

Sexual Sin as a Demonstration of Disunity  
1 Corinthians 5 in Context

Mark A. Matson  
Milligan College

In communication, context is everything. When we hear things out of context, we often make big mistakes in interpretation. Consider the person who stumbles into a conversation and has no idea of the context -- he or she might arrive at a completely wrong conclusion based on the part of the conversation. Perhaps having heard the entire conversation, you would not have assumed the others were talking about you. Haven't we all been surprised when we learn the "rest of the story," the larger context that explains certain comments or behavior of which we were previously unaware? It is precisely because of the possibility of errors or confusion that Paul Harvey's famous radio program remains so popular.

At one level, Paul's demand for the expulsion of the sinning brother in 1 Corinthians 5 is clear enough. The particular matter of sexual relations with one's stepmother, which is striking in its violation of the both Jewish and Greek standards of sexual propriety, is labeled a community concern. The church in Corinth has inappropriately accepted this kind of behavior in its midst. As an essential matter of managing the life of the community, the church must rectify the situation -- and that is by removing the erring member from its fellowship. At the very least, we have a clear statement of one area of sexual activity which is to be circumscribed by group action.

But what is the context for this statement? Why does Paul bring it up here in his letter? Is he simply responding to a particular issue? Is it, then, perhaps simply one of a large list of "problems" in

the Corinthian Church to which Paul is giving authoritative information? Or is it part of larger argument, in which the sexual sin of chapter 5 is only a brick in a larger edifice?

Such contextual issues are crucial as we try to bring this book forward 2000 years and into our modern life, our modern world. Are we to learn that sexual relations between a man and his stepmother is wrong, and thus we must add this to a list of potential sins that are specifically cited, kind of an expanded or clarified holiness code? Or, based on the context of the passage, are there further implications that we, in the church today, should draw from this passage? And does this have any bearing on the divisive issues that face us today: homosexuality and divorce in the church, the question of instrumental music or contemporary worship styles?

In order to move from this passage to our current church life, however, much more work must be done to understand Paul's comments in this chapter. Indeed, the passage bristles with problems for the interpreter, many of which will arise in this discussion. Three central questions face us as we try to reconstruct the sense of chapter 5:

1. Are chapters 5 & 6, which both deal with sexual immorality, linked together as one issue, or is chapter 6's discussion of sexual relations with a prostitute introducing a different topic?

2. Is it important that Paul uses terms such as "puffed up" and "boasting" in reference to the church's reaction to sin, especially given that these terms have already appeared in the first 4 chapters of the letter?

3. Why does Paul introduce the issue of this sin in Corinth without the introduction or formula found later, "about the things you asked me...?"

It will be my argument in this paper that the answer to all three of these questions points to

chapter 5 being part of a larger argument. Paul's instructions to the community about the sinning brother form an important unit in a cohesive argument for unity, and should be read in that way. In other words, the context of the entire letter is unity.

#### A. Contextualizing Chapter 5

It has often been assumed that chapter 5 marks a significant break in the line of argumentation in the epistle. In chapters 1–4, Paul had introduced a matter of concern to him, that of division in the church. Following this, he responds to a number of problems in the church, either from rumor or introduced by their own formal questioning. Thus, chapters 5 through 8 at least, and perhaps through chapter 11, are simply responding to issues Paul finds in the church. Chapters 5 and 6 are dealing with information that Paul has garnered indirectly or orally, while chapters 7 begins dealing with subjects raised in a letter from the church. From such a perspective, the letter lacks a central argumentative strategy, and moves from initial dogmatic concerns about unity to paraenetic and ethical concerns, primarily in response to inquiries from the Corinthians.<sup>1</sup> In this view, Paul's treatment of the various issues of incest, lawsuits among Christians, sexual promiscuity, marriage and celibacy, and eating food sacrificed to idols is situational and responsive, not part of a coherent argumentative .

But is this compartmentalization of Paul's argument compelling? In a number of ways, the issue of incest in Corinth is vitally connected with other arguments in other parts of the letter. First of all, we should consider the terminology of hubris or pride that Paul uses in 5:1–13. It is striking that Paul assails the Corinthians for being “puffed up” or “arrogant” in their attitude toward the sin in their midst. This term, *phusioŹ*, is almost unique in the New Testament to 1 Corinthians, and occurs in 5 other locations in that epistle: 4:6, 4:18, 4:19, 8:1, and 13:4. In each of these cases, it describes a

prideful attitude which works against the unity of the church. In chapter 4, the consistent theme is the pretension of power among some in the church which is causing division and resisting even Paul's attempt to establish unity in the congregation. Being "puffed up" or arrogant is precisely the kind of attitude that creates sects and divisions within the church. Similarly, chapter 8 deals with the knowledge about idol meat that, while correct, actually serves to divide the church. Thus knowledge which is arrogant, and is not respectful of the need for unity in the body, is destructive. And this is the theme again in the "Love" chapter (ch. 13)—that love always builds up and is never filled with pride and arrogance.

By the same token, Paul in 5:6 uses the term "boasting," *kauch'ma*, which shares some of the overtones of "puffed up." Again, Paul uses this and cognate words frequently in 1 Corinthians, many of them in chapters 1–4 dealing with the causes of division, as well as in chapter 9 dealing with opposition to his authority in Corinth.

Both of these terms, "puffed up" and "boasting," moreover, are rhetorical terms that are often found closely connected to other terms Paul uses in 1 Corinthians that deal with political division and enmity: quarrels (*eris*), zeal (*z'los*), to divide (*merizō*), and parties (*schismata*). In Greek rhetoric, these terms are often linked together, thus providing a lexical constellation about division; boasting and "pride" are seen as a primary basis for party divisions.<sup>2</sup>

Paul's use of these terms in chapter 5 would be a bit curious if this were simply an independent critique of sexual sin in the Corinthian church. Their use here, especially following previous use in chapters 1–4, suggests instead that the introduction of the issue of sexual sin in chapter 5 is continuing the theme and argumentation introduced already in the first four chapters, that of schisms and the need

for unity.

Secondly, Paul's discussion of the incestuous relationship in chapter 5 is also not neatly segregated from the discussion which follows in chapter 6. Notice the various points of linkage that take place with the discussions that follow:

a) At the initial conclusion of the matter of sexual sin in chapter 5, Paul discusses the need for the church to judge (*krinō*) those individuals within the church – which should lead of course to their affirming Paul's own judgement, that the sinning brother should be expelled from the church. But it is precisely this same language of judging which introduces the next chapter, the issue of lawsuits. Paul expresses amazement that judgement over matters would take place before outsiders, when in fact the church itself should be settling matter that arise within its own body.

b) After discussing the issues of lawsuits, Paul returns to the matter of sexual sin (*porneia*), although in a more general way. His list of sins that mark the “pre-Christian” way of life begins with the  *pornos*—the individual who engages in *porneia*—and this is then coupled with a variety of other sins which together make up “unrighteousness”: idolatry, adultery, stealing, greed, etc. Moreover, Paul then returns to the more specific issue of sexual sin, *porneia*, with the matter of improper sexual activity of a Christian and a non-Christian (6:12–20). Specifically he deals with sexual union with a prostitute (porn'). It would appear that Paul is still dealing with the same issue as in chapter 5, only slightly expanded or more generalized than the specific case of the incestuous relationship with which he began his argument.

c) It is noteworthy also that Paul uses language of boundaries, and the related issue of pollution of the body, in each of these interrelated sections. In 5:6, Paul uses the metaphor of the removal of

leaven during the Passover feast—in which the Jews were to search out and remove any leaven for the period of the fast of Unleavened Bread—as an example of the need to remove any evil qualities within the body, the Church. A similar theme is raised in chapter 6, when Paul refers to sexual union with a prostitute as violating the sanctity of the body of Christ.

What we have in chapter 5, then, is not a neatly compartmentalized issue to which Paul turns after discussing the issue of division in the church, as if in response simply to an oral report. Paul has not simply moved from a discussion of division to a list of practical concerns. Instead, Paul is using the issue of the incestuous relationship in Corinth as a particular example which illustrates the corrosive nature of division in the church. His discussion of lawsuits and the more general matter of sexual sin with prostitutes further amplifies that discussion.

#### A. The Rhetoric of 1 Corinthians and 1 Corinthians 5:

This contextual analysis of 1 Corinthians 5 is indicative that Paul is engaged in a more intricate and sophisticated argument than simply responding to concerns from Corinth. Margaret Mitchell, in one of the most important recent studies of 1 Corinthians, has argued convincingly that the thrust of the entire letter is to urge the church at Corinth toward unity.<sup>3</sup> The primary underlying problem which draws Paul's attention, according to Mitchell, is the divisiveness of the church, which can be seen in manifold dimensions: the existence of parties, the high status of some powerful individuals in the church, the willingness of members to sue one another in public courts, and the mockery of the Lord's Supper which these divisions have caused. As Mitchell shows, the language used in the letter teems with terms that are traditionally used in Greco-Roman rhetoric that urges unity or concord. On the negative side, such terms as schisms, quarrels, divisions, boasting, and arrogance all echo the traditional

representations of political situations which lack unity. On the positive side, Paul uses especially a variety of terms which draw on building terminology—to build up, to lay a foundation, the temple—together with body imagery, to urge unity. So Peter Marshall also has demonstrated that the rhetorical matrix of much of the language in 1 Corinthians is related to an attack on *hubris*—that is the divisive and inappropriate exercise of power by individuals.<sup>4</sup> This attack on hubris is a fundamental part of the argumentative strategy for urging unity and resisting division.

It is clear that the epistle itself begins on this note unity: “I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgement.” (1 Cor. 1:10) This opening verse, placed immediately after the Thanksgiving, sets forth the primary focus of the entire epistle. The first four chapters are almost exclusively dedicated to this issue in one way or the other: the concern over the hubris of the *sophos*, the wise, or more probably the sophistic or rhetorically powerful;<sup>5</sup> the problem with schisms represented by figurehead leaders such as Cephas, Apollos and Paul; the concern for the unified project of building up of the church into a holy temple. It is particularly important to note that Paul does not attack any particular group as having a false doctrine. Instead the dogmatic concern is not the belief of any one group, but rather the very fact that such groups exist. As Grosheide points out:

Paul does not say in I Cor. 1 that the members of the church with their slogans adhered to a definite doctrine, i.e., a false doctrine. The apostle does not combat a false doctrine in I Corinthians. ... The one thing we find here is that each Corinthian has his slogan. No other difference is mentioned but these slogans. All are exhorted to unity. Nobody is right. And when in the following chapters Paul reprimands several sins it is not one group but the whole church which is reprimanded.”<sup>6</sup>

### C. Paul’s Argumentation in 1 Corinthians 5

With this rhetorical analysis of the nature of Paul's language and argumentation in the entire letter as a backdrop, we must still make more specific the purpose of Paul's instructions about the man who is engaged in a sexual relationship with his stepmother. Why does he introduce this here, and how does it support the overarching theme of the epistle?

It is important that Paul makes distinctions between information by which he learns about the church from "oral sources" and those issues that he addresses in response to formal questions posed by the church. In the case of divisions, which he hears about from Chloe's people, the issue of sexual sin, and the matter of lawsuits in public court, Paul indicates that he has heard about these issues indirectly rather than by means of an official question or "report." In each of these issues that Paul "hears about," there is an implication of shame and reproach. Perhaps because of the shame issue, Paul has chosen to leave the source somewhat anonymous, so as not to further aggravate any divisions in the church. An additional issue is that of competing power and authority; it is likely that Paul uses oral reports, in part, to establish his own independent authority and information. But there is the further implication that the Corinthians are not an island unto themselves, but are part of a larger body to which they bear some responsibility; the fact that these issues "are reported" means that their behavior in Corinth is the subject of a broad concern in the churches at large.

By addressing the issues of oral reports first, Paul is also engaging in a rebuke of the church leaders at Corinth. One can reasonably assume that the church leaders in Corinth are the ones who have written to Paul to clarify certain issues (e.g. eating of idol meat, marriage, etc.). Since Paul addresses first, as more substantial issues, those items which they do not raise—division, condoning sexual sin, and lawsuits, he is implicitly raising these issues above theirs. For Paul these seem to be

more foundational to the health of the Corinthian church than the matters the church addresses.

But Paul is not simply trying to shame the church, and especially the “wise” church leaders. While removing the issue of pride and party spirit is essential to Paul’s concern about the church at Corinth, he relates this directly to a proper conceptualization of the body of Christ. In doing so, Paul also links this discussion to the issue of church boundaries and unity. For Paul, in order to solve the issue of division in the church, one must first properly define the limits of the church within which issues of purity can be addressed.

The problem that Paul sees in Corinth is that the church has not properly maintained its own boundaries between itself and the surrounding culture.<sup>7</sup> In order to create the possibility of a united church, a clear distinction between the kind of action that should take place within the church and what might take place outside it must be made. This assumes a clear corporate sense of limits, which is of course what we would expect from Paul. His repeated use of body language—that the church is the body of Christ, that is made up of many members, that it must think of the whole body and not just parts—is all part of a clear conceptualization of the church as a unit with definite limits.<sup>8</sup>

And in 1 Corinthians 5, Paul is implying that these boundaries have been breached. Given the way Paul addresses the problem of the sin in chapter 5—that is, he addresses only the problem of the man, and not both the man and the woman—it is likely that the man’s stepmother referred to in 5:1 is not a member of the church. So this sexual activity is taking place between a Christian and a non-Christian. As a result, this concern can be seen as a boundary issue, as Paul’s later discussion on relations with a prostitute in 6:15 ff. also suggests. There, the practice of a Christian having sexual relations with a prostitute also suggests a crossing of the boundaries, in which a non-Christian is being

joined physically to the body of Christ. Hence, Paul's belief in 6:9–11 that a variety of sins pollute the church and endanger the very lives of members of the church. In describing the specific sin in chapter 5, it is not inconsequential that Paul is echoing language from Leviticus and Deuteronomy in describing this as “a man has his father's wife” (cf. Lev. 20:11; Deut. 22:30, 27:20)—these books emphasize the holiness of Israel in terms of specific “forbidden” sins. Israel was to establish its group boundaries by means of the holiness code, an explicit set of actions that set it apart from other nations. Moreover, attention to the maintenance of group boundaries, of course, is precisely the point in 5:9–13. The Corinthians are not to “mix” with immoral people; but that mixing is more about protecting the purity within the church than simply in having social interactions with those outside the church.

Seen from a boundary issue, one then can make sense of Paul's use of the Passover metaphor in 5:6–8. It is tempting to see in Paul's reference to Jesus as the paschal lamb the use of atonement language. But the passover lamb was never an atoning sacrifice, and that is not the force of Paul's argumentation. Instead, the Passover is a festival of celebration in which Jews in community reflect upon God's choice of them, and their response as a people to God. The Passover is a celebration of boundaries, of group identity. Paul uses this community image of the Passover, and its attendant removal of leaven, to suggest precisely the kind of concern for building a unified community – unified around its sense of ethics and behavior.

And similarly, Paul's immediate move to discuss the appropriate venues for disagreements between Christians is built around a concern for boundaries. Christians should not have disputes settled outside the body. These should be resolved within the church—surely there are people “wise” enough to arbitrate differences. And at any rate, Christians should be prepared to lose rather than fight. But

the biggest problem that Paul addresses is that the Corinthians make no distinction between behavior that properly should be resolved within the body, and thus bring their disputes outside the boundary of the church, while at the same time ignoring issues that need to be addressed.

But this issue of boundaries, and of purity, is ultimately used by Paul in this section in service of the argument for unity. If I have discerned the broad pattern of Paul's thrust in 1 Corinthians correctly, then we might conclude that Paul thinks that only when the church is internally pure and has clear boundaries between it and the outside world is unity really possible. Creating a clear sense of what is proper behavior within the church, and making clear distinctions about the boundaries of the body, is absolutely essential for creating a unified body.

#### D. Implications for our Church Today

But how do we use this in our church today? In what way should 1 Corinthians 5 educate our own sense of church, or discipline; how should we react to perceived failures on the part of our church members? Let me propose three conclusions from this discussion, which I hope will serve primarily to further the discussion about this thorny passage.

In the first place, following Paul, we must pay attention to the overarching theme of unity. Unity within the body of Christ is the compelling purpose of his letter, and various subunits must be interpreted correctly within that larger context. While Paul was undoubtedly concerned with the effect on individual Christians, his primary focus in this letter (and others) is on the need for the church of Christ to acknowledge and to enact the unity of a single body. This means that church discipline is probably to be done more for the health of the body than the health of the individual. We certainly live in an individualistic age, the result of centuries of western and enlightenment thinking. But that basic

framework of thought, I think, is foreign to Paul's sense of church, and foreign to his argumentation here.

For Paul, unity could only be achieved if there was attention being paid to maintaining the boundaries. What is within the church should be "church." What is outside the church is not his, nor should it be our, primary concern. By attending to the boundaries, and seeking to retain a cohesiveness and purity within the church, then unity is more possible since the body will be well functioning.

Secondly, church discipline has a place in protecting purity within the church. It is strange perhaps to hear the word "purity" today, but this idea of purity, and its correlate term "holiness," are essential for understanding Paul's concept of the church. What is within the church needs to be constantly concerned with purity as a way of distinguishing itself from "common" practices in the surrounding culture. Paul easily turns to ideas drawn from Leviticus, echoing the need for achieving purity and hence holiness within God's people. Rather than being like other peoples, the church needs to still be concerned about its uniqueness, its holiness, in part by means of purity. The church need not, indeed should not, be about being a social club, being open to all, reflecting the popularity of the current culture.

At the same time, however, it should be noted that Paul's concern for purity seems to focus on specific actions that "pollute" the body. Differences in ideas, or doctrine, or theology are not punished by expulsion. People with such differences are urged to seek unity. But some actions will inherently divide the church in a way that can not be overcome by pleas for unity – these are the existence and condoning of clear violations of ethical norms.

Thirdly, concern for the internal health of our churches has a larger frame – the awareness of the larger church. Paul can introduce the issue of the sinner in chapter 5, and cast shame on the church leaders who condone it, because word has spread to surrounding churches. This interconnectedness of the churches is a foundation upon which Paul argues many points in his epistles. As we consider our own body's purity, as we examine our own churches' activities, it is still important that we consider how other congregations will view our internal management of the local assembly. Failure to do this will inevitably divide the body into local congregations with varying standards of purity.

But this analysis perhaps leaves us with yet more questions. Does this understanding of Paul's appeal for unity in the letter, and the specific way that group boundaries and purity support the appeal for unity, help in current issues facing the church? How should we handle such issues as divorce, homosexuality, and adultery within the church today? Are these fundamentally different than issues such as instrumental music, or worship styles? Can we discern between issues that Paul would exhort the church to unity, versus issues in which unity is not possible because the group boundaries have been violated, and the purity of the body is endangered?

1. See, for instance, Hans Conzelmann, *I Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 6. This also seems to be the basic approach of John Coolidge Hurd, Jr., *The Origin of I Corinthians* (New York: Seabury Press, 1965), which has been influential in Corinthian studies.

2. Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation* (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1991), pp. 68-183 and especially summary of terms on p. 180.
3. Mitchell notes (p. 17), for instance, “The constructive thesis here presented on the basis of an historical rhetorical analysis, that 1 Corinthians *is a unified letter which throughout urges the course of unity on a divided Corinthian church*, is a return to the understanding and appreciation of 1 Corinthians held by its earliest readers.” (Italics mine).
4. Peter Marshall, *Enmity in Corinth: Social Conventions in Paul’s Relations with the Corinthians* (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1987).
5. See especially Stephen Pogoloff, *Logos and Sophia: The Rhetorical Situation of 1 Corinthians* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992).
6. Frederick Willem Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1953), p. 37.
7. A very helpful discussion, from an anthropological perspective, of the interrelationship of body imagery and the maintenance of group boundaries is found in Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (NY: ARK Paperbacks, 1966), especially pp. 114-128.
8. The discussion of body ideologies in Greco-Roman society, and their implications for 1 Corinthians, is carefully explored in Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). I note here Martin’s comments on 1 Cor. 5: “In the end, Paul is in an ironic position. He has set out to reinforce the boundary dividing the church from the world, but his very concerns demonstrate how permeable the boundary really is in his own world view. Since no secure boundary separates the offender’s body from the church’s body, the offender’s presence in the church represents an invasion of sarx into the church itself” (p. 174).