



Christians in court Make sad spectacles

Is it right for Christians to sue each other in secular court?

The Larry Tomczak case is a tragic answer. Larry is being sued for \$19.5 million because he repeated a rumor about author/psychiatrist Thomas Harris—who professes to be a Christian. At last count it had already cost Larry more than \$100,000 in lawyer's fees.

I don't care how weary Dr. Harris was of explaining away the rumor that he had committed suicide; the secular court is not the place to settle the matter.

Jack Sparks is also fighting litigation. Jack wrote a book calling the followers of Witness Lee a cult. The Lee group (called The Local Church) say they are Christians. To prove it they have sued Sparks, his editor, and his Christian publisher for \$40 million.

In West Virginia a Southern Baptist pastor recently sued the church which voted him out. The jury was unable to reach a decision, and the judge declared a mistrial.

In a reversal of that, a group of Tennessee church members sued the pastor of their Baptist church, claiming he had stolen their church building by leading the rest of the people into "un-Baptistic" doctrine. In that case a non-Christian judge was forced to rule on what constitutes Baptist doctrine—and sided with the traditionalists.

The secular media loved it. To them it was more proof we Christians are simply a group of bumbling, fighting, ignoramuses.

Last year a former member of our church, who had moved to another city, served papers on another church member, claiming he had defrauded her in a business deal. I wrote her, agreeing she had been wronged, but asking her to withdraw her civil suit and settle the matter through Christian mediation. Influenced by her non-Christian lawyer, she refused.

The judge ruled in her favor, granting her \$30,000. The defendant, unable to pay, went into bankruptcy. She received absolutely nothing except a lot of unfavorable newspaper publicity—and a bill from her lawyer for \$24,000.

Recently, a friend in another state was accused of slander by a charismatic

preacher. My friend said his remarks were not slander—they were truth. He said he was willing to stand trial, but only before a court convened by the church and devoid of publicity. He agreed to abide by whatever decision the church court reached—even if it meant paying financial damages.

The accusing brother refused. He didn't want justice; he wanted revenge. So the matter will wind up in secular court—and the newspapers.

Who wins? Lawyers surely. They get the money. And Satan, primarily. He always gets the victory when Christians disobey God and sue each other in secular court.

God realizes Christians are not perfect—that we will have disputes. Recognizing these imperfections, He had His servant, Paul, give specific instructions on how Christians should settle disputes.

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The command is clear: *"If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints? . . . Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church"* (1 Cor. 6:1,4, NIV).

A short while ago two men in our church had a serious dispute. One, a dentist, contracted with a Christian builder to remodel his house. Both men were longtime friends. But when the house was complete and the builder submitted his bill, the fire that fell was not the Pentecostal variety.

According to the dentist, the builder had overcharged him \$7,000.

The builder suggested the dentist should fill a few more teeth and pay up.

The dentist asked the builder how he'd like to lose some teeth—right then.

The builder said, "I'll see you in court."

After the smoke cleared, both men realized they had an insoluble situation. They agreed to Christian mediation. They further agreed, in writing, that the decision by the arbitrators would be binding.

Each man chose one man—who was acceptable to both sides—to sit on the "jury." The jury then chose a third man, a Christian specialist in building contracts. Both sides presented evidence. The jury handed down a compromise solution, and the relationship has been restored.

Last year in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the Christian Conciliation Service—a division of the Christian Legal Society—arbitrated more than 400 such disputes between Christians. The only cost was a \$50 expense fee to the Christian lawyers who set up the procedure. No case made the newspaper, and in many cases—including a number of divorce cases between spouses—the parties were reconciled.

This is perfect Scripture at work in an imperfect society. It proves to the world that we, as Christians, can solve our own problems.

If my older son disagrees with my younger son, I don't take them down to the courthouse and make them put up bail money. Nor do I have the sheriff serve them with a summons. Instead we have "court" around our dinner table. I'm the judge; the other children are the witnesses; my wife is the bailiff. So far we've settled every disagreement without paying legal fees.

That's because we are a family.

Only if a person proves himself to be a non-Christian (and refuses Christian mediation) am I free to consider the secular court. If he's a member of the family, however, we'll settle it "in house."

The church is moving rapidly into another age of persecution. Christians must be careful they are not numbered among the persecutors.

The bumper sticker sums it up: "Christians aren't perfect—just forgiven."

Now, if only we can learn to forgive one another—as God has forgiven us. ↵

For more information contact the Christian Legal Society, P.O. Box 2069, Oak Park, IL 60303.