

## Old New Questions (3)- Is the Church the Morality Police?

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(1 Corinthians 5:9-13)

### I. Introduction

- A. I spent day with Lynn's Dad on 81<sup>st</sup> birthday watching old movie *Elmer Gantry*
1. '60 Burt Lancaster movie based on 100 pages of novel by Sinclair Lewis
    - a. Elmer Gantry is a boozing, womanizing salesman who finds a new racket
    - b. He joins Sister Sharon Falconer's travelling fundamentalist revival
    - c. He is successful at captivating the crowds... and romancing Sis Sharon
  2. Gantry becomes crusader for public morals, whipping townsfolk into frenzy
    - a. He leads a mob that smashes bottles of whisky & shuts down speakeasies  
*As long as I got a foot, I'll kick booze. And, as long as I got a fist, I'll punch it. And, as long as I got a tooth, I'll bite it. And, when I'm old and gray and toothless, I'll gum it till I go to heaven and booze goes to hell.*
    - b. He breaks down the door a brothel and demands the police to arrest girls
      - 1) There he meets Lulu Barnes, minister's daughter he seduced, ruined
      - 2) Gantry is exposed; crusader for public morality had none of his own!
    - c. In Lewis novel, Gantry rises-n-falls several times (*appears in later novel*)
- B. It's been a long time since Elmer Gantry; the world has seen many crusaders
1. There often seems to be disconnect between **morality police** and **morality**
    - a. Catholic Church leads abortion opposition **and** protects pedophile priests
    - b. NAE leads protest against gay rights **and** Ted Haggard with gay prostitute
    - c. Most remember Jimmy Swaggart's scathing condemnation of Jim Bakker
  2. Let's face it, church hasn't been very successful as world's morality police
    - a. And we have often blunted our message to the world because of it
    - b. When you take on the mantle of morality crusader, two things are true
      - 1) **First**, people come to know you by those things that you are against
      - 2) **Second**, people will take notice if your WALK falls short of TALK
    - c. That was true of Elmer Gantry; that has been true of the church today
    - d. It doesn't take many scandals before the world stops paying attention
  3. We're asking "*New Old Questions*," things everyone used to know
    - a. "*Why should I believe the Bible*" and "*Must I be a member of a church*"
    - b. This week the question it's "*Is the church the world's morality police?*"

## II. Paul and the Mandate for Church Holiness

- A. The church is called to be God's "*called out*" holy people in the world
1. We are called to be holy because the God who called us is holy (**1 Pet 1:16**)
    - a. Paul saw a sense in which our holiness will judge the world (**1 Cor 6:2**)
    - b. It is through us that God's light to shine in the darkness (**2 Cor 4:6**)
  2. But in what sense are we to act as the world's moral conscience?
    - a. Should we use political power to force change on morals (*Moral Majority*)
    - b. Or organize boycotts to exert influence? (*AFA boycott of Disney, Walmart*)
  3. What does it mean for church to be God's light in a dark & immoral world?
    - a. NT writers spend very little time preparing church as morality police
    - b. Why? Because they are generally too busy morally policing the church!
- B. This is dramatically seen in what Paul says to Corinth (**1 Corinthians 5:1-2**)
1. The sin that has Paul outraged is literally "A man has his father's wife"
    - a. He was "*living in sin with his stepmother*" (NLT) Not splitting hairs here
    - b. Is Paul more outraged or dumbfounded that the church permits this
      - 1) He says this act is so bad that even the pagans haven't thought of it!
      - 2) Corinth was a seriously decadent place ("*Corinthian girl*" = prostitute)
    - c. So the church was doing something the Corinth couldn't imagine!
  2. Does Paul mean that pagans can't even imagine incest?" *Sure they could!*
    - a. **Egypt**: there was no taboo against incest; it was expected in royal family.
    - b. **Greece**: They had heard of incest— remember the story of Oedipus?
    - c. **Rome**: Claudius changed law to legalize marriages of uncles-n-nieces
  3. Scandal for Paul was the church's attitude toward sin—***they were proud!***
    - a. They were so sophisticated and non-judgmental— could accept anything
      - 1) But Paul comes across as anything but broadminded (**1 Cor 5:3-5**)
      - 2) Imagine if one of our elders got up and read a note like that!
    - b. It's hard to call Paul legalistic; no one wrote more on grace than Paul!
      - 1) But he flips his apostolic wig when they openly, causally accept sin
      - 2) The church has to be the church; that means we must uphold holiness
      - 3) If sin isn't really a big deal, then grace can't be big deal either!

- C. I heard Don McLaughlin a couple of years ago ask an interesting question—  
*“Exactly where was it the Corinthians learned that tolerating incest was OK?”*
1. We want to say, *“Well, they learned it from their pagan culture”*
    - a. After all, the Corinthians culture was saturated by sexual immorality.
      - 1) People went to temple to get a prostitute! *That was their church!*
      - 2) What do you expect from a church in Sin City? *It was their culture*
    - b. Paul says it wasn’t their culture! *Even pagans wouldn’t up with this!*
      - 1) Sure, Corinth knew all about sexual sin. *They were the experts!*
      - 2) What they didn’t know was how to do it feel **morally superior!**
    - c. It was church that came up with accepting sin while feeling/acting smug!
  2. Is it true we’ve seemed more concerned guarding worship than our lives?
    - a. People threaten to walk out if we use drama or special music or whatever
      - 1) They tell you, *“You go ahead with that, and I’ll just walk out door!”*
      - 2) But won’t walk out of movie where illicit sex acts are portrayed
      - 3) They won’t walk away from someone telling gossip or a dirty joke
    - b. Are we more concerned with church rituals than holy life before God?
    - c. Do we think that what we do during church is a real test of faithfulness!
      - 1) But if I cheat on my wife, gossip, get drunk on Saturdays, etc?
      - 2) Nobody’s perfect! We’re saved by grace! *Welcome to Corinth, folks!*
  3. We can’t tolerate sin because a little poison goes a long way (**1 Cor 5:6-7a**)
    - a. Accepting sin poisons the church; it turns us from God and toward self.
      - 1) A church that accepts sin and ignores holiness is not the church
      - 2) The point of the cross is to save us from the power of sin
      - 3) If we can just ignore sin and tolerate sin, Jesus died for nothing
    - b. Remember the old analogy of church as a boat that sailing to God
    - c. Boat has to be on the sea (world), but if sea gets into the boat— it sinks!
  4. Sooner or later, Paul always goes back to the cross—here it is (**5:7b-8**)
    - a. The reason we cannot tolerate sin is because Christ has been sacrificed
    - b. Why can’t we accept sin in our lives or as church? *Because of the cross!*
- D. If the church gets so sophisticated it is not against sin—it is not the church

### III. Holiness is the Mandate for the Church

- A. We need to remember that NT churches didn't have church bulletins
  - 1. Paul's letter to Corinth was transmitted very simply—read to the church
    - a. That meant that everyone looked at the brother living with stepmother
    - b. Did brother reading try not to look over at him... or glare directly at him
  - 2. Think about that public reading during this next section (**1 Cor 5:9-11**)
    - a. Is Paul naming sins at random here... or pointing right at folks?
    - b. Paul makes it clear here that incest is no the only sin Paul has in mind
    - c. Do the folks at Corinth get the point? More to point, do we get it?
- B. Paul isn't interested in a campaign to improve public morals in Corinth
  - 1. He isn't Elmer Gantry leading mob to close down speakeasies and brothels
    - a. He demands church to be holy in a world full of speakeasies and brothels!
    - b. The point isn't to make the world behave to make it easier to live holy
    - c. The only way to get away from worldly influences is to leave world!
  - 2. Paul says that it is simply not our job to condemn world (**1 Cor 5:12-13**)
    - a. Judging the world is God's job; we are to be faithful enough to let Him
    - b. Our job is to live holy lives and to encourage holiness from one another
      - 1) That means we must hold one another to a seriousness about sin
      - 2) We must encourage each other to take obedience very seriously
      - 3) We must challenge each other when we stop seeing sin as serious.
  - 3. The modern church continues to get the moral cart in front of ethical horse
    - a. We tend to be hard on sins "*out there*"— like abortion, homosexuality,
      - 1) For many, the slogan "family values" largely applies to those 2 issues
      - 2) **Barna**: #1 way young people (16-29) see church is as anti-gay (91%)
    - b. But let's face it, the church can be pretty easy on our own in-house sins
      - 1) We have virtually same divorce rate as culture. *A higher standard?*
      - 2) We fight, fracture & fragment... while called to be known for love
- C. Paul tells us our job is to live holy lives and hold each other accountable
  - 1. Our job isn't to judge the world or even change it so it's easier to live right
  - 2. We are to live holy, loving lives so that the world can see Christ in us.