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BOUBAKAR SANOU & PETR ČINČALA RESTORING COLLEGIAL RELATIONSHIPS: AN INTENTIONAL PROCESS

Authors' Note: A version of this article was presented by Boubakar Sanou and Petr Činčala at the Evangelical Mission Society (EMS) Regional Conference on March 19, 2022.

Acts 15:36–41 records a sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas, two of the greatest missionaries of the early church. This passage reports the painful breakup of the harmonious collaboration between them. Paul and Barnabas had completed their first missionary journey into Asia Minor and were now back in Antioch after the first Jerusalem Council that validated their mission to the Gentiles. When preparing for the second missionary journey, the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark's participation escalated to such a critical point that they parted ways with one another (Acts 15:39).

Luke's account of this conflict tells us that the early believers, though dedicated to God, were not immune to conflict. We do not know many details about the conflict, but we know it was emotional and became personal. Although there is no record of their reconciliation, it appears that after some time, Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark once more became colleagues in ministry (see 1 Cor. 9:6; Gal. 2:1, 9; 2 Tim. 4:11; Col. 4:10; Philem. 23–24).

While the Bible paints a clear picture of the mature character of believers, it does not necessarily provide detailed instructions for how to grow in Christ. The Holy Spirit was sent as a Counselor to convict, guide us, and facilitate our healing. In Him, we have an assurance of growing, learning, and healing. The following testimony provides a lived example of precisely that.

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Restoring Collegial Relationships

We (Boubakar and Petr) encountered each other in different roles before we became colleagues. Our relationship started off well—a honeymoon stage of sorts where we enjoyed working with each other, seasoning one another with humor. It needs to be said, however, that there was no previous opportunity to get to know each other on a deeper level. We were basically just coworkers and acquaintances. We had many things in common: we were both first generation immigrants who obtained missiological education in the United States, had served in foreign mission fields, and were now institutional mission workers.

Living and working in a diverse multicultural society made up largely of first, second, third, or multiple generations of immigrants from different parts of the world creates challenges that can be difficult to handle properly. While this country (the United States of America) has significantly contributed to global evangelization and world mission by sending out missionaries, providing education, and supporting the mission field, it has also become a mission field itself in many ways. This is not only because of the increasing rate of Nones (people with no religious affiliation) within the States but also because of the growing need for reconversion and reconciliation of Christians amidst cultural tensions, ethnic discrimination, and racial biases.

Our first conflict occurred when we both attended a proposal defense as faculty members. When the doctoral student finished presenting his proposal and Boubakar spoke, Petr felt that Boubakar's feedback was unreasonably harsh. This was unacceptable from Petr's point of view, and so he stood up for the student, trying to give feedback in nontoxic way with a pinch of humor. In the context of Petr's personal and cultural background, it was a constructive critique of a colleague's feedback, mirroring his blind spot, intended for personal growth.

As it turned out, Boubakar did not perceive it that way; from his perspective, Petr's response was a personal attack. It only added to the numberless assaults he had experienced in his past; this humiliation from a colleague in front of a student, in the context of his personal and cultural background, was absolutely unacceptable and unexpected from a "friend" colleague. Boubakar was deeply disappointed, and this event triggered deep pain for him.

Boubakar sent Petr a text message and requested a brief meeting after the defense was over. In that meeting, he expressed his feelings and politely requested a distance between the two of them for some time. The honeymoon stage of this relationship was definitely over. It was a shock to Petr as he had

not intended to hurt Boubakar. Petr grew up in a communist country where to be a Christian—and, moreover, a pastor’s child—presented many unpleasant and hurtful moments of rejection that he had had to work with/on ever since. Precisely for that reason, the last thing he would want to do was to insult and hurt someone else.

After that incident, part of me (Petr) wanted to talk, clarify, and explain my perspective, but since that was not mutual/appropriate, time was needed for mending the relationship. My thoughts remained focused on how to prevent such a conflict from happening again. A socially acceptable solution was to keep my distance, avoid or minimize personal communication, be nice and polite, and “pretend” everything was okay. For some time, it appeared that this strategy “worked.”

Working in a multicultural environment creates challenges, even for mission-minded individuals. People bring their own history to the table, full of personal hurts and pain. Because professional boundaries are part of work ethics, individuals are not encouraged to be intentional about paying attention to each other’s histories. “How are you doing?” is just a polite greeting; it does not leave space for listening or immersing oneself in another’s life, challenges, or pain. Instead, the acceptable expectation is to go to or refer someone to a counselor to sort out these socially unpleasant challenges, rather than going the extra mile to “ache with the aching” (Rom. 12:15), offer a listening ear, and/or engage in a friendship that is outside of one’s comfort zone and/or cultural/racial boundaries.

In our situation, the socially acceptable working relationship was to keep our distance, be content with a shallow relationship, and allow our personal challenges to be dealt with by a professional. Skills for addressing collegial conflict are generally not part of signing up for a job. Cross-cultural understanding remains on an academic level (in our case, teaching missiology).

While we were still recovering from our first conflict, another member of the departmental team (a member who had taught and mentored just about everybody in the department) retired and left the position of a director of a program. Petr was asked to assume the position. At one of the following departmental Zoom meetings, applications to the doctoral program were being reviewed. As that meeting progressed, Petr realized the dynamics were different from what they had been previously; his predecessor had a greater level of authority and trust than Petr possessed. In view of the unusual dynamics of the discussions, Petr made a comment in the chat addressing another colleague, saying that he would not have any problem if the other

colleague would take over the position he had just acquired. Petr intended this statement as a joke, and he followed it with a smile emoticon, but for Boubakar—who was not a recipient of that comment but saw it in the chat—it was not a joke at all. He interpreted it as an attempt to squelch differences of opinion. That brought so much pain to him that he was unable to stay for the remainder of the meeting.

With the support of other colleagues (including the chair of the department) and with the agreement of Boubakar, an in-person meeting was initiated in order for the reconciliation process to start. The pain was excruciating, and for the department this was a serious matter. It was important to not mismanage this meeting, as it could be the last opportunity of this kind. This meeting was not a place for Petr to justify or explain away the comment he had made in the Zoom chat box. As the meeting started, Petr was asked to make his statement. He acknowledged Boubakar's pain and asked for forgiveness for making his chat comment.

At that moment, it became clear to both of us that the previous strategy of simply being polite to each other, trying to pretend that nothing hurtful had happened, and keeping a healthy distance was not working well. A different approach was needed.

Once the in-person meeting that initiated reconciliation was over, we concluded that the one viable way to overcome these frequent conflicts was to spend quality time with each other, getting to know each other better and allowing the collegial relationship to go deeper. The desire was apparent on both sides as demonstrated through little gifts, tokens of appreciation, etc. We also agreed to have weekly prayer walks around the university campus. During those prayer walks, we opened up to each other, listened to each other's stories, showed interest, shared prayer concerns, and prayed together. This fostered the growth of mutual trust, which was not based on superficial assumptions about one another but was gained through authentic engagement in each other's life.

Not long after, there was yet another in-person departmental meeting where an important decision needed to be made. We (Boubakar and Petr) disagreed with each other on the topic at hand. While every person present—us included—voiced their opinion, when the decision was made, we did not see eye to eye. In the process of searching for consensus, painful emotions reemerged.

A few days later, when the time for our next prayer walk came, by God's grace the hard feelings had dissipated. Our new strategy for developing

collegial collaboration bore good fruit. We had finally reached the place where we could disagree without experiencing hard feelings or taking things personally.

Reconciliation through Community-Making Effort

M. Scott Peck (1936–2005) was an American psychiatrist and best-selling author. His conviction was that the overall purpose of human communication is—or should be—reconciliation. Nevertheless, we humans have failed to use communication to build true community, which, according to him, is needed for spiritual survival. In his 2010 book *The Different Drum: Community-Making and Peace*, he describes how communities work and how we can start to transform society into true communities. He suggests four stages for developing true communities: pseudocommunity, chaos, emptiness, and community.

Pseudocommunity

In light of our own personal experience, Peck’s framework of true community that brings reconciliation is very helpful. Peck (2010) calls the first stage *pseudocommunity*:

The first response of a group in seeking to form a community is most often to try to fake it. The members attempt to be an instant community by being extremely pleasant with one another and avoiding all disagreement. This attempt—this pretense of community is what I term “pseudocommunity.” It never works. (pp. 86–87)

In all honesty, pseudocommunity is often the default *modus operandi* of many groups (including church groups). While there is nothing wrong with being nice and kind, a pseudocommunity is not enough for developing Christ-like relationships in mission-driven work environments.

As colleagues, we could not—and cannot—avoid relating to each other, especially if our work is related to God’s mission. The common wisdom of the local culture says that at work we are supposed to act professionally, maintaining healthy boundaries, etc. However, that easily leads to pretending/living in pseudocommunity. At the same time, part of our job at a Christian university involves praying together with our colleagues during departmental meetings, making decisions together, and so on. We’re supposed to care for students, supporting each other and, whether

we like it or not, modeling behavior for the students we work with. They notice how we relate to each other.

Although a pseudocommunity is not a lifestyle the Bible supports, it is accepted by the society in which we live. As our case shows, pseudocommunity makes working relationships prone to conflicts and wounds, especially when people come from contrasting cultures or when people carry wounds from having been mistreated in the past.

How long can one last in a mission-gearred working environment where people “who want to be loving attempt to be so by telling little white lies, by withholding some of the truth about themselves and their feelings in order to avoid conflict”? (Peck 2010, p. 88). According to Peck (2010), “it is an inviting but illegitimate shortcut to nowhere” (p. 88).

Chaos

The chaos stage is “characterized by efforts to manage the differences that begin to surface in the group, . . . efforts to solve each other’s problems, unrealistic expectations and judgments both of oneself and others” (Chattanooga Endeavors, n.d., n.p.). This stage is more or less confrontational, lacking the trust needed to deal with more complex issues. In a workplace, this comes when decisions are made based on personal beliefs and convictions. Despite best intentions, differences emerge and friction appears; as demonstrated through our experiences, these differences are often uncomfortable, hurtful, and painful. Chaos is a stage in which painful wounds from the past may easily be triggered and living in pseudocommunity becomes unbearable. But as Peck (2010) states, this is “an essential part of the process of community development” (p. 91).

Emptiness

The third stage is called emptiness and serves as the bridge between chaos and community. “It is characterized by a letting go of the barriers which have been keeping members from being fully present and which have therefore been getting in the way of honest and meaningful communication” (Chattanooga Endeavors, n.d., n.p.). This stage was fully present during our third departmental meeting when disagreement reemerged, and departmental exchange of views lasted for over an hour as consensus was sought. Assumptions were communicated and feelings were expressed. As Peck (2010) describes it,

The process of emptying themselves of these barriers is the key to the transition from “rugged” to “soft” individualism. The most common (and interrelated) barriers to communication that people need to empty themselves of before they can enter genuine community are: expectations and preconceptions; prejudices; ideology, theology, and solutions; the need to heal, covert, fix, or solve; the need to control. (pp. 95–98)

Emptiness is a hard—but necessary—part of building a community or a team where colleagues can trust each other, work on decisions, pray together, and meaningfully serve students.

Community

After our third departmental meeting, the chair of the department likely did not realize the positive effect of what had happened. Peck (2010) explains that “when its death has been completed, open and empty, the group enters community” (p. 103). Although the departmental discussion did not bear fruit as the chair had expected, it allowed further development of authentic community—and as time would show, it would bear fruit.

Community is characterized by the acknowledgment of and respect for individual differences; a depth of listening; an unusual level of group safety; the possibility of emotional and spiritual healing; shared leadership; softened (respectful) conflict; effective group decision making; a sense of belonging; a greater awareness of what stage the group is in and what is needed to move it forward. (Chattanooga Endeavors, n.d., n.p.)

As our experience showed, trying to have (pseudo) relationships by avoiding conflicts did not work. We could not work well together while ignoring our individual differences and cultural backgrounds.

Back to Paul and Barnabas’s Disagreement

We introduced this paper with a brief reflection on Paul and Barnabas’s divisive disagreement narrated in Acts 15:36–41. We now turn our attention to the same story for the purpose of drawing implications for mission leaders. Following are eight lessons from our study of Acts 15:36–41 that have direct implications for approaching conflict in mission and ministry settings.

1. Conflict is an unavoidable fact of life, even among godly Christians.

Eckhard Schnabel (2012) 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” (p. 671). The emotion-fueled conflict between Paul and Barnabas demonstrates 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” (Fernando, 1998, p. 434).

2. Although the example of Paul and Barnabas should not be used as an excuse for Christian quarreling (Stott, 1994, p. 253), or lead people to assume that division is the norm in the event of disagreement among believers, 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” (Schnabel, 2012, p. 671). God brought something good out of Paul and Barnabas’s vigorous disagreement. Their temporal, irreconcilable disagreement led to two successful missionary teams. Disagreements between Christians are not necessarily a hindrance to the successful proclamation of the Gospel. In spite of the conflict, we experience in our relationships, we can remain committed to God’s mission.

3. Even though conflicts are not necessarily bad, we need to be careful about how we handle them. A conflict can have both functional and dysfunctional outcomes, depending 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, stronger mutual respect, renewed faith in each other (e.g., Acts 6:1–7; Acts 15), and improved self-awareness leading to careful examination of personal goals and expectations. But when handled ineffectively, conflict can lead to personal dislikes, teamwork breakdown, and a loss of talents and resources as people disengage or leave (Hibbert & Hibbert, 2014). Those involved in a conflict need to carefully consider the impact of their opinions on others and on the mission and ministry God entrusted to the Church.

4. No matter the intensity of a conflict, people should never lose sight of the hope and possibility of reconciliation. The Greek word for disagreement—*paroxysmo*—in Acts 15:39 suggests that although the contention between Paul and Barnabas was severe, it was temporary rather

than long-lasting. It appears from 1 Corinthians 9:6 and Galatians 2:1, 9 that after some time, Paul and Barnabas once more became colleagues in ministry (Nichol, 1980, p. 317; Keener, 2014, p. 2309). Furthermore, Paul also reconciled with Mark and came to appreciate his usefulness in ministry (2 Tim. 4:11; Col. 4:10; Philem. 23–24). David Goetz and Marshall Shelley (1993) remind us that it is pure fantasy to think that disagreements will never surface or contrary opinions should not be stated with force. What is needed is for Christian leaders to face their disagreements and deal with them in a godly way. They suggest that “the mark of community—true biblical unity—is not the absence of conflict. It’s the presence of a reconciling spirit” (p. 14). Christian 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 (2014) lists six different styles for managing conflicts: persuading, compelling, avoiding/accommodating, collaborating, negotiating, and supporting. 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 used inappropriately” (p. 4). Therefore, to keep hope and the possibility of reconciliation alive, the choice of a conflict management style needs to be contextually 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).

5. Past failures and defections do not preclude future faithfulness and success in God’s service. The story of John Mark is proof that leaders can be grown, and people can move beyond their early failures to faithfulness. Because John Mark was given another opportunity to demonstrate his fitness for service, he grew into an important leader in the history of the early church (1 Pet. 5:13; 2 Tim. 4:11). Scholars seem to agree that it was John Mark who wrote the second Gospel after having been Peter’s interpreter (Fernando, 1998, p. 434). 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). 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. This is also an invitation for leaders to

look at others with the eyes of hope, grounded in the unlimited possibilities of God's grace in a person's life (Fernando, 1998, p. 435). In spite of people's past mistakes, God can still use them if they allow Him to reshape them. 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.

6. The charge of desertion that Paul leveled at John Mark was a serious one (Acts 15:38). In light of the standards of team discipline of his day, desertion made John Mark an untrustworthy mentee. While many of Barnabas's contemporaries considered it imprudent to entrust a significant responsibility to someone who had previously proved himself untrustworthy, he chose to show patience toward John Mark, who needed to make some progress in order to mature his latent qualities (Keener, 2014, pp. 2301–2302). Barnabas's avant-gardist perspective on leadership development is a good example of the need for high tolerance for unconventional approaches to mission (Gill, 2008, p. 7). Likewise, the 21st-century church needs to be open to creative—even unconventional—missionary methods because the God of mission is, at times, unconventional in His missionary enterprise (Paulien, 2011; Sanou, 2018, pp. 301–306). As the church continues to offer earnest prayers for the outpouring of the latter rain that will fully unleash mission, Christian leaders should be willing to make unprecedented adjustments to how they have been accustomed to understanding mission leadership, mission structures, and ecclesiology. Asking God to lead in His mission means that we should be open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit for change rather than always favoring the status quo.

7. With hindsight, Paul would likely have handled this conflict differently. It has been suggested that at the beginning of his ministry, as one of the finest scholars of his time, Paul might have been influenced by philosophers and moralists of his time. Many of these scholars, Jews and Gentiles alike, thought that it was unwise to entrust something important to a student who had once proven to be untrustworthy. It was believed that such a student's behavior could damage the teacher's reputation (Keener, 2014, pp. 2302–2303). That may also explain why Paul insisted that they should not take John Mark along with them on this second missionary journey. In his later years, Paul seems to have softened in how he dealt with human imperfections. In 1 and 2 Corinthians, the reader discovers a Paul who refuses to give up on the Corinthians despite their moral weaknesses. First Corinthians 13:11 appears to be the testimony of a change of perspective that Paul

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, NKJV). Having learned from his own experience, in his epistles, he opposes anger (cf. 1 Cor. 13:5, 7; 2 Cor. 12:20; Gal. 5:20; Eph. 4:25–5:2; Col. 3:8) and advises that if anyone gets angry, it is better to let go of it quickly (Eph. 4:26). He also appeals to believers to avoid divisions in their disagreements (cf. 1 Cor. 1:10–13; 3:3–4; Eph. 4:3–6; Phil. 1:1–4, 14; 4:2–3).

Paul’s example is an indication that the way people handle conflict depends, to a large extent, on their worldview and life experiences. Genesis 3 offers a biblical precedent on how to deal with poor choices people make regardless of their background and life experiences. There were at least three options available to God when Adam and Eve willfully deserted Him. First, He could have just discarded them; that is, let them die as the result of their sin and then create new human beings. Second, He could have let them languish forever under the consequences of their bad choice. The third option, which God chose, was that of redemption. The narrative of the Fall shows Christians that to lead after God’s own heart is to deal with people’s poor choices in a redemptive way, by graciously seeking them out (Gen. 3:7–10), graciously confronting them (Gen. 3:11–13), and generously offering them reconciliation and restoration (Gen. 3:14–15). Genesis 3 also suggests that God’s expression of His love and compassion is just as essential to Him as is His expression of justice and holiness (Walton, 2001, p. 258).

8. In any emotionally-charged disagreement, both parties need to make sure they do not commit the same offense—or an even worse mistake—that they are complaining about. Craig Keener (2013) observes that Luke’s later use of “a cognate of the verb [*apochōrizomai*] for Mark’s departure to refer to Paul and Barnabas separating over Mark (15:39) might suggest that Paul, who rejected Mark, committed the same error of division himself in his division with Barnabas” (pp. 2031–2032).

Conclusion

The story of the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas is a vivid example of the fact that conflict is an unavoidable fact of life even among godly, mission-minded leaders. Evelyn and Richard Hibbert are right to say that “conflict occurs wherever human beings live or work together. The only place there is no conflict is the cemetery” (Hibbert & Hibbert, 2014, pp. 137–138). As such, it has been also suggested that

The popular concept of unity is a fantasy land where disagreements never surface and contrary opinions are never stated with force. We expect disagreement, forceful disagreement. . . . Let's not pretend we never disagree. . . . Let's not have people hiding their concerns to protect a false notion of unity. Let's face the disagreement and deal with it in a godly way. . . . The mark of community—true biblical unity—is not the absence of conflict. It's the presence of a reconciling spirit. (Goetz & Shelley, 1993, p. 14)

Applied psychology helps us deal with the nuances and issues related to conflict that are not dealt with in the Bible. For effective mission and ministry, seeking such a multi-disciplinary approach to addressing conflict is indispensable in the complexity of cross-cultural settings where the diversity of assumptions impacts communication. For genuine reconciliation, the conflicting parties need to commit to working and living the spirit of Christian community, which, on one hand, sometimes requires stepping out of comfort zones, going the extra mile to enter into the “neighbor's” life, listening, sharing, and loving, and, on the other hand, requires a commitment to not shut down but to pursue the path of healing and spiritual/emotional maturity.

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 term. Forgiveness leading to reconciliation is an incredible triumph, even when leaders are faced with extraordinary mission-related conflicts.

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