



A STOLEN BABY, \$200M LAWSUIT AND AN ASTONISHING RECONCILIATION

By Ken Sande | PDF at [rw360.org/\\$200M-pdf](http://rw360.org/$200M-pdf)

It's not often that pastoral counseling sets the stage for a kidnapping, a \$200 million lawsuit and crying attorneys. But that is exactly what happened when Cindy and Clark went to their pastor for marriage counseling (names changed but story used by permission).

After several meetings, the three of them somehow reached the inexplicable conclusion that the solution to their marital distress was to give their newborn baby up for adoption ... to the pastor's daughter and son-in-law, who was also a pastor in the same denomination.



Cindy and Clark later changed their minds and asked for their baby back. But by then the adoptive parents had moved to another state. When pastor Paul refused to disclose their location, Cindy and Clark appealed their case through three levels of church and denominational leadership with no success.

By the time they filed a legal motion to reverse the adoption, the statutory period had expired, closing the door to any hope of legally recovering their baby. Grieving the loss of their daughter, they filed a \$200,000,000 lawsuit against their pastor, church and denomination, alleging fraud, breach of fiduciary responsibility, negligence and spiritual abuse.

Litigation dragged on for three years, requiring Clark and Cindy to drop out of school, exhaust their savings and sell precious personal property to continue the legal process. Their frustration overflowed in an attempted kidnapping of the child by a private detective and a high-speed chase across gravel roads in North Dakota.

The danger and trauma of that incident moved one of the defense lawyers to contact me to explore the possibility of resolving the case through alternative dispute resolution (mediation or arbitration). It took another full year (while expensive litigation continued) for me to persuade all sides to move out of the courtroom and into a conciliation process designed to help the parties live out the faith and values they professed as Christians.

Two other conciliators and I met with the nine parties and four attorneys for four long days, three of which were agonizing while the fourth one was astonishing.

There was a great deal of contradictory testimony, especially as to who suggested adoption in the first place and whether church and denominational leaders had obstructed a reversal of the adoption. The longer we talked, the more self-righteous all the parties became. No one would

accept any responsibility or confess any wrong. The more each of them blamed others for the situation, the further we were from a solution.

Throughout the third day, we (the conciliators) spent time talking privately with each of the parties, empathizing with their pain and gently challenging their self-righteous attitudes and assertions. We also talked and prayed with them about ways they could live out their faith in this situation. As we read and discussed Bible passages like 1 John 1:8-9; Romans 5:8; Colossians 3:12-15; and Micah 6:8, their hearts began to soften. We then encouraged each of them to think about how they could live out the wisdom principle taught in Matthew 7:3-5, which reads:

"Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."

That night, as the parties reflected on these key elements of their faith, their hearts softened further, and their self-righteousness dissipated. When they walked into the room the next morning, I could tell from their demeanor that something had changed.

Clark asked if he could speak first. Rising to his feet and choking back tears, he admitted that his failures as a husband and father four years earlier had set the stage for this tragic situation. He also acknowledged that he had been telling his version of events for so long that he could no longer be sure if his memories were accurate. Therefore, he admitted that he may have been the one who had suggested adopting their baby to the pastor's daughter in the first place, and he had supported that action as an easy but incredibly stupid way to solve their marital conflicts. He went on to describe his deep sorrow for subjecting many people to so much pain, anger and fear. Finally, he said that to bring this ordeal to an end, he and Cindy had decided to drop their lawsuit and trust God to guide the church leaders to make whatever restitution they thought was just and appropriate.

But it was Clark's next words that blew everyone away ...

Turning to the adoptive parents, he said that he and Cindy were sorry for terrifying them with the attempted kidnapping the previous year. After pausing for a moment, he went on to say that he and Cindy realized that the adoptive parents truly loved their daughter and that she would be traumatized if she was taken from their home after knowing them as her parents for four years. Therefore, Clark and Cindy had decided to drop all efforts to regain custody and instead wanted to bless them as their daughter's family.

There was a gasp of surprise and relief and then a wave of tears from the adoptive parents when they realized they no longer needed to fear losing their daughter.

When things calmed down, we all witnessed a vivid example of the "Golden Result" (people tend to treat us the way we treat them). Inspired by Clark's example, Pastor Paul stood up and walked across the room to kneel in front of Clark and Cindy. When his shocked attorney rose from his seat to object, I asked him to allow his client to say what was on his heart.

Paul poured out his heart in one of the most earnest confessions I've ever heard. Although he still recalled that Clark and Cindy had initiated the discussion of adoption and had suggested his daughter as a potential parent, Paul confessed that he had utterly failed them as their pastor

by not guiding them onto a different course or refusing to be part of such a process. With tears in his eyes, he admitted that he compounded his wrongs by not responding immediately to their request to reverse the adoption.

In an amazing display of grace, Clark and Cindy knelt and embraced him and promised their forgiveness. When Paul asked how they could forgive such a terrible wrong, they said, "God has forgiven all of our sins against him. How could we not forgive your sins against us?"

Then the president of the denomination got up from his chair and walked across the room. Dropping to his knees beside Paul, he confessed that the denomination had failed the young couple by not intervening in the situation as soon as it came to their attention. He admitted that his fear of involvement in a legal conflict and failure to live out the peacemaking principles set forth in Scripture had contributed directly to their loss.

At that point, so many people were crying that I had to call a recess. When I walked out into the hallway a few minutes later, I saw one of the defense attorneys looking out a window. I could tell from Bruce's trembling body that he, too, was crying.

I walked up beside him, put my hand on his shoulder and asked if he was OK. With tears running down his cheeks, he said, "What is going on in that room? There is a power in that room that I can feel. What is it?"

His question opened the door for me to explain how the parties were finally living out the central feature of their faith: **the gospel of Jesus Christ**.

"Gospel" literally means "good news." This good news is that although our sins have separated us from God, and no amount of good works on our part can wash them away, God loves us so much that he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to pay for our sins by dying on the cross on our behalf and to be resurrected to give new life to everyone who trusts in him (see John 3:16).

After describing the gospel to Bruce, I explained that when people put their trust in Christ, he comes into their lives and transforms them into new creations with new purposes and powers to imitate his kindness, mercy and love. As 2 Corinthians 5:17-19 promises:

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation."

I pointed out how the parties in the case had forgotten about the gospel for the last four years, but today they remembered how merciful God has been to them. As a result, they were finally seeking to live out his love and justice toward one another.

When we reconvened a while later, one of the other conciliators led a short devotional on Philippians 2:1-11, Micah 6:8 and Numbers 5:5-7, emphasizing the mercy and sacrificial example of Christ and his call for all of those involved in this situation to begin living up to the faith they professed by doing justice and earnestly looking out for the interests of others.

Within a few hours, we had worked out an arrangement to allow Clark and Cindy to begin rebuilding a relationship with the child they had not seen in four years ... an outcome that no court could have legally compelled and that was worth more than any amount of money.

The denomination voluntarily offered the couple a generous restitution package to get their lives back on track, which included compensation for all their legal expenses, compensation for their attorney, a full college scholarship to enable Clark to get back on track with his education, and a home for their family to live in as they moved ahead with their lives. The denomination also committed to investing a significant amount of money to train its pastors, as well as its state and national leaders, in biblical conflict resolution.

But what was most meaningful to Cindy was the surprise she received a few weeks later.

During our conciliation meetings, she had shared how she had been forced to sell a family heirloom piano to pursue their legal battle. This personal loss was not forgotten by the denominational president. A few days after Clark and Cindy moved into their new home and he began his classes, a van pulled into their driveway. Dropping the tailgate, the workmen rolled out a beautiful new piano. They handed Cindy a note from the denominational president, which read:

“I regret that we’ve been unable to locate the piano that you had to sell four years ago. I know that it can never be replaced, but I hope that this piano will bring you comfort and remind you of how very sorry we are for what you went through, and how grateful we are for the grace and forgiveness you have shown to us in this matter.”

Nothing could undo the many wrongs and tragic developments that had occurred in this situation, but through the process of biblical peacemaking, the parties were able to live out the central principles of their faith, experience the transforming power of the gospel, do justice by making restitution for their wrongs and experience genuine forgiveness and reconciliation. No arbitration award, even millions of dollars, could have produced a result that was so just and healing.

This same process is being used every day to resolve a wide variety of conflicts between Christians, including divorce and custody disputes, church divisions, leadership transitions, business and employment conflicts and other lawsuits between believers.

If you would like to learn how to resolve conflict in ways that encourage both justice and reconciliation, you can begin by reading [The Peacemaker](#) or by going through RW360's [Relational Peacemaking Course](#).

God has used these principles to bring repentance, forgiveness, justice and reconciliation to hundreds of situations that seemed beyond hope ... just as he did for Clark and Cindy when they finally began to live out the peacemaking principles and values of their faith.

- Ken Sande

Action Steps

- If you would like to learn how to resolve conflict in ways that encourage both justice and reconciliation, you can begin by reading [The Peacemaker](#) or by going through RW360's [Relational Peacemaking Course](#).
- Would you like your church, ministry or business to be prepared to respond to serious conflict in a biblically faithful way? If so, please take advantage of RW360's [training resources](#) that you can use to equip your own people to be peacemakers, conflict coaches and mediators.