

Sin in the Church



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Cor. 5:1–13, 2 Cor. 2:5–10, 1 Cor. 6:1–13, 1 Thess. 4:1–8, 1 Cor. 6:19–7:9.*

Memory Text: “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies” (*1 Corinthians 6:19, 20, NIV*).

Our brains are like sponges: whatever is brought to them, via our senses, stays in them. We might not be conscious of most of what comes in (we’d be unable to think clearly if we did remember everything), but it’s all there, and, to some degree, impacts what we think, feel, and do.

That’s why it’s so easy for us, even as Christians, to be impacted by all the bad things around us. The Christian church, from the start, has struggled with this problem. Where, for instance, did Sunday keeping come from? Did the church just pull it out of the air? Of course not. It came from the culture around it.

And we can see this principle unfolding here in Corinth. After an appeal against factionalism (*1 Corinthians 1–4*), Paul now turns to issues related to sexual immorality, lawsuits, prostitution, marriage, and singleness (*1 Corinthians 5–7*). The standards of the world affected them extensively. The factionalism portrayed in *1 Corinthians 1–4* opened the door for the moral behavior denounced in the ensuing chapters. How does Paul seek to address this sin in the church, and what lessons can we take from what he wrote?

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 25.

Dissonance Between Faith and Practice

Throughout Christian history, theologians, pastors, and laypeople have studied the New Testament in order to determine what the church should look like. We marvel, for instance, at the church of Acts. But we quickly lose sight of one significant element: people have problems. It seems that we can also read the New Testament to see what the Bible says about what a church should not look like. Paul’s letters to the Corinthians are a good starting point.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:1–13. What scandalous situation does Paul describe in this passage, and why is it so disturbing?

The expression “his father’s wife” (*1 Cor. 5:1*) suggests that Paul refers to the incestuous relationship between a man and his stepmother. This situation was probably reported “by those of Chloe’s household” (*1 Cor. 1:11, NKJV*). Incest was reputed as such a terrible sin that it was “not tolerated even among pagans” (*1 Cor. 5:1, ESV*). And yet, it is now happening in an early Christian church? Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 5:1, 2 show that he is in shock at the report that a church member was doing this.

However, this bad situation gets worse. Paul is more stunned when realizing that, rather than feeling sorry about the situation, the Corinthians were even proud of themselves for tolerating such a sin (*1 Cor. 5:1, 2, NIV*). Thus, he intends to correct not only the immoral man but also the church for its apparent dissonance between faith and practice. In fact, Paul makes it clear constantly that the church’s indulgent attitude toward the incestuous man demanded a correction. But being proud of such a sexual scandal, and even boasting of it (*1 Cor. 5:2, 6*)! This was too much for Paul to bear. What was wrong with these people?

We don’t have an explanation for why the church in Corinth was so tolerant of the incestuous man. Perhaps he was a wealthy member from whom the church benefited? Or, maybe, because “all things are lawful” (*1 Cor. 6:12*), they didn’t deem it the way that they should have. We just don’t know.

Whatever the true reasons, they became blind to a flagrant violation of the Scriptures (*Lev. 18:7, 8*). And they were even proud of it.

What things are clearly condemned in Scripture that we, as a church, are in danger of tolerating, all in the name of “love” and “acceptance”?

Dealing With Scandals

Dealing with matters of sexuality is always hard. It was hard for Paul, and it is for us, too. In these situations, we must be faithful to the Scriptures and address the issue with prayer and love. We must never forget that our goal is restoration.

Read again 1 Corinthians 5:1–13. How does Paul tell them to deal with this situation?

Paul makes it clear in 1 Corinthians 5 that sexual scandals require church discipline. He says that the incestuous man should be removed (*1 Cor. 5:2*), judged (*1 Cor. 5:3*), delivered to Satan (*1 Cor. 5:5*), and “put away” (*1 Cor. 5:13, NKJV*). The church members were told “not to associate with” him (*1 Cor. 5:9, 11, ESV*), nor “even to eat with such a one” (*1 Cor. 5:11, ESV*). Paul employs strong language that may sound offensive to modern ears, but his words must be understood in their historical context. Also, one must remember that he is dealing with a flagrant, sinful lifestyle. Usually, in extreme situations, strong language is necessary. In any case, a brief explanation of some expressions is helpful.

“**Let him . . . be removed from among you**” (*1 Cor. 5:2, ESV; also 1 Cor. 5:13*). This refers to church discipline.

“**Deliver this man to Satan**” (*1 Cor. 5:5, ESV*). Because this man did not choose to be under the protection of God by living in obedience to Him, he would be vulnerable to Satan. So, this expression can merely mean something like “Let him reap the fruit of his decisions.”

“**Not to associate**” (*1 Cor. 5:9, 11, NASB*), “**not even to eat with such a one**” (*1 Cor. 5:11, RSV*). Close association with sexually immoral people was considered dangerous because they might influence others to imitate their conduct. In ancient times, sharing a meal could mean sharing values, as well. We are all susceptible to the influences that are around us, and we need to protect ourselves the best we can, especially in dealing with something like this.

“**That his spirit may be saved**” (*1 Cor. 5:5, NASB*). Church discipline is rehabilitative. It intends to bring sinners back to their senses and cause them to abandon their sinful lifestyles. This is possibly what Paul meant by “destruction of the flesh” (*1 Cor. 5:5*). It is possible, too, that the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians 5 is the repentant man referred to later (*see 2 Cor. 2:5–10*). Church discipline reaches its purpose when the erring member is reintegrated into church fellowship.

Protecting the Church's Identity

In 1 Corinthians 6:1–11, Paul continues his discussion on how Christians should approach issues involving people in the church.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:3, 12, 13 and 1 Corinthians 6:1–13. What is Paul trying to teach the Corinthians and us?

The Greek word *pragma* in 1 Corinthians 6:1, translated as “matter” in the New King James Version, is a generic term meaning “thing.” Here, it refers to a legal matter. It is important to remember that 1 Corinthians 6:1–11 does not refer to a criminal case. The authority of civil courts for criminal matters is affirmed in Romans 13:1–5. Paul addresses a case of litigation right after a case of sexual immorality, just as Moses did in Deuteronomy 22:22–24. This demonstrates how much Paul’s manner of dealing with problems in the church is based upon the Scriptures.

The fact that the case in 1 Corinthians 6:1–11 is bracketed by passages that deal with sexual immorality (*1 Corinthians 5, 1 Cor. 6:12–20*) may suggest that the “matter” in 1 Corinthians 6:1 regards sexual immorality, too. We don’t know for sure what the case is, whether a minor civil issue, such as a property dispute, or a sexual problem.

Whatever the *pragma* ultimately was, Paul was not happy to see church members taking it to a civil court. Could not they, as Christian brothers and sisters, have worked it out among themselves, rather than bring the issue before “the unrighteous” (*1 Cor. 6:1, NKJV*)?

It is also possible, as some suppose, that the litigants of 1 Corinthians 6:1 are the father and the son of 1 Corinthians 5:1. In any case, it is unnecessary to understand the issue to understand the point. Paul cared about the church’s identity as a Christian community as seen by outsiders. Christians should not air dirty laundry in public (*1 Cor. 6:6*). Neither should they use secular means for judging inside matters. In the Roman world, individuals of a higher rank of wealth or political function tended to be favored in a court. Conversely, Christians must perform a Christlike judgment and distinguish themselves from secular standards.

Think about Paul’s catalog of vices in 1 Corinthians 5:10, 11 and 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10. Why does he list sexual sins along with other sins such as idolatry, thievery, greed, and extortion?

Antidote Against Sexual Immorality

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1–8. What does this passage say about the connection between sanctification and abstinence from sexual immorality?

Though Paul was writing to someone else in the above texts, the principle can be applied across the board, to all Christians which still, though, leads to the question: What was going on in Corinth? Why all these problems?

Some in Corinth apparently believed that since the gospel set them free, they were allowed to do anything. They argued that just as the stomach was made for food, the body was made for sex, and sex for the body (*1 Cor. 6:13*). Paul responds that this is a misrepresentation of Christian freedom. The lack of integrity in sexual matters is inconsistent with Christian identity and is a misuse of the freedom granted to man through the gospel (*Rom. 8:2, Gal. 5:13*). We were set free from sin, not set “free” to commit it (*Rom. 8:2; Rom. 6:18, 22*). In fact, “the body is . . . for the Lord, and the Lord for the body” (*1 Cor. 6:13*). We belong to Christ (*1 Cor. 6:15*), and who we are must impact what we do. One thing is inextricably linked to the other. This is portrayed in 1 Corinthians 6 in three different ways.

First, we are identified as **washed, sanctified, and justified** “in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God” (*1 Cor. 6:11, NKJV*). The sins listed in 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10, as well as the sexual immorality denounced in 1 Corinthians 6:12–20, have no place in the lives of those who were washed, sanctified, and justified.

Second, we are **members of Christ** (*1 Cor. 6:15*). This means that we must be united with Christ (*1 Cor. 6:17*). Sexual immorality is a violation of that union (*1 Cor. 6:13, 15*). Whoever joins with a person in extramarital sexual intercourse becomes “one body” with him or her (*1 Cor. 6:16*). Union with Christ through the Spirit must determine Christian ethics in sexual matters.

Third, our bodies are **“temples of the Holy Spirit”** (*1 Cor. 6:19, 20, NIV*). The only way to live a holy life with integrity in sexual matters is by having an intimate relationship with Christ through the Holy Spirit. Elsewhere, Paul refers to the experience of being a temple of the Spirit in terms of presenting the body “as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (*Rom. 12:1, ESV*).

Think about the wreckage that sexual sins have brought upon humanity. What should this tell us about how serious this issue should be for the Christian?

Marriage and Singleness

Paul's affirmation that the body "is the temple of the Holy Spirit" (*1 Cor. 6:19, NKJV*) occurs in the context of a warning against sexual immorality. Being a temple of the Spirit is the only means to live a holy life. The church is a Christian community that distinguishes itself from the surrounding environment. It is the presence of the Holy Spirit that makes it possible.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:19–7:9. How does this passage shed light on how one can put into practice the commandment to "flee from sexual immorality" (*1 Cor. 6:18, ESV*)?

There are significant lessons about sexuality in 1 Corinthians 7. Roughly speaking, this chapter can be divided up into two sections: (1) instructions regarding marriage (*1 Cor. 7:1–24*) and (2) instructions regarding singleness (*1 Cor. 7:25–40*). First Corinthians 7 helps us understand that speaking about sexuality is important and necessary.

However, when reading 1 Corinthians 7, we must remember that Paul is responding to specific questions related to issues in the church of Corinth. Otherwise, some statements could lead to the impression that he has a low view of marriage, which is not the case (*1 Tim. 4:1–3, 1 Tim. 5:14; also Heb. 13:4*).

Remarkably, the command "flee from sexual immorality" in 1 Corinthians 6:18 (*ESV*) is bracketed by the idea of joining Christ (*1 Cor. 6:17*) and being a temple of the Spirit (*1 Cor. 6:19*). Is there a better way of fleeing from sexual immorality? Of course not.

Also, God created sex, but it is to be enjoyed in marriage alone. Sex is a privilege of those in a male and female marriage, the only kind sanctioned in the Bible.

When saying "flee from sexual immorality," Paul may have in mind the story of Joseph (*Gen. 39:6–18*). The Bible says that before the lustful advances of Potiphar's wife, Joseph "fled out of the house" (*Gen. 39:18, ESV*). This is mentioned no fewer than four times in Genesis 39:6–18. The Bible doesn't say it directly, but it is implied that Joseph waited to have sex only in marriage (*Gen. 41:45*). He was a man filled with the Holy Spirit (*Gen. 41:38*) and wanted to do what was right before God's eyes.

How can we, as a church, protect ourselves from the aberrant views of sexuality that dominate the culture?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “A Message of Warning and Entreaty,” pp. 298–308, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

Interestingly, in the catalog of vices in 1 Corinthians 5:10, 11 and 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10, idolatry and drunkenness are listed along with sexual immorality. As Paul recalls in 1 Corinthians 10:7 (*compare with Exod. 32:1–6*), idolatrous festivals were usually marked with excessive eating and drinking, which opened the door for sexual immorality (*1 Cor. 10:8*). Ellen G. White says:

“It is impossible for any to enjoy the blessing of sanctification while they are selfish and gluttonous. . . . The power of the human constitution to resist the abuses put upon it is wonderful, but persistent wrong habits in excessive eating and drinking will enfeeble every function of the body. In the gratification of perverted appetite and passion even professed Christians cripple nature in her work and lessen physical, mental, and moral power.”—*The Sanctified Life*, pp. 25, 26.

“When one is fully emptied of self, when every false god is cast out of the soul, the vacuum is supplied by the inflowing of the Spirit of Christ. Such a one has the faith which works by love and purifies the soul from every moral and spiritual defilement.”—Ellen G. White, *The Home Missionary*, November 1893.

“God is seeking to exalt us to His high, pure, heavenly standard. For this purpose His Spirit is constantly striving with us. . . . Our natural tendencies, unless corrected by the Holy Spirit of God, have in them the seeds of moral death.”—Ellen G. White, Manuscript 12, 1888.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Many believers in Corinth manifested a desire to gain cultural approval. Why is that so dangerous to Christian identity? What can we do to prevent ourselves from making the same mistake?
- ❷ Paul’s rhetorical question “Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit?” (*1 Cor. 6:19, NKJV*) closes a series of seven questions in 1 Corinthians 5–6 introduced by the formula “Do you not know?” (*1 Cor. 5:6; 1 Cor. 6:2, 3, 9, 15, 16, 19*). All of them demand an affirmative and emphatic answer—something like “Of course you do.” How do these questions help us understand Paul’s concerns about the church? Why should we, too, be concerned about these issues today?
- ❸ Marriage is from God (*Gen. 1:27, 28; Gen. 2:18–24*) and must be honored (*Heb. 13:4*). In a time when many consider it old-fashioned, how can we show the world that marriage is really a gift from God, directly from Eden itself?

High-end Fashion for Christ

By SANDRA DOMBROWSKI

Cameras are poised, ready to shoot. Models sporting hairstyles that defy gravity and trend-setting fashions wait to walk the runway. A high-end fashion show in New York City is about to begin.

If you peek backstage, you'll see Isabelle, the woman running the show, pray with each model before sending them down the catwalk.

Isabelle has rubbed shoulders with well-known fashion designers and celebrities. But what stirs her heart most is the ministry happening at Bryant Park Life Hope Center, an urban center of influence where Adventists are reaching people for Christ.

Raised as an Adventist, Isabelle was taught that the world is a ripe field of souls for God. Whatever she has done—ballet, modeling, skateboarding, and now fashion design—she does for Christ. But since God cured her from a debilitating injury, her desire to serve Him has intensified.

When Life Hope Center began in 2021, she had recently been healed. “At that moment, I had experienced so many miracles in my life that I wanted everybody to know,” Isabelle said. “When the Life Hope Center leaders asked for volunteers, I said yes.”

But Isabelle's impact reaches beyond the doors of the center. Because God has blessed her with success in the fashion world, she has the opportunity to influence an industry where few if any Adventists mingle. She leverages her design concept, fashion show themes, and personal interactions to point people to Christ.

Isabelle issues press releases with an explanation of the inspiration behind the shows, so no one misses the message. “In every collection of clothing I present, ultimately, I'm always pushing the same button, asking the audience to search their hearts, investigate their own actions and motives, and ask themselves, is there a God out there? Should I change? Is there hope for me?” Isabelle explains.

Isabelle also reaches out with her warm personal touch to share God's love and peace. “After Fashion Week, the people who work with me would call me just to listen to my voice because they said it gives them peace,” she said. “I know that's God, because I speak too fast to be peaceful!” She prays with the models, the organizers, and anyone in this highly competitive industry who appears anxious. “Some people ask me what church I go to. They say, ‘Wherever you go, I want to go.’”

Then Isabelle brings them to Life Hope Center for a program or Bible studies or to one of the area Adventist churches. She finds joy in volunteering at this center of influence. But wouldn't you say that as she intentionally uses every aspect of her life to win people to Christ, she, herself, is a center of influence? What would happen if every follower of Jesus saw themselves as a center of influence?

To learn more about urban centers of influence and their ministry to plant new groups of Adventist believers, visit urbancenters.org.