

“Doing The Conflict Work In-House”

1st Corinthians.4:15-21; 5:1-5; 5:9-13; 6:1-7; 6:9-11; 6:12-20

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As we work through the scripture readings by small sections, I'd like you to listen to them as if you are hearing portions of a letter to this congregation from a former pastor. Paul had previously told them about how unproductive and immature it was that they were dividing up into factions — playing favorites with their various leaders. But now his tone changes in the letter and so try to listen to his words and notice the feelings you personally have being told this by Paul. Imagine it being written to you.

1 Cor 4:15-21

What do you think that a lot of them felt as they were hearing this part of Paul's communication? Did you notice the power words he was using? If we had nothing else from Paul, this piece would be enough to convince us that Paul was a very dominating personality.

He was forcefully *telling* them that they should be imitating *his* ways of going about ministry — claiming spiritual authority over their faith because he was the one who started their church and introduced them to the Gospel. To strengthen the forcefulness of what he was saying, he even went on to say he's coming to them and when he gets there, he'll see what kind of power his opponents have.

From this and other correspondence from Paul, we can't help but conclude that he was a very forceful personality and his opinions were always right out there for all to see. Paul's leadership style was top-down, seriously hands-on and he was extremely forthright in his leadership style. Some people like being told, in no uncertain terms, what they should do. Some others find this unacceptable and that was certainly true in this church.

You will remember in the time chart you were given before, shortly after he wrote this first correctional letter, Paul heard that leaders in the church had gathered to directly oppose him. Paul had moved on to Ephesus to live but in hearing of this leadership disagreement, he physically traveled back

to Corinth to straighten this out only his visit was a disaster. We're guessing that these new leaders simply wouldn't put up with this heavy-handed management style and Paul ended up returning home to Ephesus humiliated. Feeling pretty angry about the experience, he wrote a severe letter of reprimand (and we have part of that second letter, out of order, in 2nd Cor. 10-13). So we can see that in this first letter, not only was Paul expressing strong and demanding feelings about the behavior of the church members, he threatened to visit them in order to make things right — and as it turned out, he did visit them later.

Paul goes on, in this first letter, to address the report of improper sexual and life-style behavior on the part of a member.

1 Cor 5:1-5

Biblical scholars note that apparently one member of their church was living with a woman who was technically his step-mother. Slowing down carefully to look at the language in the text, when Paul used the phrase his “father's wife,” he was using a traditional rabbinical designation for stepmother. The commentators point out that in all likelihood, the man's father had a second wife, (perhaps after his first wife had died,) and then his father had died. So after his dad passed on, the man in question, had apparently married a woman who had been married to his father.¹

It also seems clear that the woman wasn't a member of that church or she would have been addressed, along with the man, as being involved with this impropriety. So in Paul's judgment, this lifestyle arrangement was highly improper and arrogant on the man's part. But here we notice his strong-handed rhetoric again.

¹ The present tense of “have” points to a lasting state, marriage or concubine condition. It is also conceivable that his father had secured a divorce and was still alive. We can rule out a marriage with his own mother, which is forbidden in Lev. 18:7. It is inconceivable even in Greece and Rome.

“For though I am absent in the body, I’m present (there with you) in the spirit. . . . When you are assembled, *and my spirit is present* with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to *hand this man over to Satan*”

Whoa! Can you imagine getting an in-your-face letter like this from someone who is or was in a position of authority in your life? People like us, who are used to a representative democracy (and not a dictatorship style of church government), would have a hard time putting up with this authoritarian-sounding rhetoric. We probably wouldn’t put up with this, whether the leader was here now or away writing the letter. But apparently the majority of the church felt this was OK. The times, and the ways people submitted to authority then, were different than now.

But Paul was essentially telling them to excommunicate the man – to have nothing, at all, to do with him. So he explains this judgment he has pronounced and wants them to carry out. His advice is about how they are to avoid, as a community, having any association with the outward appearances of their surrounding secular culture.

1 Cor 5:9-13

So in this general statement about avoiding the appearances of being too involved with the wickedness of this world, he introduced a new concept. He was drawing a line between what typically goes on inside that church community and what typically occurs outside of that religious community in the secular world. God will judge the non-believers outside of their church, he said, so they are not to get involved with that. Meanwhile, their task, as members of that community of faith, was to judge their own behavior as a body of people who are mindful that they are associated with Christ. So he concludes that the person should be ‘driven out of their community.’

Next, Paul seems to be trying to set up procedures for how they handle conflicts within their church.

1 Cor 6:1-7

Apparently there were some, in that church, who had legal disputes with one another. One member had

probably taken another to court over an issue and Paul had heard about it. Paul thought they shouldn’t have to depend on the civil courts to settle matters between themselves. He thought this because of his view about Jesus’ Second Coming and how believers are somehow to be involved in judging at the end times. Let me explain that one.

Paul makes it clear, in this letter and elsewhere, that he believed that Jesus was coming back to end history *any day*. He thought it will happen so soon that he won’t die before it happens. Paul’s belief that Christ’s return was eminent colored everything he thought and said. And we’ll run into statements he made later in this letter that show that he was totally convinced that the world was going to end soon.

When Paul said, ‘Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?’ he was saying that one of the huge events just around the corner for them was Christ’s return and their involvement with ‘judging the angels.’ ‘So if you’re going to be judging the angels,’ he was saying, ‘don’t you think that you shouldn’t have to go down the street to get a local secular magistrate to help you settle your little internal disputes like this?’ Paul was essentially saying, ‘Come on, . . . settle this little stuff in-house because if you can’t, it makes Christianity look bad if you’re out there asking the godless-government to handle it for you.’

Next, Paul launched into a general theological explanation of the overall difference between people who follow God and those, in general, who live like nothing they do matters at all.

1 Cor 6:9-11

In Paul’s list, he was ticking off a lot of vices and stupid life-style choices people were exhibiting in that Greco-Roman secular culture. Many of their life-style choices were typical of the affluent anything-goes society there in Corinth. Some of the actions in the list were even incorporated into the temple cults of the Roman temples to Aphrodite, Bacchus and others. So totally alien and utterly different from the culture in which you and I live today – in that city their temples had incorporated female and male prostitution in their weekly rituals. Our churches sometimes have bingo

and Chiavetta's® Chicken dinners for fundraisers – they had hookers and pimps.

But we pause, a minute, to look at the list of some of the general characteristics of people who live as if there is no God and that nothing much matters in terms of what they do with their lives. Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites (*which is a Greek rendering of the word for people sexually involved with people of their own sex*)², thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers (*or violent looters and fighters*) and robbers. It would be irresponsible to pull any individual vice out of this list and make it any worse than the others.³ Paul is simply listing a typical Jewish list of evils associated with an anything-goes lifestyle without God.

In the list are fornicators (people who have indiscriminate heterosexual activity outside of marriage) just to seek pleasure in that way. There were others who were having homosexual indiscriminate sexual involvement just to seek pleasure in that way. Then there were the drunks, the thieves, and the others who went to bars just to have a good bloody fight. All this, Paul was saying, is associated with the world but you people are to be different.

It was probable that some church members were involved with these vices. But the list was just to

² Which if associated with the story of Lot escaping the city of Sodom, would be incorrect if thought to be about homosexuality. The story of the escape from Sodom was about God's judgment against a rough and violent city who were so evil in their violence, that a mob wanted to sexually mistreat Lot's unknown visitors (angels) just to be violent. That kind of sexual violence and behavior was common by men when they conquered a nation. They would routinely rape the leaders publicly ("to treat them like women"). It was a brutal war-time public humiliation of a conquered foe. It was not, however, what is understood as homosexuality.

³ It would also be irresponsible to try to make Paul's mention of "sodomites" in this context some kind of universal statement that even remotely talks about true sexual orientation. Orientation is not the focus here, it is mindless-hedonistic anything-goes behavior and lifestyle that is characteristic of a person and society that does not acknowledge God. The issue of orientation ethics demands a much fuller and thorough study of the entire Biblical context of what it is saying and isn't saying about orientation and behavior.

contrast the Christian life with the anything-goes indiscriminate life of the secular world. Because of their inability to handle their own internal problems, he was saying, it was making them look like everyone else in that society who don't have anything particularly special in their life. Remember, Paul thought Christ was coming back soon so why were they out there in the petty courts (of the world) with their disputes when God was about to hold court for the world?

He went on to clarify his thoughts on the issue of personal freedom. It's related to the life-style they choose and he was trying to make sure all his teachings about freedom from the Jewish law were not misunderstood. As you hear this last section, he was speaking to members in the church who were attracted to the Stoic and Cynic philosophies. When it came to physical pleasure, the Stoics believed there isn't anything spiritual so one should be tough, be rational but have a good time. The Cynics were anti-materialistic and believed in living a reasonable life, but they had no regard for spirituality either, so anything goes in terms of sexuality.

Paul's new concept, here, is that it does matter what we do with our bodies because there is something holy about our body – because it is where God's Spirit lives.

1 Cor 6:12-20

So Paul concluded that of all the things with which we could become involved in our lives that are evil, we should exercise great caution and seriousness with sins of the body. Our bodies are the temple of God's Holy Spirit.

There's a lot of material in these passages but here are a few lessons that emerge. For the sake of time, I'll just mention each of them briefly.

First, Paul's principle of handling conflicts internally relates to not only a local church but our careers and involvements in organizations outside of the home. If you see what you think might be a problem, go to the source. Talk to the individual who is most involved and don't approach them with judgment. Paul, himself, had to learn the hard way that

you can't go storming and fuming into someone's life in a domineering, controlling and judging way.

Instead, approach them for help in your trying to understand what is going on. Things often are not what they appear to be because we don't have a lot of camera angles on all activity. If people only took the time to sit down with someone and asked about more of the facts, a lot of terrible negativity and judging (and the accompanying pain that is caused) would be avoided.

This means don't be a finger pointer, be a solution provider. It means that as soon as you see there may be a problem, and after you have personally talked with people involved, seek first to use your head and your heart in providing a solution. If something seems out of sync, it probably is but if you take the time to look, there's probably a lot of pain and hurt somewhere behind it. Don't be a judge – be a healer.

Secondly, try not to legislate morality. Maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to live as if God were going to end time at any hour. Just like we sometimes ask ourselves, 'How much am I really going to care about this matter in ten years?' – perhaps we would be wise to ask ourselves a similar question. If God brings the world to a new start but wraps up this cycle of human living, transforming it to all good and joy – how important will this event or this person be when everyone looks back into the history of how things used to be? Unless there is murder and violence, do we really have to take someone to court? Why not try to peacefully work out a solution when there is a dispute?

Lastly, I think it is clear that in our time and in our specific culture, we've lost a sense of the sacred. If you were to ask most anyone "What is it that is truly sacred in your life?" they would typically talk vaguely of family or even something about their church. But people generally and specifically don't have or express a sense of the sacredness of God and how God's Spirit actually resides within them. In fact, most of us are somewhat estranged from our bodies because we've been taught that we don't measure up with the bodies we see in the media. The

result is that most of us don't intentionally take care of ourselves physically.

But Paul's last point, then is that of all the things with which we can become involved that are harmful and wrong, especially avoid damage to the temple of the Holy Spirit. It should cast a new light on what we do with ourselves, shouldn't it? I mean that if you and I are going through our day, interacting with people, wouldn't it make a difference if we actually thought that we are a dwelling of the Holy Spirit of God? That everywhere we go and with whom everyone we speak, we are a physical being inhabited by none other than God Almighty. ■

