

What does it mean to “hand one over to Satan?”

On two occasions, the Apostle Paul makes a judgment on three Christians, two from Ephesus and one from Corinth, with the following phrases “deliver such a one to Satan” (1 Cor 5:5) and “handed over to Satan” (1 Tim 1:20). This seems contradictory for Christian behavior. Is this inviting Satan to demonize these Christians? Is this condemning one’s salvation? Why isn’t there any forgiveness? What does it mean to “hand one over to Satan”?

1. Examine 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 and 1 Timothy 1:18-20. What was the offense committed by certain church members? What was the problem with the church?

In 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, there was a man who was having a sexual affair with his stepmother, which was not only a violation of Jewish marriage laws (Lev 18:8, Deut 22:22), but also intolerable for Roman (Gentile) civil law. Greek philosophy promoted immorality, in part from the mistaken notion of achieving immortality through cultic practices of prostitution, by believing that spirituality was a function of one’s mind and unaffected by the desires and activities of the physical body.

Instead of grieving for the sinning Christian, the church did not recognize the sin of immorality. The church took pride that it existed within the congregation, because they felt it was a reflection of their spiritual progress and maturity. For Corinthians, Christian liberty included sexual freedom.

In 1 Timothy 1:18-20, Hymenaeus and Alexander were guilty of blasphemy. Blasphemy is verbally cursing, slandering, or showing contempt for God. It is a violation of the third of the Ten Commandments: “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain” (Ex 20:7). In the Old Testament, this offense brought the death sentence (Lev 24:15-16).

2. Should the phrase “handed over to Satan” be read literally or figuratively? Why?

Taken literally, the phrase “handed over to Satan” would be very difficult to understand. It would suggest that a Christian is being abandoned to Satan and presumably lose their salvation. Yet it is Jesus who provides salvation, which cannot be lost or taken away by any man or Satan.

One approach to understanding this phrase is to consider Paul’s perspective. Paul understood Satan as “the god of this age” (2 Cor 4:4) and “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph 2:2); Paul saw earth as Satan’s realm and dominion. Paul personifies the evil forces of the world that have conquered human beings and hold them as prisoners of war as “rulers and authorities” (Col 2:15).

Paul understood the significance of Christ’s crucifixion; it “disarmed the rulers and authorities” (Col 2:14-15) and “rescued us from the domain of darkness (Col 1:13).

Paul used the phrase “body of Christ” as a symbol of the church where the works of the Holy Spirit was present (Rom 12:5-21; 1 Cor 12:12-27; Eph 4:1-16; Col 1:18-24). Paul saw the church as a refuge from the realm and dominion of Satan.

The phrase “handed over to Satan” can only be understood in a figurative sense, and it is understood as an expression for excommunication where one is cast out from the “body of Christ” and into the realm of Satan.

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3. What did Paul intend by excommunicating the offending church members? What does Paul mean in 1 Corinthians 5:5 “... for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus”? What does he mean in 1 Timothy 1:20 “.., so that they would be taught not to blaspheme”?

There have been a few interpretations for the phrase “for the destruction of his flesh.”

The Jewish perspective intended that excommunication from the safety of the community would lead to premature death of the offender; without any protection, God would have free hand to exact His punishment. However, it was not likely that Paul was taking this view, because he used the phrase “handed over to Satan” not God.

The Greek philosophical perspective would understand this as affirming their dichotomous view of man – namely that man’s physical attributes are separate from his spirit. However, if Paul meant this, he faced the contradiction of refuting Corinthian sexual liberties and teaching about bodily resurrection.

Throughout his epistles, Paul often used the terms “flesh” and “spirit” with contrasting intent but never as two distinct parts of a man. Paul used the terms with a religious meaning to reflect a man’s orientation towards God (Rom 7:4).

The term “flesh” meant that the man (physical body, mind and spirit) was living a life apart from God.

The term “spirit” meant that the man (physical body, mind and spirit) was living a life honoring God.

Thus Paul used the phrase “for the destruction of his flesh” to mean for the destruction of the offender’s sinful ways. In the excommunication in 1 Corinthians 5:5, Paul hoped that in the realm of Satan, the offender would recognize that immorality leads to death, and that death to immorality would lead to life. A similar intent for blasphemy was hoped for with the excommunication of Hymenaeus and Alexander in 1 Timothy 1:18-20.

While the excommunication was intended to help the sinner recognize his blatant sin within the church, the other intent was to purify the church so that incipient sin would not grow into a larger problem as “a little yeast” permeating “the whole batch of dough” (1 Cor 5:6).

Reference:

1. Kaiser WC, Davids PH, Bruce FF, Brauch MT, *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, Chicago, IL: Inter-Varsity Press (1996).

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