says, "with anyone named a brother"), but instead are to "put away from yourselves the evil person" (5:13; cf. Deuteronomy 17:7).