

EVERYONE WELCOME?

A Study of 1 Corinthians 5
(by George Battey)

When literature is printed for a congregation, one usually sees somewhere in the brochure the address of the church building, the times of the services and the words, “Everyone Welcome.” We live in a postmodern society that takes those words to the ultimate extreme. No one is considered evil enough or dangerous enough to be unwelcome at the services of the church. “After all,” it is reasoned, “this is the Lord’s church and we must allow everyone who appears at the door to enter the services.”

In contrast to postmodernism’s permissiveness, the church of the first century was not so tolerant. Neither were they so gullible as to think it harmless for anyone and everyone to attend the services of the Lord’s church. There seems to be a scriptural precedent for even physically refusing certain ones into the assembly (cf. Jn. 20:19; Acts 9:26; 12:12-16; 1 Cor. 5:5, 7, 11, 13; Gal. 5:12). While it is never right for Christians to physically attack anyone (Mt. 5:39ff), brethren in the first century church did not consider screening those who entered their assembly to be an unreasonable nor unchristian practice. To the contrary, they believed that opening the doors to all the world and making everyone welcome was a dangerous practice. This practice of barring the door to certain ones (Acts 9:26) was not viewed as a violation of presenting the gospel to “every creature” (Mk. 16:15), but was viewed as “not casting pearls before swine” (Mt. 7:6).

On Friday, September 26, 1997, Russian President Boris Yeltsin signed into law a new ordinance for his country. This new law forbade unregistered churches in Russia to meet publicly, to conduct religious services (e.g. communion and baptism), and to publicly proclaim their doctrine (including advertising). The congregation of the church of Christ meeting in Tula, Russia was (and remains to this day) an unregistered church. This congregation is unregistered, not by choice, but rather because the Russian government has repeatedly refused to accept their application for registration. On Sunday, September 28, just two days after the new law was signed, the brethren gathered for worship. A stranger appeared whom the brethren did not recognize. They thought it odd that, immediately following the publication of the new anti-religion law, this unknown man appeared for worship. Fearing he might be a spy for the Orthodox Church, the brethren asked him to leave. He was not welcome to sit in a service where a “religious act” (i.e. communion) was going to occur. (This visitor, however, was given an invitation to meet later to discuss the scriptures if his interests were indeed about spiritual matters.) This is a modern-day example of the events of John 20:19.

While it may be easy to see that some should be refused who might persecute, what about those who might corrupt the church? The inspired apostle addressed this very issue in 1 Corinthians 5.

MEET THE MAN

Let's meet a man and see the problem created when one threatens, by his immoral lifestyle, the purity of the church.

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles; that a man has his father's wife! (1 Cor. 5:1)

“It is actually reported” – The KJV has, “reported commonly,” which is a good translation here. Reports were circulating widely about what the Corinthian church was tolerating.

“That there is sexual immorality among you” – The Greek has the word *porneia* which means “illicit sexual relations in general.” “Fornication” (KJV) includes all types of sexual misbehavior including, as in the present text, incest.

“And such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles; that a man has his father's wife!” – Let's enumerate the things we know about this man:

- 1) ***We know he is a member of the church***, for he must be “taken away from among you” (v2); he's part of the “lump” (v7); he is not part of the “world” (v10) who should be left alone; he's called a “brother” (v11).
- 2) ***The woman appears to be his stepmother***, for the scripture is careful to say “his father's wife” and not “his mother.”
- 3) ***The woman does not appear to be a Christian***, for no instructions are given about disciplining her. Since the church doesn't pass judgment and enact discipline on those “in the world” (v12), she must be “in the world” (i.e. a non-Christian).
- 4) ***This son is guilty of a very grievous sin*** – a sin which most unbelievers would refuse to commit.

SEE THE RESPONSE

How were the brethren responding to this situation?

And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. (1 Cor. 5:2)

They were proud! They were glad to have him come to worship with them. He was “welcome.”

The second half of this verse actually contains a question and should be so translated. The question anticipates a positive answer. The NIV has, “*Shouldn’t you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?*” What’s the expected answer to this question? “Yes,” the brethren should be grieving and “putting him out.”

This is a difficult concept for brethren living in a postmodern society. Some cannot conceive that when certain people come to the assembly, there should be no joy to see them arrive. Some in the church are living sinfully and shamefully. They attend the assembly, not to repent, but to worship – to have fellowship. This man should not be allowed to fellowship with the church. The apostle Paul did not believe, “The more, the merrier” or “The bigger, the better.” The church is better off without some people. We should not be glad to see just anyone and everyone walking into the assembly, because some people are not coming to repent; they’re coming to find acceptance while living an evil lifestyle.

PAUL’S ABSENCE

Listen to the verdict pronounced by the apostle upon this fellow:

For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. (1 Cor. 5:3-5)

“I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged” (v3) – Paul did not need to be present to pass judgment on this matter. He did not need to hear the other side of the story. Immorality is wrong no matter what the extenuating circumstances might be. Therefore, there is no need to have a trial to examine the circumstances. Immoral Christians don’t need a trial; they need discipline.

Notice the four-step plan of Matthew 18:15-17 is never mentioned by Paul. The church did not have to send someone privately to speak with the guilty brother. There did not have to be a second visit with “two or three witnesses.” Nor did there have to be a third appeal by the entire church before action was taken formally. Matthew 18:15-17 applies to cases where “your brother sins against you” (Mt. 18:15). To apply Matthew 18 to more than personal offences is to do more than Jesus said.

“In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v4) – “In the name of the Lord” means “by the Lord’s authority.” When the church enacts discipline they are doing in the Lord’s absence what the Lord Himself would do if He were personally present. “*If anyone*

thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge the things I write are the commandments of the Lord” (1 Cor. 14:37).

The same One who created and sustains man, and the same One who is our Savior and our anointed King and High Priest, is the same Master who sanctions the punishment that should be delivered. Punishment is neither un-Christian nor ungodly. The Lord Himself commands it. It is to be done with His name attached to it.

“When you are gathered together” (v4) – Discipline is something to be administered in the assembly by the entire congregation. Everyone must see and learn a lesson (cf. Dt. 13:10-11). Concerning leaders of the church who sin, Paul wrote, *“Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear”* (1 Tim. 5:20).

Discipline is a congregational matter. It is not for a single man to enact, but the entire congregation must be involved.

“Along with my spirit” (v4) – The apostle Paul himself is whole-heartedly in favor of administering the punishment. If he were present in person, he himself would participate in this discipline.

“With the power of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v4) – Jesus Himself is on the side of the congregation administering the punishment.

Momentarily think back to Matthew 18:15-20. Though the context there concerns, not immorality, but personal offenders, yet we learn something about the Lord’s attitude in disciplinary proceedings. Read verse 20 in its context of church discipline: *“Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them”* (Mt. 18:20). In disciplinary action, Jesus is on the side of the “two or three witnesses” (18:16). He stands fully and firmly behind the congregation who follows His instructions about discipline.

“Deliver such a one” (v5) – This encompasses, not just the fornicator mentioned in verse 1, but “such a one” – i.e. any person who falls into moral sin, whether it be sexual sins, lying, dishonesty of any kind, cheating, and all “such” immoral sins.

“To Satan” (v5) – Simply put, it appears this fellow (and all “such ones”) is (are) being put out of the church’s “membership.” He is not welcome to come to the assembly in his present, unrepentant state.

“For the destruction of the flesh” (v5) – This states the purpose for the discipline – to destroy the desire to live after the flesh.

Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience. (Col. 3:5-6)

Perhaps if these people were put out of the church they would reevaluate things. Perhaps they would be motivated to “put to death the works of the flesh” in their lives and repent and thus “save their spirit” – the most valuable possession they have (Mt. 16:26).

PROTECTING THE CONGREGATION

There is, in fact, a greater reason for discipline than saving the spirit of a single man. The sinful member may never repent. Brethren must think about something else: the congregation.

Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Cor. 5:6-8)

“A little leaven” (v6) – This refers to the fornicator (v1).

“The whole lump” (v6) – This refers to the congregation. There is a chance the entire congregation can be ruined if the fornicator continues to attend worship in fellowship. To illustrate, if my hand developed an infection and would not improve, it would be better to have the hand severed from the body than for the entire body to become infected and eventually die – so said the Lord (Mt. 5:30).

“Purge out the old leaven” (v7) – Put the fornicator out of the congregation. Call it what you will, but “purge out” means the man is “not welcome.”

Someone may argue, “We don’t have the right to tell a man he is not welcome at the services of the Lord’s church.” Yet this passage itself constitutes such authority. This passage means something. It is absurd to argue that the church should be “grieving over” the fornicator’s sinful lifestyle (v2), that he should be “delivered to Satan” (v5) and “purged out” (v7), and then conclude, “He’s still welcome to come to the services in order to commune, contribute, pray, sing, and study.” Where is the logic? Where is the scriptural authority for such a conclusion?

“Purging out leaven” should remind us of the Old Testament Passover. Israel was not allowed to have any leaven in their houses. “*You shall remove leaven from your houses. ... No leaven shall be found in your houses*” (Ex. 12:15, 19). Israel was about to eat a spiritual meal and all the leaven had to go.

“Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us” (v7) – Jesus and the Lord’s Supper are being compared to the Passover of the Old Testament. The Passover meal was a type of the Lord’s Supper. Israel ate the Passover meal with no leaven in their houses and the church is to eat the Lord’s Supper without leaven in the congregation.

“Let us keep the feast” (v8) – This refers to the Lord’s Supper.

“Not with old leaven” (v8) – This refers to the fornicator (see vv6-7). The feast (Lord’s supper) is not to be eaten with leaven (the fornicator).

“Nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness” (v8) – More than the fornicator of verse 1 is included in this prohibition. Any member with malice (ill will toward others) or wickedness (immorality) in their lives should not be eating “the feast” with the rest of the congregation.

Some take the Lord’s Supper too lightly. If taken too lightly, brethren need to consider that they may be profaning the Lord’s Supper by turning it into a common meal that anyone and everyone is allowed to partake of. The Lord’s Supper is a sacred meal. It is not for unbelievers (1 Cor. 10:17; 11:32). It is not for members who have malice and wickedness in their lives.

Someone may argue, “Where do we get the authority to say the Lord’s Supper cannot be served to immoral brethren?” The authority is found in 1 Corinthians 5:8, “*Let us keep the feast, not with the old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness.*”

A very interesting phenomenon occurs in our brotherhood when discussing communion. Advocates of individual cups commonly argue, “Communion is strictly individual – just between the worshipper and God.” We respond by pointing out “communion” means “joint participation.” Communion necessarily involves all the members of the congregation sharing together the same loaf and the same cup. It is not strictly an individual matter. Yet, when it comes to discipline, some would argue, “Communion is strictly between an individual person and God.” Logically it cannot be both ways. Either communion involves all the members together, or it does not. If it involves all the members, then it becomes the concern of the congregation as to who partakes.

A common objection is that 1 Corinthians 11:28 says, “*Let a man examine himself.*” Since no mention is made of examining others, it is concluded the examination of others is forbidden. But the answer to this is the same as the answer to Baptist people regarding John 3:16. They argue, “John 3:16 doesn’t mention baptism; therefore baptism isn’t necessary.” We respond by pointing out John 3:16 is not the final and exclusive passage on the subject. Likewise, 1 Corinthians 11:28 is not the final and exclusive passage on communion. After all, 1 Corinthians 5:7-8 comes before 1 Corinthians 11:28. When Paul wrote 11:28 the brethren already knew they were not supposed to “keep the feast” with those guilty of “malice” and “wickedness.” Communion has both congregational and individual responsibilities. So, although 11:28 mentions individual examination, this does not erase the fact that 5:7-8 mentions corporate examination.

“But with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (v8) – Rather than “keeping the feast” (communion) with members who are filled with malice and wickedness, we are to eat the Lord’s Supper with brothers and sisters who are sincere and standing for truth.

PREVIOUS INSTRUCTIONS

Have you ever heard a parent say to his child, “I’ve told you a hundred times …” What’s the point? The point is, the child should know better. He’s been previously instructed.

Corinth had been previously instructed. They should have known better.

I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. (1 Cor. 5:9-10)

Paul is here correcting a misunderstanding. Some thought Paul had previously instructed them not to associate with anyone on earth who was immoral. Paul corrects this misunderstanding. To escape all immorality the brethren would have to leave the planet. His previous and current instructions apply to members of the church.

CLARIFICATION

Paul clarifies what he previously wrote:

But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; not even to eat with such a person. (1 Cor. 5:11)

“Anyone named a brother” – These instructions apply only to members of the church.

“sexually immoral” – This includes a wide variety of sexual sins – premarital sex, extramarital sex, homosexuality, incest, bestiality, etc.

“covetous” – Someone who casts his eyes on his neighbor’s goods and desires to have them (cf. Ex. 20:17).

“idolater” – One who worships created things rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:25).

“reviler” – One who attacks another verbally by railing (yelling, cursing), slandering, lying.

“drunkard” – One who drinks alcohol, not medicinally (1 Tim. 5:23), but recreationally.

“extortioner” – A thief, robber, swindler.

“such a person” – This indicates the list just given is not an exhaustive one. All the items on the list have one thing in common: they are all moral sins. That is, they all involve the violation of moral law, not positive law (cf. Gal. 5:19-21).

There are two prohibitions given:

- 1) “Do not keep company” – that is, don’t associate with.
- 2) “Do not even eat with such a person.”

Notice the first prohibition, “Do not keep company.” Does this mean inside or outside the assembly? Can we logically or scripturally argue “association” applies only outside the assembly? If so, what compels us to reach such a conclusion? Perhaps we should simply do what the Lord commanded and have no association with these people – inside or outside the assembly.

Notice the second prohibition, “Do not even eat with such a person.” Does this mean inside or outside the assembly? Can we logically or scripturally argue the “eating” applies only outside the assembly? If so, what compels us to reach such a conclusion? Perhaps we should simply do as the Lord commanded and not eat with such people – inside or outside the assembly. After all, instructions were already given to “not keep the feast with the old leaven, for even Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us” (vv7-8). In the light of vv7-8, it would seem that “do not eat” would certainly include the Lord’s Supper. It is absurd to say on the one hand, “We may not eat a common meal with such people,” and then say on the other hand, “We may eat a sacred meal with such people.” How can eating a Big Mac at McDonalds with such people be worse than eating the communion with them in the worship assembly? This conclusion defies logic and spiritual propriety.

E. M. Zerr argues in his commentary that 1 Corinthians 5:11 could not refer to communion because 5:9-10 says we may “eat” with those in the world, but may not eat with “such ones” of 5:11. Zerr reasons that since we eat only common meals with the world, the “eating” of 5:9-11 must refer only to common meals. However, careful examination reveals some significant things Zerr overlooked:

- a) “Eating” is never specifically mentioned in 5:9-10, but it seems implied in the phrase “keep company with.”
- b) The word “even” points to an additional thing that may not be done – “not *even* to eat with such a person” (5:11).
- c) Two things are forbidden: (a) keeping company with such people and (b) eating with such people.
- d) Common meals are included in the simple statement “keep company with” (5:9).
- e) The additional mention of “eating” in 5:11 refers to more than a common meal; it refers to a sacred meal (see vv7-8 again).

“Association” is one thing and “eating” is an additional thing. Christians may “keep company with” those in the world (5:9-10). They may do all that is included in “keeping company with” – which includes eating common meals. In contrast, Christians may not “keep company with” (a phrase which includes common meals) immoral members. In addition to this, Christians may not “even eat with” immoral members. Inasmuch as the only eating mentioned in this chapter is “the feast” (Lord’s supper – vv7-8), why conclude anything different in 5:11? Contextually, the apostle is saying:

- a) Do not “keep company with” immoral members – including common meals.
- b) Do not even eat “the feast”/“our passover” (vv7-8) with immoral members.

The Lord’s Supper is how we show fellowship with one another. *“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion (koinonia) of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion (koinonia) of the body of Christ?”* (1 Cor. 10:16). This very same word translated “communion” here is translated “fellowship” elsewhere (1 Jn. 1:7; Eph. 5:11). Withdrawing “fellowship” means withdrawing “communion,” for both words are from the same Greek word. “Withdrawing fellowship” to many simply means “not using” a brother to lead songs during the assembly. If this is “withdrawing fellowship,” then it becomes impossible to “withdraw fellowship” from an immoral sister, because no sister “leads” in the assemblies of the church.

Some argue, “We cannot wrestle the communion away from people right there during the assembly.” But this reasoning misses the point entirely. The question is not “Should brethren wrestle the communion away from someone?” but rather “Should brethren offer the communion to such people to begin with?” When brethren extend the offer to partake, they are extending fellowship. If the person in question is a known fornicator, then fellowship (*koinonia* – “communion”) is being extended rather than withdrawn.

When scriptural discipline is enacted against an unrepentant brother, the leaders should inform the offender he is not welcome at the services because he has been “put away” (1 Cor. 5:13). The only exception to this should be when the guilty comes to repent and seek forgiveness on God’s terms. Should the offender insist on staying without repenting, the one waiting on the table should inform the assembly the communion is only for those in fellowship with God – it is not for those who have been withdrawn from. The Lord’s Supper should not knowingly and willfully be offered to one who has been “delivered to Satan for the destruction of the flesh” (1 Cor. 5:4-5, 8). I’m not suggesting this is the exact procedure that brethren must follow, but this is my suggestion of what could be scripturally done.

THE RUSSIAN CONGREGATIONS

The congregations in Russia have a firmer grasp on how fellowship is demonstrated than many American congregations. Brother Jerry Cutter's work report of March 6, 2002 contains the following paragraph about an incident that occurred in the Penza, Russia congregation:

The two leaders mentioned are 35 to 40 years old. One thing that impresses me is how maturely they handle problems. One vexing problem involved a sister who was very, very strong in the doctrine but, unfortunately, was strong-willed and overbearing, pushy and loud. She continued running members and visitors out the door faster than they could walk in. Finally the leaders, with the backing of the church, kindly asked her not to return until she got herself under control. This was not a sudden decision, but involved a matter that had continued for some years. ... Also, while we were there this time, there was a brother and sister that have a drinking problem, who came drunk one night. They were quietly told not to return again while drinking. The woman herself had previously been disfellowshipped for her drunkenness, and the church would not allow her to partake of the Lord's supper or attend any function or dinner involving the church. (p. 1).

The Russian brethren pay more than "lip-service" to the idea of withdrawing "fellowship"/"communion." They have not yet been infected with postmodernism and its toleration of evil.

GOD EXPECTS JUDGMENT

For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore "put away from yourselves the evil person."
(1 Cor. 5:12-13)

In 1 Corinthians 11:28 we are told that each person should "examine himself." But here the congregation is told to "examine those who are inside" the church.

"Put away from yourselves the evil person" (v13) – Put the evil person away, but still eat the communion with him? Still make him feel welcome? "Put away his influence, but not him personally," someone argues? The scripture says plainly, "Put away the evil person." A person cannot be separated from his influence.

CONCLUSION

The original question posed by this article was, “Is everyone welcome in the assemblies of the church?” The answer is both “yes” and “no.” It depends on what one means by “everyone.”

If “everyone” is taken to mean “all races of people,” “all ages,” “all genders,” “everyone looking for truth,” “everyone who wishes to repent and get saved,” then the answer is a resounding “yes” (Isa. 2:2).

If, on the other hand, “everyone” is taken to include police or spies trying to persecute, the answer is “no” (Jn. 20:19; Acts 9:26), not everyone is welcome. If “everyone” is taken to mean immoral members who have been disciplined, the answer again is “no” (1 Cor. 5:13). “*Do not receive him into your house nor greet him*” (2 Jn. 10), “*for he who greets him shares (koinoneo – “has communion/fellowship”) in his evil deeds*” (2 Jn. 11).