
MEDIATION AND FAITH—HOW THEY WORK TOGETHER

By: Boyd Lyons

In a perfect world everyone would always act in love and there would be no conflict. However, because we do not live in a perfect world and because each of us makes mistakes and sometimes acts selfishly, every one of us frequently experiences conflict in one form or another.

When conflict is serious, people of religious faith often ask, “Why is God letting (or causing) this to happen to me?” As a follower of Christ who has been professionally involved in the resolution of disputes for decades, I have come to believe that the root of all conflict is sin. Of course, I believe that God can and does forgive personal sins and puts us into a right relationship with Him, if we ask in faith and repentance. Still, there is a sense in which the collective sin of the entire world causes unwanted consequences. One of these consequences is that we experience conflict in our lives.

How, then, does a person of faith handle conflict when it comes calling? The principles stated below have been helpful to me in dealing with personal conflict and helping others work through disputes to a successful conclusion.

Remember that conflict is also an opportunity.

God has a way of using even bad things to produce something good. Sometimes He uses conflict to draw me or those with whom I disagree closer to Him, or to actually strengthen relationships that have been shattered. I need to be sensitive to the ways that God may be working around me in a situation. The following questions are often helpful.

- How can I please and honor God in this situation?
- How have I contributed to this conflict, and what do I need to do to resolve it?
- How can I help others understand how they have contributed to this conflict?
- How can I demonstrate forgiveness and encourage a responsible solution to the conflict?

Remember that many minor offenses should be ignored or forgiven.

My tendency as a person of faith should be to forgive others, because I have been forgiven. Holding grudges and being bitter over every slight or wrong would result in a very unhappy life. I should forgive whenever I can. However, there are times when it is necessary to engage another person who has committed a wrong against me. Engagement is necessary when the actions of someone are dishonoring God, damaging relationships, hurting other people or hurting the offender. When possible I seek the counsel of at least one wise friend who is not involved in the conflict before I engage someone who has offended me or caused conflict with others.

The first principle of engaging in discussion about conflict is love.

When someone is accused of wrongdoing, they are likely to become defensive, causing meaningful discussion of the issues to break down. To avoid this, confront the issues, not the person. Ask how the other person feels about the issues, and listen to their point of view before responding. Many conflicts can be resolved in this fashion.

What if a situation can't be ignored and talking with the other person(s) involved in the conflict doesn't help? Then it may be necessary to seek the assistance of a trained and experienced mediator. A mediator is someone who does not have a personal stake in the conflict, but who is trained to listen to all sides of a dispute, identify the key issues, and help the parties work out a wise solution. The mediator doesn't decide what the parties should do, but helps them to reach a wise agreement that is in their best long term interests.

If people involved in the dispute are people of faith, it is helpful to choose a mediator who has a faith-based world view. As a Christian mediator[*], I adhere to the following guidelines:

1. I believe that God calls people to be reconciled and calls His followers to be instruments of reconciliation. I commit my service as a mediator to God as a ministry and service to Him.

2. I understand that some of those whom I seek to help through mediation will not share all of my beliefs, or any of my beliefs, and I will deal with them in love as God's children, respecting their beliefs and seeking to bring reconciliation to the problem before them.

1. Although I may share my belief in God and my understanding of what the Bible says about particular issues, I will not seek to impose any particular theology or doctrine on any participant in a mediation I conduct. I will never seek to make any participant feel guilty or uncomfortable because they do not agree with me.

2. In the mediation of cases that involve decisions concerning the support or custody of minor children, I will urge the parties to keep the best interests of the children as a primary consideration.

3. I will always exercise the highest standards of professional and ethical conduct in mediations.

4. I recognize that complete reconciliation is not always possible, but my goal in mediations will be to help the parties reach a fair and practical solution to the conflict that separates them and to be reconciled to each other to the extent practicable.

The primary purpose of mediation is resolution of specific disputes, not evangelism or theological debate. By definition, a mediator is a neutral person. The mediator must not be biased for or against any party because that party's beliefs are similar to, or different from, his own. The mediator must not pass judgment on anyone's life, behavior, or relationship with God.

A good Christian mediator recognizes that people are at different points in their understanding of God and how He impacts their lives. Christian mediators attempt to work within the framework of each party's relationship with God, not persuade the parties of their own point of view. A Christian mediator should never criticize any party based on denominational factors or theological views.

Disputes are not resolved in a vacuum. Many factors play into solving problems, and often many people who are not actually involved in the conflict play important roles. A good mediator works along side pastors,

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professional counselors, family members and friends to help people see clearly the issues involved and to come to creative and wise solutions that are practical to implement.

My hope and prayer for each one who reads this is that they will be able, with God's help, to resolve conflicts in their own lives. If you believe that a Christian mediator might be helpful to you, I would be honored to talk with you.

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[*] I have used the term "Christian mediator" because that is my own faith. However, I believe that the principles in this article and the guidelines apply to people of other faiths as well.