

## Taking it to court: 1 Corinthians 6.1-11

**As today's guest contributor we welcome Dr Robert Evans, just-retired Senior Lecturer in New Testament at the University of Chester.**

One of the things that divide people now in this time of risks from Covid-19 is our attitude to prescriptive regulations. Some people say, Give us clear and absolute rules that apply to every situation, with no variations. Others say, Give us the principles to act on and we will make responsible choices depending on the circumstances. Universal prohibitions for all situations, or principles applied differently in different circumstances? We may recognise the same polarity (or perhaps a spectrum between two positions) in reading the Bible and in applying the exhortations and injunctions in Paul's letters. Do we take each saying as a commandment for all times and places? Or is Paul responding to a theological imperative, applying this to the situation before him, and are we supposed to do the same: apply that theology to our situation? Or something of both?

Paul says, *'Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?'* and connects this to the position that *'to have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat'* for believers. And he says, *'...male prostitutes, sodomites ... none of these will inherit the kingdom of God'*. Can we see what these things meant to him, and what they mean to us?

Paul was brilliant at seeing how theology applies to different situations; and, conversely, at seeing in the circumstances and the behaviours of his congregations the theology they were expressing by doing those things. Bedrock for Paul is, 'Jesus is Lord'. Nothing else, no one else, has sovereignty. The next foundational imperative is, 'We are in Christ'; and Paul believes that each believer has 'authority' from Christ. And because

‘we proclaim Christ crucified’, the way we exercise that authority, as part of Jesus’ own sovereignty, must be the way Jesus exercised it himself, in self-giving, as he did on the cross. Everything in Paul is rooted in these astonishing truths.

So in this passage, he has learned that there is litigation between two of the congregation, two of the saints, using the local court of Roman magistrates. His immediate response is, ‘Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?’ This is what I mean about Paul going straight for the theology: Jesus has sovereignty, not the courts of unbelievers; and the believers are ‘in Christ’ and have authority in him. ‘Judge for yourselves’, Paul says to them elsewhere in the letter (10:15, 11:13).

What about the particular cultural circumstances? He says that this litigation will ‘wrong and defraud’ the other believer. The courts in question are those of local magistrates, mostly dealing with property: our equivalent might be ‘small claims’ courts. Why would using those courts at that time and place be to engage in wrong and fraud? Probably because their operation of ‘justice’ was terribly corrupt, and the outcome of a case was substantially dependent on bribes and influence. Using them meant that a wealthy, socially powerful Christian would dominate a brother or sister with less money, less status. This is not just bad behaviour, it infringes bedrock theological imperatives. Later in the letter, Paul will write ‘For just as the body is one and has many members...so it is with Christ’; and he will wonderfully insist that ‘God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member’ (12:12,24). We proclaim Christ crucified, and that means honouring the sister or brother for whom Christ died, and giving way to the weaker or more vulnerable.

Does this passage tell us what to do about all small claims courts, even if

these are not the ones of colonies in the Roman Empire? Does it give us an example of the exercise of theology applied to situation? Something of both?

Next in this passage Paul gives a list of 'wrong-doers'. The issue is still the litigation between believers: 'you yourselves wrong and defraud'. The theology is that any such defrauding and wronging of others has no part in your lives now because you are in Christ, remade. The instances of wrongdoing are mostly about grasping for more – more money, more drink, more sex. This matches the situation in hand: the litigants have a grievance to do with property, and to use their wealth to win their case is fraud and greed. I am going to talk about the two in the middle of the list that have to do with same-sex acts, because they are part of a division among Christians and debate in our churches. What did Paul mean when he listed as wrongdoers the two words translated as 'male prostitutes' and 'sodomites'? And does this make a universal regulation for us, or something where we have to consider theology and circumstance?

The first word is literally 'soft' and was sometimes applied to men or boys perceived as 'effeminate'. Who were the men or boys in this time and place used by other men for sex? Slaves, overwhelmingly. A slave's body was for the use of their owner or anyone the owner chose to sell them to. Would Paul also know of *free* men who had sex like this for money or for pleasure? Possibly, but same-sex transactions in Paul's world were overwhelmingly commercial and coercive: wrongdoing and grasping. Did Paul perceive that socio-economic factor in this instance? I don't know – but we can at least readily concur that slavery and coercion have no place in God's rule and among believers.

The second word is unique to this text (and to a similar list in 1 Timothy). It

has two parts, 'male' and 'bed' (= sex). It looks like an attempt to render in Greek the act described in Leviticus (18.22) as 'lie with a male'. So it means a man who has sex with a man 'as with a woman'. If the first word means effectively 'rent-boy', then this word could refer to the men who used them. These would be the two most common agents in male same-sex acts known about in the culture Paul lived in. Did he have any conception of what we call 'sexuality', and would he have conceived of two people of the same sex being drawn to faithful love and commitment? It's hard to see how he could, so *those relationships are really not in the frame here*. Would he have approved of these if he did? Almost certainly not, I should think; but that brings us up against how we read and apply the Bible. Are the injunctions there all universal, equally applicable to our culture and Paul's? Or does he apply theology to the circumstances before him, and should we do the same?

I love Paul's clear sightedness about theological imperatives and putting them into practice. We need his clarity about when we might be in danger of wronging and defrauding others, when we are not living under the lordship of Jesus, and we need his exhortation to look after the needs of the vulnerable, not pleasing ourselves, because Christ died for us.

*Sovereign Lord Jesus, help us see where we may be doing wrong or defrauding others. Help us to read the words of your servant Paul with understanding of his witness to your great truths. Help us to live as the Body of Christ, with the authority you give us, giving honour to all and especially the vulnerable.*

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