

Forgiveness and the Church



Sabbath Afternoon

MEMORY TEXT: “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:1, 2).

AUTHOR PHILIP YANCEY begins his book *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* with a true story about a prostitute who paid for her drug habit by prostituting her two-year-old daughter to whomever was willing to pay. When asked if she ever thought about going to a church for help, she replied, “ ‘Church! . . . Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They’d just make me feel worse.’ ”—(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), p. 11.

How ironic—the exact kind of person who had been drawn to Jesus when He was in the flesh is afraid to go to the church that bears His name. Maybe with good reason too. *After all, prostituting your own two-year-old daughter?* How should your local church respond to someone who comes to its door with such a story? This week we look at the all-important question of the church and forgiveness.

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: How did Paul view the need for discipline in the local church? How did Paul balance that need with mercy? How can we as a church find the same balance? What gives the church the authority to discipline members?

*Please study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 10.

SIN IN THE CHURCH: PART 1 (1 Cor. 5:1).

Jesus came to save the lost. When we read accounts like the one in 1 Corinthians 5:1, we can understand better what that idea means. Paul says that it is “reported commonly” this there is fornication in the church. In other words, it is not just some vague rumor, some nasty little gossip that fell his way. He has good reasons to believe the sordid account.

The word for fornication forms the root for the English word *pornography*. In the Greek of Paul’s time, that means some sort of illicit sexual relations. In this case, however, the kind of fornication is made rather explicit: A man is having sexual relations with his father’s wife—in other words, *his stepmother*. No details are given regarding her current relationship with the member’s father. Were they still married, or divorced? Was the father dead? Had the member married this woman, or were they living together?

Whatever the details, Paul doesn’t seem to care. He finds the relationship an abomination, a practice, he says, that is not accepted, even among the heathen.

And now it is in the church?

Read 1 Corinthians 5:2. What is Paul saying here to the Corinthian church? In what ways is the issue he is addressing here an even bigger problem than this wayward church member?

The texts themselves do not explain the reason for the church’s attitude about this blatant sin. Maybe the church member is very wealthy. Maybe the church has improper notions of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Instead of mourning the situation, they are actually “puffed up,” proud, if not over the specific sin itself then perhaps over their own spiritual state. Perhaps they feel pride in their tolerant, loving, and graceful attitude toward the sinner. Who knows? What we do know is what Paul feels about not only the act but the church’s attitude toward it.

Take that same situation and apply it to your local church. What reasons could you see your church, or any church, use in order not to act appropriately in such a blatant situation?

SIN IN THE CHURCH: PART 2 (1 Cor. 5:5).

Though Paul was not in Corinth when this problem was happening, he let the church know what he thought ought to be done about it. In fact, he says in 1 Corinthians 5:3 that although he has not been there in person to witness what was going on, he nevertheless has already made a judgment about the person who “hath so done this deed” (2 Cor. 5:3).

Read 1 Corinthians 5:4, 5. What does Paul say to do to the member who is involved in this sinful and shameful relationship? In whose name are they to act? See Ephesians 5:24. Why is that so important a point? Who is the man ultimately disgracing by his actions? First Corinthians, verse 5, is an especially difficult text. What do you think Paul is saying? What is he ultimately trying to do for the sinner?

Paul’s words sound pretty harsh. Though he is talking about disfellowshipping the man, Paul talks about actually delivering him to Satan. What does that mean? Commentators generally agree that what Paul seems to be saying here is that this person, by willfully defying the Lord, has severed Himself from the Lord, and the church is to acknowledge that choice by expelling him from the community of faith. At the same time, too, Paul does not want them to give up on him. There is a remedial element to be found in verse 5. The delivery of a sinner to Satan appears also in 1 Timothy 1:20. The idea of the “destruction of the flesh” (1 Cor. 5:15) perhaps could mean that because of the chastisement the man will put away his sinful actions and as a result be saved “in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 5:5).

Read 1 Timothy 1:20. What parallel can you find there with what Paul says to the Corinthians regarding the fate of this man?

However difficult the phraseology, Paul’s point seems clear: The man needs to be disfellowshipped for this deed. Perhaps, however, he will change his ways, as a result. In other words, one could argue here that the object of excommunication was not just retributive punishment but actually an act that could lead the sinner to repentance and, finally, reinstatement. In fact, some believe that is exactly what happened.

“CONFIRM YOUR LOVE”: PART 1 (2 Cor. 2:1-11).

Though commentators are not in agreement, some believe that the person referred to in the text here (vss. 6-8) was, in fact, the man who had entered into an illicit sexual relationship with his father’s wife (see yesterday’s study).

Whatever the case, this point is clear from the texts: The disciplined member was to be restored to full fellowship. Just as the church in a public session had condemned him, the church in a public way must restore him. The apostle was calling for a formal action to assure this member of the congregation’s love. In that way, no question as to his full restoration could be raised in the future. They were to confirm their love toward him.

Look at verses 7-10. Write down the three verbs Paul uses to describe what their attitude toward this person should be:

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

Paul’s pastoral side comes through very clearly. Whatever the offender had done, not only should he be reinstated but the church should give him love, comfort, and grace.

What he seems to be saying is that once someone has been exposed in public as a sinner and has subsequently given evidence of repentance, it is imperative that the church make clear in just as open a manner that the person involved is forgiven and accepted as a member of the family again. What is condemned in public cannot be erased in private. In other words, the grace that God bestows upon us when we repent and turn away from our sins needs to be reflected by the body that represents Christ; that is, His church.

Indeed, Paul is so adamant about this that in verse 11 he all but says that not to treat this person in such a manner would be to fall into one of Satan’s snares. What kind of snares? Look up Job 1:9-12; Zechariah 3:1, 2; Revelation 12:10.

God is a God of mercy, forgiveness, grace, and love; His people are nothing if they don’t reflect those attributes, not only as individuals but as a corporate body, as well.

Look at 2 Corinthians 2:8: “Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him.” If, indeed, this is the same person discussed in the two previous days’ sections, Paul, who was adamant that he be disfellowshipped, now is just as adamant that they reaffirm their love toward him. What does that tell us about the nature of church discipline?

“CONFIRM YOUR LOVE”: PART 2.

Let us go back to Tuesday’s study. Someone did something that brought upon him corporate rebuke from the church. Whatever it was (maybe even having an illicit affair with his stepmother), he obviously did what was needed to be done in order to satisfy Paul and the church that he should be reinstated into fellowship.

However, it is clear, too, that Paul was concerned that the person not be “swallowed up” with too much sorrow (2 Cor. 2:7). Thus, he tells the church to confirm their love toward him.

On this topic, *The SDA Bible Commentary* says: “Confirm. Gr. *kuro*, ‘to ratify,’ ‘to confirm,’ ‘to reaffirm’ (cf. Gal. 3:15). It was a legal term used of validating an agreement. Here it means to ratify or confirm by decree or vote of the church (see on Matt. 18:18). Acting in its corporate capacity, the church should revoke its former action and restore the man to fellowship. Discipline had been administered by a formal action on the part of the church; restoration to fellowship should be no less public and official. The man was to have full assurance of the favor of his brethren in the church. Thus, in the future, no question as to the validity of his reinstatement could arise.” —Vol. 6, p. 838.

While all this is fine at the corporate level, what could individuals do in order to help such a person understand and accept that he or she has been forgiven and accepted back into the body? In other words, what could we as individuals do to help this person truly feel loved and accepted? What examples can we find from the Bible that would help us know what to do?

As a church, Seventh-day Adventists have long upheld certain moral standards that help define who we are. As a church, we must. At the same time, we need to be careful we don’t become so rigid that we forget the human side of those with whom we fellowship and whom we expect to uphold and follow these standards.

We are all sinners; we are all beings weakened by sin; we have all fallen short of the glory of God. The grace that we need for ourselves (and we all need it) we should be just as willing to give freely to others who, perhaps, have not sinned as grievously as we have. Or maybe they have. Grace, remember, is unmerited favor. It is something given to those who *do not* deserve it.

In what kind of situations should a person *not* be extended the kind of grace that Paul talks about here in 2 Corinthians 2? Who should make that kind of judgment?

CHURCH DISCIPLINE.

“In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 5:4).

The Bible makes one point very clear: Christ has established His church on earth, and it is from Him that the church has derived its authority.

What do the following teach us about the authority of the church?

Matt. 16:19 _____

Matt. 18:17 _____

Eph. 1:22 _____

Eph. 5:23 _____

Col. 1:18 _____

Notice, too, the authority that Paul acknowledges in the local church at Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 5:4, he tells them to act in the name of Jesus Christ in the action of disfellowshipping the one living in open and blatant sin. In 2 Corinthians 2:10, he again acknowledges the authority of the local church in dealing with its members, even to the point of saying that whom they forgive, he forgives.

The church, of course, is not made up of any single person. It is a body of believers organized for the work of, among other things, proclaiming the gospel. But the important point is that no one individual in the church has the authority to do the things that Paul tells the church as a whole to do. In 1 Corinthians 5:4, he stresses that when you are “gathered together” in the name of Jesus, then you can act. There’s wisdom in a multitude of counselors. These types of actions need to be taken on a corporate level, with the duly appointed leaders of the church under the unction of the Spirit, seeking to deal with the problems that arise within the church itself. No one person should be given free rein to decide these matters.

Christ, the Creator of the universe, has given power and authority to His church. That’s a heavy responsibility. What can we do, as individual members of the church, to cooperate in ways that will allow the church to exercise that authority in a manner that reveals the mercy and the justice of God?

FURTHER STUDY: See the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, “Church Discipline,” pp. 175–190; Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, pp. 260, 261.

Among the more serious of the evils that had developed among the Corinthian believers, was that of a return to many of the debasing customs of heathenism. One former convert had so far backslidden that his licentious course was a violation of even the low standard of morality held by the Gentile world. The apostle pleaded with the church to put away from among them ‘that wicked person.’ ‘Know ye not,’ he admonished them, ‘that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 303, 304.

“In dealing with erring church-members, God’s people are carefully to follow the instruction given by the Saviour in the eighteenth chapter of Matthew.

“Human beings are Christ’s property, purchased by Him at an infinite price, bound to Him by the love that He and His Father have manifested for them. How careful, then, we should be in our dealing with one another! Men have no right to surmise evil in regard to their fellow-men. Church-members have no right to follow their own impulses and inclinations in dealing with fellow-members who have erred. They should not even express their prejudices regarding the erring; for thus they place in other minds the leaven of evil. Reports unfavorable to a brother or sister in the church are communicated from one to another of the church-members. Mistakes are made and injustice is done because of an unwillingness on the part of some one to follow the directions given by the Lord Jesus.”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 498.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Look at Matthew 18:15-18 in the context of the week’s lesson. How does it parallel what we have studied this week about church authority, mercy, and discipline?
2. The *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* says that the church “recognizes the need of exercising great care to protect the highest spiritual interests of its members, to ensure fair treatment, and to safeguard the name of the church.”—(Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald® Pub. Assoc., 2000), p. 185. How could the principles studied this week, if followed, help bring these stated goals to pass? In what ways could showing forgiveness to wayward members help make these goals a living reality?



Three Strange Visitors

Cyrlle Macarayo

Dapilo-an Mission School vibrates with energy when the children gather for morning and evening worship. And the new village church, spawned by the school, is packed every Sabbath. Nearly everyone in the village has joined the church. Sanny attends group Bible studies but was not ready to commit his life to God.

One Sabbath morning Sanny’s wife and children prepared to go to church. “Go with us, Papa,” they begged.

“I’ll follow later,” he told them. But he planned to slip away to his garden in the forest instead.

Sanny’s house stands near the church. He can hear the service from there. *Shall I attend church or not?* he debated. When the singing stopped, Sanny could hear the voice of a boy preaching. But he couldn’t understand the words, so he walked to the church and sat down outside to listen. He still planned to sneak away to his farm.

Then Sanny saw three men dressed in white walk up the hill to the church. Sanny did not recognize them. Two of the men stood outside the church, but the third man walked straight to the pulpit, where the little boy stood preaching. Suddenly Sanny heard the voice of the child become the voice of the man.

Sanny hurried to the church door to hear what the stranger said. But the service was ending.

“Welcome,” the members greeted Sanny. But Sanny’s eyes were searching for the man who had walked into the church.

“Where’s the stranger?” Sanny asked.

“What stranger?” they questioned. Sanny realized that he was the only one who saw the three men in white. Sanny hurried around the far side of the church and found the three men. “Who are you?” he asked, forgetting his manners.

“It is not time to reveal who we are,” one said. “But we come every day for village worship, and we especially love to come on Sabbath. Be strong in faith, because the Lord is coming very soon, and those who are faithful will be saved.”

Sanny was struck with fear. “Lord, please forgive me,” he cried, falling to the ground. But when he looked up, the strangers were gone.

Not long after he met the strangers, Sanny was baptized. Today everyone in the village of Dapilo-an worships together morning and evening, and especially on Sabbath.

Cyrlle Macarayo is a student at Mountain View College in southern Philippines. He served as a SULAD (student missionary) teacher in the Dapilo-an Mission School in the mountains of southern Philippines.

Produced by the Office of Mission
Sabbath School-Personal Ministries department of the General Conference
Email: gomission@gc.adventist.org

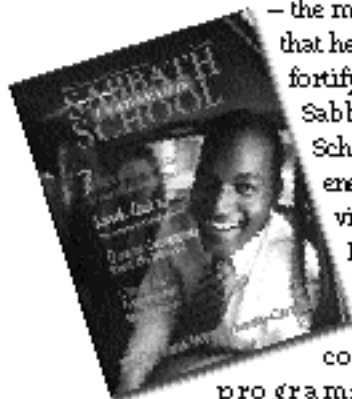


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SABBATH SCHOOL



This is the gospel commission

Jesus said, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

Since 1998 more than 34,000 new believers in Papua New Guinea have joined the Adventist Church. Some 54 new churches and 612 new companies have been established. Your Thirteenth Sabbath Offering this quarter will help build 25 new churches to help house our new brothers and sisters in Papua New Guinea.

MISSION

The Thirteenth Sabbath Offering on June 28 supports projects in the South Pacific Division.