

Conduct Prohibited Amongst Disciples

The New Testament, and Paul's writings in particular, instruct congregations to maintain a clearly-articulated standard of conduct. New attendees learn of this standard early on and established congregants well familiar with it practice self-governance to keep intervention at an absolute minimum.

Obviously, no congregation and no individual is perfect; the struggle against sin is ongoing for each of us. However, some misconduct is so destructive as to endanger individual lives and/or the entire congregation. It is these egregious sins that are forbidden by the New Testament from residing within the congregation.

When such behaviors occur, the congregational council, an institution required by scripture—both in the Torah and the New Testament drawing from the latter—evaluates the case and helps resolve it, compelling expulsion if necessary.

The goal is neither a heavy-handed “police state” nor a disorderly playground for social predators. It is, rather, a nurturing environment where we each govern ourselves according to a clear and common standard, focused on healthy relationships and positive, constructive endeavors.

In the context of forbidden conduct, the behaviors especially barred, fall under two categories: (1) those excluded from entry into the congregation and (2) those not allowed to linger at length. The first category was articulated by the Kehilah Yerushalayim (Council or Conference of Jerusalem) as described in Acts 15. The second category is variously enumerated in Paul's letters.

Conduct Prohibited from Entry

Acts 15:20 & 29 identify four behaviors that are prohibited from entry into the congregation. Most of these are categories that each embrace a range of behaviors as follows:

Fornicators (Those Involved in Sexual Engagements Outside Marriage), including:
Adulterers

[Sh'mot (Exodus) 20:13, Vayikra (Leviticus) 20:10]

Homosexuals, Transsexuals Pedophiles & Other Deviants

[D'varim (Deuteronomy) 23:17, Romans 1:26-27]

Those in a Sexual Relationship with a Divorced Person¹

[Mark 10:1-12, Luke 16:18]

Those Cohabiting outside Marriage

[Romans 13:13]

Sex Traffickers & Prostitutes

Those Involved in Any Other Sexual Practices Prohibited by Torah

God designed marriage as the ultimate human relationship. Within a marriage, we see the ultimate expression of spiritual oneness, emotional oneness and physical oneness. While a beautiful and fulfilling gift when used appropriately within marriage, sex leads to permanent spiritual, emotional and, often, physical damage when engaged in outside of God's design.

Idolaters

Those Whose Worship and/or Religion Involves Any Kind of Statues or Icons
Those Whose Religious Customs Include Pagan Customs
Sorcerers, Mediums, etc.

Idolatry, in its many forms, is a direct affront to God's authority and, because he is holy, alienates us from his divine presence. It is, thus, a particularly serious sin, as demonstrated by countless biblical examples. One prominent form of idolatry today shows up in the various pagan festivals, many of which have been co-opted by Christianity (e.g. Christmas, Easter, Halloween). Christians generally celebrate these holidays with good intentions, noting that, while pagan in origin, the "meaning has been changed so that Jesus is now the focus." However, Aaron tried the same approach with the golden calf, proclaiming a "feast to YHVH" [Sh'mot (Exodus) 32], which did not please YHVH at all. Further, the Bible [D'varim (Deuteronomy) 12:30-32] is clear that we are to serve YHVH on his terms and not borrow pagan customs, even if we try to do so in service of YHVH.

Those Who Eat or Shed Blood

Those Who Consume Blood as Food
Military Personnel
Weapons Contractors & Weapons Contract Employees
Those Engaged in Violent Criminal Activity
Those Involved in or Who Support Abortion
Those Involved in or Who Support Euthanasia

Abstaining from blood can be understood a couple of ways. First, it is a prohibition against eating blood [D'varim (Deuteronomy) 15:23]. Its other aspect is the abstention from bloodshed. The bible is straightforward in its condemnation of bloodshed for the most part, though military service is one area of confusion. While military action is necessary at times, the biblical record of godly warfare follows a pattern where the leadership seeks God's council before each battle, often with severe repercussions when this was ignored. Israel's armies were conscripted for particular crises and not, as rank-in-file, maintained as career-professionals. While a detailed discussion of the biblical perspective on warfare is reserved for another forum, suffice it here to say we discourage the pursuit of careers in the military, while aware that those already in this scenario may not have the ability to make an immediate career change.

Those Who Eat the Meat of Strangled Animals

While the Bible does require that meat animals be properly bled [Devarim (Deuteronomy 12:16)], there is no direct prohibition against strangulation as a method of slaughter. However, in Acts 15:20, Yaakov gives deference and credence to the Jewish oral law which does preclude this type of slaughter. We observe all the Biblical food laws, found in Vayikra (Leviticus) 11, as did the New Testament believers. By extension, we take Yaakov's instruction for newcomers to avoid things strangled to apply to the biblical food laws in general. As food plays such a central part of community fellowship, we expect those who join us to follow suit.

Those who earnestly desire to abandon any of the above lifestyles and practices can, in some cases, be assisted by this community outside the holy assembly until such time as they can meet assembly criteria.

Prohibited Persistent Conduct

Even as it excluded certain behaviors/lifestyles altogether from entry into the congregation, the Kehilah Yerushalayim provided initial leniency with others. This was because, as it stated, Moshe (Moses), a reference to the Torah, is taught every Shabbat in the synagogues. By hearing each week from the cycle of the Torah readings, the newcomer will gradually learn what is expected of them—positively and prohibitively. Of course, this presumes one's attendance at the synagogue where the Torah cycle is read every Shabbat—which should go without saying, but need be stated nonetheless.

Behaviors which cannot be long tolerated by the congregation, but neither can they all be arrested immediately or all at once, are enumerated principally in Corinthians 5:9-11, Ephesians 5:3-5 and Colossians 3:5,8. The context here is less about isolated occurrences and more concerned with characteristic behavior, though the discretion of the council is applicable here. Paul enumerates them² as follows:

Uncleanness – Yahoshua said, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitened graves which outwardly indeed appear beautiful, but within are full of bones of the dead, and of all uncleanness.” The word he used—**מִטְוֵנָה** (m'tunaf)—can mean filthy, nasty, soiled, grubby, squalor, sordid, mucky, sloppy, slobby, etc. Consider the filthiest washroom you ever entered. Creating such places or leading a life analogous to the same separates us from God and infects others.

Reviling – This is someone who engages in **לִשׁוֹן הָרַע** (lashon hara)—an “evil tongue”—speaking disparagingly of or to others. We're not just talking criticism here. This can be criticism before an inappropriate audience, harshness, verbal abuse, etc.

Substance Abuse – Alcoholic drink consumed in moderation can be a blessing. However, any mind-altering substance abused is a life-destroyer—not just for the abuser, but for their household.

Plundering, Extortion – This pertains mainly to our business practices, but extends to how we acquire anything. Because some business are inherently fraudulent, those engaged in them must discontinue them in favor of honorable, productive vocations if they wish to be part of a holy community. [Ephesians 4:28]

Coarseness, Obscenity & Inappropriate Sexual Speech – This is foul language. It covers expletives and sexual innuendo.

Stupid Talk – Lies, advocating harmful or unwise strategies or conduct, lauding the unrighteous for their misconduct—all fall under this description. Scripture advises us to be circumspect in our words. Perhaps the most cautionary is Yahoshua’s statement, “I say to you that for all the words which a man will speak, he will be obliged to give an account on the Day of Judgment.” [Mattityahu (Matthew) 12:36]

Mockery – Aside from the hurt it causes others, which is no small matter, mockery reflects disrespect for the fact we are made in God’s image; it is an affront to his creative work.

Avarice, Covetousness, Greed – The word Paul uses corresponds with the Hebrew **בצע** (betza)—unjust gain. Those who employ others at depressed wages are among those guilty of this.

Misdirected Passion – This can range from misdirected affections to allowing oneself to be overcome by inappropriate desires. Though the word is not used in the Septuagint version, the concept very much applies to the tragic account of Amnon and his half-sister, Tamar, where we read, “Amnon was distressed, even to becoming sick, because of his sister Tamar. For she was a virgin, and it was hard in the eyes of Amnon to do anything to her.” [2 Shmu’el (Samuel) 13:2]

Desire, Craving, Longing, Desire for the Forbidden – This is a very broad brush. When we read in the account of the Flood, “YHVH observed that the evil of man was great on the earth, and every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the day long,” this is the concept. In Hebrew, it is referred to as **יצר הרע** (yetzer hara)—evil imagination. Much of our media and entertainment are immersions in yetzer hara. These are thoughts and activities which place a chasm between us and God.

Conclusion

We are under no delusions that we or our community are perfect. We are also mindful of Yahoshua’s parable of the wheat and the tares—that the ultimate differentiation between the righteous and the unrighteous will occur on the Day of Judgment. Conditions and attitudes such as indifference, apathy, laziness, timidity, etc. are not grounds for expulsion, though they could cost one salvation. So there will always be challenges wherever mortals gather. However, to the extent we can

provide a safe and nurturing environment rather than being preoccupied with damage control, we can grow in strength together and be a blessing to each other and those with whom we come in contact.

1 Those who have divorced and remarried their original spouse where no intervening domestic/sexual relationship has occurred are not necessarily viewed as fornicators by this community. Those who have cohabited with someone out of wedlock and subsequently married a third party are, along with the third party, viewed as fornicators by this community.

2 A common strategy is to isolate Paul as though he were some rogue with unique ideas and a burr in his saddle. However, the vices he enumerates are timeless and universal. The problems they posed for congregations were well-known in his day and for generations before and after—and they remain well represented today.