

ECF 9th May 2021 1 Corinthian 5 Confront Sin in Love

Billy Graham was one of the most influential Christian leaders of the 20th century. For over 50 years, he preached the gospel in person to over 200 million people in more than 185 countries.

But he didn't do this alone. He worked as part of a close knit team who partnered and supported each other, and crucially, held each other accountable.

Early on in their ministry, they were aware of the moral failures of other Christian workers that had caused so much damage to the church and they desperately wanted to avoid this happening to themselves. So in 1948 they wrote up what they called their Modesto Manifesto.

It stated things like:

- We'll never criticise, condemn, or speak negatively about others.
- We'll be accountable, particularly in handling finances with integrity.
- We'll tell the truth and be thoroughly honest, especially in reporting statistics.
- We'll be exemplary in morals, careful to avoid even the appearance of impropriety.

These men recognised that they needed to stand together in their fight against temptation. They needed to be accountable to each other. They knew that on their own they were vulnerable, but together they were strong!

Recently we've seen again the mess when that doesn't happen. Up until his death last year, Ravi Zacharias was respected by many as an eloquent and gifted Christian apologist.

But in February of this year, a report was published by his organisation admitting that Ravi had been guilty of serious sexual misconduct, including abuse of several women.

In their statement, they apologised for the lack of accountability in their organisation. They said that, "We allowed our misplaced trust in Ravi to result in him having less oversight and accountability than would have been wise and loving."

Two different Christian leaders with very different legacies. So which one do we want to follow?

- The one who welcomed accountability, inviting others to help him overcome temptation, and as a result his life still inspires many?
- Or the other, who lived in secrecy and isolation, and tragically destroyed his life and many others?

The Bible is clear that God wants us as a church to be accountable to each other. Yes we are individually responsible for following Christ. But if we are going to continue to live for Christ in this fallen world, we need the support, encouragement, challenge and correction from each other. We're not designed to thrive on our own.

And sometimes, this commitment to care for each other means we need to take some very difficult and painful actions to confront sin in the church. This is what Paul wrote about in 1 Corinthians 5.

1 Corinthians 5:1-13: "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. ² And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? ³ Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. ⁴ When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, ⁵ hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.

⁶ Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? ⁷ Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.

⁸ Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.

⁹ I have written to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— ¹⁰ not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. ¹¹ But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.

¹² What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? ¹³ God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you."

11:25 1. When?

This passage is one of the key Scriptures that deal with what's called church discipline. That is how we should nurture purity and holiness in all of our lives by dealing with sin in our church community.

And from this passage I want us to ask the When?, the How?, the Why? And the Who? of church discipline.

So first of all, when is discipline required? What kinds of problems require this response?

a) Sexual Immorality

There was a serious problem in this church. Paul said, **"It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife."** 1 Corinthians 5:1

Someone in this church was having an affair with their stepmother. This was against the Roman law and something that even the non-Christians were repulsed by. But more importantly, this behaviour was outside of God's plan for human beings.

In Matthew 19:4-6, Jesus described that plan by quoting from Genesis 2: **"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?"** ⁶ So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

God's plan is that sexual intimacy is reserved for marriage between one man and one woman in an exclusive, life-long, faithfulness and loving relationship.

And so this man was living in sexual immorality. He had rejected God's plan for his life and was blatantly, publicly and continually living in a sinful lifestyle.

And he didn't want to change. He wasn't struggling with temptation. He wasn't trying to overcome this problem. He wasn't repenting of it. He was deliberately and unashamedly living in a way that was incompatible with following Christ!

b) Sin that is Outward, Significant, Unrepentant

And it is these kinds of problems that church discipline addresses. Outward, significant and unrepentant:

- Outward, meaning that it is visible or noticeable. It is not about guessing about the state of someone's heart.
- Significant, meaning that it is behaviour that is incompatible with living for Christ.
- Unrepentant, meaning that the person has no desire or intention of turning away from this behaviour.

And of course, these problems are not just connected with our sexuality. Paul makes that really clear in 1 Corinthians 5:11 when he includes: **"Anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler."**

- A greedy person is covetous. They're continually grasping for more and more.
- An idolater is someone who has set up a false god in their life.
- A slanderer is someone who is constantly abusing other people with their words, violently criticising, running everyone down.
- A drunkard is someone who's abusing alcohol.
- A swindler is a violent thief, robbing what belongs to others.

So this is when church discipline is required. It is not when someone is struggling with temptation, or battling with addictions or trying to overcome past sin. It is when someone is deliberately, continually and unrepentantly living in ways that are incompatible with following Jesus.

2. How?

But how should we respond when someone is living like this? Well, Church discipline is a process.

a) Genuine Concern

The first step in this process is in v2. **"And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief."** 1 Corinthians 5:2

This church had a real problem with pride. They thought that they'd arrived spiritually, that they were doing great as a church. But Paul was shocked, because instead they should have been filled with grief.

This word grief here, is used for mourning over the dead. It is the deepest and most painful kind of personal sorrow.

And that is the first step of discipline. When we become aware that a fellow believer has been living in a way that is deliberately, continually and unrepentantly incompatible with following Jesus, we should be filled with not with cold indifference or moral outrage, or self-righteous condemnation. Rather we should mourn.

That's because that's what love does. If we love our brother or sister in Christ as Christ does, then we should be deeply concerned for their spiritual life, their relationship with Christ and the fruitfulness of their service. "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." Philippians 2:4

b) Private Conversation

But we need to respond in more than just emotions. We also need to take action, and Jesus told us what that should look like. "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over." Matthew 18:15

Our first act should not be to go and tell everyone else about it, to complain about it, or to cut ourselves off from that person. Instead, we should go and try and work through this issue with the person ourselves in a private conversation. That's because it is the quickest way to forgiveness and restoration!

c) Joint Challenge

But sometimes that doesn't work. If that's the case, then we need a joint challenge: "If he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'" Matthew 18:16

By involving others, we step up the seriousness of the situation which also increases the likelihood that someone will face up to their sin.

d) Public Confrontation

But Jesus went on, "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church." Matthew 18:17 When repentance is refused, then we need public confrontation. Bringing it before the church reinforces the seriousness of the situation and the need for repentance.

e) Separation from the Community

But "If he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." Matthew 18:17.

And this is the final step in this process that Paul was writing to urge this church to take. It seemed that this man had refused all other attempts to bring him to repentance. And so Paul said that they should "have put out of your fellowship the man who did this." 1 Corinthians 5:2

That doesn't mean they were to be horrible and nasty to him. But it means, that they would no longer be treated as a member of the church. He would no longer be able to fellowship with them.

Paul also said, "With such a man do not even eat." 1 Corinthians 5:11, which probably means he would no longer be welcome to share communion at the Lord's table with them.

And so church discipline is a process, and this final step is only to be used as a last resort. It is only when all other attempts to bring someone to repentance has failed. It is not to be entered into lightly. Neither has it to be entered into individually!

This was to be a community decision. It should be made, "When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present..." 1 Corinthians 5:4

This is not the angry response of someone who's been hurt. Rather it is the considered response of a community who is deeply concerned. It is an expression of love.

3. Why?

Church discipline is a process. But why respond in this way? What is the purpose of this process?

a) Good for the Individual

Well, firstly it is good for the individual. "Hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his

spirit saved on the day of the Lord.” 1 Corinthians 5:5

Putting someone out of fellowship doesn't put them outside of God's family. If they've genuinely trusted in Jesus, they don't stop being a child of God. They are not un-saved.

But a church separating from a believer does hand them over to Satan. In some way, they lose out on the protection of the community of God's people. They become more vulnerable to Satan's attacks.

But the purpose of this is not to punish them, or to cause them pain. Rather it is to purify them. It is to bring them to their senses, so that they will repent of their sin, turn back to the Lord and experience full forgiveness and restoration.

This is such a crucial point. Church discipline is always for the purpose of repentance and restoration. Whenever repentance is expressed, the church's job is to welcome them back with open arms.

Paul talked about this in his second letter to this church: “The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. ⁷ Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.” 2 Corinthians 2:6–7

And so this whole process is motivated by love for the individual:

- We love, so we're concerned for them.
- We love, so we're willing to act to make the person aware of their sin.
- We love, so we're willing to restore them as soon as they repent of that sin!

b) Good for the church

But this process is also important for the church. “Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough?” 1 Corinthians 5:6

Sin is like yeast. Put a little bit of yeast in some dough, and it will spread and infect the whole batch. In the same way, allow outward, significant, unrepentant sin to go unchecked in a church, and it will spread and impact that whole community!

And so Paul encouraged us to: “Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are.” 1 Corinthians 5:7 Sin is like a cancer. We need to do that drastic surgery to prevent it from infecting our whole body!

But we need to be clear why we should do this! This is not to try and make ourselves right with God. This is not a vain attempt at cleaning up our lives so that God will love and accept us as his children!

Instead this is a call to live out who we already are in Christ. This church already were a new batch without yeast. They already were saints. They already were God's holy people.

That's because “Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.” 1 Corinthians 5:7 The Jewish Passover was an annual celebration of their nation's rescue from slavery in Egypt. Before the lamb was killed and the Passover celebrations started, they were to get rid of all the yeast from their houses. It pointed back to when they ate the Passover meal with unleavened bread before leaving Egypt.

But this also pointed forward to Jesus, “The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” John 1:29 Paul wanted this church to realise that because of Jesus' death on the cross, they had been rescued from sin, they had been forgiven, cleansed, made holy in God's sight.

And so now, as God's holy people, they were called to live out the reality of who they already were. “Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.” 1 Corinthians 5:8

And this is why we should be willing to confront unrepentant sin in our church. By his wonderful grace, and at the great cost of the cross of Jesus, God has made us holy in his sight. And so if we want to honour the one who loved us and gave himself for us – then we need to live holy lives.

That doesn't mean we need to be perfect. But it means that we need to live humble, repentant, grace-filled lives. Daily confessing our sin. Turning away from our rebellion. Receiving God's full and free forgiveness. And by his Spirit, allowing him to transform us and make us more and more like Jesus.

4. Who?

So this is the when, how and why we need to confront sin in our church. But there is one final question to briefly clear up. That is who? Who are the people that we need to confront about their unrepentant sin?

a) Not the World

Look at 1 Corinthians 5:9-10: [“I have written to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the people of this world.”](#)

This passage is not an excuse for us to stay away from unbelievers because of their sin. If it was, [“In that case you would have to leave this world.”](#) 1 Corinthians 5:10 And that is not what Jesus wants us to do.

Jesus was criticised because he was [“A friend of tax collectors and ‘sinners.’”](#) Luke 7:34 And we too are called to be in this world, even although we are not supposed to be like this world.

And so our job is not to judge the world! Paul said: [“What business it is of mine to judge those outside the church... God will judge those outside.”](#) 1 Corinthians 5:12-13

We are not supposed to be going about criticising and condemning people who don't know Jesus for their immoral lives. We know that the day is coming when God will judge this world in righteousness. And so instead, we're supposed to be reaching out to the people of this world, in love to share the gospel of God's grace with them.

b) But the Church

But we are called to confront unrepentant sin in our church. [“Are you not to judge those inside?”](#) 1 Corinthians 5:12. That's because becoming part of a church is to voluntarily step into a loving community of believers who will look out for each other and do whatever we can to help each other to follow Jesus.

Conclusion

If we are going to continue to live for Christ in this fallen world, we need to accept this truth about church discipline. We need the support, encouragement, challenge and correction from each other.

We're not designed to thrive on our own. We need to be willing to confront sin in our church in love.

Andrew Burt
Enniscorthy Christian Fellowship
May 9th 2020