

Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? 1 Corinthians 5.6.

So far in our study of 1 *Corinthians* Paul has been theologising. Apart from being attacked for being a divided congregation, the Corinthian Christians can smile at Paul's theorising and say, 'Yeah, yeah, whatever'. But now in chap 5, he starts to point the finger. He points at a specific member of their congregation who is sleeping with his father's wife. It must have been electric when Paul brought this up. We criticise ministers today for being too wet. Imagine if the vicar got up in the pulpit one Sunday and picked on someone who was at badness!

Interestingly, the Greek word in 5.1 for 'sexual immorality' is *porneia*. (*Porne* was a prostitute). What was so shocking was that even pagan Romans didn't go in for this incest, v1... As a matter of fact, the Roman empire vehemently opposed such relations with one's step-mother, yet here were *Christians* indulging in it! Now all this was bad enough, but what Paul was really attacking was the fact that the other Christians thought it was OK. Actually more than OK, they thought it was 'smart', 'sophisticated', v2...

And here we get to the heart of the matter: *status*. As we have seen, the real issue throughout this letter is *snobbery*. Among the Corinthian Christians was a small elite who thought they were better than the rest, cleverer, more sophisticated, more *Christian* even! This clever-dick elite thought they were so smart, that they considered they were above the norms of morality. Rules were only for the 'little people'. If you look carefully now at chap 5, you will notice that Paul spends no time at all on the man himself who is sleeping with his step-mother. The people he is attacking are the others in the congregation for not only tolerating his sin, but for

actually *celebrating* it. *They* are his target, not the sinner. The NIV calls them 'proud' in v2, but the old AV gets the Greek better: they are 'puffed up'. Paul has already singled them out in 4.18-19..

In the 19thC the egomaniac and brilliant philosopher who had such an influence on Hitler, Friedrich Nietzsche, invented the term 'Superman'. This was the individual who threw off conventional morality and Christian restrictions. Übermensch was beyond good and evil, beyond rules and the expectations of society. You can see why it appealed to Adolf Hitler, can't you? After the death and destruction of the First World War, everything was being questioned. The so-called Bloomsbury Set of upper and upper-middle class intellectuals like Virginia Woolf, JM Keynes, EM Forster, Bertrand Russell, made this amorality fashionable. Morality was all right for the little people, the lower middle classes, to keep them in their place, but the smart set were above these bourgeois restrictions. So they championed free love, homosexuality and drugs. Protected in their privileged backgrounds, they sneered at the lower middle classes trying to keep the rules. They laughed at their wish to be decent and respectable, their worrying what the neighbours were thinking. Oh how frightfully sophisticated and 'adult' they were!

If that was happening in the 1920s (and still is today), it was clearly the attitude of some people 2000 years ago in St Paul's day, *and* within the *church*. It is easy to caricature Paul as terribly uptight about sex. This is false. Here he is not attacking the incestuous man, but the smart set who think they are so tolerant and he so 'advanced' in his living arrangements. He isn't on a rant against sinners outside the church, but bad attitudes *within* the church, vv9-13.. Paul is attacking the elite in the congregation.

We live in a society today where the highest virtue is *tolerance*, and the worst vice imaginable is to be judgemental. We're all inclusive now, aren't we? Every life-style is celebrated these days, except possibly the Christian life-style. Did you see *Come Dine With Me* the other night? The host was a genial gay man who happened also to be a witch. Once the guests were settled, his partner appeared and cast a spell. He assured them that everything would be all right. Wanting to appear tolerant and all-inclusive, the guests went along with it. But just imagine that the host was a Christian and his friend came in half-way through to lead them in a brief prayer meeting. I wonder if the guests - or the TV producer - would have tolerated that.

Paul was attacking not the *world* but the smart set within the church for tolerating this incest. The liberal Episcopal Church in the USA couldn't wait to consecrate a gay man as bishop a few years back. All the trendy clergy were desperate to demonstrate their right-on credentials by rushing to support him and denouncing the red-necked bigots who objected on scriptural grounds. Actually his being gay is irrelevant. He had still left his wife for another person and was an alcoholic - hardly bishop-material, especially in the light of clear scriptural teaching about the qualities required of church leaders in 1 *Tim* 3 and *Titus* 1. But you see, these sophisticated modern church leaders are above such old-fashioned morality. They have 'moved on' from all this repressive stuff.

If you want to become a big noise in the URC, don't preach repentance and Jesus Christ as only Saviour and Lord. Instead, be gay, or leave your wife for another woman. And all the tolerant liberals will swoon over you as someone really sophisticated and

will promote you. But preach Christ and the absolute necessity of trusting in his atoning Calvary work, and you will be branded at best a thicko, and at worst an unloving bigot. And so the elite brow-beat us into abandoning the clear teaching of scripture.

But in addition to this dishonouring of God and his ways revealed in the Bible, people are hurt. It's all very well for the elite in this country to smile indulgently at their darling offspring's drug habits and their sexual promiscuity. But people's lives are being messed up by this behaviour, and the worst of it is that the Church won't say anything. Why? because we are too worried we will be accused of being 'judgemental' and 'intolerant'.

Well, let me remind you all that *God* is pretty intolerant of this life-style, because it is disobedience of his clearly stated will, and it wrecks people's lives. 1 Cor 5.5 is a difficult verse.. But it seems to be suggesting that our fellow believers should exercise a bit of discipline over us, not to *crush* us, but to *save* us from ourselves and to prevent the rest of the church community from being polluted and dragged down. What we do *does* affect others. Tolerating behaviour like incest is not the sign of a sophisticated person, but of a selfish person who doesn't care, vv6-8..

Christ called us to be the church; to be a *new* community which would shew the world a better way of living. If we are going to be just like the world around us, or, as with this incestuous man being positively *celebrated*, even *worse* than the world, the church deserves to die. People still do look to the Church, expecting Christians to be better. So let's forget trying to impress the world with how 'right-on' we are, and worry more about what Jesus thinks of us. Let's learn to be a little more intolerant.