

THE CHURCH AND LEGAL CONTROVERSY

I Corinthians 6:1-11

Here we see the Apostle Paul, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, dealing with matters in the church at Corinth in the light of eternal and universal truth. While this passage had a particular application to the Corinthians, it also revealed important and abiding truths for all of our Lord's churches down through the centuries. In dealing with certain conditions which prevailed in the church at Corinth, Paul called the attention of all his readers to an obvious problem and a grievous wrong. What was the problem? It was the problem of disputes among Christians and the wrong of litigation before non-Christians. There were some church members who had taken to court other Christians within their membership in order to get a suitable settlement in connection with certain matters that had arisen between them.

Paul wrote against a practice which was growing in Corinth, and which has been in evidence in many other places since. It was the practice of Christians quarreling with other believers in the church about temporal matters, and dragging one another into the courts of law for the purpose of adjudicating their difficulties.

This sort of thing is utterly abhorrent to the spirit of Christianity. It puts a Christian in the wrong position and light before the world and in the eyes of his brethren. It is saying to the world, "We Christians are just as covetous and just as quarrelsome as you are. We are just as much concerned about having our own way and doing exactly as we please as you of the world are." It is degrading to Christians to have that spirit and to act in that way.

There were those within the membership of the church at Corinth who were submitting their disputes with one another to the heathen courts in the city for adjudication. The Apostle was stirred with indignation about this matter and recorded some very strong language with a view to correcting this practice. In dealing with that local condition he revealed some eternal principles.

It is a challenging word with which the Apostle opens this chapter, "Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints?" Now let us be very clear about this—we are not dealing here with a situation where a believer may be obliged to take legal action against an unbeliever. This is another matter. It is plainly a case of believer going to law with believer. This chapter does not teach that a Christian should never go to law. In fact, it is quite impossible at times to avoid it. Neither is this passage a condemnation of civil courts. It does not set aside regulation by law or adjudication by legal procedure. It is simply a regulation of Christian behavior in respect to matters between Christians. It does speak against Christians airing their differences and settling their quarrels in public courts. This in itself is sinful because it is descending to carnal methods for the solution of spiritual problems.

I. What Are Some Evils Of Litigation Among Christians?

1. It degrades Christian character.

(1) By subjecting the matter to an earthly tribunal.

Such tribunals do not know anything about matters of this nature. They are not living in contact with the principles of eternal justice, and yet Christians often go to them to get them to decide some dispute between them.

(2) By denying the competence of Christian men to judge such matters.

Christians should have any disputes that may arise between them settled by men of their own type. The Holy Spirit considers those who are unregenerated unable to rightly judge the saints. Why imagine that the unsaved can judge better than those who are godly? Do you think that men who do not know God can better and more justly decide such matters than those who know God and walk in conformity

- (3) By ignoring the dignity which Christ has conferred upon His saints. It was bad enough for these civil suits to be tried, without the disgraceful spectacle of Christians suing each other before heathen officers. The Rabbis said, "It is a statute which binds all Israelites, that if one Israelite has a cause against another, it must not be prosecuted before the Gentiles." Why, then, should Christians do worse than the Jews?

Paul sought to make the Corinthians ashamed that they had acted so unworthily of their dignity as Christians. In doing so he made two complaints; first, that they went to law instead of resorting to arbitration; and second, that they made unbelievers their judges.

It was disgraceful for them to think that there were not any in the church who were qualified to act as arbitrators. Are there no wise men among the saints? If not, why not? Is not God the author of wisdom? Behold, it is written, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him." James 1:5.

- (4) By putting Christ's cause to shame before unbelievers. It was bad enough that there should be disputes at all, but to carry them to the courts and bring such things before the world was even worse and was a scandal upon the Christian testimony.

2. It indicates an unChristian spirit.

- (1) It is usually caused by a selfish desire to have one's own way.
- (2) It can frequently be prevented by some small concessions. It is better to suffer injustice than it is to seek for it before the wrong court.
- (3) It can be avoided by sacrificing some personal rights.

Dr. Harry A. Ironside related a story about his mother and him attending a meeting in Toronto where a difficulty was very much in evidence--so much so in fact that young Ironside received an impression that he never forgot. During the course of the fracas, one of the offended parties stood to his feet, and with clenched fists shouted at his brother, "I am willing to take a good deal, but there is one thing, I will not allow you to put anything over on me; I will have my rights!" There was an old Scotch brother sitting nearby--a bit deaf it seems. Hearing only faintly what had been said, he asked, "What was that you said, brother? I did not hear you!" "I said, I will have my rights" repeated the enraged brother, whereupon the old Scotsman replied, "You did not mean to say that, did you? Your rights? If you had your rights, you'd be in hell! Aren't you forgetting that Jesus did not come to get His rights, He came to get His wrongs, and He got them!" That was the well-formed barb that struck the mark for in short order the offended man realized his error and with broken spirit confessed, "Brethren, I have been all wrong. Handle the case as you brethren think best." The matter was settled in a few minutes.

It is strange, but true, that the Word of God has but little weight with many who call themselves followers of Christ, except in those things which have to do with certain great and outstanding doctrines of grace. In the realm of conduct, the average professed Christian seems to feel that he is at liberty to live as he pleases; at least, according to the dictates of his conscience.

3. It does the cause of Christ an irreparable injury.

If you have a problem which your brethren in Christ cannot help you to solve, you had better stay where you are, suffer your wrong and be defrauded rather than go to trial before the unsaved in one of the courts of the land. Even though you may say, "I do not know of any Christians to whom I would submit this case," there is another way out. You can suffer wrong, and God will help you and bless you.

II. What Is The Present Condition Of Christians?

In contrast with their former state when the hand of the devil was upon them, we shall note their present condition.

1. They are washed.
"Washed" has to do with the practical cleansing. They have been cleansed from their sins. Instead of saying, "But you stoned for your sins by repentance"; "But you reformed yourselves"; and things of a kindred nature, Paul declared, "But ye are washed." Not that they themselves removed the defilement, but on the basis of their personal faith in Christ the Holy Spirit wrought this wonderful change.
2. They are sanctified.
Having been washed and made clean, they have been separated from the evil things in which they formerly walked, and they have been set apart to God in Christ. They have been set apart for the Lord's service. They belong to Him.
3. They are justified.
Justified means that they are judicially cleared before the throne of God. To justify means to pronounce just or righteous. God does not have anything against the man who stands justified before Him. Would that all Christians might live up to their standing in Christ.

These are our blessings. They are true of every believer in Christ. How our hearts ought to thrill as we think of how mercifully God has dealt with each of us!