

Concerning Lawsuits Filed by Harvest House

A Response to Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes' Defense of the "Open Letter" and Critique of the Christian Research Journal's Reassessment of the Local Churches

Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes did not dispute the facts of Harvest House's long history of litigation against Christians. Rather, they defended Harvest Houses by stating:

Further, CRI attempts in vain to show moral (or biblical) equivalence between this kind of theological and moral issue and other friendly and/or financial suits a corporation may take to get its rightful financial due.

In First Corinthians 6:1-8 the Apostle Paul rebuked two brothers who went to a secular court over a matter related to fraud. Verse 7 says, "Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?" Here Paul says that it is better to be deprived of one's rightful due by a Christian brother than to take the brother to a secular law court. Although it is unclear what Geisler and Rhodes mean by "friendly" lawsuits, it is clear that they are seeking to excuse Harvest House from Paul's words on the basis that Harvest House is a corporation. In other words, Geisler and Rhodes seek to justify Harvest House's practice of pursuing monetary gain by taking fellow Christians to court, while condemning Living Stream Ministry and the local churches for appealing to the courts for relief from unlawful defamations. There are several flaws with Geisler and Rhodes' argument:

1. Even if their reasoning was correct (which it is not) and Harvest House is immune from scriptural restrictions because it is a corporation, then Living Stream Ministry and all the local churches that were the plaintiffs in the *ECNR* litigation should likewise be exempt from criticisms on the same basis because they also are corporations.
2. Harvest House is a family-owned corporation. All of the proceeds of its lawsuits accrue to the Hawkins family through their corporation. Geisler and Rhodes provide no explanation of how this arrangement insulates Harvest House from the strictures of 1 Corinthians 6, since Harvest House purports to be a Christian publisher and the Hawkins family members who stand to benefit from Harvest House's legal actions all profess to be Christians.
3. Although Harvest House is a corporation, the authors of *ECNR*, who joined in the Harvest House litigation against a single local church, are not. Geisler and Rhodes offer no criticism of these individuals for joining in that lawsuit.
4. In their arguments to the court Harvest House and its authors claimed that *ECNR* could not be deemed libelous because it addressed theological issues. Geisler wrote an amicus brief in which he made the same claim. Yet here Geisler and Rhodes admit that the litigation involved a "theological *and moral* issue." The words "and moral" reflect *ECNR*'s false and reckless accusations of criminal, immoral, and antisocial activities, which were the actual subject of the litigation filed by LSM and the churches, and belie the defense of *ECNR* that was perpetrated on the court by Harvest House with Geisler's assistance.
5. In arguing that suing to get money from believers is somehow morally superior to protesting defamation, Geisler and Rhodes end up defending those who bear false witness (i.e., the authors and publisher of *ECNR*) against their brothers.

6. In their “moral equivalency” argument, Geisler and Rhodes ignore the effects of *ECNR* in countries where religious freedom is not protected. In such countries, genuine believers in Christ have been arrested, imprisoned, and even executed. Prior to the conclusion of the litigation, there were already reports of threats made by government officials in one country based upon what was written in *ECNR*. The fact of almost certain persecution of believers overseas weighed heavily in the decision to litigate against Harvest House and its authors. Based on their recognition of this risk, several former ambassadors, human rights activists, and others familiar with volatile overseas religious freedom issues filed an amicus brief calling on the court in the Harvest House litigation to protect against such tragic consequences. Geisler and Rhodes are correct, albeit unintentionally—there is no moral equivalency between protecting lives and contending for one’s “rightful financial due.”
7. On the one hand, Geisler and Rhodes justify Harvest House’s use of secular courts to recover bad business debts in spite of the clear applicability of Paul’s charge in 1 Corinthians 6. On the other hand, they condemn the local churches for appealing to the courts for protection against defamation out of concern for the preservation of the lives and liberties of its members. This they do in spite of the fact that the churches’ appeal to the courts is far more akin to Paul’s appeal to Caesar in Acts 25:11 for protection against false accusations that threatened his life and his service to the Lord.