

PREFACE

A friend of mine from high school days recently retired from his long-time pastorate of a church in eastern Iowa. The church’s new pastor is a woman. The name and denomination of this church are not important; today so many denominations and individual churches have adopted this church’s philosophy—which has been in place for decades—that what I am about to relate frankly leaves *our* church’s doctrine and practices as “the odd man out.”

The title and heading at this church’s web site seem innocuous, even encouraging:

By the grace of God, [our church] is a *diverse community* of believers and seekers, *united in following and sharing the way of Christ* with all persons through daily practices of devotion, justice, and love.

From their “Beliefs and Practices”:

Bible - [our denomination] considers the Bible to be *the inspired Word of God* and recognizes 66 books in the canon, but *beliefs vary on the inerrancy of Scripture. Individual congregations cover the spectrum from traditional to contemporary.*

Heaven, Hell - *Views on heaven and hell among [those in our denomination] range from belief in literal places, to trust in God to provide eternal justice or universal salvation. The church itself does not engage in “speculative theology” and lets its individual members decide for themselves.*

From their current pastor (a woman) in a recent church newsletter:

[Our church] has been known for decades as a place that welcomes a wide variety of people. For at least twenty years people have heard welcome proclaimed whether you are old or young, gay or straight, rich or poor... This welcome has been important in many ways, but has been especially important to our gay and lesbian friends. Meanwhile, many of the conversations around questions of welcome have shifted and we haven’t always kept up. Now instead of talking only about welcome to gay and lesbian people, we use abbreviations such as LGBTQ+ to talk about sexual orientation and gender identity. And while this shift has happened, many of us, especially those who aren’t in the middle of these conversations, are left scratching our heads and trying to figure out what the initials stand for, what definitions are, and what it means to be safe and welcoming. In light of this, [two other women], and I have been working together to adapt for our setting a training used at the University.

The training is called “Safe Zone” and will focus on conversation about where we have been, progress we have made in being welcoming, theological basis for welcome, how the conversations around sexual orientation and gender identity have shifted, what all those letters stand for, and how we can be aware of the needs of the LGBTQ+ community in order to be more welcoming... I hope that whether you are uncertain about what this means, whether you are a committed ally, or whether you identify as LGBTQ+, you will join us for either the Sunday morning or Monday evening session. (emphasis added in all quoted passages)

We live in a world in which many if not most of the clearly defined, sharp edges of God’s word have been systematically rounded off smooth. And this is not just some rebellious insurrection welling up from the masses in the pews, but is being handed down as prescribed “doctrine” and rules by church leadership. Paramount in this trend is what we see illustrated by the aforementioned church documents.

Many today have co-mingled the concepts of “acceptance” and “love,” rendering down the latter to an insipid and ignorant version of its biblical definition. By their usage, if one does not “accept”—i.e., affirm, celebrate—another’s beliefs and lifestyle, one does not “love.” It is clear from their documents and preaching that these churches are not “welcoming” these “diverse” individuals for the opportunity to teach them the literal truth from God’s word, to teach them a foundational, biblical walk of faith to replace their formerly errant one, but are, instead, “accepting” them as they are with open, affirming arms, without the slightest intention of leading them toward the truth of Scripture.

But, as Solomon wrote, there is nothing new under the sun. This same thing was going on in the early, first-century church—not least in the city of Corinth—and has been going on ever since. The apostle Paul, as he opens our fifth chapter of this letter, reveals the face of *true* love, biblical love, godly love, for he makes clear to the Corinthian church that he will not countenance the “welcoming acceptance” of blatant sin.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-5.

v1

It is actually reported...

The adverb *holos*, modifying “reported,” could mean commonly or widely—that is, *the whole world knows what is going on in your church!* But a number of factors favor it being translated as it is in all our common versions other than the KJV: “actually.”

And just what was being reported to Paul from third parties?

that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife.

The word *porneia* in the Greek world simply meant “prostitution,” in the sense of going to the prostitutes and paying for sexual pleasure. The word, however, had been picked up in Hellenistic Judaism to cover every expression of extramarital sexual sin and aberration, including homosexual activity (Fee).

In this instance the form of *porneia* was that “a man has his father’s wife.” The language “father’s wife” tells us that it was not the man’s mother, but a subsequent wife of the man’s father, and the verb “has” (“to have”) tells us that this was not just a passing fancy or one-night stand, but an ongoing sexual relationship (Fee).

Though most people today would not classify it as such, to societies at the time and, more important, biblically, this was considered incest. Even with the licentiousness of the pagan world, this—having an ongoing sexual relationship with a woman who had been (or worse, was still) your father’s wife—was a bridge too far. David Guzik tells us that the ancient Roman writer and statesman Cicero said this type of incest was an incredible crime and practically unheard of. But let us not cite the questionable morals of those living in the first century Mediterranean culture; we will cite God’s word. [Please turn to Leviticus 18.](#)

In the first paragraph of Leviticus 18 the Lord (*Yahweh*) hands down to Moses the general rule that the Lord’s people are not to live by the standards of the unbelieving societies around them, but they are to follow the judgments and statutes of the “Lord your God.”

Read Leviticus 18:1-5.

Then in the next paragraph the Lord goes into the fine details of this, enumerating, it seems, every conceivable disallowed familial coupling. We will look at just the first two.

Read Leviticus 18:6-8.

To “uncover the nakedness” of someone means to reveal their nudity—especially the genitals; both words include an element of shame, disgrace, and the phrase came to mean (in many cultures, and for a long time) a euphemism for sexual intercourse. That is, the word for uncovering came in time to mean the *reason* for the uncovering.

Note here Paul’s focus: He cites the sin and those who have so committed the sin, but he does not dwell on the offense of the individuals, but on the reaction of the church to the offense. *That* is what shocks him, and it is that on which he focuses. And that is what makes this so pertinent for us today.

You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead,

We can think of any number of reasons for the church's disappointing response to this situation.

- Even though this particular practice (lying with one's stepmother) was exceedingly rare in that society, it was nevertheless a society of moral and sexual license, which would have been familiar to many in the church.
- Some commentators would argue that they should have known better, that the injunction in the Jewish law should have been sufficient for them to know it was wrong. But the church in Corinth was made up of a mix of ethnic backgrounds: "Roman freedmen, indigenous Greeks, and immigrants from far and wide" (Garland)—including a strong Jewish community. The city was diverse, but it was a Roman city, imbued with Roman cultural values.
- Finally, and more pertinent to our application, David Guzik points out, "More than anything, the Corinthian Christians were probably allowing this in the name of 'tolerance.' They probably were saying to themselves, 'Look how loving we are. We are accepting this brother just as he is. Look how open-minded we are!'"

But we also cannot leave out the evidence of the other problems in the church that Paul addressed in the first four chapters. He had used before two key words found in this extended passage: He finds the Corinthians to be "arrogant" (NIV, *proud*)—puffed up—and, in v6, boastful, glorying in themselves. This would explain why they are not hiding this situation: they are *proud* of themselves for showing such tolerance and "grace" to their brother, and in their arrogance they are convinced theirs is the correct response. As a result, the situation has become known, and then the news delivered to Paul.

Remember, too, the factional disputes with which Paul opened this letter. The Corinth church was riven with ambition and jealousy, *as well as* arrogance and pride. James, the leader of the Jerusalem church and the brother of Jesus ties all this together for us, showing that the attitudes and behavior that were prevalent in Corinth would *naturally* result in their insipid response to the type of scandalous behavior revealed in our passage.

Read James 3:13-16.

Adding up all this evidence, how else *could* the Corinthians have responded when one in their midst was behaving in a way that made even unbelievers and pagans blanch? In their disordered state, they considered their response to be gracious, even Christ-like. But Paul's judgment was altogether different.