

The Rule of Law and Righteousness among Christians

(Including an exegesis on 1 Cor 6:1)

By Lim Seng Hoo

In recent times, the rise of extremist teachings and of dishonest, conscience-hardened teachers, have resulted in confusion, division and the trampling upon of God's ordained rule of law and righteousness, in turn fuelling a rise in legal suits among Christian individuals and organisations.

In a case settled in October 2001, Gail A. Riplinger's extreme KJV views promoted at the Canadian branch of the Trinitarian Bible Society ("TBS") resulted in TBS UK suing TBS (Canada) to recover and protect the TBS name. TBS (Canada) launched a frivolous counter-claim for alleged defamation and breach of fiduciary duty, but finally had to agree to stop using the TBS name and regrouped as "GraceWay Bible Society". TBS did not ask for costs as their chief stated concern was *"to preserve its good name (Proverbs 22.1), which was felt to be one of the most valuable assets that the Society owns. The legal action was taken with great regret, but with a concern for justice and with an eye to the future prosperity of the work in Canada."*

The rise of legal means to settle church disputes is indicative that we are living in the "last days" of which the Scriptures say, some would depart from the faith and give heed to deceiving spirits and false doctrines, and speak lies in hypocrisy, with a conscience seared as if by a hot iron; "without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, fierce, despisers of those that are good, heady, high-minded, having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof; creeping into houses, leading captive silly women laden with sins, led away with various lusts." They also have Diotrephes-like leaders, who love pre-eminence, refuse to receive believers from other churches and forbid their members doing so on the pain of ex-communication. (1Tim 4:1-3, 2Tim 3:1-7, 3John:9-10)

In Singapore, there have been suits against pastors as well as reports of financial irregularities committed. In a case involving a Charismatic church, an accountant who blew the whistle on the senior pastor was ex-communicated, which forced her to sue to protect her name. It is sad that there are cases where Christians were made victims of injustice in their own churches, with no avenues afforded to have the matters resolved fairly and justly within the "house of God".

Are such victims allowed as a last resort to appeal to the civil courts for better justice (our common law courts being tempered as they are by Christian-Westminster principles of equity, and carrying over into its civil laws facets of the 5th to 10th Commandment such as responsibilities to care for our elderly and prohibition and penalties against murder, theft, adultery and perjury)? Or are they proscribed from seeking redress just because the other party goes by the name "Christian" (1Cor 6:1)? The following review discusses God's ordained rule of law and righteousness for Christians.

I. God's Ordained Laws, Statutes and Judgements

God, being by nature just and righteous, ordained unto Israel some 613 laws, including the Ten Commandments, which can be classified as moral, ceremonial and judicial laws, stated as commandments, statutes and judgements, for the conduct of worship and for the rule of law and righteousness, including a just penal code for infringements against our fellow men.

"And the LORD said unto Moses, Come up to me into the mount, and be there: and I will give thee tables of stone, and a law, and commandments which I have written; that thou mayest teach them." (Ex 24:12)

“Remember ye the law of Moses my servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments.” (Mal 4:4)

“For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law: and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law; (For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified. For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another;) In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel.” (Rom2:12-16)

“Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good.” (Rom7:12)

“And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?” (Rev 6:10)

II. God’s Ordination of Procedural Rules of Justice

Almighty God also ordained procedural rules of justice and the law of evidence for the conduct of hearings, to ensure that trials are carried out fairly and without fear or partiality. These Divinely ordained procedural rules (also known in our civil courts as the *rules of natural justice*) include the requirements of: - 1) at least two witnesses for a conviction, 2) providing a prior hearing, 3) allowing the accused to face his accusers, and 4) the indictment of false witnesses.

“And I charged your judges at that time, saying, Hear the causes between your brethren, and judge righteously between every man and his brother, and the stranger that is with him. Ye shall not respect persons in judgment; but ye shall hear the small as well as the great; ye shall not be afraid of the face of man; for the judgment is God’s: and the cause that is too hard for you, bring it unto me, and I will hear it.” (Deut 1:16-17)

“At the mouth of two witnesses, or three witnesses, shall he that is worthy of death be put to death; but at the mouth of one witness he shall not be put to death”. (Deut 17:6)

“One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sinneth: at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established. If a false witness rise up against any man to testify against him that which is wrong; Then both the men, between whom the controversy is, shall stand before the LORD, before the priests and the judges, which shall be in those days; And the judges shall make diligent inquisition: and, behold, if the witness be a false witness, and hath testified falsely against his brother; Then shall ye do unto him, as he had thought to have done unto his brother: so shalt thou put the evil away from among you.” (Deut 19:15-19)

“Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth?” (Jn 7:51)

III. The Powers That Be Are Ordained of God

God ordained that chiefs of tribes and wise men be appointed as judges to judge the people. In monarchical days, the king was the final appellate. In one of King Solomon’s earliest cases after assuming the throne, a dispute between two harlots as to who was the real mother of a surviving baby was brought before him. His wisdom in solving this case earned him wide fame and respect, “for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him, to do judgement.” (1 Ki 3:16-28).

“And it came to pass on the morrow that Moses sat to judge the people: and the people stood by Moses

from the morning unto the evening” (Ex 18:13)

“So I took the chief of your tribes, wise men, and known, and made them heads over you, captains over thousands, and captains over hundreds, and captains over fifties, and captains over tens, and officers among your tribes.” (Deut 1:15)

Under theocratic Israel, the Jews were able to bring all their disputes before their own elders, and not before a Gentile judge. This ceased to be the absolute case during the Babylonian captivity and thereafter, under the subsequent Medo-Persia, Greek and Roman rule.

For Christians, this is not the case, as we are not a nation. However, the Scriptures reveal that all secular powers are ordained of God for wrath and for conscience sake. We thus have confidence before God to lead a disciplined, law-abiding life and to do good always and in every place,

“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. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. 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: 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. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God’s ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. (Rom 13:1-6)

IV. Paul’s Use of His Civil Rights and His Appeal to Caesar

Given that all laws, procedural rules of justice and the powers that be, are ordained of Almighty God, Christians who are free men (Act 22:28, 1Cor 7:21, 12:13) are entitled to the free use of their civil liberties and rights, even for the promotion of truth and the propagation of the Gospel.

In Act 16, Apostle Paul and Silas were ignominiously treated, beaten and imprisoned by the authorities in the Roman colony of Philippi. As they prayed and praised God from the inner dungeon cells, a great earthquake opened all the prison doors. In the moments that followed, the Philippian jailor and his family were converted and baptized. The next day, the magistrates sent to let Paul and Silas go free. Realising the potential impact upon the relatively poor new converts, who would otherwise fear the magistrates unduly, affecting their freedom of religious conscience, Paul and Silas invoked their Roman citizen rights to demand that the magistrates come personally to release them publicly, fully vindicating them in the eyes of all people. Paul later wrote to the same Philippians of their common joy and freedom as the sons of God and citizens of heaven.

Other occasions when Paul resorted to his Roman citizen rights, helped opened the way for him to address an unruly Jewish crowd, avoid a wrongful severe beating, and escape a plot by the Jewish religious leaders (who were supposed to be brethren) to have the Roman governors bring him down to their council at Jerusalem, where more than 40 Jews had bound themselves under a curse to neither eat nor drink until they had killed him (Act 21:39, 22:25-28 and 23:12-35). Paul also found himself constrained to appeal to Caesar when the Jews pressed their requests before Festus (Act 25:1-12). Later, from his detention home, he explained to the Jewish leaders in Rome that his appeal was due to his true innocence and not because he wished to accuse his own nation,

“And it came to pass, that after three days Paul called the chief of the Jews together: and when they were come together, he said unto them, Men and brethren, though I have committed nothing against the people, or customs of our fathers, yet was I delivered prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the

Romans. Who, when they had examined me, would have let me go, because there was no cause of death in me. But when the Jews spake against it, I was constrained to appeal unto Caesar; not that I had ought to accuse my nation of. (Act 28:17-19)

V. What About 1Corinthians 6:1?

“Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints?”

This verse is frequently cited in suits between Christians. As a general rule, a Christian should not sue another Christian over small matters, especially not so as to defraud one who is weaker than himself. A US Christian law professor suggests an exception for road accidents involving two Christians, where the insurance companies covering the damages may routinely enter into legal suits in the name of the insured parties, to determine the correct claims adjustments.

This verse however is apt to be misunderstood and subject to abuse as being a proscription that binds a fellow Christian against filing complaints of wrongful acts to the authorities, which it cannot be. There were cases where pastors had defamed (i.e. to kill and bear false witness against a person's name, against the 6th and 9th Commandments) their church members and then threatened them that if they sued or reported to the authorities, they would be subject to “church discipline” for breaching 1Cor 6:1! One pastor who ordered the hacking of a computer, despite being told that this was a crime under the Computer Misuse Act, later told his victims to the effect, “How dare you use ungodly means and report to the police, against 1Cor 1:6!” These are gross misapplications of 1Cor 6:1, are they not? When the Apostle Paul wrote 1Cor 1:6, was his main goal in his mind to create a blanket-immunity from all civilian penalties for crimes committed by Christians? This cannot be when the Scriptures itself teach a duty to report any crime that we had witnessed,

“And if a soul sin, and hear the voice of swearing, and is a witness, whether he hath seen or known of it; if he do not utter it, then he shall bear his iniquity.” (Lev 5:1)

An Exegesis upon Proper Hermeneutical Principles

If the popular interpretation of 1Cor 6:1 is unbalanced, what is the correct and proper meaning of this verse that the Apostle Paul was intending to convey when he penned this under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit? An exegesis on proper hermeneutics would yield as follows: -

1. The first hermeneutical principle of verse interpretation is the 2Cor 13:1 rule: “In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established.”

What often escape notice is that 1Cor 6:1 has no parallel Scripture; not in the OT or NT. In contrast, Commandments such as “thou shalt not kill”, or “thou shalt not commit adultery”, are repeated several times both in the OT and NT, establishing and confirming their effectual application. 1Cor 6:1 however, not being confirmed by any other verse, is not established as a universal principle to be applied in every case. This indicates that it is not a commandment but is rather a unique statement made in a particular context for a particular people or situation.

2. The Historical – Geographical Context: Acts 18:11-17 gives us the account of Paul's experience when he sojourned in Corinth for 18 months, teaching the word of God among them,

“And he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. And when Gallio was the deputy of Achaia, the Jews made insurrection with one accord against Paul, and brought him to the judgment seat, Saying, This fellow persuadeth men to worship God contrary to the law. And when Paul was now about to open his mouth, Gallio said unto the Jews, If it were a matter

of wrong or wicked lewdness, O ye Jews, reason would that I should bear with you: But if it be a question of words and names, and of your law, look ye to it; for I will be no judge of such matters. And he drave them from the judgment seat. Then all the Greeks took Sosthenes, the chief ruler of the synagogue, and beat him before the judgment seat. And Gallio cared for none of those things.”

Wikipedia: “Corinth was destroyed by the Romans under Lucius Mummius in 146 BC. Julius Caesar refounded the city as *Colonia laus Iulia Corinthiensis* in 44 BC. According to the Greek historian Appian, the new settlers were drawn from freedmen (former slaves given their freedom) of Rome. Under the Romans, this city state became the seat of government for Southern Greece or Achaia. It was noted for its wealth, and for the luxurious, immoral and vicious habits of the people. It had a large mixed population of Romans, Greeks, and Jews.”

From the Scriptures and from historical accounts, we learn that the Corinthians comprising the prosperous descendants of former slaves, were unabashed at taking up small, non-judicial matters before the Roman pro-consul; who was however in turn nonchalant towards justice, did not allow Paul to speak, roughly drove away the people and did not care when Sosthenes, a Jew, was beaten up in front of him (albeit this may have worked out for the good of Christianity at Corinth, such an act nevertheless is unjust). Paul perhaps vividly remembered this when he used “unjust” to describe the judges at Corinth, in contrast to say Festus, whom he later confidently addressed as “most noble Festus” in Act 26:25.

3. The Greek word for “unjust” (Vine’s Expository Dictionary): *adikos* - "not in conformity" with *dike*, "right," is rendered "unjust" in the AV and RV in Matt. 5:45; Luke 18:11; Acts 24:15; Greek *dike* - primarily "custom, usage," came to denote "what is right;" then, "a judicial hearing;" hence, "the execution of a sentence," "punishment," 2 Thess. 1:9, RV; Jude 1:7, "punishment," RV (AV, "vengeance").

Adikos would indicate that the judges at Corinth did not act in conformity to right in judicial hearings and in the execution of sentences.

4. The Greek word for “saints” (Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Greek NT words): *hagios* - " for the meaning and use of which see HOLY, B, No. 1, is used as a noun in the singular in Phil 4:21, where *pas*, "every," is used with it. In the plural, as used of believers, it designates all such and is not applied merely to persons of exceptional holiness or to those who, having died, were characterized by exceptional acts of "saintliness." See especially 2 Thess. 1:10, where "His saints" are also described as "them that believed," i.e., the whole number of the redeemed. They are called "holy ones" in Jude 1:14, RV.

The saint before whom one may go to for judgement is to be a genuine believer, not perfect in exceptional holiness perhaps, but clearly not unruly or evil-intending,

“But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat.” (1Cor 5:11)

5. The Literal-Grammatical Context: a consideration of verses proximal to that being interpreted,

“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? Know ye not that we shall judge angels? How much more things that pertain to this life? If then ye have judgments of things pertaining to this life, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church. 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? But brother goeth to law with brother, and that before the unbelievers. 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? Nay, ye do wrong, and defraud, and that your brethren.” (1Cor 6:2-8)

First, Paul tells the Corinthians that since the saints shall judge the world and angels, it was unbelievable that there was not a wise man among them, able to judge between his brethren.

Second, the subjects are the smallest matters, (in verse 1, “a matter” singular). Matthew Henry’s Commentary here says: “*Here is at least an intimation that they went to law for trivial matters, things of little value; for the apostle blames them that they did not suffer wrong rather than go to law (1Cor 6:7), which must be understood of matters not very important. In matters of great damage to ourselves or families, we may use lawful means to right ourselves. We are not bound to sit down and suffer the injury tamely, without stirring for our own relief; but, in matters of small consequence, it is better to put up with the wrong.*”

Third, Paul had present justice in view as seen in the term, “*things pertaining to this life*”. Almighty God is interested in justice in this world here and now! In Rev 6:9-11, we have a glimpse of martyrs who cry to the Lord for judgement and vengeance on their blood taken away in injustice. God expects that church decisions should be “just” so that justice is upheld in His house according to His ordained laws, statutes and judicial procedures (see above I., II. and III.)

Fourth, Paul reveals that when the Corinthians took their brethren to court, they went beyond mere relief from being defrauded, into undue profiting so that they themselves “do wrong and defraud their brethren”, i.e. obtain from the courts more than what is rightfully theirs. A T Robertson says of 1 Cor 6:8, **Nay, but ye yourselves do wrong and defraud** (*alla humeis adikeite kai apostereite*). “But (adversative *alla*, on the contrary) **you** (emphatic) do the wronging and the robbing” (active voices) “and that your brethren” (*kai touto adelphous*).”

If such is the case, Paul would much prefer that these Christians allow themselves to be defrauded rather than exceed what they should recover in the courts. He reminded them that before they were saved, some of them were thieves, covetous and extortioners, who had no inheritance in the kingdom of God. Now however, washed, sanctified and justified in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God, they should no longer live in the old way.

Avenues of Appeal

During the Apostolic times, the churches could appeal to the apostles for help or clarification on matters that concern individuals in the churches. Paul evidently wrote out a number of judgements and advice for the Corinthians in 1Cor 5, 7 and 8, dealing with issues ranging from one taken in gross immorality, issues of marriage and divorce and of foods offered to idols.

In modern times, appeal avenues may be to a presbytery or a Synod in the case of Presbyterian and Methodist churches. For Bible Presbyterians in Singapore, unfortunately its Synod was dissolved in 1988 at the instance of leaders unwilling to submit themselves to the wisdom of the majority.

VI. Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Sceptre of Righteousness and Law

There are those who think that since our Lord Jesus taught His disciples to turn the other cheek, He is not concerned with the rule of law. The Psalmist as well as the prophet Isaiah however both

foretold of our Lord's zeal for righteousness. When Jesus Christ comes again to rule and reign in His millennial kingdom, He shall bring in everlasting righteousness and make the law honourable.

"Thy righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, and thy law is the truth." (Ps 119:142)

"Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles. He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench: he shall bring forth judgment unto truth..." (Is 42:1-3)

"The LORD is well pleased for his righteousness' sake; he will magnify the law, and make it honourable." (Is 42:21)

CONCLUSION

Going to court against another, whether brethren or not, is unpleasant for any normal person, and a thing all would wish to avoid. At times however, due to the wilful intransigence of the other party, a court process cannot be avoided, and we have as Matthew Henry's Commentary says, "to stir for our own relief" as a matter of principle and conscience. I know a man who had to go to court to overturn a defamatory ex-communication. He was mindful that as David twice spared Saul, (1Sam 24:3-6, 26:7-12) he too did not wish to be the means to destroy those who had been unjust towards him. In the end, the Lord gave him all that he wanted: the ex-communication was withdrawn, he spared the perpetrators and provided them a face-saving way to continue in their ministry, and he did not ask for damages or costs. In such a case, 1Cor 6:1 cannot be the guiding verse, to prevent the seeking of truth and justice and allowing the perpetuation of wrong. When there is a higher cause and principles of righteousness and innocence involved, a Christian can appeal to Caesar.

Concluding Prayer - *"Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear."* (Heb 12:28)