

1 Corinthians 5:3

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

For I, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged, as present, to deliver — in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, ye and my spirit being gathered together with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ — him that has so wrought this, to deliver him, I say, being such, to Satan for destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

Your boasting is not good. Do ye not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Purge out the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, according as ye are unleavened. For also our Passover, Christ, has been sacrificed, so that let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with leaven of malice and wickedness, but with unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. I have written to you in the epistle not to mix with fornicators — not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the avaricious and rapacious, or idolaters; since then ye should go out of the world. But now I have written to you, if anyone called brother be fornicator, or avaricious, or idolater, or abusive, or rapacious, not to mix with him; with such a one not even to eat. For what have I to do with judging those outside also? Do ye not judge them that are within? But those without God judges. Remove the wicked person from amongst yourselves.

Absent in Body, Present in Spirit

Verse 3 does not support the independency of assemblies — for what would the apostle have to do with the matter in that particular way, seeing he was not in that assembly? He was somewhere else. Yet that does not change anything spiritually.

He couples himself with this action because he has grounds to do so. He speaks of himself as absent in body, but present in spirit, and having already judged — just as though he had been there in person concerning the one who had done this deed.

The matter was not open to question. Later in the chapter it is spoken of as leaven: when he says, *Purge out the leaven*, he is speaking about purging out the person. To be exclusive means to exclude leaven like this. If someone associates with such a person — has fellowship with such a person — he makes himself one with that evil and becomes leavened. It all falls under the removal of leaven. So excluding is not the excluding of Christians who belong inside; it is the excluding of evil, and of those who make themselves one with it. That is what is meant by the much-maligned word.

The Story of the Independent Man

A believer who was a practitioner of independency — who believed very definitely in independent assemblies — told a little story that illustrates the concept perfectly. He lived in Denver, Colorado, and was visiting a city in the Midwest, where he found an independent assembly of like-minded people. When he arrived, he discovered they were in trouble over some difficulty — talking, perhaps arguing, about the problem.

As it happened, where he came from they had faced the very same issue, had looked into the matter for some weeks and months, and he knew just what to do. And so — he closed his mouth. He said nothing. 'I believe in independent assemblies,' he said. 'I am not part of these people here. I belong back there. I could not help them. I would not want to say a thing. Let them work themselves out of their own troubles.'

And what did the apostle Paul do? The exact opposite. He was absent in body — yet why did he write this letter? Why did he write this chapter? Because in spirit

he was present with them. The apostle Paul did not believe in the independency of assemblies.

One Body — Not Independent Assemblies

The contrast with one-body truth is striking. Where is the joint of supply in that independent man's story? What an interruption of the body working harmoniously together as one! Ephesians 4:11–13 tells us: *He gave some apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.*

Are those joints of supply to minister only in one independent local place? Or for the whole body of Christ? The scripture says: *for the edifying of the body of Christ.* Not a little local assembly where each is careful not to help anyone outside its own boundaries — but the body of Christ, everywhere, for all of its members, *till we all come in the unity of the faith.*

And what we have in 1 Corinthians 5 is just exactly what those verses say. One of the gifts the Ascended Saviour gave was apostles. The apostle Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 5 — for what? For the edifying of the body of Christ. When we read 1 Corinthians 5 today, we are reading the result of one of those gifts functioning for the edifying of the body of Christ.

There are intelligent men who espouse the old teachings of independency and come up with all kinds of explanations. But what matters is not their explanations of themselves, but what their words and teachings actually mean. A teacher of evil doctrine is judged not by his explanations, but by what he has actually said and taught, and what his words mean.

The Loaf and What It Signifies

When one teaches independency and then breaks bread on the Lord's Day morning — what does that loaf signify? In independency, it can signify only local unity. Nothing more. But local unity is not a scriptural concept. There is no such membership in Scripture as membership in a local assembly. Scripture speaks of membership in one body, membership in one another, membership in Christ. Scripture knows nothing smaller than that as to membership.

It might be objected that part of the body is already in heaven — so what is being spoken of here below? But the scripture speaks of *the whole body*, ministered to by every joint of supply. That is not up in heaven. The one body in Scripture is looked at in its functioning, and its functioning is down here. The whole body — ministered to by every joint of supply — is on earth.

In 1 Corinthians 12, we read that God has set some in the church — first apostles, second prophets, then teachers, then other gifts. What church? The church on earth. The Apostle Paul was not connected to Jerusalem at all; he was saved on his way away from it. The gifts are set in the church on earth. Unity in Scripture is not local assembly unity. The loaf represents the whole body on earth. Every member is set forth in that loaf.

Assembly Action — Not a Substitute

The apostle couples himself with the act — but he does not replace the action of the assembly with his own. There is no substitute for the action of the assembly. He could not do this for them. If he had done it for them, they would not have proved themselves clear in the matter, as we see in the second epistle. They would not have approved themselves pure if some authority outside had acted for them.

And importantly, this action is taken by the assembly as gathered together — not by some gifted ones in the assembly, not by elders, not by a board, not by a care meeting or any other sub-group. Nothing more and nothing less than the assembly as gathered together to the name of Christ to do this thing.

Even in times past, it was sometimes reported that after the Lord's Day morning meeting, a brother would rise and announce: 'So-and-so is out of fellowship.' What kind of thing is that? It is not the consciences of those in the assembly — who have responsibility to maintain truth and holiness — actually acting. Just announcing someone out starts all kinds of whisperings and surmises. It is not good.

John Banks: Not Soft on Sin

There is a recollection of a time when, after three months, a care meeting was held regarding someone who had fallen. Someone spoke up feeling sorry for this person — as if others were not. Of course the saints felt sorry for those who had fallen into such a thing. But John Banks let it all come out. He had a way of doing that — letting those with something to say have their opportunity.

Finally he said: 'Brethren, I want to say something. Yes, we are sorry. And I agree that that person is sorry. But sorrow is not godly sorrow unto repentance — and I have not seen it yet.' He was a very gracious man; no one could fault him as being harsh. He was not a hard person. But then he put up a finger, looked around, and said: 'Besides that, brethren — our young people here have to learn that we are not soft on sin around here.' That made you sit back in your seat. It was very solemn. It was another three months before godly sorrow unto repentance came.

Three Objectives of Assembly Action — In Order

In assembly action there are three principal objectives, and they must be kept in proper order. First is the honour of the Lord Jesus, which must be maintained. Second is the purity of the assembly, which must be maintained. Third is that discipline seeks the good of the disciplined one, that there might be restoration.

The tendency is to reverse that order. How often one hears: 'The object of discipline is the restoration of a person.' There is something in that — but it is not pressed with the same force as the prior considerations. The first purpose is the honour of the Lord Jesus who is in the midst — the holy and the true. Then comes the purity of the assembly. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians, *Ye have proved yourselves pure in the matter.*

If they had not done so, what would they have been? Someone might say the assembly is not leavened simply by failing to put the leaven out — that it only becomes leavened if everyone is practicing the same evil. But that is not what Scripture says. *Ye have proved yourselves pure.* That implies that had they not acted, they would have been impure. Tolerating known leaven in the midst leavens the assembly. It leaves them in an impure state.

The Power of Our Lord Jesus Christ

Verse 4 is one of the most remarkable in the Bible. In it the full name and titles of our Saviour appear twice: at the beginning, *in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*, and at the end, *with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ*. He fills that verse. It is the most encouraging verse to those who love that name.

His power is there because He is there in the midst. The assembly is gathered together by the Holy Spirit to the one divinely appointed centre — to the name of the Lord Jesus. And the action is taken in that name: His authority is invoked. That authority stands — and no assembly in the next town can simply receive such a person when the power of the Lord Jesus has acted.

When this principle is brought before some, the first thing raised is: 'But what if the assembly makes a mistake?' That objection, raised as the first response, tells you that the truth has not found entrance into the heart. The right first response is: *I see that. I want to bow to Scripture on that.* When a theoretical difficulty is raised immediately instead, it is a way of rejecting the truth itself. It amounts to saying that God is not in control — that because of human frailty, this principle cannot be upheld. That is practical infidelity.

The power invoked is the power of our Lord Jesus Christ — not political power, not the manipulation of egos and constituencies. A politician persuades men; the apostle's work is to convict — and that is the work of the Spirit, acting on the conscience.

Delivered Unto Satan

In verse 5 we learn that Satan is an instrument in the hands of God — as in other scriptures also. God uses Satan; Satan does not use God. In Job 1 and 2, the thought was God's: He invited Satan's attention to Job — *Hast thou considered my servant Job?* So it was really God who initiated that. He uses Satan as an instrument for the accomplishment of His purposes.

One of the objects of this discipline was to deliver such a one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh. This the assembly of itself could not do. That is why the apostle coupled himself with their action: *my spirit being with you.* He had delivered others to Satan, as recorded in 1 Timothy 1:20, that they might be taught not to blaspheme. That was an apostolic power, not shared by the saints generally.

The apostles could also convey the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands. In 1 Timothy, when it speaks of the gift conferred upon Timothy, the prepositions are revealing: it was *by* the laying on of the apostle's hands — through his instrumentality — while the laying on of the hands of the elderhood accompanied

it.

This was a very heinous matter. The apostle coupled himself as an apostle with the action, for the purpose of delivering such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Grace came in, and the man was brought to repentance. It did not have to go the full distance — but that was the thrust and tendency of the action taken.

What an extraordinary act of faith that must have required. If the apostle had thought of committing someone to the care of Barnabas or Timothy, he might have expected good results — they were good men. But here he was committing someone to Satan. That must have required immense faith to know that God is so in control that even Satan would be forced to do what turns out to God's glory in the long run. It worked for Job. It worked for this man. And one does not for a moment believe the apostle was flippant about it. What a solemn thing it was.

That the Spirit May Be Saved

The act was not without love. *That the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus*. This did not mean the Lord Jesus had no regard for this person.

It is worth noting that the full title is not given here — it is simply *the Lord Jesus*. When we come across that simpler name, there seems to be something connected with affections. The day of the Lord Jesus, the day of Christ, the day of Jesus Christ — these phrases all refer to the heavenly side of the day of the Lord. The day of the Lord has a judgmental aspect with respect to the earth during the millennial epoch. But the day of the Lord Jesus is the heavenly side in which we all participate — the day when Christ's glory is manifested, and we shall be manifested in glory with Him. Even such a one as this had his place there. How gracious the Lord is.

One who introduces sin into the assembly of God is working against the proper affections of the saints for the Lord Jesus. The way the Lord is referred to — the Lord Jesus — touches upon affections. That was at the root of the evil this man was responsible for.

The Body — Neither Despised Nor Abused

God has given each of us a human body — and it is not intrinsically something to be abused or despised, but something to be grateful for as a gift from God. Some have taken from this verse the conclusion that the human body is a bad thing — and have accordingly done harmful things to their own bodies, thinking thereby to emphasize the things of the spirit.

But the verse does not say that. And it is not a proper conclusion to draw. Rather, we are to live for the Lord Jesus — body, soul, and spirit — each one of us a whole human being, devoted to the Lord Jesus in every way.

Most of the time, the extreme things that people do when they have wrong ideas about this do not really get to the heart of the problem in their lives. They may starve themselves, or engage in self-flagellation. And yet when they are finished, their spirits are no closer to Christ. Because that is not what the verse is about.

— *Study ends* —