



Settling Disputes in the Church -- 1 Corinthians 6:1-11

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul instructed the church to practice church discipline in a case of gross sexual immorality. This discipline was designed to protect the church from the spreading and permeating influence of sin and to bring restoration to a man who was on his way to destruction. The man's sin was well known within the church and non-Christian community and would greatly damage any positive influence the church might be able to have for Christ. The pagan world would have criticised the church for a type of immoral behaviour that even they did not condone.

In chapter 6 the subject of the divisive and damaging affects of lawsuits amongst church members is introduced. Here is a problem that needed to be handled quickly within the boundaries of the church instead of in public courts of law. 1 Corinthians 6:1-11 provides helpful teaching about how the church should handle internal grievances, disputes, and conflicts.

I. Grievances Amongst Christians Should be Handled Within the Church

The problem is clearly stated in 1 Cor. 6:1, ***“When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints?”*** Church members were taking each other to courts of law to settle their disputes. It is not hard to imagine the damage that was done to the reputation of the church by their litigiousness. Paul's question is asked with an air of disbelief, shock, and outrage that the Corinthian Christians would go to the courts of the world to solve problems within the church.

The Corinthians were known for their love of the lawsuit. William Barclay wrote: *“The Greeks were naturally and characteristically a litigious people. The law-courts were in fact one of their chief amusements and entertainment...In a Greek city every man was more or less a lawyer and spent a very great part of his time either deciding or listening to law cases. The Greeks were in fact famous, or notorious, for their love of going to law.”* The Corinthian Christians were continuing what had been a part of their lifestyle prior to their conversion.

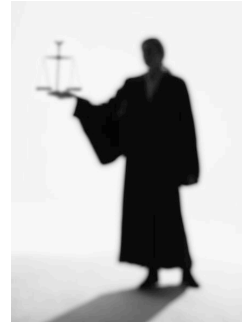


Though Christians today may not often take one another to court, the same type of damage to the witness of the church can take place when Christians gossip to non-Christians about a problem in the church. A problem within the church or with a fellow Christian is not something we share with neighbours, non-Christian friends, or family. When Christians are involved in disputes they need to be kept within the church and handled within the church.

- 1. In verse 7, Paul says the Corinthian Christians had already been defeated. What does he mean?**

2. Does Paul teach that a Christian should *never* be involved in a lawsuit or in the courts? If there is an appropriate time, when would it be? (See also Acts 25:11)

The lawsuits that were taking place in Corinth were not criminal in nature. In verse 1, Paul uses the word “*grievance*” which has to do with disputes that concern money or property. When criminal activity is involved a Christian could be compelled to testify in a court of law against another Christian. Since we are to obey civil law and to submit to those in authority this would be perfectly acceptable. This is quite different from taking a brother to court over a personal grievance. Christians should utilise the law when purchasing property, signing contracts, etc., but Christianity should never be used as a cloak to defraud another.



Christians must handle their own internal grievances. Paul gives two very interesting proofs that Christians are more than capable of settling disputes. First, in verse 2 he says, ***“Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases?”*** The problems Christians are fighting over are trivial compared to the fact that saints (Christians) will judge the world.

What does it mean to say that Christians will judge the world? We know that Jesus told his disciples in Matt. 19:28, ***“Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”*** We also know that all Christians are given this assurance in 2 Timothy 2:12, ***“if we endure, we will also reign with him.”*** It is impossible to be specific about how Christians will judge the world since we cannot be sure. Perhaps Christians will be with Jesus when he judges and can lend a hearty agreement to the chorus. It is also possible that Paul has the present Christian life in mind which demonstrates to the world that it is possible to live a righteous life.

If verse 2 is difficult, verse 3 is even more so as Paul writes, ***“Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life!”*** We can surmise that the angels in question were those who had previously sinned (2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6). We can only speculate as to how Christians will judge angels. We do not know if this is an active or passive judgement. Perhaps again, Christians will voice approval of God’s judgment or judge angels by living a holy life. While we may not know in this life exactly what Paul has in mind in 1 Cor. 6:2,3 we can say with certainty that it proves that Christians are fully competent to handle problems that arise between brothers without the intervention of a pagan judge.

Contentious matters can be judged within the church by those with standing (vs. 4) and a wise one (vs. 5). This judgment or arbitration will generally come through the direction of the elders. They may at times consult with another wise person in the church who has expertise in certain issues.

3. Why would any Christian prefer to go before a secular judge instead of having the matter decided within the church?

4. Describe any instances you have seen where a grievance between brothers was decided by leaders within the church.

II. Be Willing to Be Wronged

Most disputes in the church will never get to the point where an arbitrator is needed if Christians are willing to be wronged. Paul sternly rebukes the Corinthian Christians in verse 7 when he asks, “*Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?*” This teaching flies into the face of modern life where everyone demands their rights and people are taught not to allow anyone to do anything that might inconvenience them in any way. This scripture teaches that personal rights are not paramount.

5. What could be more important than the rights of an individual Christian?

6. What does Matthew 5:38-42 add to a discussion about individual rights?

7. What does Philippians 2:5-8 teach us about Jesus and his rights?

No one in the church should trample over another. Provision has been made in the past two chapters for the well-being of Christians. We have learned: a) If there is a dispute we can attempt to work it out; b) if it cannot be worked out we can find arbitration in the church; c) If someone is a swindler church discipline is appropriate; d) Church discipline is also indicated for those who are engaged in immorality, greed, or slander. God has made provision for the protection of individual Christians, but he also calls on them to be willing to be wronged for the good of the church.

III. Remember Who You Are

8. What kind of people were the Corinthian Christians before their conversion? (Define the list of sins with your answer)? (vss. 9-10)

Any wilful and habitual sin is disobedience to God and makes one unrighteous. The fact that the Corinthian Christians were defrauding one another placed them into the category of unrighteous and makes them unfit for the kingdom of God.

9. What does Paul say about the destiny of the unrighteous?

10. What three action words are used in verse 11 to describe the conversion of Christians?

To be washed is a reference to baptism (Acts 22:16); Christians are sanctified at the point of baptism into Christ; and are justified at the same time. To be sanctified is to be set apart to God and to be justified is to be viewed as sinless by God. We note that God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit all have a part in this washing, sanctification, and justification.

The Corinthian Christians were divided in many ways. The division caused by grievances between brothers can be overcome within the church as mature Christian leaders arbitrate disputes, as Christians are willing to be wronged, and as Christians remember their position outside of Christ and what they have gained in Christ.