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‘But you were acquitted...’: 1 Corinthians 6.11 and Justification and Judgment in its Socio-Literary and Theological Context¹

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Abstract

1 Corinthians 6.1-11 poses a number of challenges to the interpreter including comprehending how it fits in the overall context of Paul’s discourse. In the analysis of this passage, Paul’s language of justification (*dikaioō*) in 6.11 is hardly ever brought into the discussion as many scholars presume he is reciting a pre-formed creedal statement about salvation. However, given the extensive use of the *dikai** word-group in this pericope, the employment of *dikaioō* in 6.11 plays an important part in recasting the Corinthians’ understanding of justice and acquittal within the context of his concern over litigation, judgment and appropriate social and eschatological boundaries. Attending to the forensic nature of this conversation eschews an attempt to harmonize his use of *dikaioō* with ‘traditional’ justification language as found in Galatians or Romans and encourages a more appropriate translation ‘you were acquitted’ rather than ‘you were justified’.

1. Introduction

It is well recognized that the apostle Paul was a skilled communicator and capable of expressing himself in a variety of ways within his letters. One example of this is the way in which he occasionally demonstrates overt hostility or sternness towards opposition – internal or external. Such rhetorical invective seems somewhat rational in such circumstances as his wish for the troublemakers in Galatia to castrate themselves (Gal 5.12) or his warning that the Philippians be cautious of ‘those dogs...those evil

¹ I wish to acknowledge the helpful comments and feedback of John M.G. Barclay who read an early draft of this article. Many of his critiques were taken into consideration.

workers...who mutilate the flesh' (Phil 3.2). He is even content to compare false apostles who disguise themselves as genuine to Satan himself (2 Cor 11.14). Once in a while, though, we have such a kind of heated rhetoric where it is unclear to what issue it is being oriented, or why. The first part of 1 Corinthians 6 (vv. 1-11) is an example of this, which one may even label 'diatribe': 'The tone produced in [diatribe]...is biting, sarcastic, even pejorative. And it seems we have all this encoded in our text'.² On a topic such as the bringing of grievances into the public arena, it is startling at times what ostensibly harsh language flows from the Apostle's pen. From the beginning of the chapter, Paul refers to adjudicators of the city court as the ἄδικοι. In 6.4, the outside judges are objects of scorn ('τοὺς ἐξουθενημένους') in the church, and Paul explicitly comments that their submitting to such ones is a matter of shame (6.5a).³ In 6.9 Paul offers a vice list that delineates the ἄδικοι, and claims that some of the Corinthian believers had once lived lives of such degradation.

Another curious dimension of this pericope is the way it relates to the letter as a whole. In a sense this section interrupts what may have seemed like a discourse on sexual immorality that ended in 5.13 and picked up again in 6.12.⁴ Commentators, then, often treat this passage as a digression from Paul's argumentation and analyze it in isolation from its context. The tendency to read it within its literary surroundings is even more subverted by the almost universal assumption that 1 Corinthians 6.11 represents a 'baptismal liturgy'.⁵

² V.G. Shillington, 'People of God in the Courts of the World: A Study of 1 Corinthians 6:1-11' *Direction* 12.2 (1983) 41.

³ Though there is considerable debate on this passage, Richard Hays observes that any reading that sees the 'despised' as Christians would work against his wider purpose of promoting unity and equality in the church. He glosses 'the unrighteous' as 'pagan high-status Corinthian judges'; see R.B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Interpretation; Louisville:WJK,), 94.

⁴ See R.H. Fuller, 'First Cor 6:1-11: An Exegetical Paper' *Ex Auditu* 2 (1986) 98; on a similar matter, 6.9-11 could also belong to 6.1-8 or 6.12-20, though traditionally it has been grouped with the former (see B.S. Rosner, 'The Origin and Meaning of 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 in Context' *BZ* 40.2 [1996] 250-1).

⁵ G. Strecker, *Theology of the New Testament* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000) 89; in general agreement see, e.g., E. Lohse, 'Taufe und Rechtfertigung bei Paulus' *KD* 11 (1965): 308-24; A.M. Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection* (WUNT 44;

The particular argument that will be pursued here, though, is that (1) 6.11 should not be *a priori* cast into a baptismal-tradition background, (2) but rather plays a key role in the progression of Paul's argument in 6.1-8, and 9-10, and (3) 6.1-11 can be logically linked to the antecedent subject matter regarding litigation when 6.11 is given due rhetorical weight.

2. Preliminary Matters

Alongside the many literary challenges that have been already noted, we have the limitation of not knowing the nature of the litigious dispute. As we are 'reading somebody else's mail' when engaging in the interpretation of this epistle, we strain to 'overhear a fascinating argument in progress'.⁶ We can only make basic assumptions. It appears that one member of the Christian community, having had some issue with another member, wished to take it before the secular court. The nature of this grievance is undeterminable, despite strenuous exegetical work on the part of some to settle the matter. Paul's statements are far too epigrammatic to define the problem as a 'sexual matter'⁷ or a dispute over money or property⁸. In fact, Paul does not appear to be concerned directly with the issue at all, but rather with the arbitration of it. The best clue for seeking further clarification on the problem itself is the vice list, as the items vary from one list of Paul's to another suggesting the contents of the

Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987) 54; L.T. Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment: Decision-making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 121; V.P. Furnish, *The Theology of the First Letter to the Corinthians* (NTT; Cambridge: UP, 1999) 43-4; W.A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) 320.

⁶ R.B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Interpretation; Louisville: WJK, 1997) 1; see also L.W. Countryman, *Interpreting the Truth* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press Intl, 2003) 89-90.

⁷ See P. Richardson, 'Judgment in Sexual Matters in 1 Corinthians 6:1-11' *NT* 25.1 (1983) 37-58.

⁸ A. Clarke argues along this line with reference to the adjudication being under 'civil jurisdiction' (*Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth* [Leiden: Brill, 1993] 60).

catalogue are 'situational'.⁹ Nevertheless, Paul's real concern is with the ἄδικοι. What makes this designation all the more strange is that, when applied to people, it is found nowhere else in Paul's letters. He, rather, prefers ἄπιστος when referring to those outside of the faith (as in 6.6; cf. 7.13-15; 10.27; 14.22-24; 2 Cor 6.14-15). That special attention should be given to the ἄδικοι in interpretation is confirmed by the cluster of cognate terms in this passage: ἄδικος (6.1, 9); ἀδικέω (6.7, 8); δικαίω (6.11). Given such a concentration of similar language, it is surprising that 6.11 is treated independently as merely casting the Corinthians' identity in terms of their baptism. It would seem that something much more interesting is going on here.

3.1 Corinthians 6.11 and Its Meaning: Is This About Baptism?

It is a reality that little exegetical attention has been paid to 1 Corinthians 6.11 in its own context, most probably a result of the convenient appeal to it being a reference to baptism. In spite of this, James Dunn has issued an important caution against anachronism and overinterpretation regarding supposed references to baptismal traditions: 'key NT phrases like "baptized in Christ" were intended as and are best understood as metaphors rather than descriptions of the physical act of being baptized'.¹⁰ Much of this critique should be applied to the study of this passage for the simple reason that even if there is some vague association with baptism the phrasing is so distinctive as to beg questions about the usefulness of such an association. Also, when Paul *does* speak of baptism, he regularly uses εἰς to define the relationship to Christ and not ἐν (e.g., Gal 2.27; Rom 6.3; 1 Cor 10.2; 12.13; cf. *Didache* 7.1).

What has encouraged many to adopt a baptismal interpretation is the only other NT occurrence of the same word that Paul uses for washing in 6.11: 'Arise, be baptized (βάπτισαι), and have your sins washed away (ἀπόλουσαι τὰς ἁμαρτίας σου) calling on his name'

⁹ B.J. Oropeza, 'Situational Immorality – Paul's 'Vice Lists' at Corinth' *ExpT* 110 (1998) 9.

¹⁰ J.D.G. Dunn, "'Baptized" as Metaphor', *Baptism in the New Testament and the Church* (ed. S.E. Porter and A.R. Cross; Sheffield: Academic Press, 1999) 294.

(Acts 22.16). It is important to note here, though, that a separate verb is used alongside βαπτίζω, and that calling *on* the name is different than being washed *in/by* the name. And, of course, we must be careful not to ‘read Paul through the eyes of Luke’, as one scholar puts it.¹¹ In order to sharpen our understanding of what Paul is communicating we must briefly account for his precise language with its lexico-semantic influences and the wider context of his letter.

First, the reader’s attention should be drawn to the fact that the first major verb (ἀπολούω) is rare in the Greek biblical corpus, and in the LXX appears only in Job 9.30 used metaphorically with the basic meaning ‘to wash’. Among contemporary Jewish writers, only Philo seems particularly interested in this verb as he uses it over a dozen times. And it should not be a surprise that, for him, this allegorical ‘washing’ almost always derives from his reading of scriptural passages of cultic purification. Thus, just as God commanded that the sacrifice itself be washed, so the wise man purifies himself (ἀπολούεται) from all pleasures (*Leg.* 3.141 regarding Lev. 9.14).¹² Perhaps the most interesting use of the language of washing comes in *Somn.* 1.148-149:

But the angels—the words of God – move about in the minds of those persons who are still in the process of being washed (ταῖς δὲ τῶν ἔτι ἀπολουομένων)...Do thou, therefore, O my soul, hasten to become the abode of God, his holy temple (ἱερὸν ἅγιον), to become strong from having become weak, powerful from having been powerless, wise from having been foolish, and very reasonable from having been doting and childless (trans. Yonge).

For Paul, the Corinthians were *already* washed and *already* God’s temple, but the point is that Paul and Philo are probably in agreement that the language of temple (and festival-keeping [5.6-8]) and purification should naturally be understood together – especially

¹¹ Fee, *First Epistle*, 246.

¹² Similarly see *Spec.* 1.207; 260; 3.89.

when it is further defined in terms of consecration. Furthermore, it should be recognized that Paul's verb of holy separation (*ἀγιάζω*) found in 6.11 is relatively rare¹³ in his writings and at least one of those instances is clearly cultic (Rom 15.16).¹⁴

Reading Paul's language of purity and holiness in 1 Corinthians 6.11 within the wider literary context, this imagery follows earlier associations with temple and ritual (i.e., the removal of Unleavened dough during Passover in view of the sacrifice), and in its own chapter Paul is probably anticipating his statement that the body is a temple (6.19). In 6.11, the cultic relationship is certainly not explicitly outlined. Is Paul comparing them to priests, worshippers, or holy objects? Such detail is both impossible to ascertain and beside the point. He wishes only to communicate that his converts have made an eschatological shift from being impure to being holy. The fact that, especially in 1 Corinthians, Paul could so easily transition from one kind of cultic metaphor to another shows a fluidity in these categories. In each the point is the same: if God's presence is found among his people, they have been consecrated and must continue to be pure. Paul's thought operates here on dual axes: a temporal axis (old age/new creation) and a spatial axis (community/outside), and both factor into his counsel. This, then, is not (simply) a matter of baptism, but the purity/holiness imagery contributes to Paul's concern to 'preserve social boundaries'.¹⁵ R. Prickett states:

It is with reference to social boundaries that purity and the concomitant theme of holiness become an issue. These boundaries serve to circumscribe the community in order to keep it 'pure' from outsiders and in so doing they facilitate group cohesion, that is their function...Paul emphasizes the

¹³ 1 Thess 5.23; 1 Cor 1.2; 6.11; 7.14; Rom 15.16.

¹⁴ The author of Hebrews, though, often employed this term within cultic-allegorical discourses (e.g., Heb 9.13; 10.10, 14, 29; 13.12; cf. Matt 23.17, 19).

¹⁵ R. Prickett, *The Cross in Corinth* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1997) 90.

purity and holiness of the Corinthian community in order to distinguish it from ‘outside’ society...¹⁶

4. 1 Corinthians 6.11 and Its Meaning: Is This about Paul’s Classic Doctrine of Justification [by Faith]?

In the same way that Paul’s statements about being ‘washed’ and ‘consecrated’ have been relegated to liturgical formulas, so much can be said for Paul’s statement ‘you have been justified’. D.K. McKim’s comments on this are representative of many scholars as he lists 1 Corinthians 6.11 as typical of places where ‘Paul was apparently repeating primitive confessions of faith’.¹⁷ However, there are a number of reasons to conclude that Paul is doing something very peculiar here, being both different from traditional statements about justification *and* more directly related to the situation of his readers.

First, it should be observed that Paul’s language of justification in 1 Corinthians 6.11 is quite dissimilar to his use of δικαιόω in the other two undisputed letters where this verb occurs frequently – Romans and Galatians. With respect to the Galatians, the procurement of justification is discussed as an act directed towards the future as in 5.4. Of the eight occurrences of the verb, none entail an indicative statement that declares the Galatians already justified. In fact, Paul’s usage most often carries a tone of final judgment which is assumed ‘in the usual forward look of the verb “justify” (*dikaioō*)’.¹⁸ In fact, the whole discourse regarding justification is filled with the language of law and faith – issues that are absent from 1 Corinthians 6.1-11. In Romans we have a similar situation as in Galatians,

¹⁶ *The Cross*, 90; see also D. Horrell, *Solidarity and Difference: A Contemporary Reading of Paul’s Ethics* (London: T & T Clark, 2005) 94.

¹⁷ *Theological Turning Points: Major Issues in Christian Thought* (Louisville: WJK, 1988) 78; also *EDNT* 1: 331; *ABD* 3.1130. Indeed, the attempt to synthesize Paul’s statement with his other passages dealing with justification is especially tempting to L. Hartman, *Into the Name of the Lord Jesus: Baptism in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997) 64.

¹⁸ J.D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 467.

though on occasion Paul comes close to being more declarative in 5.2: 'Therefore, since we are justified (δικαιωθέντες) through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ'.¹⁹ Again, though, this is put within the ambit of faith and the language of holiness/purity is not present.²⁰

What follows Paul's language of justification in 1 Corinthians 6.11 is also uncharacteristic as all three of the preceding verbs are related to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. As for the former, Paul does not mention justification being in relation to the power or agency of the 'name of the Lord Jesus Christ' anywhere in Galatians or Romans.²¹ Three 'controls' in the interpretation of Paul's words are necessary. First, the most useful comparison text(s) must have closer semantic parallels. Second, the language of justification in 6.11 must be investigated in terms of 1 Corinthians as a whole. Third, the context and content of 6.1-11 in general must be consulted.

From a semantic perspective, the closest parallel to the language of 1 Corinthians 6.11 is in fact found in 1 Timothy 3:

Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great: He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit (ἐδικαιώθη ἐν πνεύματι), seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed throughout the world, taken up in glory (3.16).

We have the rare correspondence of the passive aorist form of δικαιώω along with a prepositional phrase that includes ἐν and

¹⁹ See D. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 298.

²⁰ We must look further to 6.19 for a statement that connects 'justification' to 'consecration'.

²¹ Though, note, 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord...' (Rom 10.13); otherwise in the undisputed letters only Phil 2.10: 'at the name of Jesus every knee will bow...'

πνεῦμα.²² What is particularly noteworthy, given the attribution of this verb to Christ, is that the translation ‘justified’ does not seem appropriate in 1 Timothy 3.16. The issue is clearly one of accusation (perhaps of blasphemy) and acquittal/vindication.²³ Such a meaning of vindication in light of (false) accusation also appears in other New Testament occurrences of the passive form of δικαιώω.

[T]he Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated (ἐδικαιώθη) by her deeds (ἀπὸ τῶν ἔργων αὐτῆς) (Matt 11.19).

“Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children (καὶ ἐδικαιώθη... ἀπὸ πάντων τῶν τέκνων αὐτῆς)” (Luke 7.35).²⁴

We can see here, then, that δικαιώω can and should be translated in terms of ‘acquittal’ or ‘vindication’ if the context requires. Since the situation in Corinth is literally one of litigation, Paul’s words in 6.11 would have had a particular resonance with their concerns for ‘justice’. No doubt Paul’s forensic terminology in chapter six was meant to be understood in correlation with the matter of Paul’s own behavior as described in chapters 3 or 4. This is made clear by the only other appearance of δικαιώω in 4.4.

In the matter of Paul’s ministry (4.1-21), he is indignant at the audacious manner in which the Corinthians were scrutinizing²⁵ his work. He argued that his behavior could not be properly assessed by

²² Questions concerning the authorship of 1 Timothy are moot at this point as the interest is in the semantic relationship of words and not the attempt to synthesize Paul’s theology.

²³ The forensic nuances of this verb are addressed by Reumann, “*Righteousness*” in *the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 30.

²⁴ C. Spicq draws attention to these texts (in relation to 1 Tim 3.16) as employing the language of vindication and the reclaiming of honor (‘une nuance d’honneur et d’acclamation’); see *Saint Paul: Les Épîtres Pastorales* (Études bibliques; Paris: Gabalda, 1969) 472-3.

²⁵ Hays rightly points out that *avnakri,nw* is best understood as ‘examined’ or ‘scrutinized’; see *First Corinthians*, 66.

any human court (4.2). Even though he himself claimed a clear conscience, he recognized that 'human judgment remains fallible and inadequate whether it be positive or negative, or whether it be Paul's or another human agent's'.²⁶ Instead, Paul found that God is the only capable judge.²⁷ Thus Paul contrasts the perceptibility of what is ἀνθρώπινος (4.3) with that of the Lord (4.4). Such a juxtaposition of perspective, fueled by eschatological convictions, is also stated by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5.16: 'From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way'. Paul, realizing the fallibility of human judgment, goes as far as saying that he is willing to accept a standing judgment on himself.²⁸ As we know from other instances, the moments where Paul engages in dialogue about his own life and ministry are not only meant to be defensive, but also exemplary. This must be kept in mind as we turn ahead to chapter 6.

If the key to comprehending 1 Corinthians 4 is recognizing that Paul contrasts both the judgment of an old way ('this aeon'²⁹) with the eschatological verdict and contrasts the adjudicating acuity of humankind with the Lord's, this bifold framework (old age/new creation) can be beneficial for comprehending the situation of arbitration within the Christian community in chapter 6. That Paul is so concerned with the fact that believers want to take matters to the secular courts probably stems from two concerns. In the first place, the desire for justice (whether for vindication or acquittal) was an attempt to salvage one's honor and standing in the community. Paul's ultimate response is that Christ's pronouncement of acquittal (6.11) should suffice in terms of one's true standing (i.e., before God). Thus, in 4.4b: 'It is the Lord who judges me'. Secondly, Paul is concerned about the kind of procedure that one goes through in

²⁶ A. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 339; see also W. Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther: 1 Teilband: 1 Kor 1,1-6,11* (EKKNT 7.1; Zürich: Benziger Verlag, 1991) 322.

²⁷ H. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 83.

²⁸ T.C. Edwards, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1885) 99.

²⁹ Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 83.

order to receive the hoped-for verdict in the public arena – one that often involves bribery, perjury, manipulation, and other sorts of malicious behavior.

From such a perspective, Paul's concern would not be for the church's witness in the world as many scholars have suggested – a concern over 'airing their dirty laundry before the larger society'.³⁰ His focus here, as through the whole epistle, is primarily on the unity and stability of the community fostered through mutual concern and respect. As mentioned above, Paul never refers to the details of the matter in question, but the issue of who dispenses judgment and from where acquittal comes. From a *spatial* perspective, acquittal comes from the Lord and not untrustworthy humans. From an *eschatological* perspective, those 'in Christ' have already received the status of acquittal (1 Cor 6.11) and should not trust the judgment of outsiders (4.3).³¹

Perhaps the best way to understand what Paul is communicating is to look at a parallel issue in Galatians (but not necessarily related to 'justification *by faith*'). Here, the same issues of temporal and spatial boundaries are at work, except in this case the catalyst is the matter of circumcision.³² That Paul could say neither circumcision

³⁰ Keener, *1-2 Corinthians* (Cambridge: UP, 2005) 53.

³¹ It is unclear how Paul envisions the process of settling disputes within the church, but precedent for handling such concerns internally may come from the practice of Jewish communities that set up their own legal proceedings; see Hays, *First Corinthians*, 95.

³² The number of similarities between Galatians 5-6 and 1 Corinthians 6 are noteworthy. From a sociological perspective, both churches were suffering from internal disunity and dissension. On this issue in Galatia, see J.M.G. Barclay, *Obedying the Truth: Paul's Ethics in Galatians* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2005) 152-5. From the perspective of form criticism, though a number of Paul's letters contain vice lists (cf. 1 Cor 5.9-11; 2 Cor 12.20; Rom 1.29-31; 13.13), the similarities between 1 Corinthians 6.9-10 and Galatians 5.19-21 are remarkable, including the only two instances of the exact phrase 'θεοῦ βασιλείαν οὐ κληρονομήσουσιν'. Though a bit further removed from 1 Corinthians 6.1-11, closeby is Paul's employment of the maxim concerning the little leaven that infects the whole lump (1 Cor 5.6), which is also stated in Galatians 5.9. And, again, we have both epistles engaging thematically in the dialectic between freedom/authority and enslavement/servitude (cf. Gal 5.13; 1 Cor 6.20; 9) [see Barclay, *Obedying*, 115].

nor uncircumcision have any value (5.6; 6.15) and at the same time declare that Christ is of no value to those who would become circumcised (5.2) seems incredible. But, in Paul's mind, for the Galatians to accept circumcision was, in effect, a decision to both transfer oneself outside of the Christ-community *and* to step back into the old aeon where one would be 'obligated to obey the whole law' (5.3). Such a decision would be, in the words of Richard Hays, 'a reversion to the *status quo* ante, an attempt to reenter a symbolic world that has been obliterated by the cross'.³³ Paul, again, reiterates this point when claiming the non-value of either circumcision or uncircumcision in 6.15, but tersely interjects: '...*new creation!*'³⁴ It is a key point to observe that Paul's particular concern is not with circumcision, but with the old age with which it is associated, for in God's new creation 'nothing that human beings normally take to be criteria for assessment, evaluation, inclusion, or exclusion has any force whatsoever'.³⁵

The parallels to 1 Corinthians 6 are manifold. In this case, Paul does not have anything against lawsuits *per se*, but a decision to accept human judgment means both that one has lapsed back into the old aeon of skewed perception and that one must accept the verdict. If circumcision meant that the Galatians would be required to keep the whole law and would be severed from Christ, the Corinthians' appeal to secular courts meant that God's proleptic verdict 'you were acquitted' (6.11) would be undone. Paul, then, would be saying, *you already have the divine ruling of acquittal/vindication, why submit yourself to a lesser authority? Why pursue the reclaiming of your honor when you have been honored by Christ?*

From this perspective, it can be observed that what Paul writes goes far beyond simply appealing to a baptismal tradition that reiterates

Finally, and this point will be developed later on, the Spirit is the key to recognizing the new age and confirming the kind of justification/righteousness that comes from God in Christ (cf. Gal 5.16-18, 22-25; 1 Cor 6.11, 19).

³³ R.B. Hays, *Galatians* (NIB; Nashville: Abingdon) 345.

³⁴ For a discussion of the syntax of this see Hays, *Galatians*, 345.

³⁵ B. Gaventa, 'Galatians', *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (ed. J.D.G. Dunn and J. Rogerson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 1384.

the Corinthians' identity as being 'justified' – a move that Paul rarely makes in such terms. Though there are certainly wider implications that can be inferred from his statement, the purpose and focus of his words are probably situational. Thus the most appropriate translation of 'ἐδικαιώθητε' should correspond to the usage in 4.4 and fit the tenor of the issues in chapter 6: 'you were acquitted'. Though the basic logic behind this contextualized approach to 1 Corinthians 6 has been adumbrated thus far, a more detailed exegesis of 6.1-11 will aid in fleshing out the reasonability of this interpretation.

5. 1 Corinthians 6.1-8

Transitioning from chapter 5 to 6, Paul's words are immediately striking as he shows complete shock at the behavior of the Corinthians who dare to bring their disputes outside (6.1) – a kind of astonishment that seems close to his statement in Galatians 1.6-7. He sets in contrast the tribunal of the unrighteous (ἄδικος) and the holy ones (ἅγιος). It is difficult to discern how to understand the former. Is it assumed that they are, in fact, morally 'unrighteous'?³⁶ This is a possibility, and such a meaning is well attested elsewhere (cf. Rom 3.5). But, that the meaning is primarily oriented towards a generic label of 'unbelievers' is more likely, not least for the reason that in 6.1 it is juxtaposed with the Corinthian 'holy ones' who have clearly not upheld a reputation of probity. Additionally, Paul was deviating from a normal Jewish pattern of contrasting ἄδικος and δίκαιος (Prov 10.31; Zeph 3.5; Wis 4.16). Certainly labeling his readers 'holy people' was not restricted to the Corinthians (Rom 1.7; Phil 1.1; Phm 1.5), nor limited to just Paul's religious lexicon (Jude 1.3; Rev 5.8). But, neither should we regard his specific language in 1 Corinthians 6 as merely an adoption of Christian 'tradition' in reference to 'the identity of God's elite' alongside other such tags as 'church' and 'the elect'.³⁷ Given the significance of the ἅγιος word-group as a whole in 1 Corinthians (occurring 17x in all; 12x in chs. 1-7), it appears to be a key strategy of Paul's managing their

³⁶ See this viewpoint argued by D. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (BEC; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) 195-6.

³⁷ C. Roetzel, *Paul: A Jew on the Margins* (Louisville: WJK, 2003) 70.

problems with immoral behavior *and* disorder to turn to the matter of holiness and consecration to God.³⁸ But a key element of Paul's conception of purity and holiness as the foundation for ethics is the apocalyptic, transformative operation of the Spirit – a point that is often missed in 6.1-11 as he only brings this into the discussion at the very end (6.11).³⁹ Nevertheless, describing the Spirit as the dynamic agent of moral transformation and the mark of association with and participation in the Christ-epoch has been a consistent strategy throughout 1 Corinthians, first in terms of Spirit-enabling perception (2.10-15), and then Spirit-possession demanding unity (3.16), later proceeding to Spirit-possession as the sign of divine possession (6.19-20).

In light of this, it is not sufficient to conclude that ἄδικος and ἄγιος are merely boundary-marking labels. The ἄδικοι are 'unjustified' in the sense that they stand outside of God's redemptive work in Christ and the justification that comes through faith, but they are also 'unrighteous' insofar as they do not possess the Spirit which reverses the degenerative power of Sin⁴⁰/sinfulness.⁴¹ On the other hand, the ἄγιοι are not only clearly identified with Christ, but are considered

³⁸ Regarding the language of holiness and the codification of purity as a need for order, see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 2002) 67.

³⁹ Much of this is easily applicable to Galatians as in this letter also 'Paul understands the Spirit to be the driving force behind Christian moral identity' (B. Longenecker, *The Triumph of Abraham's God: The Transformation of Identity in Galatians* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998] 78); see also S.K. Williams, 'Justification and the Spirit in Galatians' *JSNT* 29 (1987) 96-7.

⁴⁰ Though Paul does not personify ἁμαρτία in a way similar to Romans (see Rom 7.8), this apocalyptic perspective is clearly represented in his portrayal of 'Death' as the last, greatest enemy (1 Cor 15.26).

⁴¹ Overall I am in agreement with Alistair May that Paul is concerned with both the moral and forensic aspects of ἄδικος here, but I consider it to be more than an 'ethical stereotype' precisely because they do not possess the Spirit – a point not given weight in May's analysis (see *'The Body for the Lord': Sex and Identity in 1 Corinthians 5-7* [London: T & T Clark, 2004] 82-84).

‘God’s *holy* people’ because of the endowment and empowerment of the Spirit who frees them from bondage to the world and to death.⁴²

For Paul it is unthinkable that those who associate with Christ should wish to be judged by the representatives of this world when, in fact, the ἄγιοι will judge the world (6.2). The Corinthians’ logic amounts to nothing less than ‘an inversion of the eschatological relationship of the church and the world’.⁴³ But, Paul goes even further in distinguishing the believers from everyone else for he writes that they will even judge the angels (6.3). However one understands the background of Paul’s statement here, this statement at least serves to underscore Paul’s primary concern with two seats of power/authority – the Spirit/Christ and the rulers of this world (see 1 Cor 2.6).

The incredulity that Paul feels is expressed in the exasperated rhetorical question: ‘If you have ordinary cases, then, do you appoint as judges those who have no standing in the church?’ (6.4; see footnote 2 above). English translations cannot capture the play on words that occurs with his use of ‘τοὺς ἐξουθενημένους’ here as compared to the beginning of the letter when applied to the world’s evaluation of the Corinthian community:

God chose the insignificant (τὰ ἀγενῆ) of the world and τὰ ἐξουθενημένα the things that are not, in order to render null the things that are so that no one may boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus who became for us wisdom from God, and rectification and consecration and redemption (1.28-30; my translation).

What Paul is implying is that the world’s power structures exacted a judgment of rejection and absolute dismissal on the Corinthian believers. Indeed, in 2 Corinthians he recognizes that accusations

⁴² See G.D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996) 108-9; see also D. Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness* (NSBT; Downer’s Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1995) 46-7.

⁴³ E. Adams, *Constructing the World: A Study in Paul’s Cosmological Language* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000) 127.

were flung against him that his presence was weak and his speech worthless (‘ἐξουθενημένος’) in comparison with his letters (10.10). And yet God chose these ‘despised nobodies’ (both apostles and Corinthian believers) ‘to shame and destroy the world’s hierarchies’.⁴⁴ For the Corinthians to [re]install⁴⁵ these potentiaries by acknowledging their authority would be to retrovert God’s act of nullifying the world’s power systems and reversing his elevation of his own people. Paul wishes to shame his readers for acting in opposition to the gospel and underestimating the power of the Spirit who is able to produce wisdom in judgment within the church (1 Cor 6.5).⁴⁶ It may have been the case that Paul anticipated such problems entailing authority and so early on made a judgment (‘ἔκρινά’) of his own to acknowledge (‘εἰδέναι’) only the crucified Christ among them – a Christ that was brought before an earthly tribunal and considered an object of scorn and mockery and one who could not be acquitted of his charges by human reckoning.

In a similar way, Luke recounts Herod’s (along with his soldiers’) judgment that Jesus was worthless (‘ἐξουθενήσας δὲ αὐτὸν’) before mockingly dressing him as a king (23.11). Much of this early Christian language of rejection and subsequent reversal of evaluation may have been influenced by Psalm 188.22: ‘The stone which the builders rejected (ἀπεδοκίμασαν), the same has become the head of the corner’ (my translation). In Acts 4.11, Luke reports a speech by Peter who alludes to this psalm with a slight revision: ‘This Jesus is the stone that was rejected (ὁ ἐξουθενηθείς) by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone’. Whether this was an established theme beyond Paul’s letters is not of central concern in our analysis, but what evidence we do have supports the notion that the pattern that Paul describes to be relevant to his Corinthian readers likely stems

⁴⁴ D. Horrell, *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence: Interests and Ideology from 1 Corinthians to 1 Clement* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996) 202.

⁴⁵ Literally, to ‘cause to sit’ (καθίζω).

⁴⁶ In 6.5, Paul does not make wisdom explicitly a matter of the Spirit or being ‘spiritual’, but certainly one can connect this line of reasoning with chapter 2 where worldly wisdom is contrasted with the Spirit (2.4) who teaches his people how to examine (συγκρίνω) what is spiritual (2.13; cf. 12.8). Luke appears to make this association as well (see Acts 6.3, 10).

from his christology – by rendering a guilty verdict on Christ and crucifying him the rulers of this age unwittingly initiated a process of transformation whereby their own power structures and significance began to fade into oblivion (see the use of καταργέω in 1 Cor 2.6).⁴⁷

In 1 Corinthians 6.6, Paul is astonished that instead of investing energy in properly seeking out trustworthy and wise adjudicators within the community of faith, they drag their affairs before unbelievers (‘ἐπὶ ἀπίστων’). Again, the primary matter for Paul is not whether such an action would damage their Christian witness. Neither is the problem necessarily that unbelievers cannot be trusted (cf. Rom 13.1-5). Nevertheless, unbelievers in 1 Corinthians 6 ‘represent “the world” (v. 2), the realm of unbelief which is by definition inferior in understanding and integrity to the circle of “the saints”’.⁴⁸ Paul could not conceive of the Corinthians’ legal action as anything other than a breach of the ‘bounded system’ of their communal body.⁴⁹

Unless the perspective outlined above is taken into consideration, it is almost incomprehensible that Paul would go on to say, ‘why not accept the injustice (ἀδικέισθε)? Why not be cheated?’ (6.7). Many scholars would identify Paul’s sentiment with the kind of non-retaliatory attitude found in either the tradition of the Sermon on the Mount⁵⁰ or perhaps with Greek philosophy (particularly stoicism),⁵¹

⁴⁷ Mark Given describes how Paul uses this verb in terms of power and judgment; see ‘On His Majesty’s Secret Service: The Undercover *Ethos* of Paul’, *Rhetoric, Ethics, and Moral Persuasion in Biblical Discourse* (ed. T.H. Olbricht and A. Eriksson; London: T & T Clark, 2005) 212-3; also, Hays rightly notes that its regular usage (especially in 1 Corinthians) makes this ‘one of [Paul’s] favorite apocalyptic verbs’, see *First Corinthians*, 43.

⁴⁸ J.M.G. Barclay, ‘1 Corinthians’, *Oxford Bible Commentary* (ed. J. Barton; Oxford: UP, 2001) 1117.

⁴⁹ For a systematic treatment of the socio-cultural aspects of these group dynamics in Paul’s letters (with particular attention to 1 Corinthians), see J. Neyrey, *Paul, in Other Words: A Cultural Reading of His Letters* (Louisville: WJK, 1990) 102-180; esp. 128.

⁵⁰ See C. Senft, *La Première Épître de Saint Paul aux Corinthiens* (Commentaire du Nouveau Testament; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1990), particularly 79ff.

and such influences are possible but conjectural at best. What is clear is that Paul was redefining 'justice' in a new way for them by showing how such inner-conflict within the church (where one hopes to have justice) actually ends up subverting the kind of rectification that comes from Christ.⁵²

But what would it mean for Paul to counter-claim that those seeking 'justice' actually commit injustice (ἀδικέω) and also cheat (ἀποστερέω) their Christian siblings (6.8)? Whether we have the plaintiff or the defendant in mind, it is probably true that the process of legal action in the ancient world involved all sorts of dubious activity in an attempt to obtain the hoped-for ruling.⁵³ Andrew Clarke's description of the rhetoric and manipulation that was typical of legal interactions is illuminating:

Hostility, expressed in personal insult, could be an extremely powerful weapon in the court room, and was unashamedly used. It must be understood that, in first century litigation, such *inimicitiae* was not only socially acceptable but also virtually inevitable...[T]he aspiration to support friends and denigrate enemies was in many cases more important than to speak the truth or seek justice done.⁵⁴

Paul's concern was probably two-fold. First, the Corinthians' pursuit of 'justice' in the secular courts would only lead to more wrongdoing and inhibit the righteousness-producing work of the Spirit (see 6.11). Secondly, such activity will most likely only deepen the rifts within

⁵¹ Robert Grant offers the Roman Stoic Musonius as an opponent of an 'evil for evil' attitude, see *Paul in the Roman World: The Conflict in Corinth* (Louisville: WJK: 2001) 54; see Musonius, fragment 10.26-27.

⁵² For the relationship between 'justification' and 'reconciliation' (with God and within humanity as a result of salvation) in Paul's writings see J. Lambrecht, *Second Corinthians* (SP; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1999) 105-6; J.T. Fitzgerald, 'Paul and Paradigm Shifts: Reconciliation and Its Linkage Group', *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide* (ed. T. Engberg-Pedersen; Louisville: WJK, 2001) 241-261.

⁵³ See B. Winter, 'Civil Litigation in Secular Corinth and the Church: The Forensic Background to 1 Corinthians 6:1-8' *NTS* 37.4 (1991) 557-72.

⁵⁴ Clarke, *Secular and Christian Leadership*, 67.

the community and not mend them – even if the ‘original intention’ of the lawsuit was some form of reconciliation. Seen in this way, if Paul was concerned about ‘airing their dirty laundry’ in public, it is not a primary matter.

6.1 Corinthians 6.9-11

Having just shamed his readers by pointing out the acts of unrighteousness caused by those who seek justice (6.8), Paul employs his ‘do you not know’ rhetoric a fifth time to remind them that ‘*ἄδικοι* will not inherit the kingdom of God’ (6.9a). Given the list of personified vices that follow, Paul is pointing *both* to a label of ‘unjustified’ (as they will not be included among those who are God’s heirs) and to a label of ‘unjust/unrighteous’. Once again, though the word ‘Spirit’ does not appear explicitly, certainly Paul would understand the ‘kingdom of God’ to be a matter of power activated by the Spirit (4.20-1).⁵⁵ Indeed, the kingdom must be populated by people of the Spirit especially because flesh and blood cannot inherit it (1 Cor 15.50) as it is all about ‘[true] rectification⁵⁶ and peace and joy *in the Holy Spirit*’ (Rom 14.17).⁵⁷

With such a perspective in mind, the vice list of 6.9-10 may be seen as Paul’s way of saying, *you who seek acquittal, know that if you choose to have that verdict rendered by human authorities, you run*

⁵⁵ Most translations understand ‘*πνεύματι τε πραύτητος*’ in 4.21 to be a ‘spirit/attitude of gentleness’, but Fee notes the similarities with Galatians 6.1 and the fruits of the Spirit (one being gentleness) and concludes that ‘The Spirit of Christ is...understood as reproducing “the spirit of Christ,” in whose “spirit of gentleness” Paul desires to come to them’ (*God’s Empowering Presence* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994] 121).

⁵⁶ C.E.B. Cranfield understands this term (in tandem with the mention of the Spirit) to have ethical as well as forensic significance: ‘there is no doubt that in Paul’s view it is by the work of the Spirit that Christians are, in some measure, morally ‘*δίκαιοι*’ though by ‘*δικαιοσύνη*’ Paul probably means the status of righteousness before God which is God’s gift’ (*Romans 9-16* [ICC II; London: T & T Clark, 2004; first ed. 1979] 718).

⁵⁷ See J.D.G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16* (WBC 38B; Dallas: Word, 1988) 822-23. Consider, as well, the crucial role that the Spirit plays in Paul’s discussion of the kingdom of God and the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5.22-26.

the risk of accepting their ruling that could put you into the category of the ἄδικος. For Paul, though, the fact of the matter is that some of them already had an ἄδικος verdict over them, but through Christ they were given a new ruling of acquittal (6.11). Scholarship has not accounted for the presence of two qualifying preposition phrases. In the first instance, acquittal is 'ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ'. Paul is reminding the Corinthians that their right-standing status comes from the highest authority (as Christ is Lord), and his judgment is not based on human perception (as he is the *crucified* Christ). Secondly, such a ruling is 'ἐν τῷ πνεύματι τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν', whereby the acquitted are given the power to live as new godly creatures as products of his new creation and members of his eschatological kingdom. This two-pronged aspect of the verb 'ἐδικαιώθητε' is well summarized by Fee: 'Together...the two prepositional phrases refer to what God has done *for* his people *through Christ*, which he has effected *in* them by *the Spirit*'.⁵⁸ Seen from this perspective, Paul was not blowing out of proportion the desires that some of the Corinthians had to settle disputes under the world's authorities. Specifically with the temptations of his audience in mind, Paul was communicating that the desire to seek acquittal/justice by the sovereignty of the state was to, in effect, *overrule* Christ's pronouncement of their acquittal at their conversion, because it would transgress the kingdom boundaries established in Christ and resist the operation of the Spirit. Paul's fundamental concern is *not* with the actual act of legal dispute any more than the physical act of circumcision. Rather, the matter which plagues the Corinthians has everything to do with misconceptions of Spirit/spiritual, power, authority, wisdom, judgment, and acquittal – and within the letter as a whole, then, 1 Corinthians 6.1-11 is rather appropriate and well positioned in his argument.

7. Conclusion

Paul's discourse is not a digression, nor should one strain to place it directly within his discussion of sexual matters. Rather, what these

⁵⁸ *God's Empowering Presence*, 129.

issues have in common is a concern for the body (both physical and communal) and the appropriate boundaries that protect God's people from transgressing borders both spatially (causing the social identity of the community to be compromised)⁵⁹ and eschatologically (nullifying the authoritative ruling in Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit). The superficial conclusion of most scholars that Paul had slotted in a 'baptismal liturgy' in 6.11 has resulted in a serious neglect of how the argument in 6.1-8 and 9-10 builds up to verse 11 and how each step was carefully taken to address issues of justice, authority, and unity within the community and in light of the parallel matter of the standing of Paul (chapter 4) and of Christ himself (1.23; 2.2; cf. 2 Cor 13.4).

Paul does not see the Christian body as a 'spiritual' community that is unaffected by the physical world. Though it is true, for Paul, that the kingdom of God is 'spiritual', in the sense that it is empowered by God's Spirit, unions with the world's powers (which apparently include legal agreements) are just as destructive as sexual ones. It is true that the Christ event has initiated an aeon-shift that nullifies the authority of the 'rulers of this age', but an apocalyptic conflict is ongoing (cf. 2 Cor 10.3). Paul issues serious warnings against clear and present threats. Is it any wonder that when Paul *urges* his converts to act, it is almost always in response to matters of unity (1 Cor 1.10; 16.15; 2 Cor 2.8; 10.1; 15.30; 16.17; Phil 4.2; Phm 9-10), the lack of which breaks the ranks of God's militia and makes them vulnerable to enemies (particular Sin and Death)? Finding logical parallels with the Galatians crisis of circumcision has illuminated how Paul can diagnose the greatest danger to a community and how what may seem to be harmless can have cataclysmic effects. Thus, it may be instructive to end by paraphrasing Paul's argument to the Corinthians in chapter 6 by mimicking the language and structure of Galatians 5:

For [righteousness] Christ has [justified] us. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery [and

⁵⁹ See May's excellent employment of social identity theory (Tajfel) and 1 Corinthians 5-7 in *Sex and Identity*, particularly 17-33, 91.

the authority and judgment of the world's powers]. Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you [take your legal battles to the secular courts] Christ will be of no benefit [in your desire to be acquitted]. Once again I testify to every man who [takes battles to the secular courts] that he is obligated [to accept their flawed and misguided verdict]. You who want to be justified by [the secular court] have [judged for yourself who should be judge], you have fallen away from [righteousness]. For through the Spirit, by [the wisdom of God], we eagerly wait for the hope of [confirming Christ's prophetic pronouncement of righteousness]. For in Christ Jesus [a state-authorized ruling of guilt or innocence] counts for nothing; the only thing that counts is faith [in God's framework of wisdom] working through [unity and the Spirit] (compare Gal 5.1-6).

The pneumodynamic character of 'justification' is central for Paul as he considers salvation to entail not just a new status (and a claim to honor), but a new disposition and a sense of consecration to God. The desire for public recognition that underlies the issues in 1 Corinthians 6 is problematic precisely because it relocates the seat of authority back in the world and often involves degenerative means of defense and accusation. Paul's sharp rhetorical questions that encourage the Corinthians to accept the shame of being wronged (1 Cor. 6.7) probably emerged from his own experience where he felt the shame of mistreatment and false accusation (4.13). The court is a place for self-defense and self-promotion. For the sake of God's kingdom and the gospel, Paul accepted his position as the 'world's garbage' (4.13), but maintained his trust in the present acquittal and future commendation (4.5) of God. His discourse in 1 Corinthians 6.1-11 reinforces and refers back to his statement in 4.16: 'I appeal to you, then, be imitators of me' – imitators of a Paul that found strength in weakness and honor from God despite shame and ill-repute in the world.

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