

In missiological terms, a goal is the establishment of local churches that are self-supporting, self-propagating and self-governing. It is often viewed as a sign of viability when a church is able to demonstrate these “self” principles. It is this last principle that we want to focus on in this study: the principle and practice of self-regulation. But before getting into this, let’s review.

The context of chapter 6 flows quite naturally from that of chapter 5. In chapter 5, Paul had exhorted the church to deal biblically with sinning members. In the opening verses of chapter 6, Paul continues with the theme of the responsibility of the local church to deal with its internal affairs (vv. 1–8). In other words, the local church must exercise discipline upon itself rather than going outside of its parameters for arbitration.

Then, in vv. 9–20, Paul seems to slightly change gears and turn to the individual church member and his responsibility to regulate his own conduct. Again, as in chapter 5, the issue seems to be that of sexual sin.

You could sum up the teaching as: the responsibility for the church’s self-regulation and the individual member’s responsibility for self-discipline. If each member disciplines himself, then ultimate corporate discipline will not be necessary.

TO THINK ABOUT

Those who will not govern themselves, are bound to be governed by others. In fact, so much of the old covenant law code was precisely about teaching God’s people to govern themselves (see Proverbs as well). Self-government is essential for true freedom. But this principle also applies to the local church. In our country, the government is threatening to regulate churches both as to their practices and their personnel (pastoral). Does government have the right to do this? Has the church brought this upon itself? How should the church respond if the government passes such legislation?

Shameful Lawsuits (vv. 1–8)

These verses highlight a Corinthian catastrophe: members of the local church minimising the wise and reconciling ministry of one another and rather embarking on litigation towards one another. We are not told the exact nature of the conflict, but it is possible that it had to do with issues of sexual sin (cf. the context of chapters 5–6). Regardless, they were not handling conflict in a Christ-honouring way. Thus, the local church became a scandalous spectacle to the watching world.

Note: The “law” here is not quite like our law courts, but they were similar when it came to binding judgements.

A Series of Questions (vv. 1–7)

We see once again Paul’s masterful use of sarcastic questioning to get the Corinthians’ attention. (Note: Our Lord used this strategy at times—see Matthew 12:3, 5; 19:4; 22:31).

Question 1: “How dare you be so brazen?” (v. 1). Rabbinic law included “a statute which binds all Israel that if one Israelite has a cause against another, it must not be prosecuted among the Gentiles.” The “unrighteous” here refers to those who have not been justified—to unbelievers.

Question 2: “Have you forgotten your privileged position?” (vv. 2–4). Other New Testament texts likewise make reference to believers ruling: Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:30; Revelation 2:26–27. By “smallest matters,” Paul does not intend to criticise the judicial system. Instead, he is making a statement concerning what is expected of the church: divine wisdom. The reference to judging angels may be a reference to the final judgement, when the fallen angels will justly be cast into outer darkness: We will cast our amen.

Question 3: “Do you not have even one spiritually discerning member?” (vv. 5–6). Paul was incredulous, but the implied answer was, apparently not (v. 6)! There is something deeply hypocritical about a body of people who claim to be reconciled with God and yet cannot (or will not) reconcile with each other.

Question 4: “Why don’t you just bear with the wrong rather than losing as you seek to win?” (vv. 7–8). The underlying principle here is similar to that with which Jesus dealt in Matthew 5:38–42. The word “failure” speaks of a defeat or a loss. The Corinthians were actually losing and becoming worse by seeking to win the argument. They were marring their testimony as they harmed the body. Paul’s counsel was that the right thing to do would be to be wronged (“cheated”) rather than doing the wrong thing by insisting on being right. Worst of all, this behaviour was being exercised toward their fellow church members—those whom they should have been helping!

God expects for his people to biblically resolve their conflicts. This should be done within the family of God, thus protecting the church’s ministry in the world. We need to remember that most people are not looking for reasons to believe the gospel, but for excuses to not believe.

A Stinging Verdict (v. 8)

The Corinthians were guilty of “depriving” one another, in the sense of not applying biblical principles to resolve the conflicts and thus helping all to grow in Christlikeness.

TO THINK ABOUT

How far should a Christian be willing to go in being “cheated” for the sake of the testimony of Christ, the gospel and the church? What kind of wisdom does a church need in order to solve such disputes? Is there ever a place to seek outside mediation? How could being a member of Sola 5 helps us in such cases? When should a Christian press charges against another Christian or church? Can this ever be justified?

Shameful Lifestyles (vv. 9–20)

This section (which we will only begin in this study) focuses on the problem of immorality that seemed to plague the Corinthian culture and, sadly, also the church. There is a hint in these verses of the Gnostic heresy of dualism. This heresy holds that all matter is evil and that spirit is good. Thus, what one does with his or her body is irrelevant in the big scheme of things. Paul points out that, in fact, God made the body and that believers are to glorify God with their bodies as well as with their souls.

TO THINK ABOUT

Do you think that this error is still present in Christianity today? Is it true that, generally speaking, holiness is not emphasised much in Christianity? If so, what is the cause of this? What is the consequence of this?

A Caution to Unbelievers (vv. 9–10)

Belief affects behaviour; fruit reveals the root; conduct reveals character. Paul’s point is that, if you live like a pagan, you can expect to die like a pagan.

The phrase “do you not know” (v. 9) is used eight times in 1 Corinthians. These believers were living ignorantly. The danger is that they would “not inherit the kingdom of God” (i.e. they would not experience salvation). Those whose lives are marked by what follows have not been regenerated and thus will not be redeemed. “Revilers” refers to slanderers; “extortioners” to swindlers or robbers.

The Conversion of the Believer (v. 11)

Note that Paul defines a believer as someone now cleansed and cleared from the wicked lifestyles previously mentioned. The true believer is no longer characterised by what he was, but by what he is (see 1 John 3:1–10).

TO THINK ABOUT

What does this passage say to those who claim that they Christians and yet they continue in a lifestyle characterised by vv. 9–10? Is it possible for someone to be truly converted and yet to fall back into such sins? How would you help someone who is struggling in their own life with these very tensions?