

Introduction

“Governmental edicts aside, there is a grave risk of civil lawsuits should any member or visitor to your church fall ill with COVID-19. Even if your member wouldn't sue, their family might if the member passes away.”¹

Given this, I could easily become paranoid. I could demand you to sign into the church with a statement that you know you come at your own risk—which you must understand that you are doing anyway as you always have. We cannot guarantee that no one is an asymptomatic carrier—no one can make that guarantee anywhere. Still, I could require you to list the places you have been and people you have been with in the past 14 days so that if you got sick, I would know that you have been other places and could use that information to protect the church. We could take your temperature and require you to wear a mask and not permit the use of the bathrooms or clean bathrooms after every use, and ... the list goes on. Rather than all that, I am strongly in favor of using common sense, prudent mitigation techniques, and avoiding the issue of lawsuits entirely. I hope you will agree.

I suppose this fear of lawsuit is a big reason why *everything* is changing out there—practices at grocery stores, doctors' offices, and hospitals. But threats of going to law are nonsensical and non-Christian. After all, if we are ok suing churches for COVID-19, why not do so for influenza? Why not for potluck food poisoning?

Yes, someone last winter could have gotten the influenza from someone at church and died from complications. But do you even think about suing if that happens? How can you *prove* that you picked it up at a particular place? The risk is present during flu season every year no matter where you go. Someone who is immune compromised or elderly is always taking a risk when they go out among people. But that is a reasonable risk to take, because life is life. Driving to church is risky. Traversing a stairway in your own home is risky. Taking a walk by the side of the road is very risky too.

¹ COVID-19 Suggested Church Reopening Guidelines, Gibbs & Associates Law Firm, LLC, and the Christian Law Association, page 3.

Countless examples can be marshalled from history of individuals suing churches and churches and denominations suing each other for the furniture when one of them went astray into false doctrine. Mission agencies sue churches that have gone astray; denominations sue if a church tries to leave the denomination and take their building with them, etc. When it comes to money or property, people get funny and will rationalize a lawsuit as if it were not disobedience to Scripture.

I use these things as illustrations of the present-day need for the teaching in 1 Corinthians 6. While the opening 8 verses are not about public health, they *are* about lawsuits. This is not a new problem. In this case, the problem was between believers—both of whom and their entire church should know better.

Do you remember Judge Joseph Wapner and his syndicated television show “The People’s Court”? Our message title today is a play on that title. Christian believers should be involved in a *believer’s* court.

I. The Next Problem in Corinth, v. 1, 6

- A. Paul has addressed divisions in the church and a case of immorality that remained unaddressed by the congregation. Now he turns to yet another serious problem in the church. Verses 1, 6, 7, and 8 give the details.
- B. Paul asks a simple question: how dare you go to court, taking a brother before an unrighteous judge? How do you think you can get away with such evil, instead of asking for help from the believers in the church? It is scary that Paul thinks this is obvious, while at the same time many professing believers today don’t see it as obvious. It is clear: to present your situation before an unbelieving tribunal and submit to its wisdom is akin to walking in the counsel of the ungodly (Psalm 1:1).
- C. The word for “dare” is used infrequently in the Bible. To get a flavor for the meaning, note these uses: Matthew 22:42-46 (dare); Mark 15:43 (boldly); John 21:12 (dared); Acts 5:11-13; Acts 7:30-32; Romans 5:6-8; Philippians 1:14; Jude 9.
- D. The word speaks of a kind of courage or bravery to do something out of the realm of normal. It can have a positive sense of boldness (like Joseph of Arimathea), but it can also mean to presume in a negative sense. “Do you presume to have the authority to disobey God by taking a believer to a secular law court?” That is a *bold* disobedience.

II. Arguments from Greater to Lesser, v. 2-4

- A. Verse 2: Paul had taught the believers that, as a group, they will “judge the world.” Since this is in their future, how could they think they are unable or incompetent to judge the relatively trivial matters that were coming up between believers in the present?
1. Meaning of this future judgment. 2 Timothy 2:12 and Rev 20:6 are key reference passages about this matter. To “judge” does not mean only to preside over a court-room; it has to do with a wider idea of ruling. Saints will rule with Christ over the millennial kingdom, and that includes passing judgment of matters that come up at that time between residents and regions and countries of the millennial world.
 2. Implication of Paul’s statement. The word *smallest* refers to the relatively tiny matters that were coming up in the church between the people. They were making mountains out of molehills; the issues that they thought were all-consuming and terrible were actually trivial in the big scheme of things. Keep this in mind when you face some problem that looms large in your mind. You might just have made it way bigger than it actually is. Often the passage of time will bring that perspective. But sometimes we get hung up on a thing and need to be shaken into reality. The thing that you have tenaciously held to for years is not nearly as big as you think. Get some perspective. It is wrong to be a bulldog about it. Let it go, relax, and trust the Lord.
- B. Verse 3: The Apostle had also taught them that they would judge angels. This is even more dramatic: Paul is saying that angelic beings, made higher than we are at this time, will be under our rule in the future. We believe that God will judge the evil angels (2 Peter 2:4, Jude 6). And since righteous angels do not sin and would therefore have no need for dispute resolution or criminal justice, it seems certain that the idea of *ruling* applies here rather than a court-room situation. Believers will direct the activities of angels for the benefit and blessing of the inhabitants of the kingdom. The angels will then indeed be ministering spirits for the saints (Heb. 1:14). What a different world that will be!
- “How much more the things that pertain this this life?” The simple, small issues that trouble us now should be able to be handled in the church.
- C. Verse 4: How is it then, with these small matters, that you put your issues before those people who are *not* going to be involved in that future regnal activity? They are not esteemed as wise by the church because they are not believers, and possess the wisdom of the world instead of

the wisdom of God. You may have read this as if they were placing the least esteemed church members over such matters, but that is not the case. They were using people *outside* of the church as judges, people whose life and philosophy is antithetical to the church.

III. Take Such Matters In House, v. 5

- A. The point is that believers are to settle matters within the church. As for the scope of these matters, it is left undefined, presumably covering all kinds of matters between believers. The matter could be financial, theological, inter-personal, etc. I want to be clear that this does not include criminal matters for which Person 1 reports to the state, and the state takes up the matter as “State of Michigan vs. Person 2.” That situation is not a believing plaintiff against a believing defendant before an unsaved judge. The “plaintiff” is the corporate state, whose God-ordained role is to maintain civil society (humanity among men) by restraining evil and praising good. Criminal matters fall into their scope of work, not the church’s scope.
- B. **Application:** Because of this, believers need to be wise as to what interactions they take up with other believers in the church. Some have said that you should never hire a contractor from your church, sad as that sounds, because what happens if there is a problem with the work? Or what happens if there is no payment for the work? If you know you have no legal recourse, that will constrain your conduct toward your brother—you will give rather than lend, for example (Luke 6:35), or avoid getting into business partnerships that may go south.
- C. What does this look like? Designated, spiritual people in the church should be called upon to help resolve a dispute, as in Galatians 6:1. Often, and in a small church, this will be the pastor and deacons or other mature men who can lead those in dispute out of the dispute. The church should have *at least one man* who can do such work. It appears that the Corinthians were practically acknowledging they had no one in the church wise enough to handle these matters. Apparently they were all less wise than the secular judges!
- D. This is the case with divorce in Christian homes, friends. Think of the pathetic testimony that it is for two professing Christians to be fighting like cats and dogs (no disrespect to our feline and canine friends), and show up before a judge who may well be an unbeliever, officiating over an unbelieving system of law, who may have his marriage together better than they do. He probably goes home at night and shakes his head, wondering why so-called Christians act that way. But my point is

this: divorce between believers is a *clear* violation of Paul’s command. You have a problem in your marriage? Go to the church. Open it up to the church leadership. Have them pray for you. Get some accountability with another couple in the church. Yes, it may be embarrassing. Yes it will be humbling. But it is far better than being a “home-wrecker” by divorcing. Fixing the problems is far better than going to a divorce court!

I have never understood why the state allows the church to officiate at weddings, but not have any involvement in divorce. What if you had to submit your case to a tribunal of believers in your local church before you could get a divorce—to determine who was at fault and what restitution needs to be made and what financial division should occur—and how reconciliation could be done to avoid divorce altogether? Would that change people’s approach compared to our no-fault divorce culture?

IV. Additional Details, v. 7-8

- A. Paul reiterates that this whole situation is an abject failure of the basics in the church. There is no excuse for it.
- B. Instead of going to court, verse 7b suggests, it would be better to just accept the wrong, allow yourself to be cheated, and drop the matter. Better yet, of course, is to appeal to the church for help.
- C. Yet the believers there, in going to secular law, were *doing the wrong*, and *cheating their brothers!*
- D. This has another major implication – if you are willing to cheat and do wrong to your brother, you are acting in line with those who will not inherit the kingdom of God (gulp). The full ramifications of that will come out when we examine verses 9-11.

Conclusion

Nothing in this passage prevents a believer from making legitimate use of the court system in a dispute with an unbeliever or corporation, or participating in a court hearing about a criminal matter. And it does not exempt professing believers from being summoned to court for misbehavior they have done. In both cases, we must be aware that the judge and most jurors will not all (most) be Christians. The law to which they are held is not perfectly just either. Such is life.

Believers need to manage themselves well: first, to avoid disputes in the first place, and second, when problems arise, to address them in the Spirit. Period.

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