

5. Paul's directive regarding this man was consistent with his previous instruction to the Corinthians (5:9), notably in an earlier letter to them (a letter lost to the Church, providentially omitted from the New Testament canon). Somehow Paul had been made aware that they'd misunderstood that letter and its exhortation concerning association with immoral people. Apparently the Corinthians concluded that Paul was forbidding them *all* interaction with *all* such persons, which was not at all his meaning. (Some scholars speculate that this misinterpretation was intentional – that the Corinthians were intentionally employing the *reductio ad absurdum* argument: reducing Paul's instruction to its supposed logical absurdity in order to justify rejecting it.)
- a. Whether or not the misunderstanding was intentional, Paul made sure he corrected it. He wasn't calling the Corinthians (or any believers) to refuse interaction with all ungodly people; indeed, such an obligation enjoys its own *reductio ad absurdum* fallacy: In the very nature of the case, the world is comprised of "worldly" people, so that the only way to avoid associating with them is to remove oneself entirely from this world, either by dying or by renouncing all contact with non-Christians (5:9-10). Even if one could achieve such isolation, it violates the Church's fundamental responsibility of witness. Christians are to be salt and light, not a lamp hidden under a basket; as Abraham's true children, they are to bear Christ's fragrance and thus mediate His blessing to all men (ref. Matthew 5:14-16; cf. also 1 Corinthians 7:12-16, 9:19-23; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20).
  - b. Paul's instruction regarding separation pertained to the ungodly in the Church, not in the outside world. But precisely because it implicates relationships within Christ's body, it is crucial that Paul's meaning not be misconstrued (ref. 3:16-17).

The first thing to note ought to be the most obvious, which is that Paul's list of impieties (vv. 10-11) is *representative* rather than exhaustive. He wasn't providing the Corinthians with a catalog of sins which demand the punishment of excommunication, but a general depiction of the fleshliness which defines the natural man and so marks the natural mind – the fleshliness the Church must not abide (cf. 6:9-10; Romans 13:12-14; Galatians 5:19-21; 1 Peter 4:1-3; etc.).

Secondly, Paul's instruction pertains to individuals whom the assembly has come to regard as brothers in Christ. The NAS rendering – "a *so-called* brother" – is unfortunate because it connotes cynical disbelief on Paul's part. Paul wasn't speaking pejoratively or derisively; he was merely indicating that his instruction pertains to ungodliness among individuals in the Church who are named in the body – by the saints and by themselves – as brothers in the Lord Jesus (ref. the KJV, NKJV, ASV and ESV translations).

Third, and perhaps most important, Paul wasn't demanding that there be no further interaction between Christ's saints and the sinning brother. He wasn't calling for complete separation, but the *severing of Christian fellowship*, and that with the goal of ultimately securing the offender's repentance and restoration to full fellowship (ref. again 5:5 and 2 Corinthians 2:1-11).

This is evident from the broader context, but also from Paul's language. His verb (here rendered *associate*) refers literally to the intermixing of individual substances, as when ingredients are blended together in a medicinal potion. It's noteworthy that Paul is the only New Testament writer to use this verb, and he employed it solely with respect to relationships in the Church (cf. 2 Thessalonians 3:14 as the only other instance outside this passage). This singular usage highlights, on the one hand, the way Paul conceived the intimacy that exists between the members of Christ's body, and, on the other, what he meant when he called for such "mixing together" to be withheld from a sinning brother.

This same meaning is reinforced by Paul's insistence that this non-association include the severing of *table fellowship* (5:11b). The issue here wasn't merely sitting down at the same table, but the fellowship embodied in Christians taking their meals together (cf. Acts 2:46-47), especially as this table fellowship had its centerpiece in the observance of the Lord's Supper (11:20-34). This finds a counterpart in John's instruction to the saints to not welcome into their homes those who've strayed from the true doctrine of Christ (2 John 9-10). His point was not to keep such persons outside of one's house, but to withhold the hospitality of Christian fellowship from them. (Some Christians have wrongly used this passage to justify their refusal to speak with cultists who appear at their door.)

Christ's Church is a holy (*unleavened*) assembly precisely and solely because it consists of persons who are members of Him (cf. John 6:53ff; Romans 8:9; Galatians 2:20; Colossians 3:1-3). But for that very reason, and in that specific sense, they are members of one another – members whose individual existence is bound up in the whole (cf. 12:12-27; Ephesians 1:22-23, 2:11-22; 1 Peter 2:4-5). As such, the severing of fellowship serves two vitally important purposes: First, it attests, affirms and preserves the holiness of Christ's Church, for its own sake and for the sake of its witness to the watching world. But second, it serves the health of the body by working toward repentance and restoration in its erring members.

- c. These considerations provide a solid foundation for interpreting Paul's closing clarification regarding the Church's obligation toward sin as it manifests itself in the Church and in the world (5:12-13). The saints are to judge those within the assembly, leaving to God the judgment of those outside. Here, too, several observations are important to note:

The first is that the context explains what Paul meant by the Church *judging* those within its ranks. This judgment is neither absolute condemnation of erring brothers nor the arrogant "passing of judgment" Paul previously decried (4:5). It is a ministration of spiritual wisdom and love: love for Christ, love for His Church, and love for its individual members. It is not the natural-minded judgment which defiles and tears down Christ's Church by usurping His authority, legislating consciences and constructing coalitions around personal convictions, notions and agendas; it is the spiritual judgment which honors and edifies the Church, regarding it and its individual members as "holy to the Lord."

The saints' judgment of the immoral and ungodly is restricted to those within the Church precisely because of what that judgment presumes, what it entails, and what it seeks. This judgment involves the severing of Christian fellowship by expelling an unrepentant brother from the assembly of believers. Obviously this form of judgment cannot extend to people outside the Church. Moreover, it has its goal in the preservation of the Church's well-being and purity along with the erring person's repentance and restoration to fellowship; this, too does not apply to those outside the body of Christ.

Christians cannot execute this sort of judgment with respect to unbelievers because it doesn't pertain to them; unbelievers don't reside in the realm where this judgment exists and operates. Thus even *God Himself* cannot judge those outside the Church in this way, but this doesn't mean such persons are exempt from judgment altogether. *They are, however, exempt from all judgment at the hands of Christ's Church*; God alone is their judge.

This observation is critical because so many Christians fall prey to the tendency to pass judgment on unbelievers. They make themselves the judge in a myriad of ways, from concluding (tacitly or overtly) regarding a person's "reprobation," to making judgments regarding a particular individual's sin and guilt before God, to calling God to execute sentence upon them (cf. Luke 9:51-54; this attitude is exposed, for instance, by the way many Christians use the imprecatory psalms).

Christians are not men's judges, but they are *God's heralds*; their responsibility is to proclaim that the living God has judged all things in His Son and that He righteously commands all people to obtain forgiveness, cleansing and newness of life in Him (2 Corinthians 5:9-21). For those who disobey this gospel, there is an appointed day of judgment and retribution (cf. Matthew 7:21-23, 25:31-46; John 6:22-40; Acts 14:14-17, 17:24-31; 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10; 1 Peter 2:6-8, 4:17).

The last observation concerns Paul's employment of the Deuteronomic prescription for dealing with impiety/impurity in the assembly of Israel (5:13b). This prescription occurs repeatedly in Deuteronomy (ref. 13:1-5, 17:1-13, 19:11-20, 22:13-24, 24:7), and Paul's citation follows the Septuagint rendering in these passages, with two exceptions: He substituted the aorist imperative for the future indicative, and he altered the verb number from singular to plural. These changes don't alter the meaning (let alone assault scriptural inspiration), but merely reflect that Paul was applying this prescription as a directive to the Corinthian church.

As with the Passover, Paul drew upon this aspect of Israel's Law *fully recognizing its salvation-historical relevance to the Church*. The Law of Moses – Yahweh's covenant with Israel – described and prescribed Israel's identity and role as His *son*, and fundamental to the nation's sonship was its obligation of sanctity. Israel was "holy to the Lord" – a people set apart to Him for His own possession according to His covenant election of Abraham (cf. Exodus 3:1-8, 6:1-8, 19:1-7; Deuteronomy 4:1-20, 7:1-8; cf. also Psalm 105; Isaiah 41:1-9, 51:1-3; etc.).

The critical point of this is that sanctity in the assembly was central to Israel's self-understanding and integrity – not only in terms of its relationship with Yahweh as His consecrated, firstborn son, but also for the sake of fulfilling its election and calling with respect to the world: By conforming to its identity as the son of God, Israel would testify of its Father to the nations around them. The crucial implication of this – and one that is routinely missed in the Church – is that Israel's sanctity didn't concern, nor was it determined by, conformity to a moral code within the Law of Moses. *The nation's obligation of purity derived from its identity and mission, and those things were the measure of its conformity:*

As to **identity**, Israel was God's elect son (cf. Exodus 4:21-23; Deuteronomy 7:6-8; Isaiah 1:1-4; Hosea 11:1-2), and, in the very nature of the case, *sons possess an essential likeness to their father*. (Note that Israel's sonship and its destiny in Jesus Christ – who is the embodiment of Israel – presupposed man's creation in the divine image and likeness. Man was created as image-bearer to be image-son, which sonship is realized in Jesus Christ – first in His own person, and then in those sharing in His life as the Last Adam. Jesus is the origin and destiny of man.)

Israel's sanctity concerned, and was determined by, its integrity as the “son of God”; its purity consisted, not in moral/ethical uprightness as such, but true *godliness* – the “God-likeness” appropriate to His sons. This was God's demand of Israel, *and it's precisely the reason He condemned His “son” for perpetual unrighteousness irrespective of the nation's meticulous conformity to the Law's demands* (cf. Matthew 22:34-40; Romans 13:8-10 with Isaiah 1:1-15; Matthew 15:1-11, 23:23-28). There is no more powerful illustration of this than the quintessential Israelite Saul of Tarsus – a man who was blameless under the Law and yet regarded by the God he served as a blasphemer and grievous offender.

Israel's **mission** presupposed and flowed out of its identity. Yahweh had chosen Israel to be His firstborn son, but by virtue of His covenant with Abraham. Israel's election and identity were bound up in God's election of Abraham, *which election served His larger purpose to recover and restore His creation to Himself*. God didn't set apart Israel to have them conform to a moral code; He chose them and set them apart for His righteousness' sake: His commitment to uphold and fulfill His covenant oath to Abraham – the oath that all the families of the earth were to obtain divine blessing in him. God's purpose was that the watching world, being aware of Israel's status as His elect son, would come to know *Him*, the Father, through the loving devotion and goodness – the purity – of the son.

Israel's obligation to purity (sanctity) in the assembly reflected its Abrahamic identity and mission, *both of which it was unable to fulfill*. But this was by divine design, for Israel was to find its destiny in another Israel from within Israel. Jesus is that son; He is the seed of Abraham for the sake of the nations' blessing, but He is carrying out His work of global witness and blessing through His Body that is His fullness and fragrance. *This assembly, unleavened in Him, must keep the feast that is its Abrahamic birthright for the sake of its Abrahamic calling, which means keeping it in the purity of integrity and truth.*