

Ecclesial conflict management: Healthy separation in Acts 15:36-41

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Abstract

In Acts 15:36–41 a moment of conflict between Paul and Barnabas leads to the separation of these two early church leaders. In this article I argue for the validity and, indeed, the wisdom of healthy separation as an approach to ecclesial leadership conflict management. Even though healthy separation does not necessarily lead to the immediate or eventual restoration through the transformation of the relationship, it can serve as a source of hope, encouragement, and support for individuals facing situations of hopelessness as a result of unhealthy and unbearable conflict in ecclesial leadership. Given the eschatological nature of reconciliation, healthy separation is also presented as an approach to conflict management in ecclesial leadership which creates an opportunity for growth, transformation, and at least the possibility of the future restoration of the relationship.

Keywords

Acts; conflict management; healthy separation; leadership; reconciliation

Introduction

In both “normal life” and “life gone wrong” necessary endings are a suitable reality and, if done well, “can bring incredible results ... growth itself demands that we move on” (Cloud 2011:7). People react in different ways both emotionally and intellectually to this reality. For some, there is strong resistance to the idea of necessary endings, whilst others might view these endings as natural and healthy (2011:8). Christensen and Johnson provide four conflict management schemes from the New Testament, namely, arbitration, separation, avoidance, and negotiation (Visser & Mamula

2018:6). Arbitration considers the integrity of the church as a higher priority than relationships. In the New Testament a form of arbitration in the shape of official church action is described in Acts 15:1–35. Separation might end the dispute, but it does not immediately restore the relationship. Avoidance implies accepting the wrongs of others without the demand for retribution. Negotiation “requires a trained, neutral third party who facilitates a process” (2018:6).¹

In this paper I present a discussion of healthy separation in Acts 15:36–41 as one example of early ecclesial conflict management in leadership.² I suggest that when healthy separation is accepted as a valid approach to ecclesial conflict management in leadership, the results could very well stimulate the realisation of reconciliation defined as the restoration through the transformation of a relationship. Healthy separation carries the additional benefit of providing an avenue through which unhealthy and unbearable forms of conflict can be defused. The healthy separation described in Acts 15:36–41 can, therefore, serve as a “source of empowerment and encouragement” (Visser & Vinson 2018:7 of 15) for those involved in

1 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” (Visser & Mamula 2018:6). 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) is found in Acts 15:1–35.

Examples of separation: separation does not establish reconciliation in the form of restored relationships, but it ends the dispute. The example from Acts 15:36–41 shows the practice of separation. 1 John 2:15–27 and 2 John verse 10, as well as 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 also serve as examples of separation. In the former example 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).

Examples of avoidance: avoidance “includes accepting the wrong of others without retaliation” (2018:6). 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 to let God be the judge whilst the church allows differences to exist side by side.

Matthew 5:23–24 and 18:15–20, Acts 15:1–35, as well as Philemon serves as examples of negotiation.

2 This article is presented as the second in a four-volume article on conflict management in leadership in the early church. The first article is titled *Reformed Hermeneutics: A Hermeneutic that fits the Occasion?*

leadership situations of intense ecclesial conflict. Ultimately, “endings bring hope” (Cloud 2011:7 of 31).

Personal experience of approaches to ecclesial conflict management in leadership, has oftentimes seen the process reach a dead-end because of an unwillingness by the parties involved to even consider a process of healthy separation as a possible solution to the situation at hand. The result is that people are forced to stay in painful and destructive situations, or to end unhealthy relationships at great personal cost.³ Joynt (2018:1) has indicated that conflict contributes to the shortage of clergy in both the Roman Catholic and the Protestant church. Unhealthy and unbearable conflict negatively influences clergy in pastoral ministry. Healthy separation can, I suggest, function fruitfully as an acceptable and wise part of the process of striving towards reconciliation – even if it does not lead to the immediate restoration of the relationship. Even if ecclesial leadership efforts in conflict management can and should also approach difficult situations of conflict by means of arbitration, avoidance and negotiation, this paper argues for a reconsideration of the value of approaching volatile ecclesial leadership conflict in terms of healthy separation.

I approach the investigation from two perspectives. First, I present an exegetical discussion of the events in Acts 15:36–40. This will be done in three movements. To begin with, a description of the dynamics in the lead-up to the conflict between Paul and Barnabas described in Acts 15:36–41 is given. These examples are primarily taken from the book of Acts. Next, I also present some exegetical insights from the text of Acts 15:36–41. A detailed emphasis is placed on inner texture (with a specific emphasis on

3 It is important to note that the opposite extreme, namely, to consider separation prematurely in any relationship, carries the capacity for equally destructive consequences.

argumentative texture),⁴ as well as the social and cultural texture⁵ of Acts 15:36–41. Finally, I discuss the results of the healthy separation between Paul and Barnabas as described in Acts 15:36–41. In this section I engage with different biblical references to Paul, Barnabas, and Mark as I attempt to reconstruct a biblical witness of the consequences of this episode.

Second, I present a short overview of the theological concept of reconciliation to indicate and emphasise the eschatological fabric of reconciliation. This eschatological fabric, I propose in conclusion, can be fruitfully engaged in situations of ecclesial leadership conflict as the catalyst for reconciliatory transformation in relationships.

Acts 15:36–41: Healthy separation

John Calvin said of the episode of conflict between Paul and Barnabas, and the resultant split (Acts 15:36–41), that Christians should be on the lookout for the chinks open to Satan. For Calvin, this episode illustrates that Paul lacked the kindliness to excuse John Mark's earlier behaviour, whilst Barnabas was misled by some great pride in this incident (Branch 2007:316). McKnight (2018:5) says of the incident in Acts 15:36–41: "Barnabas, correctly it turns out, saw more in John Mark than did Paul at the time."

But is this really the case? In this section I suggest that there is much more to be said of this incident of conflict management in Acts 15:36–41.

4 Inner texture refers to data that linguistic, literary, narratological, rhetorical, and aesthetic interpreters gather when they emphasize the relation of signs in a text to one another (Robbins 1996b:238). The result of this is six kinds of inner texture: repetitive; progressive; opening-middle-closing; narrational; argumentative; and sensory-aesthetic (1996b:238). Argumentative texture concerns the internal reasoning in the discourse as it moves from the beginning to the end (1996b:88). Some of this reasoning is logical. In other words, assertions are given and supported with reasons, clarified through opposites and contraries, and possibly presents short or elaborate counterarguments. Other forms of reasoning might be qualitative. The quality of the images and descriptions encourages the reader to accept the portrayal as true and real. This happens when analogies, examples, and citations of ancient testimony function in a persuasive manner (Robbins 1996a:21).

5 Social and cultural texture refers to the ways in which texts encourage readers "to adopt certain social and cultural locations and orientations rather than others" (Robbins 1996b:72).

Moreover, I believe that this incident of conflict management between Paul and Barnabas has much more value for the church than simply acting as a warning on how not to approach conflict. I argue, to the contrary, that healthy separation might even be necessary in situations of unhealthy and unbearable ecclesial leadership conflict.

The healthy separation described in Acts 15:36–41 is by no means an anomaly of ecclesial conflict management in the early church.⁶ It could much rather be seen as one of the many equally valid examples of conflict management in the early church. But the question still lingers: What to make of this episode of ecclesial leadership division? Does this account of the decisive split which resulted from the conflict between Paul and Barnabas, justify ecclesial divisions which lacks a reconciliatory conclusion where the relationship is transformed and restored? Is there some way in which incidents like this one can be accepted as the best solution amidst very complex circumstances? Is there, perhaps, some indication from within the biblical text that helps us to better understand the dynamics involved in this episode? In the paragraphs that follow, I present a way of reading this episode between Paul and Barnabas which aims to engage these questions. In the following section I present an overview of the relationship between Paul and Barnabas prior to the conflict in Acts 15:36–41.

Paul and Barnabas: A successful working relationship?

The New Testament makes 29 references to Barnabas. According to Branch (2007:318) this indicates that Barnabas was a man of “importance and stature in the Early Church.” Acts describes the relationship between Paul and Barnabas in rich detail. From Acts 4 Barnabas was a man of word and deed (Stenschke 2010:505). Barnabas was a man of faith, gifted in speaking, as well as in taking appropriate action in order to meet the needs of others. Acts 9 confirms that Barnabas provided Paul with an outstretched hand whilst many others doubted Paul because of his violent past in which he persecuted Jesus followers to the death (2010:506). It was Barnabas who took Paul to the Apostles: “Without Barnabas’ intervention on his behalf, Paul may have become an insignificant figure, at least in Jerusalem”

6 See also 1 John 2:15–27 & 2 John 10, as well as 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15.

(2010:507). Later, in Acts 11, Barnabas travels to Tarsus to bring Paul with him to Antioch to teach in the congregation. Barnabas, most likely, served as Paul's mentor during this period. It was also during this time that Barnabas and Paul were sent to the church in Jerusalem for a famine relief visit (Acts 11:27–30)⁷ (2010:509). In Acts 13 Barnabas and Paul are sent on a first missionary journey together. In Acts 15 they travel together to the council in Jerusalem. The evidence from the biblical text indicates that the relationship between Paul and Barnabas was a healthy one which provided an example of serving together in unity in the body of Christ.

In Acts 15:36–41, however, this healthy relationship seems to end abruptly. After serving together for seven splendid years, the experience, though not forgotten, is lost (Kucicki 2015:93). This moment described in Acts 15:36–41 is a pivotal one, I suggest, if we are to come to grips with the eschatological nature of reconciliation in ecclesial leadership. The reader is faced with many complex questions, namely: Which occurrences brought about this change in the relationship between Paul and Barnabas? Is it possible to determine a detailed account of the events leading up to the event, the event itself, as well as the resulting consequences of the event? In the paragraphs that follow, I will pay attention to these questions.

Paul and Barnabas: Events and differences prior to the healthy separation

Paul's strong reaction in Acts 15:36–41 in refusing to take Mark along on the second missionary journey begs the question: What circumstances could have created the situation of conflict between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:36–41? I suggest at least three dynamics which could have laid the platform for the conflict in Acts 15:36–41.

First, according to Acts 13:13 John Mark left Paul and Barnabas during a missionary journey to go back to Jerusalem. The possible reasons for Mark's withdrawal vary greatly. They include the following: Missing home, the challenges involved in missionary work, discontentment about Paul taking over the leadership responsibilities from Barnabas (as can be gathered from

7 It is likely that this is the visit that Paul refers to in Galatians 2:1–10 (Stenschke 2010:509).

Luke's changing of the sequence of the formula "Barnabas and Paul" to "Paul and Barnabas" from Acts 13:13 onwards; see also 13:43, 46, 50; 15:2), or being despondent about having to leave Cyprus so soon (Longenecker 2017:15). It has even been suggested that Mark was uneasy about the direct approaching of Gentiles with the gospel (as can be seen in the conversion of Sergius Paulus in Acts 13:12), and that he disagreed with Paul on this issue. Mark could have taken his concern regarding this matter back to the Jerusalem church, which might have instigated the divisive Judaizers to act. In any event, "Mark's departure on this first missionary journey may have been for reasons that hurt Paul deeply and were more than merely personal" (2017:15).

Second, it has also been suggested that there was already tension in the relationship between Paul and Barnabas which were the result of events unrelated to the departure of Mark. In reference to Galatians 2:11–13, Visser & Vinson (2018:7) highlights the possibility of tension which would have already occurred between Paul and Barnabas after Barnabas was led astray by the hypocrisy of Peter and the other Jews. Peter and the other Jews had separated themselves from the Gentiles for fear of those who belonged to the circumcision group, and apparently Barnabas had done the same. This, for Paul, meant not acting according to the truth of the gospel (Gal 2:14).⁸ The matter is of utmost concern for Paul and indicates at least the

8 The historical reliability of the book of Acts has been a matter of debate in scholarly circles (Trobisch 2010:119). The Paul of Acts and the Paul of his letters are not in all instances easily reconciled. According to Trobisch (2010:121), Acts functions as a commentary on the Pauline letters, as well as on the Catholic Epistles: "Acts explains the letters, and the letters explain Acts" (2010:122). The primary redactional thrust of the book of Acts has been described as addressing and resolving the tension between Peter and Paul in the narrative (2010:125). This is the position of most scholars (Phillips 2009:14).

Phillips (2009:10) makes a very helpful distinction between the data which Acts and the letters of Paul presents in terms of place, order, and time frame. Regarding place, Phillips (2009:10) indicates that Acts and Paul's letters show Paul to have been active in "essentially the same cities and regions". Regarding order and time frame, Phillips follows a more nuanced approach. For Phillips, the accounts regarding order and time frame in both Acts and Paul's letters, serves to not contradict, but rather to supplement one another (2009:10). The dating of Paul's visits to Jerusalem is relevant for the discussion on conflict management in Acts 15:36–41.

Did Paul and the Jerusalem church grow apart, or did they share a common understanding of the mission to the Gentiles? This is a central question to answer in determining the dates of Paul's visits to Jerusalem. The answer to this question is

possibility that the tension was brewing between Paul and Barnabas before the strong difference of opinion on Mark as can be seen in Acts 15:36–41.

Third, another important aspect to consider in coming to terms with the background of the conflict between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:36–41, is the difference between their sense of loyalty and calling. It has been suggested that the conflict in Acts 15:36–41 is the result of “personality strengths” (Branch 2007:315). Barnabas is described in terms of his “loyalty to individuals” and his “big heartedness,” whereas Paul is described as bold, fearless, tenacious, devoted to gospel purity, and being able to count all things as loss for the joy of proclaiming Christ (2007:315). Branch (2007:315) describes Barnabas as the “people person” and Paul as “arguably ... easily irritated, feisty, younger.” Paul was contentious, and engaged in piercing hostility with those who opposed him. Various arguments ensured that Paul “made enemies ... and there is evidence that many fellow believers, as well as non-believers, distrusted, disliked and opposed him” (Barclay 2017:11). Paul was a controversial figure which makes it hard to be insouciant towards Paul (2017:11). He was “resolute, daring, and audacious”

determined in large part by the sequencing of Paul’s recorded visits to Jerusalem as can be gathered from Acts and Galatians. Hans Dieter Betz once referred to this task as “hopeless” (Phillips 2009:10). Phillips (2009:10 of 19) suggests, however, that the task is possible when the order and time frame is separated – though not segregated. The key question seems to be: in what way does Paul’s five visits to Jerusalem as indicated in Acts, align with the two visits to Jerusalem which Paul mentions in Galatians? This is the “eye of the storm” (2009:10) in any quest to synchronize the dates of Paul’s visits to Jerusalem from all biblical evidence.

Acts indicates five visits to Jerusalem by Paul, namely, in Acts 9:26–28, 11:29–12:25, 15:1–35, 18:22–23, and 21:17–23:30. In Romans 15:25 Paul mentions a planned return trip to Jerusalem. In Galatians 1:18 and 2:1–10 Paul’s own version highlights two visits to Jerusalem. If it is accepted that the reference in Romans refers to Paul’s final visit in Acts, the question seems to be how to relate the first four visits in Acts with the two mentioned in Galatians? Traditionally, scholarship has offered two approaches to this problem. First, the majority view states that the crisis in Antioch occurred after the Jerusalem council, since Galatians 2:1–10 refers to Acts 15. Second, that the crisis in Antioch occurred before the Jerusalem council, and that the description in Acts 15 serves as a case study because early church leadership managed the conflict and tension that was present amongst them in a creative and reconciliatory manner which seems to have restored relationships.

The majority view is that Galatians 2:1–10 aligns with the visit recorded in Acts 15:1–35 (Benema 2013:753). I agree, however, with Benema that “the Antioch crisis was the lead-up to the Jerusalem council and that the Jerusalem church remained central by providing authoritative direction for the entire Christian mission” (2013:754).

(Longenecker 2020:3). There are, however, also other aspects of Paul's personality which should not be neglected in describing the man. Paul was "no pushover" (Campbell 2018:20), but this does not necessarily equate to him being someone for whom "the mission predominates" (Branch 2007:315) at the expense of anyone or anything.

Longenecker (2020:5–6) describes Paul as a "pastoral theologian" and a "master of pastoral 'theologizing.'" From his letters it can be argued that Paul was, therefore, quite the people person. In Philippians 2:19–30, for example, Paul speaks in glowing terms of both Timothy and Epaphroditus. He has confidence in Timothy and asks the Philippians to honour men like Epaphroditus. For Paul, these men imitate the attitude of Christ. In Rom 16:1–16 Paul provides his readers with an extensive list of co-workers in which we see "titbits of Paul's relationships" (Gorman 2022:19). In another example, Paul writes a short, yet remarkable letter to the slave owner Philemon who was a man of faith in Jesus. Paul ardently argues for Philemon's acceptance of his runaway slave, Onesimus, as a brother in Christ. For Paul, the relationship between master and slave is redefined considering the change in identity of Onesimus because of his faith in Christ (Moo 2008:19). And, I suggest, herein lies an important perspective on Paul's approach to relationships with fellow believers:

Believing in Christ joins us to other believers in an intimate family unit. Within that new relationship, which takes pride of place in all our relationships and dictates how those other relationships are to be lived out, we bear responsibilities for one another ... In Christ we belong to one another ... and we are obliged to support, to the point of sacrificing our own time, interests, and money, our brothers, and sisters (2008:19).

In this section I presented three aspects which probably combined to create the situation of conflict in Acts 15:36–41. First, Mark's departure from the missionary journey described in Acts 13:13. Whatever the reasons for Mark's departure, his actions concerned Paul deeply. Second, the action of Barnabas in not being true to the Gospel (Gal 2:14) would have caused considerable tension in their relationship. Third, the difference in sense of loyalty and calling between Paul and Barnabas. Both men seem to have been relationally focused, but it is very likely that they approached their

relationships from a different perspective. For Paul, loyalty to God and God's family was of central concern.

In the following section I will provide insights into the cultural and social texture of the first century Mediterranean world to highlight Paul's relational rationale and the possible ways in which it could have influenced his relationship with Barnabas and others. When taken in conjunction with the three realities which seem to have created the situation of conflict in Acts 15:36–41, it becomes clearer that the conflict between Paul and Barnabas was unhealthy and unbearable. An ending was necessary.

Acts 15:36–41 and social identity

An appreciation of the social and cultural texture of Acts 15:36–41 provides the reader with significant insight into Paul's character and relational rationale.⁹ Paul followed the social patterns of a first century Mediterranean world in the leading of his communities (Nebreda 2011:222) in a unique way.¹⁰ As I indicated at the end of the previous section, for Paul our relationship with Christ dictates how all other relationships are to be lived out. All matters are "relativised by a superior allegiance to Christ" (Barclay 2020:305). Paul questions the inevitably flawed nature of human behaviour because of its being intertwined in "the present evil age" (Gal 1:4). To this we should not ascribe "ultimate significance" (2020:305). I argue that it is on precisely this point that Paul and Barnabas had "a sharp disagreement" (Acts 15:39).

The significance of a new social identity of every person who comes to faith in Jesus as the Messiah, is emphasized through an appreciation of the phenomenon of patronage. Patronage is widely prevalent in the ancient world and its presence cannot be neglected (Rice 2013:29). In his strikingly

9 Hellerman (2013:24) has indicated from Acts that Philippi "was Roman in ways that other Pauline church-planting locales were not – especially the colony's social values." A specific focus on the relational priorities in Philippians better illuminates Paul's agenda in the letter.

10 It is important to note the way Paul, even though he is "one Jewish voice in a chorus of divergent opinions" (Barclay 2015:30), "radicalizes the incongruity of grace, and the distinctive way he connects that grace to the Christ-event and practices it in his Gentile mission, relativizes the authority of the Torah in a fashion unparalleled among his Jewish peers" (2015:30).

fresh reading of grace in Paul's theology, John Barclay presents the Christ-event as the focus and fulfilment of divine gift-giving. Barclay (2015:30) calls attention to two aspects of gift-giving in the ancient world which is relevant to the current discussion. First, Greco-Roman, and Jewish practices of gift intended to stimulate mutuality and reciprocity by creating or maintaining social bonds. A gift can, therefore, be "*unconditioned* (free of prior conditions regarding the recipient) without also being *unconditional* (free of expectations that the recipient will offer some 'return')" (emphasis in original) (2015:30). For Paul, the discordance of grace as well as the expectation that "those who are 'under' grace ... will be reoriented in the 'obedience of faith'" (2015:30) is intelligible. Second, benefits, because they "expected a return" (2015:30 of 36), were regularly given in a biased manner, namely, to those who were considered worthy of the gift. The concept of "unmerited" grace (as expressed by Paul and other Jewish voices) was, therefore, not normal in the ancient world (even though it was possible). In fact, "an unmerited gift from God was theologically problematic, and could threaten the justice and the rationality of the universe" (2015:30).

Barclay's presentation of Paul's understanding of the patronage of God in Christ as unconditioned, conditional, unbiased, and unmerited, serves to clarify why Paul "desires a structured hierarchy" (Nebreda 2011:223) within his first-century groups of Jesus followers, namely, a "hierarchy of benefaction" with God at the top (2011:223–224).¹¹ Paul strongly urges communities of Jesus followers to "display a salient social identity rather than centre on their personal identity" (2011:226). This type of power is salvation-oriented (not political power), ablative (not to the principle of

11 The concept of mimesis functions as a "strategy of power" (Castelli 1991:15) in Paul's letters, namely, it "articulates and rationalizes as true and natural a particular set of power relations within the social formation of early Christian communities" (1991:15). Castelli (1991:21) has indicated that mimesis, with its "hierarchy of benefaction," can, however, function as an oppressive category – which she terms "sameness." Within this "sameness" any type of deviation is seen as a threat. In Paul's case I suggest a two-pronged reality, through which Paul steers clear of this danger, is at work, namely, his authority based on his calling, as well as his sacrificial service for his communities. Paul is both a slave and a leader (Nebreda 2011:226–227). There seems to have been an intersection and interaction between organizational structure and charismatic structure in the early church: "Thus, cruciform leadership does not exclude the use of (rhetorical) power within a hierarchical structure" (Tangen 2018:283).

sovereignty), individualising (not to legal power), coexistent and continuous with life, and it is linked with a production of truth (2011:226–227).

Both Paul and Jesus viewed the church as a surrogate family (Hellerman 2009:77). Hellerman (2009:78–79) groups Paul's use of family imagery under four headings, namely, affective solidarity, family unity, material solidarity, and family loyalty. The community of faith understands and accepts an ultimate reality other than their own culture "and so they are ready to give ultimate loyalty to God and his promised new world" (Constantineanu 2013:39). Barnabas, it seems, disappointed Paul in his expectation regarding loyalty towards his surrogate family and their benefactor, namely, God. That Paul is forceful and emphatic in defending this understanding of the gospel cannot be denied (Nebreda 2011:228).

Based on these cultural and social textures, Singfiel (2018:12) argues that the conflict recorded in Acts 15:36–41 has as its focus family, loyalty, and honour, instead of character and theological faults. I suggest, however, that theological difference played a significant role in the healthy separation between Paul and Barnabas. Barnabas and Mark were cousins (Col 4:10). Mark came from an influential family in the early church (Acts 12:7–11), which must have provided him with an abundance of resources and relational networks from which he could benefit, as well as the accompanying honour provided because of his heritage. The social and cultural expectations of a first-century Mediterranean society would have exerted pressure on Barnabas to show loyalty to Mark – no matter how immature or damaging Mark's actions were as recorded in Acts 13:13 when Mark left Paul and Barnabas to head back to Jerusalem. Even if Paul were justified in being unwilling to take Mark along on the second missionary journey (which I argue is most likely the case in Acts 15:36–41), Barnabas simply could do nothing else but provide Mark with family loyalty. Given that blood is often thicker than water, Singfiel (2018:11) argues that "Barnabas would not, and could not, distance himself from his cousin in the disagreement with Paul." Singfiel, in effect, downplays the significance of this moment of conflict as not having to do with significant theological differences, so

much as with influential social and cultural factors, and that Paul would have understood and accepted this as such.¹²

As stated at the start of this section, I believe that it is on precisely this point that Paul and Barnabas had “a sharp disagreement” (Acts 15:39). It can be argued that Paul was the one who was placed in a position where he “had no choice” other than to part ways with Barnabas on this issue. If, as Singiel suggests, Barnabas did choose Mark because he felt compelled to do so based on the social and cultural expectations placed on him by his context – irrespective of whether Mark acted in an inappropriate manner or not in Acts 13:13 – this would have left Paul in a position of having to compromise on some of his own deeply held theological convictions regarding loyalty to God in Christ as the benefactor of the newly formed community of Jesus followers with its expectations of affective solidarity, family unity, material solidarity, and family loyalty. Mark’s previous behaviour clearly caused Paul to doubt the wisdom of including him in their work going forward. Whatever the exact nature of Mark’s actions was (even if we can gather that his actions were of a negative nature – perhaps even regarding theological differences, we cannot be sure exactly what Mark did), Paul would have expected Barnabas to be loyal to his surrogate family and its expectations and theological beliefs, namely, the church – especially in the face of irresponsible or negative behaviour from his very own blood family.

Moreover, based on the goodwill Barnabas had shown Paul (Acts 9; 11), Barnabas could have been strongly irritated (Kucicki 2015:96) and disappointed that Paul was not willing to extend the same benefaction by accepting Mark on the second missionary journey. In as much as the actions of Barnabas were disappointing and frustrating to Paul, Paul was also disappointing and frustrating Barnabas because of the possible expectations which Barnabas had of their relationship. Barnabas, true to the social and cultural expectations of his day, his “sympathetic character” (Marshall 2015:17) and, perhaps, his own expectations in terms of benefaction from Paul, would have argued strongly for the inclusion of Mark.

12 Kucicki (2015:97) also says: “Probably the conflict between Paul and Barnabas concerning Mark, was only a minor incident in the relationship between them.”

Given the possible sources of tension and conflict in the background leading up to the event in Acts 15:36–41, as well as the apparent theological differences between Paul and Barnabas described from the perspective of the social and cultural texture, it becomes clear that the situation in Acts 15:36–41 was an extremely volatile one. Perhaps we might even conclude that the situation of conflict and the ensuing split was inevitable? In the following section I present a discussion of the inner texture of Acts 15:36–41 to further emphasise the dynamic of the conflict between Paul and Barnabas.

Inner texture of Acts 15:36–41

The situation at hand in Acts 15:36–41 is “personal, complex, and theologically significant” (Visser & Vinson 2018:7). In this section I present a reading of the inner texture of Acts 15:36–41 which suggests that Luke, even if he does not explicitly choose sides in this situation of conflict, does present the reader with possible subtle clues as to his evaluation of the situation of conflict. It is possible that Luke’s choice in focusing on Paul’s mission after the split in Acts 15:36–41, indicates his choice of side in the conflict (Branch 2007:316). I hope to indicate that these insights from the argumentative texture of Acts 15:36–41 confirms healthy separation as a valid approach to ecclesial leadership conflict management. I highlight two insights from the biblical text for my reasoning.

Firstly, the use of *paroxysmos* in Acts 15:39 indicates that the nature of the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas was intense, “a severe argument” (Kucicki 2015:96). Even if the social and cultural textures highlighted in the previous section is important for our understanding of the dynamics involved in this situation, and even if this might have put Barnabas in a position where he experienced social and cultural pressure to choose the side of his family member, Mark, in this dispute, Paul strongly disagreed with Barnabas on his choice in the matter at hand. Barnabas, of course, also strongly disagreed with Paul.

Secondly, Luke states the reason for the conflict clearly: “Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not

continued with them in the work” (Acts 15:37–38), Βαρναβᾶς δὲ ἐβούλετο συμπαραλαβεῖν καὶ τὸν Ἰωάννην τὸν καλούμενον Μάρκον· Παῦλος δὲ ἡξίου, τὸν ἀποστάντα ἀπ’ αὐτῶν ἀπὸ Παμφυλίας καὶ μὴ συνελθόντα αὐτοῖς εἰς τὸ ἔργον μὴ συμπαραλαμβάνειν τοῦτον. A comparison between the two words Luke uses to describe the position of both Barnabas and Paul, can be fruitfully investigated to provide the reader with insight into this situation.

In Acts 15:37, Luke describes the position of Barnabas on the matter with the expression ἐβούλετο. In Acts 15:38, Luke describes Paul’s position with the expression ἡξίου. The expression ἐβούλετο is taken from the root form βούλομαι, “to desire to have or experience something, with the implication of some reasoned planning or will to accomplish the goal” (Louw & Nida 1996:287). The expression also has a semantic range of meaning which includes “to plan on a course of action” (Arndt, et.al 2000:182).¹³ The term, therefore, carries the sense of planning in order to attain a very specific and envisioned outcome, a desire, wish, or want.

The expression ἡξίου, which Luke uses to describe Paul’s position, is taken from the root form ἄξιόω, “to make a choice on the basis of greater worth” (Louw & Nida 1996:361). The word also carries the semantic range of meaning which can be translated as “to consider suitable for requital or for receipt of something” (Arndt et.al 2000:94),¹⁴ or “to make an evaluation concerning the suitability of something, especially an activity” (2000:94).¹⁵ The term, therefore, carries the sense of discernment, insight, and wisdom as to what course of action is best suited given the circumstances.

I suggest that Luke’s choice of words in describing the conflict between Paul and Barnabas provides the reader with a subtle, but definitive hint as to Luke’s evaluation of this moment of conflict. It seems that Luke is implying that Paul was discerning which course of action is the desired one, whereas Barnabas was being calculated in trying to ensure his desired outcome. In other words, Luke’s description of the conflict between Paul

13 E.g., 1 Corinthians 12:11; 2 Corinthians 1:15, 17; Matthew 1:19; 11:27, Mark 15:15; Luke 22:42; Acts 5:28, 33; 12:4; 17:20; 18:15, 27; 19:30; 22:30; 23:28; 25:20; 27:43; 28:18; Philippians 1:12.

14 E.g., 2 Thessalonians 1:11; 1 Timothy 5:17; Hebrew 3:3; 10:29; Luke 7:7.

15 E.g., Acts 13:42–43; 28:22.

and Barnabas seems to indicate that Paul was wise and discerning, whilst Barnabas might have been guided by some ulterior motive.

The textual evidence, when taken in dialogue with the social and cultural texture insights, therefore, seem to indicate another reality, namely, that Paul was not simply reacting from irritation and frustration in Acts 15:36–41, but that he was discerning a necessary ending and that he was striving to execute it well (Cloud 2011:7).¹⁶ When Acts 15:36–41 is read from the perspective of the social and cultural texture, as well as from the argumentative texture, Luke seems to indicate that Paul's position in the matter was a wise one. Even if Luke does not provide the reader with an explicit evaluation of the matter, given the aspects just mentioned, as well as the fact that in the rest of the book of Acts the name of Barnabas is never again mentioned by Luke, I believe that, according to Luke, Paul made the wise choice in this situation of conflict.¹⁷

In the next section I discuss the validity of healthy separation in ecclesial leadership conflict management, given the eschatological nature of reconciliation.

Paul and Barnabas: Healthy separation and reconciliation?

Endings should be viewed as a “normal part of life” (Cloud 2011:9). Seasons are a natural part of any lifecycle which should be recognized, accepted, and respected by means of wise discernment and decision-making (2011:9). Luke, in using *ῥήξιον* to describe Paul's approach to the situation of conflict

16 It is interesting to note what seems to be missing from this situation of conflict in Acts 15:36–41, namely, prayer and a mediator (Branch 2007:316). From the description of the events leading up to the situation of conflict in Acts 15:36–41, I am of the opinion, however, that there have already been many efforts made to sustain the relationship. Unfortunately, it seems that none of these efforts had the desired effect – hence Paul's decision not to take Mark on the next mission.

17 By no means am I implying that Luke is taking a stand against Barnabas in general. In Acts 11:24 Luke explicitly states that Barnabas was “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.” This statement unequivocally confirms Luke's view on Barnabas, even if Luke's writing indicates preference for Paul's views in the specific situation of conflict described in Acts 15:36–41.

Kucicki (2015:98) argues that the event of Acts 15:36–41 were not used by Luke “in order to insert some kind of a sensational news ... but to indicate the point where Luke turned to write exclusively about Paul.”

in Acts 15:36–41, was seemingly highlighting the role which discernment, insight, and wisdom played in Paul’s position regarding the situation of conflict with Barnabas. Given the realities of bad experiences and past differences (Gal 2:14 and Acts 13), as well as differences in sense of loyalty and sense of calling, Paul seemingly discerned that to meaningfully continue in this working relationship with Barnabas was not an option. I suggest, based on the investigation up to now, that Paul’s discernment and insight in diagnosing the reality of the situation guided him to end the working relationship with Barnabas. When the situation of conflict in Acts 15:36–41 is viewed from this perspective, I believe this moment of conflict and the resultant split can be viewed as a moment of significant potential for growth and transformation in the lives of Paul, Barnabas, and Mark, as well as in the Gentile mission of the early church.

And yet, another question immediately arises: If some endings are necessary, natural, and healthy, does this reality not make reconciliation – defined as the restoration of relationships – redundant? To complicate matters even more: How is reconciliation to be defined? Is it only the restoration of relationships? But is this not merely “deceptive reconciliation” (Boesak & DeYoung 2012:1)? Is reconciliation not rather, in essence, about truth-telling, forgiveness, retribution, and, ultimately, the restoration of justice? Could it not, therefore, be that reconciliation has as its focus the complete and radical transformation of relationships, instead of the mere restoration of relationships? Reconciliation, defined as “the desire to repair fractured relationships in order to move forward” (Castle 2014:7), is something to be pursued, even as it is already experienced as a reality. Reconciliation is a “missionary imperative for all God’s followers” (2014:7). Even whilst holding to the belief that God has reconciled the world to Himself through the death of Christ,¹⁸ few would argue against the notion that much reconciliatory work is still needed on a global scale in both church and society. Reconciliation has an eschatological fabric.

18 As can be seen from 2 Corinthians 5:18–19, Paul believed that God had reconciled us to Himself through the death of Jesus on the cross: “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.”

In the foreword to the gripping book, *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism* (Boesak & DeYoung, 2012), Desmond Tutu says of reconciliation: “radical reconciliation means radical transformation of persons and societies” (2012:ix). Boesak & DeYoung notes that reconciliation should resist “the temptation to domesticate the radical Jesus” (2012:6). Reconciliation is oftentimes “incomplete and anticipatory” (Martin 2010:238). Even if the biblical texts of Matthew 5:23–24 and 18:15–20, as well the example from Acts 15:1–35 serve to emphasise the striving of the early church for reconciliation which restores the relationship and realises the creative resolution of conflict, there are many dynamics involved in the management of conflict in order to transform persons, societies, and relationships.¹⁹

What details can be gathered from the biblical text to understand the relational results and implications of the separation in Acts 15:36–41? Did Paul, Mark, and Barnabas experience a radical reconciliation characterised by transformed relationships? Once more, based on the limited amount of biblical evidence on the matter, the reader should be creative in terms of the approach taken to answer this question. Given that the biblical text does not provide the reader with any direct explanation of the relational consequences of the event in Acts 15:36–41, all references from the rest of the biblical canon to the relationship between Paul, Mark, and Barnabas will be considered to provide clarity on the matter.

Paul mentions both Mark and Barnabas in other textual evidence, namely in 1 Corinthians 9:6 (Barnabas), Colossians 4:10 (Mark and Barnabas), Philemon 24 (Mark), and 2 Timothy 4:11 (Mark).²⁰ From these biblical references, it can be deduced that Paul and Mark have reconciled, even though we have no conclusive indication from the biblical text whether the relationship between Paul and Barnabas was ever restored. The reference to

19 Paul’s approach to reconciliation can be described in three stages, namely, being reconciled to God, being reconciled with others, and doing the work of reconciliation between those who are separated (Branch 2007:316–317).

20 If the healthy separation between Paul and Barnabas occurred in 49 AD, all four of these biblical references to Mark and Barnabas occurred after the event – assuming the following dates: 1 Corinthians dated to 55 AD, Colossians and Philemon dated to 60–62 AD (during Paul’s Roman imprisonment), and 2 Timothy dated to 66 AD (Schnabel 2016:10).

Barnabas in 1 Corinthians 9:6, I suggest, can in no way provide conclusive clarity as to the nature of the relationship between Paul and Barnabas. Neither can the reference to Barnabas in Colossians 4:10. Colossians 4:11 makes it rather clear: only two from the circumcision were working with Paul – and Barnabas was not one of them.

From this evidence, I suggest, that there are instances when a striving for reconciliation in ecclesial leadership conflict is confronted with the reality of its eschatological nature. The dynamics involved in the event described in Acts 15:36–41 at the very least encourages the reader to come to grips with a reality which forms a part of any attempt at reconciliation, namely, that reconciliation as the transformation of relationships is a lifelong process oftentimes characterised as troublesome and incomplete. The results of the healthy separation in Acts 15:36–41 seemingly led to the transformation and the restoration of the relationship between Paul and Mark, but not necessarily to the transformation and restoration of the relationship between Paul and Barnabas. Another consequence of the healthy separation between Paul and Barnabas is described in Acts 15:39–41: “Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.” The Gentile mission of the early church could continue. Moreover, the mission now had a double movement, namely Paul and Silas, as well as Barnabas and Mark were travelling and serving the congregations.

I suggest that a definition of the process of reconciliation should leave room for the possibility that a healthy separation might imply that the relationship is never transformed – even as there should always be a striving for the transformation of the relationship. The validity of healthy separation in ecclesial conflict management should, however, not be disqualified because of this reality. This episode from the life of Paul and Barnabas, rather, reminds the reader of the eschatological nature of reconciliation in Christ. The wisdom of such an approach to conflict management should encourage the reader to understand that there might indeed be times when a striving for reconciliation means that a period of healthy separation first must run its course. It is precisely during this period of division when transformation seems to take place which resurrects the possibility of reconciliation which

transforms and restores the relationship. “Sometimes ... the best way to manage conflict is to walk away from it” (Visser & Vinson 2018:7).

Conclusion

In this article, the situation of conflict between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:36–41 was presented as an example of healthy separation. In ecclesial leadership conflict management healthy separation can function as a source of hope and encouragement in situations of intense, unbearable, and unhealthy situations of conflict. The events leading up to the healthy separation in Acts 15:36–41, the event itself, as well as the consequences of this event was presented to indicate the eschatological nature of reconciliation. Reconciliation, defined as the radical and complete transformation of people, societies, and relationships, is a lifelong process characterised by its incomplete nature. Healthy separation, I suggest, can function as the context from which radical and complete transformation can lead to the eventual restoration of relationships.

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