

Homiletics Analysis: 1 Corinthians 5

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

First Corinthians 5 is a concentrated disciplinary passage in which Paul confronts the Corinthian church for its failure to address a flagrant case of sexual immorality within the congregation. The case involves a man living with his father's wife — almost certainly an ongoing sexual relationship with his stepmother, a union prohibited explicitly by the Mosaic law (Leviticus 18:8) and regarded with revulsion even by Gentile Roman legal standards. Paul's indictment runs in two directions simultaneously: against the man for the sin, and against the church for its arrogant inaction. The congregation has not mourned; it has boasted. Paul then moves to formal instruction: though absent in body he is present in spirit, and in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ the man is to be delivered to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved. Paul then addresses the underlying theological disease the case exposes — the church's self-satisfied tolerance, figured as leaven spreading through a lump of dough. The remedy is purging the old leaven, grounded in the fact that Christ our Passover lamb has already been sacrificed. The chapter closes by clarifying the limits of the church's disciplinary jurisdiction: not an absolute separation from all sinners in the world, which would require leaving the world entirely, but a sharp separation from those who bear the name of brother and persist in sin. The world is left to God's judgment; the flagrant unrepentant brother is to be removed — not eaten with.

This Text — Intent:

God is seeking to produce in the Corinthian church — and in every church that reads this text — a recovered seriousness about the holiness of the covenant community and the genuine danger that unaddressed, celebrated sin poses to the whole. The church's boasting in the face of immorality reveals a deep confusion about what grace means and what the church is. Paul is not merely solving a pastoral problem; he is reconstructing the church's self-understanding. The church is a new Passover community, unleavened because Christ the Passover Lamb has been slain. To tolerate flagrant, unrepentant sin among its members is not love — it is a betrayal of what the gospel has made the church to be. The intent is simultaneously to produce grief over sin (not pride), to move the church to protective action (not tolerant inaction), and to recover a right understanding of church discipline as both a preserving act for the community and a redemptive act for the sinner. The goal of excommunication is not expulsion as punishment but restoration — “that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.”

Subject Sentence:

The church must judge and remove flagrant unrepentant sin from its midst because it is a holy Passover community.

Primary Claim:

God is confronting His church's self-congratulatory tolerance of flagrant sin and calling it to the painful, loving, gospel-grounded act of discipline — not because holiness earns grace, but because the Passover Lamb has already purchased a holy people, and to celebrate sin among them is to live as if He had not.

Interpretive Evaluation

The nature of the sin and the severity of the response. Most traditions acknowledge the severity of the sin described — incest with a stepmother — and agree that Paul's response is firm. The primary interpretive divergence concerns whether Paul's language ("deliver to Satan for the destruction of the flesh," v. 5) refers to physical affliction, spiritual death, or simply exclusion from the covenant community as a kind of exposure to Satan's domain. Roman Catholic and some Lutheran interpreters have read "destruction of the flesh" as potentially physical suffering or even death sent as divine discipline (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:30). The Reformed reading, supported by the parallel in 1 Timothy 1:20 and the overall structure of Paul's argument, is that "delivery to Satan" refers to formal excommunication — removal from the protective sphere of the covenant community into the domain where Satan operates — with "destruction of the flesh" referring to the mortification of fleshly desires through that exposure and discipline, aimed at spiritual salvation. This reading is preferred because it coheres with Paul's explicit salvific goal ("that his spirit may be saved") and with the rest of the chapter's logic, which is about separation, not execution. **Verdict:** The Reformed reading of excommunication as the primary referent, with physical suffering as possible but not primary, best accounts for the text's own stated aim of ultimate restoration.

The scope of "not to associate with" (v. 9-11) and the question of degrees of fellowship. Baptist and some evangelical traditions read verses 9-11 as a blanket prohibition on casual social contact with the excommunicated person, which is one defensible reading of "not even to eat with such a one." The Reformed tradition has generally distinguished between eucharistic fellowship (the Lord's Table) and ordinary social contact, arguing that the eating prohibition here is specifically about table fellowship as a sign of acceptance and covenant inclusion, not every form of social contact. This reading is preferred because (a) Paul himself argues in the same letter that buying meat in the marketplace — contact with the world's immorality — is not inherently defiling (1 Corinthians 10:25-27), and (b) the contrast Paul draws is between the world (where sinners are expected) and the church (where the name of brother is claimed). The prohibition is about covenantal recognition, not social quarantine. **Verdict:** The Reformed

distinction between eucharistic fellowship and all social contact is more carefully textured than a blanket avoidance reading, though the spirit of social distance for the purpose of producing shame (2 Thessalonians 3:14) should not be entirely dismissed.

Whether church discipline is still binding on the church today. Some charismatic and broadly evangelical traditions treat this passage as culturally conditioned — applicable to the first-century house-church context but not directly transferable to contemporary congregational structures. This reading should be **refuted** firmly. Paul’s theological grounding is not cultural but cosmological and gospel-grounded: “Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed” (v. 7). The obligation to be a community of holy unleavened bread flows from what Christ has done, not from first-century social norms. The passage is not addressed to a specific individual or a specific city’s customs; it is addressed to the church in its character as a Passover community. Every generation of the church is a Passover community; therefore every generation of the church is addressed by this obligation. The Reformed tradition’s insistence on church discipline as a mark of the true church (alongside Word and sacrament) is directly grounded in passages like this one.

The relationship between church discipline and the goal of restoration.

Wesleyan/Arminian and broadly evangelical traditions often emphasize the restorative goal of discipline (v. 5b, “that his spirit may be saved”) to the point of softening the severity of the act itself, treating excommunication as a last resort to be applied only after exhaustive pastoral process. This reading **partially holds** but overreaches. Paul shows no evidence of an extended failed process preceding this instruction — the church has simply failed to act at all. The Reformed reading does not eliminate pastoral wisdom about process, but it does insist that once the condition of flagrant, unrepentant, publicly known sin has been established, the church’s obligation is clear and not subject to indefinite deferral in the name of compassion. Genuine compassion for the sinner includes the act of discipline, which is designed for his restoration.

Key Canonical Support

- **Leviticus 18:8; Deuteronomy 22:30** — The explicit Old Testament prohibition against uncovering a father’s wife, establishing that this sin violated both Mosaic law and the creational boundaries the law codifies; Paul’s readers would have understood immediately why this case was indefensible.
- **Deuteronomy 13:5; 17:7, 12; 19:19** — The repeated Old Testament refrain “purge the evil from your midst,” which Paul echoes in verse 13 (“Purge the evil person from among you”); the church’s disciplinary act stands in direct continuity with Israel’s obligation to maintain the holiness of the covenant community.
- **Matthew 18:15-20** — The Lord Jesus’s own teaching on the process of church discipline, culminating in treating the unrepentant member as “a Gentile and a tax

collector” — exclusion from the covenant community; this provides the dominical warrant for what Paul commands.

- **2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15** — Paul’s parallel instruction to withdraw from those living in idleness and disobedience, using the language of shame as the mechanism of restoration; confirms that discipline-through-separation is a consistent Pauline practice, not a one-time emergency response.
- **2 Corinthians 2:5-11** — Almost certainly the follow-up to this very case, where Paul instructs the Corinthians to restore and comfort the man who was disciplined, lest he be “overwhelmed by excessive sorrow”; confirms that the discipline of chapter 5 was carried out and accomplished its restorative purpose, and demonstrates that exclusion is not permanent if repentance follows.

Aim:

To move the congregation from comfortable tolerance of sin within the covenant community to a gospel-grounded understanding of holiness that motivates both the painful act of discipline and the hopeful pursuit of restoration.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Paul reports the case: sexual immorality of a kind not found even among pagans — a man with his father’s wife	“It is actually reported” — Paul has heard this; the sin is public knowledge
2	The church’s response: arrogance, not mourning; failure to remove the man from fellowship	The indictment is double — the sin itself and the church’s celebratory inaction
3–4	Paul’s authoritative declaration: though absent in body, present in spirit; already pronounced judgment	Paul exercises apostolic authority through the text; the assembly is the vehicle of action
5	The sentence: deliver to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the	Excommunication as a redemptive, not merely punitive, act; salvation is the ultimate goal

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	Lord	
6	Rebuke of the church's boasting: "your boasting is not good"; leaven illustration introduced	The metaphor shifts to the community's spiritual health
7a	Command: cleanse out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened	Imperative grounded in indicative — "be what you are"
7b	Theological grounding: "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed"	The Christological anchor of the entire passage; Passover typology
8	Therefore: let us keep the feast — not with old leaven of malice and evil, but with unleavened bread of sincerity and truth	The church's ongoing life is figured as Passover feast; moral implications follow from the sacrifice
9–10	Clarification of a previous letter's instruction: not to associate with the sexually immoral — not meaning the world's immoral, which would require leaving the world entirely	Paul corrects a misapplication; discipline is for those who bear the name of brother
11	Positive restatement: not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother and is guilty of flagrant unrepentant sin — not even to eat with such a person	The list of sins is broader than sexual immorality — idolater, reviler, drunkard, swindler
12–13a	Clarification of jurisdiction: the church judges those inside; God judges those outside	The church has no disciplinary authority over the world — only over its own members
13b	Closing command, drawn from Deuteronomy: "Purge the evil person from among you"	The OT covenantal imperative applied directly to the NT church

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–2	The Case and the Church’s Failure: Sin Present, Mourning Absent
2	3–5	The Apostolic Judgment: Deliver to Satan for Salvation
3	6–8	The Theological Grounding: Passover Lamb, Unleavened Community
4	9–13	The Scope and Limit: Judge Those Inside, Not Those Outside

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The church must judge and remove flagrant unrepentant sin from its midst because it is a holy Passover community.

Primary Claim: God is confronting His church’s self-congratulatory tolerance of flagrant sin and calling it to the painful, loving, gospel-grounded act of discipline — not because holiness earns grace, but because the Passover Lamb has already purchased a holy people, and to celebrate sin among them is to live as if He had not.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] Recover the church’s self-understanding as a Passover community, not a therapeutic community. The Corinthian church’s failure was not first a failure of nerve — it was a failure of theology. They had misunderstood what grace creates. Grace does not produce a community where anything is tolerated in the name of love; grace produces a community that has been unleavened by the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb. When a congregation fails to grieve over flagrant unrepentant sin among its members — when it boasts instead of mourning — it has stopped thinking of itself as a Passover community and started thinking of itself as a support group. The first corrective is theological: the church must understand that it is what it is because of what Christ has done, and what Christ has done demands a corresponding purity of life together.

2. [Affections/Worship] Let grief, not pride, be the congregation’s first response to known sin within its fellowship. Paul’s indictment in verse 2 is not primarily that the church failed to act — it is that the church was “arrogant” when it should have been

mourning. The affective temperature is wrong before the action is wrong. A congregation that is cavalier about known sin among its members — that has learned to shrug, to normalize, to celebrate its own broadmindedness — has lost something more serious than its discipline process: it has lost its capacity to feel what God feels about sin within His people. Recover the grief. Sit with it. The pastoral response to flagrant sin in the body begins not with a committee but with lament.

3. [Will/Behavior] Carry out the act of discipline when the conditions Paul describes are present — flagrant, unrepentant, publicly known sin — rather than deferring indefinitely in the name of pastoral patience. Paul does not prescribe a multi-year process of attempted conversations before action; he confronts a church that has simply not acted at all. Every eldership and every congregation must ask honestly whether their reluctance to exercise discipline is wisdom about process or avoidance of difficulty. When a person bearing the name of brother is living in the condition Paul describes — flagrant sin, no repentance, public knowledge — the church's obligation is clear and timed. To defer indefinitely is not compassion; it is the old leaven left to spread through the whole lump.

4. [Mind/Belief] Understand church discipline as a redemptive act aimed at salvation, not a punitive act aimed at expulsion. The sentence Paul pronounces is startling in its severity — deliver to Satan — and in its goal — that his spirit may be saved. These two cannot be separated. The act of excommunication is not the church washing its hands of a difficult person; it is the church doing the most serious loving thing available to it in order to produce the grief, the exposure, and the crisis that might lead to genuine repentance. A church that removes a member without praying for his restoration has misunderstood the instrument. The discipline is the scalpel; the restoration is the surgery's goal.

5. [Will/Behavior] Distinguish sharply between the church's jurisdiction over its own members and its relationship to the world, and stop treating the two as equivalent obligations. Paul is explicit and careful: the church is not to police the world. The sexually immoral, the greedy, the swindlers outside the church are the world — and the world is left to God's judgment. To treat every non-Christian in one's social circle as a person to be avoided because of their sin would require "going out of the world," which Paul dismisses as absurd. The church's disciplinary calling is internal and specific: those who bear the name of brother and persist in flagrant unrepentant sin. This distinction matters pastorally because churches often get this exactly backwards — comfortable with ongoing sin inside the fellowship while treating outsiders as if they should already be living by Christian standards.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: This passage establishes one of the most foundational realities about the church's identity in Christ: the people of God are a Passover community, constituted by the sacrifice of the Lamb and therefore obligated to the holiness that flows from that sacrifice. The doctrines of both the holiness of God and the atonement of Christ

bear directly on congregational life — not merely on individual conduct. Paul's Passover typology is not decorative; it is architecturally essential. The church is what it is because Christ has been sacrificed; what the church does (or fails to do) either reflects or contradicts that foundational reality. This passage also establishes that the visible church has a real and definable membership with real obligations — it is not a porous gathering of spiritual seekers but a covenant community with boundaries, and those boundaries matter to God. Finally, the passage teaches that God's discipline — exercised through the church — is purposively redemptive: even the harshest act of removal is aimed at the salvation of the soul, reflecting God's patient, pursuing love beneath the severity.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: The Reformed tradition has historically identified church discipline as a mark of the true church alongside the preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments (Belgic Confession, Article 29). First Corinthians 5 is among the most important biblical foundations for that claim. Paul's insistence that the church must judge those inside — and that failure to do so is not neutrality but active corruption (the leaven spreading) — directly grounds the Reformed conviction that the church is a visible, defined covenant community with genuine authority to act within its own fellowship. The indicative-imperative structure of verses 7-8 is a concentrated display of Reformed soteriology: the imperative ("cleanse out the old leaven") is grounded entirely in the indicative ("Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed") — not "be holy so that Christ will accept you" but "be what you already are because of what Christ has done." Grace does not abolish the demand for holiness; it provides both the ground and the power for it. The passage thereby guards simultaneously against antinomianism (grace does not mean sin is irrelevant) and legalism (holiness is not the basis of acceptance but the fruit of the Lamb's sacrifice).

Main Takeaway

The Passover Lamb has been sacrificed — which means the church is already an unleavened community by Christ's act, and it must live accordingly. When flagrant, unrepentant sin is celebrated or tolerated among those who bear the name of brother, the church is not being gracious — it is being unfaithful to the sacrifice that made it. Do the hard thing. Grieve. Act. Pursue restoration. That is what it means to keep the feast.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing the passage to a procedural manual for church discipline while bypassing its theological foundation.** The most common mishandling of 1

Corinthians 5 is treating it as a governance text — “here are the steps for excommunication” — without grounding the obligation in Paul’s Passover theology. Verses 7-8 are not an aside; they are the theological load-bearing structure of the entire chapter. Any sermon that produces a disciplinary procedure without first producing a Passover theology has inverted Paul’s argument. The indicative (“Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed”) must be preached before the imperative (“purge the evil person from among you”) or the imperative will sound like legalistic housecleaning.

- **Preaching tolerance as a virtue rather than diagnosing the arrogance beneath it.** Paul’s rebuke is not that the Corinthians were being too lenient; it is that they were being arrogant — boasting — in the face of sin. Contemporary congregations often frame their failure to address sin as humility (“who are we to judge?”) or love (“we don’t want to drive him away”). Paul identifies this not as misguided compassion but as pride. The sermon must expose this inversion: what presents itself as grace is in fact a refusal to take the Passover Lamb seriously.
- **Treating the passage as a warrant for harshness toward sinners generally, including those outside the church.** Paul is emphatically clear that this text does not apply to the world. A sermon that leaves the congregation feeling justified in its disdain for non-Christian sinners has read the passage backward. The church has no disciplinary jurisdiction outside its own membership; the world is God’s to judge. The passage’s severity is reserved entirely for the internal case of the unrepentant brother, and it is motivated by love for his soul, not disgust at his sin.
- **Separating the act of discipline from the goal of restoration.** Verse 5b — “that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord” — is not a footnote or a softening qualifier. It is the purpose clause that defines the entire act. A church that excommunicates without praying earnestly for restoration, or that treats the act as permanent rather than conditional on repentance, has taken the instrument and abandoned the surgery. The second Corinthians passage (2 Corinthians 2:5-11) confirms that Paul expects restoration to follow repentance — and warns against withholding it when repentance is genuine.
- **Failing to address the ecclesiological implication: that the church has a real, definable membership.** The passage assumes that “those inside” and “those outside” are distinguishable categories. This assumption is foreign to many contemporary evangelical churches that have large informal attender populations with no formal membership or accountability structure. The passage creates discomfort that should be productive: if the church has no defined inside, it cannot do what Paul commands. The preacher must not rush past this implication. The passage is a call not just to discipline but to the kind of covenanted community in which discipline is even possible.

- **Extracting “do not even eat with such a one” (v. 11) as a blanket social quarantine without Paul’s own contextual qualification.** Paul’s own clarification in verses 9-10 demonstrates that he is not calling for the avoidance of all contact with all sinners — he explicitly rejects that reading. The eating prohibition in verse 11 is about covenantal recognition and table fellowship as a sign of acceptance, not a mandate for zero social contact. Over-applying this verse can produce a cold, fortress-mentality church that misunderstands its own mission to the world. The distinction Paul draws — between the world where sinners are expected and the fellowship where the name of brother is claimed — must be preserved.