



The Question this month is: "What did Paul mean in 1st Cor. 5:5, 'Deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus'?"

This question, asked by one of our sisters, is well worth considering, not only because the verse she quotes is often misunderstood, but also because it raises a subject about which, in these days, sadly, we hear far too little. That subject is discipline in the Church.

The context.

The first verse of 1st Cor. 5, deals with the case of the man in the Church in Corinth, who was involved immorally with *'his father's wife'* (v.1). It seems clear that the father had married a second time and the son was having an affair with the woman who was now, legally, his *step-mother*. This is why Paul expressly and carefully describes her as *'his father's wife'*, rather than *'his mother'*.

The seriousness of this situation is revealed and stressed when the apostle points out that, as immoral as Greek society was in those days, conduct of this kind was despised even by the pagan Corinthians. He does not go into great detail to explain why the congregation had neglected to take action to deal with the situation, apart from to rebuke them for their indifference, but he *does* say is that their failure to act constituted a danger to the entire body (v.6).

In v.2 he lays down the course of action that they must adopt. Asserting his apostolic authority, he commands that the guilty man must be *'removed'* from among them – excluded from their fellowship. (Since nothing is said about the woman involved in the offence, we must assume that she was not a member of the Church, and the congregation therefore did not have the authority to deal with her).

What Paul orders is, effectively, *the excommunication of the guilty man*, and he describes this course of action as, *'delivering the man to Satan'*. Outside of the Church, which is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus - (see Col. 1;13) - this man, cut off from the people of God, will again be in the domain of Satan, and, consequently, in grave spiritual danger.

The Church's responsibility

This action by the Church has a purpose. It is designed to bring the guilty man to his senses, so that he opens his eyes and recognises the seriousness of his position and comes to repentance. This is what is meant by *'the destruction of the flesh'*.

It means that the man must recognize and acknowledge the sinfulness of his

conduct, and, with the help of God, 'put to death' (Col.3:5) his sinful physical desires. He may then ask to be restored to fellowship. Failing to do this he stands in danger of losing his soul

Excommunication is not necessarily final.

It is important to recognize that this act of 'excommunication' is not meant to be 'amputation'. Serious – and painful – as it undoubtedly is, it is a course of action intended only for the good of the offender. In other words, it is not meant to be 'terminal', but to be *remedial*.

When a congregation excommunicates an offending person, it is taking the final step in its endeavour to bring him to recognize his sin and to change his life. The door must always be kept open for the offender to repent and desire to return.

The outcome in this case

In 2nd Cor. 2:5-11, Paul reveals that Corinthian Christians acted on his advice, took action and banished the man from the fellowship. And the action was effective. The guilty man repented, and in his second letter the apostle tells the Corinthian church that they should restore him to fellowship, and, since he was evidently heart-broken and sorrowful because of his sin, they must comfort him and be gracious to him. 'Reaffirm your love for him', they are told.

If the congregation neglected to respond to his obvious repentance in a positive manner, and did not take the man back, Satan would make the most of what would undoubtedly be looked upon by enemies of the Faith as lovelessness and self-righteousness in the Christians, and the man himself might be 'overwhelmed with excessive sorrow'.

This teaching continues to be relevant.

An interesting fact is revealed in v.6. Evidently there were some in the Corinthian church, who influenced by a misguided sense of charity, or by the desire to show tolerance, who did not agree with the excommunication of this immoral man, and the decision to disfellowship him is described by Paul as 'punishment by the majority', with which, we should note, he was in full agreement

Very little has changed! Congregations still find that they have among them, members who shy away from the exercise of scriptural discipline. Nevertheless, if we consistently followed the teaching of the Word in the matter of Church-discipline, not only would our assemblies be stronger both spiritually *and* numerically, they would also be happier and more loving.

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