

CHRISTIAN LAWSUITS, OR CHRISTIAN DISPUTES?

AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF 1 CORINTHIANS 6:1-11

BY

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“Judge with righteous judgment” (Jn. 7:24b). Our Lord Jesus Christ calls His people to evaluate everything in life according to His Word, in order that we might apply His righteous standard to all that we think, say, and do. In light of this, Christian conduct toward others and relations with one another ought also to be shaped according to that same standard. When we are delinquent in our conduct or when our relations with one another break down by reason of sin or disharmony, the Lord has mercifully provided for the counsel and discipline of His church through which to minister His Word and lovingly administer His corrections, reproofs, and judgments. Many of the principles that the church is to use in carrying out this important task are found in the book of First Corinthians, particularly in chapters 5 - 6, though the stage is set earlier when Paul writes to the Corinthians, “So then let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you” (3:21). Just before, he had written, “Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become foolish that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God. For it is written, “He is the one who catches the wise in their craftiness”; and again, “The Lord knows the reasonings of the wise, that they are useless”” (18-20).

It is easy, then, to understand why, in chapter 5, Paul calls for the church faithfully to judge and discipline professing Christians who fall into open sin. The church has salvation by Christ, regenerate hearts by the Spirit of God, and the clear standard of the Word of God to teach them the righteousness of God and to enable them to judge accordingly. In matters of disagreement in our relations with one another, the Word of God, in chapter 6, again calls Christians to look to the church in order to solve the disagreement by judging with righteous judgment. In fact, it specifically prohibits the Christian from seeking judgment in such disagreements from the unbelieving judges, which appears to forbid the Christian from seeking relief in the governmental court system since it

is likely to be populated with unbelievers and operated according to principles of human “wisdom” (foolishness to God).

But to what extent does this well-known passage in 1 Cor. 6:1-11 reach? The answer to that question is also in disagreement. Does it apply only to disagreements in business matters, or does it have a wider scope, applying to all kinds of disagreements, including marital discord? Specifically, for purposes of this paper, we want to determine whether this passage “cover[s] marital disputes as well as property, business contracts and torts.” The question itself is a bit vague or misleading because of the definition of “tort.” One dictionary defines it, “Damage, injury, or a wrongful act done willfully, negligently, or in circumstances involving strict liability, but not involving breach of contract, for which a civil suit can be brought.”¹ This same dictionary defines, as a related term, “alienation of affection” as “A tort based on willful and malicious interference with the marriage relation by a third party without justification or excuse.” It would seem, therefore, that a tort, according to this dictionary, can by definition at least involve the marriage relation. However, in light of the distinction that the question itself appears to make between the two, we can only assume that, by the term “tort,” the question refers to a wrongful act subject to civil suit, not including marital disputes, in which the plaintiff would seek financial damages. In order to answer the question, this paper will proceed on that assumption and use the term “tort” in that manner. This paper, then, will address the question, “Does 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 cover marital disputes as well as

¹Found online at www.thefreedictionary.com/Tort

property, business contracts and torts?”² In doing so, however, what the passage teaches will become clear regarding how the Christian is to deal with all kinds of disagreements.

In order to arrive at the correct exegesis of the passage and thus determine the answer to this question, we must address the purpose and context of the passage as well as additional matters of word-scope and meaning. These matters are crucial to answering the question posed from this passage. We must first give an overview of the passage in order to determine its purpose and any requirements or commands it may give, upon which there is general agreement among most interpreters. Second, we must evaluate the context within which the passage occurs and the connection of the passage to that context. In light of the contextual evidence, then, we must determine the correct scope and meaning of the word *pra/gma* (*pragma*), variously translated “matter,” (KJV, WEB, ASV, NKJV) “case,” (NASB) “dispute,” (NIV) “grievance,” (ESV) or even “business” [sic] (Geneva Bible) in 1 Cor. 6:1; the meaning, in its connection, of the verb *apostere,w* (*apostereo*) ordinarily translated as either “defraud” or “cheat” in 1 Cor. 6:7, 8; and the exact scope, in this connection, of the term *kri,ma* (*krima*) in 1 Cor. 6:7, translated by most of the versions as “lawsuit.” In connection with the latter, we will examine the entire group of words in this passage that spring from the root meaning “judge.”

Purpose

An overview of the passage will reveal its purpose, instructions and requirements for the Christian, matters about which most interpreters agree. According to the pattern we find throughout 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote this passage in response to a problem in the life of the congregation in

²This is the exact form of the question as it was received by a presbytery from the elders of a local church, seeking the advice of presbytery.

Corinth that sprang from their arrogance and contributed to their divisions. While we are not given a great deal of detail about the problem which occasioned 6:1-11, it is fairly safe to infer that the Corinthians were liberally using the courts of the civil magistrate to pursue the settlement of disputes and disagreements with others. Paul was especially concerned over their disagreements with their fellow Christians and their use of the civil courts and unbelieving judges to seek resolution or settlement (6:6, 7). In reading the passage, one is overwhelmed with the tone of Paul's consternation (6:1). In addition, Paul expresses amazement to learn of such an occurrence as one Christian going to law against another Christian when he asks, "Does any one of you...dare...? (vs. 1). The passage gives the impression that the Corinthians had become overly litigious,³ as we see in our own litigious culture today. His astonishment continues throughout the passage, expressed by a number of emphatic constructions including rhetorical questions and statements designed to give added weight to the guilt the Corinthians have incurred by their actions (6:1, 5, 6, 8). He points out by his comment in vv. 7, 8 that their motives and attitudes in their actions toward one another which caused such disputes were particularly un-Christian: "Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that you have lawsuits with one another. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded? On the contrary, you yourselves wrong and defraud, and that your brethren" (NASB).⁴ His amazement does not stop there, but extends to the fact that they have sought judgment before unbelieving judges in

³Calvin seemed to acknowledge this when he wrote, "Here, he begins to reprove another fault among the Corinthians – an excessive eagerness for litigation..." John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, Calvin's Commentaries, tr. John W. Fraser, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960), 117.

⁴Calvin wrote that the minds of those who "are obstinate in joining issue with each other with the utmost rigor of the law...are inflamed far too much by wrongful, greedy desires." Ibid., 122.

courts of the civil government instead of seeking help from other Christians within the church to settle their disputes with one another.

Note for a moment Paul's rhetorical questions and the contrasts they contain. They clearly convey Paul's meaning even without the benefit of providing the answers. They convict the Corinthian Christians of their wrongdoing in using the courts of the civil magistrate and unbelieving judges to resolve disputes among Christians, and failing to use fellow Christians instead, who are qualified to "judge with righteous judgment" (6:1, 4-5, 6). They affirm, with intent to convince, that the Corinthian Christians are capable of settling such disputes in a righteous manner (6:2-3). The questions affirm, with intent to convince, that they should act toward one another in a manner befitting those whom Christ loves and whom they also should love, not in the un-Christian and vengeful manner reflected in both their disputes and their method of seeking judgment in the civil courts (6:7-8). He even points out, by means of his contrast between 6:9-10 and 6:11, that there is a clear dividing line between the church and the world. But at the same time that these questions and contrasts convict and convince the Corinthian Christians, they also call them to something. Daniel Wallace, explaining the grammatical and literary force of rhetorical questions, wrote,

As the name implies, the *rhetorical* question expects no *verbal* response, but is in fact a thinly disguised statement, though couched in such a way as to draw the listener into the text. In the speaker's presentation, there is uncertainty about whether the listener will heed the implicit command. . . . it does not ask a question of fact, but of *obligation*. It is supremely a question of "oughtness" (emphasis his).⁵

In general, Paul's purpose was to issue instructions, requirements, and commands to the Corinthian Christians as he expressed his astonishment that they would do the things they had done in

⁵Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 467.

connection with their disputes among themselves, and had failed to handle them how they ought, considering their Christian confession.

This leads us, then, to consider the specific requirements Paul makes of the Corinthians, and through them the church throughout the centuries. Put rather simply from both the negative and positive viewpoints, he required them to cease taking their disputes with fellow Christians to the unbelieving courts for judgment, and to have other Christians settle them within the confines of the church.⁶ These requirements are definitely directed toward Christians in their relationships with one another. Paul addresses the Corinthian Christians when he asks, “Does any one of *you*, when he has a case against his neighbor, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints?” in vs. 1 (emphasis added). He also specifies in the original language that he refers to a case that a Christian has against “the other” (with the definite article), not “his neighbor,” or “another,” as several of the translations put it. Then, of course, he states it clearly in vv. 5, 6, and 8 that he refers to cases between brethren in Christ. As it relates to the particular question under consideration, emphasis should fall on the second of the requirements for a moment. God, in the word He gave through Paul in this passage, commands His people to have their disputes settled by the mediation or arbitration of fellow Christians. Charles Hodge wrote,

It was adapted to make them ashamed that they had acted so unworthily of their dignity as Christians; and it was no less disgraceful to them to suppose that there was not in the church a single man fit to act as arbitrator...Instead of referring the matter to the arbitration of a judicious brother, ye go to law, and that before unbelievers.⁷

⁶As mentioned above, this is not only obvious from the passage itself, but most commentators agree on these basic elements of the passage. See, for example, Calvin, cited above, as well as Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), p. 179 and Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1964 reprint of the sixth edition), 95-6.

⁷Hodge, *1 Corinthians*, 96, commenting on vv. 5, 6.

Kistemaker wrote,

Paul wants them to appoint a man who is able to act as mediator, that is, a person who arbitrates between two people to bring about harmony...this passage breathes a spirit of mediation rather than revenge. The wise man acts not as a judge who delivers a verdict, but rather as a mediator who seeks to bring two parties together for mutual understanding and agreement.⁸

He further added a noteworthy comment regarding the Greek verb *diakri,nai*, “[T]he compound verb differs in meaning from the simple verb *kri,netai* (v. 6). The compound means to arbitrate, the simple connotes to judge.”⁹ Calvin wrote, “This is the first statement – that, if anyone has a controversy with a brother, it ought to be decided before godly judges, and that it ought not to be before those who are ungodly,” and again, “And lest they should allege that they were deprived of a better remedy, he directs them to choose out of the church arbiters, who may settle causes agreeably and equitably.”¹⁰ Leon Morris quoted Grosheide’s succinct summary, “Paul recognizes that disputes will occur, but these should be settled within the brotherhood.”¹¹ Peacemakers Ministries takes this same position in a paper that draws from 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 their own purpose or foundation for their ministry of Christian conciliation.¹²

⁸Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians*, 183-84.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Calvin, *1 Corinthians*, 117, 120.

¹¹Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), 90.

¹²David V. Edling, Jeffrey Dodd, Molly Routson, “Can the Church Be a Peacemaking Forum?” at www.peacemaker.net/site/c.aqKFLTOBIpH/b.1172255/apps/s/content.asp?ct=1245387. The authors charge the Christian with the biblical responsibility to seek settlement of his dispute with a fellow Christian by the mediation of other Christians in the church. They also charge the church with the biblical responsibility, based upon the teaching of 1 Cor. 6:1-8, to faithfully carry out the function of the peacemaker to bring about reconciliation among Christians in time of dispute. There are many valuable insights in this paper which serve both to instruct and reprove.

Having emphasized the passage's weighty command for Christians to have their disputes judged within the church, it would be helpful to complete our overview with some of Paul's plainly stated reasons for this requirement. The first is the inability of unbelieving judges to judge righteously. Apart from regeneration and faith in Christ, they have no capacity to judge matters in accord with biblical truth and righteousness. "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (1 Cor. 2:14). Such a judge would only look to the laws and ways of fallen man as the standard to guide his judgment of a dispute, for he has not been subjected to the change of mind involved in repentance that accompanies regeneration.¹³ He can neither "be of the same mind toward" the Christians involved in the matter (cf. Rom. 8:5-8; 12:16; Phil. 2:1-3), nor can he have the same purpose they do, the glory of God. Note that Paul describes these judges with three terms that make this point clear, "unrighteous" (vs. 1), "despised" (vs. 4 - "of no account"), "unbelievers" (vs. 6). This does not mean that the unbeliever has absolutely no sense of justice at all; if that were true, it would make civil government impossible. It does mean that the unbeliever is not able, nor does he care, to find God's biblical solution to the dispute. Neither does he have any ability or desire to obey God or glorify Him in ruling righteously, "judging with righteous judgment."

With regard to this point, Grosheide wrote,

Paul is not saying that the secular courts in Corinth were corrupt, but that they were composed of unbelievers. Such courts did not regulate their thinking or actions by the law of God. He is not complaining that believers would not obtain justice in heathen courts, but saying that they had no business being there at all...In accepting Christ believers deliberately rejected the standards of the world. It is completely out of character for them to go to law

¹³The Greek word for repentance in the New Testament, *meta, noia*, is a compound word that would literally be translated "change of mind." Repentance obviously involves a change of one's thinking with regard to sin and righteousness.

by such worldly standards and to submit to the judgment of ‘men who count for nothing’ among them.¹⁴

On the other hand, the believer does have the capacity, ability, and desire to “judge with righteous judgment,” and Paul gives this as the second reason for the requirements of this passage. The Christian does have faith in Christ and love and fear of God due to a regenerate heart. He has the ability to appraise things spiritually, to understand the Word of God, to apply it to the matters of life, to judge in accord with God’s truth and righteousness as revealed in His Word and thoroughly fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He has both the capacity and desire to look to God’s ways which are higher than man’s ways. Paul argues in this passage that the Christian is indeed fit to judge disputes between fellow Christians and ought to do so. In vv. 2-3 he employs the argument from the greater to the lesser to prove his point. He argues first that Christians will be involved with Christ in the righteous judgment of the world and that, being competent for that, they are certainly competent to judge righteously the lesser matters of the disputes of this life between Christians. He repeats this argument, except that the second time, he reminds the Corinthians that Christians will judge angels. If they are competent to be charged with the responsibility to judge fallen angels, or rule in heaven over holy angels,¹⁵ surely they are competent to arbitrate disputes of this life between their brethren! Paul expected there to be wise men in the church who were capable of mediating in such disputes; in fact, he knew there were such men, at least in the persons of the elders, if not others as well. This is why he used the form of the rhetorical question when he asked, “Is it so, that there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren?” Paul, of course, knew that

¹⁴Quoted in Morris, *First Corinthians*, 90.

¹⁵See Calvin, *1 Corinthians*, 119 for the former interpretation and Hodge, *1 Corinthians*, 95-6 for the latter interpretation.

there indeed were wise men among them who were able to resolve their dispute. Furthermore, he intended it to elicit the unspoken answer to his question as an admission by the Corinthians that it was so, and that the Corinthians ought to have availed themselves of their elders rather than unbelieving judges in the arbitration of their disputes.

The final reasons for the basic requirements of this passage are the church's testimony to the world and the Christian's relation to his fellow Christian. Calvin helpfully summarized both of these matters. Of the first he wrote, "...in pursuing their quarrels before the courts of the unbelievers, they were giving a bad name to the gospel, and reducing it to a public laughingstock." Of the second he wrote, "...while Christians ought to suffer injuries, they were causing harm to others, rather than put up with their being involved in trouble of any kind."¹⁶ Calvin's summaries make the points clear. When Christians air their disputes and disagreements before the unbelieving world, it makes the unbeliever think that the gospel has not effectuated any change, contrary to Christian claims. Such behavior does not lend itself to adorning one's doctrine (Titus 2:10). Furthermore, since the gospel does indeed have its effect in producing love in one's heart for the other, then the Christian's love toward his fellow Christian should manifest such a change; "do nothing from selfishness and empty conceit, but with humility of mind, let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others." (Phil. 2:3-4).

¹⁶Ibid, 117. Another translation found on Ages Digital Library's *The Comprehensive John Calvin Collection* ver. 1.0 (Albany, OR, 1998) reads, "... by bringing their disputes before the tribunals of the wicked, they by this means made the gospel contemptible, and exposed it to derision. . . . while Christians ought to endure injuries with patience, they inflicted injury on others, rather than allow themselves to be subjected to any inconvenience. . . ."

So then, the overview of the passage shows that Paul's purpose was not really to address one specific type of conflict or dispute between Christians. He did not intend to instruct the Corinthian Christians, nor the rest of God's people, only in the matter of torts or business disputes. Rather, his purpose in general was to discourage disputes between Christians altogether. He realized, however, that the church militant is not yet perfected and that there will always be disputes even among Christian brethren, as was powerfully evident in Corinth. So, his more specific purpose was to call Christians to judge Christians; to call Christians to seek resolution of their disputes from fellow Christians; to call Christians to forsake the use of the courts of the civil magistrate to settle disputes among Christians. Although Christians instigating lawsuits in civil courts against one another was the occasion that brought about Paul's instruction, and was the subject of part of Paul's rebuke of the Corinthians, his purpose was more emphatically, by what he inferred, to exhort them to act in accord with their Christian confession and new nature: to love one another even as Christ loved them; to exercise Christian conciliation in accord with the forgiveness Christians have in Christ and in accord with their union with Him; to seek to have their disputes "judge[d] with righteous judgment" for the glory of Christ and the good of His church. It was not to put the specific description of the lawsuits in view, but the principle that would prevent them and provide for Christian mediation.¹⁷

¹⁷As we will see below, the very term "lawsuits" in and of itself cannot be limited to torts or business and property disputes. Thus, even if one wanted to maintain that Paul's main purpose was only to halt the Corinthians' practice of litigation with one another, this passage must still allow for application to marital disputes and other matters of violated rights in addition to business, monetary, or property disputes.

Context

In analyzing the context, will we come to the same conclusions? The context certainly is important. We have all heard the cliché “a text without a context is a pretext.” What it conveys, however, is wise. The context is especially important to properly understand 1 Cor. 6:1-11.

First, let us consider some grammatical reasons why the traditional view (that this passage is a parenthesis in which Paul addresses torts and business disputes only) is inaccurate, to some degree. In so doing, we will also be able to introduce some aspects of a more consistent contextual interpretation of it. We can see from the writings of many commentators that 1 Cor. 6:1-11 has traditionally been considered something of a parenthesis in Paul’s letter, a parenthesis in which he deals with a Corinthian problem separate from that which he answered in both the immediately preceding and subsequent contexts.¹⁸ That view, however, inserts a matter whose relation and ties to the surrounding context are tenuous into the midst of what should be a rather more integrated section. Note, in the first place, that there is no transitional conjunction in 1 Cor. 6:1, which one would expect to see if Paul were moving to a completely new topic and different Corinthian problem, or even if he were adding in more unrelated material by way of a parenthesis. Young writes of the conjunction *ga,r*

¹⁸See Hodge, *1 Corinthians*, 92-3 for this interpretation, though he does not use the term “parenthesis” to describe the passage. Along with Hodge, other commentators also say that Paul addressed an entirely different problem in the Corinthian church from that of chapter 5. Their view is that he dealt with lawsuits and litigiousness connected with property, business, etc. For such an interpretation, see, e.g., Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, New Modern Edition, vol. 6 (n. c.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 428-29. Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 177 wrote, “Paul interrupts his discussion on immorality to instruct the Corinthians on the course they ought to take in regard to lawsuits.”

“*Transition* – Ga,r can indicate the transition of a discourse into a new discussion, as in 1 Corinthians 10:1 (moreover; cf. Gal. 1:11). As a transitional device, ga,r is often translated “now,” “and,” or left untranslated.¹⁹

One might quickly object to this that Paul has used the grammatical device asyndeton instead, in order to transition to completely new subject material. Asyndeton is the intentional exclusion of a connecting conjunction for purposes of emphasis or transition. It is true that Paul uses asyndeton in 1 Cor. 6:1. In the present case, however, it does not serve to change topics altogether. Paul began this section in 5:1 by addressing the church’s failure to discipline a man who was openly in the sin of adultery, and that with his own step-mother. He also addressed in that passage the church’s need to discipline such people to the point of excommunicating the unrepentant one. He used asyndeton in 1 Cor. 5:9 to then speak to them about a matter that was corollary and closely related to that case, a matter that was still within the topic of open sin within the church and the need for church discipline, but moved to a general principle which applied to the specific case. He spoke of the church’s need to disassociate itself from those who profess Christianity, but live scandalous lives. He communicated a further principle that was to be drawn from the specific and the general taken together, that Christians are to judge Christians. In other words, those who live scandalously and/or continue impenitently in sin, yet profess to be Christian, should be judged within the church, by the church. These matters, related in 5:9-13, are obviously very closely connected in theme and topic with the material in 5:1-8. They simply expand the teaching on sin within the church and church discipline which Paul began in the preceding passage. Since Paul used asyndeton for that purpose in the preceding paragraph, it is grammatically and exegetically reasonable to assume that he used

¹⁹Richard A. Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek: A Linguistic and Exegetical Approach* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 183.

it for the same purpose in 6:1. Thus, both of these grammatical factors indicate that 6:1-8 are not a parenthesis, but are also closely related in theme and topic with the preceding context, but further expand on the teaching with regard to sin within the church that Paul began in the earlier passage.

Second, keeping the preceding in mind, we must determine how the passage fits into its context, including the immediate context within the passage itself. We maintain the view that it, too, addresses matters connected to sin in the church. This is the only view that does justice to the context and makes sense of the various parts, which the traditional view does not do. However, the asyndeton that Paul used allowed him to shift his focus to matters of dispute, and to address their wrongful use of the civil courts to settle their disputes. The Corinthians, due to the influence of the unbelieving culture and their own lives and habits previous to their conversion, had been taking their cases of dispute before the courts of the civil magistrate to seek redress by means of civil litigation. So, now Paul moves from matters of discipline to matters of dispute. It is not so much that disputes might not also make Christians subject to church discipline; rather, Paul's focus changes to settling such matters through arbitration and mediation, if possible, prior to moving to formal, public church discipline. When Paul begins to rebuke the Corinthian church for "going to law" before unbelievers rather than the saints, there is no reason for him to refer to anything other than "matters," "cases," or "disputes" spawned by sin and which require resolution and reconciliation through mediation by someone in the church. So Paul simply continued in this passage by addressing matters of dispute in which Christian had offended against Christian. Indeed, it is hardly possible to envision any dispute between Christians in which sin is not involved. Whether it is sin by one or all of the parties

involved in the dispute, sin always has a hand in it.²⁰ Thus, although Paul's purpose is to convey his basic principle of Christians judging Christians in matters of discipline and dispute, sin within the church is one of the main threads that binds this section together.

This view fits best with the context within which the passage occurs and binds the entire section together into a cohesive whole. It fits with matters of the preceding context. It fits with Paul's concern over the outbreak of immorality in the church and how such an outbreak not only spreads, but constitutes sin against other individuals, as well as against the body as a whole, and ultimately against God. It fits with Paul's giving of the representative list of sins in 5:9-10²¹ and the fact that it was a so-called brother, who continued impenitent in such sins, from whom the church should disassociate itself via discipline. Christians *among* whom one sinned were to judge such matters; Christians *against* whom one sinned, therefore, should also keep such judgment within the church.

It fits with matters of the immediate context. It is consistent with Paul's use of the term "a case against his neighbor" (NASB) in 6:1. Though the term can refer to legal disputes,²² these must

²⁰For example, if two Christians contract for goods or services in exchange for payment, and a dispute arises, either one has not satisfactorily provided the goods or services, or the other has not provided sufficient payment if any payment at all. A moment's contemplation of this situation in light of the Scriptures reveals several sins involved in either alternative. In fact, even if one disputes with the other and the second one has not violated the contract, then the first party committed the sin of false accusation. We might also consider a marriage of two Christians in which one spouse has a dispute with the other over a third party causing trouble between them. In many such cases, adultery at some level is involved. Conversely, if one spouse has committed adultery, disputes will almost always arise, and very often, many other sins are involved in this marital dispute.

²¹See V. George Shillington, "People of God in the Courts of the World: A Study of 1 Corinthians 6:1-11" in *Direction*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 40-50 Spring 1986: accessed at www.directionjournal.org/article/?537. Shillington rightly reminds us that the lists of vices in 5:9, 10 and 6:9-10 are representative.

²²See below, pp. 23-6, for further exegesis of the key word "case." Its legal connotation here is as much connected to the law of God as to the idea of a case that one had filed in court. This is why it is sometimes translated "grievance" or "dispute."

have mainly resulted from one Christian sinning against another. It is interesting, in this connection, that the Treasury of Scripture Knowledge lists Matt. 18:15-17, the Bible's manifesto for confrontation of the sinning Christian and for church discipline, as a cross-reference for this phrase in 1 Cor. 6:1. It is therefore consistent with Paul's purpose to put a stop to taking such matters of judgment within the church to the civil magistrate, and to command that they be kept within the church instead. The civil magistrate has no Biblical authority to involve itself either in matters of church discipline, or of adjudicating matters of dispute in the church, nor does the church have any Biblical authority to ask it to do so. It is consistent with Paul's reasoning that it would be better to allow oneself to be "wronged" and "deprived" ("defrauded") than to "wrong" and "deprive" ("defraud") others. Indeed, better that than to take disputes among Christians to civil courts for judgment (vv. 6-8). Paul does not mean that the Christian should do nothing when wronged or defrauded; just that one ought not look to the alternative of the civil courts for the settlement of disputes with his brethren. In addition, Paul's contrast in verse 8 points out their sinful behavior and implies that the Christian's place is not to wrong and deprive others; it is rather to treat one's fellow Christian rightly, no matter how one's fellow Christian treats him (vs. 8). In other words, as a member of the body of Christ, one ought to be more concerned with his responsibilities than with his rights.²³ It is consistent with Paul's confirmation that those who continue impenitent in the entire

²³David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians: Life in the Local Church*, The Bible Speaks Today, ed. John R. W. Stott (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1985), 105-06 gives us this important insight. Although he takes it as the most important thread to bind the context together, whereas the present writer does not, it is still an important idea, especially to set this section within the whole of 1 Corinthians. He writes, "We have already seen that the Corinthians were proud, competitive and assertive people. They were concerned most of the time for their *rights*. Their rights had virtually taken over from their redemption as the mainspring of their life together. As a result, they were extremely touchy if anyone infringed their rights or inhibited their freedom. This inevitably led to grievances between fellow-Christians, and such grievances could be harboured unendingly. . . . once a group of Christians becomes obsessed with its rights instead of its responsibilities, there will be untold trouble until they find the way to true repentance." Note how he, too, acknowledges that sin within the church, indicated by his use of the word "repentance," is involved in these disputes.

gamut of sins shall not inherit the kingdom of God (vv. 9-10). This is a stern reminder (“Do you not know?”) that those who continue impenitently to sin against and deprive their brethren will at some point prove their profession of faith false. After all, was it not for similar matters that the immoral man in chapter 5 was excommunicated from the visible kingdom of God? And is it not nearly the same list that guides the church’s disassociation from so-called brethren who live in such a way (5:9-10)? This stern reminder serves as notice that they must not act in the same way in which the unbeliever does. W. Harold Mare wrote,

Paul concludes that in practicing such acts of wickedness (*adikeo*) toward others they must realize that the wicked (*adikoi*) will not inherit the kingdom of God. . . . they need to clear their heads and realize that if they act wickedly in this way, they are no better than the wicked idolaters and others who will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. . . . In the light of this comparison, the Corinthians should have seen how unchristian and sinful their actions were toward one another.²⁴

It is consistent with Paul’s contrast of the church with the world (vs. 11). The new nature given to the Christian is to produce love for the body of Christ and its members and a hatred of sin. Thus, they should not act against their brethren in such a way as to cause disputes. Paul drew a clear dividing line between the actual status and condition of the Corinthians and that of the unbelieving world, which their sinful conduct and disputes against their brethren too closely mirrored. And by this, Paul reminded them that due to the cleansing, justifying work of the Savior on their behalf and its application of it to them by the definitively sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, they had both a responsibility and ability to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which they had been called. They were no longer among the wicked of the world; they must not act in such a way nor treat their brethren in such a manner.

²⁴See W. Harold Mare, *1 Corinthians*, vol. 10 in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 222-23.

The view that sin within the church is the main contextual connection fits with the subsequent context. In addition to being too concerned for their personal, individual rights and causing divisions in the body of Christ thereby, the Corinthians were too concerned for their personal, individual Christian liberty.²⁵ They also misunderstood it. Thus, Paul clearly distinguishes between a valid liberty of things indifferent and an invalid liberty to sin (6:12-13). He even indicates that the liberty to things indifferent ought not always to be exercised, if it is not profitable or if it masters one (6:12). But he goes on to explain that the kind of immorality they had allowed to go unchecked in the church, as reported in chapter 5, is not a matter of Christian liberty, but a matter of sin by which they defile the body of Christ and sin against themselves (6:14-20). Such sin would be the same as joining Christ to a harlot since the members of the body of Christ are joined to Him. Each Christian must, therefore, seek to keep such sin away from himself and out from among the body of Christ; rather, he should glorify Christ in his body (6:18-20).

Having said all of this, we must include a caveat. This passage addresses disputes born of sins that would be considered civil matters if taken to court, not criminal matters. Paul would not contradict himself elsewhere in Scripture by forbidding a Christian from approaching the government in a criminal matter. The prosecution of a criminal case, even when a Christian is witness against a fellow Christian, is one of the God-ordained functions of the civil magistrate, and one which the church is not to usurp. The church does not bear the sword, the civil magistrate does. Therefore, neither would Paul forbid a Christian from availing himself of the civil magistrate for protection from harm while a dispute is being resolved between Christians.

²⁵Prior, *1 Corinthians*, 106 again insightfully writes, “The way of the ‘freedom’ lobby at Corinth was to lay claim to rights here, there and everywhere . . . ‘Why shouldn’t I do what I feel like?’ was their defiant cry.”

Thus, we have seen the explanation of the grammatical and contextual evidence that this passage is not a parenthesis that deals with torts alone, but must be connected to sin in the church in general. Third, then, with this understanding of the context in mind, we must see that, in 1 Cor. 6:1-11, Paul expanded the teaching of his basic principle, that Christians are to judge Christians, clearly taught in 5:12-13. He has shifted his emphasis, however, from discipline to dispute and to settling disputes within the church, not in the civil courts, in order to reconciliation and peace. The visible Corinthian church failed to judge within itself those Christians and those matters which it should have. The Corinthian Christians should have been judging those within the bounds of the church in matters of both discipline and dispute. It behooves us, therefore, to look more closely and specifically at 5:1 - 6:11.

It seems readily apparent that 1 Cor. 5:12-13 is the key transitional text due to its clear teaching of the principle that Christians are to judge Christians. Paul's statements there, as we have seen, grow out of the disciplinary matter for which Paul rebuked the Corinthians and called them to judge. When Paul learned that a Corinthian man who was a member of the church had committed gross immorality, in the form of adultery with his own step-mother, he called them to account for their failure to discipline the man. He told them that the man should be removed from their midst and be delivered over to the power of the evil one to bring torments upon him that might pressure the man to repentance; indeed, he announced that he himself had done so. Paul himself did not need to be present to know what should be done. He indicated to the Corinthians that excommunication was called for, and he had already pronounced that sentence. He also indicated that their concern in such an action should be for the purity of the body of Christ. The presence of open sin in the church corrupts or profanes the body of Christ and has a tendency to spread. Paul explained that the

sacrifice of Christ for His people's sins and the communion Christians have with Him imply that we must put sin out from within ourselves, of course, but also put out from among the church those who live in open sin.²⁶ Our communion with Christ as it is signified and sealed in the Lord's Supper is particularly to be kept pure, obviously, through our own repentant hearts guarding against the impurity of being impenitent in our sins, but also is to be kept pure from those in the body of Christ who are obviously impenitent in their sins.²⁷ Therefore, the church was to disassociate itself, not from the world, as though the church were to be monastic, but from those who called themselves Christians and either fell into gross sin, remaining impenitent in it, or who never turned from their previously sinful lives in the first place. In fact, they were "not even to eat with such a one" (vs. 11).²⁸ Paul taught that all of this was to be the result of a judgment by the church; the church was to judge those within the church (vv. 3, 12, 13). A clear dividing line between the visible church and the unbelieving world was to be maintained. The church was to have nothing to do with judging those who were outside her bounds. But she certainly had a duty to judge, according to the standards of Scripture, the wicked conduct of those who claimed membership in the church, and to enact discipline accordingly. This, of course, still applies to the church as it has in all ages; the church is to judge those within her bounds in disciplinary matters.

The expression of this principle, then, accomplishes the transition from the previous matter to the next matter that Paul addresses. Recall how Paul expressed it so clearly by means of rhetorical questions, "For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within

²⁶Mare, *1 Corinthians*, 216-17.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 218.

²⁸As a side note, this chapter not only gives clear authority to the church to practice excommunication as a censure of church discipline, but also to practice suspension from the Lord's Supper as a censure.

the church?” We can also note that the thematic connection is made by repetition of the word *kri,nw* from 5:3, 12, 13 in 6:1-11 and its more profuse occurrence in the latter passage. The general principle of Christians judging Christians is still in view, even though Paul has shifted his emphasis and begun to address the Corinthians’ ungodly habit that resulted from their disputes. The principle, thus Paul’s basic topic, remains the same; but once again we see the shift in emphasis from discipline to dispute.

So then, Paul intended to convey to the Corinthians in this context, “You Christians who are within the church must judge and discipline one who is within the bounds of the visible church and is impenitent in such a terrible sin of sexual immorality (5:1-9). In fact, Christians must judge and discipline Christians, not those who are outside of the church, who continue impenitent in any of the entire gamut of open sins (5:10-13). Indeed, Christians must judge Christians in any dispute or grievance among themselves; those who are outside the church are not to be the judges in such matters (6:1-8).” Notice how Paul has expanded the reach of this principle by addressing both sides of the issue; namely, that Christians *are* to judge those within the church, not those outside the church, and that Christians *are not* to be judged by those outside the church when the matter for resolution is between Christians. The church, not the world, is to be the judge of those within her bounds when they have disagreements with one another, in order that their disputes might be resolved and settled.

And, at this point, we should note that 1 Cor. 6:1-11 stipulates that Christians should judge Christians in *any* matter in which one Christian has a grievance against another or in which two Christians have a matter of disagreement that prevents them from being reconciled or at peace with one another. The rhetorical question of 1 Cor. 6:1 appears to leave the identity of the disputes vague,

to which allusion has been previously made. But that is exactly Paul's purpose. He intends not so much to identify one specific kind of case, but to address the ungodly behavior that the Corinthian Christians were practicing on a broad scale, a behavior they had retained from their pre-Christian worldliness. Paul, as we saw above, was teaching them that they must not resort to the courts of the unbelievers to solve differences between Christian brothers. He was purposefully vague in order to convey to the Corinthian Christians that any dispute among Christians should be handled by the church, not the unbelieving courts. Thus, Paul leaves the disputes and the court proceedings unidentified, in order to convey that he is now speaking of a principle to inform their conduct, not of a limited, concrete instance.

Thus, we find, in a thorough understanding of the context of this passage, that Paul intended it to fit smoothly into the overall presentation of chapters 5 and 6 as an integral part of the related principles these passages teach for the benefit of the growing church's life. He did not intend it as a parenthesis, nor did he intend for it simply to address one particular problem, that of "lawsuits" perceived as torts, or business and property disputes. The contextual analysis proves that this is not a passage intended solely to address business ethics,²⁹ but any dispute among Christians. It therefore must apply to marital disputes as well. Paul intended to convey a principle that is applicable in all cultures in all times, that Christians are to judge Christians in all kinds of disputes among themselves; that is, Christians are to seek mediation and arbitration within the church by those who are wise in the Word of God, not by those who are outside the church.

Key Words

²⁹Even with as many keen and helpful insights as David Prior provides in his commentary, he still mistakenly and inconsistently comes to this conclusion. See Prior, *1 Corinthians*, 113.

Next, we move to the consideration of the scope and meaning of various key words Paul used in this passage which are particularly important for accurately interpreting the passage. Among them are the word *pra/gma*, words from the root meaning “judge,” including *kri,nw*, and *kri,ma*, and the word *avpostere,w*. *Pra/gma* in 1 Cor. 6:1 is variously translated “case,” “grievance,” “dispute,” “matter.” It is used just eleven times in the New Testament. In every other case, it is used in a general sense to indicate a “matter” or “thing.” Where it is definite, the “matter” to which it refers is usually defined by the context; it is thus used almost as a pronoun (Acts 5:4; 2 Cor. 7:11; 1 Thess. 4:6; Heb. 6:18). Occasionally, the “matter” is defined by a modifying adjective (Heb. 10:1; Jas. 3:16), or a relative clause (Lk. 1:1). Where it is indefinite, its range of reference is limited only by another modifying phrase (Matt. 18:19; Rom. 16:2). Thus, it refers to any matter or thing within the view of the modifying phrase. In either case, it is the context that determines the actual identity or referent of the “matter” or “thing.”

In its 126 occurrences in the Septuagint, we find the same dynamic at work in almost every case. All but a couple of its occurrences translate the Hebrew word *rbd*, which can refer to a “thing” or “matter” as well as to its more well-known meaning, “word.” In addition, in a specifically legal context, *rbd* refers to a decision, sentence, or verdict reached by means of judgment. It is used in just such a way in Deut. 17:10, and the Septuagint uses *pra/gma* to translate it. Thus, *pra/gma* was understood to have a legal connotation in a legal context. It can refer to a legal matter. It is still subject to its modifying phrases and the context, however, to determine the scope of legal matters which it encompasses. In fact, in Deut. 17:9, 10 and the surrounding passage specifically, it is very significant to the current question and important therefore to note that it teaches the same principle that 1 Cor. 6:1-11 teaches: the judgment of God’s people in matters of dispute is to take place within

the church. Deut. 17:8-13 does include the theocratic exercise of the death penalty, which in the New Testament is reserved to the civil magistrate. But it also teaches that God's people were to seek judgment within the church not only in matters of "blood to blood" and "stroke to stroke," but also in matters of "judgment to judgment." These are literal translations of the Hebrew phrases in Deut. 17:8, which reads "If any case is too difficult for you to decide, between one kind of homicide or another, between one kind of lawsuit or another, and between one kind of assault or another, being cases of dispute in your courts (lit. "gates"), then you shall arise and go to the place which the Lord your God chooses." (NASB). Vs. 9 then makes it very clear that they were to seek just judgment in all their matters of dispute from "the Levitical priest or the judge who is in office in those days, and you shall inquire of them, and they will declare to you the verdict in the case." Thus, it does not use the term *rbd* (translated by *pra/gma*) to describe the identity of the dispute itself, but rather to refer to the entire range of cases or verdicts to include any which they found too difficult to decide within their gates. Thus, taking into account that the theocracy is no longer in operation, it clearly, unmistakably sets forth the principle of Christians judging Christians in *all* matters of dispute between Christians. In confirmation of this Ezek. 44:24a also makes it clear that the judgment of God's people by God's people is to be according to the standard of His law: "And in a dispute [the Levitical priests] shall take their stand to judge; they shall judge it according to My ordinances" (NASB). It also makes it clear that officers in Christ's church are ultimately responsible for such judgment, just as 1 Cor. 6:5 calls for the "wise man" to judge, "who is able to decide [arbitrate] between his brethren."

In 1 Cor. 6:1, where *pra/gma* has a legal connotation in a legal context, its scope must still be determined by the two factors of modifying phrase and context, but cannot contradict the teaching

of God's Word in Deuteronomy. It is modified by the phrase, "against his neighbor"; thus, any matter or case defined by the standard of God's law that one has against a fellow Christian might be considered for inclusion in its range of reference. This gives the term a considerably broader range than only monetary, business, or property disputes. In addition, the context, as we have seen above, indicates that its range of reference can include any kind of dispute that might arise in connection with offenses of sin. Since Paul is expanding here on the theme of Christians judging Christians, and the corresponding lists of offenses in 5:9-10 and 6:9-10 go far beyond the realm of business disputes and torts to include all disputes among Christians, then the identity of the "matters" or "disputes" to which Paul refers in 6:1 must also go beyond that realm. Especially since the context deals so strongly with the topic of sexual immorality amid marriage, disputes resulting from such matters must certainly be included in the range of reference of the "case against [one's] neighbor" about which Paul gives instruction in 6:1.

We also must realize that since Paul rebukes the Corinthians over lawsuits in 1 Cor. 6:1-11, this term must be taken broadly enough to include any sort of dispute that Christians could possibly have among themselves that a civil court might hear. Such a range of cases is broader than the usual conception of lawsuits and certainly includes marital disputes. In view of the revealed Scriptural usage of this term and the contextual considerations above, we ought to consider its range of reference to extend to every kind of dispute or disagreement among Christians.

Next we consider the group of words that derive from the root meaning "judge." The word *kri,nw*, especially in its passive voice uses in 6:1, 2, 6, is translated by most of the sound translations as "go to law." It indeed connotes the idea of going to court. Make no mistake; the Corinthians Christians were taking one another into court. We must, however, be cautioned against presuming

that this refers only to a tort as currently and commonly conceived in our culture. In this term's New Testament uses, it can refer to suing someone (Matt. 5:40). However, it can also connote standing trial on charges of sin or criminal charges (Acts 23:3, 6; 24:21; 25:9, 10, 20; 26:6). But, it can also mean simply to be judged according to a standard. In view of the immediate context within the passage in 1 Cor. 6:1-11, there is no doubt that Paul is speaking of going to court when it comes to the idea of seeking judgment before unbelievers. There is equally no doubt that the idea of a lawsuit in which one seeks monetary redress is included in "go to law," but the term is not limited to such an idea. The passage also requires that this term be viewed on a broader basis than merely referring to a Christian suing a fellow Christian for medical costs and lost wages after breaking one's leg when he trips over a broken threshold in the home of his Christian brother, for example. In keeping with the proper interpretation of the word "matter" above,³⁰ the more general references in the surrounding context,³¹ and especially the purpose of the passage to command Christians to seek the arbitration of their disputes within the church,³² "go to law" must, in this passage, refer to seeking judgment in any kind of dispute. It obviously, therefore, goes beyond a Christian's seeking monetary redress from a fellow Christian in a matter of business or property as well as personal injury, etc.

It is important to understand that, in the passage before us, Paul's most basic idea when referring to judgment is to seek a decision that is rendered in accordance with a standard in such a way as to determine and demonstrate what is right and what is wrong in the matter, and bring

³⁰See pp. 21-23 above.

³¹See pp. 14-16, 20 above.

³²See the overview of the passage, pp. 5-7 above.

resolution and settlement of the dispute.³³ More specifically, the two parties in a dispute desire for someone to render a decision as to which of the parties is in the right, and which is in the wrong in the particular matter at hand. Of course, each of the parties believes he is in the right and desires for the decision to be favorable to his position. He thereby would not only be demonstrated to be in the right, but would receive the benefit of having his rights, or property, or money, or privileges restored, or of being able to pursue the course of action rightfully called for in response to the sin that was committed against him. Paul called upon the Christian to seek such a resolution and settlement at the hands of his fellow Christians, especially the wise men in the church, according to the standard of the law of God (1 Cor. 6:2-5; cp. Jas. 2:12), not in the courts of the civil magistrate according to an ungodly standard. This is simply because those within the church have the standard of the Word of God to teach them what is right and wrong, and enlightened minds to recognize and discern it due to their having hearts regenerated by the gracious work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:12-16). In light of what Paul commanded, that Christians seek from their fellow Christians righteous resolution and settlement of their disputes with one another, the term could be translated “go to judgment” or “seek

³³By way of exegesis to make this point, consider that several of Paul’s references to judgment do not specifically relate to the courtroom setting, but rather deal with the saints determining whether the deeds of the world and of angels are right or wrong (vv. 2, 3). Note that Paul draws the conclusion from his argument (noted above on pp. 7-8) that if Christians are competent to judge the world and angels, they should appoint those who are within the church as judges, not those who are outside the church, even in their everyday “cases for judgment” (vs. 4); this does not reflect a specific courtroom situation. It is, to be sure, a legal matter in that judgment according to a standard is involved, specifically the law of God. But, the contrast between vv. 1 and 6 and vv. 2-5 is whom one will seek to settle a dispute between Christians: an unbeliever as judge, or a believer. In this connection, note the phrases “before the unrighteous” versus “before the saints” in vs. 1, and “are *you* not competent to judge the smallest cases” in vs. 2 (emphasis added), and again “before unbelievers” in vs. 6. Also note that the idea of decision as to which party is right in a dispute is implicit in the rhetorical question in vs. 5b even though the word itself calls for mediation: “Is it so, that there is not among you one wise man who will be able to *decide between his brethren*,...” (emphasis added). Thus, the word “judge” cannot be limited to the courtroom alone, nor to decision or resolution of torts alone. Therefore, the exegesis shows that the word *kri.ma*, translated “lawsuits” in the NASB, must not be limited to torts, as argued below. Thus, though the Corinthian Christians were seeking to resolve their disputes by way of lawsuit in the courts of the civil magistrate, Paul did not focus on the idea of the lawsuit per se, especially not merely the tort or business dispute. Rather, as the Peacemakers’ paper cited in note 11 expresses, Paul’s concern is a matter of jurisdiction and resolution of the disputes.

judgment” as easily as “go to law,” and might more accurately reflect the broader referent of this term.

This, then, assists us in understanding the proper frame of reference for the word *kri,ma*. It is translated “lawsuits” in 1 Cor. 6:7. In order to be consistent with the proper interpretations of the words we have already looked at and with the intent of the passage, it could be thought of as “cases for judgment.”³⁴ Again, we must be clear; Paul was referring to the fact that the Corinthian Christians were filing lawsuits against their fellow Christians in civil courts. But to think of the term as “cases for judgment” avoids the modern tendency to think of lawsuits only as torts. It acknowledges that any kind of dispute is to be included within its range of reference. The same is true of the word *krith,rion* found in verses 2 and 4, translated “law court” by the NASB. It can also be translated “case” or “judgment,” as it is in the major translations other than the NASB (KJV, ASV, NKJV, NIV, ESV, GEN), and be rightly understood as referring to the matters in dispute that have been or should be brought for judgment, rather than the place where they are to be judged. In his commentary, Gordon Clark wrote, “*Kritēriōn* usually means “tribunals,” but verse 4 seems to require “matters” of judgment. . . . Again *kritēria* can mean either a court or a case. Since the Corinthian church did not have courts, but used pagan courts, the word here must mean cases.”³⁵ It still, therefore, cannot be limited to torts, but necessarily includes all matters of dispute between Christians that might be judged within the church; Paul wrote that the church should be able to “judge the smallest matters” (vs. 2 NKJV). In other words, the church is able to decide in all cases

³⁴See note 30 above.

³⁵Gordon Clark, *1 Corinthians: a Contemporary Commentary* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1975), 86 - 87.

of dispute among Christians without engaging unbelievers in the courts of the civil magistrate to make such decisions.

Thus, even if this group of terms does carry the connotation of the court situation, they cannot be limited to apply to torts alone, nor can they be understood apart from the fact that Paul called Christians to avoid seeking decisions to resolve and settle their internecine disputes from those who have not ability to “judge with righteous judgment.” He called them to seek a righteous decision and settlement from those who do have both the standard of righteousness in the Word of God and the ability to “judge with righteous judgment.” His use of the word *diakri,nw* in vs. 5 confirms this conclusion. Leon Morris quotes Grosheide’s insightful comment regarding Paul’s use of this word:

But now the apostle can ask whether they have even one wise man among them. [vs. 5.] *To judge* is an aorist infinitive with the meaning ‘to give a decision’ (rather than ‘conduct a trial’). The word implies not litigation, but ‘an amicable settlement by means of arbitration.’³⁶

Although the correct interpretation of the “judgment” word group is crucial to the right interpretation of this passage, there is one more word that is perhaps just as crucial to understand, if not more so. It contributes to the correct understanding of the passage within its context. The range of reference of the word *avpostere,w* in verses 7 and 8, translated “defraud,” must also be correctly established if we are not to be drawn into the temptation to think only of monetary or property disputes. The term is used six times in the New Testament and twice in the Old Testament as translated in the Septuagint.³⁷ It can refer to fraud and oppression where material goods are concerned (Mal. 3:5; Jas. 5:4). In Mk. 10:19 our Lord uses it in the former sense as an expression

³⁶Morris, *First Corinthians*, 92.

³⁷Six additional uses occur in the Apocrypha. They add nothing to the discussion, however.

of the Tenth Commandment, with the implication that fraud is an outward behavior that stems from covetousness. It can also refer to depriving one of something, usually the conjugal rights of one's spouse (Ex. 21:10; 1 Cor. 7:5). The term as it is used in 1 Cor. 6:7-8 cannot be limited only to fraud in relation to material goods, nor can it eliminate marital matters from the view of this passage. It is significant that it appears in 1 Cor. 7:5, the nearby context of our passage. In view of the fact that the preceding context, 5:1-13, deals with sexual immorality in marriage, and the subsequent context deals with sexual immorality, among other things (6:9-11), the avoidance of it (6:12-20), and then the proper use of sexual intimacy in marriage (7:1-9), including the admonition not to deprive one's spouse of this right, it seems fitting that Paul's use of the word in our passage would relate to the deprivation of rights connected to marriage when a dispute arises.

It is also significant that our Lord uses the term in Mk. 10:19 as an expression of the Tenth Commandment, with the implication that "fraud" is the outward behavior that results from covetousness. Since the Tenth Commandment includes "you shall not covet your neighbor's wife," then if one commits adultery with his neighbor's wife, it can be considered defrauding or depriving his neighbor, for adultery is an outward behavior that results from coveting a neighbor's wife. This is confirmed by 1 Thess. 4:3-6, a passage that addresses very similar themes. That passage requires that in sanctification, the Christian refrain from "fornications" (translated "sexual immorality" in the NASB), that each Christian "know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification [holiness] and honor, and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter. . ." Before likening this passage to 1 Cor. 6:1-11, we must first note that the word translated "defraud" here is not the same Greek word translated "defraud" in 1 Cor. 6:7-8. Nevertheless, it is closely synonymous with the

word used in 1 Cor. 6:7-8.³⁸ On the other hand, the word translated “matter” here is the same word translated “case” (NASB) in 1 Cor. 6:1. Thus, to commit fornication defrauds one’s brother. In other words, when one commits fornication with a woman, he is defrauding a man by coveting his wife and acting on that covetousness. Even if the woman is not married, he is defrauding that woman’s possible future husband of his rights to an “unsoiled” wife. And of course, if the woman is married, defrauding his brother of his marital rights becomes more immediately recognizable and problematic. We can easily see how marital disputes can arise from such “fraud” and would necessitate the mediation and arbitration of the church in order to foster confession, forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration among all the parties, if both of the men are Christians. And certainly, what applies to men in this passage also applies to women when the roles in the fornication are reversed, or looked at from the viewpoint of the woman’s part in the matter.

But this passage takes the connection between fraud and marital disputes a step farther. The “matter” (cp. 1 Cor. 6:1) to which this passage refers is, generally, sexual immorality. But 1 Thess. 4:4, in giving the second requirement for sanctification in this context, narrows the referent to marriage in particular. It requires that each Christian “know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor.” This passage may be understood in two ways. On the one hand, Jay Adams argues that this means that each Christian is to “acquire his own wife” in holiness and honor,

³⁸Πλεονεκτη,ω, used in 1 Thess. 4:6, is usually translated “take advantage of” elsewhere in the New Testament, but has the connotation that in taking advantage, one is cheating another of rights or possessions. The *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), s.v. “Avarice” says that it “means to take advantage of, wrong, defraud, or cheat.” While ἀποστερε,ω (1 Cor. 6:7, 8) seems to focus a bit more on the act of depriving or withholding, πλεονεκτη,ω seems to focus a bit more, in most instances, on the fact that the depriving is at the expense of another. However, one can see how closely synonymous these words are when one considers how Paul rebukes the Corinthians by pointing out that the Christian should rather be defrauded than to defraud. One’s concern should be to see that right is maintained even if it must be at his own expense rather than at the expense of the other. See *NIDNTT*, vol. 3, s.v. “rob” for details on ἀποστερε,ω.

“not in lustful passion as the Gentiles who do not know God.”³⁹ Thus, the Christian must acquire a wife in biblical ways, in conformity to the law of God, not by means of fornication either in act or motive. To acquire a wife in an unbiblical way, especially by way of fornication, defrauds one’s brother of his marital rights, not least by depriving him of the “unspoiled” wife he desires. On the other hand, other commentators argue that this phrase means that one must “know how to possess his own body in sanctification and honor.”⁴⁰ In this case, a Christian who maintains purity through godly self-control in abstaining from sexual immorality refrains from depriving his brother of his marital rights through adultery, in the case of a brother already married, or fornication, in the case of the brother yet to be married to that woman. From the standpoint of either interpretation, the implication for 1 Cor. 6:1-11 is the same: the term “defraud” in 1 Cor. 6:7-8 applies to marital disputes and disagreements as easily as to torts and other disputes. The application of 1 Cor. 6:1-11 in the situation envisioned by either interpretation is also the same. Such deprivation of rights can easily bring about disputes, and if such disputes are between Christians because of the sin of one or more of them, they need to be resolved and settled through the mediation of one’s fellow Christians within the church.

We must, therefore, conclude that the term has a broader range than torts and monetary matters. As a side note, we can also see from its use in 1 Thess. 4:6 that the term “matter” applies to marital disputes as well as to any other kind of dispute, as we proved above.⁴¹ This is consistent

³⁹See Jay Adams’s many counseling books on marriage, as well as his *Christian Counselor’s Commentary*.

⁴⁰See, for example, John Calvin and Matthew Henry on 1 Thess. 4:4. F. F. Bruce argues the case for the latter interpretation against the former in *1 - 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary vol. 45 (Waco, TX: Word Publishers, 1982), 83.

⁴¹Cf. pp. 21-23 above.

with its broad range of meaning and the fact that its referent is determined by context. In this context, it is more narrowly defined; in 1 Cor. 6:1-11, the context calls for a far broader referent.

None of the above argumentation is to be taken to mean that the term “defraud” would not also apply to the deprivation of property, money, and other kinds of rights, as well. In Jas. 5:4, it is translated “deprive,” but refers to depriving a worker of rightful pay, a matter of tort. Mal. 3:5 uses the term in a very similar way, but most of the translations use the word “oppress” there to emphasize the connection this matter has with rights, rather than just money. When our Lord uses the term in Mk. 10:19, it certainly indicates that fraud, in addition to being a matter of the heart, and having its application to coveting a neighbor’s wife, is a matter that applies also to money, property, and other rights; the Tenth Commandment does also prohibit coveting a neighbor’s house, servants, animals, or *any other thing* a neighbor possesses. Thus, while the term often refers to matters that would be considered torts, when used in a context where marital matters are involved, it can also refer to the depriving of marital and other rights.

If one is disinclined to agree that the word has this breadth of significance in 1 Cor. 6:7-8, but still believes, in spite of the evidence that has been offered, that it applies only to fraud in connection with material goods, then it must be emphasized that in connection with his question in 1 Cor. 6:7, “Why not rather be defrauded?”, Paul also asks, “Why not rather be wronged?” Thus, even if the term “defraud” were to be limited to that which would be considered a tort, and this writer does not believe that it is, the term “wrong” broadens that range considerably. It is consistent with any wrong that would result in a dispute or a “matter against [one’s] neighbor.” Once again, whether we consider the term “defraud” by itself or in conjunction with “wrong,” we find that the

terms are consistent with and support the interpretation of the passage that any dispute among Christians, not merely torts, is to be judged, mediated, arbitrated, resolved, settled, by Christians.

The consideration of several key words, therefore, also demonstrates that 1 Cor. 6:1-11 is not limited to property and monetary disputes. Rather, it not only applies to any kind of dispute that Christians may have among themselves, but it also has a very strong connection with marital relationships and the disputes that can arise when they begin to break down. David Prior addressed the idea of relationships in connection with this passage, especially vv. 5-6:

Whenever personal relationships become strained within the body of Christ, it is important to identify and use specially-gifted members of the congregation to bring the wisdom of God into the situation. Few things impair the witness of a church more than broken relationships. There will always be disagreements amongst Christians, but the disciplined approach of Jesus to such matters needs more uninhibited obedience. The best catalysts for healing fractured relationships are usually those with listening hearts and the patience to hear both sides out to the end.⁴²

Conclusion

We must affirm, based upon the exegesis of the Scriptures that has been presented, that Paul's purpose, the context of the passage, and the key words all require that 1 Cor. 6:1-11 address all kinds of disputes among Christians. It is not limited to business ethics or the common tort. Specifically for the purpose of this paper, it applies to marital disputes as much as to any other dispute. The overview of the passage showed that Paul's purpose was to expand the basic principle that Christians must judge Christians, in order to reveal the scope of this principle. The context is

⁴²David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians: Life in the Local Church*, The Bible Speaks Today, ed. John R. W. Stott (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1985), 112. When he mentions "the disciplined approach of Jesus" he footnotes Mt. 18:15-17, apparently indicating that personal confrontation and the call to repentance in private discipline ought to be used more consistently and faithfully within the church to foster the restoration of relationships that are broken or hindered due to sin. His reference certainly does not rule out, but likely also includes, the need for more faithful and wise involvement of the elders and other mature members of the church, and the faithful use of public church discipline in the restoration of broken relationships in Christ's church, which would especially include marriage.

too closely bound together to think that this passage moves to a completely different matter. It must, therefore, be Paul's expansion of the scope of the principle. The context showed that sin brings defilement, divisions, and disharmony to the communion of the believer with our Lord Jesus Christ and should be dealt with by the church's judgment as it exercises Christ-commanded discipline (5:1-13; cf. Matt. 18:15-17). But sin also brings defilement, divisions, and disharmony to the communion of believers with one another as members of Christ's body. It should be dealt with by the church's mediation to secure reconciliation and peace, not by those who have no jurisdiction in such matters, namely the courts of the civil magistrate (6:1-11). The wide range of sins means a wide range of disputes. The key words of the passage round out the proof by their indication, in every case, that this passage refers to every kind of dispute among Christians; perhaps we could say, especially marital problems. In any case, they also demonstrate that the passage cannot be limited to torts such as monetary, property and business disputes.

It is clear that the findings of this paper do not agree with some recent and not-so-recent commentary. It does not, however, stand alone in its findings, and it is as much as to say that the present writer does not stand alone in his view of the meaning of this passage. Among those who hold these convictions are not only the Reformed authors of the paper from Peacemakers Ministries, cited above, but also Jay Adams, whom we would all agree is also Reformed. He writes,

It is not that Paul is idealistic or naive that he does not expect problems – even serious ones – to arise between Christians. No, not that. What scandalized him was that the Corinthian Christians were not resolving these problems *in the church*. Paul's words here are essentially a call for counseling. . . . “Can't you find among you those who are competent to judge one another about the everyday affairs that occasion differences?” he asks (vv. 2, 3). That Paul was restricting his discussion to taking marriage and sexual problems to law, as some think

(see Bernard), is in error. This is clear from the general statement about the “everyday affairs of life” (v. 3). In that, there is no such limitation (emphasis his).⁴³

As Reformed believers and interpreters of the Bible, we recognize the value of church history and of the study conducted by our brothers in Christ in the past. We would be foolish not to conduct our own study of the Bible within the context of believing scholarship. We would be both arrogant and foolish not to question ourselves and consider that we are likely wrong if we come to an interpretation of Scripture completely new in all of church history. But the interpretation expressed in this paper is not a novelty. We must recognize that a traditional view of a given portion of Scripture cannot be the ultimate authority for our conviction about the meaning of that Scripture. Scripture interpreted by Scripture through the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit must guide our consciences. If, therefore, a reader of this paper still holds to the traditional interpretation of 1 Cor. 6:1-11, he may want to reconsider his conviction based not upon the words of this paper alone, but also on the words of others who believe 1 Cor. 6:1-11 teaches that Christians are to judge Christians in all matters of dispute among Christians, and ultimately, upon what Scripture itself teaches since it is the only authoritative rule for faith *and* practice.

⁴³Jay Adams, *I & II Corinthians*, in *The Christian Counselor's Commentary* (Hackettstown, NJ: Timeless Texts, 1994), 39-40.