

7.5 Final thoughts and applications [March 3, 2013]

A vital side of battling spiritually is the part that the church is to play as a community of brothers and sisters in a bond of one-anothering love. This is vital because, as Hays puts it, “The biblical strictures against homosexual behavior are concerned not just for the private morality of individuals but for the health, wholeness, and purity of the elect community.”¹ This perspective is clear in 1 Corinthians 5.9-11, which presents the church with no small challenge for practical application: **I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people--¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹ But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler--not even to eat with such a one.**

The challenge here is striking in the contemporary context of our culture’s obsession with sex and the prevailing pressures of that culture to squeeze the church into its mold. Notably, the apostle exhorts the church to maintain its corporate purity by casting out the leaven that contaminates the entire lump (5.6-7). Paul’s major concern is with the sexual sin of incest (5.1), which has its ethical definition in the Holiness Code of Leviticus 18.² Therefore, the precise disciplinary words of Moses to Israel (Deut 22.21, **So you shall purge the evil from your midst**) are addressed by Paul to the Corinthians as the new Israel (1 Cor 5.13, **Purge the evil person from among you**).³ Moreover, the sexual immorality in view in Paul’s imperatives of disciplinary purging (5.13) and dissociation (5.11) includes same-sex sex because a) the list in 6.9-11 where homosexuality is specifically cited is simply a parallel expansion of the list here in 5.9-11 (both lists are selective and representative; all sexual sins along with all other types of sin are in view representatively) and b) chapter five is deeply imbedded in Leviticus 18 where incest gets the most attention, but where same gender sexuality is *explicitly condemned* as defilement of the family of God (18.24-26). We cannot avoid the conclusion that the commands to purge and dissociate from any brother that is a sexually immoral person extend by implication to those who claim the name of Christ but who practice same-gender sex.⁴

¹ *MV*, 391.

² See J. Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 49-55.

³ So Hays, *First Corinthians Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: WJK, 2011), “Drive out the evil person from among you,” is presented as a word spoken directly to the Corinthians. There is no appeal here to analogy (“Just as God told Israel to drive out the evil person, so you should do the same”); rather, Paul in effect addresses the Gentile Corinthians as Israel. God’s word to Israel has become God’s word directly to them. The scriptural command with which Paul closes the chapter culminates his treatment of the incest problem and discloses the fundamental theological basis for his directions to the Corinthians. Sinful behavior of this sort cannot be allowed to corrupt God’s elect covenant community, 88.

⁴ Of course, the church must know that someone within the body is practicing such sin. In the current climate, many who practice same-sex sex intentionally, and quite vocally, make their conduct known claiming that their form of the practice is not sinful. Those who practice premarital sex do not typically make such public claims in the context of the church, even though it is acceptable behavior in the public domain between consenting adults. The “secular” drive for acceptance of all “consenting” forms of homosexuality influences people in the church to vie for acceptance, especially those who seek acceptance not of all consenting forms of homosexuality but of loving and monogamous forms without promiscuity, even though homosexuality is typically polysexual. Given that the condemnation of all forms of same-sex sex is univocal in Scripture and exists explicitly side by side with the condemnation of incest in both Leviticus 18 and 1 Corinthians 5-6, the church has the obligation to exercise tough love with moral courage and purge out the corrupt leaven from her midst. To be sure, the ultimate goal of such toughness is repentance and restoration; it is the exercise of tough *love*.

This demand is clear but perplexing.⁵ Without question, emotionally, it is difficult to apply the text given that the number of people within the church coming out of the closet steadily increases, and given the strong claims of the culture that Christians who identify same gender sex as sin are guilty of homophobia.⁶ Nevertheless, the text is plain in its insistence that the community has moral responsibility for the conduct of its membership and that the sinful conduct of the individual members in private, even if loving and between “consenting adults” negatively affects the entire community. Corporate responsibility has its roots in the stipulations of the Holiness Code where those who commit various sexual sins are to be “cut off” from the people or the land will vomit out the people of Israel *as a whole* (Lev 18.24-30; 20.22-24). Similarly, purging out the old leaven with its corrupting influence does not tell individuals to clean up their lives. Rather, it tells the church to purify itself by expelling the offender (a little leaven leavens *the whole lump* of dough, so clean out the old that you may be *a new lump*, 5.6b-7). The example of incest opens the door to the larger theme of sexual immorality including same gender sex. Purging and dissociating of those who practice homosexuality (and any of the sins listed in 1 Cor 5-6) is necessary for community discipline and purity because as Hays puts it, “we have within the church people claiming that their newly attained enlightenment or wisdom sets them free *precisely as Christians* to disregard the teachings of Scripture and tradition on moral issues...they boast in their liberated transgression of what they regard as outmoded norms.”⁷ In response to such claims, Paul says to us what he says to the Corinthians: we should mourn.

In this context, the holiness of the church regarding the sexual sins of incest, homosexuality, adultery, and so forth is a matter of its internal discipline and integrity for Paul speaks of **anyone who bears the name of brother** (5.11). To avoid all contact with the sexual immoral, **you would need to go out of the world** (5.10). Hence, Paul’s concern is with those who bear the name of a brother or sister and who practice various sins including the sin of same-sex sex. The immoral conduct brings discredit to the family of holy ones.

Therefore, purging the evil doer out of the church takes the practical form of *not even eating with such a one* (5.11). Table fellowship with professing Christians living immoral lives, blurs the identity of the church as God’s holy family. God will judge outsiders, but the apostle tells us that it is the church’s responsibility to exercise discipline over its own members

⁵ Surprisingly (or should we not be surprised), individual commentators such as Richard B. Hays omit explicit reference to the application of 1 Cor 5.9-11 to homosexuals (in both his book *Moral Vision* and in his *Commentary on 1 Cor*). Similarly, the *Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America on the Gospel and Sexual Orientation* (Crown and Covenant, 2012) omits reference to 1 Cor 5.9-11 in its otherwise quite complete treatment of all the relevant passages on homosexual behavior. Both Hays and the RPC study defend same gender sex as sinful and both do so with fairness and empathy. Perhaps, they err where error best occurs, namely, on the side of empathy and compassion. However, in his commentary on 1 Cor, what Hays says regarding the sexual immoral applies to the homosexually immoral. Therefore, in much of what I have yet to say in this paper I take from Hays’ commentary (82-92), but I paraphrase and orient it to homosexuality. I do this because homosexuality is my present subject. The same could be done *mutatis mutandis* with any other sin on the lists in Corinthians.

⁶ According to an article in the Detroit News (Feb 9, 2013), 62 percent of young people between the ages of 18 and 29 support gay marriage and 69 percent agree that religious groups are alienating young people by being too judgmental about gay and lesbian issues. This affects church leaders regarding how they approach these issues causing some to embrace a new ethical theology that welcomes practicing homosexuals or at least to work hard at finding better ways to love the sons and daughters of the church that come out of the closet. Justin Lee, the founder of Gay Christian Network, is a child of the church. In this article, he suggests that the more you listen to people and ask about their lives and stories, the more you are able to show grace and love, even if you do not agree with their conduct. This is a worthwhile suggestion to which the purging and dissociating requirements of 1 Corinthians 5 must be integrated with loving wisdom. That must be case specific and nuanced.

⁷ *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* by Richard Hays, 92 (italics mine).

(5.12-13). By closing the chapter with the call to purge out the evil one, Paul is clear that the sinful sexual behavior of incest, and by clear implication homosexuality (and all other sinful practices) cannot be allowed to corrupt God's elect covenant community. The church is a holy nation and therefore the members have a call to take active loving responsibility for each other. Discipline calls the church to challenge the individualism of Western culture with its "I'm okay, your okay" principle of enlightened tolerance. The church's lack of discipline in the name of tolerance can therefore be euphemistic for indifference and lack of moral courage.

Furthermore, we should consider if 2 Thess 2.14-15 helps us balance ourselves in the practice of dissociation: **If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.** It seems that we may *literally* eat with professing Christians who practice sexual immorality, *while having nothing to do with them except to warmly warn them* (in a brotherly way) by calling for their repentance. This suggests that in 1 Corinthians, the point of not associating is that we are to avoid fellowship at the meal table, but we can meet with them to warn them seeking their good. Removing and excluding from membership are inescapable implications but not to the neglect of a process of effort to communicate grounds of such censure. This call may be conveyed in a nuanced way by principles not unlike those that make up academic freedom such as open-minded humility, critical thinking, question and counterquestion in meaningful contact with "living" people who profess faith in Christ while being identified as sexually immoral. These principles are the servants of truth that promote godly wisdom. Their application ought to rest firmly on belief in the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit in spiritual renewal. Thereby, we patiently instruct those who oppose the truth waiting on God to give them repentance by His efficacious call (2 Tim 2.24-25). The absolute "do not associate" of both texts has the qualification of "warmly warn them for their good."

The hope of church self-discipline is repentance, transformation, and healing, but hope is sacrificed when there is no clear public confrontation, purging, and dissociation.⁸ Thus, Hays says, "We delude ourselves when we think that the caring thing to do is to be infinitely nonjudgmental and inclusive. This is quite simply a demonic lie that allows terrible cancerous abuses to grow unchecked in the church. We should know that a little cancer corrupts the whole body, so, surgery is necessary. We must cut out the cancer so that the body may be healthy and whole."⁹ To do this, the church needs bold wisdom from above.¹⁰

Finally, a word is needed regarding Christian higher education. Purging and dissociation are disciplinary measures of the church not the academy. Therefore, on one hand, the principles of 1 Corinthians 5-6 must be applied judiciously in Christian institutions of higher learning. On the other hand, Christian education ought to be marked by academic freedom without discouraging debate among students or between students and outsiders, even those outside the institution claiming to be Christian homosexuals. Surely, a code of campus ethics serves good

⁸ Each individual member needs the mutual exhortation of one anothering love to overcome the deceitfulness of sin generally (Heb 3.12-14) and the deceitfulness of sexual sin specifically (Eph 3.22; 1 Cor 6.9).

⁹ *1 Corinthians*, Hays, 90.

¹⁰ Much wisdom is necessary when the rubber meets the road in the fellowship of the saints. No one knows the heart and censoriousness is as unjust as it is unloving. Here, we might wonder when it is appropriate to inform the church so it can purge and dissociate with obedience to God and love for the neighbor. Same-sex sin may be practiced in mind or body (the mind affecting the body and the body involving the mind), but the church does not see the mind and people who side with inclusivism may be confused, even deceived, without being properly identified as homosexuals. The church must bend over backwards in charity to act in discipline only when the identity of being homosexual is clearly known. Then, the evil one must be purged out from the church.

order for institutions devoted to Christian education aiming to develop holy character as well as healthy minds. Even more surely, strong principles of academic freedom such as open-minded humility, critical thinking, question with counterquestion, and meaningful contact with “living” opponents are the servants of truth that promote godly wisdom. As noted earlier, this perspective on academic freedom reflects a philosophy of education that springs from belief in the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit in spiritual renewal. Therefore, the sin of same-sex sex may be deep-rooted but it is overcome efficaciously by the power of God’s gracious call. Our confidence, then, is in God no matter where it is that we must fight the battle with sin as individuals, institutions, and as the body of Christ called to be saints.