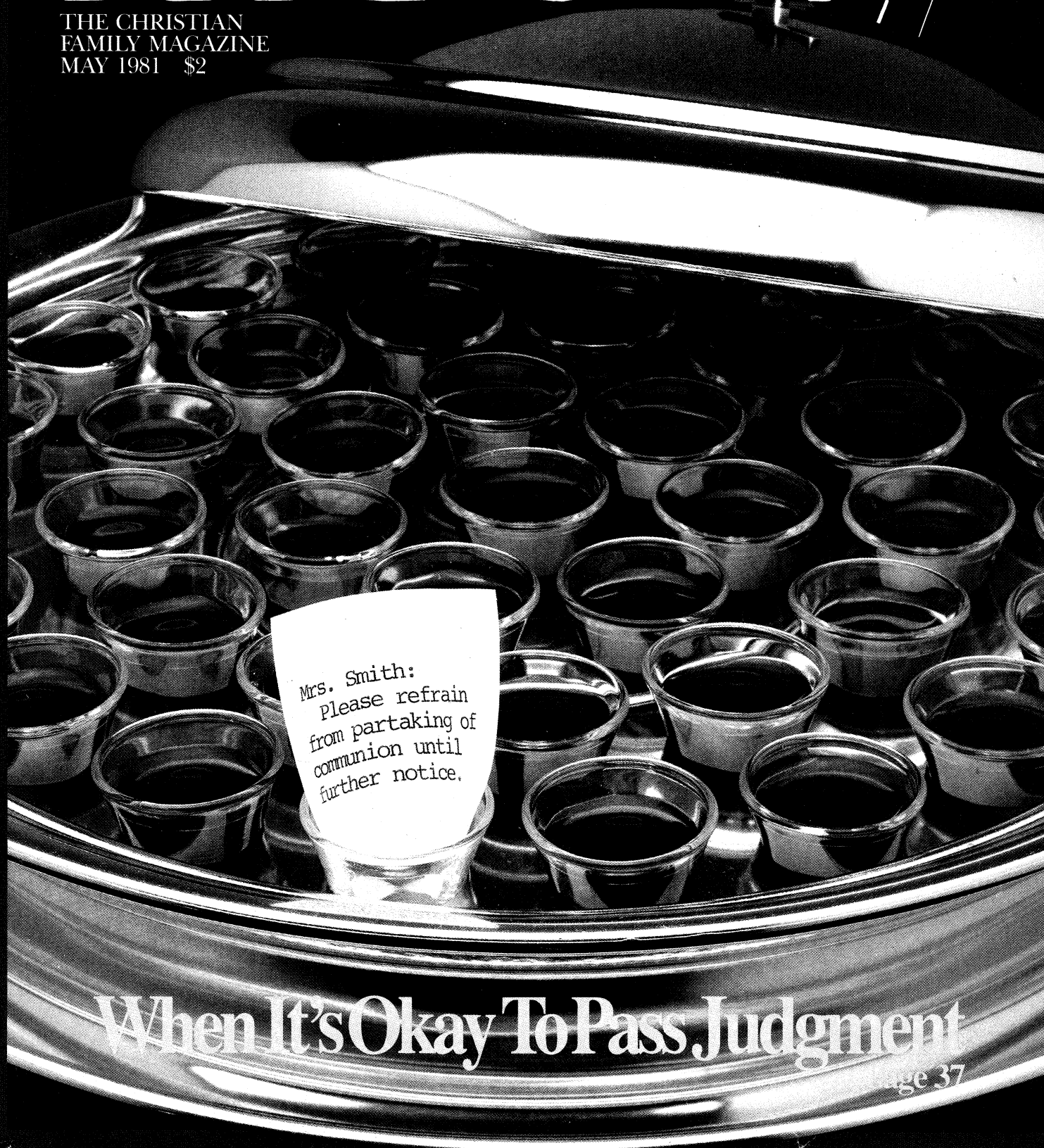


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Mrs. Smith:
Please refrain
from partaking of
communion until
further notice.

When It's Okay To Pass Judgment

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by Paul E. Engle

Names have been changed.

Jennifer's church friends gently supported her during her traumatic transition back to singlehood, but they couldn't help her ward off the pangs of loneliness the attractive divorcee felt as she returned to her empty condominium each night.

They watched as she responded to Bob, a married employee of a Christian para-church organization. Their casual luncheon appointments led to a serious affair.

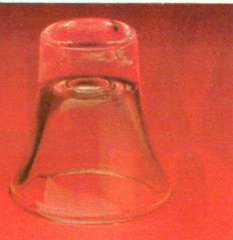
"It's none of our business," one of her friends said. "What they do is between themselves and the Lord."

Another said, "We especially don't want to offend her. She might give up teaching her Sunday school class. And, besides, who are we to pass judgment?"

When It's Okay to Pass Judgment



Many churches today are strong on doctrine and instruction in righteousness, but they ignore reproof and correction.



A third said, "What authority do we have over Bob anyway? He's not a member of our church. Let his co-workers handle this one."

Fewer and fewer churches today practice Biblical discipline. They preach the Word and celebrate the ordinances. They are strong on doctrine and instruction in righteousness, but they ignore reproof and correction.

The Apostle Paul didn't.

The church in Corinth faced a problem: incest. Even neighboring pagans condemned the grossness of the act.

Paul objected because God's moral law condemns incest (Lev. 18:8; Deut. 22:30).

If the problem had been privately known, the proper discipline would have required a private meeting, according to Christ's injunction in Matthew 18. When the sin is repented of and the situation resolved, no one else need be involved.

But in Corinth the sin was public knowledge and a blot on the reputation of Christ and His church. Indeed, Corinthian Christians should have felt deep remorse. If one part of the body suffers, every part should suffer with it (1 Cor. 12:26).

But the believers were bursting with pride. The text doesn't say why. It may have been conceit over their "enlightened tolerance" in accepting this weak man as a member of their fellowship.

Their hesitancy to act gave the impression they were condoning this immorality, if not encouraging it. Paul charged them to "put out of your fellowship the man who did this" (1 Cor. 5:2 NIV).

In this instance, a personal sin became the problem of the entire church because 1) it was widely known, and 2) the elders failed to correct and counsel the persons

involved.

Suppose your church encountered a situation like the one involving Jennifer and Bill. What action would you take?

Christ would have you confront the people involved. If that fails, take a third party—an elder or two. The last resort is to take the matter before the church. The Corinthian case was apparently handled on the third level because of its wide publicity.

Paul gives two methods of discipline for moral offenses:

First, a church was to address the problem, not as a local union or a personnel department would resolve an employment problem, but as those concerned for God's will and reputation. The members would call on His name prayerfully.

They could count on the prayer support of Paul and on the presence and power of the Lord Jesus. He had promised in the context of church discipline that "where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matt. 18:20 NIV).

The church must allow Christ's spiritual presence to control the tone of the gathering. Such meetings must not be occasions for personal vendettas or gossip. The

Satan's camp.

The purpose of this action? The *New International Version* says it was done "so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord." The King James and New American Standard Versions say it was done so that the physical body would experience affliction through the work of Satan, perhaps even leading to physical death.

The "flesh" would be destroyed, but the sinner's spirit would be saved on the day of the Lord. The intent of all proper church discipline is that temporal punishment might lead to eternal good. Repentance and restoration should be the ultimate goal. In the Corinthian case, this goal was accomplished.

Some churches have taken this skeletal framework from the Scripture and have added some practical procedures. They restrain the guilty person from participating in communion.

If this does not lead to repentance, they take further measures of increasing severity in this order: public mention of the sin without identifying the name of the sinner, announcement of the person's name, notice of imminent excommunication, actual removal from the fellowship of the church.

Sin left unchecked can expand like yeast in a batch of dough. It can quickly infiltrate and contaminate the entire church. This is pictured in the Old Testament Passover that inaugurated the seven day Feast of Unleavened Bread. Once the Passover lamb



The sacrifice of Christ, our Passover Lamb, to cleanse us from the leaven of sin requires church discipline.

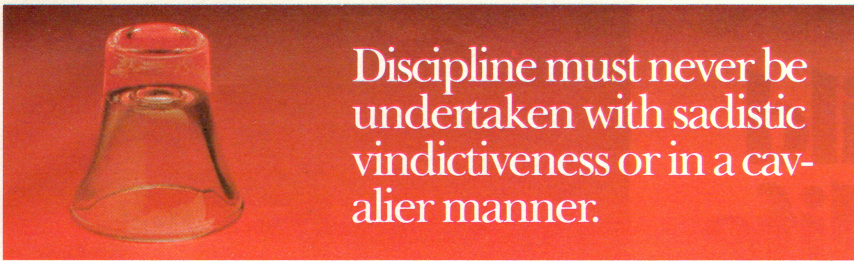
Lord Himself should be glorified through the proceedings.

Second, the church was to "hand this man over to Satan," a phrase probably synonymous with the "put out of your fellowship" in verse 2. Removing someone from church fellowship puts him within

was slain, God's people removed all traces of leaven from their homes.

Picture a fastidious housewife searching every corner of her home to find even the smallest crumbs of leavened bread. This Passover custom was familiar to

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Discipline must never be undertaken with sadistic vindictiveness or in a cavalier manner.

many Jews.

Now Paul exhorts that a similar practice be observed in the church: "Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast, that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Cor. 5:6-8 NIV).

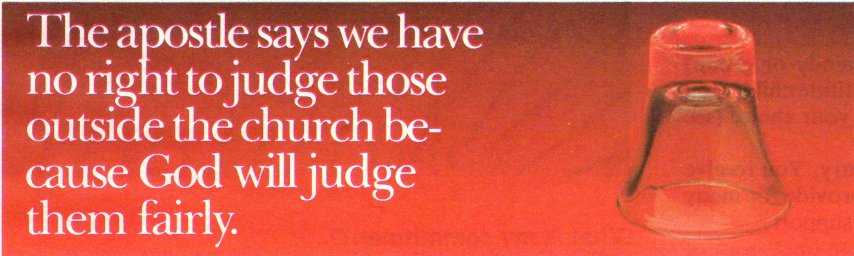
By this injunction, he meant

and one another against this list.

Paul distinguishes between the immoral unsaved and those who claim to be Christian brothers and who persist in open sin. He goes so far as to say "with such a man do not even eat."

Imagine the withdrawal pains—no more warm Christian fellowship and respect. No more spontaneous invitations for strawberry shortcake after a church service. No more pizza parties with Christian friends at a local restaurant. No more sharing mutual joys and concerns over coffee.

No more sharing in spiritual



The apostle says we have no right to judge those outside the church because God will judge them fairly.

that we should now be celebrating a continual Passover festival by removing any leaven of sin from among us. The sacrifice of Christ, our Passover Lamb, to cleanse us from the leaven of sin requires church discipline.

Because some call themselves "brothers" when they are living in open sin, Paul lists sins that violate God's moral law: "I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world.

"But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolator or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat" (1 Cor. 5:9-11 NIV).

We need to examine ourselves

service. No more oneness with godly believers.

Paul calls for total rejection.

Some of Jennifer's church friends thought it was not their business to become involved in judging her moral actions. Not so.

The apostle says we have no right to judge those outside the church because God will judge them fairly. Inside the church, our role is to exercise loving discipline within the Biblical boundaries of church responsibility.

Paul asks, "Are you not to judge

those inside?" (1 Cor. 5:12). His grammatical form in the original language implies a positive answer is expected. Of course we are!

Therefore, Paul commands, "Expel the wicked man from among you." This is the language of excommunication, perhaps drawn from Deuteronomy 24:7. It's hard to imagine how Paul could make the required action any clearer.

Fortunately, this isn't the end of the story. Apparently (2 Cor. 2), the church did discipline this immoral church member and the punishment accomplished its purpose. The man sincerely repented.

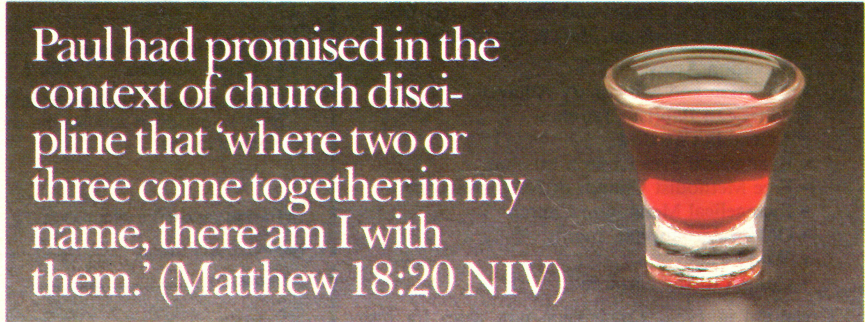
But lamentably, the church failed to take the next step and receive him back into fellowship.

So Paul wrote back to the church, saying, "The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. . . .

"If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us" (2 Cor. 2:6-11 NIV).

This is precisely the healthy balance needed in the contemporary church. Discipline must never be undertaken with sadistic vindictiveness or in a cavalier manner. We exhort, correct, rebuke, and discipline out of genuine love and concern that the erring brother or sister repent, experience the fullness of Christ's forgiveness, and be warmly accepted back into the fellowship of Christ's church.

This is the bottom line of all church discipline. □



Paul had promised in the context of church discipline that 'where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.' (Matthew 18:20 NIV)