

What Does Mediation Have To Do With Christianity?

Many Christians view marriage and the relationship it signifies as a reflection of the intimate relationship the human being has with God and God's presence through the Holy Spirit. The union of marriage is often equated with the union of Christ with the church, a relationship of oneness and completeness. But what happens when that union dissolves into unbearable pain and suffering? Is the divorcing couple's relationship with God also broken and dissolved? Of course, the answer to this question is a resounding no. Paul assures us of this in Romans 8:38-39 when he says that nothing can separate us from the love of God as that love is experienced in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. In spite of our faith in God's everlasting love, many divorcing couples experience condemnation, both internally and by the community of faith. This condemnation often leads to a downward spiritual spiral, an unfortunate consequence of applying the metaphor of marriage to the spiritual relationship we, as people of faith, have with God.

Aware of this spiritual tug-of-war, the divorce mediator may be one of the few people not only to lead divorcing couples toward peaceful resolution of differences and conflict but also to function in ways that reassure couples of the continuing love, forgiveness, and grace of God. Biblical principals of Shalom, reconciliation, and justice, evidence of the Spirit, are more apparent and realizable in and through a mediated approach to divorce than in an approach based on competing interests, adversarial reasoning, and heightened suspicion.

An often thought, but unspoken question about mediation is, "Why would I want to mediate?" The answer to this question has everything to do with the role mediation can have in assuring and affirming the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the divorcing couple and family.

The optimal environment for mediation is one of mutual trust and respect. Agreement becomes easier when the divorcing couple feels that each is being honest and trustworthy, that both are striving for a fair and equitable settlement. Creating such an environment is often difficult, because divorce, almost by definition, creates contrary feelings among the divorcing spouses. Creating an open and accepting environment, however, can be one of the goals of mediation.

To counter the natural tendencies of divorce to encourage mistrust and fear, the mediator works to see that love, forgiveness, and reconciliation are a part of the

divorce process. This approach stands in contrast to most approaches, emphasizing the benefits to each spouse of a cooperative, mediated approach and the spiritual benefits that would result from a less hostile divorce.

A pastoral colleague of mine has on his study wall a framed quotation from Mr. Robert Davis, which epitomizes how God's Spirit works in mediation. It reads, "Moral judgments belong to God, and it is part of the divine mercy that we do not have to undertake that heavy part of God's work, even when the judgment concerns ourselves." Not only are others free from judgment in mediation, but so are we.

When people of faith assume that others are at heart generous, caring, and compassionate, they are living Jesus' teaching to look for the log in their own eye before pointing out the speck in another's. Christians find it possible to believe God's Spirit in mediation when the spouses, with the help of the mediator if necessary, leave judgment of each other behind, taking advantage of the fresh opportunity to show understanding and support in reaching agreement.

A very dear Christian friend once described his meeting with a woman who was experiencing post-divorce complications with her former husband. The issues centered on his failure to pay spousal and child support and conflicts over the visitation schedule. My friend, a pastor gave her an assignment to pray for her former husband everyday for one week in fulfillment of their marriage vows, which, he interpreted for her, meant to love her husband until death. He explained to her that these vows did not say live with him, share the same bed with him, or be in an oppressive relationship with him, but only to love him.

That week she faithfully fulfilled the assignment. She returned to see the pastor the following week with joy in her eyes and a smile on her face and in her heart. "It works! It really works!" she exclaimed. She went on to describe how she felt less hostile toward her former husband and how in turn he talked openly and without anger about the problems they needed to resolve.

The pastor had understood Jesus' ethical imperative to love your enemies as yourself and realized that there was a reward for such love that, at times, beyond understood. More important, he shared that message with the divorced woman in a way that permitted her to experience the Savior she knew and loved.

Mediation permits couples to build on a solid foundation of respect and understanding rather than on the assumption that they must defend against each

other's hurtful tendencies. They begin with the assumption that they can work together to reach agreements that are mutually acceptable and supportive.

If evil has a stronghold, it is the hate that many divorcing spouses hold for one another. This fortress is nearly impenetrable, and it will accept self-destruction before capitulation. The guards of the fortress of hate are most often pain, fear, and rejection. Mediation may shift the focus of thoughts and actions away from assaulting the fortress to focusing on forgiveness, understanding, and compassion.

In his book, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*, Lewis Smeade says that forgiveness is not just forgetting, not just excusing, not just smothering conflict, not just accepting, not just tolerating. Rather, forgiveness is letting go of the painful past. It is the miraculous release of malice from the spirit to experience the love that restores broken relationships.

Smeades reminds his readers that the past cannot be erased, but the pain from the past can be healed. This is the reason that mediation, while acknowledging the past, withholds judgment of past actions and begins in the present. Mediation offers a fresh new beginning in which to resolve differences.

Sometimes I ask couples at the outset of mediation if the other spouse has been hurtful. Because of the nature of divorce, the answer is usually yes. Then I ask if they would like to stop hurting each other. Sometimes it is actually necessary to have each say to the other, "I would like to stop hurting you." At the moment that each realizes that the past is and can be forgiven, the couple can begin to treat each other in a new and kinder way, approaching issues with the intent of helping each other through the process. The wish they exchange is, in many instances, the first kind and encouraging message they have shared in weeks, even months. The moment is often a breakthrough of feeling and emotions.

Besides seeking justice and fairness in the marital agreement, mediation often leads to a form of reconciliation between the partners and children of a dissolving marriage. I call it a form of reconciliation because it helps bring people together who may have been alienated from each other by irreconcilable differences and from God by feelings of guilt, failure, and loneliness. The mediator demythologizes the divorce process and promotes the redemptive possibilities for both the individual and the family.

Perhaps the most compelling biblical reference to reconciliation is found in

Colossians 1:15-20. Here Paul formulates an understanding of Christ as the complete reconciler, putting into order all things visible and invisible, earthly or heavenly. Paul sees Christ holding all things together in himself through the fullness of God.

This idea provides perhaps the truest understanding of reconciliation through mediation. Through Jesus Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit, the pastoral mediator assists the divorcing couple in looking with hope toward what lies beyond the divorce while gently and carefully bringing the conflicted parties to agreement.

In a sense, the pastoral mediator dignifies the death of the marriage and nurtures the new life that begins to grow during the mediation process. This is why the question I often ask couples at the beginning of the first session...: "is this marriage over?" Is so poignant. It confronts the mediating couple with the reality of their choice to divorce, permits us to acknowledge the death of the marriage, and allows them to begin preparing for life beyond its confining walls.

At the same time, the role of the pastoral mediator is to understand the need for grief and the suffering inherent in the divorce process while hinting at the possibilities that lie ahead.

When the mediator acknowledges and celebrates the options available as part of the negotiation process, suffering is converted into creative hope, invariably turning barriers into building blocks, problems into challenges, and options into solutions.

For many couples, respecting each other in the midst of divorce is difficult, or even impossible. Therefore, rather than seek to achieve reconciliation with your divorcing partner, it is more appropriate to seek justice and fairness in the resolution of the divorce-related issues. But justice and fairness are not, themselves, void of respect and mutual acceptance, for true justice would imply that neither spouse would be unjustly deprived or treated. True fairness would require that the parties making the agreement would need to seek to understand the needs, hopes, and desires of the other.

In a theological sense, justice is that which is in conformity with the will of God. The search for justice is based on determining which of competing values deserves the highest priority, requiring the parties to put themselves in the shoes of the other in order to understand the other's hopes and fears. It is my experience that justice is best achieved when the parties approach each other looking for understanding and respect. But if that is not possible, the search for a fair resolution of the issues is often a first step toward what may, later, become reconciliation.

To put a name to the often times transcendent experience associated with mediation is to name that which most characterizes God's presence for the divorcing couple. Some people identify the sense of caring, respect, and dignity that often emerges in mediation as the presence of God. Others name it as something they personally achieved, without acknowledging the mystery that is part of the process.

Others experience a sense of peace or closure. For some this may mean simply the absence of war, the end of the battle, the release that comes when the struggle is over. For others, however, mediation brings them closer to their divorcing spouse or their children. They experience a sense of being heard, understood, and accepted.

On one hand, the mediator's objective is to assist the divorcing couple in reaching agreement by resolving differences as amicably as possible. On the other hand, it is always hoped that the process of mediation will also help couples learn to resolve differences more easily and to improve communications. When divorcing spouses not only reach agreement but also experience the desire to help the other begin to recover from the divorce itself, they may have fully experienced God's presence in a real and meaningful way.

Mediation is most successful when the participants and their children experience God's unconditional love. Through that love, they can establish new relationships among themselves and with God. Since no specific professional category of pastoral mediators exists as of this writing, divorcing couples who wish to use this unique approach to divorce may call our number to set up a time for your free consultation and to discuss this alternative in further detail.

God's grace abounds when no harm comes either to the couple or to the children and the dignity is maintained during the divorce process. The sweetest thing the mediator can hear when the final agreement is reached is that the spouses respect and care for one another, even though they know that they cannot love together as husband and wife.

Dignity can be defined in several ways. The definition that best expresses the hope of mediation is the acknowledgment of the worth of a person or thing. If couples can survive the divorce transition with a sense of worth, both for themselves and for each other, then it can be said that God has been present. Mediation, like so much of life, is most successful when the spiritual is woven into the fabric of our very real lives.

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