

First Epistle to the Corinthians

8 – Essay Two: Sex – Immorality and the Church (2.1)

1 Corinthians 4:17-5:6a

1. The five essays per Bailey¹
 - a. **A:** The Cross and Christian Unity (1:5-4:16)
 - b. **B:** Men and Women in the Human Family (4:17-7:40)
 - c. **C:** Food Offered to Idols (Christian and pagan) (8:1-11:1)
 - d. **B':** Men and Women in Worship (11:2-14:40)
 - e. **A':** The Resurrection (chapter 15)
2. Outlines that include 4:17-7:40
 - a. *ESV Study Bible*
 - i. A Report of Sexual Immorality and Legal Wrangling (5:1–6:20)
 1. Incest, arrogance, and the need for discipline (5:1–13)
 2. Trivial cases before unrighteous judges (6:1–11)
 3. Sexual immorality and the body's resurrection (6:12–20)
 - ii. Three Issues from a Corinthian Letter (7:1–11:1)
 1. Marriage, divorce, and unchangeable circumstances (7:1–24)
 2. The betrothed and widows (7:25–40)
 3. Food offered to idols (8:1–11:1)
 - b. *Reading the New Testament: 1 Corinthians*
 - i. A: Separation for the Sake of Salvation : Sexual problem (incest) (5:1-13)
 - ii. B: The Costs of Going to Court: Problem of lawsuits (6:1-11)
 - iii. A': Keeping the Bedroom Attached to the Rest of the House: Sexual problem (fornication) (6:12-20)
 - iv. Christians are not Angels (7:1-24)
 - v. When a Theological Good Becomes a Liability (7:25-40)
 - c. *New International Commentary, New Testament: The First Epistle*
 - i. In Response to Reports (1:10-6:20)
 1. Immorality and Litigation: Test Cases of the Crisis of Authority and Gospel (5:1-6:20)
 - a. The Case of the Incestuous Man (5:1-13)
 - b. A Case of Litigation (6:1-11)
 - c. On Going to the Prostitutes (6:12-20)
 - ii. In Response to the Corinthian Letter (7:1-16:12)
 1. Marriage and Related Matters (7:1-40)
 - a. To the Married (or Formerly Married)—Stay as You Are (7:1-16)
 - b. The Guiding Principle—Stay as One Was When Called (7:17-24)
 - c. About the “Virgins” (7:25-40)
 - d. Bailey²
 - i. Immorality and the Church (4:17-6:8)
 - ii. (Three Road Blocks: Leaven, Immorality, and the Law Courts [5:6b-6:8])
 - iii. Theology of Sexual Practice: Kingdom Ethics (6:9-12)
 - iv. Theology of Sexual Practice: Joining the Body (6:13-20)
 - v. Sexual Practice in Harmony with the Gospel (7:1-40)

¹ Bailey, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians*, loc. 228

² Bailey, loc. 1777

Table 1: From Bailey, location 1831

1 Corinthians 4:17-5:6a (ESV)		Motifs
1-Intro	^{4:17} That is why [For this reason] I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church.	The Tradition
2-A	¹⁸⁻²⁰ Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power.	Arrogance and Power
3-B	²¹ What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?	A Rod Or Gentleness?
4-A	^{5:1-2a} It is actually reported [Everyone reports] that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn?	Arrogance and Immorality
5-A	^{2b-3} Let him who has done this be removed from among you. For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing.	Him-Remove My body My spirit Him-Judge
6-B	⁴ When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, [In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, When you are assembled, and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus.] ³	Name of Jesus Your "body" My spirit Power of Jesus
7-A	^{5-6a} you are to deliver this <i>man</i> ⁴ to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. Your boasting is not good.	Him-Remove His flesh His spirit Day of the Lord

3. The question of placement of 4:17-21

- a. Is it a conclusion to what came before, or is it an introduction to what will come?
 - i. This paragraph speaks of power and words, subjects which were noted in the earlier piece
 - ii. There is some type of boasting and arrogance that is condemned in the earlier piece
 - iii. However, subject of arrogance repeats very closely in 5:2
 - iv. The implicit image of a father disciplining his children echoes end of earlier piece
 - v. Paul's "imitate me" and "remind you of my ways in Christ" can be seen as functioning together
 - vi. 4:16 contains a "therefore" (translated "then" in the ESV). Odd to see two *therefores* next to one another (4:16 *and* 17).
- b. How does 4:17 begin?
 - i. *That is why* or *Therefore*
 1. This translation clearly looks backwards
 - ii. *For this reason*
 1. This translation can look backwards or forwards
- c. What is Paul's rhetorical and literary style of his essays in this epistle?

³ This reflects ordering of phrases in the Greek language.

⁴ "Man" is not present in the Greek. It should be seen as a *blank* to be filled in by the readers according to their preference; e.g., "idiot," "fool," or something stronger. (Bailey, loc. 1897)

- i. He begins each with an appeal to tradition delivered to the church
 - ii. He ends each with an appeal, such as to imitate him (4:16)
 - iii. “For this reason” looks forward in many cases; it introduces an introduction in which Paul summarizes the basis for his next essay
 - iv. Western/Latin tradition places the thought break between chapter 4 and 5
 - v. Much of Middle Eastern/Arabic tradition places the thought break around 4:16-17⁵
 - vi. As seen in the above rhetorical structuring, a clear seven segment pattern can be seen that encompasses 4:17-5:6
- d. Why does placement matter?
 - i. Paul’s tone changes at 4:18. First essay is comparatively gentle in tone. Paul avoids direct accusations. With 4:18 Paul’s tone becomes much more aggressive, direct, and specific.
 - ii. The idea that Paul would come and find out who is causing dissension would be a surprise here, given that Paul hinted at nothing of the sort in the first essay.
 - iii. As an introduction to the second essay, this sets the tone and expectations for what will follow.
- 4. The Tradition (4:17)
 - a. “Remind” and “I teach them everywhere in every church”
 - i. Paul’s views and teachings on sexual matters is not something new
 - ii. The Corinthians had been instructed on this topic
 - iii. Timothy is not teaching something different – he is repeating what Paul taught
 - b. The power and wisdom of the cross of Jesus Christ was the tradition of the first essay
 - c. How Jesus Christ informs sexual ethics in the church is the tradition of the second essay
- 5. The Problem Statement (4:18-5:2a)
 - a. What is the problem?
 - i. Traditionally: incest
 - ii. But that problem is only briefly mentioned (5:1)
 - iii. Paul seems much more concerned with the problem of *arrogance* (notice how this section begins and ends with the statement regarding arrogance)
 - iv. In chapter 13, Paul revisits boasting and arrogance
 - v. Perhaps our reading should see incest and sexual immorality as symptoms and arrogance as the disease; or to put it another way, how might arrogance birth sexual immorality?

As one sees through a careful, close reading of the text, Paul is upset because of the immorality in Corinth, but he treats that flamboyant phenomenon as a symptom of the true, deeper problem that he faces among the Corinthians, namely, their spiritual arrogance, which produces elitism or indifference that renders the congregation inactive and ineffective in living out God's will for their lives in this world.⁶

- b. Power, talk and arrogance
 - i. There seems to be a small (“little leaven” 5:6), but powerful group that is openly and aggressively promoting theology and practice counter to Paul’s (and other apostles), i.e., the tradition
 - ii. This is not simply a matter of factional divisions as was the issue of the first essay

⁵ Bailey, loc. 1786. Bailey continues with ten technical reasons why the break should appear between 4:16 and 17, and not between 4:21 and 5:1. He follows with three reasons why Western tradition breaks the thought unit between 4:21 and 5:1.

⁶ *Understanding the Bible Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, entry 13 for 1 Cor. 5:1-13.

iii. Paul sees a power struggle between true and false power⁷

In fact what is most remarkable about 5:1-13 and 6:1-11 is how little time he [Paul] devotes to the "sins" (and "sinners"). He does threaten the latter with grave consequences of their wrongdoing, but he is far more exercised in both cases with the church and its attitudes.⁸

c. Choice

- i. Paul gives the Corinthian Christians a choice
- ii. Paul is certain he will revisit Corinth – it's just a matter of when, not if
- iii. How Paul comes to them in person depends on how they choose to deal with their problem

d. It is actually reported vs. Everyone reports

- i. English translations typically take the former
 1. Has the nuance, "I'm hearing this about you. I don't know if it is absolutely true"
- ii. Middle Eastern sources take the latter⁹
 1. Paul has no misgivings about what is happening in Corinth
 2. At the same time, Paul does not reveal his sources – he says *all* his sources say the same thing

In a culture where one could matter-of-factly say, "Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of the body, but wives to bear us legitimate children," the Judeo-Christian moral restrictions on human sexuality were not easily absorbed by pagan converts.¹⁰

The problem specified in 5:1 is *porneia* (sexual immorality): one has his father's wife. The expression "father's wife" refers to one's stepmother in Lev 18:8 (cf. 18:7, where one's mother is a different entity). Martial, in Epigrams 4.16, refers to such liaisons between Roman men and their stepmothers. Heliodorus, in Ethiopian Story 1.15, also dwells on the issue of a young man's potential adultery with his father's wife. The problem was real.¹¹

Specifically, Roman law forbade marriage both between adoptive parents and children and between steprelatives; thus, the man's father could be dead or divorced from this woman, and an unacceptable liaison would be formed if the "son" and the "wife" became involved sexually.¹²

At the same time, violations of the incest taboo were widespread enough in ancient Roman society that Juvenal could say of Roman females that there are "few whose fathers are not very much afraid of their kisses" (Satires 6).¹³

e. Sexual immorality (*πορνεία porneia*)

- i. Paul's description implies the father was no longer in the picture (for whatever reason)
- ii. Thus not adultery

⁷ True vs. false power was something he had dwelt upon in great length in the first essay, so that forms a natural foundation for the second essay.

⁸ *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle*, entry on 5:1-6:20

⁹ Bailey, loc. 1870

¹⁰ *NICNT*, entry on 5:1-13

¹¹ *Reading the New Testament: 1 Corinthians*, entry on 5:1

¹² *UBC*, entry on 5:1

¹³ *RNT*, entry on 5:1

- iii. In the current context this “refers to sexual relationships within certain degrees of kinship”¹⁴
- iv. Paul is appealing to both Jewish and Roman acceptable norms of behavior
 - 1. He cannot appeal to the entirety of Hebrew scripture since the early stories describe sexual relationships between near-kin that would become incestuous under the Law of Moses
 - 2. Raises questions:
 - a. How much of what is considered ethical and legal are cultural norms?
 - b. Does scripture prescribe/proscribe, or does it describe the way things were?
 - c. How can we determine when to apply specifics today, or to dismiss specifics and instead reach for deeper ethical considerations?
- f. The problem
 - i. The church in Corinth is not only condoning, but flaunting, violations of law and tradition (both religious and secular) under the guise of spiritual freedom
 - ii. The church in Corinth is misrepresenting Christ and his power
 - 1. The church’s proper attitude should be that of mourning

The notion of being cut off from the people is widely used in postbiblical Judaism (e. g., Jubilees 6:12, 14; 1QS 2:16; m. Kerithoth 1:1-2). Being cut off from the people means being excommunicated so that one will not share in the Age to Come (cf. m. Sanhedrin 10:1).¹⁵

- 6. Paul’s Directive (5:2b-6a)
 - a. Primary point is that it is the entire church’s responsibility to deal with problems
 - i. It is not Paul’s individual responsibility to deal with all the problems that might arise in all the churches. Paul suggests a course of action, but he does not command it. The church must take action. (c.f., 4:21)
 - ii. The church might have been reluctant to take action, preferring to have Paul or another apostle (an authority figure) to take the fall (from the “powerful” members of the Corinthian church) for instituting corrective action. Paul is not going to place himself in that position.
 - iii. Implied: there is no “authority” figure in the Christian church, other than Christ. Apostles and teachers may have more knowledge and wisdom, they may be looked upon to suggest courses of action, but any authority rests in the body as a whole.
 - b. Paul’s directive is to remove the offending individual from the body of Christ

In the center (6) the *authority for this action* is discussed. They are to act in the name and with the power of our Lord Jesus.¹⁶

- c. Body (Flesh)/Spirit concept repeats in each of the A-B-A sections
 - i. Paul wrote about this in Essay One (1:26, “according to the flesh”; 2:10-16, spiritual vs. natural person; 3:3, Corinthians are “still of the flesh”; 3:16-17, the Spirit dwells in the temple, which is you, the church)
 - ii. Paul discussed judgment in Essay One – the various building materials, some will endure, others will be burnt up
 - 1. “If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.” (3:15 ESV)

¹⁴ RNT, entry on 5:1

¹⁵ RNT, entry on Acts 3:17-26, *Repentance (3)*

¹⁶ Bailey, loc. 1883

In a collectivist culture, the most important entity is the community—the family, the tribe or the country—and *not* the individual. Preserving the harmony of the community is everyone’s primary goal, and is perceived as much more important than the self-expression or self-fulfillment of the individual. A person’s identity comes not from distinguishing himself from the community, but in knowing and faithfully fulfilling his place... The highest goal and virtue in this sort of culture is supporting the community. This makes people happy (*makarios*).¹⁷

Scripture is clear that when we become Christians, we become—permanently and spiritually—a part of the church. We become part of the *family* of God, with all the responsibilities and expectations that word connotes in the non-Western world. We don’t choose who else is a Christian with us. But we are committed to them, bound to them by the Spirit. And we are not free to dissociate our identities from them—mainly because once we are all in Christ, our own individual identities are no longer of primary importance.¹⁸

Jesus viewed us—his church—as a collectivist community. He came to establish a people of God, over which he would reign as king. It is not really “me and Jesus.”¹⁹

- d. The entire Christian community is bound together as one, through the Spirit, and is responsible for what happens among them, wherever it may occur
 - i. “When you are assembled, and my spirit is present” (5:4)
 - ii. In a mysterious, spiritual way, Paul is actually present with the Corinthians, when they come together
 - iii. What one Christian subcommunity does, affects all other communities
 - e. Surrender this ___ to Satan...
 - i. The discussion of judgment in Essay One informs how to interpret this text
 - 1. The Day of Judgment is a time of restoration and revealing
 - 2. Punishment is not the primary concern of Judgment
 - ii. It is *not* that this person needs to suffer or be punished (though these aspects are not excluded), but that the person needs to be returned to the domain of the flesh (vs. the Spirit) where he has shown he belongs
 - iii. The priority of belonging to community and the shame from being excluded from it should serve as a wakeup call to bring repentance, restoration and reconciliation
 - iv. The “destruction of the flesh” speaks *not* to some kind of physical torment or death, but to the realization that brings this person out of the domain of flesh and back into the domain of the Spirit
 - f. Paul criticizes and judges the entire Corinthian church
 - i. “Your [plural: the church] boasting is not good”
 - ii. The church’s arrogance (and the failure to address it by those who are not party to the arrogance) is equally unspiritual as the man’s sexual immorality
7. Summary Points²⁰
- a. The church has a tradition that is known to all
 - b. Some are arrogantly asserting total freedom in sexual practice
 - c. The church must address the matter in a public meeting and throw the man out
 - d. The action has the intended effect of redemption of the man and the church
 - e. The authority for this action is not in Paul or the apostles, but *in the name and power of our Lord Jesus Christ*

¹⁷ *Misreading Scripture With Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understanding the Bible*; E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O’Brien; Kindle edition, location 1010.

¹⁸ *Misreading*, loc. 1141.

¹⁹ *Misreading*, loc. 1173.

²⁰ Bailey, loc. 1913