



[1 Corinthians 6:1-8](#)

Christians taking each other to civil courts

Name of the author: Paul the Apostle

Date: 50 CE to 60 CE

Place: Ephesus

Language: Greek

Category: New Testament

Literary genre: Letter

Title of work: The First Letter to the Corinthians

Reference:

6:1-8

Commentary:

In this passage, Paul chastises the Christian congregation in Corinth for dealing with disagreements in civic courts, as opposed to within the community itself. Paul objects to the Corinthian Christians taking insignificant disagreements to the secular courts when a wise elder among them could settle the dispute instead. Ultimately, it is argued, the holy ones (i.e. those who believe in Christ) will be in a position to judge the entire cosmos (including the angels), and so they undermine themselves by allowing non-believers to adjudicate their disputes. Paul does not have a problem with the Roman legal system per se, however (although for the contrary view, see Bruce Winter, "Civil Litigation," who argues that Paul might have been unhappy about the frequent use of bribes in civil courts and the privilege shown to those of higher status). It seems that his real issue is with the Christians themselves, and their degrading behaviour. Civil disagreements appear to be at issue here (verse 2), rather than those involving crimes – indeed, Paul's strict attitude to a man who is found guilty of incest in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5 shows that he did not wish to discourage the church from pursuing proper proceedings against such people (see William F. Orr and James Arthur Walther, *1 Corinthians*, p. 194). Indeed, civil litigations would not fall under the criminal law of the Roman empire, but would be initiated by a plaintiff who felt some sort of wrong had been done to them by another (see Peter Garnsey, *Social Status*, p. 181-218). The nature of the cases Paul refers to is debated, with the only clue in text being in verse 7 ("why not rather be cheated/defrauded?"), suggesting some sort of money dispute. However, as David Horrell states, given that wealth and social status "carried considerable advantages in the courts," it is likely that the accusers had a reasonable amount (*Social Ethos*, p. 111). An accuser would have been required to undergo a procedure of accusation which could be complicated and expensive (see Adrian Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law*, p. 1).

It should be noted that according to Acts Paul himself will later be tried by both Romans and Jews, appearing before the procurators Antonius Felix and Porcius Festus, as well as before the Sanhedrin (see Acts 21:27-40; 22:22-29; 24:10-26; 25:1-12). Interestingly, the rhetoric put forward by the author of Acts during Paul's trial makes clear that the Roman judicial system is much more trustworthy and fair than that of the Jewish authorities. Indeed, Paul appeals to his Roman citizenship and his right to have his case adjudicated by the emperor, while trying to avoid at all costs being handed back to the Jewish authorities, who want him dead (see the discussion of Acts 25:13-22). Of course, one must be mindful of the agenda of the author of Acts. We cannot say for certain that Paul's own view of the Roman legal system is accurately reflected in the episodes Acts records, however, it is worth bearing in mind in relation to the present passage, as it seems that Paul's main concern is not the *ability* of secular judges. Rather, the issue is that when Christians enter into conflict with other believers, both parties suffer spiritual defeat, as they have not acted in accordance with the central Christian tenets of forgiveness and love. By failing to treat each other with the required respect, they have in turn failed to give it to God himself. As David Horrell points out (*Social Ethos*, p. 141), it is significant that in condemning the use of civil courts, Paul reverses what was viewed in the wider Roman world as a system enabling individuals to maintain or regain honour (by challenging those who had wronged and potentially brought shame on them), instead suggesting that the use of this system is precisely what will bring great dishonour and shame to the Christian believer: "the values of the dominant social order are reversed and opposed."



Keywords in the original language:

- [????????](#)
- [?????](#)
- [????????](#)
- [?????](#)
- [????????](#)
- [?????](#)
- [????????](#)
- [????????](#)
- [?????](#)
- [????????](#)
- [?????](#)
- [????????](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [Corinthian church](#)
- [judgement](#)
- [law](#)
- [lawsuit](#)
- [litigation](#)
- [Roman court](#)
- [trial](#)

Bibliographical references: David Horrell, [The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence](#) (London: A&C Black, 1996)

Garnsey, Peter, [Social Status and Legal Privilege in the Roman Empire](#) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970)

William F. Orr , James Arthur Walther, [1 Corinthians: A New Translation with a Study of the Life of Paul. Notes, and Commentary](#) (New York: Doubleday, 1976)

Michael Peppard, "[Brother against Brother: Controversiae about Inheritance Disputes and 1 Corinthians 6:1-11](#)", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133.1 (2014) : 179-192

Bruce Winter, "[Civil Litigation in Secular Corinth and the Church: The Forensic Background to 1 Corinthians 6.1-8](#)", *New Testament Studies* 37 (1991) : 559-572

Sherwin-White, Adrian N., [Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament](#) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963)

Realized by:

[Kimberley Fowler](#)



Source URL: <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/1-corinthians-61-8>