

Christians and the Courts: What Say the Scriptures?

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When you –a follower of Jesus Christ – have been wronged, what is the right response? When defrauded, defamed, injured, or abused, what is the Christian to do? Whereas God’s heart is always bent toward forgiveness and reconciliation, it is God Himself that appointed or instituted governing authorities to maintain the civil order! In the Old Testament, during the giving of the Law, God gave clear instructions regarding the establishment of the civil courts:

¹⁸“You shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. ¹⁹You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous. ²⁰Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the Lord your God is giving you.” (Deuteronomy 16:18-20)

There are many other passages in the Old Testament that illustrate the fact that God established the justice system (see Exodus 18:25-26; Deuteronomy 1:15-17; et al). Even in the New Testament it is abundantly clear that there is no governing authority but that God has permitted or instituted it for the exercise and preservation of social justice:

¹Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ²Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. (Romans 13:1-5)

What God finds detestable is the abuse of the courts, not their existence or activity (see Jeremiah 22:1-4; Lamentations 3:36; et al). But is it ever permissible for a Christian to take legal action? The Scripture most often cited, having to do with Christians and the courts, is found in Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth:

¹When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? ²Or 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? ³Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! ⁴So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? ⁵I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, ⁶but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? ⁷To have lawsuits at all with one another is already

a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? ⁸But you yourselves wrong and defraud—even your own brothers! (1 Corinthians 6:1-8)

This passage encourages God's people to reconcile problems with *fellow-Christians* outside of secular or pagan tribunals. The Jews held that to bring a lawsuit before a court of idolaters was blasphemy against the law. But the Greeks were fond of disputatious lawsuits with each other. Probably the Greek Christians brought cases before pagan judges.¹ In any event, from the many things that are here denounced by the Apostle Paul, we learn that the Christian church at Corinth was in a state of constant turmoil. And divided as they were among themselves, there was no one who possessed any public authority to settle differences between one man and another. Therefore, as one party would not submit to the decisions of another, they felt obliged to carry their contentions before the pagan magistrates. And as most commentators observe, the subject of these litigations arose out of their ecclesiastical divisions. *That Christians would go to pagan tribunals to settle petty disputes that had arisen within the local church was what Paul found unthinkable and reprehensible* (v. 4).

Let's observe two important distinctions within this passage – what it *does* say and what it *does not* say:

What it does say:

- The “grievance” is between Christians (v. 1, 8)
- The “offense” is taking the grievance before the pagan courts rather than settling it within the church (v. 1, 4, 7)
- The offense is considered “petty” – something so trivial that it *should* easily be resolved by fellow-Christians (v. 2, 5)
- To have Christians battling with one another over such trivial matters is a shame to the church (v. 7, 8)
- In such instances it is better to suffer the wrong than to shame the church (v. 7)

What it does not say:

- That Christians should *never* take civil action – either against other Christians or unbelievers

In matters of litigation, there are *rarely* any simple answers. There may be situations where you are legally justified in taking civil action, but as a follower of Jesus Christ you must evaluate more than just the letter of the law. To understand what is at stake, it is helpful to consider what God's Word says about Christians suing Christians.

Ideally, according to the Scriptures, minor disputes between fellow-Christians should be addressed between the individuals themselves or with the help of other Christians (1 Corinthians

¹ *Robertson's Word Pictures in the New Testament*. Copyright 1985 by Broadman Press.

6:2; see also, Matthew 18:15-17). This same principle was encouraged between the people of God even in the Old Testament:

⁸What your eyes have seen do not hastily bring into court, for what will you do in the end, when your neighbor puts you to shame? ⁹Argue your case with your neighbor himself, and do not reveal another's secret, ¹⁰lest he who hears you bring shame upon you, and your ill repute have no end. (Proverbs 25:8-10)

In Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus offers principles for how two believers are to resolve a conflict.

²⁵Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. ²⁶Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. (Matthew 5:21-26)

And a little earlier, Jesus advised his followers how to carry themselves if they are the *object* of a suit: “*And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well*” (Matthew 5:40). So what is the application of all this instruction for Christians living in today’s ultra-litigious society?

There will be situations in which one has no choice but to seek legal recourse to resolve a conflict. However, Christian-initiated lawsuits should be a rare occurrence. And the first recourse of the believer, especially when wronged by a fellow-Christian, is to seek reconciliation and not their “rights.” There are four guiding-principles for the Christian to consider when considering legal action:

1. Prayerfully examine yourself to make sure that you are not acting in vengeful anger over the other party's actions
2. Seek godly counsel from a trusted and neutral Christian adviser
3. Make genuine attempts to reconcile, according to the principles in Matthew 18:15-17, before choosing legal action
4. And in the last response, determine that the lawsuit can be handled with integrity and will not tarnish your Christian witness

God has called us to the ministry of reconciliation; He has called us to reconcile relationships by imitating Christ. Clearly, we are to pursue peace and not selfish ambition (see Psalm 41:14; James 3:13-18). We should always remember what Jesus said when He warned us not to be caught up with legal rules but to consider the more significant matters of the law – things such as justice, mercy and faithfulness (see Matthew 23:23; Micah 6:8). We should also reflect upon our Christian heritage, the power of prayer, the promises of God to vindicate, and the righteous Judge in whom we have put our trust (see Isaiah 54:17; 2 Timothy 4:1-8). But we are never forbidden by God to initiate legal action to preserve justice or receive a righteous judgment. God Himself put the system of civil government in place to insure that justice and righteousness are served.

Ultimately, when thinking about the question of whether or not to enter into litigation, consider the greatest advocate of all as your best example. Based upon the instruction of the Scriptures and the input of godly counsel, only you can decide what the Lord requires of you.



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