Can a Christian go to court against his own brethren?

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Can A Christian Go To Court Against His Own Brethren?

Berry Fike, Hickory, NC

In the past few months the attention of the church has been turned to the subject of the sixth chapter of first Corinthians. Here Paul is reproving the Corinthian church for the practice of going to law before the heathen courts instead of settling their differences among themselves. Paul sees this as contrary to the spirit of Christianity and as exposing religion to the world as being contemptuous. Does this same feeling apply today to Christians? If so how far can one brother go against another and not go to court? Unfortunately today many feel that almost any grievance against either the church, or the elders, that has caused them to lose face in the community should go to a civil court for a judgment. In all things, and especially this one, let us return to the Bible and see what Paul said in the first eight verses of this chapter.

The background for first Corinthians six is interesting. It seems that in the day this was written that in every Greek city each man was more or less a lawyer. Each man spent a great deal of time either deciding or listening to cases of law. In fact, the Greeks were notorious for their love of going to law. It would not be surprising, then, to learn that certain Greeks brought this practice into the Corinthian church.

Paul begins this discussion with a strong statement to indicate what their attitude should be toward this practice. Verse one asks the question, “Is it proper, or right, as Christians, for you to take questions of things that pertain only to this life, before men who, because they do not keep the law of Christ, cannot judge rightly? Instead, can you not settle your differences among yourselves as Christians by leaving the cause to your brethren?”

The church does not condemn the judges of the world whose sole duty is to uphold justice for the populace (Rom. 13:1-7). But this is not the discussion here. The problem is one where one brother in Christ takes another brother to a civil court on matters pertaining to civil law. While it would not be wrong to go before a court to find out what the law was on such matters, called an amicable suit, Paul says that it is wrong to go before men who will not follow Christ when your own brethren are available to assist you. Of course the question would arise, “But why would Paul suggest to go to his own brethren instead of trained lawyers and judges?” Reading verses two and three we find the answer to this question. Paul says that the saints will one day judge the world! In what way? In looking at Scriptures such as passages as Matthew 19:28 and Luke 22:23 it seems clear that this is another indication of the judgment day when Christians, by the right hand of God, will approve of the judgment given. Perhaps the idea is, not that they pronounce sentence but that they shall be qualified to see the justice of the condemnation passed on Christ by the angels Christ. Christians will even be qualified to see the judgment passed on the fallen angels (2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6; Rev. 20:10).

Paul’s full argument might be stated in this way: “If some day you are going to judge the world, and the angels, the highest created beings, how can you go and submit your cases to men and to heathen men at that?” “If you must do it,” he continues, “do it inside the church. Any man who is destined to judge the world and fallen heavenly beings, would be able to judge about the trifles of this life of everyday.”

To show the nonsense of such legal actions he asks them, in verse four, “When you have a case do you allow those who are of no account in the church to judge such matters? Why do you go to those outside the body of Christ who have less insight into your affairs than they who are of no account in the church?” I hope that the reader is beginning to see that Paul felt that to go to law at all, and especially to go to law with a brother, was to fall far below the Christians’ standard of behavior.

These brethren were so far behind in living the Christian life that they did not think it was possible to find, in Christian circles, a man who would handle their judicial disputes. Since there were no Christian judges to be found, and very few today, Paul may be suggesting for them to go to an individual or a group of Christians to help settle the matter. If such were the case shouldn’t elders of a neutral congregation be the best to set in such judgment? Their maturity and knowledge of the Scriptures would surely lead to a decision that, if decided to prior to the discussion would be followed, would be fair and Christ-like.

The statement in verse six draws forth the question that should be obvious to all. “How is it possible that a Christian would go to a worldly court with a brother in Christ whom he loves?” Wouldn’t such a position only be possible if there was no love for the brethren? Paul states so in verse seven. What happens to the cause of Christ as a result of such legal action? One had only to watch the Phil Donahue show a few weeks ago when the Collinsville case was presented before an audience that obviously was worldly. Our own brethren were laughed at and ridiculed for following the word of God. Why not just suffer the disgrace yourself rather than harm the cause of Christ by your actions? Surely we all acknowledge Scripture such as Matthew 5:11,12; 10:22; Romans 12:17,18 and others as saying that true Christians will be persecuted. Why not let the natural reaction of religion happen and not hurt the cause of Christ? We fail to remember that in the Lord’s church we must be humble and follow the example set before us by Christ. We seek not to reign but to serve (Matt. 20:25ff; John 13:13ff; 1 Thess. 3:17ff; 5:5).

There might arise such circumstances where two men existence would be at stake, and the question, “Why not?” would allow the civil court to intervene in such cases. When a Christian is injured in his person, character, or property, he has a right to seek redress. Courts are instituted for the protection and defense of the innocent and the peaceable against the fraudulent, the wicked, and the violent. (See Barnes’ Notes on First Corinthians.) One owes not only himself but others to execute the law in such cases. But even in such cases each Christian, if opposing his own brethren, must ask himself such questions as:

1. Could the church not find a better solution than the civil courts?

2. Will this action, in any way, hurt the church and its influence in this area so much as to bring reproach on it?

3. What would Christ do in this situation?

4. Am I concerned about the things of this world more than spiritual matters in this area?

5. What will be the outcome of the case if I win in a civil court?

6. At Corinth there seemed to be too much pride and a seeking of one’s own rights. Is that my problem?

Instead of enduring wrong patiently and cheerfully (Phil. 4:4), the Corinthians were guilty of fraud and injustice. The offense in such a case as this is aggravated because of the obvious loss of love and kindness of all ties that would drive a brother to help another and not injure him. To do this would show no such ties existed.

In summary, Christ says that if a Christian has even the remotest tinge of the love of Christ within his heart, he will suffer insult and loss and injury rather than try to inflict on someone else—especially if that person is his brother. To take revenge is always an unchristian thing. A Christian does not order his dealings with others by the desire for recompense and the principle of cruel justice. He orders them by the spirit of love, and the spirit of love will insist that he live at peace with his brother, and will forbid him to demean himself by going to law. (See William Barclay’s The Letter to the Corinthians.)

In all things let us allow Christ to lead us and His word to be the light unto our path.