

Can the Church Be A Peacemaking Forum?

by David V. Edling, Jeffrey Dodd, and Molly Routson

What is the relationship between the Bible, the local church and Peacemaker Ministries? Based upon our commitment to God's Word and his people, the stated mission of Peacemaker Ministries is "to equip and assist Christians and their churches to respond to conflict biblically." We believe that the local church is an indispensable factor in the ability of individual Christians to respond to conflict biblically. The second of our [four distinctives](#) states it this way:

The Responsibility of the Church – We believe that peacemaking is an essential ministry of the local church, not a task reserved for professional mediators or lawyers. Therefore, we encourage Christians to take unresolved conflicts to their church families, which are called by God to restore peace by promoting biblical justice and reconciliation (see Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 6:4; Eph. 3:10; Heb. 13:17).

We are often asked why, and how, the local church should serve its Lord and its members in the area of biblical peacemaking. It is never easy to think about the ethical demands that Scripture places upon the church—the implications of Scriptural mandates for the actual practice of biblical conflict resolution in the church are powerful and certainly not "politically correct," particularly in our American culture at the dawn of the 21st century. It is our hope and prayer that those who read this will seek biblical faithfulness over cultural comfort.

Must a Church Be Also a Court?

Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) once noted, "It is so difficult to believe because it is so difficult to obey." The link between belief and consistent action—obedience—continues to be a significant stumbling block for individual Christians. We can say that we truly believe something, but if we don't *act* consistently with that belief, do our actions ultimately undermine our words? James W. Sire, in his book *Habits of the Mind – Intellectual Life as a Christian Calling*,¹ captures the Christian's dilemma between belief and obedience by asking, "If belief requires obedience, then how can I believe and not obey?" Paul's struggle with that question is recorded in Romans 7:14-24: "I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out" (7:18) For the individual believer, Paul offers an answer in the following chapter: "Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God ... but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live" (Rom. 8:8, 13).

What if the church as a *corporate body*, however, knows what is required of it but fails to put into action the steps that its knowledge requires? This essay offers one avenue for narrowing the gap between belief and obedience in the church by confronting the customary *modus operandi* of the church when dealing with conflict.

We are contending that Scripture requires the local church to be the forum for resolving all conflicts and disputes between its professing Christian members. In other words, this essay seeks to explain that any church that is not willing to be a peacemaking forum is not faithfully fulfilling *all* of its biblical commission. While this is for most Christians a challenging, even abrasive, proposal to hear regarding the church, we are persuaded that our Lord requires no less of his children. We challenge you to examine the Scriptures yourself in light of our argument and to be encouraged by God's promise that he does not ask us to do anything that his Spirit will not empower us to do by his grace.

The thesis that the church should be providing such a forum for justice and its negative implications are some of the logical inferences of 1 Corinthians 6:1-8:

If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life! Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church! I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? But instead, one brother goes to law against another—and this in front of unbelievers!

The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers.

A Matter of Jurisdiction

The language that we find in 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 arises from the context of the preceding chapter where Paul has found it necessary to admonish a particular local church, the members of which know the person involved and the details of the situation, for not appropriately exercising its right and responsibility to discipline a member. Verses 12 and 13 of chapter five make it clear that Paul considers the church the authority to make such judgments:

What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you."

The *NIV Study Bible* footnote for these verses (12,13) states, "The church is to exercise spiritual discipline over the professing believers in the church (Matt. 18:15-18), but it is not to judge the unsaved world. There are governing authorities to do that (Rom. 13:1-5), and the ultimate judgment of the world is to be left to God (Rev. 20:11-15)."²

Continuing with the theme of jurisdiction (i.e., the relational authority to exercise binding judgments), Paul outlines the corollary by declaring how inconsistent it is for Christians to go outside of the church before "the world" for judgments. The *New Geneva Study Bible* footnote for verse one of chapter six states in part, "The failings of the Corinthians with regard to lawsuits are an expression of the problem already discussed in chapter 5, namely, a weak doctrine of the church. Just as Christians are not responsible to regulate the lives of non-Christians, so non-Christians have no power to discipline in the church."³

Paul then uses strong mocking language of condemnation to demonstrate the absurdity of Christians going before unbelievers to have their disputes resolved: "Appoint as judges even men of little account in the church! ... Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers?" (1 Cor. 6:4, 5). He uses such language to "shame" the church! Unfortunately, that is exactly what most churches need in order to bring them to their senses. The local church has a serious responsibility to exercise the jurisdiction that God has assigned to it. Failure to exercise that jurisdiction—by failing to be prepared to be a viable forum for Christian conflict resolution—results in great shame to the church and to the church's head, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Church's Motivation – The Reputation of Christ

Two of the most powerful questions raised in the entire New Testament are found in verse seven of chapter six: rather than allowing sinful responses to tear the church apart through worldly litigation, "*Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?*" Only Christians who believe God's Word, and who believe that obedience is evidence of that belief, can seriously contemplate such questions.

Church history teaches us about many Christians who were faced with similar questions and who chose torture and death rather than see the name of Christ dishonored through their compromising actions, or inactions. Thomas Hawkes, a sixteenth-century Briton condemned as a heretic during the reign of the Catholic Queen Mary, is a good example of one who gave his fortunes and his life for the sake of "the name" and the Gospel.

A little before his death, some of Hawkes's friends asked him a favor. They were afraid for their own lives and wondered how long faith could stand in the midst of the fire. Hawkes agreed to lift his hand over his head if the pain was tolerable and his mind was still at peace. When he had been in the fire so long that he could no longer speak, his skin had shrunk, his fingers had been burned off, and everyone thought he was dead, Hawkes suddenly raised his burning hands over his head and clapped them together three times! The people there—especially those who understood his gesture—broke into shouts of praise and applause as Thomas Hawkes sunk down into the fire and gave up his spirit.⁴

In modern countries we don't expect to make that kind of sacrifice for Christ. But just because we don't anticipate martyrdom doesn't mean that the standard of Christian obedience has been diminished. In our case, answering the powerful questions of verse seven may mean forsaking a right of recovery from another Christian if there is *any* likelihood of Christ's name being brought to ill repute, the reputation of the church questioned, or the credibility of the Christian community brought into doubt. Our modern "martyrdom" may consist of sustaining material loss in order to resolve a dispute in a way that brings glory to our Lord and demonstrates his grace.

Romans 12:18 commands, "As far as it depends on you, live at peace with all men." How far is "*as far as it depends on you?*" We submit that it is a lot farther than God's people are usually willing to go. In fact, Paul's challenge to the Corinthians here is akin to Jesus' directive in the Sermon on the Mount—turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, prefer to be wronged and cheated if such self-sacrifice will preserve unity in the body and bring honor to the name of Christ. Too often we read about and admire heroes of the faith, like Thomas Hawkes, without recognizing that our Lord is calling us to the same degree of obedience. Our sacrifice may not appear as great but our obedience is no less crucial: do we have the courage of a Thomas Hawkes to do today what he did in 1555?

Fortunately, God provides his people a remedy for the consequences of hypocrisy: the *forum of the church*. By providing a forum for biblical conflict resolution, the local church will assist its members in evaluating the validity of their claims and in answering those two pointed questions of verse seven. In effect our Lord is saying, "Turn to the church! The church is the place to work out your differences and disputes. My church is the place to find answers, justice, and a resolution to these matters that are distracting you, so that you can return to the work I have set before you. Think eternally! Put these matters of dispute in the broader context of eternity and remember your real priorities."

Peacemaking from an Eternal Perspective in the Church

While answering Paul's question, "Why not rather be wronged?" is certainly a matter of faith and obedience, our identity in Christ helps us to assess our temporal possessions, reputation, and rights from an eternal perspective. God expects his chosen people—even those of today—to possess the same outlook and attitude as the saints of old. Hebrews 11:13-16 captures the spirit of that world-view:

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

When you are wronged and seek relief, are you able to think first of your identity in Christ, as a finite mortal being with an infinite future in eternity? Then, are you able to say to yourself, "Since the church has been instituted by God as Christ's body on earth, I *will* do all things according to God's plan, including taking my need for reconciliation to those in church authority?" If you answer no, or if the church fails to provide you with an avenue of relief, we urge you to reevaluate the authenticity of your obedience to God's Word.

These are challenging words and challenging thoughts, but Paul's language was no less direct. His words, which were inspired by the Holy Spirit, have been preserved for us through God's providence so we might be challenged and confronted with their implications for our lives today. We believe that the implications of 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 require all Christians to think about their relationship to the church, to the world, and to eternity. The local church must ask itself some tough questions about jurisdiction and forum. Specifically, how will your church answer questions like:

1. Who is able to partake of the blessings and benefits of pastoral care through peacemaking?
2. For whom do church officers expect to be held accountable before God (see Hebrews 13:17)?
3. If Christians are not to go to secular courts for the resolution of disputes with other Christians, where are they supposed to go?
4. What disputes between Christians should be resolved in the church in light of the language of 1 Corinthians 6:1-8?
5. How must the church organize itself so that church members can get help with conflict?
6. What training do church leaders need in order to be qualified to resolve conflicts?

We could ask many other questions about the implications of 1 Corinthians 6:1-8. The point, however, is to evaluate how the church can serve her members for the sake of preventing dishonor to the name of Christ. An enormously practical answer, we believe, is to be a church that exercises jurisdiction over church members (i.e., holds them accountable to biblical mandates for peacemaking) and provides a viable forum through which disputes may be resolved.

A Common Excuse

Some will say that the typical church today doesn't have the resources to provide this level of care for its members. We don't believe that this is a legitimate excuse. At the foundation of our conviction is Christ's promise that his church would be built and the gates of Hell could not and would not prevail against it. Do you believe this is true of the church? Is the body of Christ that strong? If it is, then this excuse is not credible. One of the most common and frequent accusations brought by unbelievers against the church today is the charge of hypocrisy. Is the church ready to prove the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit by truly being the body of Christ—by exercising Christ-like authority to resolve conflicts and disputes among her own members?

This question takes us back to Kierkegaard's statement, "It is so difficult to believe because it is so difficult to obey." The issue is obedience! The church that believes God must be ready to exercise her authority because obedience is the only proof of belief. To believe Christ's proclamation about his church means demonstrating obedience in every way the biblical revelation sets forth.

People with the spiritual gifts of wisdom and discernment have been given to every church. As a matter of stewardship, those gifts ought to be developed and employed in ministry. Training is available to equip the church for peacemaking, and Peacemaker Ministries seeks opportunities to help your church obey God in a more consistent manner. [Peacemaker Ministries' training](#) has been designed to arm the church with the skills necessary for undertaking the responsibilities of peacemaking and decision-making when Christians fall into conflict. It is church-based training; and it focuses on the needs of the local church, helping it to become a forum by and through which all conflicts of church members can be biblically resolved. The training can greatly contribute to a believer's ability to lead the body in growing to be more like Christ, in presenting a more compelling witness to the world around us, as well as in speaking (and hearing) the truth in love.

If what you have read here has stirred you to reflect on the implications of 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 for your local church, please contact Peacemaker Ministries. In addition to information about becoming a peacemaker and beginning a peacemaking ministry in your church, our website offers you written information about a number of benefits that your church will enjoy as byproducts of obeying 1 Corinthians 6, as well as true stories of God's powerful intervention in the lives of ordinary people. As we stated before, our mission is to equip and assist Christians and their churches to respond to conflict biblically; and our conviction, based on 1 Corinthians 6:1-8, is that peacemaking is the responsibility of the local church.

Please reflect upon the Bible's instructions for you and your church and then answer this question: "If belief requires obedience, how can I believe and not obey?" Remember, alongside God's many commands are always his promises. As we consider how to re-form the church to be a forum for biblical conflict resolution, let us always be mindful of the Apostle Paul's great encouragement from 1 Thessalonians 5:24, "The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it."

Endnotes

¹ Sire, James W., *Habits of the Mind* (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 2000).

² The NIV Study Bible (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1985).

³ New Geneva Study Bible (Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1995).

⁴ Foxe's Christian Martyrs of the World (Barbour Books, Uhrichsville, Ohio, 1989).

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