

## Godly Negotiation

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Genesis

Two instances in Abraham's life demonstrate techniques for godly negotiations. The first is Abraham's dispute with Abimelech over water rights. The second is Abraham's negotiation over a burial plot for his wife Sarah.

When Abraham and Sarah entered the country of King Abimelech, Abimelech awarded Abraham free grazing rights to whatever land he wanted. Subsequently, a dispute erupted over a certain well of water that Abraham had dug but Abimelech's servants seized. Abraham complained to Abimelech and pursued the matter with the King until both men entered into a sworn agreement. The final contract publicly acknowledged Abraham's right to the well and therefore his continued business activity in the region.

While earlier in Genesis Abraham gave up his right to land that was rightfully his to keep, in this situation Abraham doggedly protected what was his. The narrator does not imply that Abraham's tough negotiation strategy was an act of low faith. On the contrary – the account concludes with worship. Rather, Abraham is a model of a wise and hard-working person who makes fair use of appropriate legal protections available to him. In the business of shepherding, access to water was essential.

Abraham could not have continued to provide for his animals, workers, and family without it. Abraham's rights to the water, and consequently his negotiation with Abimelech, were matters of extreme importance.

Like Abraham, people in every kind of work have to discern when to act generously to benefit others, and when to protect resources for the benefit of their organizations. When we make a decision on whether to negotiate fiercely for our own rights, it is not only a matter of who is in the right, but also of how the outcome will affect relationships with those around us. In the case of Abimelech, it seems that Abraham's forcefulness actually improved relationships between the two parties. The dispute originated because Abraham had not asserted his position when first encountering Abimelech. To establish an ongoing peace between the two parties, Abraham's clear instance on his rights was the only way to negotiate effectively.

When Sarah died, Abraham engaged in a different but no less exemplary negotiation to buy a burial plot for her. He conducted the negotiations openly and honestly in the presence of witnesses, taking due care for the needs of both himself and the seller. Their dialogue took place at the gate of the city where business was done in public. Abraham asked for the owner of a field with a cave appropriate for a burial site, and offered to buy it at full price. Ephron, the owner, overheard the request and offered the field as a gift. Because this would not have resulted in Abraham having

permanent claim, he politely offered to pay full market value for it. Contrary to the staged bargaining that was typical of business transactions, Abraham immediately agreed to Ephron's price and paid it "according to the weights current among the merchants" (Genesis 23:16). Why did Abraham pay full price? He could have been so wealthy that he did not need to bargain, or he could have been wishing to buy a measure of good will along with the land. Abraham received the title deed to the property with its cave that became the important burial site for Sarah and later Abraham himself.

As in Abraham's negotiation with Abimelech, all parties came away with a clear understanding of what belonged to whom, and with a good working relationship intact.

In all negotiations Abraham modeled the core values of integrity, transparency, and business acumen. He communicated clearly, with sensitivity to the negotiation process and with respect for the other person. Thus, Abraham left each negotiation with what he needed, and also with good relationships that blessed him into posterity.