

## Opheilo

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1 Corinthians 6:1-11

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A little Jewish praise word caused a lot of controversy as a Colorado church, divided over the proper spelling of 'hallelujah,' split up and re-formed as separate congregations. The problem arose when the board of elders at Full Gospel Temple budgeted money for a praise banner to hang from the sanctuary ceiling bearing the word "hallelujah," or "alleluia." One faction insisted the word be spelled the first way, while the other wouldn't budge from the second way. Petitions were drawn up, rallies held and late-night threats received by both sides. One man, an "alleluia" supporter, was nearly clobbered by a rock that came through his window. The rock bore a note that said, simply, "hallelujah!" Both sides were adamant that since they had grown up with a particular spelling, theirs was correct. "It makes a tremendous difference, when you open your eyes and see it there on the banner spelled wrong," said a hallelujah supporter. "It's so jarring to see it without the 'h' at the beginning. Nobody spells it that way anymore." However, an ardent "alleluia" supporter said while carrying a sign during a recent day of picketing, "I was so sick about it I couldn't sleep. To think some people spell this wonderful word with a 'j' in it. It's not something where I question their salvation, but at times you have to wonder." The two churches now meet in separate school auditoriums, and each has fashioned a banner to suit its own preference. Worship, says one parishioner, is "much better now."

I don't doubt that worship is indeed much better now, especially since they have laid aside their pettiness and selfishness (at least for now, that is). Oh sure, each group is united. They are happy and content to be fellowshiping with like-minded individuals. But what if someone new decides to attend? What question do you suppose the "Hallelujah" church might ask this new person? And more importantly, how might the community view this church? These are strange questions, I know. But they are very similar to the questions Paul asks the Corinthian church.

As Paul has been talking about building our faith upon the proper foundation and about church unity, so far he has reminded the Corinthians that they are Saints, that they have received Grace, that they are to stop living according to the world's standard and by the world's wisdom. He reminds them that they must mature as Christians, building their faith upon a proper foundation. Two key building blocks of that foundation are humility and love. And in chapter six we find him mentioning the third; *Opheilo*, our Christian duty or responsibility. (Read 1 Corinthians 6:1-11).

Here we see a congregation whose behavior was so broken that it would have been difficult to distinguish them from their pagan neighbors. They were envious of their fellow Christians, critical of fellow Christians, and took advantage of fellow Christians. Paul says that before they were saved they followed the selfish desires of their heart (verse 9). However, this attitude should have been cleansed from their lives (verse 10). But apparently it had not. They carried these selfish attitudes and habits with them into their new lives. Although they resembled the world at one time, they had been washed, sanctified, and justified. It was their *Opheilo*; their duty (or responsibility) to demonstrate this to a watching world.

There was an overabundance of lawyers and lawsuits within the Greek culture, but as Christians, these believers should forfeit the old life and embrace the new. But because they had brought with them this selfish tendency to get their own way, Paul says that they have been defeated.

First they are defeated because they were presenting a poor testimony to the lost. Even the Jews practiced more faith in God to handle these circumstances. They dealt with these matters in the local Synagogue. To go to court would imply that God was not competent to solve every problem. Paul had called them Saints. He is trying to point out that for believers to go to court with believers is to confess that they didn't have the right actions and attitudes to solve their differences on their own. It tells the world that they were more concerned with revenge or gain than with the unity of the body and the glory of Jesus.

Secondly they were defeated because they were living in disobedience to God's Word. Even if some of them won their case in a secular court, in God's eyes they had

been defeated. And Paul must have been referring to Lord's teaching in Matthew 5, ("But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you." <sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:39-42). Better to lose money or possessions than to lose a brother and your testimony as well.

So is Paul teaching us that we are to let people walk all over us; that we should never go to court? Of course not. But we do have a certain responsibility when someone does wrong us. And it is important to keep things in perspective. Notice that he calls these trivial matters; little disputes, such as what we might see on a program like Judge Judy (my boyfriend didn't pay my cell phone bill). What Paul is addressing is going to court for the wrong reasons, and that our response to these little disputes will affect our testimony.

In our society today we hear so much about our rights. And left unchecked, these rights tend to become privileges; people feel that they are owed something. Over 200,000 civil suits were filed in the federal courts in one recent twelve-month period. Nearly 1 million lawyers are handling them. In one year, more than 12 million suits were filed in the state courts. Well, that might be the way of the world, but it should not be the way of a Christian, especially between Christians.

What Paul says is that he is concerned about the Christian who has elevated their rights above their responsibility; their duty; their *Opheilo*. Take the case that I talked about in the beginning. When Christians base the foundation of their faith upon their responsibility toward a fellow believer (their brethren), it's better to lose the case yet retain the relationship and the testimony. It would have been better if this church had put aside their rights and instead acted according to their responsibility, which would mean No Banner. And I can't help but think that there are an awful lot of churches that need this advice today. We are saints. We have been given God's Truth and God's Spirit. And yet we still divide over such trivial things. Like the Corinthian church, the church today has forgotten its duty.

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<sup>1</sup>New American Standard Bible : 1995 update. 1995 (Mt 5:39-42). LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.