

Why Christians Should Not Sue Christians In Civil Court

1 Corinthians 6:1-11

Introduction: 1) Sometimes Christians by their actions and behavior cast a dark cloud over the beauty of the gospel. They turn unbelievers away from the Lord Jesus because their lives are a contradiction to the message that salvation in Christ makes you different. Examples of such contradictions run throughout 1 Corinthians. The body of Christ, which should be characterized by grace and truth (John 1:14), is being torn apart over division, disputes, and party politics. It is being ripped to shreds by sexual immorality and a demand for my rights over what is best for others. Now, in chapter 6, further shame is brought on the church in the public arena as believers take one another to the secular courts to settle their “dispute,” their “grievance” (*ESV*), their “complaint (civil dispute)” (*AMP*). Paul is scandalized at their behavior because it is “shameful” (v. 5) and it is to admit “defeat” (v. 7) for the gospel and the reputation of the redeemed community who ought to be different. The great Baptist preacher from London, Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892), knew what is at stake for the church before a watching world. In a sermon preached on December 21, 1873, he said, “The eagle-eyed world acts as a policeman for the church.... [It] becomes a watch-dog over the sheep, barking furiously as soon as one goes astray.... Be careful, be careful of your private lives... and I believe your public lives will be sure to be right. [But] remember that

it is upon your public life that the verdict of the world will very much depend”

(“The Parent’s and Pastor’s Joy,” MT, 12-21-1873).

2) Paul provides three arguments why Christians should not sue Christians in civil court. Now, let’s be clear as we begin to walk through the text. Criminal matters are not the issue in this chapter. Criminal acts, like the sexual abuse of a minor, theft, or any crime at all for that matter, are to be immediately reported to legal authorities. The church has its place to deal with certain issues and the government has its place to deal with certain issues. “What happens in the church stays in the church,” when it comes to a crime, is wrongheaded, dangerous and sometimes criminal itself. The church must know its place and responsibilities in these matters.

I. Suing a fellow believer is inconsistent with our future responsibilities 6:1-3

Jesus said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another” (John 13:35). Evidently the Corinthians had forgotten this statement or did not think it applied to taking a brother or sister in Christ to civil court. Further, they failed to see the inconsistency of unbelievers judging believers. Paul hits this head on spiritually and theologically.

1) We will be judges over the world 6:1-2

Paul begins with a direct and confrontational question, “If any of you has a dispute with another, do you dare to take it before the ungodly (*ESV*, “unrighteous”) for judgment instead of before the Lord’s people (*ESV*, “the saints”)? Schreiner agrees with what we said earlier, “The Corinthians’ lawsuits were not criminal cases, such as murder, rape or theft, but the kind of minor matters that lead to litigation” (*1 Cor.* TNTC, 117). *The Message* provides a powerful paraphrase of verse 1, “how dare you take each other to court! When you think you have been wronged, does it make any sense to go before a court that knows nothing of God’s ways instead of a family of Christians?” The very thought of doing such a thing is unthinkable!

Paul adds to his initial salvo in verse 2 with a point of theology and the first of six “do you not know” statements in chapter 6 (cf. 5:6). “Or don’t you know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is judged by you, are you unworthy (*ESV*, “incompetent”) to judge the trivial cases?” Text like Daniel 7:22; Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:29-30 and Revelation 20:4 speak of believers being involved in future judgment. But there is more that we must consider. The doctrine of our union with Christ in salvation enters into the discussion! Paul Gardner is helpful here when he writes, “For Paul and the early church, it is a given that God’s judgment will be carried out by the Christ who is himself the “Lord”.... Paul believes that God’s people are

involved with the work of their Lord and caught up in his status, being found “in Christ” and *participating* covenantally with him. They are involved in his work and are incorporated in him as they are represented by him...so he can envisage God’s people caught up in all that is true of the Lord Jesus. If Christ is judge of the world, it stands to reason that those “in Christ” will judge the world” (*1Cor. ZECNT*, 252).

2) We will be judges over the angels

6:3

Paul extends his argument in verse 3 to the spiritual realm and specifically to angels. “Don’t you know that we will judge angels – how much more matters of this life?” In the eschaton believers will judge the angels.

Whether it is the good, the bad or both is not specified. However, Paul’s main point is clear as he employs a greater to lesser argument. Angels, as Morris notes, “are by nature the highest class of created beings” (*1 Cor. TNTC*, 91). If you will someday judge these extraordinary creatures, you certainly should be able to handle the mundane matters of this life. Kyle Dillion sounds a helpful reminder, “We do not use worldly methods to achieve worldly aims. Rather, in all things, we should be set apart as people governed by God’s Word and empowered by God’s Spirit” (“What Does It Mean for the Saints to Judge Angels?” *TGC*, 9-1-21). Are you as wise as you say you are? Your behavior at the moment says “no!”

II. Suing fellow believers is inconsistent with how the church should work 6:4-8

In commenting on 1 Corinthians 6, John Piper writes, “I can’t think of any reason why a Christian would take another Christian to court. Peacemakers ought to go to peace with each other. What you want to do is model for the world you’re not a lover of money” (“Is It Ever Okay For a Christian to Sue a Non-Christian?”, 9-30-09). We cannot ignore that a love for money is part of the equation of this chapter. It is probably the driving component. I think verse 7 seals this argument. Note carefully how Paul moves his argument in this direction, especially his use of rhetorical questions.

1) The Church should be able to handle matters like these 6:4

Paul begins this section with a question, “So if you have such matters (ESV, “cases”), do you appoint as your judges those who have no standing in the church?” The irony, yea sarcasm, is biting. You actually invite pagan judges who have no status in the church to arbitrate matters in the church. This is mind-boggling! The church should be able to handle matters like this. You are family. Act like it! (For an alternative understanding of verse 4, see Taylor, *1 Cor.* NAC, 146-147).

2) The Church’s witness to unbelievers must not be compromised 6:5-8

The Corinthians should be ashamed of themselves, and Paul tell them so (“I say this to your shame!”). This is not spiritual abuse; it is spiritual

admonition! Paul again raises a rhetorical question to make his point, “Can it be that there is not one wise person among you who is able to arbitrate (*ESV*, “settle a dispute”) between fellow believers?” (v. 5). Again, the sarcasm is biting given how the Corinthian church boasted about its wisdom and how smart they were. However, their actions prove otherwise as verse 6 makes painfully clear, “Instead, brothers go to court against brother, and that before unbelievers!” Shame on all of you, Paul says, for the harm you continually bring to Christ and the gospel as you repeatedly ask unbelievers to handle your disputes and disagreements. I would have never imagined Christians acting like this, but I guess I was wrong.

If this situation were an athletic contest, the church lost before the event ever began. “As it is, to have legal disputes (*ESV*, “lawsuits”) against one another is already a defeat for you” (v. 7). Regardless of the outcome of the lawsuit, you are all losers for going there in the first place.

Perhaps drawing from the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:39-42, Paul asks, “Why not rather be wronged (*ESV*, “suffer wrong”)? Why not rather be cheated (*ESV*, “defrauded”)? Pastor Warren Wiersbe puts it well, “Better to lose money and possession than to lose a brother or lose your testimony as well” (*Be Wise*, 78). I readily acknowledge this is a tough pill to swallow, but is clearly what the Bible tells us to do. Unfortunately, the Corinthians,

and too many Christians today, love money more than they do Christ, the gospel and the reputation of the church. “Instead, Paul says, you yourselves do wrong and cheat – and you do this to brothers and sisters” (v. 8). Curtis Vaughn says, “the Corinthian Christians had double problems. They sinned against ethical standards, for they actually defrauded. They also wounded brotherly love.” (*1 Cor.* BSC, 63). Such behavior was totally inconsistent with their new life in Christ, which Paul will now make crystal clear in verses 9-11.

III. Suing a fellow believer is inconsistent with our new life in Christ 6:9-11

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!” This wonderful verse is a marvelous summary of 1 Corinthians 6:9-11. Here Paul draws a stark and striking contrast between who we were before Jesus saved us and who we are after Jesus saved us. These verses serve the dual purpose of rejoicing and warning.

1) Don’t forget who you were before Christ 6:9-10

Verses 9-10 constitute what we call a “vice list.” It is similar to Romans 1:29-31; 1 Corinthians 5:11; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 5:3-6; and Colossians 3:5-9. They address our nature and lifestyle before Christ and

also the eternal destiny of those who never trust Christ and are regenerated and justified.

The Corinthians were living like the unrighteous and they needed to be reminded that “the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God” (v. 9). They will not escape eschatological judgment. They will not enjoy the new heaven and new earth and new Jerusalem (Rev. 21-22). They will not spend eternity with God in heaven. Tragically their eternal destiny is hell, “the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:14-15).

“Do not be deceived” is a present imperative and sounds a strong warning.

What follows is a selective list of 9 sins that represents those who will not inherit the kingdom of God. Such sinful behavior is not occasional and rare. Any Christian can commit any sin. The list identifies those whose lives are characterized by these sins. This is who they are and they have no regard for what God thinks or desires. What follows is the list and a very brief description:

- 1) “Sexually immoral people” (Gr. *porneia*) – a general term for sexual sin contrary to the teachings of the Bible.
- 2) “Idolaters” – perhaps the most basic and fundamental of all sin (see Ex. 20:3-6). It is giving status and position to anyone or anything that rightly belongs only to God. Schreiner points out it is repeatedly addressed in

Scripture (see Rom. 1:18-25; 1 Cor. 5:10, 11; 10:7, 14; Gal. 5:20; Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5; also Rev. 21:8). [Schreiner, 122].

- 3) “Adulterers” – those who are unfaithful to their covenantal marriage vows.
- 4) “Males who have sex with males” – there are actually two Greek terms in the original text that refer to passive homosexual partners (Gr. *malakoi*) and active homosexual partners (Gr. *arsenokoitai*). In spite of cultural accommodation and liberal reinterpretations, the Bible is consistent in its condemnation of homosexuality as sinful and contrary to the design and plan of God (see Lev. 18:22; 20:13; Rom. 1:26-27; 1 Tim. 1:10; Jude 7-8). Jesus spoke to this issue as well in Matthew 19:4-6. (For an excellent treatment of the issue see Gardner, 264-269).
- 5) “Thieves” – one who steals secretly attempting to avoid attention.
- 6) “Greedy people” – those who never have enough and always seek to gain more by any means.
- 7) “Drunkards” – those who abuse alcohol to the point of drunkenness (cf. Eph. 5:18). A sure way to avoid drunkenness is abstinence from alcohol.
- 8) “Verbally abusive people” – (*ESV*, “revilers”) those who use harsh and abusive language to mock or scoff or even slander others (Gardner, 238).
- 9) “Swindlers” – those “who forcibly steal from others” (Schreiner, 123).

One should note that “not inheriting the kingdom of God” brackets verse 9. This reinforces the seriousness of the warning. God does not make light of or wink at sin. Neither can we. Those who practice these things and profess should be excluded from the church (ch. 5). They will be excluded from the kingdom of God (ch. 6).

2) Don't forget who we are in Christ 6:11

Paul knows many of us have sinful, ugly, and wicked past. Some of us were the people of verses 9-10. But praise God, not anymore! That is BC, before Christ! That is who I used to be, but not now! Three powerful theological truths describe who we have become “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” (full majestic title) and by the Spirit of our God. Do not pass over too quickly the Trinitarian nature of our salvation! God sent the Son, the Son accomplished redemption, and the Spirit applies the Son's work!

1) “Washed” – this speaks of the new birth (John 3) and our regeneration (Titus 3:5). The early church would have made a connection with our baptism as well. Schreiner is right, “Baptism is part of a series of events that occur at conversion; those who are converted also repent, believe and confess Jesus as Lord. Hence, the washing takes place upon conversion, when one repents and believes in Jesus Christ, and thus baptism symbolizes cleaning from sin.” (123).

- 2) “Sanctified” – usually we think of sanctification as progressive growth in Christlikeness, but here it is “positional sanctification” that is in view. When we were saved, washed, regenerated, we also received a new status of being holy or set apart to God. We became “saints”, holy ones, who belong to God (cf. 1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 5:26).
- 3) “Justified” – we now stand before God acquitted, innocent before God because of the imputed righteousness of Christ to our account. We are not made justified we are declared to be justified based upon what Jesus has done for us. Morris says it so well. Justified “is a legal term used of acquittal, ‘reckon as righteous’, ‘declare righteous’, ‘acquit’. Paul uses it for the act of God whereby, on the basis of Christ’s atoning death, he declares believers to be just, and accepts them as his own” (94). The Father through the Son by the Spirit has done all this for us. How utterly inconceivable that we would live and act like we did before our great God did all this (and more!) when He saved us.

Conclusion: I want to conclude our study on a very practical note that expands the application of our text to how we should handle conflict in a number of areas. Ken Sande is the founder of “Peacemaker Ministries and Relational Wisdom 360.” He is a prolific author and gift to the church. His article entitled “20 Ways to Prevent and Resolve Conflict in the Church” is a goldmine of biblical truth and wisdom. It

is a very helpful way to bring our study of 1 Corinthians 6 to a close. The following is a closely followed summation of the article. It beautifully demonstrates the gospel in action for those who have been “washed, sanctified and justified in the name of Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (6:11).

(20 Ways to Prevent and Resolve Conflict in the Church)

Posted by Ken Sande on November 10, 2020, Relational Wisdom

“The COVID crisis, combined with heightened racial and political tension, has triggered unprecedented conflict throughout our nation, as well as in the local church. Churches are literally dividing over masks, racial policies and political positions. As a result, pastors are spending untold hours every week talking with frustrated parishioners, deflecting personal attacks and trying desperately to rebuild unity within their leadership teams and congregations.

Having conciliated hundreds of church conflicts over the past three decades, I would like to describe 20 key peacemaking principles that have proven to be effective in healing church divisions, reuniting leadership teams, restoring marriages, and settling multi-million dollar lawsuits.

1. Remember the Golden Result

We all know the Golden Rule: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” But do you know the Golden Result? It’s a direct corollary to the Golden Rule: “Other people will usually treat you the way you treat them.”

So anytime you're in a conflict, ask yourself, "How do I want to be treated?"

Then engage others by treating them exactly the same way (Matt. 7:12).

2. Bring the Gospel into Every Conflict

When Christians are in conflict, our tendency is to resort to "the law." We love to use God's Word to show where we're right and others are wrong.

This approach only drives us further apart.

Instead of bringing the law to others, bring them the gospel. Remind others of the forgiveness we all have in Christ. If we are trusting in him, our sins have been paid in full.

As you remind yourself and others of these promises, you can bring hope, reduce defensiveness, make it safe to confess sin and inspire Christ-like behavior.

3. Expose the Idols that Drive Conflict

James 4:1 provides a key insight on conflict: "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?"

In many church conflicts, these passions are not inherently sinful. They are often good things we want too much. This gives rise to a downward spiral, which I often refer to as the "progression of an idol:" a good desire turns into

a consuming demand that leads us to judge others and eventually punish them if they don't give us what we want.

4. **Guard Against Amygdala Hijacking in Yourself and Others**

This process typically involves sudden, intense emotions that trigger an impulsive reaction that is deeply regretted.

The good news is that the Bible describes four simple steps you can follow to avoid this destructive dynamic: This process is summarized in the simple acronym: **READ** (**R**ecognize and name your emotions; **E**valuate their source; **A**nticipate the consequences of following them; and **D**irect the power of your emotions on a constructive course).

5. **Weave Relational Wisdom into Your Church**

When we get into a conflict, most of us have a tendency to go “two-dimensional.” We focus obsessively on our own righteousness and the other persons' wrongs.

Relational wisdom, which is [a] gospel-driven form of emotional intelligence, helps people to always view their relationships “three-dimensionally” by seeking to be *God-aware*, *self-aware* and *other-aware* in every relational interaction, just as Jesus taught (Matt. 22:37-40).

6. **Communicate So Clearly the You Cannot Be Misunderstood**

Many conflicts in the church are triggered or inflamed by poor communication, often by leaders themselves. [It is] not good enough to communicate so you *can be understood*. You must communicate so clearly that you *cannot be misunderstood*. [Make clarity and charity your goal.]

7. Work Patiently with People As They Process Their Emotions and Experiences

People are always interpreting our words and actions through their own life experiences and emotions. As a result, a seemingly innocent statement can trigger an intense emotional reaction in others. Our natural tendency in such situations is to defend ourselves and point out how unwarranted their responses are.

It takes time and patience, but it's possible to turn these types of interactions into opportunities for life-changing ministry if you'll take the time to gently and patiently help people process their emotions and life experiences.

8. Don't Be Misled by the Three Faces of Fear

When people react to you with control, anger or withdrawal, it's natural to become defensive and judgmental. But has that response ever helped, whether in your family or in your church? Probably not.

You can break this cycle by realizing that control, anger and withdrawal are often triggered by fear.

Once you understand this underlying dynamic, you can resist the temptation to become defensive and instead seek to discern and address the fear that is triggering other's behavior.

9. Practice the Three P's of Satisfaction

Process satisfaction, which requires a fair, orderly, and even-handed process where everyone feels that they've had a reasonable opportunity to present their side of the matter,

Personal satisfaction, which requires treating everyone with respect, courtesy and equality, just as we would want to be treated ourselves, and

Product satisfaction, which requires a final solution that is as reasonable, just and equitable as is humanly possible.

I cannot emphasize this point too much: Give people process satisfaction (the opportunity to fully and candidly share their views), as well as personal satisfaction (treating them with sincere courtesy and respect), and you'll be surprised how content they'll be even if they disagree with your substantive decision.

10. Constantly Build Passport

A passport is an authorization to go someplace you have no inherent right to be. In relational terms, it is the permission that people give to you to enter

into their lives, to learn their secrets, to know their struggles and to offer advice and correction.

The best way to do so is to relate to others in such a way that they would automatically answer “yes” to three key questions:

Can I trust you?

Do you really care about me?

Can you actually help me?

11. Teach Your People to Practice Charitable Judgments

Many of the conflicts that arise in a church begin or grow worse because people assume the worst about others’ actions or motives. The best way for you to prevent this tendency is to proactively teach your congregation to practice “charitable judgments” in every area of life.

Making a charitable judgment means that out of love for God, you strive to believe the best about others until you have facts to prove otherwise.

12. When You Need to Negotiate, PAUSE

Prepare (pray, get the facts, seek godly counsel, develop options)

Affirm relationships (show genuine concern and respect for others)

Understand interests (identify others’ concerns, desires, needs, limitations, or fears)

Search for creative solutions (prayerful brainstorming)

Evaluate options objectively and reasonably (evaluate, don't argue)

(Philippians 2:3-4; see also Matt. 22:39; 1 Cor. 13:5; Matt. 7:12)

13. Diffuse Explosive Meetings with a Six Part Format

- 1) Briefly stated, how do you feel because of this problem?
- 2) What have you done that might have contributed to this problem?
- 3) What do you think would please God as we work through this situation?
- 4) What steps have you already taken to make things better?
- 5) What are you now willing to do to help resolve this problem?
- 6) What do you suggest others do to help resolve this problem?

14. Teach People to Focus on the Good Before Itemizing the Bad

When any of us get into a conflict, our tendency is to see our opponents in an increasingly negative light, highlighting their faults and recounting their wrongs. This is a perfect strategy for destroying relationships and dividing churches.

Since God commands us to seek unity and reconciliation in the body of Christ, he graciously provides wisdom principles that enable us to overcome our tendency to focus on others' flaws (see Philippians 4:8-9). God can use this passage to change the course of bitter divorces, lawsuits and church divisions.

15. Be Approachable

Conflicts in churches often begin with misunderstandings and minor differences in opinion. Unfortunately, many Christians are afraid to approach their church leaders with their concerns, which sometimes allows those concerns to fester and grow until they finally explode into an intense conflict.

One of the most effective ways to encourage church members to share their concerns before they become major problems is for church leaders to strive earnestly to make themselves “approachable.” This requires the development of a variety of relational skills, including humility, empathy, reading subtle emotional cues and attentive listening.

16. Unleash the Power of Confession

If you instead confess your contribution to a problem, it’s amazing how often others will follow your lead and begin to acknowledge how they have contributed to the situation as well.

17. Follow the Example of Lincoln and Reagan

One of the many characteristics that these two men shared was their exceptional ability to understand and manage not only their own emotions and interests but also the emotions and interests of the people they led and the opponents they wished to turn into friends.

18. Deploy God’s Full Array of Peacemaking Processes

The Bible provides a variety of ways for Christians to resolve conflict, including overlooking minor offenses (Prov. 19:11), talking privately with the other person (Matt. 18:15), seeking advice from wise counselors (Prov. 20:18), pursuing mediation (Matt. 18:16) and submitting to binding arbitration (1 Cor. 6:1-6).

Although some conflicts are so complex that professionally-trained conciliators may be needed, the vast majority of conflicts involving Christians can be fully resolved by spiritually mature leaders in the local church, just as God instructs in 1 Corinthians 6:4-5.

19. Practice Redemptive, Gospel-Centered Church Discipline

Jesus knew that believers will occasionally refuse to receive guidance and correction from church leaders. This is why the Matthew 18:15-20 (see also 1 Cor. 5-6) process includes instructions on how to carry out formal discipline with believers who refuse to listen to the church.

Jesus calls us to approach such ministry as a gospel-centered “rescue mission” rather than a time to impose guilt and condemnation (see Matt. 18:12-14).

20. An Ounce of Prevention Is Worth Many of Hours of Conflict Resolution

There is one thing that is even better than successfully *resolving* a conflict; *preventing* a conflict in the first place. [Train others] to improve their own relational wisdom and peacemaking skills.

Remember what James 3:18 promises, “Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.”