

# Life Together

*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?  
If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.  
For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.  
(1 Corinthians 3:16-17. ESV)*

*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same  
image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.  
(2 Corinthians 3:18. ESV)*

## **Why Not Rather Suffer Wrong?**

**November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2014**

**1 Corinthians 6:1-11**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning! Open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 6:1-11; that's on page 954 in your pew Bible. Once again we find ourselves dealing with a passage that is not terribly hard to understand but that does require sensitivity with respect to application. As with chapter 5, I think it will be best to treat this passage in two messages; the first message, this week we will look at the text as a whole and we'll talk about what it says and how that should be applied in our church. Next week we'll look at what Paul says, somewhat in passing in verses 9-11. If you are a Bible reader and if you are even a little bit aware of what is happening in our culture then you know that these verses have become the subject of great controversy in the culture and increasingly in the church. And so even though the issues raised there are not central to the argument of the text as a whole, it is absolutely critical that we understand what Paul is saying and that we are prepared to explain that to our friends and neighbours. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

<sup>1</sup> When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? <sup>2</sup> Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? <sup>3</sup> Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! <sup>4</sup> So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? <sup>5</sup> I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, <sup>6</sup> but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? <sup>7</sup> To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? <sup>8</sup> But you yourselves wrong and defraud—even your own brothers!

<sup>9</sup> Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, <sup>10</sup> nor thieves, nor the greedy,

nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.<sup>11</sup> And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:1–11 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

### **Understanding The Text:**

I mentioned during one of the first messages that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians in response to a letter he received from them that contained a list of questions. In addition, Paul interviewed the messengers who brought the letter and in the course of that interview he made a list of his own questions and this is one of them. It has been reported to him that the Christians in Corinth are regularly taking petty disputes before the civil courts. Paul is outraged and flabbergasted that they would be doing this. The Roman Court system in Corinth as everywhere in the Empire at the time was a complete and utter gong show. The Romans themselves knew this, Roman commentators understood that the corrupt nature of the courts was one of the reasons that the Roman Empire was threatening to collapse. Justice was bought more often than not. The system favoured the rich and outcomes had more to do with who could bribe the most jurors and whose lawyer could entertain the crowd with the more flamboyant personal attacks than it did with any particular legal merits of the case. It was not an appropriate venue for Christians to be airing personal disputes. The volatile and corrupt nature of court proceedings virtually ensured that divisions would be magnified and solidified in the church. If you take your petty disputes into the Roman courts, Paul says, you are going to do so at the cost of Christian unity.

You are also going to do it at the cost of Christian witness. Quite frankly Paul says, you are going to look petty and stupid. God is going to be slandered and the Gospel is going to be hindered. Don't do it. This is a very bad idea.

The grammar of the text makes it clear that Paul is making two separate and convincing counter arguments. He is saying first of all in verses 1-6 that Christians ought to be able to settle their disputes internally. After all, the Bible says that we will judge the world and even judge the angels. Surely if that's going to be true of us in the future then we ought to be able to mediate petty disputes in the here and now? There are several passages in the New Testament that speak of us participating in Christ's Judgement of the earth as well as several passages that speak of

how Christians themselves will stand before Christ and give an account. Matthew Henry comments on this issue saying:

They themselves are indeed to be judged (see Matt. xxv. 31-41), but they may first be acquitted, and then advanced to the bench, to approve and applaud the righteous judgment of Christ both on men and angels.<sup>1</sup>

If you are going to do that, Paul says, then why can you not do this? Christians should be able to handle sub criminal disputes inside the house of the Lord.

Secondly, in verses 7-11 he makes the point that if Christians take each other to civil court to solve their petty disputes, no matter who wins, everybody loses. Paul is trying to remind people that how we behave determines how people think about God. He makes the same point again in chapter 14:

<sup>23</sup> If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? (1 Corinthians 14:23 ESV)

In chapter 14 Paul says that if your defective beliefs with respect to spiritual gifts and order in worship result in foolish and stupid behavior that is witnessed by unbelievers you are actually setting up barriers in your city to the progress of the Gospel. Don't do it. Behaviour is essentially evangelistic. That point is made again and again and again throughout Scripture. Here in chapter 6 Paul is saying that when you air your dirty laundry in public as a Christian all you do is make it harder for lost people to believe in the Gospel. Even if you win, you lose. We all lose. God is blasphemed, the church is ridiculed and the lost are damned. Why not rather be wronged?

That is the clear and straightforward teaching of the text but as with chapter 5 understanding the text is far easier than applying it. Paul is saying in pretty clear language that petty disputes should be handled inside the church of Jesus Christ. For the sake of God's name and for the progress of the Gospel, for crying out loud, deal with this stuff internally. And p.s., grow up so that you have fewer things to fight over in the first place. That seems to be what Paul is saying. How then can we submit to this teaching and apply it in our church? Let's talk first of all about

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<sup>1</sup>Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible (Unabridged)*, Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), n.p.

how we should handle sub-criminal disputes inside the church.

## Principles For Handling Sub-criminal Disputes Within The Church

Again, I need to emphasize that we are talking about sub-criminal disputes. Paul says in Romans 13 that the government is our friend and that the justice system is God's servant for ensuring peace and safety for all. So to be very clear, we do not even attempt to deal with criminal issues internally. This is why if there is an allegation of sexual abuse inside the church it is immediately referred to the police or to CAS depending on the circumstances. We do not investigate such things internally. Churches that have tried to deal with such things internally have got themselves into all types of trouble. If there is an allegation or a reasonable suspicion of sexual abuse in Children's Ministry for example, I only hear about it after the police or after CAS have been called. It has to be that way and so I want to be clear that we are not talking about that. We are talking about some principles in the Bible for dealing with sub-criminal disputes inside the church.

Nowhere in the Bible are those principles laid out more succinctly than in Matthew 18:15-20.

Let's turn there now. Jesus says:

<sup>15</sup>“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. <sup>16</sup>But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. <sup>17</sup>If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. <sup>18</sup>Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. <sup>19</sup>Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. <sup>20</sup>For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”  
(Matthew 18:15–20 ESV)

From this passage I think we can easily discern 5 principles for sub-criminal dispute resolution within the church.

### **1. Every attempt should be made initially to solve the dispute privately and personally**

Go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. This is so critical! Talk to the brother or sister before you solicit advice from other people! So often we dress up our inclination towards gossip and slander by calling it “consultation” and “counsel”. It is so hard to go back and undo

the damage that is done by skipping this step. The issue with your brother may be a simple misunderstanding. It may be that when you point out the problem, he or she agrees and confesses the mistake, makes amends and the issue should go away. No one else should ever know it happened. Love your brother or sister by protecting their reputation by following very carefully this important step in the process. Asking for advice before you have talked to the individual in question is GOSSIP. PERIOD. Sharing it as a prayer request before you have talked to the individual in question is GOSSIP. PERIOD. Don't do it.

**2. If agreement is not achieved privately, a third party mediator(s) from the church should be secured**

We see that in verse 16:

<sup>16</sup>But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you

We do this here at FBC all the time. If two people can't agree on a just verdict in a sub-criminal dispute we will connect them to a wise and disinterested third party from the church. Now, by "disinterested" I don't mean that they don't give a rip, I mean that they have no vested interest in the outcome other than peace between brethren and safeguarding God's Name. In such cases we will attempt to recruit a senior saint with years of wisdom in the bank and assign them as a third party mediator and very often this will provide the necessary change in dynamic that allows a resolution to be achieved.

Here is something you need to understand as a Christian person. Sin distorts our perception of reality. I am a sinner and therefore I am not able to look at situations I am involved in without some unavoidable distortion. My self interest, my pride, my greed, my immaturity will inevitably lens and distort my understanding of the issues that involve me. This is why third part mediation is so helpful. Its not that the third party is smarter than the first or second parties, it is just that they have no stake in the outcome. Therefore, their own pride and self interest is not a factor in their perception. You could turn right around and serve this function in their life. It isn't about who is wise and who is foolish its just about understanding that our sin distorts our perceptions. This is why third party mediation is so helpful in marriage. When my wife and I have a dispute generally speaking, she honestly sees it her way and I honestly see it my way. Now of course

I'm right and she is wrong but it could also be that we're both wrong because we're both seeing things through the lens of our own selfishness and pride. So we will both be helped by outside perspective. This is just WISE and it reflects the humility and self awareness that ought to be characteristic of truly saved people. Truly saved people know that they need this. In their marriages and in their membership. If you can't see eye to eye get another disinterested believer to have a look.

### **3. If the mediators agree but the contesting parties cannot, the matter should be referred to the church**

Now scholars and theologians disagree as to whether we should understand “the church” as the whole church or whether we should understand it as “the delegates of the church – i.e. the elders”. Now to be fair, there is Biblical precedent for understanding “the church” as “the delegates of the church”. In Acts 15 after all the arguments have been heard the text records in verse 22:

Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, **with the whole church**, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. (Acts 15:22 ESV)

Well clearly in Acts 15 the whole church was not there when this decision was being made. In fact they are sent out to go tell other people in the church about the decision that was made. So clearly “the whole church” in Acts 15:22 does mean “the representatives of the whole church”. Our church polity takes a middle ground on this issue. We would have the parties present their case to a court of the elders. The elders would decide a verdict and they would then ask the congregation, in cases of serious discipline, to affirm the verdict of the board. This avoids the difficulty of the whole congregation hearing the testimony of all the parties which may be damaging to the cause of unity and to the future restoration of the guilty party. Nevertheless, however you slice it, Jesus understood “the church” as the final court of appeal on sub-criminal disputes. He expected both parties to submit to the verdict. If the guilty party would not submit to the verdict he was to be treated as unconverted.

Jesus said that. Jesus knew that if a person was so arrogant that he did not believe himself capable of distorting reality in his own favour and if he was so autonomous that he felt no need of communal counsel and if he was so rebellious as to disregard the wisdom of his elders and his

church as a whole then such a man gave irrefutable evidence of his non-regeneration. He was clearly not saved and should therefore be formally recognized as such.

Fifth and finally with respect to the principles of sub-criminal dispute resolution:

## **5. We should expect to have God's help throughout the entirety of this process**

Jesus said:

<sup>20</sup>For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

You will often hear this verse referenced in small prayer meetings, usually as a way of encouraging folks that even though not many people came to prayer meeting, we are still assured of the presence of the Lord in our midst. That's fine – there is nothing wrong with that though it is a classic case of making the right point from the wrong text. Of course Jesus will be with us – though I trust that you understand that even if you were praying alone in your car, Jesus would be with you; you don't require a quorum of 3 people for Jesus to show up at prayer meeting. So its true that Jesus is with us in small prayer meetings but that's not really the point being made here. The point that Jesus is making here is that when we are concerned with HIS NAME – when we do church discipline BECAUSE WE CARE ABOUT HIS REPUTATION IN THE COMMUNITY – we can be assured that he will be with us and he will help us. He has a vested interest in that that you can count on. That is very good news because sometimes you feel like you need the wisdom of Solomon to know who is telling you the truth and who is lying. Sometimes everybody is lying because they are so affected by sin that they can't see the truth to save their lives. In such situations you need MORE THAN THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON, you need the help and presence of the Lord and this verse promises that you shall have it.

That's why Paul was so shocked that they took these cases before unbelievers. You don't need to do that, he says. We have a process. We have wise people. More than that, we have the help and presence of the Lord. You can do this in house and should do this in house.

Secondly and more briefly, we need to also deal with Paul's desire that we generate fewer of these disputes in the first place. He is clearly annoyed that these disputes arise at all:

To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. (1 Corinthians 6:7 ESV)

If you are going to have disputes, handle them properly and internally but far better still to not have them in the first place! Toward that end, I want to conclude by asking what we could do as Christians that would help us experience fewer conflicts with brothers and sisters in the church.

### **Preventing Conflict In The Church:**

I had originally sought to answer that question by reflecting on some virtues to cultivate – that is reflected on your bulletin handout, but over the last few days I have begun to feel that perhaps it would be more useful to talk about best practices to adopt. Both are useful but time restrictions force us to choose and I think that this is the more useful choice. In ministry we often talk about how salvation is a one handed work. God does it to us. We were dead in our trespasses and sins until God in Christ had mercy upon us. He lifted us out of the pit and set our feet upon the rock – that is all stuff **GOD DOES TO US**. Sanctification, on the other hand – how we grow as Christians – is a two handed work. Meaning we have to do some stuff to grow – we have to partner with the work of God in us and as we do we will find ourselves getting mired in fewer and fewer disputes. The best thing you can do to prevent conflict in the church is to **GROW** in your Christian faith. Here are two things you can do that will help you grow and help you inspire less conflict and fewer disputes within the church.

#### **1. Preach the Gospel to yourself**

The Gospel isn't just a message you need to hear when you are switching from being a pagan to being a Christian – it is a message you need to preach to yourself everyday. The Gospel says that God is large and in charge and he makes the rules and he is good. His ways are right and lead to life. The Gospel begins with the idea that first and foremost, people need to be reconciled to **GOD** – not to us – to God! God is the one who has the power to cast people into hell – not you. God loves and hates – you only get to love. You are not God. God is allowed to do some stuff that you are not allowed to do. Vengeance is mine – **I WILL REPAY** sayeth the Lord – you don't get to do that, you forgive, you pray for those who persecute you, you love your enemy and turn the other cheek. **YOU ARE NOT GOD**. That's a message you need to hear everyday.



And you are a sinner. That's the second G of the Gospel – GUILT. You are a sinner and you deserve to go to hell because you rebelled against your Creator. The fact that you are not going to hell because Jesus died for you should shut your mouth against any and all further complaints. Whatever you have now its better than you deserve. Whatever treatment you are receiving now it is better than you deserve. You have received GRACE now go and show others grace.

We call that gratitude and it is the 4<sup>th</sup> G of the Gospel. God, Guilt, Grace, Gratitude. Gratitude is when you show mercy because you've been shown mercy. Remember the parable of the unmerciful servant? He was forgiven by the Master but he couldn't forgive the petty debts he was owed by others and so the Master threw him into hell. According to the Bible if you fail to forgive others it only proves that you never received the forgiveness of God. You rejected his grace. Here is what that seems to imply. You grow in your grace and peace before God by extending grace and peace to others. We respond to God's love and mercy by showing love and mercy to others.

The last G of the Gospel is "glory" and that leads me to the second thing you can do to facilitate fewer disputes in the House of the Lord.

## **2. Think about the future**

Paul goes there at the end of this passage in 1 Corinthians 6. He says:

<sup>9</sup>**Or do you not know** that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? (1 Corinthians 6:9. ESV)

Think about the future. One day everyone will die and God will declare the truth about who they are. Persistent sinners will go to hell and those who walked and persevered in faith will enter into God's Presence to enjoy his glory forever. Think about that! That clearly implies that nobody gets away with anything! Therefore you don't need to deal out justice in this present life. LET IT GO! Not because justice doesn't matter but because only God can ultimately be trusted to deal out justice. If you can't sort it out – LET IT GO. It doesn't get swept under the carpet it gets reserved for the Last Day. Chill out. God will deal with it as he will deal with you. Think about that and make sure that you are in the right with respect to all men.

Think about the Judgment and think about what's after that. After the Judgment, if we are found in Christ, we inherit all things. Let me say that again: **WE INHERIT ALL THINGS. SO STOP FIGHTING OVER SCRAPS!** You are kings and queens in the making – you don't need to roll around in the mud like a bunch of dogs fighting over scraps. Let it go. You will not lose a thing that is rightly yours in Christ.

That's Christian hope! Cultivate it in your heart as a defense against petty grievance. Remember who God is and who you are and what you deserve apart from the grace of God in Christ. And remember where you're going and what and who is waiting for you on the other side. For the sake of God's Name, for the unity of the church and for the progress of the Gospel, let's not air our dirty laundry before all the watching world. Let's deal with it wisely, internally and God willing infrequently and when all else fails, let us rather be wronged. God sees, God knows, He'll make it right, now or in the age to come. You can trust in that because this is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.