A Church Needing To Stop Unbecoming Conduct

In the US military, an officer can be found guilty of “conduct unbecoming,” a charge indicating that the officer did something that was inappropriate behavior for one of his or her rank. Such “unbecoming” conduct shows a lack of respect for the soldier’s uniform, rank, and country.

All Christians are soldiers in God’s army. We volunteered to fight for the Lord when we became Christians. As soldiers, we are expected to live up to a certain moral code. If we fail to do so, we are guilty of conduct unbecoming a Christian.

One of the problems at Corinth was the fact that the members were engaging in conduct unbecoming Christians. In chapter 6 Paul expressed concern about their tendency to indulge in sinful behavior. He warned them not to take part in activities which are inappropriate for Christ’s followers.¹

GOING TO LAW AGAINST A BROTHER
Paul began by saying:

Does any one of you, when he has a case against his neighbor, dare to go to law before the unrighteous and not before the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? If the world is judged by you, are you not competent to constitute the smallest law courts? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more matters of this life? So if you have law courts dealing with matters of this life, do you appoint them as judges who are of no account in the church? I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren, but brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers?

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. You do this even to your brethren (6:1–8).

“To go to law against a brother,” Paul was saying, “is to show disrespect for what you are—a family. Since you are a family, act like it: Do not go to law against your brother ‘before the unrighteous.’¹² To do so is a ‘shame’” (6:5).³

Why should one brother not go to law against another? Paul gave specific reasons.

The church will be shamed. Paul implied that the church can be shamed when he said that going to law against a brother would be a “shame” (6:5, 6). Lawsuits between Christians give outsiders reason to ridicule the church.⁴

Church members are qualified to judge disputes. Paul said that church members should not go to

²“’The unrighteous’ in 6:1 simply means unbelievers—those who have not been justified, in contrast to Christians. Paul was referring to civil law courts.

³Paul did not directly make this point. Rather, he made it indirectly by asking a series of rhetorical questions. In the NASB, of the thirteen sentences found in the first eight verses of chapter 6, nine are questions. The first declarative sentence is found in verse 5.

⁴Eldred Echols said that the Corinthian Christians’ suing one another “was especially distressing to . . . Paul because not only did it reveal a lack of concern for the unity of the body, it tarnished the reputation of the church in the eyes of the world” (Eldred Echols, The Most Excellent Way—Overcoming Chronic Issues that Divide the Church [Fort Worth, Tex.: Sweet Publishing, 1994], 77).
law against one another because they themselves have the ability to resolve their arguments. Brethren should settle matters among themselves, having someone in the church arbitrate their disputes instead of using a pagan judge (6:1). Saints are quite capable of judging such matters. Someday, the saints will judge the world and the angels (6:2, 3). Compared to those assignments, questions concerning material goods in this life are trivial.

Since the church is shamed when its members take legal action against one another, we ought to be willing to forfeit our money rather than going to court. We should not publicize that we cannot get along (6:7); as Christians, we are to be known for our love (John 13:35).

Verse 8 adds another idea: The reason mentioned for the lawsuits is that someone in the church had tried or was trying to defraud someone else. This is certainly wrong and may be the basis for Paul’s speaking of the fact that the “covetous” (6:10) will not inherit the kingdom of God.

How should we apply Paul’s teaching in this passage? Here are three practical truths to remember:

First, Christians are to avoid going to law against one another. We must take seriously Paul’s admonition that, if we have anything against a brother, we should find someone in the church to help us settle our disputes. Surely, someone in the church could make a righteous judgment when members of the church disagree.

Second, Christians must be careful not to “wrong and defraud” (v. 8) one another in such a way as to make lawsuits necessary. We are all ways to do the right thing, the honest thing, in our dealings with our brethren.

Third, for Christians, some things are more important than money lost in a business deal. Our ties to our brothers in Christ are far more important than money. Also, the reputation of the church, the body of Christ, is more important. Those who insist on their “rights”—on getting the money they think is due them—at the expense of the good name of the Lord’s church demonstrate a warped set of values.

The main truth for us to remember is that either going to law against a brother or defrauding a brother is inappropriate for a child of God. Such behavior is conduct unbecoming a Christian!

**PERSISTING IN UNRIGHTEOUS BEHAVIOR**

Paul next discussed the problem of unrighteousness, in a variety of forms.

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God (6:9–11).

In effect, Paul was saying, “To continue in the kind of unrighteous behavior that characterizes the pagans is to show disrespect for who you are—Christians who were sinners but who have known God’s saving grace, since you are no longer what you were, you should act like new people. Let your changed condition be reflected in your changed behavior.”

**The Unrighteous Will Not Go to Heaven!**

Paul began this part of his letter by affirming that those who are “unrighteous” (ἀδικος, adikos) will not “inherit the kingdom of God” (6:9). In other words, they will not go to heaven. Why did he insert this warning at this point? Probably, he had several reasons: (1) He had just said that

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5Paul presented these facts in the form of questions: “Do you not know . . . ?” He used the expression “Do you not know . . . ?” six times in the chapter (6:2, 3, 9, 15, 16, 19). In each case, there seems to have been a note of surprise, as if Paul thought they should already know what he was telling them. James Burton Coffman believed that Paul was speaking sarcastically in each case, as if to say, “You Corinthians, who claim to know so much—do you not even know these obvious things?” (James Burton Coffman, *Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* [Austin, Tex.: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1977], 82–83).

6Paul suggested that it is absurd to seek to resolve “matters of this life” before those who are of no account in the church”—before pagans—in 6:4. However, the sentence may have been a statement rather than a question, Paul may have been referring to less influential members of the church, and the statement or question may have been made or asked sarcastically.

7This is the same Greek word used in 6:1, where it is also translated “unrighteous” (“unjust”; KJV).
the Corinthians tended to “wrong and defraud” one another (6:8). (2) He had earlier told them to withdraw from a brother who was guilty of obvious immorality, and he had rebuked them for their permissive attitude toward that sin (ch. 5). (3) He would go on to warn them even more pointedly against the sin of fornication. (4) Since they had been guilty of the sins listed in these verses, they might be tempted to go back to their sinful lifestyles. For all these reasons, they needed to be warned about the consequences of unrighteous behavior.

“Let Us Point to Specific Sins!”

Next, Paul listed some of the sins that will keep the unrighteous out of heaven, or that will send them to hell. He wrote that neither “fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers” (6:9, 10) will go to heaven. That fact is a powerful incentive for Christians to avoid such behavior!

Then he said, “Such were some of you . . .” (6:11). Can such people be saved? Can adulterers, thieves, drunkards, and homosexuals go to heaven? If we ever had any questions about whether or not God’s grace is great enough to save the worst of sinners or that Christ’s shed blood is powerful enough to cleanse such sins, this passage should forever settle those questions. The answer is “Yes!” Even the vilest of sinners can be saved.

“God Has ‘Washed,’ ‘Sanctified,’ And ‘Justified’ You!”

Sinners today can be saved in the same way that the Corinthians were saved. Paul said, “Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God” (6:11). Even the worst of sinners can be saved by being washed, sanctified, and justified! The members of the church at Corinth were washed in the blood of the Lamb when they were baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 18:8; 22:16; Ephesians 5:26) after believing in Christ and repenting of their sins. When they were sanctified, or set apart for the Lord’s service, they were made holy. At the same time, they were justified, or made right with God.

Why did Paul remind them of what they had been? No doubt, he wanted to provide them with an incentive to avoid unrighteous behavior that would keep them out of heaven. In addition, he wanted them to avoid conduct unbecoming a Christian, so he reminded them of their former conduct. He used the past tense—“such were some of you”—to imply that they were no longer like that. He was encouraging them to live righteously, as people who have been washed, sanctified, and justified.

These brethren were encouraged to live righteous lives by a consideration of who they had been and who they had become. In the same way, the memory of what we once were, contrasted with the thought of what we are now, should motivate us to do right and to avoid sinning.

COMMITTING FORNICATION

In 1 Corinthians 6:12–20, Paul had more to say about one ungodly act that Christians are to avoid:

All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything. Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food, but God will do away with both of them. Yet the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body. Now God has not only raised the Lord, but will also raise us up through His power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be! Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body with her? For He says, “The two shall become one flesh.” But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him. Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body (6:12–20).

“To commit fornication, to be guilty of immorality,” Paul taught, “is to disrespect whose you are—namely, the Lord’s—since your body belongs to Him.”

Of the sins Paul listed in verses 9 and 10, he focused on one—fornication, or immorality—in the rest of the chapter. Why? Probably, because
sexual immorality was a major problem at Corinth. This is evidenced by the behavior of the man who was guilty of open immorality and the permissive attitude of the church toward him (ch. 5). Church members should refrain from all the sins of which they once were guilty; but, in particular, Paul here urged brethren to “flee immorality” (6:18).

**Answers to Objections**

Before Paul told the Corinthians to “flee immorality,” he mentioned anticipated objections to his point of view. He made three statements and then responded to them. These statements do not reflect Paul’s opinion; probably, they were the views of those who claimed the “right” to commit fornication. They should be put in quotation marks.² Paul was giving voice to the views of the fornicators, or of those who defended them, so that he could refute such thinking.

First, those who believed it was their right to commit fornication were saying, “All things are lawful for me” (6:12a). Basically, they implied, “I can commit fornication if I want to.”³ Paul’s response was this: “Not all things are helpful. Even if it were true that these sinful practices were lawful, they might not be helpful.”

Second, he repeated the claim: “All things are lawful for me” (6:12b). Then Paul replied, “Even if something is lawful, I will not be enslaved by it. In truth, sin enslaves the sinner. The sin of fornication certainly enslaves the person who is guilty of it.

Third, he noted that immoral people were insisting, “Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food” (6:13). While this statement perhaps was associated with the problem of eating certain foods (chs. 8—10), it is more likely that the saying was being used to argue, “God gave us these bodies of ours to use in whatever way we choose.

Nothing is wrong with our using them for the sexual pleasure we desire.” Paul explained that God will destroy both body and food someday; the body belongs to the Lord, and the body will be raised by God (6:13b, 14).

**Reasons to Avoid Fornication**

Since we belong to the Lord, Paul admonished, we are not allowed to use our bodies in any way we choose. Certainly, we should not use them for immorality (6:15–20). For a Christian to have sex with a prostitute is wrong because he belongs to Christ. To join a part of Christ’s body with a prostitute is certainly conduct unbecoming a Christian!

Paul reasoned with his readers by asking, in effect, three questions: (1) Is it appropriate to join a body that belongs to the Lord with a prostitute (6:15)? No! In fact, when a Christian commits fornication with a prostitute, he is also guilty of a form of adultery, since he is joining himself to the prostitute after being joined with Christ in a spiritual union (6:16, 17). (2) Is it appropriate to sin against our own bodies? No. Since our bodies belong to the Lord, to commit fornication is to sin against Him as well as our own bodies (6:18). (3) Is it appropriate to use God’s dwelling place, God’s temple, to commit sin? No. Since our bodies belong to the Lord, the Holy Spirit dwells within them (6:19). Surely, then, we ought to “flee immorality.”

Paul concluded the chapter with these memorable words: “For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.”¹² The price Christ paid to redeem us was His own blood, which He shed for our sins (1 Peter 1:18, 19). Consequently, we should use our bodies to glorify God. If we do, we will be engaging in conduct that becomes a Christian. If, in contrast, we misuse the bodies in which the Spirit dwells by committing fornication, we will be guilty of conduct unbecoming a Christian.

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²Quotation marks are used in the NRSV and in other versions.

³The objectors may have been using Paul’s own words against him. He may have taught them, in another context, that “all things are lawful” and that “food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food.” If so, they used Paul’s words out of context.

⁴They were convinced of their liberty: “All things are lawful.” However, they mistakenly believed that their liberty gave them license to indulge in sinful activities. (Soards, 131.)

¹¹“What Paul had affirmed earlier with reference to the church’s being the temple of the Holy Spirit [3:16, 17] is here declared to be true of individual believers of the church” (Coffman, 92–93).

¹²Soards believed that “the body” in 6:19, 20 is still a reference to the church, since the pronouns in these verses are plural. (Soards, 133–34.) It is more likely that the plural pronouns were used to emphasize that what Paul said was true of each of the Corinthian members.
CONCLUSION
Churches today, like the church in Corinth, exist in an immoral environment. Popular entertainment encourages immorality. People are generally expected to commit fornication. To remain chaste is to become the butt of jokes. In such an immoral climate, the church must emphasize the need for personal purity on the part of every Christian. Members of the Lord’s church should avoid wrongful behavior because of what they are—the family of God; because of who they are—sinners who have been washed, sanctified, and justified; and because of whose they are—Christ’s.

By emphasizing the need for moral lives, the church may avoid the kind of problem that Corinth had, as related in chapter 5. Then unbelievers will not be able to criticize the church because of the immorality of its members. The more serious a church is about its beliefs, and about its demand for purity, the more likely it is to attract outsiders who are seriously seeking spiritual help.

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“LAWFUL” AND “EXPEDIENT”
Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 6:12, “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable [“expedient”; KJV]. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.”

“LAWFUL” means “operating within the bounds of the law.” If something is “lawful,” then Christians have the God-given right to participate in that activity.

“EXPEDIENT” means “right for the situation”; it refers to the best thing to do at a certain time. While something can be lawful yet not be expedient, nothing can be expedient if it is unlawful.

New Testament law gives us freedom in Christ. However, not everything that we are allowed to do is expedient. It is lawful to stay awake until midnight every night, but that is not the expedient, or helpful, thing to do. It was lawful to eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols, but that was not always expedient.

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