

Court Cannot Rule on Ecclesiastical Matter, Dismisses Suit Against Celebration Church

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A sad chapter for Celebration Church in Jacksonville, Florida, has come to an end, for now.

The defamation lawsuit was filed by former pastors Stovall and Kerri Weems, who founded the church in 1998.

Last week, Florida Circuit Judge Marianne Lloyd Aho dismissed the lawsuit on the grounds that courts do not rule in ecclesiastical matters.

"Because the plaintiffs' claims on their face as currently written require this court's involvement in ecclesiastical, doctrinal matters, neutral principles of law cannot be used to consider the issues at hand. As such, this Court DISMISSES WITHOUT PREJUDICE the plaintiffs' complaint," Aho wrote.

This lawsuit stemmed from a difficult period for the church, when the board of trustees launched an investigation into their pastors for alleged fraud, financial misconduct and emotional and spiritual abuse.

Stovall Weems and his wife have refuted the claims and filed the defamation lawsuit against the church on Feb. 23, 2022.

The churches investigation stemmed from the Weems' making "several large financial transactions earlier in 2021 without notice to or authorization from the board."

The Weems' were also accused of improper use of Paycheck

Protection Program (PPP) loans, and salary advances that were unauthorized by the board and violated church policies along with state law.

Sara Brady, spokeswoman for the Weems', issued a statement to News4Jax on the matter:

"No PPP funds were utilized in the TurnCoin investment. The church's 2020 audited financials certifies that the church utilized the PPP funds in accordance with their legally allowed purposes. Administration of the church's PPP funds was controlled by the church's CFOs. The 2021 PPP funds were completely used up by the church's payroll.

"Neither the PPP funds nor the TurnCoin investment had anything to do with Pastor Stovall's salary advance. Pastor Stovall invested approximately \$100,000 in TurnCoin, an SEC approved investment, for the purpose of creating a retirement fund for long-time Celebration Church employees.

"Currently, that investment is worth more than \$1.5 million. Pastors Stovall and Kerri never intended to receive any money from this investment. The restricted usage of these funds is documented with the church's Human Resources department."

This case highlights why finances and accountability are frequently mentioned throughout the Bible. No Christian should rejoice at the falling out of another, much less the founding pastor and his wife, but there are always consequences for actions no matter the person or their position.

Had there been a different judge, one who did not honor the autonomy of religious institutions, this case may have opened up a Pandora's Box of lawsuits against churches from disgruntled employees, pastors or parishioners.

Thankfully, Judge Aho explained precisely why she dismissed the case in her written judgement:

“As pled, these claims would require this Court to impermissibly examine the inner workings of Celebration Church, including the church’s internal financial policies and by laws, as well as the duties and actions of Pastor Weems. In order to determine whether Celebration Church defamed Pastor Weems as currently alleged, this Court would need to look to the time Pastor Weems was employed by the church to see whether he did or did not partake in the actions as alleged by the church and whether those actions were forbidden by the church’s bylaws and other internal policies.”

The Bible gives clear instruction on how to handle matters of this sort. Bearing witness, good faith and clear communication may have prevented this falling out between believers (Matt. 18:15-17; Eph. 4:32). {eoa}

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