

ARE THE LOCAL CHURCHES LITIGIOUS?

A few irresponsible individuals have recently brandished, as “proof” that the local churches are litigious, a discredited list of organizations purportedly sued or threatened with lawsuits for criticizing the local churches. The charge is deceptive. To accuse a person or organization of being litigious is to accuse them of being unreasonably prone to take others to court to resolve disputes. Those who accuse the local churches of litigiousness have never properly researched the matter and seemingly cannot be bothered with the facts. Further, when presented with proof that their claims are not true, they simply ignore the evidence.

Three Related Legal Actions

In nearly sixty years of history in the United States, the local churches pursued only three legal actions against books deemed to be false, defamatory, and injurious. While two of these litigations took place in the 1980s and the third in the 2000s, all three books had a common source.

- The first action taken was against *The Mindbenders* by Jack Sparks. The book was subsequently withdrawn with an apology based on an agreement signed by Sparks and his publisher.
- The second action taken was against *The God-Men* by Spiritual Counterfeits Project (SCP). This book was developed from a monograph commissioned by Jack Sparks, the author of *The Mindbenders*. A California court ruled *The God-Men* to be libelous in all major respects.
- The third action taken was against the authors and publisher of *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions (ECNR)* after learning that the publisher had filed a lawsuit against a local church. *ECNR* was based on a manuscript written by John Weldon, who had a strong association with SCP and based his assessment on *The God-Men*.

The accusations in all three books went far beyond mere theological misrepresentation into unfounded allegations of immoral, anti-social, and criminal behavior. In each case litigation was undertaken as a last resort due to the books' content, the damages they caused, and the refusal of the authors and publishers to engage in meaningful dialogue.

Examining the Claim of Litigiousness

The list of alleged threats of legal action was developed by Jack Sparks in an attempt to muster support for legal defense of his book *The Mindbenders*. Though Sparks gave no evidence to support the list, it became the basis for subsequent accusations of litigiousness against the local churches. SCP then published the same list—again without verification—in its attack on the local churches. Later, Sparks's list was “updated” by Eric Pement, another countercult figure, and then used in the defense of the authors and publisher of *ECNR* by Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes.

Elliot Miller, the late editor-in-chief of *Christian Research Journal (CRJ)*, examined the charge of litigiousness, including the updated list, and published this assessment in an issue of the journal dedicated to the reconsideration by the Christian Research Institute (CRI) of the local churches and the ministry of Witness Lee:

To sum up: what the countercult community perceives to be litigious behavior on the part of the LC [local churches] can in most cases be documented to be merely an effort to meet with and appeal to countercult writers and publishers to correct false allegations that they have published against a Christian group. (*CRJ* 32:6 (2009), 46)

Miller's observation affirms that the local churches practice what we have always claimed, namely, that we first go to fellow believers directly in a spirit of Christian fellowship and in the principle of Matthew 18:15-17 to seek reconciliation and an accurate understanding of our faith and testimony.

One organization on Pement's list is CRI, the very group that Elliot Miller served from 1976 to 2018. Relying on his firsthand knowledge of interactions between CRI and the local churches, Miller wrote, “In response to

Pement, I know for a fact that he is wrong about the LC threatening legal action against CRI in 1977 (or in any other year for that matter)” (44).

An article published by the Defense and Confirmation project in 2011 entitled “Repeating False Witness in Accusing the Local Churches of ‘Litigiousness’” contains an in-depth look at the available documentary evidence concerning a number of the alleged legal actions and threats. That analysis shows the emptiness of the claims in the list Sparks produced as well as its later iterations. A few brief examples, covered in more detail in that article, follow.

1977 was a time of controversy between CRI and the local churches, but, as Miller testified, there were no threats of legal action. During that year an agreement was reached for a respectful and peaceful meeting between Walter Martin, founder and then director of CRI, and Witness Lee. This meeting took place on February 21 at the latter’s home and ended with an agreement for further Christian fellowship and study. However, CRI staff broke the agreement, and the promise of dialogue was unrealized until 2003, when CRI and the local churches began a fellowship that resulted in CRI reassessing and withdrawing its earlier criticisms of the local churches (see *CRI* 32:6, 2009).

James Bjornstad is on the list with his publisher Regal Books based on a 1979 meeting they had with representatives of the local churches concerning the book *Counterfeits at Your Door*. Regal Books brought a lawyer; the local churches’ representatives did not. During a deposition over *The God-Men*, Bjornstad, who had reviewed the book’s manuscript, was asked if he had been threatened with a lawsuit over *Counterfeits at Your Door*. He admitted that he had not been threatened either in writing or verbally.

Jerram Barrs and his publisher, the English branch of InterVarsity Press (IVP), are on the list because his book *Freedom & Discipleship* repeated accusations against the local churches from *The Mindbenders* and *The God-Men*. Members of the church in Blackpool, England, wrote several letters to both the author and the publisher. Derek Wood, then IVP’s Managing Editor in England, characterized the letters as having been written “more in sorrow than in anger.” There were no threats of legal action and the only attorney involved was engaged by IVP at the suggestion of the author of *The God-Men*. Barrs and IVP removed references to the local churches from the second edition of *Freedom & Discipleship*.

Moody Press is on the updated list for its decision not to include the local churches in its 1991 book *A Concise Dictionary of Cults & Religions* by William Watson. This decision was made by Moody Press unilaterally. The local churches had no knowledge that Moody was considering the book for publication. In fact, the local churches only learned of Watson’s book after its publication!

Jesus People USA (JPUSA) published a demeaning tract about the local churches and Witness Lee. Representatives of the local churches met with Pement and other JPUSA leaders in Chicago. Although the local churches’ representatives strongly protested that the tract was inaccurate and unfair, no legal threats were made either then or subsequently. Thus, Pement learned firsthand how the local churches deal with an objectionable publication, that is, by seeking fellowship and not by legal threat. That knowledge should have led him to question the list’s central charge of litigiousness as well as to inquire into the facts underlying its claims.

Conclusion

Neither Sparks nor any who have added to his list of examples alleging that the local churches are litigious have offered any evidence to support their claims. As the examples discussed here show, the list is not credible. Moreover, no one who has made or repeated claims of litigiousness has addressed either the analysis of Elliot Miller and CRI or the aforementioned article published by the Defense & Confirmation Project in 2011. Instead, they have simply repeated the accusation of litigiousness while ignoring the facts. Absent facts, such claims are simply gossip, to which we should not listen.