



## CHAPTER 13



# The Christian Conciliation Alternative

Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they will be called sons of God.

—MATTHEW 5:9

## Life Lessons—Eldon and Emily

To Eldon, it all seemed to make sense at first. The way he saw it, his customer didn't pay him for work he did. He tried everything he could think of to get the customer to pay. When nothing else worked, he had his lawyer file a lawsuit to collect the money. It wasn't even that much money in the grand scheme of things, but for a small building contractor like Eldon, it was enough. Not receiving the money made it difficult for Eldon and his wife, Emily, to stay current with some of their bills, made it necessary for them to put off a planned week at the beach, and made Eldon angrier and angrier whenever he thought about it.

But on the day Eldon signed the papers to finalize the lawsuit, he never dreamed that within a few months the situation would

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have cost him and Emily several lifelong friends and caused their church to experience an ugly and painful congregational split.

"I still don't get it," said Eldon with frustration. "I don't see why old Hoover won't just pay the money he owes me for that job!"

Emily looked at Eldon and shrugged. "Hon, neither do I. He's a stubborn man, a proud man. I guess he still blames you for the water damage from the broken pipe . . ."

Eldon raised his voice. "Emily, I told you, that pipe had nothing to do with me! It was an old pipe and it was just a coincidence that it busted while I was on the job!"

Emily paused, then asked, "Eldon, is that the way you reacted when Hoover first asked you to pay for the water damage?"

"What do you mean, Emily?" Eldon demanded. "Sure, I told him in no uncertain terms it wasn't my fault and that I wouldn't think of paying for the damage—and that was the truth. What else was I supposed to say? He was just plain wrong! But, boy, I wish I knew then that he was going to blame me anyway, and that he was going to let me finish my work and then refuse to pay me! I would have walked off the job that very day if I had only known, but I thought I could trust a fellow Christian, an elder of our own church! Who knew the guy would turn out to be a liar and a coward!"

Emily tried again. "But don't you see, Eldon, you didn't give him much of a chance to talk things out with you—maybe there's something to that story he told the pastor about the wires you'd been running getting caught on the old solder joint and breaking the pipe loose."

"No way, no way!" Eldon shot back. "I don't even want to hear another thing about Hoover and his crazy lies! And I still can't believe he was going around telling that phony story to our pastor and the other elders behind my back—calling me a liar when I wasn't even there to defend myself! I'm a professional and I know my trade, and I know I didn't damage that pipe! I have my repu-



tation to protect! And that's why I had to write to the elder board and the pastor, that's why I had to set the record straight about Hoover and all the lies he was spreading about me!

"And to think, that young pastor had the nerve to come over here and get in my face about me calling Hoover a liar and a coward in my letter! And then for him to give me that pious lecture about how the Bible says Christians shouldn't sue fellow Christians! Well, I wonder how he feels about it now that there's not enough money in the offering plate to pay his salary, now that so many of our friends have left the church with us!"

Emily had a sad look on her face. "Eldon, doesn't it bother you some of our friends didn't leave the church with us? There were some good people, old friends, people I'll really miss. And all the memories."

Eldon frowned and told her, "Forget about 'em. If they want to side with that no-good Hoover and his cronies on the elder board, then let 'em. But they're no friends of mine!" Eldon looked at Emily's face and noticed she was tearing up. "Emily, just think—the trial is coming up in only a few weeks. We'll have our day in court; we'll prove Hoover is a lying deadbeat. And we'll show that pushy pastor he's wrong! Justice will be done and we'll get the respect we deserve! And we'll get our money!"

Emily's tears began to flow. "I don't know, Eldon, I just don't know if I care about the money or any of this anymore. I just wish there was some way to go back to the way things were . . ."

### **More Life Lessons—Ronnie and Reba**

Ronnie and Reba sat down at the small table in the private conference room. "You know, Ronnie," Reba said in a surprised tone, "I hate to admit it, but there might be something to this Christian conciliation business after all. What's your take on the offer they've asked us to consider?"

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Ronnie couldn't conceal the grin forming on his face. The Christian mediation session had lasted about two hours. There were some heated words at first, but as things went on there were also some times of heartfelt sharing, some tears, and even some laughter. Now, after a few minutes of silent prayer with everyone still sitting around the big table, the mediator had asked Ronnie and Reba and the couple they'd been having so much trouble with (Mr. and Mrs. Davis) to adjourn to separate waiting areas, while she prepared a settlement proposal she hoped would be acceptable to both sides. And she had just returned to the small conference room with that proposal, which she handed to Ronnie.

Ronnie and Reba had been struggling back and forth with their new neighbors, the Davis's, for several months, mostly by way of tense and unfriendly phone messages. The trouble started one day while Ronnie and Reba were at work, when the Davis's constructed a high wooden fence between the two properties. The concept of a fence was fine with Ronnie and Reba—in fact, Ronnie and Reba themselves had often talked about installing a fence along the back of their yard for better privacy—but money was tight and the project was always deferred. The problem was that the Davis's new fence encroached on Ronnie and Reba's property by several feet, cutting off their access to part of their own yard.

Thinking at first that it was a simple mistake that could easily be taken care of if the Davis's were informed of their error, Ronnie and Reba tried stopping at the Davis's house to talk on several different evenings after work, but no one ever answered their knocks on the door. After several failed attempts at a personal visit, Ronnie was becoming a bit edgy about the situation and was able to track down the Davis's phone number. Reaching a voice-mail system when he tried to call, Ronnie let his increasing frustration get the best of him and left a rather confrontational message with instructions for the Davis's to correct the problem immediately. After another week or so of inaction, Ronnie, now even more frus-

trated, called again, leaving an even more insistent message. But again there was no response.

From time to time Ronnie and Reba could see lights or other signs of activity at the Davis house, but whenever they would call, the voice-mail system was all they could reach. And when they again attempted a personal visit, there was still no answer at the door, even though they could hear music playing inside. And the fence remained in place.

Now Ronnie and Reba were becoming convinced the Davis's were intentionally ignoring the situation. Finally, after another week or so, Reba came home from work to find a message on their own home answering machine from Mr. Davis. He sounded upset and said his wife had been emotionally shaken by hearing the "threatening" messages left by Ronnie, and insisted Ronnie stop calling her. And things only worsened from there, as several more hostile messages were exchanged, with various denials and further accusations being issued by the husbands.

The tone of the messages eventually prompted Mr. Davis to contact his lawyer for assistance, and a few days later an attorney's letter addressed to Ronnie and Reba arrived, warning them to cease and desist from their "harassment" of the Davis's. The letter did not even mention the fence. Ronnie was incensed and called his own lawyer the next morning, arranging to meet with him and bring him the letter later in the week.

When the appointment finally arrived, Ronnie and the attorney talked about the whole situation at some length. The attorney and Ronnie had first met when they were serving together on the board of a local Christian charity some years ago, and that sparked an idea in the lawyer's mind.

"Ronnie," he suggested, "I can write you a big scary letter and shoot it back at the attorney for the Davis's, disputing all their charges, making our own countercharges and, of course, bringing up the whole issue of the fence. But experience tells me

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such a letter is likely to lead merely to another letter from opposing counsel, going on the record to deny our allegations, and so on and so forth until we work something out through some long and expensive negotiation process—or we end up in court, fighting things out at even greater expense. And when it's all over, you will still be living as an enemy of your neighbors.” Ronnie acknowledged the lawyer's comments with a nod.

“I recall you are a Christian man, Ronnie,” the lawyer continued, “and, if I have my facts straight, I also recall Jesus saying something about us loving our neighbors. And, frankly, I'm tired of watching the legal system turn neighbors into enemies, and I'm tired of being a part of that ugly process.

“There's a new organization in town called the Christian Conflict Resolution Center. I met their chief mediator at a local bar association function the other week. She seems very well qualified—she's a lawyer with extensive specialized training in alternative dispute resolution from a Christian perspective. Her goal is to resolve disputes in a biblically based manner so at the end of the process, the adversaries will not only feel justice was done, but they will be fully reconciled into fellowship with each other—all with God's help, I might add! And I found out about her rates, too—I can promise you, if she's as effective as she appears to be, you will save yourself a substantial sum in legal fees if you use her services.

“So what do you think, Ronnie? Want to give it a shot? If you say 'yes,' I'm quite sure I can persuade the attorney representing the Davises to make a similar recommendation to them. Of course, they would have to agree to meet with the mediator to make any of this work.”

After some discussion and persuasion, Reba agreed with Ronnie that they ought to give this Christian mediator a chance to see what she could do, especially since it might save them some money. Ronnie let their attorney know and he got the wheels in motion. It turned out the Davises were receptive to the concept,



being active Christian believers themselves. And soon the day came for the mediation session.

The facts and circumstances the mediator was able to draw out of the parties put everything in a different and unexpected light. It turned out that within days of his family's move into the new house, Mr. Davis, an engineer, had been assigned by his employer to troubleshoot a major industrial installation project overseas. The assignment was for forty-five days, and he had not been home to supervise the fence installation. In his absence, Mrs. Davis had been sketchy on the precise whereabouts of the lot line, leading to the unintentional error in the placement of the fence. And because of his overseas location, Mr. Davis had extremely limited communication with his wife and could only call home occasionally, and never during the evenings when Ronnie and Reba were usually home.

Mrs. Davis worked the evening shift as a nurse at a local hospital, sometimes leaving her thirteen-year-old daughter home alone, always with strict instructions not to answer the phone or open the door for anyone during her absence. Mrs. Davis had become overwhelmed with the unanticipated responsibility for settling into the new house in her husband's absence and had fallen behind in checking her phone messages and other usual household responsibilities.

The Davises were now expressing a willingness to make immediate arrangements for the removal of the fence to the proper boundary line at their own expense, provided Ronnie and Reba would apologize for their antagonistic tone in communication throughout the matter.

And the mediator's settlement proposal that Ronnie and Reba were now reviewing was the reason Ronnie couldn't hold back his smile. It contained five points: (1) Ronnie and Reba would sign a note of apology to the Davis's for their conduct, (2) the Davis's would likewise sign a note of apology for *their* conduct, (3) the

Davis's would cause the fence to be promptly relocated to the correct boundary at their own expense, repairing any damage to Ronnie and Reba's yard, (4) Ronnie and Reba would, within the next thirty days, have the Davis's over for a backyard barbeque at their home, and (5) the Davis's would reciprocate with a barbeque of their own within thirty days of Ronnie and Reba's cookout.

"I say we take the offer!" exclaimed Ronnie.

"Amen!" agreed Reba. "It's a deal!"

### Biblical Insights

*When any of you has a grievance against another, do you dare to take it to court before the unrighteous, instead of taking it before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? —1 Corinthians 6:1–2 (NRSV)*

*Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother, then come and offer your gift.—Matthew 5:23–24*

*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.—Philippians 2:3–4 (NRSV)*

*But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others what you would have them do to you.—Luke 6:27–31*



*So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him.—Luke 17:3–4*

*The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.—Psalm 103:8–10*

*If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.—Matthew 18:15–17 (NRSV)*

*As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.—Ephesians 4:1–3*

*So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God—even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.—1 Corinthians 10:31–11:1*

### **Practical Counsel**

How can we provide for disputes to be resolved in a manner that honors God? Is there a realistic alternative to lawsuits and other

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litigation? God wants us to honor him in all aspects of our lives, including those inevitable personal and business disputes. God's Word provides us with clear guidelines to help us resolve conflicts in a way that glorifies him. And, in stark contrast to the secular legal system, God's way challenges us to seek the interests of others as well as our own, with a focus on preserving relationships, not "winning at any cost." A biblical approach to conciliation addresses underlying factors involved in disputes and provides a genuine opportunity for true justice and healing.

A Christian mediation and reconciliation process can be pursued simply and informally by seeking the assistance of a trusted brother or sister in Christ to help disputing parties talk through and resolve their differences, or it can be pursued formally by involving the leadership of the church or a professionally trained Christian mediator. Either way, Christian dispute resolution can spare everyone involved the misery and expense of litigation in the secular courts, while providing a much more satisfactory conclusion and a Christ-honoring witness to the watching world. And, thankfully, there are now numerous individuals and organizations throughout the country with ministries specifically devoted to facilitating Christian mediation and reconciliation. Some mediators are Christian attorneys, some are Christian counselors or social workers, some operate under the umbrella of nonprofit organizations, and some are extensions of traditional church pastoral ministries and denominational agencies.

The process of Christian dispute resolution may unfold in various ways, depending upon the history of the conflict, the stage at which assistance is sought, and the complexity of the underlying matter. In some cases, the mediator may undertake an independent investigation of the facts and circumstances, while in others the mediator may simply bring the parties together in a neutral environment for facilitated discussion and negotiation. In every case, the matter will be bathed in prayer and the Scriptures will be



opened for relevant guidance. Typically, the mediator is not empowered to make a binding decision, but rather will diligently seek to guide the parties into a mutually acceptable resolution, some uniquely crafted outcome both parties can willingly embrace.

Of course, Christian conciliation is usually a realistic alternative only if both parties are willing to become involved in such a process. (Any individual embroiled in a dispute would surely benefit from receiving trained Christian peacemaking counsel, even if the other party refuses to partake. In some cases that counsel might even include some effective strategies for encouraging the reluctant party to join in the process in spite of misgivings or skepticism.) And, yes, the common Christian faith of the parties is also normally a prerequisite to commencing a Christian reconciliation process, although there have been instances where even a non-Christian is willing to consider giving Christian arbitration or mediation a try.

One excellent way to ensure that any possible future disputes between Christian parties involved in a formal ongoing relationship (for example, landlord and tenant, employer and employee, buyer and seller, homeowner and contractor, business partners, etc.) will be resolved through a Christian conciliation process, rather than risking the unnecessary stress, expense, and unbiblical aspects of secular court litigation, is to include a Christian conciliation clause in the underlying legal agreements governing the relationship (lease, employment contract, sales agreement, construction contract, partnership agreement, etc.). The inclusion of such a clause is also a clear witness to others that you trust in God and desire to follow his principles in every aspect of your life. In simple terms, the Christian conciliation clause would state that if an unresolvable dispute arises between the parties, they agree in advance to submit the problem to biblically based Christian mediation or arbitration (binding or nonbinding, as the parties see fit) and to abide by the outcome of that process.

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In addition to their use in contractual documents, Christian conciliation clauses can also be adapted for use in estate-planning documents, such as wills and trusts, to encourage positive, God-honoring, relationship-preserving resolution of any disputes that might arise among heirs in settling an estate. Other applications of Christian conciliation clauses might include corporate bylaws, organizational rules, church governance documents, and the like.

The Bible strongly discourages us from getting involved in litigation. God knows the heavy toll a lawsuit can take on our finances, our families, and our emotions. And getting involved in a lawsuit can distract us from doing the truly important things in life, the things that will build up God's kingdom. Our witness of Christ to the world can really suffer from our involvement in litigation. So choosing voluntary Christian conciliation and advocating for the use of Christian conciliation clauses are ideal ways for Christians to stand up for Jesus and stand against the culture of unhealthy, destructive dispute resolution in which we find ourselves immersed.