

Rather be Wronged

Mark Heath, 7 Sept 2004

1 Cor 6:1-8

¹ When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? ² 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?

³ Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! ⁴ So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church?

⁵ 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, ⁶ but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers?

⁷ To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? ⁸ But you yourselves wrong and defraud – even your own brothers!

On 6th Sept 2004, the Daily Telegraph published a story about a dispute concerning bell ringing at St Nicholas church in Leeds, Kent. Basically, Chris Cooper led a team of bell ringers, but he became angry about the way services were being conducted in the church. They were singing “silly songs” and not using the Book of Common Prayer. He wrote letters of complaint and refused to ring the bells at services that were not to his liking. Eventually, the vicar decided to use a different group of bell ringers instead. Mr Cooper was furious, and apparently contacted the press.

Not only did the Daily Telegraph feature the story prominently, but the following day the BBC news website linked to the story from its front page under the headline “Hell’s Bells”. This petty dispute was on view for the whole country to read about. Leaving aside for a moment the question of why on earth the national media felt that this story was worthy of so much attention, we need to ask why the press should have even heard about it in the first place. Here in 1 Cor 6, Paul argues that Christians should be able to resolve their differences amongst themselves, rather than bringing the church into disrepute by public squabbling.

It seems that the Corinthian church had a lot of problems that they were simply ignoring, perhaps hoping that they would go away. In the previous chapter, Paul has to help them sort out an issue of sexual sin that they had not dealt with properly. And here it seems that church members were taking each other to court. They were in danger of becoming the talk of the town for all the wrong reasons. The church’s unity and love are supposed to be powerful witnesses to an unbelieving world, but this church was characterised by high profile disagreements.

Competent to judge

If anyone ought to be competent to make judgements in disputes, it is Christians. We have the Word of God, so we have standards of truth and principles of justice to apply. The world judges according to its own standards and laws that seem reasonable to it, and increasingly these are drifting further from God’s law as our society continues to reject God. We have the Holy Spirit, who is able to give gifts of wisdom, discernment and even supernatural revelation, whilst the world relies merely on intuition or gut feeling. We are people who have been given mercy and forgiveness by God, which leads us to be merciful in our own dealings with others, but the world wants to exact harsh punishment and retrieve substantial compensation from those who have wronged them.

In the light of this, Paul found it astonishing that they would want unbelievers to judge in their disputes. He reminds them of something which may actually come as a surprise to us – Christians will be involved in the final judgement of the world and angels. This is an awesome responsibility. How inappropriate that the Christians who had bitterly argued in front of a secular judge and jury would later stand together passing judgement over them.

How did the Corinthian Christians allow this situation to escalate to the point where church members were taking each other to court? Was it that they were afraid of “taking sides”, or “interfering”? After all, there is lots of New Testament teaching that we should not judge one another. But the command not to judge is primarily concerned with having a superior or condemning attitude to those whose consciences permit or deny them different actions to our own. Nowhere are we expected to leave a fellow Christian to their own devices if they are clearly disobeying commands of Scripture.

Whenever there are tensions in the church, between individuals or groups, it is up to the rest of us to be peacemakers. All too often we are either afraid to get involved for fear of causing offence, or we take sides with our friends against those we don't know so well. Disputes can rarely be resolved simply by talking to the parties involved separately. There needs to be open and honest dialogue, so that misunderstandings can be cleared up and genuine reconciliation becomes possible.

If the two sides refuse to come together and talk, but simply talk to others about their feelings, then before long the church will be rife with gossip. And gossip becomes slander when people who only know half the story pass on misinformation as fact. Church unity is very precious and should be guarded vigilantly. This means that we must be willing to talk with those we have grievances against, to listen to those who have complaints against us, and to encourage others to do the same.

You are brothers

In this passage, Paul stresses that we should think of ourselves as family. Four times (v5,6,8) he talks of Christians as “brothers”. A typical family will have many arguments, some getting quite heated, but generally speaking they will all be dealt with internally. It is rare for brothers to take each other to court over a family dispute.

Our churches should be like families. Places where everyone is accepted despite their faults. If you have a disagreement with your family you don't just go and move in with a different one, but this is often how Christians deal with conflicts in the church. People need to know that they can say what they really feel, and that their opinions matter. Failure to discuss the issues will result in growing bitterness, anger, and complaining to third parties.

Living in a family inevitably involves compromise. What we watch on TV, what we eat for dinner, where we go on holiday are decisions that affect everyone, but not everyone can have their preference every time. A wise family will ensure that everyone's feelings are taken into consideration, but require that from time to time each family member accepts another's preference rather than their own. Many churches need to learn this lesson. Styles of worship are a classic example – it is almost impossible to please everyone (as St Nicholas' church discovered).

We need to think of one another as family members. Don't expect relationships to be easy all the time, or everyone to share the same opinions on all subjects. Be willing to let people express their own thoughts, and to let them express their disagreement with you. Learning to do this without getting angry is essential for church unity. There will be some matters that you will have to disagree on, some which you will reach a compromise middle ground on, and maybe others where we have the humility to admit we are wrong. Where someone has hurt you in some way, they remain your brother or sister in Christ, so alienating yourself from them is not an option. Rom 12:18 teaches “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

Don't let it get that far

In verse 7, Paul makes a very provocative suggestion. You should prefer to be wronged and defrauded by other Christians than to bring your dispute before unbelievers. This is not an easy teaching for many to accept. Isn't that being a “doormat” for others to walk all over?

The key to understanding this is the underlying value system that Paul had. Nothing mattered more to him than the glory of Christ. If it was a choice between Paul losing money and Christ losing reputation, then there was no contest. He did know how to stand up for his rights, and did so on a number of occasions, but never at the expense of the gospel. In fact, most of the difficult situations he faced came precisely because he was faithful to his God-given calling of preaching the gospel.

The reason that so many newspapers printed the rather trivial bell-ringing story is that the world loves to hear that the church is just full of hypocrites. It makes them feel better about themselves. How can a religion profess to be the hope for the world when its adherents spend their time in petty squabbles?

There are two lessons to be learned here. The first is not to let disagreements escalate to such a level. If someone thinks you have wronged them but you think you were in the right, are you willing to apologise anyway? If you think someone owes you something, but they deny it, are you willing to let go of the matter? If the answer is no, then how far are you prepared to go? Perhaps you will gossip about that person, destroying their reputation wherever you go, and making sure that everyone else looks down on them as well. If you follow this route you simply demonstrate that you care more for your own reputation than for Christ's.

The second lesson is not to be quick to publicly criticise other Christians. There certainly are people in the global church who need to be rebuked for their heretical teaching, or greed or egotism. But wherever possible we need to deal with these matters internally, not publicly humiliating people, but giving them a chance to repent and be restored to fellowship. If you have problems with fellow church members, don't moan about them to your non-Christian friends. If you are critical of a particular denomination's beliefs, don't be eager to tell the world of your disgust. The Protestant – Catholic hostility in Ireland, that is still felt today has caused some people to write off Christianity completely. The only way to set the record straight is for us to demonstrate true Christian unity.

Conclusion

The Bible has much to say on the unity of believers. Jesus singled out love for one another as a key factor in our witness (John 13:35). As he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane before his crucifixion, the theme of unity featured prominently (John 17:20-21). Again, this was with a view to the world believing in Jesus. If we care about the reputation and glory of Jesus, then we will do all in our power to stop disagreements in the church from getting out of hand.

Ephesians 4:1-3 reminds us that we should "walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called". This requires humility, gentleness, patience and "bearing with one another". In other words, no one is saying that it will be easy. It continues to say that we should be "*eager* to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace". Make it a personal priority to be in right relationship with everyone, and act as a peacemaker wherever you can.

So if there is someone in your church who has upset you, or doesn't like you, or you have a strong disagreement with, then you have a choice. Will you deal with it in the world's way, or does your love for God and his people demand that you resolve the issue peacefully?