

Question: How are we as a church to relate to believers in sin?

Answer: 1 Corinthians 5:11 says, “But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one.” Paul exhorted the Corinthian Christians “not to associate” with anyone who was a part of their church (or in principle, who claimed to be a Christian), who was involved in overt, unrepentant sin. In biblical times, eating with others was the greatest expression of intimate fellowship. Today, this may not be as true. Regardless, the principle remains: If another Christian has refused to repent of overt sin and rebellion against God (e.g., sexual relations with one’s stepmom, 5:1), we must NOT have fellowship with him/her. This means that we don’t spend time (“associate”) with such a person for the purpose of friendship. Rather, if and when we do spend time with such a person, we do so for the purpose of lovingly confronting and correcting the believer’s behavior. Please notice that Paul makes it clear that this principle ONLY applies within the church (5:10–12). If someone in the world is living in a similarly sinful manner, we CAN associate with that person because he/she is a sinner, NOT a saint (i.e., a Christian who should know better). Obviously, Christians are held to a higher standard than the world. Since God has called us to reach out to the lost with the love of Christ, we must go after them while they are neck deep in their sin. However, for the sake of the purity of the church, we must NOT tolerate scandalous and unrepentant sin within the body (5:6–8, 13).