Discipline and Community: Another Look at 1 Corinthians 5

Lyle Vander Broek

Introduction

Whenever I teach the fifth chapter of 1 Corinthians, whether it be in church or seminary, the class members invariably want to focus on the man’s sin (v. 1) and his anticipated discipline (v. 5). In part this is due to the sensational nature of these elements. What reader’s interest is not piqued at Paul’s indictment that a certain man is having a sexual relationship with his stepmother (for the term “father’s wife,” see the Septuagint of Lev. 18:7-8), an incestuous act considered taboo even in the often amoral Greco-Roman world. And the wording of the disciplinary action proposed by Paul leads modern readers to puzzle over what appears to be a strange and overly severe condemnation. Does the immorality of the man warrant his being delivered to "Satan for the destruction of the flesh" (v. 5), an apparent reference to physical death (cf. 11:30)?

Actually, insight into how Paul is using "Satan" and "flesh/spirit" makes the pronouncement somewhat less harsh. In the dualistic cosmology of Paul, to be dismissed from the church is, in effect, to be delivered into the realm of Satan. And if flesh and spirit are a contrasting word-pair used as they typically are in Paul, flesh refers to the man’s sinful nature and not his physical body. The desired result of the man’s exclusion from the church is that his sinful nature or "old self" might be destroyed (cf. Rom. 6:5ff.) so that he might be saved in the end ("in the day of the Lord"). But even armed with this interpretation, Paul’s words are often shocking to the modern reader; the sinner is to be thrown out of the church and is given no explicit hope of reconciliation to his community in this age (for a more forgiving Paul, see 2 Cor. 2:5-11).

I have often thought, however, that a more essential explanation of my students’ interest in verses 1 and 5 has to do with their supposition that church discipline is something that is focused primarily on the offending individual. Of course they realize that both individual and community are necessarily involved in discipline, but it is often assumed that the individual is the party actually impacted by the action. In a society in which individual rights are highly prized and community is misunderstood or even devalued, it is easy to dissociate discipline and community.

In fact, Paul is more concerned in 1 Corinthians 5 with the community than with the man participating in the illicit relationship. In verse 2 Paul severely
criticizes the church for its lack of action. They have been arrogant when they should have mourned, and they are told to remove the offending party. In verse 6 Paul says that the church is boastful and uses a proverb to remind them of how the one affects the many: "a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough." Paul expands this metaphor in verses 7-8 and emphasizes that the actions of the community have their foundation in Christ. Verses 9-13 address the relationship between Christian community and world. Christians need not avoid immoral people in the world, but they are told to shun those who claim to be fellow Christians yet continue in sin (v. 11).

Not only is the community the focus, but the chapter is especially intriguing because of the peculiar attitude the church has toward discipline. They are actually arrogant and boastful about their lack of discipline! This is not a church that has somehow simply failed to act, but one that considers freedom and the absence of discipline to be part of its theological stance. Whether one labels this attitude "proto-Gnostic" or "enthusiast," it is clear that many in the Corinthian church feel that they have "arrived." They have special wisdom (1:18ff.) and spiritual powers (chap. 14), and they assume that pagan rites (chaps. 8, 10) and sexual practices (chap. 6) cannot affect them. In a passage filled with biting satire, Paul contrasts his own behavior with their form of realized eschatology:

Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings! Indeed, I wish that you had become kings, so that we might be kings with you! . . . We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. (4:8, 10)

Ironically, Paul's own message may have contributed to this problem. He had most certainly spoken to the church about their freedom from the law in Jesus Christ; now he must write to emphasize what he had always assumed, that Christian freedom must be tempered by a concern for the community ("'All things are lawful,' but not all things are beneficial." 10:23). In reality, Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 5 are an address to two forms of problematic behavior, that of the offending individual, and that of a church which does not understand how discipline affects community.

The community focus we find in chapter 5 is entirely consistent with the theme of the rest of the letter. Above all, 1 Corinthians is a letter about community, about Paul's understanding of how Christians can experience fellowship and group definition based upon their common call to follow Jesus Christ. The letter is Paul's response to a series of barriers to community: divisions based upon an illegitimate loyalty to certain leaders (1:10ff.); tensions caused by association with pagan practices (chaps. 8-10); stress caused by those who ignore standard practices of dress (11:2-16); divisions based upon economic
differences (11:17-34) and even spiritual gifts (chaps. 12-14). The church at Corinth is in a state of extreme disunity; Paul responds to each of their communal problems in turn, offering what he knows about the unity in Christ. As we look at 1 Corinthians 5, the most important questions grow out of this pervasive theme of community: Why is discipline necessary for the Christian community? In what sense is a lack of discipline a barrier to community? What exactly is Paul saying about the relationship between discipline and community?

An Investigation of the Chapter

The most obvious purpose of Paul’s instruction is the removal of the offending individual. Paul explains the necessity of this action through the use of what was probably a common proverb: "Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?" The apostle is making a comparison between the way a small amount of yeast affects the entire piece of dough and the way the sinning individual impacts the community. Like Jesus’ parables, Paul’s comparison or metaphor lends itself to a variety of interpretations. Part of the ambiguity of the proverb lies in the term "yeast." In its non-religious usage, yeast can symbolize either impurity (because of the possibility that the small piece of dough kept to leaven the next batch of bread could go bad; or the infectious process (cf. Matt. 13:33; Mark 8:15; see also Paul’s use of the proverb in Gal. 5:9). The mention of leaven reminds Paul of its religious significance for the Jewish people, and verses 7-8 are an amplification of the proverb based upon the rituals of Passover. He alludes to both the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Paschal Lamb and, in the process, refocuses the proverb in terms of the contrast between old and new. While it is clear that the proverb points to a relationship between the one and the many, what exactly is Paul intending to say about how the undisciplined member affects the community? Three interrelated interpretations are especially helpful: the sinner affects the group in terms of (1) the holiness of the community, (2) their corporate responsibility, and (3) contamination.

There are several reasons for thinking that Paul views the community as holy. The most important image for the church in Paul’s letters is "the body of Christ." While this is primarily an image used to illustrate the function of the church (chap. 12), it also clearly illustrates the church’s relationship to Christ and hence to the holy (12:27; Eph. 1:22; Col. 1:18). When the body (as community) is profaned, Christ is profaned, and terrible things may result (see 11:30). More explicit is Paul’s assertion in 3:16 and 17 that the community is God’s temple and therefore holy. Using the strong language of a literary form called "sentence of holy law," Paul decrees that God will destroy the one who destroys God’s holy community. It is hard not to see these verses as a foreshadowing of the discussion in chapter 5.
It has even been suggested that 1 Corinthians 5 is a midrash (interpretation) based on Deuteronomy 23:1-8. This passage in Deuteronomy lists those who, because of their sin or uncleanness, may not enter the holy temple. Interestingly, the passage in Deuteronomy also follows a prohibition about a man having sexual relations with his stepmother (22:30). If the Christian community is holy, as Paul asserts, then lack of discipline affects that holiness. It is leavened in the sense that both its distinctiveness and its ability to represent God in the world are compromised. The latter is very important to an apostle who sees the church in terms of mission (10:19-23) and involvement beyond its own community (5:9-13).

An interesting and somewhat related interpretation sees the community affected by the undisciplined member in terms of its "corporate responsibility." After giving several Old Testament examples of how the sins of individuals or small groups are held against the entire community (Exod. 16:27,28; Deut. 29:19-21; Josh. 22:16,18), Brian Rosner shows how the word πενθέω (v. 2) functions elsewhere in Paul (2 Cor. 12:21) and in the Septuagint to refer to mourning based on one's conviction of sin. Paul would then be enjoining the Corinthian community to mourn, not because they have been shamed or because they will lose a brother, but because God holds the whole community responsible for the sin of the undisciplined member and hence because they need to repent. This sense of corporate responsibility is surely what the Heidelberg Catechism is getting at in Question 82 when it responds to the question of whether the "unbelieving and ungodly" should be admitted to the Lord's Supper: "No, that would dishonor God's covenant and bring down God's wrath upon the entire congregation."

Perhaps the most obvious interpretation of the proverb in verse 6 is that the sin of one infects others; contamination occurs in the sense that others will be encouraged to sin because of the presence and example of the undisciplined member. As is shown in chapters 8-10, Paul is acutely aware of how people may be caused to stumble because of the actions of others. If Paul is concerned about modeling in the so-called "gray" areas of the ethical life (the issue of eating meat offered to idols), how much more will he be concerned, as in our passage, with the impact an explicit violation of Christian morality will have in terms of temptation to sin. Calvin speaks to this issue when he says that the purpose of church discipline "is that the good be not corrupted by the constant company of the wicked, as commonly happens. For (such is our tendency to wander from the way) there is nothing easier than for us to be led away by bad examples . . . ." In this case discipline is related to community in that it functions to safeguard the moral integrity of the group.

The above interpretations tell us a good deal about Paul's understanding of the relationship between discipline and community based specifically upon the most obvious intent of the passage, the desire to rid the church of the
contaminating member. But Paul's concern in chapter 5 goes beyond this particular issue; his latent purpose is to strengthen the community, to reinforce its understanding of how it should function. What he communicates more generally as he attempts to upbuild the church at Corinth is also helpful for our understanding of discipline and community. Two aspects of his message are especially important, one more implicit and sociological in nature, and the other explicit and theological.

Paul's argument for discipline is based upon his assumption that the deviant behavior of the one will endanger the larger group. As sociologists would put it, Paul is affirming the need for certain "functional requisites," in this case ethical norms that must not be violated. These norms are essential to the community's self-definition. Discipline is a natural reaction of a community that is unified in its ethical vision. Lack of discipline is a significant barrier to community because it indicates that the normative values, the values that act as the "glue" of the community, are being challenged. As stated succinctly by C. K. Barrett, "Any community inculcating moral standards ... is bound to recognize a degree beyond which transgression of its code becomes intolerable. . . ."

Some might be surprised to discover that the same apostle who in Galatians so strongly affirms Christians' freedom from the law can here argue for community norms. Part of the answer lies in the different settings of these letters: in Galatians Paul is arguing against those who would make Jewish law a prerequisite for Christians; in 1 Corinthians he is arguing against a form of Christianity denying the need for any norms at all. But Paul never leaves behind the ethical norms of his Jewish background as they are used to guide the Christian life. That fact, coupled with the essential Pauline assertion that Christians are directed both by their freedom in Christ and their obligation to community ("'All things are lawful,' but not all things are beneficial") make his intensity in our passage understandable.

What characteristics would Paul use to describe a community that is able to discipline? What are its key traits? In a helpful sociological analysis of 1 Corinthians 5, Gerald Harris (based upon the work of H. Himmelweit) notes that modern disciplining communities are ones that (1) are unified or cohesive, (2) have authoritative leadership, (3) are in some tension with the "world" or outside forces, and (4) have a clear sense of the group's mission. These categories ring true and are helpful in the study of Paul because they represent precisely the points of contention between Paul and the Corinthian church relative to the use of discipline.

The church at Corinth cannot discipline because it falls short in each of these categories. The church is in an incredible state of disunity, while Paul argues for community; the church is divided about its leadership (chap. 1) while Paul asserts the authority of Christ and himself as founding apostle; the church is
confused about its relationship to the world, at times either avoiding it (5:9ff.) or participating in its inappropriately (chaps. 6, 8-10), while Paul presents a clear picture of the distinctiveness of the Christian life. Paul is unabashed about the mission of the church to the world (chap. 9), while the church at Corinth seems more content to revel in its spiritual powers. Paul would agree that disciplining communities are unified, have a clear sense of their distinctiveness and mission, and have an authoritative leadership that allows them to act. The entire letter to the Corinthians is, in effect, an exhortation to be this kind of community.

Of course Paul not only reminds the church of its common norms as a basis for self-definition, but he also reminds them of their common foundation in Christ. The former is mostly implicit, the latter is a clear theological message that lies at the heart of verses 6-8 and indeed the entire chapter. Paul quickly moves from the image of leaven and its effects (v. 6) to the contrast between the old and new in verse 7 (cf. 2 Cor. 5:16ff.; Mark 2:20ff.). His brief comments express what is commonly called the Pauline indicative/imperative, ethical exhortation which grows out of the salvation Christians already have in Christ. Paul says that the Corinthians are to cleanse out the old yeast so that they may become what they really are, the pure unleavened dough (v. 7b). The basis for this new status is the cross of Christ (v. 7c; cf. 1:18ff.). Because of what Christ has done, the community is enabled to live in sincerity and truth, not in the old ways of malice and evil (v. 8). Community has its foundation in Jesus Christ!

In a sense this serves both to affirm and diminish the importance of discipline. Discipline is affirmed in that it is a way of defending what the community is in Christ. It is relativized in that the ethical norms discipline protects are never the ultimate definition of community. This ambiguity is surely inherent in the indicative/imperative itself; the ethical norms are important, not in and of themselves, but because they represent how we live as new creatures in Christ. The irony of life in this age is that we must be told to become what we already are. The foundation in Jesus Christ also helps explain the strange stance the Christian community is to have toward the world (vv. 9-13). If ethical integrity were the only reason for discipline, escape from outside influence might be preferable. Although Paul does not state here why it is undesirable to associate with the immoral of the world, one can assume that his answer lies in the church’s mission (see 10:21). The Christian community’s foundation in Christ makes discipline even more radical and necessary than it might be; because of the desire to proclaim Christ, one must live the distinctive life of a disciple even as one moves in the midst of a hostile world.
Some Concluding Thoughts

The recent movie, *The Age of Innocence*, provides an interesting "secular" parallel to modern Christians' typical reaction to 1 Corinthians 5. The movie is set in the tightly regulated upper-class community of New York City during the 1870s. We are given fascinating glimpses of the social life and hierarchy of a bygone era. The story centers upon two members of this community, a betrothed and later married man, and a woman separated from her husband and seeking divorce. These two are attracted to each other and seek to have an adulterous relationship, but the community makes their affair impossible. Through various influences, ranging from guilt to financial pressure to seating order, the community enforces its standards.

Movie commentators rightly praised the production for its authentic costuming, its grasp of Victorian social life, and its acting. But when they evaluated the theme of the movie, they invariably saw the would-be lovers as victims of a manipulative social structure. In doing so they were interpreting the intention of the movie correctly, and consistent, of course, with the modern American valuation of individual freedom. Yet from another point of view, indeed from the point of view of the era in which the movie is set, the community and its disciplining guidance would be understood quite differently. It is entirely possible to see the social pressure put upon the man and the woman as a good thing, both for them and for the community. The lovers are prevented from destroying their lives. The community is able to affirm its standards and upbuild the bond that joins its members together.

We modern Christians often view church discipline from a similarly skewed point of view. We readily assume society's notion that the individual's freedom is the highest good. Church discipline is then seen as archaic, doctrinaire, and arbitrary. Discipline is separated from community because we typically have a limited understanding of the nature and function of Christian community.

Why is discipline important in the church? Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 5 do not overlook the positive value for the person being disciplined. His hope is that the action will be remedial. But his primary concern is the Corinthian community, its attitude, and how lack of discipline will affect it. The apostle feels that the sinner in their midst is a danger to the life of the community. This leaven, as we have seen, might be interpreted as a compromise to the community's holiness, as an indication that all are responsible for the sin of the one member, or as the threat of further contamination. Implicit in what Paul says about discipline is the assumption that a community needs to protect its ethical norms if it is to have an identity. Discipline reinforces community by clarifying boundaries and by reminding members of the need to observe them. Finally, discipline is important because it encourages the community to be what it already is in Christ. The call to follow Christ is the most essential bond in community.
If discipline is a natural aspect of healthy community, then we must ask ourselves why discipline is so seldom practiced in the modern church. Perhaps we need to examine ourselves in terms of the categories discussed above, those which point to the nature of the conflict between Paul and the Corinthians and further define the disciplining community. Are we unified enough to be able to act as a group; do we have an authoritative leadership to guide us; do we have a proper sense of our distinctiveness relative to the world; do we understand our mission? It is important to realize that discipline cannot create community. A church cannot simply mandate discipline and expect that otherwise contentious members will somehow be unified. But discipline can reinforce and strengthen community that already has a strong foundation in Christ. It should be an expected function of a community that has a clear sense of what it is striving to become in Christ.

ENDNOTES:


The New Century Bible Commentary

PROVERBS
R. Norman Whybrey
0787-9, paper, $19.99

HAGGAI, ZECHARIAH, MALACHI
Paul L. Redditt
0748-8, paper, $14.99

A WORD FOR ALL SEASONS
Missionary Perspectives, 1960–1992
Leslie Newbiggin
This collection of previously unpublished essays, sermons, and addresses by Bishop Leslie Newbiggin pursues his developing view of the agenda for Christian missions from 1960 to the present.
0730-5, paper, $14.99

THE IMPACT OF THE REFORMATION
Heiko A. Oberman
"This new collection is vintage Oberman. The range of topics is simply immense, from the late Middle Ages to the present." — Thomas A. Brady, Jr.
0732-1, paper, $19.99

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY, Volume 2
Wolfhart Pannenberg
"Wolfhart Pannenberg has produced the major work in systematic theology of the last twenty years. No serious Christian theologian can afford to miss this work."
— David Tracy
3707-7, cloth, $39.99

SIN: Radical Evil in Soul and Society
Ted Peters
"Peters’ book tells us wisely and winsomely just about everything an informed Christian needs to know about the evil that so satanically bedevils both our cloaked souls and our naked society."
— Lewis B. Smedes
3764-6, cloth, $24.99
0113-7, paper, $14.99

IMAGES OF DISCORD
A Graphic Interpretation of the Opening Decades of the Eighty Years’ War
James Tani & Daniel Horst
0742-9, paper, $27.50

THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS TODAY
James C. Vander Kam
"Simple, straightforward, and entirely reliable... This is the best and the most up-to-date introductory work on the scrolls that I know of."
— David Noel Freedman
0736-4, paper, $12.99

THE LIBERATING SPIRIT
Toward an Hispanic American Pentecostal Social Ethic
Eldin Villafañe
"Should be required reading for anyone interested in the study of social ethics, Pentecostal theology, or Hispanic American theology."
— Samuel Solórzano
0728-3, paper, $14.99

SINGleness of Heart
Restoring the Divided Soul
Clifford Williams
"An experientially deep yet sophisticated treatment of the dynamics that currently hinder a simple and straightforward doing of the good for God’s sake."
— Dallas Willard
0705-4, paper, $9.99

EVER A FRONTIER
The Bicentennial History of the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary
James Arthur Walther, editor
3723-9, cloth, $24.99

THE INTRUSIVE WORD
Preaching to the Unbaptized
William Willimon
"Willimon on preaching is the freshest voice in the country right now.
— Eugene H. Peterson
0706-2, paper, $10.99

The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting
Bruce W. Winter, editor

VOLUME 1: THE BOOK OF ACTS IN ITS ANCIENT LITERARY SETTING
Bruce W. Winter & Andrew D. Clarke, editors
"This work lifts the study of Acts onto a new, much more contextual plane... A most attractive entree to a promising series." — Edwin A. Judge
2433-1, cloth, $37.50

VOLUME 2: THE BOOK OF ACTS IN ITS GRAECO-ROMAN SETTING
David W. J. Gill & Conrad Gempf, editors
"Outstanding as Jackson and Lake was in its day, this volume on the Graeco-Roman setting of Acts holds out the promise of equaling if not surpassing that great achievement." — Paul Barnett
2434-X, cloth, $37.50

CONFlict AND COMMUNITY IN CORINTH
A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians
Ben Witherington III
Witherington applies an exegetical method informed by both sociological insights and rhetorical analysis to the study of 1 & 2 Corinthians.
0144-7, paper, $34.99

EZekiel I (Chapters 1–12)
Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries
The Rutherford House Translation
D. R. Wright, general editor
2468-4, cloth, $34.99
0761-4, paper, $24.99

THE POLITICS OF JESUS, Second Edition
John Howard Yoder
"This new edition updates Yoder’s original findings and it especially useful for provoking theological and ethical reflections."
— Dennis P. McCann
0734-8, paper, $16.99

Eerdmans® ISBN prefix: 0-8028-
Prices subject to change without notice. An "s" after the price indicates a limited discount.
For more information on these or other Eerdmans titles, or for details about our textbook examination policy, contact the Eerdmans Textbook Department at 1-800-253-7521, or FAX 616-459-6540 for a copy of our most recent Academic Catalog.

At your bookstore, or call 800-253-7521.
FAX 616-459-6540

425 WM. B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING CO.
1115 JEFFERSON AVE S.E. / GRAND RAPIDS, MICH. 49503