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CHRISTIANS AND LAWSUITS

"TWO WRONGS DON'T MAKE A RIGHT"

May a Christian sue (file a lawsuit) another Christian?

Does the Bible permit Christians to sue at all?

My prayer is that God will guide you and grant you a proper and practical knowledge, understanding, and wise application of the principles found First Corinthians 6 and related scriptures.

Summary: According to [1 Corinthians 6:1-8](#), a Christian is not to civilly file a lawsuit against another Christian in a secular court of law. Rather, the disputed matter should be arbitrated or judged by a wise Christian or Christians. However, in our modern societal system, there are exceptional situations that may not fall squarely within this principle. Such special circumstances will be discussed later in this article.

Sometimes, the issue is not black and white. In those “gray area” cases, ask God and yourself these questions:

“Is a lawsuit in secular court my only reasonable option, or is there another way to remedy my situation?”

“Do I have an improper motive in filing a lawsuit such as revenge, anger, hurt feelings, stubbornness, impatience, or greed?”

“Is the church equipped to resolve this legal dispute with my brother?”

“Are there Christian lawyers, retired Christian judges, or other professionally trained Christian mediators available to negotiate and/or adjudicate this legal dispute with my fellow Christian?”

Secular Courts are ordained by God ([Romans 13:1-7](#)). Therefore, there is no prohibition against a Christian suing a non-Christian in a secular court.

Christian versus Christian Disputes

Historical Backdrop: Corinthian Christians in Paul’s time sued their fellow Christians in secular court. But, back in those days, not even the Jews used the secular courts.

Rather, in those times, the Jews utilized Jewish arbitrators. Further, in Greek culture, watching civil disputes in the public courts was very popular entertainment. Therefore, legal disputes were very public events.

Paul's Response: "How Dare you!" ([1 Corinthians 6:1-10](#)): "How dare you sue a Christian brother in secular court!" (1 Corinthians 6:1-paraphrased) How dare you utilize "unrighteous" Corinthian judges to resolve inter-Christian disputes! ([1 Corinthians 6:1](#)). But Paul's point appears to be that the "Corinthian" judges, as a whole, or in general, were either unbelieving or corrupt or both. (Further, many of the judges/arbitrators were 60 year-old lay persons performing required civic duty, as I understand it).

"Law" (Verse 1): "[P]apyri discoveries in the last century reveal that Paul's word was used regularly in a legal context to mean a lawsuit."

Christians will (with Christ) judge the world and angels. Therefore, believers can competently judge lesser (earthly) matters between two believers ([1 Corinthians 6:2-4](#)).

For Christians, spiritual and legal issues commingle and intertwine. Secular, government judges are either unqualified or not permitted to resolve the spiritual issues that may be involved in the dispute (1 Corinthians 2:14-16, [6:4](#)). But wise Christians can discern and judge both the legal and spiritual issues ([1 Corinthians 6:5](#)).

Judging an openly "Christian versus Christian" legal dispute in secular court creates a bad witness (This conclusion is indirectly inferred in [1 Corinthians 6:6-7](#)). Pagans will see Christians behaving just like they do and NOT demonstrating God's love, which hurts the cause of Christ (John 13:5). It would be better to be defrauded by a Christian (and suffer financial loss) than to take them to secular Court because the cause of Christ is more important than money or possessions (See [1 Corinthians 6:7-8](#)). This last point will be elaborated on later in this article.

Specific Situations: Many of the situations below may be considered "gray area" matters. Therefore, before deciding a course of action, you need to ask God for wisdom and understanding (Proverbs 2:6, James 1:5). You are also admonished to seek counsel from wise Christians (Psalm 1:1, Proverbs 11:14, 12:15, and 15:22). Lastly, before making a final decision, you ought to have God's peace in your heart about which decision to make (Colossians 3:15).

1. Criminal Matters: The context of 1 Corinthians 6 is civil legal disputes, not criminal prosecution. With few exceptions, the Government prosecutes crimes. Therefore, a Christian may look to a secular court to prosecute anyone (including Christians) who committed a crime against them ([Romans 13:1-7](#), 1 Peter 1:13-14).

2. Christians Acting on Behalf of Others: When Christians undertake certain legally defined positions, they may, in certain circumstances, have a legal duty to pursue secular legal action (which could potentially involve other believers). Examples: Christian legal guardians; Christian executor of a will; Christian trustees;

and Christian parents. These representative examples involve fiduciaries acting on behalf of the beneficiary, child or person whom they are in charge.

3. Christians Covered by Insurance: In many cases, the person who caused your harm or damage is covered by insurance. Example: Automobile accident cases. What if that insured person is a Christian? In some states, you can sue the Christian's secular insurance company directly. Therefore you don't have to directly sue the Christian who harmed you. In other states, you must sue the individual even though the insurance company (surety) is paying for the damages and controlling the case. Obviously, a secular insurance company will rarely, if ever, agree to a Christian dispute resolution process.

For example, if you were seriously injured, out of work, and unable to provide for your family, what do you do if the negligent driver who caused your damages is a Christian? Remember, you have an obligation to provide for your family (1 Timothy 5:8). Therefore, in that situation, seeking fair compensation via an out-of-court settlement through a believer's insurance company would appear reasonable. Moreover, if the insurance company is unreasonable or disputes liability, you may have to file a lawsuit (or go to trial) in order to obtain compensation for your losses. The Christian versus Christian issue is, I believe, incidental in this matter in nearly all of these types of cases.

What if your injuries were temporary and your own health insurance paid for your bills, but the automobile insurance company won't pay you as much "pain and suffering" damages as you think is fair? There are sections later in this article that may help you make a wise decision.

In general, I believe that a Christian may seek compensation for injuries from another Christian's insurance company if the claim is pursued without malice or slander or greed. The following advice may be helpful to you: "Do not initiate anything without first saturating the matter with prayer." God loves you and wants to guide you in the best path.

4. Christian Filing Bankruptcy: A Christian family of four earns \$2,000 per month and has \$50,000 in credit card debt, and owes \$1,000.00 to their Christian auto mechanic. The Christian files bankruptcy and lists their automobile mechanic as a debtor as required by law. Does this violate principals outlined 1 Corinthians 6? I don't believe so in most cases. This is a situation where the Christian mechanic is (in nearly all cases) incidental to the matter (other than being owed money). See also "[Is Bankruptcy Scriptural? What does the Bible Say?](#)"

5. Christian Evicting a Christian From a Residence or Business Property: A Christian versus Christian landlord-tenant dispute, it seems, can be resolved via Christian mediation or arbitration in most cases. However, in some cases, going to the magistrate may be proper if the Christian tenant refuses to vacate, refuses to

pay rent, and refuses to immediately seek a Christian mediator and/or arbitrator to quickly resolve the dispute.

6. Christian Versus Christian Divorce: This article does not address what Biblical grounds for divorce are. Here are, however, some scripture references pertaining to divorce: Matthew 19:1-12; Mark 10:2-12; 1 Corinthians 7:10-16.

A divorce proceeding is a civil matter. However, to obtain a "legal" divorce, some level of government court involvement will be required. The government regulates and grants divorces. Accordingly, divorce falls within [Romans 13:1-7](#), and secular courts may be utilized.

Nevertheless, spiritual and legal issues combine and intertwine in divorce cases. Therefore, as between two Christians, a wise, neutral Christian, ought to be utilized, if possible, to assist in the resolution of the matter.

A number of Christian attorneys in or near your geographical area may offer divorce mediation as a cost-effective option. Alternatively, your church may have a dispute resolution process.

If more than one church is involved, you can have one pastor from each church be involved, and the two pastors can choose a neutral third person to produce a three person panel. Alternatively, you can hire a professional Christian mediator or arbitrator who can negotiate or adjudicate the matter alone or include members of your church or churches in the process. However, there are too many factual variables in a divorce to make one rule to fit all situations. In certain situations, it may be necessary or prudent to pursue the matter through traditional secular court.

7. A Christian refuses to have another Christian evaluate and decide the issue of dispute. What is a Christian refuses to follow 1 Corinthians 6? There are two primary points of view on this subject.

One view believes that if a Christian does not agree to resolve a matter within the Church, then the other Christian is free to sue him or her in civil court in order to seek to achieve justice. The other view is that the Christian should, out of mercy, just accept the wrong done to him or her rather than interjecting a Christian versus Christian dispute into the public area and thereby harming the cause of Christ.

In this matter, pray for wisdom and seek confidential counsel from wise Christians.

8. Wolf in Sheep's Clothing: "What if a person is not truly a Christian?" This is another difficult issue. Some believe that one can sue in secular court if one is convinced the person is not really a Christian even though they profess or claim to be a "Christian. " Others declare that it is dangerous to judge a person as not being a Christian, and that one should play it safe and not sue the alleged wrongdoer.

This may be a factual issue needing to be resolved on a case-by-case basis. However, one should first seek to persuade the wrongdoer to agree to submit to either Christian mediation and/or Christian arbitration per 1 Cor. 6:1-8. If he or she is a member of your particular church, your church may have a dispute resolution system that can be utilized. Pray for wisdom and seek godly advice..

9. "What if I am sued by another Christian in a secular court?" If you are sued by another Christian, you could possibly contact them (or, if they are represented by an attorney, then contact their attorney), and request that, pursuant to 1 Corinthians 6:1-8, this lawsuit be put on hold, or referred by the court to a Christian mediator and/or Christian arbitrator agreed upon by the parties. In any event, in my opinion, you may defend yourself in a secular court in this situation.

If your adversary has a valid case against you, agree to a settlement quickly to avoid further costs, damages and/or attorney's fees (Matthew 5:25). A speedy settlement will also diminish harm to the cause of Christ by taking the matter out of the public eye.

The above examples are illustrative and are not exhaustive. There may be other gray areas as well (e.g. foreclosure, quiet title, and others) while other disputes may fall squarely within 1 Corinthians 6 parameters. Nevertheless, in many or, if not most of these cases, the church or a private Christian mediator or arbitrator (or combination of both) should be able to negotiate and/or judge the matter.

Biblical Resolution Method: [Matthew 18:15-17](#) states that a Christian, who is wronged by another Christian, should follow the following four step approach:

Step 1: Address the issue privately, alone with the other believer who you believe wronged you. If that does not resolve the dispute, then proceed to the second step:

Step 2: Repeat Step 1, except, this time, bringing one or two Christian persons to with you seek to help convince the other person of his erroneous ways. If this second step does not solve the problem, then proceed to the third step.

Step 3: Bring the matter before the church. This is where a Christian dispute resolution process comes into play or use of private Christian mediation and/or arbitration. As to this third step (bringing the matter before the church), you normally want to agree with the other party, in a signed writing, that any final decision by the Christian decision-maker(s) is legally binding on the parties. To create a legally enforceable binding agreement, you ought to seek legal counsel to help assure that a valid binding agreement is created. If, after a final decision about the matter is made, the wrongdoer refuses to repent and admit his or her wrongdoing or responsibility, then proceed to the fourth step.

Step 4: Expel the wrongdoer from the fellowship of the church (which modernly, perhaps, means the local fellowship or denomination, as the case may be). (See 1 Corinthians 5:5).

If you have a dispute that involves substantial money or property, you should, I believe, in most cases, seek advice from a knowledgeable attorney before implementing these steps above. Seeking legal counsel will build your knowledge base and, in most cases, help you make decisions with greater clarity. Also consider seeking counsel from a Pastor who can further add clarity to the matter.

Christian versus Non-Christian Disputes

The courts are instituted by God. The government court system is established by God to maintain law, order, and peace in the land ([Romans 13:1-7](#)). Christians may, in certain instances, use the secular court system. Even Apostle Paul cited Roman law and utilized secular courts protect his legal rights (Acts 16:37-38, 22:25-29, and 25:10-12).

Christians may use secular courts to resolve their legal disputes with unbelievers. 1 Corinthians 6 only applies to Christian versus Christian disputes, but does not apply Christian versus non-Christian disputes.

Final Words

God's glory is great gain. Christians still defraud other Christians today. Let assume, for sake of discussion, that a person can't obtain dispute resolution within the church or by private Christian arbitration. And, after prayer and careful consideration, this person decides to suffer the material or financial loss rather than cause shame to the cause of Christ by suing publicly in a secular, worldly court. Remember this: "Anyone who accepts wrong for the sake of God's glory will not come out the loser." Recall that Jesus suffered wrongly for us, to the glory of God (1 Peter 3:18, Philippians 2:5-11). "It is far better to lose financially than to lose spiritually." It is "[b]etter to suffer wrong than to do wrong." 1 Peter 2:18-25.

Wise Christians are available to arbitrate disputes. Today, a believer is, in most cases, without excuse, in failing to find a wise Christian to settle or judge a legal dispute! Today, many Christian conciliation groups exist. Many Christian lawyers and retired judges are willing to provide their services. Many churches have a Christian dispute resolution infrastructure.

"What about justice?" But what if the cheater was not really a Christian, and he or she got away with wronging?

That person will ultimately receive justice. In First Corinthians 6:9-10, Paul turns to the wrongdoer who thinks he got away with his actions. Paul rebukes this person harshly. Some of these Corinthians were preying (not praying) crooks. Paul has a word for them:

Practicing "thieves don't go to heaven!" Those who have not a saving faith in Jesus, and, who, therefore, repent not and have a thieving, dishonest and/or immoral lifestyle will never enter the Kingdom of heaven!

"What about turning the other cheek?" [Matthew 5:39](#) ("whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also"). Jesus' command to turn the other cheek is radical, but it is not absolute. Turn the other cheek means to allow yourself to be insulted without retaliation. Don't retaliate or take revenge when you are insulted. However, the government may restrain evil by prosecuting a person who commits a physical assault on another person (Romans 13:4). Further, self-preservation, self-defense from physical harm is, obviously, acceptable.

"What about legal nonresistance?" [Matthew 5:40](#): "And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat [undergarment], let him have thy cloke [outer garment] also."

If we take these words too literally, Christians would have to institute nudist colonies and other intolerable results. [Matthew 5:38-42](#) is a paragraph and must be taken in context and compared with other scriptures to assure proper, balanced interpretation. A famous and highly respected Bible commentator offers this practical advice:

"If the matter be small, which we may lose without an considerable damage to our families, it is good to submit to it [legal nonresistance] for peace' sake." Matthew Henry

Verse 40 must be taken in context with the entire paragraph ([Matthew 5:38-42](#)) which corrects how the Pharisees incorrectly taught that "an eye for an eye" allowed personal revenge, when, in the Old Testament, and "eye for an eye" spoke of equitable justice meted out by a governmental body.

The Apostle Paul stood up for his legal rights. But he did not seek revenge or retaliation. Paul and Silas were wrongfully beaten, imprisoned, and chained. Paul defended himself using Roman law (Acts 16:37).

Right Actions With Wrong Motivations: Your motive for taking legal action is crucial. Your motive is wrongful and will cause harm to all if legal action involves greed, revenge, anger, or other ungodly motives.

Christians and Christian Arbitrators may use non-Christian experts. Christians are aptly qualified to evaluate and resolve issues and disputes involving Christian disputants. However, there are times when specialized legal, technical, medical, or scientific knowledge necessary to help resolve the dispute may not be available from a Christian professional or expert. In those cases, it may be necessary to bring in a non-Christian with advanced or specialized medical, legal, scientific or technical knowledge to help the Christian decision-makers make a fair and just decision.

Conclusion

Know this, that lawsuits can take on a life of their own. Parties often dig in, fix their legal positions, and cases can become very contentious, stressful, and expensive to pursue. “Believers have the necessary resources to skillfully arbitrate the various issues and problems that pertain to life.” Going to court, while necessary in some instances, should, in general, be a rarity, and a last resort.

“We should seek godly, wise, Spirit-filled and directed counsel within the church to resolve our differences.”

"Church" includes any born-again believer, even the "least esteemed" believers ([1 Cor. 6:4](#)).

Notes:

Some groups (a minority in number) believe that a literal reading of this passage in the original Greek language does not refer to secular court lawsuits at all but refers instead to the improper use of unfit persons within the Corinthian church to render judgments.

An even smaller group of people believe that civil lawsuits are not “smallest matters,” and, therefore, 1 Corinthians 6 does not apply to lawsuits

A very small set of people believe that “brothers” refers to family relatives, not Christian brothers.

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1 Corinthians 6:1-11

King James Bible:

1Cr 6:1 Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints? 2 Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? 3 Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life? 4 If then ye have judgments of things pertaining to this life, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church. 5 I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? no, not one that shall be

able to judge between his brethren? 6 But brother goeth to law with brother, and that before the unbelievers. 7 Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another. Why do ye not rather take wrong? why do ye not rather [suffer yourselves to] be defrauded? 8 Nay, ye do wrong, and defraud, and that [your] brethren. 9 Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, 10 Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.

New King James Bible:

“1 Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? 2 Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? 3 Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life? 4 If then you have judgments concerning things pertaining to this life, do you appoint those who are least esteemed by the church to judge? 5 I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren? 6 But brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers! 7 Now therefore, it is already an utter failure for you that you go to law against one another. Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather let yourselves be cheated? 8 No, you yourselves do wrong and cheat, and you do these things to your brethren! 9 Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor *homosexuals, nor sodomites, 10 nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.”

Romans 13:1-7

King James Bible:

Rom 13:1 Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. 2 Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: 4 For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to [execute] wrath upon him that doeth evil. 5 Wherefore [ye] must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. 6 For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending

continually upon this very thing. 7 Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute [is due]; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour

New King James Bible:

13:1 Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. 4 For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. 5 Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. 6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. 7 Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.

Matthew 18:15-17

King James Bible:

Mat 18:15 Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. 16 But if he will not hear [thee, then] take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. 17 And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell [it] unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.

New King James Bible:

15 "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.'" 17 And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector."

Matthew 5:38:42

King James Bible:

Mat 5:38 Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: 39 But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on

thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. 40 And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have [thy] cloke also. 41 And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. 42 Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away.

New King James Bible:

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'* 39 But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. 40 If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. 41 And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. 42 Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.