Is It Biblical to Sue Another Christian?  
*By David W. Jones*

On October 17, megachurch pastor James MacDonald and his church, Harvest Bible Chapel, filed a defamation lawsuit against five individuals: Scott and Sarah Bryant, Ryan and Melinda Mahoney, and Julie Roys. The lawsuit seeks damages and a temporary restraining order. The catch? All five defendants are professing Christians.

Aware that 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 forbids Christians from suing other Christians in secular courts, Pastor MacDonald wrote an opinion piece to explain why his lawsuit is biblically justified.\(^1\) To make his case, he needed to prove two things: (1) that Scripture’s prohibition on Christians suing other Christians is not absolute, but rather allows for certain exceptions; and (2) that his specific situation qualifies as one of these exceptions. His argument fails on both counts.

**Did God Actually Say?**

Regarding the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 6:1-8, MacDonald argues for what he calls “a deeper understanding of Scripture.” He asserts, rightly, that we must look at all relevant texts regarding an issue, not just one primary text (in this case, 1 Corinthians 6). So he puts forward three additional texts for consideration: Matthew 18:17, John 8:49, and Romans 13:1-7. Yet MacDonald does not demonstrate how these texts give Christians the freedom to set aside 1 Corinthians 6 and sue other Christians. An examination of each reveals no such justification.

Matthew 18:17 describes the end of the church discipline process. If a sinning church member refuses to repent after multiple appeals by other members, the sinner is to be excommunicated and treated as an unbeliever. MacDonald infers that the person can then be sued. Yet Jesus does not actually say that; lawsuits are foreign to the context.

Regarding John 8:49, MacDonald cites Wayne Grudem’s recent book on Christian ethics.\(^2\) Grudem shows that, even though Jesus remained silent on his way to the cross, he did not normally allow his character to be slandered. Rather, the Lord responded to critics. Grudem then infers that we need not suffer in silence when our character is maligned. We can follow Christ’s example and refute false statements made about us. This is a valid point and helpful. Yet Grudem does not mention *suing* fellow Christians, as MacDonald implies. In fact, 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 does not appear in that section, nor anywhere else in the book.\(^3\) So Jesus may have corrected his opponents, but he did not sue them (nor their spouses). The record can be set straight without resorting to secular courts, especially for a megachurch pastor with multiple communication platforms.

Romans 13:1-7 does not apply to Christians suing Christians, either. It says government has been ordained to carry out God’s wrath on the *wrongdoer*, literally, ‘the one practicing evil’ (verse 4). In the same verse, Paul says a ruler ‘does not bear the sword in vain,’ which is widely understood as a reference to capital punishment. So this passage refers to *criminal* behavior, such as murder and the like. Presumably, the wrongdoer is *not* a Christian. So Romans 13 is talking about *criminal law*, not civil law.\(^4\) Also, it immediately follows Romans 12, which contains one of the longest and clearest passages in the New Testament about not seeking
revenge, but rather treating your enemy better than he or she deserves (see Romans 12:14-21).
Surely that colors any application of Romans 13:1-7.

So MacDonald uses three texts that are not about civil suits to explain away the one text that is about civil suits (1 Corinthians 6). He also ignores completely the biblical teaching on non-retaliation (e.g., Leviticus 19:18; 1 Samuel 24:12; Proverbs 20:22; 24:29; 25:21-22; Matthew 5:38-45; Mark 11:25; Luke 6:27-36; 23:34; Acts 7:60; Romans 12:14-21; 1 Thessalonians 5:15; 2 Timothy 2:24-26; 1 Peter 2:19-23; 3:9, 14-18; 4:8; Hebrews 10:32-34 et al). In light of these texts, MacDonald’s so-called “deeper understanding of Scripture” appears shallow and unconvincing—a ham-fisted attempt to justify unbiblical behavior.

Missing the Sarcasm
MacDonald’s handling of 1 Corinthians 6 is also inadequate. He does not seem to grasp how incensed Paul is over Christians suing other Christians. The word dare in verse 1 denotes insolence or presumption. It could be paraphrased, “What nerve you have!” The apostle asks whether they are incompetent (verse 2). He explicitly shames them (verse 5). He incredulously asks rhetorical question after rhetorical question, concluding that the presence of lawsuits shows they are already defeated (verse 7). Commentator Gordon Fee refers to this passage as “the most biting sarcasm in the letter.”

MacDonald, who is normally fluent in sarcasm, downplays this. He says, “1 Corinthians 6 deals with two brothers in a single church dealing with a trivial matter that should just be ‘let go.’” Now the word trivial does appear in verse 2, but it must be understood in context. In verses 7-8, the apostle spells out what was going on: wrongdoing and defrauding. The former term denotes behaviors that harm, such as slander and injury; the latter, various types of cheating, such as breach of contract and property right infringements. Why, then, does Paul call such civil suits trivial? For rhetorical effect. In verses 2-3, he says believers will judge both the world and angels—a reference to eschatological judgment. Craig Blomberg says, this “does not mean that the Corinthian litigation did not involve serious offenses, merely that all human litigation is trivial when viewed in the light of Judgment Day.”

So the Corinthians were not simply arguing over the color of the church carpet. Some believers had wronged others, though not to the level of criminal court. Paul does not just dismissively say “Let it go.” He wants them to resolve their disputes—only among believers (verse 5). If a matter cannot be resolved privately, the apostle urges them to suffer the injustice and be defrauded, rather than parading the church’s dirty laundry into the public square (verse 7). The testimony of Christ and the unity of the church trump personal rights.

MacDonald also seems unaware of the social context. Romans with higher social status had an unfair advantage when it came to civil cases. The rich could hire good attorneys; the poor could not. Juries were typically composed of wealthy citizens, who may be peers and perhaps even friends of the plaintiff, and thus not completely objective. Justice could also be perverted by a bribe, which the wealthy could afford, and the poor could not. All of these factors made it difficult for a poor person to get justice in civil court. So it is possible that wealthier, more powerful Christians were taking those less fortunate to court, in order to power up on them. This almost certainly factors into Paul’s sense of outrage.
The piece raises issues of practical application. To paraphrase MacDonald, what if there is collateral damage? What if the matter is serious, perhaps even illegal? What if the plaintiff and defendant are from different churches? These are legitimate questions, though it should be recognized that they deal with the application of 1 Corinthians 6, not its interpretation. Paul provides no exception for collateral damage or illegality. He urges the Corinthians away from the secular courts, even if it means allowing oneself to suffer injustice or be defrauded. The issue of different churches does pose a difficulty, but it is not insurmountable. In Roman law, a citizen might opt for private arbitration rather than dragging a matter through the courts. Paul points out that Christians could do the same. Surely, there are wise Christians in the area who can step in and mediate—leaders who are respected and trusted by both parties.

So MacDonald has not made his case that the Bible allows exceptions to its prohibition on Christians suing other Christians. Both his interpretation and application of the relevant passages are wanting.

**Brother Goes to Law against Brother**

The second thing MacDonald needs to prove is that his lawsuit constitutes an exception to the general prohibition in 1 Corinthians 6. Several factors make this highly suspect.

First, the piece says MacDonald is suing “three outspoken critics.” As mentioned above, the lawsuit actually specifies five defendants: two bloggers, their wives, and an independent journalist. The inclusion of the wives casts the lawsuit in a different light.

Second, the bloggers have published little in the last few years. Why sue them now, especially since MacDonald admits that some of the criticisms had merit and bore good fruit? Why try to get a temporary restraining order against them after six years?

Third, the inclusion of the journalist was initially puzzling, because she had not published anything about MacDonald or Harvest prior to the lawsuit. How could she be labeled an “outspoken critic”? Why seek a temporary restraining order against her? Turns out that Mrs. Roys had been working on an article about MacDonald, and the latter got wind of it. The temporary restraining order appears to have been an attempt to keep the article from seeing the light of day. Mrs. Roys quipped, “I always knew I ran the risk of being sued for speaking the truth. But I always envisioned that it would be for something I actually published, not for something I merely indicated I was going to publish.” If this is the motivation behind the lawsuit, it should be recognized as an attempt to limit freedom of speech.

Finally, MacDonald ends by denying he seeks vengeance. He also denies seeking damages (although the lawsuit does request damages in multiple places). He expresses a willingness “to give grace and forgive,” but that of course assumes it is the bloggers and journalist who sinned. Until MacDonald answers the charges made about him (apart from simply painting them all as “lies”), the question remains open as to who is telling the truth. MacDonald says he prays for “the blogger’s peace,” although that is hard to reconcile with the decision to sue these families for damages. Like the wealthy citizens of Corinth who used the courts to their own advantage, he almost certainly has resources at his disposal beyond that of the defendants.
So MacDonald has not made his case that his lawsuit qualifies as an exception to 1 Corinthians 6. On the contrary, several factors call into question the motive(s) behind the suit.

**WWJS—Who Would Jesus Sue?**

As a general rule, when someone contravenes the express teaching of Scripture, and then tries to justify it with a “deeper understanding of Scripture,” discerning believers should take note. The question, “Did God actually say?” landed the first couple—and the rest of the human race—in a world of hurt. Jesus says, ‘whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 5:19). Later, in the same chapter, the Lord instructs us to turn the other cheek, renounce our rights in court, and go the extra mile (verses 39-41).

To answer the question posed in the title of this article, it is not biblical to sue a fellow Christian. Perhaps there could be an exception. But MacDonald has not made a case for why his lawsuit is that exception. Mediation is the preferred way of resolving disputes among Christians. Thus, I would urge the leadership of Harvest Bible Chapel to withdraw its lawsuit against these five believers and seek private mediation with a third party.

Dr. David W. Jones is senior pastor at Village Church of Barrington in Barrington, Illinois. From 2001 to 2010, he served at Harvest Bible Chapel as James MacDonald’s research assistant. He was also Associate Editor for The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Crossway, 2001).

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3 Grudem has made a statement regarding this lawsuit: “I have not expressed any opinion on the merits of the specific lawsuit that James McDonald has initiated, nor have I looked into any details about that lawsuit or the accusations from the people who have criticized his ministry online. Nor do I intend to.”

4 In the Roman world, slander and libel were matters for the lower courts, as they are today. See Bruce Winter, “Civil Litigation in Secular Corinth and the Church: The Forensic Background to 1 Cor 6:1-8,” *NTS* 37 (1991): 559-72; cited in Thiselton, 420. So also Brian S. Rosner, *Paul, Scripture, and Ethics: A Study of 1 Corinthians 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 112-15.


11 Julie Roys, “Hard times at Harvest,” *World*, Dec 13, 2018, 