

Title of Essay: **When in Corinth, Do Not Do What the Corinthians Do**

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INDEX

Page Number

Essay.....	3
Introduction.....	3
Social and Historical Context.....	3
Literary Context	6
Exegesis on 1 Corinthians 6:1-8: Brother Against Brother.....	7
Application.....	11
Bibliography.....	14

Essay

Introduction

The practice of going to a court magistrate and making an accusation against your neighbour is not a new one. Civil trials are described countless years ago in Exodus when Moses found himself swamped by innumerable hearings.¹ Centuries later, members of the Church in Corinth were taking each other to court over civil disputes, causing severe disunity in the body of Christ. Furthermore, these trials were held in public in front of non-believers and were giving Christians a bad reputation. The problem had gotten so out of control that the Christians in Corinth were more concerned with suing other members of the body of Christ than with forgiveness. Paul writes 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 to challenge the Corinthians on their behaviour.

To comprehensively understand the situation including the Corinthians' mindset and behaviour, we must examine the secular world and the Graeco-Roman culture in Corinth, specifically focussing on the court system. After building an awareness of the passage's context, we can then begin to decipher what Paul is really trying to convey to the Christian community of Corinth, and understand how Paul's message can be applied to the contemporary church today.

Social and Historical Context

In order to understand 1 Corinthians 6:1-8, we must become acquainted with the Graeco-Roman judicial system in the Roman colony Corinth. This judicial system differentiates between criminal and civil cases, with the governor handling criminal

¹ Exodus 18:13-26

cases and the local magistrate handling civil cases.² As our passage refers to civil cases, we will focus on the civil courts. A civil case was processed through three stages. The first is the plaintiff appearing before the magistrate and giving the facts of the charge. If the magistrate deems the case worthy of consideration, the other party is summoned to appear before the court. The second part of the process is the assignment of a judge that both parties agree upon. In the last stage, the judge hears the case, makes the ruling, and decides the punishment.³

This judicial structure seems straightforward and just. However, Roman law made the system inherently unfair because it favoured anyone of higher social status. Bruce W. Winter states, “If the defendant was a parent, patron, magistrate, or a person of higher rank, then the plaintiff could not be a son, freedman, private citizen, or a person of lower rank respectively.”⁴ This gave legal benefits to those with higher social status. Because of this, litigation typically took place between social equals, or when a person with superior social status and power brought charges against someone who was socially inferior.⁵ Litigation gave power to high society, allowing them to trample over anyone who was considered lower in status. Someone of lower social status could only bring charges against someone of higher status if he or she had the support of a powerful patron.⁶ Even a witness’ status and wealth determined the influence of his or her testimony. The Roman poet, Decimus Iunius Iuvenalis (known as Juvenal), captures this when he writes:

² Bruce W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 59.

³ Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 162.

⁴ Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, 45.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁶ Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 163.

...you may produce a witness as unimpeachable as the host of the Isaeian Goddess...the first question asked will be about his wealth, the last about his character: “How many slaves does he keep? How many acres does he own?”...A man’s word is believed to be in exact proportion to the amount of cash he keeps in his strong-box.⁷

In other words, social inequality and corruption was so prevalent that the weight of a witness’ statement came from their status in society, not their character or conduct. The court’s favouritism towards people of high social status had flung open the doors to injustice.

Numerous other factors further contributed to the injustice of the Roman court system. One such factor was the common practice of bribery. Suetonius recounts that the Corinthian juries are up for sale to the highest bidder or the greatest influence in town. By bribing the jury of the court, one could guarantee a verdict in his or her favour.⁸ Another determining factor in the civil courts in Corinth was the skill of lawyers. Great rhetoric was highly regarded, so in order to be successful, a lawyer had to be exceptionally skilled in the art of communication. A person of lower status had no chance of winning a case unless he or she had an exceedingly skilful lawyer.⁹

There are many reasons someone might take another to civil court, mostly regarding legal possessions, breaking of a contract, damages, fraud, and injury. However, Roman society saw civil courts as an opportunity to settle innumerable—typically petty—grievances. People used the courts to settle scores with rival politicians, to get even for betrayal in relationships, to defend the name of a family member or friend, to voice envy over someone getting more than their fair share of

⁷ Juvenal, *Satire* 3.136-44

⁸ Suetonius, *Claudius* 15.1

⁹ Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 163.

the spotlight in society, or to take revenge on someone who obstructed their ambition.¹⁰ Fundamentally, the civil courts became a playing field for power struggle. The object of the game was to get an upper hand over everyone else, and to take out as many competitors as possible along the way. Civil cases bred enmity among prosecutors, magistrates, witnesses, and jury members. In court, everyone in the courtroom became the object of someone else's fury. Because Christians were suing and publically shaming each other in court as was the social norm in Corinthian society, these feuds and grudges were being brought into the church and causing disunity among the church.

Literary Context

Scholars conventionally split 1 Corinthian 6 into two sections. The first addresses Christians using the civil court to resolve their disputes, and the second a case of sexual immorality, involving going to prostitutes. Previously in chapter 5, a case of incestuous sexual immorality is addressed. Though some believe these two cases sandwiching our passage are linked, others believe that the case in Chapter 6 is distinct from the case mentioned in Chapter 5. This is because 1 Corinthians 6:7 mentions fraud, suggesting a property matter, which has nothing to do with the case mentioned in Chapter 5. However, society at that time associated marriage with property. Therefore, this could potentially be linked to or synonymous with the case in Chapter 5.¹¹ Nevertheless, with the lack of information, scholars cannot be certain.

Despite these differences, a central message runs throughout all of Chapters 5 and 6. Paul is reprimanding the Corinthians for damaging the unity of the church and consequently tarnishing the Church's reputation. They have done this both by taking

¹⁰ Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, 65.

¹¹ Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 164.

their disputes to the pagan courts and by satisfying their sexual desires outside of marriage.¹² Therefore, the central point that Paul is making in 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 and in the surrounding passages is that when members of Christ's Body dispute among each other, Christians should preserve the Church's unity and reputation with forgiveness.

Exegesis on 1 Corinthians 6:1-8: Brother Against Brother

The main message Paul is communicating in 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 is that believers should forego their right to take another to court and be willing to pardon any loss to protect church unity and repute. In order to make this point, Paul uses several sarcastic rhetorical questions to cut through the Corinthians arrogance, superiority and egotistical thinking and confront them with an understanding of their genuine ethical state. Because this letter would be read aloud before the whole church, it would humiliate and convict those in the situations the letter pinpoints, effectively rectifying these issues.¹³

Essentially, Paul begins by asking, "How *dare* any of you behave in this way?" In the Greek, the verb 'dare' appears at the start of the sentence, emphasizing this word and signalling its importance.¹⁴ Instead of an exclamation mark, Paul structures the sentence as a rhetorical question, which delicately reprimands the Corinthians with just enough edge to show he is astonished with their behaviour.¹⁵ His first question mentions one major reason Paul disapproves the Corinthians taking disputes to secular courts. The Christians in Corinth were taking their cases to the

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Gregory J. Lockwood, *1 Corinthians* (Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 187.

¹⁵ Roy E. Ciampa, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 226.

“unrighteous” judges. This word “unrighteous” could refer either to the fact that the judges are unbelievers, or that the judges act in an unrighteous manner. However, the opposing structure in verse one shows that Paul is using the two terms “unrighteous” and “saints” as opposites, indicating that Paul is probably using “unrighteous” in a religious sense, not a moral one. This is confirmed in verse six, when Paul refers to the judges as “unbelievers.”¹⁶ Later verses of this passage support this idea plainly as the essence of Paul’s argument is revealed to be that Christians must not take other Christians to the courts of non-Christians.

Paul’s next rhetorical question is if the Corinthians are “incompetent to try trivial cases.”¹⁷ Paul strategically surrounds that question with two facts: first, that they will judge the world,¹⁸ and next that they will even judge the angels. These refer to the end times when God’s people will judge both the world and the fallen angels. Paul is making two major points. Firstly, the Corinthians Christians’ identity is as the judges of world, not those judged by the world. Secondly, Paul is telling the Corinthian Christians that if they will be judges in the biggest judgment that will ever take place, then they are able to handle minor disputes themselves.¹⁹ Paul asks the question, “Are you incompetent to try trivial cases?”²⁰ because he knows the Corinthian Christians hold such an exalted rank that they are certainly competent to handle “matters pertaining to this life.”²¹

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ 1 Cor 6:2

¹⁸ The idea of the saints judging the world comes from the Old Testament from the book of Daniel 7:22, which gives the Jewish people hope that God will allow His people to take part in the judgment of the last days, which is also develop from other Jewish writings (e.g. Wis. 3:7-8; Jubilees 24:29; Sit. 4:11, 15; 1 Enoch 1:9, 38; 38:5; 95:3; 96:1; 98:12; 108:12; 1QpHab. v 4-5)

¹⁹ Richard L. Pratt Jr, *I & II Corinthians* (Broadman & Holman, 2000), 86.

²⁰ 1 Cor 6:2

²¹ 1 Cor 6:3

Paul's next question comes in verse four. Paul begins his question in a hypothetical form by saying "if you have such cases...." By doing this, Paul reveals that he is not confident that the church even has cases that require a court trial. His question is completed with this phrase: "...why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church,"²² referring to the pagan judges mentioned in verse one. Non-believers cannot handle disputes between believers because they do not have the godly wisdom and mindset of heavenly things that believers have.²³ Essentially, Paul is asking the church why they are taking matters that could be better resolved within the church to outsiders when after all, it is God's people who will judge the world.²⁴ Above all, the body of Christ is God's holy temple and the world has no right to handle disputes among believers.

In verses five and six, Paul posed another question to shame the Corinthians. Shaming was not Paul's goal, but he needed to fully convey his disappointment in their handling of disputes, and communicate that they should have known better. Paul sarcastically asks them if "there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers."²⁵ Obviously the answer is yes, because Paul has already made it clear that the Christians at Corinth have been empowered and equipped to judge. However, they failed in selecting a brother in Christ to handle their dispute, and have failed to grasp what true wisdom is.²⁶ Paul's sarcastic question to the Corinthians church hints to them that they should have already abandoned the secular court system and selected a trusted individual in the church to settle private quarrels in the church. Unfortunately, the church of Corinth had failed the test.

²² ESV translation

²³ Dietmar Neufeld, "Acts of Admonition and Rebuke: A Speech Act Approach to 1 Corinthians 6:1-11," *Biblical Interpretation* 8, no. 4 (October 2000): 396–397.

²⁴ David E. Garland, *First Corinthians* (Baker Academic, 2003), 204–205.

²⁵ 1 Cor 6:5

²⁶ Jr, *I & II Corinthians*, 87.

In the second half of his question, in verse six, Paul reveals two central reasons it is unthinkable for the Corinthians to take each other to court. Firstly, it is destroying family unity. Paul begins the verse with the familiar language of “brother against brother.” Paul reinforces the idea that the body of Christ are family throughout the entire letter with terminology such as “brothers and sisters.”²⁷ In the Corinthians’ society, family disputes are resolved strictly within the family, without any “outside” help.²⁸ Cicero wrote about family in the courtroom, “Do not allow brothers to engage in litigation and to settle their differences in a proceeding involving charges of scandalous conduct.”²⁹ Paul is showing the church of Corinth that when they take other church members to court, they are violating their own their code of conduct by taking their family to court, and causing disunity in the family.

His second central reason revealed in verse six was that these trials were giving the family of Christ a bad reputation. Corinthian civil cases were dealt with publically so anyone could come and watch, including many non-Christians. Christians had been gaining a reputation as a loving and graceful people, but the Corinthians were showing themselves as the polar opposite of loving or graceful by seeking to punish and shame each other in court.³⁰ These Christians at Corinth had received irresistible grace from God through the anguish and sacrifice of Christ. However, instead of acting on their spiritually changed lives, they were suing each other and treating each other just like everyone else in Corinth. Here we see another reason justifying Paul shaming the Corinthians.

²⁷ 1 Cor 4:15

²⁸ Michael Peppard, “Brother against Brother: Controversiae about Inheritance Disputes and 1 Corinthians 6:1-11,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 190.

²⁹ Cicero, *Epistulae ad Familiares*. 9.24.3

³⁰ William R. Baker and Ralph P. Martin, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 89.

Paul has clearly made his case that the Corinthians should not have taken their brothers and sisters in Christ to court. He convincingly concludes “to have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you.”³¹ In verse seven, instead of merely settling grievances within the church in the future, Paul issues a new spiritual challenge. Paul challenges the church to drop grievances completely and humbly take the hit. He writes this because recipients of God’s grace should be prepared to suffer injustice as Christ did. Even if one were to win the lawsuit, he argues, spiritually they would have lost because they are disgracing the family name of Christ before their brothers and sisters, and before the world to which they are called to witness. It could not be called a complete victory when they would have sullied the reputation of the church, of a brother or sister in Christ, and missed an opportunity for spiritual growth.³² However, Paul does not leave it there. In verse eight, he takes it one step further by telling the Corinthians that they would be considered wrongdoers if they still wish to pursue a lawsuit against a brother or sister in Christ. All in all, they should drop lawsuits for the benefit for everyone.³³

Application

The message of 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 is still pertinent to Christians in the 21st century, and challenges Christians on multiple levels. The main message in this passage, and probably the most the obvious one, is that Christians today should not be taking each other to court over civil matters because they are brothers and sisters in Christ. These matters should be worked out between the two parties. If they cannot resolve the issue then they should bring their case before another member of the body

³¹ 1 Cor 6:7

³² Baker and Martin, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, 89.

³³ Garland, *First Corinthians*, 210.

of Christ who will help resolve the matter. However, in the end, the apostle Paul calls for something higher. He encourages brothers and sisters in Christ who have been wronged by other member of the body of Christ should forgo one's right to take action but rather accept the loss caused by the other person. Christians today should be willing to sacrifice their rights in favour of extending grace, just as Christ did for us.

A second application is that Christians need to watch out for greed, jealousy, or envy towards other Christians in their own heart. When a Christian allows voraciousness or bitterness to come into their heart against a brother or sister, it causes disunity in the church because instead of loving one's brother or sister in Christ his or her heart becomes consumed with malice towards other Christians. This malice makes the person unwilling to help his or her fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Essentially, refusing to assist a brother or sister in Christ is like refusing Jesus Christ. Therefore, Christians must guard their hearts against developing grudges and give up any past bitterness or resentment for the sake of church unity

Lastly, probably the greatest connotation of this section of Paul's letter to the Corinthians is his call for forgiveness. This goes hand in hand with the first application, but it is extremely different. The first application suggests a brother or sister in Christ should never take another Christian to court, and that he or she should be willing to suffer the loss the other Christian has caused him or her. However, this does not call for forgiveness. One can let something slide and still hold a grudge against the perpetrator. However, forgiving someone that has wronged you involves abandoning bitterness or enmity towards the person and being free from it. This keeps the unity of the church intact. Therefore, moving towards the act of grace and forgiveness is the best possible solution.

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