

# **Voices: Don't tolerate sexual immorality in the church**

November 20, 2024

Sexual immorality should not be tolerated in the church. Paul makes that clear in his letters to various churches.

1 Corinthians 5, Paul responds to a particular case of sexual immorality within the church. The details are not provided, but it seems to be a case of incest between a son and his stepmother. Paul, by his apostolic authority, prescribed expulsion from the church and handing the perpetrator over to Satan.

Two questions arise: Why did the church's leadership tolerate this individual's behavior, allowing him to continue worshipping with the congregation? Do we have this same authority from Scripture to excommunicate a Christian individual practicing some type of sexual immorality in the church?

The answer will depend on a church's context.

## **Sexual immorality in New Testament times**

As with the Corinthian church, some churches today have not matured in Christ. This is why Paul wrote: "So, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but instead as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ" (1 Corinthians 5:1, NET).

Paul described the sexual immorality in question as being "of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate." Thoralf Gilbrant and Tor Inge Gilbrant, in

their commentary on 1 Corinthians, say, "Its existence reflected a weak church needing restoration."

Greek, Roman and Jewish law prescribed severe punitive actions for such behaviors (see Leviticus 18:8; 20:11).

Even so, "the area of sex was one of the most dramatic places where the ethics of Greek culture clashed with the ethics of Jesus. Sexual immorality was an accepted fact of life for the common person in Greek culture, but it was not to be so among the followers of Jesus," Chuck Hickman said in [his sermon on 1 Corinthians 5](#).

Though Paul was not present with this church, he demonstrated his apostolic authority through a letter, instructing the church: "Expel the wicked person from among you" (1 Corinthians 5:13).

## Paul's instruction

Paul does not waste time, nor does he mention anything concerning forgiving and forgetting, but views this act as a moral threat to the church. "What upsets him is the attitude of the community towards the scandal ... 'inflated with pride,'" wrote George T. Montague in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, suggesting the man even may have been a wealthy benefactor.

Paul called for what amounted to a "social burial." Robert Gundry, agreeing with Montague, suggests the Corinthian church depended on him and may have met in his home.

"Whatever the case, mourning suggests sorrow over a death, and a moral death has indeed occurred. So, the church should have buried the incestuous man, so to speak, by removing him out of their midst the way a corpse, decaying as it does, is removed through burial. Paul is speaking of a social burial: ostracism," [Gundry states](#).

Peter Orr, [commenting on 1 Corinthians 5](#), states: “The basic idea is clear: they were to exclude this man from their fellowship (5:2; 13) meaning the congregation were not to associate with him or even to eat with him (5:11). ... This is a person, rather, who has two competing identities—they may be known as ‘brother or sister’ but their behavior identifies them as an unbeliever. Genuine Christian believers, Paul says, are not to associate with such people.”

G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson write in *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament*: “In biblical thought, failure to deal with a blatantly sinning member invites the possibility of judgment from God on the whole group. ... Paul prescribes the actual judgement in 5:5 the offender is to be handed over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh” (pp. 706-707).

Such [expulsion is not to be the last word](#), however. “[First Corinthians 5:5](#) makes it clear that the purpose of excommunication is not finally to reject a sinner but to restore him. Church discipline must always be carried out with the hope that the person will repent and return.”

## Who’s responsible for discipline?

Yes, we do have the authority from Scripture to expel an individual from the church who continues to practice sexual immorality.

Jacob Gerber, in answering [who is responsible for such discipline](#), writes: “Paul holds the whole church responsible for failing to discipline the man living in a sinful, incestuous relationship with his father’s wife ([1 Corinthians 5:1-2](#)).”

“They believe that when Jesus entrusts the exercise of his authority to the church, he entrusts the exercise of the authority to the whole body, and not to one organ of his body alone,” he continues.

Paul tells Timothy why expulsion needs to be public: “As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear” of God ([1 Timothy 5:20](#)).

Likewise, as Gerber states, “If the elders of a church could excommunicate someone privately, without accountability, they might be tempted to abuse the authority that Jesus has entrusted to them.”

Gerber quotes John Calvin, who expressed [a similar caution](#) in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*: “Paul’s course of action for excommunicating a man is the lawful one, provided the elders do not do it by themselves alone, but with the knowledge and approval of the church; in this way the multitude of the people does not decide the action but observes as witness and guardian so that nothing may be done according to the whim of a few.”

Christians are not to tolerate sexual immorality among them and are to judge rightly against it with the power of our Lord Jesus.

*Cristian Cervantes is an adjunct lecturer of biblical and theological studies at Baptist University of the Americas and a member of First Baptist Church in San Antonio. The views expressed in this opinion article are those of the author.*