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“Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church...” (Acts 15:22)

**SYNODALITY IN THE EARLY CHRISTIAN
COMMUNITY OF JERUSALEM ACCORDING
TO THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES**

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Abstract

The current focus on conflict and violence in the popular and academic study of religious conflict must not detract from instances of de-escalation and resolution of conflict. In view of this, this article examines the resolution of the inner-Christian conflicts in the Acts of the Apostles (6:1-7; 11:1-18; 15:1-41; 21:17-26). What was disputed among these Christians in Apostolic times? How were these conflicts resolved, the unity of the community retained and how was a way forward found by the Apostles, the elders and the entire community? What can the Church learn from these accounts of what could be called “*Apostolic synodality*” for its own practice, but also challenge of synodality in the life and mission of the Church today? Answers will be provided by drawing on the biblical accounts, insights from biblical studies and some current theorising on the nature of religious conflicts and their resolution.

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Introduction

In its comprehensive document *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018), the *International Theological Commission* has defined and developed the concept of synodality as it is to be understood in the Church. The Commission carefully describes and assesses synodality from different perspectives.¹ The document opens with definitions (3–9) and a longer survey of what may be understood as synodality in the Bible (Old Testament, 12–14, New Testament, 15–23), even though we should be careful not to read our definitions and the experiences and doctrines of the Church in its course through the centuries back into the New Testament without careful reflection. One section of *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* is devoted to what is often called the Apostolic Council in Acts 15 (20–21). Other relevant passages in Acts are not mentioned.

In view of this reference and the significance ascribed to it, it is worthwhile to study in more detail this passage and others in Acts which describe what was disputed among these Christians in Apostolic times and how they proceeded to find solutions and retained the unity of the Church in demanding times. We will do so by drawing on some current theorising on the nature of religious conflicts and their resolution.

The Book of Acts contains conflicts of all sorts. It offers a multifactorial portrayal of religious conflict of different types, including a number of conflicts within the Christian community of Jerusalem (and Antioch) and of their resolution.² For a number of reasons, most of them sad and disturbing, religious conflict has become a dominant theme in religious studies in the past few years.³ This quest is part of a larger interdisciplinary interest in violence.

¹ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html The members of the sub-committee which produced the document are mentioned by name in the preliminary note on page 1.

²Conflicts among Christians are not mentioned in other places, see however, Acts 20:29–30 (see discussion below).

³For a convenient survey of recent contributions see *W. Mayer, "Religious Conflict: Definitions, Problems and Theoretical Approaches,"* in *W. Mayer & B. Neil, ed., Religious Conflict from Early Christianity to the Rise of Islam, (Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte 121),* Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2013, 1–19. On religion and violence in general see *Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts & Michael Jerryson, ed., The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Before turning to the conflict *and resolution* accounts of Acts, we first refer to some insights from the current discussion of religious conflict. According to Mayer (2013, 5), religious conflicts involve contested domains—e.g., ideology/morality, power, personality, space/place, group identity—, singly or in combination and there are enabling conditions—e.g., political, social, economic, cultural and psychological. This distinction will prove helpful in our analysis.⁴ Mayer cautions that the focus on religious conflict and violence must not detract from instances of conflict de-escalation and conflict resolution, which also appear in Acts. Once the conflicts are resolved, Acts paints a portrait of peaceful *co-existence* and *co-operation* of the former conflict parties. This portrait suggests some measure of *transition* and *assimilation* to the consensus which was reached.⁵

Some introductory observations are in order:

- In this study we concentrate on the *literary portrayal* of religious conflict. I do not discuss the historical validity of this portrayal⁶ or its contribution to the reconstruction of early Christian history.
- We focus only on conflicts involving the *whole community*, at least as *one* of the parties in conflict and resolution. While we include the conflict of Peter with a sub-group of the community of Jerusalem in Acts 11:1–18 (“the circumcision party,” 11:2), we have *not* included the conflict of Peter with Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1–11 and the conflict between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark in Acts 15:36–41 (“And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other,” 15:39).⁷ It is interesting to note that both of these inner-

⁴Mayer, “Religious Conflict: Definitions, Problems and Theoretical Approaches,” 5. On pages 5–14, Mayer describes “the theoretical approaches that have been brought to bear in recent decades, including discussion of a number of significant research projects with specific relevance to the time period that is the focus of this volume (the first to the ninth centuries CE).”

⁵Mayer, “Religious Conflict: Definitions, Problems and Theoretical Approaches,” 17.

⁶Mayer rightly points to the “perennial issue of the bias of the surviving sources, and the historical forces that led to the transmission of some and the suppression or dwindling into obscurity of others”: Mayer, “Religious Conflict: Definitions, Problems and Theoretical Approaches,” 15. For a recent survey of the issues and debate see Jörg Frey, Clare K. Rothschild & Jens Schröter, ed., *Die Apostelgeschichte im Kontext antiker und frühchristlicher Historiographie*, BZNW 162, Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 2009.

⁷Two further texts deserve consideration: Does the tension between Saul and the community of Jerusalem after his return from Damascus constitute a conflict (9:26–30)? His attempt to join the community meant that “all were afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple” (9:26). If it is a conflict, it is one between an individual and the community.

We have also not included Acts 21:20–26 in this study. The way in which the conflict is portrayed there, it is latent conflict between large numbers of Jewish

Christian conflicts between *individuals* are *not* resolved: There is no de-escalation or resolution to the conflict of Acts 5. Ananias and Sapphira remain in hypocrisy and lies; they do not repent and are not given an opportunity to do so (in contrast to other figures in Acts).⁸ Both of them die under divine judgement. They are not “reconciled” to God, to Peter and to the community of believers. Of all the conflict accounts in Acts, this is the only conflict in which Satan and the Holy Spirit are involved.

Paul and Barnabas do not reach agreement after their sharp disagreement over John Mark (Acts 15:36–41). They part their ways and seek other co-workers for their further ministry. Paul is not reconciled to John Mark. Neither Paul nor Barnabas attempt to transfer this case to Jerusalem for decision.

The decision not to include these conflicts obviously impinges on the conclusions. However, our focus in this article is not on the conflicts as such but rather on their resolution.

- Primarily, Acts is not a book about conflict and is not a handbook on conflict resolution. If we make these issues our focus in this study, we need to be aware that we are asking questions which the author of Acts is not seeking to answer.

1. Three Inner-Christian Conflicts in Acts and their Resolution

The beginning of Acts offers a portrayal of an ideal community of believers in Jesus in Jerusalem (2:42–47; 4:32–37). They share of goods, the great unity among the believers⁹ in contrast to the various

Christians in Jerusalem (“how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law,” 21:20) and Paul as an individual. It is an *indirect* conflict over Paul’s own loyalty to his Jewish identity and his ministry among Jews in the diaspora. There is no open conflict: the leaders of the community tell Paul about the suspicions of many Jewish Christians in Jerusalem against him and suggest a plan of action for disproving and dispelling these reservations. There is no direct encounter between Paul and those suspicious of him or open criticism. The solution envisaged there is not a verbal defence/lengthy verbal interaction as in Acts 11 and 15, but actions intended to demonstrate Paul’s own loyalty to Judaism and to disprove rumours about him.

⁸The case could be argued that Peter does not act as a private person but as the leader of the group of the apostles or as leader of the community. He acts with their approval.

⁹For a recent detailed analysis see A.J. Thompson, *One Lord, one People: The Unity of the Church in Acts in Its Literary Setting*, *Library of New Testament Studies* 359, London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2012, D.A. Hume, *The Early Christian Community: A Narrative Analysis of Acts 2:41–47 and 4:32–35*, WUNT II, 298, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011.

groups within Judaism and the inhabitants of Jerusalem (the people, the religious leaders).

However, as the conflict accounts of Acts 6:1–6; 11:1–18 and 15:1–35 indicate, this portrayal of the early Christian community in Jerusalem is not without challenges.¹⁰ In our study of each of these three conflicts we follow the same pattern, where applicable: After a brief summary of the occasion of the conflict, we examine the contested domains (what the conflict is about) and enabling conditions in each conflict (the resources available to the parties to the conflict and which are employed and which make conflict possible) and the measures taken to initiate de-escalation and the resolution of conflict. In closing we ask, whether the solution was persistent.

1.1. Acts 6:1–7: Inner-community Tension Due to the Neglect of a Sub-group

The *occasion* of the first inner-community conflict is a complaint by the “Hellenists,” Jewish Christians with a diaspora Jewish background,¹¹ against the “Hebrews” (Jewish Christians from Judea or Jerusalem) because the widows of the Hellenist faction were being neglected in the daily distribution (of food or money to obtain it), so the enigmatic summary in Acts. As the distribution was up to that point the apostles’ responsibility (themselves Judeans), the complaint should have been directed against them. Acts does not indicate why this was not the case,¹² neither is there indication whether the complaint was justified or whether the neglect of the widows was more a matter of perception than a real fact. Compared to the conflict of the apostles with the religious leadership of Jerusalem in Acts 4–5, the account of this first inner-community conflict is short and its course “mild” (no threats of violence, no violence).

The *contested domains* are on first sight financial means which were unevenly distributed and of which a needy group of people (widows) in the community is deprived off. One can only speculate whether

¹⁰The account of the death of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1–11 indicates that the sharing of goods was not without challenges.

¹¹For their identity see M. Zugmann, “Hellenisten” in *der Apostelgeschichte: Historische und exegetische Untersuchungen zu Apg 6,1; 9,29, 11,20*, WUNT II.264, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009.

¹²Did this happen out of reverence for the apostles? Were people slow to criticise them after the Ananias and Sapphira incident or the stunning miracles of Acts 5? In most of Acts 4–5, the apostles were engaged in conflict with the religious leaders of Jerusalem. This will have impacted on their responsibilities within the Christian community.

other issues were contested as well, such as the identity of the community, lack of attention by the apostles and their authority in the community. Does the neglect of some and the reaction to it perhaps point to the issue of equality with the people of God?

Enabling conditions do not play a major role in this conflict. The Hellenists “complain.” In this way, the disadvantaged party draws attention to an existing pressing problem. The Greek word for this activity—*γογγυσμός*—recalls the repeated *murmuring* of Israel against Moses (and indirectly against God) during its desert wanderings. They do not employ one or more of the other means which appear in the conflict accounts of Acts. The enabling conditions on the side of the apostles are the ability to summon the full number of disciples and to address them. They can also trust that the disciples will follow their instruction and elect suitable people and will present these people to them. Apparently there are enough suitable people available. Prior to this conflict the apostles received full recognition from the whole community, are portrayed as faithfully obeying the commission given to them by Jesus despite suffering, and as divinely affirmed through exceptional miracles within and outside of the community.

The de-escalation of this conflict starts with the initiative of the apostles. They do not ignore the situation or the complaint but call *the whole community* together (6:2). They remind the community of the particular task given to them as apostles and insist that they cannot or can no longer “serve tables” instead. They trust the assembled community and propose that seven people be elected by the community for this task and indicate their qualifications (6:3). The apostles will stick to their particular calling. “And what they said pleased *the whole gathering*.” As a result, the *solution* to this conflict the whole community chose seven men who fulfilled the criteria outlined previously. All seven men bear Greek names. Presumably they come from the group of the Hellenists. Apparently they were trusted that they would not neglect the Hebrew widows either. These men were brought to the apostles and ordained to this task. This was a public act. It was clear to the whole community who is now entrusted with “serving at tables.” Acts 6 does not report the consequences of this solution for the community (see, however, Acts 6:7). Presumably, the men fulfilled their task and the complaints stopped. The unity—which was emphasised previously—was restored.

According to the portrayal of Acts, the solution to this conflict was persistent. At least, Acts does not report further conflicts between these parties. The accounts of further inner-community conflicts (see

below) do not mention these groups again nor are there further instances of complaint or neglect (this may be due to the fact that the Hellenists had to flee from Jerusalem after the death of Stephen, one of the seven appointed men).

1.2. Acts 11:1–18: Conflict and Solution

On the surface the *occasion* of this second round of conflict is the fact that Peter went to Gentiles in Caesarea and ate with them (11:3; the account of his activities is given in Acts 10:1–48). The events in Caesarea become known in Jerusalem: “Now the apostles and brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles had received the word of God.” On his return to Jerusalem, Peter is challenged by the “circumcision party” (“those of the circumcision”: 11:2). Their identity is difficult to define. Says Schnabel:

Since their critique does not mention the need to circumcise the converted Gentiles, they are evidently not identical with the “circumcision group” of Gal 2:12..., nor are they identical with the minority group in the Jerusalem church consisting of converted Pharisees who later demanded that Gentile converts be circumcised (Acts 15:5). The expression “the circumcised believers” describes Jewish believers who, as Jews, obviously were circumcised, in contrast to the converted Gentiles (... v. 1), who were not.¹³

This group criticised Peter for going to Gentiles (presumably for entering their ritually unclean houses) and for eating with them (presumably unclean food).

Like with the complaint against the Hebrews (when actually the apostles were responsible, not the “Hebrews”), one may ask whether Peter’s own transgression of Jewish purity laws was the real issue in this conflict. In doing so, Peter relativized important aspects of Jewish identity. Was it not actually the inclusion of Gentiles *as Gentiles* into the people of God? Perhaps this is suggested by the vague accusation of “going to Gentiles” and by the conclusion of V. 18: The critics do not explicitly agree that Peter was right in going to Gentiles and eating with them, but conclude that God has granted to the Gentiles also repentance that leads to life.

As the account stands, the *contested domain* in this conflict is the necessity of adherence of Jewish Christians to Jewish purity regulation and all that is related to it. For those of the “circumcision party,” adherence was mandatory and the significance of the Law non-negotiable. From the account of Acts 10 and Peter’s response it becomes clear that Peter initially shared the position of his critics,

¹³E.J. Schnabel, *Acts*, (ZECNT), Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012, 508.

firmly adhered to them but had to change his mind due to divine intervention. There is no indication that the authority of Peter as such or his leadership role in the community was challenged.

Like with the first conflict (complaint), the *enabling condition* on the side of the opponents is *verbal criticism* of Peter as he arrives back in Jerusalem. The enabling condition on Peter's side is his trustworthy account (there were six witnesses to the events!) of divine preparation and initiative in the events. Peter did not act on his own volition, but obediently followed divine prompting. If anyone, then God is to be blamed. Peter also mentions six witnesses to at least some of the events. His account is trustworthy and stands up to scrutiny. As a witness of the life and teaching of Jesus, he can refer to words of Jesus who is the undisputed authority for him and his critics. In addition, Peter received tremendous divine affirmation through his miracles immediately prior to the disputed events (healing paralyzed Aeneas in Lydda, and raising Tabitha from the dead in Joppa) and by his miraculous liberation from prison in Acts 12:3-19.

Again, the course of this second conflict is mild in comparison to the previous conflict of Stephen with some diaspora Jews and the ensuing persecution of Christians, and with the fate suffered by Paul in Damascus and in Jerusalem.

The process of *de-escalation* is initiated by Peter's detailed account of the events in good order which preceded his disputed behaviour and which explains the reason for his change of attitude and behaviour (11:5-17). Peter summarises the events of chapter 10 and emphasises the *divine interventions* in the process. He first mentions the vision which challenged his own attitude and that of his critics (11:5-10): "What God has made clean, do not call common" (11:9). He also refers to the divine command to go along with the envoys of Cornelius ("And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction" (11:12). Only on that basis, did Peter enter a Gentile house. If he wanted to be obedient (which is mandatory to do when the Spirit prompts, see 5:32), Peter had no choice but to go to uncircumcised men, as he was charged (11:3).

Peter mentions six Christians who came with him and serve as witnesses of the event (12). Then Peter quotes verbatim the message which Cornelius received from an angel who commanded him to summon Peter (13) and indicated the significance of this encounter: "he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household" (14). Peter next refers to the supernatural coming of the Holy Spirit on the audience, apart from

all concern for purity regulations and circumcision: "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them, just as on us at the beginning" (15).

Peter also shares with them how he remembered at that moment the words of Jesus, the undisputed authority accepted by Peter and his critics. The event recalls the annunciation of Jesus: "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (16). That the announcement actually was given to the Jewish disciples and does not refer to Gentiles is apparently not an issue. In closing, Peter shares the conclusions which he drew from the vision, from the divine preparation of the encounter and from the coming of the Spirit and which constitutes the basis for his disputed behaviour, namely eating with Gentiles (11:3): "If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I should stand in God's way?" If God made no distinction, neither should people distinguish (any more).

The solution of conflict comes as Peter's critics apparently accept his explanation for his disputed behaviour (going to Gentiles, eating with them), "And when they heard these things, they fell silent," and conclude: "And they glorified God, saying, 'Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life'" (11:18). The implication is that Gentiles need not become Jews first before they can participate in God's salvation for Israel. Therefore it was acceptable for Peter to go to Gentiles (on divine instruction) and to have fellowship with them (on divine prompting). The critics were silenced and the conflict ends in joint glorifying of God.

Solution involved several steps: Peter takes his critics serious and explains to them in detail the course of the events (likely his speech in Acts 11 is a shortened summary of what he said on the occasion). As had happened to him before, the critics come to realise the legitimacy of Peter's course of action and withdraw their earlier criticism.

In the presentation of Acts, the solution to this conflict is persistent for a time and a wider group of people. Acts only now reports the systematic Gentile mission of Diaspora Jewish Christians from Jerusalem in Antioch. The next conflict in Acts 15 indicates that at least some Jewish Christians challenged the conclusion that Gentiles as Gentiles had been granted the repentance that leads to life.

1.3. Acts 15:1-35: Conflicts over the Inclusion of Gentiles into the People of God

The conflict in Acts develops in two stages and at two locations. We will first address the initial conflict in Antioch (15:1-3) and then its continuation and solution in Jerusalem (15:4-35).

Stage I: Conflict in Antioch (conflict, but no de-escalation and solution in Antioch)

The *occasion* of the third conflict is the legitimacy of the inclusion of Gentiles as *Gentiles* into the people of God as practiced by the nascent Gentile mission of the Hellenists in Antioch and by the missionaries from Antioch elsewhere. A number of Christians from Judea (v. 24, from Jerusalem?) came to Antioch and teach (*edidaskon*) the Gentile Christians: "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses [i.e., become full proselytes], you cannot be saved [i.e., fully participate in God's salvation for his people]" (15:1). This claim leads to major dissension and debate between these people and Paul and Barnabas who remained at Antioch after returning from the first missionary journey (13:1-14:25). As it stands, the critics address the Gentile Christians of Antioch, but their criticism also applies to the practice of Paul and Barnabas which was known in Antioch ("... they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to *the Gentiles*": 14:27).

The *contested domain* is the appropriate mode of the inclusion of Gentiles into God's salvation. Should they be accepted as Gentiles or must they become Jews first by being circumcised and becoming obedient to the law. This issue concerns not only the Gentiles but also has repercussions for Jewish identity and self-understanding: if circumcision/Jewish identity are not necessary for Gentiles, what is its meaning for Jews? At stake is not only the mission practice of the Diaspora Jewish missionaries from Jerusalem in Antioch but also the legitimacy of the practice of Paul and Barnabas on Cyprus and in Asia Minor. In addition, by their demand, the Judeans also question Peter's practice in Caesarea (as narrated in Acts 10) and the conclusions drawn from it by the community of Jerusalem in Acts 11:18.

The *enabling conditions* on the side of the Judeans are significant: what they demand of the Gentiles, namely circumcision, becoming Jews, is commanded by the Law regarding proselytes (presented by Acts merely as "the customs of Moses," not as a divine mandate). When their demand is not followed, (participation in) salvation is at stake. The Law plays a significant role on Luke-Acts and particularly

in Luke's Gospel obedience to the law is a sign of piety (however, there are some indications that the Law is relativized there). In view of Paul's personal circumcision of Timothy in Acts 16:3 and of several other instances of violence in Acts,¹⁴ it is interesting that the Judean Christians argue their case, they do not enforce it violently themselves or incite others to do so.

Paul and Barnabas defend the progressive position by refuting the claim of the Judeans. Acts does not indicate how they argued their case. Immediately prior to this conflict in Antioch, both men refer to the divine approval of their mission practice: "... they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles" (14:27). Acts 15:3 notes that their reports on the way to Jerusalem through both Phoenicia and Samaria regarding the first missionary journey ("describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles") brought great joy to all the Christians. In this way, the Judean critics in Antioch appear as an isolated minority. Paul and Barnabas also receive recognition in Jerusalem ("they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders": 15:4) and report "all that God had done with them." In this way, they give glory to God [an indication of their piety and character] and claim divine approval and prompting for their mission.

As it proves impossible to de-escalate and solve this conflict in Antioch and as the parties to this conflict are related to Jerusalem in one way or another (Judeans from Jerusalem?—Barnabas as a Jerusalem emissary to Antioch, Paul as a former member of the church in Jerusalem), the decision was taken that the matter should be decided by the apostles and the elders in Jerusalem (15:3). Apparently, they are the acknowledged authority for both parties to this conflict. Paul and Barnabas and some others (perhaps to serve as impartial witnesses) are appointed to present the case in Jerusalem. It is noteworthy that despite major dissension, none of the parties resorts to violent action. Paul and Barnabas do not use the supernatural powers (amply attested previously) in this conflict (as Paul had done over against a Jewish adversary on Cyprus in Acts 13:6–11).

Stage II: Conflict and Solution in Jerusalem

The occasion for this second round of conflict are the warm welcome of the Antiochene delegation in Jerusalem by the church and the apostles and the elders and the reports of "all that God had done with" Paul and Barnabas (15:4, implying divine affirmation of

¹⁴See the instances of forced circumcision of Samaritans in the Hasmonean age.

this mission and its practice). There is no mention of the conflict in Antioch and of the fact that these Christians had come up to Jerusalem as an official delegation to seek a solution to the conflict in Antioch. This acceptance and the reports move Christian critics in Jerusalem with a Pharisaic background to action. They make the same demand (*legontes*) as the Judeans had made in Antioch: "It is necessary to circumcise them and order them to keep the Law of Moses" (15:5). The Greek word "saying" (like "teaching" in 15:1) does not imply a verbally forceful intervention (see "argue" in 11:2; see for comparison the activities of Bar Jesus/Elymas in Acts 13:8).

The *contested domains* are similar to those in Antioch. However, they appear intensified: not only must the Gentiles be circumcised in order to obtain salvation (15:1), they must also—explicitly—*keep the Law of Moses* (more than the "custom of Moses"). Possibly this emphasis/intensification is related to the Pharisaic background of the proponents. The contested domains concern the identity and ethics of the Gentile Christians: they must become Jews and live accordingly. The Pharisaic Jewish Christians do not demand discussion of these issues, but readily present their conclusion and ensuing demand. This demand also concerns the right and authority to determine the conditions of joining the Christian community (the acceptance of Gentiles into the Jewish people of God) and determining and safeguarding its identity. Who has the authority to decide in these matters and where should such decisions be taken?

The *enabling conditions* are similar to those of stage I in Antioch. The Pharisaic Jewish Christians have the Old Testament stipulations regarding proselytes and the ethics for the people of God on their side, supported by their traditions and practice. They demand that the Law of Moses, given by God, be followed. In a day and age when antiquity of a religious conviction or practice is highly valued, this was a strong argument. In addition, Moses is one of the leading figures of Israel's past.

Paul and Barnabas have the divine affirmation of their ministry as a benefit on their side. They also have the trust and approval of the Christian community of Antioch. Their reports on the way to Jerusalem brought great joy to all the Christians (15:3). They were welcomed by other Christians in Jerusalem (the church, the apostles and the elders). Thus, they are by no means isolated. This rather applies to their opponents.

De-escalation starts with a meeting of the apostles and elders who take the visitors from Antioch and the local Pharisaic Jewish

Christians seriously (15:6). Acts 15:22 seems to suggest that more people were involved ("Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church..."). As Paul and Barnabas got to speak as well (15:12), they must have been there, possibly also the Pharisaic Jewish Christians. The meeting was characterised by much debate. Of this debate, three contributions are singled out:

Peter again summarises the events in Caesarea of Acts 10 (already reported in Jerusalem in Acts 11:1-18) with an *emphasis on his own divine appointment and God's actions*: "God made a choice among you... God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith" (8-9). To act any different, that is demanding full observance of the law, would mean to put God to the test. In addition, Peter admits that Jews themselves have not been able to observe the law anyway. In closing he affirms that salvation is through the grace of the Lord Jesus, for Jews and Gentiles alike (11).

Barnabas and Paul (interestingly, Acts here returns to the initial order of the names) relate once more what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. These signs and wonders indicate divine approval and affirmation (see 2:22: "Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst..."). While some Christians questioned the mode of this mission, it had full *divine approval*.

James briefly summarises to Peter's account ("how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people from his name," 14) and argues that these (admittedly surprising) events agree with Scripture. After a long quotation from the prophet Amos, he presents his conclusion that the Gentiles should not be troubled by the demand to become Jews and to keep the Law. James suggests some practical stipulation which are aimed at enabling the fellowship of Jewish and Gentile Christians.¹⁵ As the Law of Moses is well-known through proclamation and reading those who live by it need to be respected.

The solution to stage II of this conflict occurs when all, the apostles, the elders and the whole church agree on this proposal and see to its proper and efficient communication. The demands of the Pharisaic Jewish Christians were rejected.

¹⁵For discussion see Schnabel, *Acts*, and Markus Öhler, ed., *Aposteldekret und antikes Vereinswesen: Gemeinschaft und ihre Ordnung*, WUNT 280, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011.

Stage III: Solution of Conflict in Antioch

At this point the narrative returns to *stage I* of the conflict, that is to *Antioch*. Christians of Jerusalem are to come along with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch (“We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth,” 15:27).

In addition to the delegation sent to Antioch, the decision is communicated in the form of an official letter (quoted in 15:23–29, “will tell you the same things by word of mouth”: 27). The letter clarifies that those who had come down from Jerusalem previously did so without authorisation (24). The letter affirms Paul and Barnabas as “our beloved Barnabas and Paul” and their authority (25). They are recommended as people who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (26). Judas and Silas are mentioned by name as official delegates (unlike those who had come to Antioch of their own accord). The letter then communicates the decisions agreed upon (28–29). At this juncture, the letter claims that the decision was not only a decision taken by humans, but that it also pleased the Holy Spirit. Thus, it carries divine approval (as it agrees with God’s prior activities and the prophet Amos). This is an additional, transcendent enabling condition in this conflict.

The delegation is formally commissioned, arrives in Antioch, gather the congregation together and deliver the letter. All of this is unlike the previous unauthorised arrival of some Judeans who initiated the conflict by their demands. The letter is read out and well received: “they rejoiced because of its encouragement” (15:31). Before their return to Jerusalem, Judas and Silas, themselves prophets, encourage and strengthen the Christians there with great intensity. Judas and Silas are sent off “in peace.” The conflict is fully solved. As was the case before the conflict, Paul and Barnabas remain in Antioch and continue their ministry with many others also.

According to the portrayal of Acts, the solution to this conflict was lasting. The question of whether the Gentiles needed to become Jews and keep the Law of Moses is not raised again in Acts. The decision of the council is explicitly confirmed later in in Acts 21:25. The “conflict” of Acts 21 does not concern Gentiles but Paul’s own observance of the Law.

As this study concerns the portrayal of Acts, we do not have time to examine in detail the picture which arises from Paul’s letters. The

many Jewish Christian opponents mentioned in them¹⁶ suggest that not all Jewish Christians agreed with the decision of the council. In view of the references in Paul's letters, critical scholarship on Acts as question whether the council actually took place at all or took place in the way presented by Acts.

2. Summary, Observations and Critical Analysis

Summary

The three conflicts which we analysed have different *occasions*: the distribution of material means and the neglect of some in the community, "going to Gentiles" and the behaviour of Jewish Christians and their adherence to Jewish traditions when confronted with Gentiles and finally the question under what conditions Gentiles can participate in God's salvation and how they should live.

The contested domains are material resources and/or attention by the apostles, compromises with regard to Jewish identity and life-style and the conditions for participating in God's salvation and for membership in God's people and the ethical standards which this implies. It is also instructive to see what is not contested: the identity and significance of Jesus, the community itself as a separate entity apart from established Judaism, experiences of the Holy Spirit and the inclusion of Gentiles (while the criteria for inclusion are disputed).

The enabling conditions are the direct address of the contested issues (complaining, criticism), reference to tradition and divine revelation (the Law of Moses, the prophet Amos), but also experiences and accounts of divine guidance and activity (tradition vs. experience).

The de-escalations and solutions of these conflicts are different. They come by addressing the issues, presenting concrete proposals, giving clear instructions, creating new structures (6:1-6); by detailed reporting and explanations of the course of events which led to contested behaviour, including reference to divine guidance and activity and to the words of Jesus (11:1-18) and by generous discussion, reports of the course of events which led a certain position including divine affirmation of disputed domains, conclusions based on Scripture, God's word and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, proposal of a solution and course of action and clear and

¹⁶On the opponents of Paul see J.L. Sumney, "*Servants of Satan*", "*False Brothers*" and *Other Opponents of Paul*, JSNT.S 188, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999, and S.E. Porter, *Paul and His Opponents*, Pauline Studies 2, Leiden: Brill, 2005.

efficient communication (15:1-35). In the course of all three conflicts under consideration there is de-escalation and an eventual solution of conflict. In each case the threatened unity of the community is restored.

Before we come to a critical analysis, some observations by way of comparison and contrast are in order.

Observations

In all these conflicts, the causes of conflict/dissension were recognised, taken seriously and addressed and a solution was reached. While not without conflicts regarding the distribution of material means (a typical contested domain in conflict) and the identity and maintenance of the own group, Christians are people who manage to resolve conflicts and achieve solutions. In view of the other conflicts of Acts where conflict resolution is not possible, it is noteworthy that all three inner-Christian conflicts in the book can be resolved and the unity of the community is maintained.

With the exception of Antioch in Acts 15:1-2, all inner-community conflicts and their resolution involve Christians from Jerusalem, are located there¹⁷ and occur between Jewish Christians (while the occasion in Acts 11 and 15 is the inclusion of Gentiles). The conflict in Antioch is resolved in Jerusalem. The circle of those involved in these conflicts and their resolution widens from the community and the apostles to the elders, the whole assembly and James.

Although the implications of the disputed issues are far-reaching (issues of Jewish identity, inclusion of Gentiles as Gentiles into the people of God and the authority to do so and the mode of this inclusion and all the repercussions which this may have for Jewish identity and the stance of the Christian community in Jerusalem under the critical eyes of other Jews!), the course of these conflicts is *mild* in comparison to other conflicts in Acts. There is murmuring, arguing, teaching and saying and eventually “no small dissension” and “much debate,” but there is no stronger verbal interaction (no pressure is put on the opponents, there is no vilifying, no threats) or resort to violence by those whose position is rejected (in comparison, the defeated Jewish opponents of the Christian mission regularly resort to violence).

While for those involved, some contested domains and aspects of these conflicts are *superhuman* (for example, the significance of Jewish

¹⁷The third conflict arises in Antioch but is transferred for solution to the community in Jerusalem.

identity, the Law of Moses) and generous reference is made to divine activity and guidance in the course of de-escalation and seeking resolution (11:5–10, 12–15; 15:7, 9, 12), all three conflicts are solved and have to be solved by humans. In no case is conflict resolution simply achieved by the Holy Spirit or other divine intervention, of which there is a generous amount in other accounts of Acts. There is no reference to prayer in the context of these conflict solutions. Conflict solution takes time, wisdom and effort.

Only one of these conflicts involves Paul who dominates the second half of Acts. He is placed in a group of other Christians of Jerusalem which includes Barnabas and the Hellenist missionaries come from Antioch up to Jerusalem. While Paul was a highly disputed figure according to his letters, according to Acts, Paul was a disputed figure among non-Christian Jews and Gentiles, but not *within* the Christian community (for the significance of this observation see below).

According to the portrayal of Acts, all three conflict solutions are persistent. Once the issues are solved, they do not come up again. The conflict between Judean and Diaspora Jews was resolved (6:1–6); the Christians of Jerusalem accepted Peter's controversial behaviour and the Gentiles as part of the people of God and did not demand that they become Jews and keep the Law of Moses.

It is noteworthy that there is little direct overlap between these inner Jewish-Christian conflicts and the conflicts between the Christian missionaries and representatives of Diaspora Judaism. There the contested domains are the identity and significance of Jesus of Nazareth and the adherence of Gentile sympathizers, not the mode of the inclusion of Gentiles into the people of God or demands for circumcision, although these must have been disputed issues in this context.

While Acts uses reconciliation terminology only once in Stephen's review of Israel's history with regard to Moses' effort of reconciling quarrelling Israelites with each other (7:26), these terms are not used regarding the inner-community conflicts. While a summary statement regarding the increase of the word of God and the multiplication of the number of the disciples in Jerusalem appears at the end of the first conflict account (6:7), the earlier statements of unity among the believers are not repeated.¹⁸

¹⁸This is an argument from silence—other characterisations of the early community are not repeated either.

Critical analysis

What are we to make of this picture? *Three* issues need attention:

One: What is the literary function of these accounts of conflict and their solution for the Book of Acts? How do they contribute to the purpose of Acts? Obviously, there is some contrasting going on: while there was deep division in Israel before, in and through the encounter with Jesus, Israel's Messiah, there is unity among his followers. While this unity was not without disagreements on several challenging occasions, the community achieved to maintain its unity and to stay together. The conflicts which arose were solved. The Christian community is not a "quarrelsome lot" (as others in the narrative are!), but manages its own conflicts in exemplary fashion. Thus, these accounts are an important ingredient in the characterisation of the community of Christ-believers.

But more is involved in the inclusion of these tales of conflicts and their resolution. They indicate:

- The Hellenists/Diaspora Jews were fully acknowledged by the Jerusalem community. Their leading representatives were elected by the whole community and appointed by the apostles. Therefore, the Hellenistic Jewish Christians who had to leave Jerusalem after the death of Stephen and who started the systematic Gentile mission in Antioch and elsewhere were not isolated figures but people from the midst of the community in Jerusalem who enjoyed its full approval.
- While not without initial criticism by some, the community of Jerusalem confirmed Peter's activities in Caesarea, that is, "going to Gentiles" and "eating/associating with them." The community confirmed ritual compromise on the side of Jewish Christians evangelising Gentiles, table fellowship with them and the acceptance of Gentiles as Gentiles into the people of God. All this had happened when Paul was not even on the scene (in the narrative, Saul is "parked" in Tarsus, 9:30, and only appears again in Antioch in Acts 11:25-26). Far from being naïve, the community in Jerusalem was fully aware of the implication of the Gentile mission for Jews and Gentiles alike and agreed on a course of action that was initiated by God himself.
- Despite the demands of some Judean Christians for Gentiles to be circumcised and keep the Law, the community in Jerusalem stands behind Peter, Hellenistic Jewish Christian missionaries and Paul and his law-free mission—not without proper reflection, discussion and resolution of disputed issues. In doing so, the Christians of Jerusalem recognised divine prompting, understood the developments in view

of Scripture, experienced the Spirit's approval and followed it. To have done otherwise and to do otherwise now would mean putting God to the test, as Peter (not Paul!) declares. Therefore, those who criticise Paul, appeal in vain to Jerusalem for support.

Surely, a detailed and nuanced portrayal of the inner-community conflict is not the purpose of Acts. At first sight, these accounts appear as mere "by-products" of Luke's over all apologetic purpose. However, on closer examination it becomes clear that the conflict and solution narratives of Acts make an important contribution to the narrative apology for Paul and his disputed Gentile mission, which is the purpose of Acts.

Two: In view of the long history of the church with all its conflicts between Christians and all frustrations, the question is pressing whether the portrayal of Acts is not all too good to be true. Is this portrayal—in part or whole—a construction of the author of Acts for the reasons just outlined? While it surely fits his purposes well, is it historically reliable or at least plausible?¹⁹ While some summary statements in the early chapters of Acts paint the ideal picture of the Christian community as Israel re-gathered and restored, Acts also reports about the conflicts that were there (and we have focused on three, others could be included, depending on definitions of conflict), even though each of these conflicts is resolved.

From the middle of the 19th century onwards, some scholars of early Christianity have argued that all of Acts should be understood less as an accurate historical account but rather as an exercise in reconciling the Jewish Christian fraction (Jerusalem, Palestinian, Petrine) and Gentile Christian fraction (Antioch, Hellenistic, Pauline) of early Christianity. The conflict narratives are an important ingredient in this endeavour. In its radical form, this hypothesis has come under much criticism and is no longer upheld. However, in a certain way, the author of Acts aims at reconciling Christians to each other by showing the legitimacy of Paul's mission. Those who heard the Gospel from Paul or his many co-workers, can be assured that it is not a minority position (see Lk 1:4), but has the approval of other followers of Jesus, including the first followers of Jesus in Jerusalem.

Three: Is this portrayal of conflicts and their solution relevant beyond these two questions of interests to New Testament scholarship, and if it is so, in what way?

¹⁹See the excellent discussion in C.S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary Vol. 1 Introduction and 1:1–2:47*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012, 90–220.

The steps taken to achieve de-escalation and solution of conflict offer some inspiration for the resolution of present day contested issues in the Church. This is all the more so within the Church, were these accounts are part of canonical scripture and are read regularly. In one way or another, they shape the self-understanding of the community and of its ideals. Where they are not read and reflected upon, something important is missing.

While the original occasions of conflict in Acts change over time and in different contexts, some of the *contested domains* of the past remain contested issues: the distribution of material resources, attention by leaders given to different groups and issues of equality among different groups of believers; the identity of the own group, its privileges and duties, and how it should relate to others (making contact and associating with “outsiders”) and the way how people deal with their traditions and authoritative scriptures in changing circumstances and the conditions under which others are to be included into the in-group.²⁰

What about the *enabling conditions*, the pre-requisites for conflict to run its course? In these conflicts, there is exemplary verbal interaction (raising issues, discussion, drawing conclusions, amicable agreement and proper communication). Obviously, some aspects of these accounts are less natural today, also as they have often been abused. The recourse to established authority (tradition, Scripture) has become ambiguous in some contexts; God’s working in history is no longer as obvious, fresh or easy to be recognised.

It is interesting to observe that there in our accounts there is no use of verbal violence (which has come to the fore in recent discussion of religious conflict) or physical violence (still the emphasis of much research on religious conflict). The portrayals of the parties to these conflicts whose position is eventually rejected are friendly. Even Peter as the leader of the apostolic band and as repeatedly divinely affirmed can be questioned and called to account by rank-and-file Christians.

Conclusion

The steps taken in the de-escalation and resolution of these conflicts are timeless: time is granted to explain, people listen to each other, weigh arguments; there is room for ample discussion without verbal or physical violence (this is in marked contrast to the other

²⁰With these issues we are well within the range of the insights and theories of the social sciences (social identity theory, social psychology, etc.).

conflicts of Acts!). People receive, recognise and respond to divine affirmation and guidance; there is recourse to Scripture for enlightenment and the readiness to act, even though this may involve risks.

The conflict of Acts 6:1–6 could only occur because the number of the originally 120 disciples who had come with Jesus from Galilee increased drastically and included people of different background (the Hellenists). The occasion of conflicts of Acts 10 and 15 were encounters of Jewish Christians with Gentiles,²¹ the mode of their inclusion into the community and the implications of this inclusion for Jewish believers. The conflict accounts in the Acts of the Apostles remind us that communities, whose horizons are broadened, which encounter new situations and people, whose traditions and identity are challenged and modified are likely to experience conflict. The question is *whether* they are willing and able to deal with such conflicts and *how* they do so. The events which generated these conflicts and their solution can broaden theological horizons. In our case, they brought in new people into leadership positions who play a significant role later on (including Philip, the first person to share the Gospel with Samaritans and an African!) and deepen understanding of God's intentions and of the identity of the community and its role.

Acts presents a Christian community that is not harmonious and ideal, but had its significant dissensions and conflicts. It allows for dissension (murmuring) and open discussion (even criticism), a community in which leaders can be questioned and are held to account and a community where those who disagree can take the initiative and also have a voice. That the church (and society at large) has not always followed this example is all too evident. The fact that the community managed to resolve these conflicts and how it went about it, is one of the abiding legacies of the portrayal of the early Christian community in the Acts of the Apostles.

As in our day and age the Church is called to probe the concept of synodality as a way forward in its several crises, what we read in Acts of the early Jerusalem community can inspire and guide us in finding new ways that are true to the Gospel, and ways that will reflect that we are called to and endeavour to "walk together," as

²¹For a survey see C. Stenschke, "Interreligious Encounters in the Book of Acts," in H. Hagelia & M. Zehnder, ed., *Interreligious Relations: Biblical Perspectives*, T & T Clark Biblical Studies, London, Oxford, New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2017, 135–179.

indicated in the document of the *International Theological Commission* (3), with which we began this essay. The Book of Acts indicates that a Church which emphasises and prides itself in its Apostolic origin and heritage and elements of synodality go hand in hand. The challenges which the Church faces in the 21st century on all continents (for example, increasing opposition on the Indian sub-continent, scandals with regard to finances and sexual abuse worldwide, an increasing secularisation in the Western world, to name but a few) are so complex and of such a nature that the traditional hierarchies, structures and processes for decision-making and their implementation by many Churches will not be sufficient. The wisdom and insights of *all of God's people* will be needed—in combination with their commitment to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, their active involvement in the Church (not as second class lay-people but as respected brothers and sisters at eye-level!) and their spiritual and material resources and their time.