



Reformed hermeneutics: A hermeneutic that fits the occasion?

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Abstract

Despite the Spirit-nature of Calvin's hermeneutic, he does not provide the reader with either explanations or concrete examples of the way in which the Spirit is involved in the interpretation process (Nel 2020:8).¹ In this article, I present a contribution to the ways in which the hermeneutical process of communal spiritual discernment during the council of Jerusalem, as recorded in Acts 15:1–35, can engage with this aperture in Calvin's hermeneutic. As an integral part of this communal spiritual discernment process, the engagement of the council, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, with the biblical text is also highlighted. Reformed hermeneutics can, from the perspective of a process of communal spiritual discernment, be described as a hermeneutic that fits the occasion.

Keywords

Acts; Calvin; discernment; hermeneutics; Holy Spirit

Introduction

Johan Christiaan Beker described the texture of Paul's hermeneutic as a "hermeneutic that fits the occasion" (Beker 1980:94).² The contextual (dare I say missional?) nature of Paul's letters was, of course, Beker's reference point for this statement. In this article, I adopt Beker's famous statement

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- 1 Keener (2016:33 of 44) indicates that a Pentecostal hermeneutic is simply a Christian hermeneutic. Ultimately, a Christian hermeneutic is a Spirit hermeneutic.
 - 2 Beker was the Richard J. Dearborn Professor of New Testament Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. He served for thirty distinguished years at Princeton between 1964 and 1994. Beker was a "person steeped in Calvinist faith" (Migliore 1995:1).

and adapt it to present a description of a Reformed hermeneutic, namely, as a hermeneutic which fits the occasion.³

“Even the noblest and best-intentioned groups will invariably experience some measure of conflict” (Singfiel 2018:11). The relationship between Jew and Gentile – presented in the form of a robust debate on the role of circumcision in salvation – has been described as the primary conflict in the early church, namely, an ethnic conflict (Bennema 2013:753). In Acts 15:1–35 the matter comes sharply into focus as the council in Jerusalem takes up the responsibility to provide guidance on this most serious of matters in the early church.

The need for this study arises from personal experience of conflict on two levels. First, from the experience of conflict as a minister in a local congregation, I have been left with a deep-seated desire to develop a deeper insight into a theology of biblical conflict-management. Second, from the experience of conflict in ecclesial leadership, I have been left with a deep-seated desire to develop a deeper insight into a theology of biblical communal spiritual discernment as a response to ecclesial conflict situations. Though this study does not pretend to represent a complete theology of either biblical conflict-management, or biblical communal spiritual discernment as an expression of biblical conflict-management, the current study does attempt to provide the reader with a larger hermeneutical framework from which to engage more fruitfully with both aspects of biblical theology.⁴

Luke provides a rich description of the process of communal spiritual discernment in Acts 15:1–35 as an attempt from ecclesial leadership to deal with the ethnic conflict in the early church. Communal spiritual discernment is, oftentimes, not a simple, linear, or tidy process. Spiritual

3 This paper was presented at the *Mirrors and Windows Conference* in Stellenbosch at the Faculty of Theology which took place from 17–19 October 2022. The conference aimed to explore local expressions and contributions of the Reformed tradition.

4 This article serves as the first of a four-volume effort in this regard. The second article, which has already been submitted to the *STJ* for publication, attempts to focus more specifically on an approach to conflict-management from the biblical text of Acts 15:36–41, namely, healthy separation. The third article, which is currently being finalized for submission to the *STJ*, attempts to read the letter to Philemon from the perspective of Paul as mediator in a situation of relational conflict within the community of faith. Finally, the planned fourth article to be submitted to the *STJ*, will attempt a discussion of 1 Corinthians 6:1–11 as an example of avoidance in a situation of ecclesial conflict.

discernment includes “seeking to know and do the will of God” (Reed 2016:47). The process of communal spiritual discernment in Acts 15:1–35 can be described as an interplay between three components, namely, rational debate, sensitivity for affections, as well as a contemplative gaze on God (De Villiers 2013:151). The council, I suggest, advocates for the “erasure of enmity due to difference” within the Christian community (Campbell 2017:10). This effort was characterised, amongst others, by a creatively faithful hermeneutical approach, described as the process of communal spiritual discernment, exemplified by the decree which was compiled during the council in Jerusalem in Acts 15:1–35.

This essay attempts to provide guidelines for a Reformed hermeneutic from the description of the process of communal spiritual discernment in Acts 15:1–35. I attempt to do this by focusing on three aspects. First, I present a short overview of John Calvin’s approach to the interpretation of the biblical text, with a specific emphasis on Calvin’s understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in this process of interpretation. Second, I present a short overview of the process of hermeneutics. Third, I present some guidelines for the process of communal spiritual discernment as can be gathered from Acts 15:1–35. I suggest that when a hermeneutical engagement with the biblical text is viewed as an integral part of a larger hermeneutical process of communal spiritual discernment, the biblical text can fruitfully function as a central aspect in this process in a manner which faithfully dialogues with the challenges, experiences, and the opportunities of the present context which is characterised by a situation of conflict. The reading of Acts 15:1–35 is done with a focus on the inner texture, intertexture, as well as the sacred texture of the text.⁵

In this way, it is suggested, that a Reformed hermeneutic which finds its praxis in the Christian ecumenical mission, will be characterised by an attitude of reconciliation – even as we acknowledge that all interpretations

5 Inner texture treats relationships among word-phrase and narrational patterns that produce argumentative and aesthetic patterns in texts (Robbins 1996b:46). Intertexture (Robbins 1996b:40–70) refers to the relation of the text to other texts, oral, written, cultural, social, and historical. Sacred texture (Robbins 1996a:4) refers to the manner in which a text communicates insights into the relationship between the human and the divine. See Robbins (1996a & 1996b) for more details on the different aspects of these three textures.

of the Bible are not equally valid, and the process of interpretation is not innocent (Lategan 2009). Reformed hermeneutics can, therefore, be described as a hermeneutic that fits the occasion which comes to expression as a process of communal spiritual discernment in response to a situation of conflict.

In the following section, I will present a short overview of Calvin's approach to the interpretation of the biblical text, focusing on his understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation.

Calvin and Scripture

Pneumatology has been referred to as the Achilles heel of Reformed theology considering its largely marginalized status (Nel 2020:7). The Swiss Reformer John Calvin (1509–1564) is a notable exception to this rule.⁶ Calvin referred extensively to the Spirit as *Magister veritatis* (Master of truth), “the Seal of the Gospel that interprets the Bible for the preacher” (2020:1). The central image which John Calvin used to describe Scripture, is that of a pair of spectacles. In the same way that spectacles provide clarity of sight for those who are weak in sight, so Scripture presents the true God with clarity (Bartholomew 2015:17 of 32). Scholars emphasize the conviction that Calvin's theological insights are the result of his continuous interpretation of the Bible (McKim 2015:14 of 20). Calvin wrote, lectured, and delivered sermons based on his interpretation of the Bible. Even though Calvin does not present the reader with an “elaborate hermeneutic”, certain hermeneutical principles can be gathered from his different publications (Nel 2020:2). Calvin's hermeneutic can be described as a hermeneutic which strives for harmony and peace (Hoegger 2013:92). Calvin encouraged the reading and interpreting of the biblical text within the “communion of churches” (Hoegger 2013:95). He was critical of interpretations which threatened the peace and unity. Calvin has been

6 In highlighting Calvin's Spirit hermeneutic, I do not intend to minimize the presence of this very same Spirit hermeneutic in other prominent Reformers. Luther, as an example, was deeply dependant on the Spirit in order to discern the meaning of Scripture (Keener 2016:37 of 44). My choice in focusing on Calvin's Spirit hermeneutic is primarily determined by my own denominational commitment. As an ordained minister in the Dutch Reformed Church in Southern Africa, I have been steeped in the Calvinist tradition from the cradle.

called the father of the ecumenical movement. He had a consensus-seeking approach to matters of importance (Van Wyk 2010:226 & 228)⁷. A certain logic was at work in Calvin’s understanding of the relationship between unity, the truth and the biblical text. For Calvin, there can be no unity without truth, and through the biblical text this truth is revealed in Jesus Christ. The biblical text, therefore, needs to be read and interpreted with respect and soberness. Such an approach includes an awareness of the historical determination, kerygmatic structure of focus, soteriological motive, eschatological focus, knowledge of revelation and theo-doxological finality (Nel 2020:3). According to Calvin, the biblical text is the “rule of all rules” (*norma normans*), whilst tradition – though important and valuable – is a “secondary norm” (*norma normata*) (Hoegger 2013:93–94). Calvin’s interpretation of the biblical text has Jesus Christ as its primary focus. Calvin describes the name of Jesus as:

Oil and condiment, without which all meat would be dry ... salt to give flavour to every doctrine, which otherwise would be tasteless. In other words, it is honey for the palate, melody to our ears, joy to our heart; medicine for the soul; and every discussion or dispute is foolishness if His name does not resonate (2013:94–95).

Ultimately, since human beings need illumination, it is the Holy Spirit that provides understanding and insight into the meaning of the biblical text (Nel 2020:2).⁸ The primary point of departure for Calvin’s hermeneutics, is that the Spirit alone can know the things of God (2020:4). The Holy Spirit is the great and decisive hermeneutical factor (2020:7).

Unfortunately, however, Calvin does not present the reader with examples or a description of the way in which the Spirit is involved in the process of interpretation. I propose that the process of communal spiritual discernment, as it is presented in Acts 15:1–35, can be fruitfully utilized to engage this aperture in Calvin’s hermeneutic. Before engaging with Acts 15:1–35, however, I present a short overview of the process of hermeneutics.

7 Luther, in contrast, was more interested in the “true church and not the one church” (emphasis in original) (Van Wyk 2010:222).

8 The Latin phrase *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum* captures this reality for Calvin. It can be translated as “the internal testimony of the Spirit” (Nel 2020:4).

Hermeneutics

The specific focus in this article is the role of biblical hermeneutics, expressed as a process of communal spiritual discernment, in the missional praxis of the church. This section attempts to provide terminological clarity which should enable the research to progress in a clear and vivid manner.

What is hermeneutics?⁹ Thiselton (2009:4 of 24) describes hermeneutics as the exploration of “how we read, understand and handle texts, especially those written in another time or in a context of life different from our own.” Thiselton (2009:4 of 24) also makes the helpful distinction between exegesis and interpretation on the one hand, and hermeneutics on the other hand. Whilst exegesis and interpretation refer to the “*actual processes of interpreting texts*” (2009:4 of 24) (emphasis in original), hermeneutics “also includes the second-order discipline of asking critically *what exactly we are doing when we read, understand or apply texts*” (2009:4 of 24) (emphasis in original). Hermeneutics surveys the “*conditions and criteria that operate to try to ensure responsible, valid, fruitful, or appropriate interpretation*” (2009:4 of 24) (emphasis in original).

In a seminal work from a South African scholar, Smit (1987) presents the conditions and criteria of the hermeneutical process as a dynamic process of understanding characterised by six dimensions. First, the text itself. To better understand the meaning in a text, the reader asks historical, grammatical, as well as literary questions of the text (1987:24). Second,

9 Due to limited space, this section attempts to provide only a short overview of the process of hermeneutics with relevance to the topic of study. More detailed and helpful works about biblical hermeneutics include:

Ferguson, D.S. 2016. *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Introduction*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock.

Kaiser Jr., W.C. & Silva, M. (eds.). 2007. *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Mburu, E. 2019. *African Hermeneutics*. Cumbria: HippoBooks.

Nel, M. 2018. *An African Pentecostal Hermeneutics: A Distinctive Contribution to Hermeneutics*. Oregon: Wipf & Stock.

Porter, S.E. & Stovell, B.M. (eds.). 2012. *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic.

Wright, N.T. 2020. *Interpreting Scripture: Essays on the Bible and Hermeneutics*. London: SPCK Publishing.

the world behind the text. This dimension attempts to answer the question regarding the origin of the text. The speaker, audience, *sitz im leben*, and the social dynamic are some of the important aspects which deserve the attention of the reader in this dimension (1987:26–29). Third, the world in front of the text (reception history and tradition of the text). In this dimension the reader takes seriously the wider community of interpreters of the text. The text has a history of interpretation which serves as a megaphone which selects, strengthens, and emphasises certain aspects of a text (1987:30–33). Fourth, criticism and suspicion. In this dimension the subjective nature of the interpretive process is acknowledged and critically evaluated and sifted (1987:36). Fifth, the hermeneutical spiral. This dimension acknowledges that the conversation with a text is never completed or finally dealt with. In light of specific people, in specific circumstances and with specific needs, the pre-understanding of the text becomes a new understanding of the text in conversation with the text itself. This new understanding then become a pre-understanding in light of new circumstances, etc. In this way, the interpreter acknowledges that the text is not uncommunicative. The text is understood to have an abundance of meaning. The reader strives to allow the text to communicate in light of the context, and not to simply become the ventriloquist of the text (1987:40–41). Sixth, the context of the interpreter. One of the dangers involved in the hermeneutical spiral concept, is the danger of thinking that the text can say anything. Even as the complexity of context becomes a conversation partner of the text, the context should never be allowed to lord it over the text itself in such a manner that the text is simply misused to confirm the reader's own prior convictions (1987:44–46).

Both Thiselton & Smit confirm the multi-faceted nature of hermeneutics. In a pioneering work, Arrington (1994:104) says as much. He refers to hermeneutics as the distinctive nature and function of the biblical text, as well as the roles of the Holy Spirit, the Christian community, grammatical-historical research, and personal experience in the process of the interpretation of Scripture.

I suggest that a Reformed biblical hermeneutic can, therefore, benefit much from embracing the exegetical and interpretive approach to the biblical text as an integral, though not an exclusive, part of the hermeneutical process known as a process of communal spiritual discernment. Discernment can

be described as both a gift and a learned ability to “think, desire, know, feel, choose and do what is right for the present moment, and to influence future circumstances for the welfare and common good of others” (Joubert 2019:144). Aquino (2017:168) describes discernment as “the ability to weigh properly all the relevant pieces of information and to render an apt judgement concerning the redirection of thoughts and the right course of action.” South African missiologist Nelus Niemandt (2019:151) describes discernment in terms of a triologue, namely, a discerning interaction between the church, the biblical text, and the culture. In this third and final section of the research, I propose a reading of Acts 15:1–35 which appreciates this triologue at work in Luke’s narrative description of events before, during, and after the council in Jerusalem.

It is within the broader scope of a process of communal spiritual discernment that I now proceed to an engagement with the biblical text of Acts 15:1–35.

Conflict management through the process of communal spiritual discernment in Acts 15:1–35

One of the primary characteristics of the early church, as it is presented to us in the canon of Scripture, is the tension and conflict between individuals and groups in ecclesial leadership. Despite this tension and conflict, I believe ecclesial leadership in the early church – as it is presented to us in the biblical canon – actively pursued faithfully creative hermeneutical resolutions to situations of conflict which strived to achieve peace, wholeness, and reconciliation.

The potential for conflict tends to be higher in diverse teams. One of the characteristics of the early church was its diverse make-up. Campbell (2017:215 of 282) provides a timely reminder that, even as Jews and Gentiles are in the process of being transformed in Christ, their distinctiveness and differences remain. The primary conflict in the early church, namely, an ethnic conflict (Bennema 2013:753) manifested itself in significant

ways in ecclesial leadership.¹⁰ Conflict has been categorised in terms of relationship, task, and process conflict. First, relational conflict happens because of reciprocal discordance. Frustration and irritation develop into robustly negative feelings over time. Second, task conflict comes to the fore when there is difference in the expectation of how a task should be done. Third, process conflict might be the result of differences regarding how a task should be done, the how of a resource allocation, or the responsibility of group members. These are differences about ideas, sequencing, and priorities. Personal likes and dislikes do not form a part of this conflict-dynamic (Singiel 2018:12–13). In many instances conflict escalates as a result of a combination of, or an interplay between all three of these categories – as, I suggest, is the case at the council of Jerusalem.

Christensen and Johnson provide four conflict management schemes from the New Testament, namely, arbitration, separation, avoidance, and negotiation (Visser & Mamula 2018:6 of 15). Negotiation is the approach to conflict management which is relevant to the current research. Negotiation “requires a trained, neutral third party who facilitates a process” (2018:6 of 15). Matt 5 and 18, Acts 15, as well as Philemon serve as examples of negotiation.¹¹ The description of the process of communal spiritual

10 Consider some examples of this conflict in the early church:

First, from 1 Corinthians 1:12 one group within the congregation associated with Paul and another group associated with Peter. Second, from Galatians 2:11 we read of the conflict between Paul and Peter as it escalated in Antioch. Third, James 2:24, states: “You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.” Could this be read as standing in tension with Paul’s reference to justification by faith and not by works (cf. Rom 3:27–28; 4:5; 9:32)? Fourth, from 2 Peter 3:15–16 we can gather a sense of tension in the following words: “Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. *His letters contain some things that are hard to understand*, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction” (my emphasis).

11 Examples of arbitration: arbitration can be found in 1 Corinthians 5, as well as Acts 8:20–23. Arbitration is defined as “a defined announcement by a recognized authority” which seeks to “settle the matter with a ruling” (2018:6 of 15). In the example from 1 Corinthians 5, it can be gathered that arbitration is not always successful. A form of arbitration “in the form of *official church action*” (emphasis in original) (2018:6 of 15) is found in Acts 15.

Examples of separation: separation does not establish reconciliation, but it ends the dispute. The example from Acts 15:36–41 shows the practice of separation. 1 and 2 John, as well as 2 Thessalonians 3 also serve as examples of separation. In the former example

discernment during the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15:1–35 serves as a case-study in coming to a more nuanced insight into the nature of hermeneutics in the following section.

The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:1–35

De Villiers (2013:135–136) alerts the reader’s attention to the significance of the events described in Acts 15:1–35.¹² Not only does Luke’s central placement of the narrative indicate its significance, but two other aspects confirm the significance of the events described in Acts 15:1–35. Both Luke’s indication that some travelled as far as 250 miles for this event, as well as the fact that all the central characters in the book of Acts meet in one place to discuss this matter, serves to further confirm the significance of these events. What is at stake in the council of Jerusalem, is “a vital spiritual issue” (2013:136), namely, the concept of salvation and its relationship to circumcision. The book of Acts falls into two parts, namely, Jerusalem in the first part, and Paul in the second part. In the middle of the book – in Acts 15:1–35 – they shake hands (Trobisch 2010:120).

Acts 15:1–35 is here presented as a case study to identify crucial aspects involved in the process of communal spiritual discernment as an expression of Reformed hermeneutics. The fourfold pattern identified by De Villiers (2013:137–147) in Acts 15:1–35 will be closely followed in this section, namely, discerning together, discernment through debate, discernment, and wisdom of the past, and, finally, discernment and affections.¹³

entire groups of people leave the church because of concern over matters of teaching, whilst the latter example sees Paul encouraging the church to have nothing to do with a certain member (2018:6 of 15).

Examples of avoidance: avoidance “includes accepting the wrong of others without retaliation” (2018:6 of 15). In 1 Corinthians 6 Paul encourages the congregation to suffer being wronged without initiating a new conflict by means of a lawsuit. James 4:10–12 advises God be the judge whilst the church allow differences to exist side by side.

12 My own position is that the events recorded in Galatians 2:1–10 refers to Acts 11:30, whilst the Antioch incident referred to in Galatians 2:11–14 precede the Acts 15:1–35 council in Jerusalem.

13 As was indicated in the introduction of this paper, the inner texture, intertexture, and the sacred texture of Acts 15:1–35 will serve as the exegetical method of choice in this instance. From such a reading of the biblical text, I suggest, these four aspects of discernment can be distinguished.

Discerning together: Communal storytelling, debating and affections

Communal reflection is a pattern in Acts (De Villiers 2013:137). In one example of this pattern Acts 15:1–35 presents a description of a large and diverse group of people involved in the discernment process as a reaction to a situation of conflict.¹⁴ This large and diverse group include individuals in their capacity as leaders of the community such as Paul, James, Barnabas, Peter, Judas, and Silas, but also different groups such as the Pharisees (Acts 15:5) and Jewish groups from the circumcision (Acts 15:1). Different churches are also involved in the discernment process, namely, the church in Antioch (Acts 15:3) and Jerusalem (Acts 15:4). It is noteworthy that “everyone, even the bitterest of opponents” (2013:138) is a part of the council in Jerusalem. Acts 15:22 explicitly states that the “whole church”, ὅλη τῆ ἐκκλησίᾳ, was present at the council in Jerusalem.

The role of “communal storytelling” (Reed 2016:51) is also a characteristic of the process of discernment in the narrative of Acts 15:1–35 which can be highlighted. The Jerusalem council had the task of interpreting Scripture in light of the experiences of the early believers. Keener (2014:9 of 91) highlights these experiences as the dramatic spread of the Gentile ministry, perhaps some Jerusalemite complaints about this reality, as well as miracle accounts which suggest that God is with this mission. The Pharisees, Peter, Paul, and Barnabas (Acts 15:7–12) all present their stories and beliefs, as well as experiences regarding the matter at hand. Once Peter has shared his own experience (15:7–11), Paul and Barnabas shared their experience (15:12). In a compelling moment, the whole council “became silent”, ἐσίγησεν, as they listened. In this moment the council “recognizes the divine actions” (De Villiers 2013:141). James, for his part, also presents his “own judgement”, ἐγὼ κρίνω (Acts 15:19), by engaging the experiences heard in dialogue with the testimony from Scripture.

Debate was another characteristic of the process of communal spiritual discernment during the council. According to Acts 15:6, “the apostles and the elders met to consider this question”, ἰδεῖν περὶ τοῦ λόγου τούτου. In

14 For a detailed discussion on Acts 10–15, see Fowl, S.E. 2008. *How the Spirit Reads and How to Read the Spirit in Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation*. Oregon: Wipf & Stock. 97–127.

Acts 15:7 Luke indicates that “after much discussion”, πολλῆς δὲ ζητήσεως γενομένης, “Peter got up and addressed them”. The word ζητήσεως (from the root form ζήτησις) in 15:7 can be variously translated as a search for information, an investigation, a matter of dispute, a controversial question, a debate, or an argument (Arndt et.al. 2000:428–429). From this understanding it can be deduced that debating during the council was “heated and emotional” (De Villiers 2013:142). The debating at the council itself was, of course, preceded by what seems to be even more vigorous debating with the group from Judea. Luke describes the situation as a “sharp dispute and debate”, στάσεως καὶ ζητήσεως (Acts 15:2).

These sharing of stories and experiences can, therefore, also be connected to the importance which the council placed on affections, namely, “feelings, emotions and intuitions” (De Villiers 2013:145). De Villiers (2013:145–146) is emphatic in stating that this dimension of discernment is one of the most neglected dimensions. An acknowledgement and an appreciation of the affective dimension of discernment emphasises the awareness that discernment goes beyond rational reflection and a considering of theological content (2013:146). The council’s letter to Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia (Acts 15:22–29) also places a specific focus on affective matters, mentioning that the believers were “disturbed” and were experiencing “troubling minds”, ἐτάραξαν ὑμᾶς λόγοις ἀνασκευάζοντες τὰς ψυχὰς ὑμῶν (Acts 15:24), because of the message of the Pharisees (Acts 15:1). Other negative emotions which occur as a result of the message of the Pharisees, are also mentioned. In Acts 15:28 the council does not want to “burden”, βάρος, the Gentile believers, nor does the council want to “cause difficulty”, παρενοχλεῖν (Acts 15:19), for them – both instances serve as a reference to the results of the message of the Pharisees.

The contrast between these negative emotions and the resultant positive emotions based on the communal spiritual discernment process during the council of Jerusalem, is remarkable. Luke portrays the unity and the agreement present between those attending the council in Jerusalem. In Acts 15:25 the council “all agreed”, ὁμοθυμαδόν, in terms of the decision to send Barnabas and Paul, as well as Judas and Silas to communicate with the believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia. Judas and Silas provided fellow believers with encouragement, παρεκάλεσαν, and strength, ἐπεστήριξαν (Acts 15:32). They were “sent off ... with the blessing of peace”, μετ’ εἰρήνης

(Acts 15:34). De Villiers (2013:147) describes the results of the council's decisions as follows: "The church is at peace, no longer in turmoil because of the divisive discernment of the Pharisaic group".

Even though there exists a mutuality within the relationships of those present at the council, the church in Jerusalem enjoys priority in this relationship (De Villiers 2013:141). The church in Jerusalem provided leadership and influence at the council. At various stages during Luke's narrative, the church in Jerusalem is consulted regarding matters of concern.¹⁵ This authority of the church in Jerusalem is closely connected with the "apostles and elders", τοὺς ἀποστόλους καὶ πρεσβυτέρους (Acts 15:2, 6). This authority is derived from "their knowledge, insight and experience of the ministry of Jesus and their empowerment by the Holy Spirit" (2013:140). The apostles and the elders have reliable practical wisdom as a result. The attitude of these leaders towards their own authority, makes the authority of the Jerusalem church very attractive. This attitude is best displayed through the mutuality of the relationship between the apostles and elders, and Paul and Barnabas (as representatives of the church in Antioch). Paul and Barnabas are included in the delegation of the council sent to Antioch, and they are recommended and highly spoken of (Acts 15:22, 25–26). The church in Jerusalem has an astute awareness of authority and leadership as can be seen from its reference to authorisation (Acts 15:24), and "requirements" (Acts 15:28). The choice of Judas and Silas were done because they were leaders (Acts 15:22), ἡγουμένους.

One of the defining characteristics of the process of spiritual discernment at the council was communal reflection expressed in terms of the sharing of experiences by means of storytelling. The different experiences and beliefs were debated. This debating was done in respect of the affective realities which accompanied such a significant matter as the nature of salvation and the implications thereof. Even as the mutuality of relationships were emphasised, the church in Jerusalem enjoyed priority in this relationship. The authority and leadership of the church in Jerusalem is described as an attractive authority based on the attitude and practical wisdom of the apostles and elders.

15 See Acts 11:2, 18, 27; 21:18.

A description of the textual engagement of the council is provided in the following section.

Discerning by means of past wisdom: Engagement with sacred texts

The council in Jerusalem not only incorporated the experiences of believers, as well as the practical wisdom of the apostles and the elders into the communal process of discernment. The council also incorporated existing wisdom from the past, in the form of sacred Jewish texts, as a point of reference for discernment in the current situation. In this aspect, the “process of discernment moves beyond the cognitive level of decision-making to reflection on the divine presence in their midst and the consequences for the life of the church and the issue under reflection” (De Villiers 2013:145).

The engagement of the Jerusalem council with the written Jewish texts, can be considered in two movements. First, the decision regarding the inclusion of Gentiles into God’s family were based on an engagement with sacred Jewish texts in light of the experiences of Paul, Peter, and Barnabas, as well as after some rigorous debate among those present at the council. To answer the question of how Gentiles were to be incorporated into the family of God (Johns & Miller 2018:9 of 15), the council discerned that the wisdom needed to answer this question also existed in the form of engagement with sacred Jewish texts, namely, Amos 9:11–12, Jeremiah 12:15, and Isaiah 45:21 (Acts 15:15–18). For James, these texts indicated that Gentiles were included in the people of God. Furthermore, those from the Judaean party “were teaching”, ἐδίδασκον, that circumcision was necessary for salvation “according to the custom taught by Moses”, τῷ ἔθει τῷ Μωϋσέως (Acts 15:1) and “the law of Moses”, τὸν νόμον Μωϋσέως (Acts 15:5). Both sides of the conflict, it seems, were arguing their case from the sacred Jewish texts.

Second, the decisions regarding the four prohibitions (Acts 15: 20, 29) on which the council agreed were, I suggest, based on an engagement with Scripture which can be described as creatively faithful hermeneutics. These four prohibitions were: τοῦ ἀπέχεσθαι τῶν ἀλισγημάτων τῶν εἰδώλων καὶ τῆς πορνείας καὶ τοῦ πνικτοῦ καὶ τοῦ αἵματος, “to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood” (Acts 15:20). The question immediately occurs:

why did the council decide on only these four aspects? Another question can be asked: how did the council decide upon these four prohibitions? Many attempts have been made to answer these questions.

Savelle (2004:457–460) indicates three possible sources for the prohibitions agreed upon by the council in Jerusalem (Acts 15:20, 29). First, rabbinic literature. Second, the Noahic precepts. Third, the Holiness Code of Lev 17–18. Even though each of these three options “has some evidence in its favour, the anomalies are significant” (2004:461). Savelle (2004:461), therefore, suggests an inclusive approach which confirms the general background and illustrates the mindset behind these decisions – instead of striving to establish only one primary source. Savelle (2004:462–465) continues to categorize the nature of the prohibitions into three streams, namely, the ethical, the societal, and the cultic view. He then opts for a modified cultic view which proposes that the Gentile Christians were asked to “refrain from activities that even *resembled* pagan worship” (2004:465) (emphasis in original).

Unfortunately, the many attempts (like this one of Savelle) to connect these four prohibitions in Acts 15:20, 29 with a common Old Testament theme or source, though helpful, have not provided satisfying clarity on the rationale of the Apostolic Decree.

The work of Elena Butova (2018) on the four prohibitions in Acts 15:20, 29 has, however, made significant strides in providing clarity to the mystery of the rationale behind the Apostolic Decree¹⁶. In her full-length treatment of the Apostolic Decree, Butova argues for both an ethical and a cultic sense of the prohibitions by closely linking it to the nature of true worship (2018:223). Butova (2018:59) presents three concepts which provides the platform that supported the four prohibitions of the Jerusalem council, namely, the creation-fall-re-creation paradigm, the concept of natural/universal law, and false versus true worship motifs: “... these three

16 The work of Butova does not necessarily stand isolated from being questioned and critically read by modern scholars, nor do I uncritically accept her presentation. For the purposes of this study her work does, however, provide the reader with an appreciation for the important role which textual wisdom from the past played in the process of discernment, and, more specifically, for the contribution which a faithfully creative hermeneutical engagement with Scripture makes to the missional practice of the church.

concepts, working together, reveal the rationale of the Apostolic Decree” (2018:60). Butova argues that the council in Jerusalem prescribed a reversal of the Gentile practices of worship, diet, and marriage (2018:62). Through a convincing hermeneutical and exegetical argument, Butova indicates that the midrashic element in Acts 15:14–21 provides the foundation which proves that the four prohibitions were based on the natural law of God as can be found in the creation account: “The four prohibitions were necessary, not for salvation but for a full conversion to God, since they call for conversion from pagan worship to true worship established on Genesis 1–3” (2018:285)¹⁷. No fewer than ten echoes of Genesis 1–3 are found in the text of Acts 15.¹⁸ The basic theological concepts in Genesis 1–3 can, therefore, be seen as providing the common background for the four prohibitions in Acts 15:20, 29 (2018:287).

The decisions of the Jerusalem council were, I suggest, not done simply as an exercise in cultural inclusivism or as an accommodating pragmatism. The decisions of the council were, amongst the already mentioned communal storytelling and debating, based on a creatively faithful reading of Scripture which was to provide guidance for the entire Christian mission (Bennema 2013:760).

Conclusion

Although Calvin insisted that the Word and the Spirit should be held together (Bartholomew 2015:17 of 32), he did not provide the reader with examples or a description of the ways in which the Spirit forms a part of the process of interpretation. The insights provided in this article attempted to contribute within this aperture in Calvin’s Spirit hermeneutic.

The article provided a short overview of Calvin’s approach to the interpretation of the biblical text, with a specific focus on his understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation. Next, the essay presented a short description of the primary characteristics of hermeneutics. Finally,

17 The Acts 21 account of returning to the ritual law, can be understood as of a temporary nature and culturally limited (Butova 2018:285).

18 In this regard, note the suggestion by Volf of the creation account in Genesis as a model for constructing our identities (Constantineanu 2013:39).

the text of Acts 15:1–35 served as a case-study for the identifying of key features of a process of communal spiritual discernment which, I suggest, is a biblical hermeneutical expression which can serve a modern Reformed hermeneutic fruitfully.

A Reformed hermeneutic, I argue, can benefit greatly from contextually incorporating the highlighted principles from the process of communal spiritual discernment as described in Acts 15:1–35. These principles of communal discernment are: discerning together, discerning through debating, discerning by means of an appreciation of affective realities, and, finally, discerning in conversation with past wisdom in the form of sacred texts. The result of this process of communal spiritual discernment led to a church at peace in Acts 15:1–35 (De Villiers 2013:147). It is this outcome which makes the suggested approach of communal spiritual discernment attractive as the approach of a Reformed hermeneutic.

These characteristics of discernment invites the reader to hold fast to the value of viewing the role of the biblical text in hermeneutics as part of a larger and overarching process of communal spiritual discernment. In Acts 15:28 the council of Jerusalem wrote to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia regarding the outcomes of the council. Among other things, they wrote: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us ...”, ἔδοξεν γὰρ τῷ πνεύματι τῷ ἁγίῳ καὶ ἡμῖν. Of this verse Calvin said:

Whereas the apostles and elders match and join themselves with the Holy Ghost, they attribute nothing to themselves apart therein; but this speech importeth as much as if they should say, that the Holy Ghost was the captain, guide, and governor, and that they did set down, and decreed that which they write as he did indite it to them (King 2012: 1 of 1).

From this remarkable statement, this article has argued for an awareness, as well as an appreciation for the process of communal discernment which gave the council the assurance that their conclusions were, indeed, the result of following the guidance from the Holy Spirit. The symbiosis present between the apostles and elders present at the council and the Holy Spirit, is not simply a “charismatic, intuitive, and spontaneous ‘guidance of the Spirit’” (De Villiers 2013:152).

When the insights gained from a responsible reading and interpreting of the biblical text functions in conversation with the context and the church community, a modern Reformed hermeneutic can respectfully and boldly concur with the council in Jerusalem: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us ...” This dynamic is what is referred to as the contemplative gaze of God (De Villiers 2013:148). This contemplative gaze entails the desire to view the significance of a situation from God’s perspective. A primary role is, therefore, acknowledged to the transcendent and divine in the process of discernment (2013:148).

The biblical text is a “book essentially about living wisely in peace” (De Villiers 2009:24). Based on the discoveries from this investigation, I propose the following ethos of interpretation: a Reformed hermeneutic which finds its praxis in the Christian ecumenical mission, will be characterised by an attitude of reconciliation – even as we acknowledge that all interpretations of the Bible are not equally valid, and the process of interpretation is not innocent (Lategan 2009).

The occasion studied in this essay is a situation of conflict in Acts 15:1–35. This conflict is resolved through a process of communal spiritual discernment characterised by a trialogue between the biblical text, the church community, and the context which allows the council to conclude that they are in unison with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

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