

IMMORALITY

Immorality was as rampant in New Testament times as it is today. How did the early church respond to the immorality in the world, and what does that teach us for today?

Now

The Roman world was one filled with pagan practices, immorality, and situational ethics. Not that every individual was grossly immoral—in fact, it is evident that the typical Roman respected authority, cared for family, and worshipped family gods. Yet the pagan beliefs in that society pervaded the cultural environment and were particularly evident among the ruling class. Assassination was a common practice. Marriages were viewed as matters of convenience, to be discarded casually. Sexual images dominated much “religious” art. The excavations at Pompeii, for example, have uncovered large homes with prominent paintings of phalluses and sexual acts.

When Jesus pronounced the foundation of the church after Peter’s confession, He and the disciples were in Caesarea Philippi, the center of the worship of the god Pan, an especially licentious cult. They may well have been overlooking the temple of Pan at the time, where a river purported to lead to the home of Pan emerged from the hillside. “...the gates of Hades will not overpower (the church),” Jesus pronounced (Matthew 16:18). For anyone else this would be a preposterous claim. Many other spiritual leaders emerged around those times, only to disappear forever after the death of the leader (see for example, Acts 5:33-37). In challenging the popular culture and religious practices, Jesus proclaims that His church will stand up against even the most heinous practices.

Jesus never directly confronted individual immorality. When He met the woman at the well, He treated her with kindness and respect, merely pointing out the facts of her situation and calling her to sin no more after she recognizes Him as the Messiah. Jesus’ confrontations were not with individuals enslaved to sin, but rather with the religious establishment that sought to enslave those individuals with endless superfluous rules and regulations or with those who insulted the Father (such as the money-changers in the temple). He taught the precepts of God in a manner that focused on repairing the hearts of individuals rather than on trying to convince people to change behavior. He knew that a change in the heart would inevitably lead to changes in behavior.

The New Testament church never directly confronted the immorality of individual unbelievers. The only examples we have are of confrontations with

the immorality of individuals *within* the church. The best-known example occurred in Corinth. Paul had founded the church in Corinth, but soon after he left, things went sour in many ways. When he reached Ephesus during his third missionary journey, members of the Corinthian church came to report what was going on in their city. 1 Corinthians (which is really Paul's second letter to the church there) describes numerous misguided and immoral practices, but he reserves his most biting comments for a man apparently sleeping with his (step-)mother—*"immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles,"* he says (1 Corinthians 5: 1). He berates the church for arrogantly accepting this man's gross immorality.

What Paul says next is instructive:

"I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people [obviously, in an earlier letter]; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges." (1 Corinthians 5:9-13a)

Paul specifically says that Christians are not to judge the immorality of non-Christians! Later, it appears the Corinthians may have once again misinterpreted Paul's instruction by becoming entangled with non-Christians. *"Do not be bound together [Greek, **heterozugeo**] with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?"* (2 Corinthians 6:14) he says in a later letters. The word **heterozugeo** means to be yoked unequally, an image that would have been vivid in the agrarian society and harkened back to God's instruction to Israel not to plow with an ox and a donkey together (Deuteronomy 22:10). Such a practice would be highly upsetting for the animals and would be unproductive. Quoting Isaiah 52, Paul then advises the Corinthian church to *"come out from their midst and be separate"*, (2 Corinthians 5:17a). Clearly, Paul is not telling the church to isolate itself from the world physically but rather morally...*be separate* from their practices, be different, be distinctive.

Then

Far too often, we get it exactly backwards! Our modern evangelistic efforts are often aimed at attacking sinners, rather than showing them—through our deeds and our words—the incredible majesty of the Jesus and God's grace. Our efforts to shape American public policy along Christian lines are well-intentioned but misguided. The Gospel doesn't work through laws, political persuasion, or judicial decisions—it's designed to work its way into the heart of individuals, changing the world one person at a time. To a lot of the world, organized efforts of conservative Christians to block homosexual marriage, ban reproductive choice, erect Christian monuments, and support

public prayer are attempts to legislate morality—our morality. Do we really believe any of these will open anyone’s heart to the Gospel?

Don’t get me wrong—I believe single-sex marriages and abortion are detestable to God, but it will do no good to impose our will on those who have no relationship with God. Alabama Justice Roy Moore’s decision to haul the Ten Commandments monument into the Alabama Supreme Court may have been a courageous display of conviction, but it probably didn’t lead a single person to Christ. And the entire argument about prayer in schools and other public venues strikes me as rather silly. Jesus told us to pray in secret (Matthew 6:6), not at football games. Did the early believers lobby Rome to permit a public prayer before gladiatorial contests?

Of course, it is quite possible to advance these kinds of causes in ways more compatible with the New Testament examples. Groups of high school students gathered around a flagpole are more powerful than a constitutional amendment. Offering a loving alternative to abortion is far more productive than shouting epithets at people entering a clinic. Leading a quiet life, doing our best to live the kind of life God made us to live is far more persuasive than words on a block of granite. Practicing the kind of nonjudgmental love toward those rejected by the religious establishment—as Jesus did with tax collectors and prostitutes—is more likely to lead homosexuals to a genuine relationship with God than waving negative posters at a “Gay Pride” parade. I’m sure that some of you could cite examples of people convicted by confrontational tactics, but how many others have been dissuaded by such spectacles?

Does that mean we should do nothing about the behavior of others? *Me ginomai!* (may it never be!, or God forbid!) as Paul would say. First, we should certainly rigorously defend our fundamental right of religious expression (and defend that of others as well). There is a very real trend in this country to discourage genuine Christian discourse. Second, we should always be prepared to respond to those who are seeking purposefulness in life. As Peter wrote, “*sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame*” (1 Peter 3:15-16). Note that Peter assumes the world will slander Christians, but today it’s at least as common for Christians to be slandered non-Christians. Third—and this is one of the places we really have it backwards—we should confront sin and immorality with the *ekklesia*.

I’m not talking here about Catholic-bashing by Protestants or liberal-bashing by fundamentalists, but the direct, loving discussion of ungodly behavior within our church family. It does little good for evangelical Christians to be attacking Gene Robinson personally—both warning and encouragement are functions of existing relationships. On the other hand, it is certainly appropriate for church leaders to strongly warn both the Catholic Church for its handling of abusive clergy and the U.S. Episcopal Church for its ordination of a gay bishop. Both have brought shame to the church.

Paul told the Corinthians to continue to associate with immoral people (just not to be unequally bound together) in order develop relationships that can lead people to Christ. But he also ordered them to "*remove the wicked man [the man sleeping with his father's wife] from among yourselves*" (1 Corinthians 5:13b) so that (1) the man might be restored because he knows better and (2) his sin would not infect the church. The norm among many Christians today is to shun unbelievers and accept sinning believers. It is always important to recognize that the motivation for either action—associating with unbelievers and removing sinning believers—is a desire that the individual might find his or her way (back) to God. And, by the way, I'm certainly also not talking about the kind of pulpit accusations practiced by a few in conservative circles. Confronting sin needs to be personal—friend challenging friend in love. Only the most extreme cases draw the public censure Paul proscribed in Corinth. If one of his friends had been more of a friend and challenged his behavior, it probably never would have become the huge problem it did for the entire church.

The problem with attacking the immorality of the world is twofold:

- (1) When the church sets itself up as judge, people may feel unworthy of exploring a relationship with God. A line has been drawn between "insiders" and "outsiders." Those of us on the inside understand, of course, that we're all unworthy and need God's grace to hope for reconciliation. But how can those on the outside know that? From their perspective, the church is a club with impossible entrance requirements, and that's a terrible shame because the church of Jesus Christ really has the easiest entrance requirements in the world—just accept the free invitation.
- (2) The "outsiders" know that the "insiders" don't live up to their own standards and often view the church as a bunch of hypocritical, self-righteous, self-satisfied bigots. They end up judging the church by its flawed members rather than its perfect founder, and is it any wonder? If we're holding up a bunch of rules and regulations rather than Jesus, how else can they judge us?

The bottom line is that the early church was interested in two things: (1) bringing more people to know Jesus and (2) helping each other stay faithful. There is no evidence they were interested in reforming the world in any way other than one new disciple at a time—a powerful lesson for today's institutional church.

Discussion

Only a couple of "attaboys" in response to last week's issue on Confronting Immorality:

From Judy: *Your message is uplifting and insight in God's word. I will continue to read your work from the Bible.*

From Eric in Delaware: *Dick, very nice! Great article! These won't be comfortable concepts to swallow for many that wish to see American return to it's "Christian" roots, but your points are*

good ones and point out to us that our charter in the restoration movement is to restore first century Christianity, not nineteenth century Christianity.

From Gordon in Texas: *Your are so right brother. I am encouraged by your conclusions in this lesson. Thanks.*



Unsure about or don't agree with something in *Ekklesia Then & Now?* First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, post a message so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: Baptism (February 3)

© Richard M. Soule, 2004 Unlimited copy and distribution permission is hereby granted on the condition that this copyright notice is included.

Website: www.peculiarpress.com

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE, © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.