

## A REFLECTION ON LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN LIGHT OF ACTS 15:36–41

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### 1. Introduction

Acts 15:36–41 is the narrative of a sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas, two of the greatest missionaries of the early church. The contention between them was so sharp that it resulted in the splitting of their missionary team. This article examines the passage from a leadership and missiological perspectives and draws some implications for leadership development and conflict management in ministry settings.

### 2. The Setting

Paul and Barnabas had completed their first missionary journey into Asia Minor and were back in Antioch after the first Jerusalem Council. After having spent some time strengthening the church at Antioch, Paul thought it wise to get back to the mission field. He suggested the following to Barnabas: “Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are” (Acts 15:36). Barnabas agreed to Paul’s suggestion except that he was determined to take John Mark with them (Acts 15:37). Paul disagreed with the suggestion to include John Mark in their team because the young man had deserted them during their first missionary journey (Acts 15:36–39; See also Acts 13:13). The contention between them became so sharp that they parted from one another (Acts 15:39).

### 3. My Perspective

The purpose in addressing the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark’s participation in their missionary team is not to decide

who was at fault. It is suggested that the Greek word for *disagreement* (*paroxysmos*) “is so neutral as not to touch on the question of responsibility.”<sup>1</sup> Besides, the Bible does not mention the reasons why John Mark abandoned the missionary team. My goal is to approach this text from a leadership and missiological perspective and then draw some lessons applicable to ministry and mission today.

For Howard Marshall, Acts 15:36–41 “is a classic example of the perpetual problem of whether to place the interests of the individual or of the work as a whole first.”<sup>2</sup> The issue at the heart of the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark was the following: “Should a person who has deserted a team be given a second chance?” Paul’s opinion was “absolutely not” while Barnabas’ opinion was “yes.” Although Luke does not comment on Paul’s and Barnabas’s motivations, it is apparent that they approached the issue from different perspectives. While Barnabas may have argued his case from a pastoral concern, Paul appeared to have focused on the requirements of missionary work.<sup>3</sup> In this particular instance, whereas Paul focused on human weaknesses that could potentially prevent the successful achievement of a missionary task (he probably viewed John Mark as unreliable), Barnabas’s concern was to mentor younger Christians despite their weaknesses and help them grow in their faith as well as in their commitment to serve God just as he previously did for Paul. There is no indication that Barnabas disagreed that what Mark did was wrong. Accepting to give a second chance to John Mark says a lot about Barnabas’s high level of acceptance of risk in mentoring others. He may have taken John Mark on board during their first missionary journey, ready to accept the possibility that the young man might fail. He is a good example of godly leaders who do not neglect the real growth needs of people for the sake of meeting agendas and abiding by policies. He seemed to have been of the opinion that strong stands should not be taken on issues of no salvific significance while minimizing issues of greatest significance in mission and ministry.<sup>4</sup>

Pleading that a second chance be given to people was consistent with who Barnabas was. It was Barnabas himself who pleaded with the church to give Paul a chance when they were very suspicious of his past persecution of believers and his sudden conversion to their faith (Acts 9:26, 27).

1 Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts*, EBC 10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 956.

2 Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 258.

3 Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 662.

4 Ken Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse: How to Break Free from Bad Church Experiences* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 89.

This makes Paul's response to John Mark ironic. One could say that while Barnabas was people-oriented and a compassionate builder of people who looked at life from the viewpoint of the overall good for both individuals and God's mission, Paul was more of a task-oriented person who looked at things from the viewpoint of the overall good of his mission.<sup>5</sup>

Following are five lessons from this study of Acts 15:36–41 that have a direct implication for leadership development and conflict management:

1. Conflict is an unavoidable fact of life even among godly church leaders. Eckhard Schnabel suggests that "since personal initiatives involve subjective evaluations of facts and factors that are relevant for both pastoral ministry and missionary work, disagreements are the natural result of different opinions regarding the most effective missionary strategies."<sup>6</sup> This emotionally-filled conflict between Paul and Barnabas shows us that the early church "was not an ideal church, with saints whose perfect lives leave us panting with frustration over our failures and imperfections. It was a church with people just like us but who nevertheless were available to God and were used to do great things for him."<sup>7</sup>

2. Although this example should not be used as an excuse for Christian quarreling,<sup>8</sup> or lead us to assume that division is the norm in the event of disagreement among believers,<sup>9</sup> the fact still remains that in his providence God can work through human imperfection, especially when the reasons for disagreements or separation "are not personal prestige and power but considerations connected with the proclamation of the gospel."<sup>10</sup> In his providence, God brought something good out of Paul and Barnabas's vigorous disagreement. Their temporal irreconcilable disagreement led to two successful missionary teams. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has a lot to learn from this precedent in regards to current and persistent vigorous disagreements on the subject of women's ordination to pastoral ministry. Although conflicts are not necessarily bad things, church leaders need to be careful about how they handle them. A conflict can have both functional and dysfunctional outcomes depending

<sup>5</sup> Dan R. Dick and Barbara Dick, *Equipped for Every Good Works: Building a Gift-Based Church* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2001), 58–60.

<sup>6</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 671.

<sup>7</sup> Ajith Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 434.

<sup>8</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 253.

<sup>9</sup> Fernando, *Acts*, 434.

<sup>10</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 671.

on how it is handled. When handled effectively, conflict can lead to increased insights on how to achieve one's goals without undermining others; better group cohesion and stronger mutual respect and renewed faith in each other (Acts 6:1–7; 15); and improved self-awareness leading to careful examination of personal goals and expectations. However, when handled ineffectively, conflict can lead to personal dislikes, teamwork breakdown, and loss of talents and resources as people disengage or leave.<sup>11</sup> Each person needs to carefully consider the impact of their position on others and on the mission and ministry of our beloved church.

3. No matter the intensity of a conflict, people should never lose sight of the hope and possibility of reconciliation. The Greek word *paroxysmos* suggests that although the contention was severe, it was temporary rather than long-lasting.<sup>12</sup> After some time, Paul and Barnabas undoubtedly became colleagues in ministry again (1 Cor 9:6; Gal 2:1, 9). Furthermore, "Paul had not only come to appreciate Mark but also to depend on him so much that he asked for him to come to him towards the end of his life (2 Tim 4:11; Col 4:10)."<sup>13</sup> David Goetz and Marshall Shelley remind us that it is in a fantasy land that disagreements never surface or contrary opinions are stated with force. What is needed is for us to face our disagreements and deal with them in a godly way. They stress that "the mark of community—true biblical unity—is not the absence of conflict. It's the presence of a reconciling spirit."<sup>14</sup> Leaders motivated by a true reconciling spirit never consider punishment as the next option if they fail in their first attempt to build bridges of understanding with disagreeing parties. They are also aware that true reconciliation does not always mean that others must necessarily espouse their ideas and opinions. Speed Leas lists six different styles for managing conflicts: persuading, compelling, avoiding/accommodating, collaborating, negotiating, and supporting.<sup>15</sup> He insists that each style "can be an appropriate style, and none should be thought of as 'bad' or inferior. A certain style can cause a problem if it is

<sup>11</sup> Richard Hibbert and Evelyn Hibbert, *Leading Multicultural Team* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Review & Herald, 1980), 6:317.

<sup>13</sup> Fernando, *Acts*, 431.

<sup>14</sup> David Goetz and Marshall Shelley, "Standing in the Crossfire: Interview with Bill Hybels," *Leadership* 14.1 (1993): 14.

<sup>15</sup> Speed B. Leas. *Discovering Your Conflict Management Style* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

used inappropriately.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, to keep the hope and possibility of reconciliation alive, the choice of a conflict management style needs to be contextual and appropriate no matter how long the prospect of reconciliation might take (Matt 18:21–22). This approach is displayed by God in his relentless effort to reconcile the world to himself since the Fall (Heb 1:1–2).

4. Past failures and defections do not preclude future faithfulness and success in ministry. The story of John Mark convinces me that leaders can be grown. As such, a second chance should be given to those desiring to grow in their spiritual journey. Their first failures should never be interpreted as continued failures. Because John Mark was given another opportunity to demonstrate his fitness for service, he grew into a significant person in the history of the early church (1 Pet 5:13; 2 Tim 4:11). Scholars seem to be in agreement that it was John Mark who wrote the second gospel after having been Peter’s interpreter.<sup>17</sup> Ironically, Barnabas redeemed John Mark for Paul’s benefit. Another vivid example is Peter to whom Jesus graciously gave a second chance after he vehemently denied knowing him (Matt 26:69–75). Jesus not only forgave Peter but also recommissioned him to the office of apostle (John 21:15–17). In his later years, Paul seemed to have softened his ways of dealing with human imperfections. In reading 1 and 2 Corinthians, we discover a Paul who refuses to give up on the Corinthians despite their moral weaknesses. This is an invitation for us to look at people with the eyes of hope grounded in the unlimited possibilities of God’s grace.<sup>18</sup> In spite of our past mistakes, God can still use us if we allow him to reshape us. A hand of fellowship and service opportunity, devoid of any suspicion, should be extended to those who have failed, repented, and learned valuable lessons from their mistakes.

5. I personally believe that with hindsight, Paul would have handled this conflict differently. In 1 Cor 1:10, he appeals to believers to avoid divisions in their disagreements. First Corinthians 13:11 appears to be the testimony of growth and maturity that he experienced in his life journey. There he writes, “When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things” (1 Cor 13:11). This is an indication that the way people handle conflict depends to a large extent on their worldview and level of exposure and maturity. As such, leaders need periodic training on effective conflict management. Also, in handling conflict, leaders should avoid fo-

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>17</sup> Fernando, *Acts*, 434.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 435.

cusing only on the conflict management styles that are convenient to them and take into consideration the perspective and level of understanding of other parties involved in the conflict.

#### **4. Conclusion**

As human beings, we do not have a choice about whether or not conflict will arise between us and others. However, we do have a choice about how to deal with conflict, in both the short and long terms. The challenge for us is how to be more of a Barnabas by encouraging others and investing ourselves in them and to help them make progress in their spiritual journey. Forgiveness leading to reconciliation is an incredible triumph, even when we are faced with extraordinary ministry-related conflicts. We should also be like Paul, who made mistakes, admitted them, learned from them, and grew as a result. We need a balanced perspective on our ministry agendas and policies, on one hand, and the spiritual growth needs of all those who are impacted by those agendas and policies, on the other hand. It seems that leaders should always err on the side of second chances.