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NO SUIT FOR YOU

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A legendary *Seinfeld* episode featured the now-famous “soup Nazi” who, for seemingly irrational reasons, would banish patrons for life by pronouncing “No soup for you!” Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:1–11 seems like a “suit Nazi” when he tells believers “No suit for you,” at least against other believers. Unlike a good bowl of soup, however, lawsuits often are expensive, time-consuming, and emotionally draining.

Our understanding of Paul hinges on the text itself as well as the immediate context, both of which teach us that one of the kingdom privileges of belonging to the church is not getting sued by another brother.

Directing Brothers to the Church. In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul directs us to go to the church with *civil* cases instead of court (God vests the state with authority to prosecute and punish criminals [Rom. 13:1–4]). The problem Paul addressed was that brothers were daring to become civil adversaries by going “to law before the unrighteous [unbelievers] instead of the saints [the church]” (6:1, 6; 1:1–2; all Bible quotations are from the ESV unless otherwise indicated). Paul explains that because believers one day “will judge the world” with Christ, they are competent to judge the “smallest matters” (NKJV), or “trivial cases” in church tribunals now (v. 2). If believers one day will sit with Christ when He judges angels about eternal spiritual matters, they should be judging temporal civil matters relating to this life (v. 3). The Corinthians, however, were running to court instead of going to the church (6:4). This was shameful (v. 5). Surely the church had one person “wise enough” to judge such disputes between brothers (v. 6).

Unlike in Paul's day, our fundamental problem now is that not many churches are well equipped to resolve such disputes, which, at a minimum, requires real church membership, biblical church government, and meaningful church discipline. This reality check poses a huge obstacle to taking Paul seriously. Paul assumes that the church has the membership, government, and discipline necessary to resolve all kinds of civil disputes between brothers. Brothers who belong to such a church should be committed to preventing disputes from escalating by following a few basic principles for resolving conflict:

- They should *refrain from sinning against each other*, since sin is the reason why disputes erupt (1 Cor. 6:8 ["You yourselves wrong and defraud—even your brothers"]).

- When someone sins, the offended brother, by God's grace, should *allow love to cover the sin, if possible* (1 Cor. 6:7 ["To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?"]; 1 Pet. 4:8 ["Keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins."]).

- If love truly cannot cover the offense, the offended brother should *meet privately with the offending brother* to resolve the matter, and if the offending brother listens, the offended brother has "gained [his] brother" (Matt. 18:15).

- But if the offending brother refuses to listen, the offended brother should *take one or two other brothers with him*, since biblical due process requires matters to be confirmed by two or three witnesses (most likely witnesses to the subsequent attempt to resolve the dispute biblically) (Matt. 18:16; Deut. 17:6; 19:15; 2 Cor. 13:1; 1 Tim. 5:19; Heb. 10:28).

- If the offending brother refuses to listen to them, the matter *should be brought before "the church"* acting as the church (Matt. 18:17).

- If the offending brother refuses to listen to the church, *the church must declare what already is true about him: he has made himself an outsider and should be treated like one* (cut off from certain benefits or covenant privileges of belonging to the church) (Matt. 18:17).

Sadly, the vast majority of our churches simply don't have the necessary systems in place (i.e., people, processes, and procedures) to resolve civil disputes between brothers. Until we do, we really can't take Paul seriously when he directs us to take our civil disputes to the church instead of court.

Dissociating from So-Called Brothers. We now need to look at the immediate context of the preceding chapter (chap. 5) to grasp an important distinction that sheds light on the scope of our text (6:1–11). Chapter 5 involves the disturbing issue of a man who behaved inappropriately with his stepmother (5:1).

Paul swiftly pronounces judgment on this immoral man (v. 3) and commands the church to meet as the church to carry out his judgment by putting him out of the church (delivering him over to Satan, purging the leaven)—hoping that he eventually would be saved (vv. 4–8). Paul then directs the Corinthians not to fellowship or to eat with any so-called brother who lives in such open rebellion (v. 9). Paul quickly clarifies that he is not telling the Corinthians to dissociate from the people of this world (unbelievers), but rather from “*anyone who bears the name of brother*” (v. 11) who is guilty of living in open rebellion or is characterized by being sexually immoral, greedy, an idolater, a reviler, a drunkard, or a swindler (vv. 9–13).

Distinguishing True Brothers from So-Called Brothers. Distinguishing true brothers from so-called brothers in chapter 5 is one of the keys to understanding the limits on lawsuits in chapter 6. Belonging to Christ and His church comes with certain kingdom benefits or privileges, including the ministry of the Word and the sacraments and the unbroken bond of true fellowship. In chapter 5, the immoral man was cut off from the kingdom and all of its privileges, including partaking of the Lord's Table (5:6–9; 11:17–32), fellowshiping, or even having meals with believers (5:11). And in chapter 6:1–11, *the immoral man or anyone like him also was cut off from the kingdom privilege of not being sued in court by a true brother.* Not everyone who takes the name of brother (Paul's phrase in 5:11) deserves to be treated like one. If someone lives like hell, they simply cannot expect a slice of heaven on earth. *If someone is put out of the church, he is to be treated like an unbeliever* (5:5; Matt. 18:17), and this even can include lawsuits by a true brother. Why? Because the dispute, by definition, no longer would be between two true brothers.

Discussing Some Challenges. Now that we know what Paul means in 1 Corinthians 6:1–11, we have some challenges to discuss briefly.

Paul directs his entire discussion to *members of the same church*, so the situation admittedly becomes a bit more complicated *when the two brothers belong to different churches*. Even then, the brothers can agree to have one church resolve it, have both churches resolve it (equal number of elders), or have their dispute resolved by a neutral church or in a neutral alternative dispute resolution (ADR) forum committed to biblical resolution/reconciliation (e.g., peacemakers or private mediation using believing neutrals, etc.). While using ADR does not involve the church acting as the church per se, it still involves the broader church and still prevents the public shame of going before unbelievers.

If *someone gets sued* in court, he obviously can defend himself there since he didn't choose to be there. Even then, he can offer to resolve the matter by taking it out of court and using biblical reconciliation/resolution or ADR. If not, he is free to remain in court.

Also, while the church generally may be competent to resolve some disputes, *other disputes are very complicated and may be beyond the reach of the local church*. Once again, however, the solution could involve biblical reconciliation/resolution or ADR. The local church also can bring in folks with the expertise necessary to help resolve a particular dispute.

The *existence of companies* also poses a modern challenge since they are treated as "persons" under the law in that they can sue and be sued. While a board of directors (corporation) or managing members (limited liability company) can act on a company's behalf, a company obviously cannot exercise faith. Nothing, however, stops a company from choosing to engage in biblical reconciliation/resolution, ADR, and so on. I've represented ministries through the years that have done so with great success, sometimes even before a prospective lawsuit reached the point of being filed.

Church-state issues also come into play. Some things that in Paul's day or later in church history were within the sole province of the church (e.g., marriage and divorce) now are creatures of the state. Also, *the law requires legal action to enforce certain rights or to obtain certain remedies* (e.g., constitutional rights, unfair competition, intellectual property infringement, restraining orders, injunctions, etc.). The state also has jurisdiction over certain areas (e.g., crimes, taxes, regulations, ordinances, etc.).

Deciding to Imitate God. Just because we *may* do something, doesn't necessarily mean that we *should* do it. Having biblical grounds for divorce, for example, doesn't necessarily require divorce. The same thing is true when it comes to suing others in court. Even if the other guy is put out of the church or is to be treated that way doesn't mean that we must sue him.

We always can decide instead to imitate God (Eph. 5:1). A good starting point is acknowledging that we all broke God's law and became His adversaries at law. We too deserved the covenant lawsuit His prophets of old prosecuted on His behalf. We also deserved His eternal judgment to follow. All of us *were* something (e.g., sexually immoral, greedy, idolaters, revilers, drunkards, or swindlers). All of us were outsiders, cut off from the kingdom of God (5:9–11; 6:9–10; Eph. 5:5). But the glorious good news is that what *was* no longer *is*. By His mercy and grace alone, we “were washed,” we “were sanctified,” and we “were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God” (6:9–11). May the triune God who made us insiders by justifying, sanctifying, and washing us also strengthen us to imitate Him.

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