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CONFLICT AND GROWTH IN CHRISTIAN CHURCHES: A SCRIPTURAL INSIGHT FOR HUMAN AND NATION BUILDING

Rowland Onyenali, cmf

Abstract

It is the belief of the writer that conflict and its mastery are integral parts of any living organism or society. There is no natural organism or society of beings that is involved in any process of growth without one form of conflict or the other. We see this in plants and animals. In the same way, any human organization on the way to maturity bears distinctive aspects of conflict. The early Christian communities were not immune to this phenomenon. So the question arises as to the appreciation of the import of Acts 4:32 which expresses that the early group of believers was united in heart and soul. Was this the real or the ideal situation of the early followers of Jesus? A clear understanding of the trajectory of conflict in the early church could help the Nigerian project.

Introduction

This article is coming at an auspicious time in the history of the world and of Christianity. Although each epoch experiences aspects of conflict and tension that defines it, it seems that ours has become a period of intensive and intensifying gradation of different shades of conflict. From the multifarious and malicious attacks of the ISIS in the former cities of Asia Minor, to the interreligious disputes and discord among religions and again to the internal wrangling of some members in some Christian denominations, one considers that the human race has come

unhinged and is heading to a cataclysmic end. Self-acclaimed end-time prophets speak of rapture and the like. Conspiracy theorists imagine a hidden force that is pushing the fate of humanity and the cosmos into an abyss of no return. In sum, it is assumed that what is happening now is unprecedented since the dawn of human history and the history of religions.

But the take-off of this study is that there is nothing new under the face of the earth and what we experience now is only but a new version of an old phenomenon. Conflict is but an integral part of the process of growth. Understanding this fact will help in channeling our various conflict situations towards a positive goal. On the other hand, failure to appreciate the positive role of conflict will only lead to its mismanagement and eventually to the inability to see conflict as necessary for growth. Philosophers of repute have appreciated the conflict in the human person and in society. One need only mention the Platonic soul and body dualism or the Cartesian mind and body dichotomy.

In the history of Christianity, conflict has helped in the shaping and sharpening of her doctrines. The reader is reminded of the Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries to appreciate how the faith of the ancient fathers of the church was shaped by the theological conflicts they had to battle with.¹ Although the councils of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381) settled the question of the divinity of Jesus, the precise definition of his human nature became the main focus afterwards. These issues were not settled till many bishops were exiled, the church split a couple of times, and seemed to be on the brink of collapse. But instead of collapsing, she came back stronger in the

¹ Some decent works in this regard include Richard A. Norris, *The Christological Controversy* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1980); D. G. Horrell & C. M. Tuckett (eds.), *Christology, Controversy and Community: Essays in Honour of David Catchpole* (Köln, Brill, 2000).

knowledge of what she has always believed in, that is, the divine and human natures of Jesus. One need only refer to the Council of Ephesus (431) as proof of the above proposition.

However, one might conclude that these series of events were a later development in the history of the church that show a loss of Christian unity that was the bedrock of the Jerusalem Church during the early stages. Let us then go back to the origin to show that the spirit of Christ has been present even in the seeming dark paths of conflict situations. In spite of crisis in the ranks of believers, the Christian message was able to spread to the ends of the world. In the same way, there is no notable nation that does not have crises dotted along the contours of her history.

In this regard, I will focus on the first clause of Acts 4:32. My choice of this sub verse is because of my belief that it is central to the understanding of Christian *koinonia* in the first century of her existence. The second clause of the verse seems to be an example to show the concrete manifestation of the unity among the early believers. It is on the basis of the unity of heart and soul that the early Christians were able to share things in common and to bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus. However, the texts of Acts 5:1-11 and 6:2-5 present a different view of ecclesial communion.

Acts of the Apostles and Ecclesial Communion

The Acts of the Apostles seems to be a historical presentation of the development of primitive Christianity from its cradle in Jerusalem. This motive seems to be captured in the first verse of the Acts of the Apostles in which the author (Luke) greets his addressee(s) and makes reference to his former work whose intention was to write out everything concerning Jesus orderly after a careful investigation (cf. Lk 1:1-4; Acts 1:1). By making

reference to his gospel narrative in the second volume of his work, the reader sees the Acts of the Apostles as a continuation of Luke's historiography.²

If we divide the book of Acts into two (Chapters 1-15 and 16-28), we see how the Jerusalem council (chapter 15) functions as the break between the primitive church and the later development of the church with the legitimization of the Pauline Gentile mission. Hence, the events of Acts 4 and 5 fall within the first years of the primitive church and can provide veritable grounds for understanding the mind and mission of the early church. Such questions may arise: was the church more united then than now? What role does conflict or crisis play in the growth of the body of Christ? Can such conflict situations help nations undergoing similar crises to forge a way forward?

United in Heart and Soul (Acts 4:32a)

The Literary Context

We are only at the fourth chapter of the book of Acts when the narrator reports that the early believers in Christ were one in heart and soul. This is coming shortly after the events of the Pentecost (Acts 2) and the manifestation of the power of the risen Jesus through the activities of some of his early followers. After reporting that many wonders and signs were performed through the apostles (Acts 2:43), Luke goes ahead to narrate a particular case (cf. Acts 3). The healing of the blind man at the

² The historical reliability of the New Testament has been defended by F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are they Reliable?* 6th edition (Cambridge, Intervarsity Press, 1981). He devotes chapter seven to the Acts of the Apostles where he finds a lot of correspondence between the narratives of Acts and secular literature.

beautiful gate³ (Acts 3:6f) and the amazement this healing generated (Acts 3:10f) gives Peter the impulse to preach about the power of faith in the resurrected Jesus (Acts 3:12-26). He accuses the people of denying Jesus in the presence of Pilate while preferring the release of a criminal.⁴ This preaching infuriated the religious leaders that they put the apostles in custody till the next day (Acts 4:1-3). It is in this state of affairs that we are told that the number of the men who came to believe in the message of the apostles was about five thousand (Acts 4:4). If the Greek word *anēr* rendered as "men" refers to the males to the exclusion of the females⁵, then we would be sure to count more than a thousand souls when both women and children are added to the number of those who have come to believe. This is a sure improvement from the three thousand that believed on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41). Thus, we see a contrast between the reaction of the people and that of their leaders.⁶ While the Jewish leaders try to subdue the early believers, the people identify with them in their numbers.

The Jewish leaders are then given a clearer identification the next day as they come to interrogate the apostles. They are the rulers, elders and scribes, as well as Annas (reported here as the high

³ This gate probably led into the court of the women beyond which the women cannot go. The name "Beautiful" could be a reference to the splendor of the gate. See F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids, W. B. Eerdmans, 1988), p.77. See also Josephus, *Jewish War*, 5.201.

⁴ The complexity in the textual variants of Acts 3:14 has been adequately analyzed by D. F. Payne, "Semitisms in the Books of Acts," W. W. Gasque & R. P. Martin (eds.), *Apostolic History and the Gospel: Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F. F. Bruce* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1970), pp.134-150. Here pp.141-142.

⁵ In many places where the word appears in the NT it often refers to a man as opposed to a woman (cf. Acts 8:12; Acts 17:12; 1 Tim 2:12); or as a husband (cf. Mt 1:16; Mk 10:2; John 4:16ff; Rom 7:2ff; 1 Cor 7:2ff, etc.).

⁶ Cf. D. G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, W. B. Eerdmans, 2009), p.188.

priest), Caiaphas, John and Alexander and other members of the family of the High priest (Acts 4:5f).⁷ Some manuscripts read Jonathan instead of John. Annas had a son known as Jonathan who later became high priest. If he is the same person named John in this passage, then we have only one unknown figure, Alexander. Therefore, the impression the author creates here is that the same court that tried Jesus (cf. Mk 11:53) is now trying his apostles. It is as if the trial of Jesus has been reopened and the informed reader anticipates a similar end to the plot as happened in the case of Jesus. However, this anticipated end would not happen in Luke's writing. We thus have what scholars have come to refer to as external prolepsis⁸ or foreshadowing, a literary maneuver that carries the narrative forward in time.⁹ Although the events have been taking place in Jerusalem, the author explicitly names Jerusalem as the place where the Jewish leaders gathered (Acts 4:6). It is possible that Jerusalem is once more mentioned "to highlight the significance of the context in which opposition to the gospel was coming."¹⁰ From the mouth of Jesus we learn that Jerusalem is the city that murders God's prophets (Mt 23:37).

⁷ Although Annas held the office of the high priesthood from AD 6 to AD 15 he seems to have wielded much influence that he was considered the reigning high priest many years after. According to Josephus, Caiaphas, the son-in-law to Annas was high priest at that time. Cf. Josephus, Ant. 18:26-35.

⁸ The terms "analepsis" and "prolepsis" have been effectively explained by I. J. F. de Jong, "Narratological Theory of Time" in: *Time in Ancient Greek Literature: Studies in Ancient Greek Narrative*, Vol. 2 (eds.) I. J. F. de Jong & R. Nünlist (Leiden, Brill, 2007), p.5.

⁹ The death of Peter and John is not narrated by the writer even though Peter must have been martyred before the composition of Acts.

¹⁰ D. G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p.189. Reading the gospel of Matthew, one sees reference to Jerusalem mainly in the context of opposition to the teachings of Jesus. This point has been noticed by M. Konradt, *Israel, Kirche und die Völker im Matthäusevangelium*, WUNT 215 (Tübingen 2007), p.216.

The question as to what power or name was behind the actions of the apostles (Acts 4:7) again leads the reader to the events that occurred when Jesus entered Jerusalem in the synoptic tradition (cf. Mk 11:28//Mt 21:23//Lk 20:2). There the question is about the source of Jesus' authority. Notice the remarkable linguistic agreement in the question posed against Jesus: "en poia exousia tauta poieis kai tis soi edoken ten exousian tauten" (by what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority to do these things?) and the one posed against the apostles "en poia dunamei e en poio onomati epoiesate touto hymeis" (by what power or by what name have you done this?). It seems, therefore, that the question of authority or power is central to the conflict between the early church and Judaism.¹¹ This question is of utmost importance to Judaism since the Mosaic Law stipulated that even if anyone performs a miracle and then leads the people away from the God of Israel, such a person is to be stoned to death (Deut 13:1-5).

But instead of responding with a counter question as Jesus did in Mk 11:30, the question provides Peter the opportunity to preach to the Jewish leaders. He declares fully that it was by the name of the crucified Jesus of Nazareth that the lame man was healed (Acts 4:10). To draw the similarity with the controversy story that runs through Mk 11:28-12:11 closer, Peter applies the stone saying of Ps 118 (Acts 4:11) as a sort of warning to the Jewish leaders. This psalm celebrating the anticipated enthronement of the messiah of the house of David,¹² identifies Jesus as the triumphant Messiah. If the connection between the fate of Jesus

¹¹ In analyzing the pericope of Mt 21:23-27 John Drury concludes that "nothing more is at stake than the central tenet of Christianity, the divine authority of Jesus." J. Drury, *The Parables in the Gospels: History and Allegory* (London, 1985), p.96.

¹² Cf. S. Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (Oxford, 1962), p.75ff; A. R. Johnson, *Sacral Kingship in Ancient Israel* (Cardiff, 1955), pp.114-118.

and his apostles has been implicit in the narrative, the author makes it explicit by recording the recognition of the Sanhedrin that these people have been with Jesus (Acts 4:13).

The eventual release of the apostles by the Jewish leaders brought great joy to the young fellowship that is already gathered in Jerusalem. The result was an outburst of prayer and praises (Acts 4:23-30) to the effect that the house in which they were staying was shaken¹³ and they were filled with (more) anointing that made them to speak boldly (Acts 4:31). This is surely a reliving of the Pentecost experience. It seems as though the first wave of persecution has brought them closer to God and to themselves. The reader is then prepared for the next verse that announces the unity in heart and soul of the early group of believers. It is to this verse that we now turn.

The Text (Acts 4:32a) and Explanation

The short text under consideration reads:

tau de plethous ton pisteusanton en kardia kai psyche mia

And the community of them that believed was in heart and soul one.

The operative clause in this sub verse is *kardia kai psyche mia* (one heart and soul). Some ancient manuscripts like codex Bezae add the following words: and there was no kind of difference or dissension among them. Although scholars have seen the longer reading as a later addition,¹⁴ it nonetheless captures the mind of the original text. The longer text understands that the unity

¹³ This was one of the signs to indicate divine presence in the OT (cf. Ex 19:18; Is 6:4).

¹⁴ For such views see B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), p.283.

among the believers was the source of the lack of difference or dissension. It is this same thinking that led A. C. Clark to aver that the shorter reading arose as a result of "the accidental omission of a stichos, facilitated by the presence of *mia* at the end of successive stichoi."¹⁵ The expression *Kardia kai psyche mia* combines, in a beautiful way, the Greek notion of perfect friendship as a single soul dwelling in two bodies¹⁶ and the OT idea of total loyalty.¹⁷ Heart seems to refer to the intellectual side of character (cf. Mk 2:6; Lk 2:35, et al) while soul refers to the emotional side (cf. Lk 2:35; Lk 12:22, et al). Hence, *kardia kai psyche mia* is used to express the totality of the persons that make up the early gathering of disciples. One could expand this to include oneness in all matters of belief and practice. It seems that the prayer of Jesus in John 17:20-23 is already realized in the body of his disciples.¹⁸

On the other hand, the noun *plethos* (multitude, NKJV) whole group (NRSV) is already used in 2:6 and would be used again about 15 times in the Acts of the Apostles. It occurs 31 times in the NT. It also frequently occurs in the Qumran writings (1QS 5:2, 9; 6:19).¹⁹ It is used to designate the members of the Qumran community. Also in the Acts of the Apostles, *plethos* is used to refer to the multitude of believers (cf. 5:14; 6:2; 6:5, etc.) or to the Jews that gathered to listen to them (5:16; 14:4; 21:36, etc.). In the LXX, *plethos* is used nearly 300 times. However, the translation of *plethos* to mean multitude may not be entirely correct. A. Deissmann points out that in the inscriptions *plethos* with a genitive has a technical significance, not only in official

¹⁵ Quoted in B. M. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, p.283.

¹⁶ Cf. Aristotle in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, 5.10.

¹⁷ Cf. I Chron 12:39; Jer 32:39.

¹⁸ Already Acts 2:44 has notified the reader that the believers were together and had everything in common.

¹⁹ W. Bauder, "Plethos," *The New International Dictionary Commentary*, 737.

political life, but also in that of religious communities (cf. Lk 19:37, Acts 15:30, et al) and so should not be translated as multitude but as community.²⁰

We thus have a situation where the author tells of the harmony of intellect, will and belief that existed among the early believers. This harmony is shown by the fact that none claimed private ownership of his goods (Acts 4:32b) and they had everything in common (Acts 4:32c) while giving witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power (Acts 4:33). To show the reality of such unity, the narrator mentions that no member of the community lacked anything (Acts 4:34a) since those who had possessions sold them (Acts 4:34b) and brought the proceeds to the apostles (Acts 4:34c) for common use (Acts 4:35). Already, Acts 2:44 has notified the reader that the believers were together and had everything in common. One would then agree with Marshall that Luke was trying to emphasize that “the gift of the Spirit (verse 31) led not only to inspired preaching but also to Christian fellowship and generosity.”²¹ To concretize this situation, Luke introduces the story of Joseph. However, the story of Ananias and Sapphira shows another face of ecclesial unity.

Joseph and Ananias: Two Faces of a Church

One of the tensions in the history of the early church was between the ideal and the factual echoes in the Christian communities.²² In this case, explicit expressions of unity are

²⁰ A. Deissmann, *Neue Biblestudien*, 1897. English translation, *Bible Studies* (Edinburgh, T & T Clarke, 1901), p.59.

²¹ I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapid, W. B. Eerdmans, 1980), p.108.

²² I have argued elsewhere on the difference between the real and the ideal image of the Matthean community. See my *The Trilogy of Parables in Mt*

juxtaposed with evident tensions that question this unity. While we have the good example of Joseph, nicknamed Barnabas by the disciples (Acts 4:36), we have the negative folio in the story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). As Marshall concludes, it is likely that Acts 4:32-35 "describes the pattern of life, and is then followed by two illustrations, positive and negative, of what happened in practice."²³ Let us examine these cases closely.

Joseph as Barnabas (Acts 4:36)

The story of Joseph is singled out for special mention because it was outstanding.²⁴ If it was because of this singular action that the disciples surnamed him "*huios Parakleseos*" (son of encouragement) we then see that his action has merited a high degree of commendation. If his actions were normal, there would be no need for this special recognition. However, there are some inherent problems in the presentation of Barnabas. Although bar means son in Aramaic, no scholar has been able to prove how naba came to mean encouragement.²⁵ For me, the most probable derivation would be the one from bar nabiyya (son of a prophet) which is then smoothed down to bar naba.²⁶ This explanation is given more credence in Acts 13:1 where Barnabas is mentioned first among the prophets. Therefore, Luke's translation of Barnabas as "son of encouragement" acquires a theological profile. His aim of introducing this figure at this point of the narrative was to show how generous this early

21:28-22:14 from a Matthean Perspective (Frankfurt, Peterlang, 2013), pp.254-261.

²³ I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 108.

²⁴ Cf. I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 109.

²⁵ Several conjectures have been analyzed by S. Brock, "Barnabas, Huios Parakleseos," *JTS* 25 (1974), 93-98.

²⁶ This interpretation has been accepted by M. Hengel, *Paul Between Damascus and Antioch: The Unknown Years* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1997), 211.

follower of Jesus was in the early church. Calling him son of encouragement clearly shows the role he would play in the early church. A similar conclusion has led many critical commentators to argue against the presence of Barnabas in the church at Jerusalem. Most of the arguments point to the fact that Barnabas was never a member of the early church in Jerusalem but rather a leading missionary of the Syrian community, who was transposed to Jerusalem by Luke.²⁷

Moreover, the depiction of Barnabas as a Levite brings with it some difficulty. In the OT we see the Levites as those without landed property (cf. Num. 18:20; Deut. 10:9). However, from Num. 35:1-2 we hear of the command to give the Levites pasture land round the city. This command was carried out by Joshua (Josh 21:41). It was to this portion of land that the Levites fled for their sustenance when their allocation of the tithe was misappropriated by Eliashib, the High priest.²⁸ This ownership of land by Levites seems to have continued during the time of the prophet Jeremiah who owned a portion of land although he was a Levite (Jer. 32:37ff). Nonetheless, in all probability, Joseph functions to introduce the conversion of Levites into the fold of the disciples. Later, Luke would inform us that a great number of the Priests were becoming obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7).

One would then rightfully consider the text of Acts 4:36 as a narrative aside.²⁹ Narrative asides have been defined as those narratives whose “omission would not affect greatly the flow of the narrative...but may be important for the achievement of an

²⁷ Cf. M. Hengel, *Paul Between Damascus and Antioch*, p.211f.

²⁸ I have made an elaborate expose of the Levitical tithe in R. Onyenali, *Paying of Tithe: The History behind the Theology* (Enugu, 2017), especially pp.81-90.

²⁹ The importance of narrative asides in the Luke-Acts has been studied by S. Sheeley, *Narrative Asides in Luke-Acts* (New York, Bloomsbury Pub., 2015).

important goal by the evangelist.”³⁰ The important goals in this respect would be the introduction of the person of Barnabas in anticipation of the role he would play in the life of the church (see 9:27; 11:23; 15:37). Also the eventual conversion of the priestly class may also be in view here. This tendency to introduce characters before their main role is evident in the Acts of the Apostles (cf. Acts 7:58). What readily comes to mind, then, is that Luke has idealized the early community of believers on the model of the Hellenistic idea of perfect friendship.³¹ This conclusion has been accepted by many scholars.³² Evidently, the Hellenistic background of Lukan literature has not been doubted by any serious scholarship.³³ In the words of Bartchy, “in Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-5:11, Luke uses language that echoes Greek utopian hopes to describe the actual meeting of individual needs among the Jewish Christians in the Jerusalem house-churches by means of their pervasive acts of sharing, which Luke believed

³⁰ J. J. O'Rourke, „Asides in the Gospel of John,” *NovT* 21 (1978), p.211.

³¹ This idea is found in Plato, *Republic*, 462b-e. On the part of Pythagoras, “the origin of justice, then, is community feeling and fairness, for all to share experience, approximating as closely as possible to one body and one soul, and for everyone to say “mine” and “someone else’s” about the same thing.” See Iamblichus *On the Pythagorean Life*, Trans. with notes and introduction by G. Clarke (Liverpool, University Press, 1989), p.167.

³² Scholars who accept that Luke borrowed this idea from the Pythagorean school include, U. Schnelle, *Die Ersten 100 Jahre des Christentums*, 30-130 n. Chr. (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), p.140; D. L. Mealand, “Community of Goods and Utopian Allusions in Acts II-V,” *JTS* 28 (1977), pp.96-99; J. Dupont, “Community of Goods in the Early Church,” in *The Salvation of the Gentiles: Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (New York, Paulist Press, 1979), pp.85-102; S. S. Bartchy, “Community of Goods in Acts: Idealization or Social Reality?” in *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honour of Helmut Koester* (B. Pearson, ed. Minneapolis, Fortress, 1991), pp.309-318.

³³ For a fuller treatment of Luke as Hellenistic author see W. Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric in Luke 14 SNTSMS 85* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp.8-10

had indeed happened.”³⁴ His principal figure in this presentation is Barnabas, the Cypriot Levite. Be that as it may, one must conclude that the selling of property and laying the proceeds at the foot of the disciples was but one face of the common life of the community.³⁵

Ananias and Another Face of the Community (Acts 5:1-11)

If the story of Barnabas has presented the positive longing of the early church, the story of Ananias and Sapphira informs the reader that this longing for unity has not already been achieved. There is no better way of making this aware to the reader than through the presentation of the story of Ananias and Sapphira as another face of the church. This story tells how a couple tried to counterfeit the example of Joseph. They sold a piece of property and brought part of the proceeds to the disciples while secretly keeping back a portion of the money for themselves.

The contrast between Joseph and Ananias is shown by the opening adversative particle of our pericope *de* (but). The word translated ‘kept back’ is the Greek *nosphizein* which the LXX used to describe the sin of Achan (Josh 6:18-19). This keeping back while presenting a different picture to the church was seen by Peter as lying to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3). While

³⁴ Quoted in R. Cameron and M. P. Miller (eds.), *Redescribing Christian Origins* (Boston, Leiden-Brill, 2004), p.168. But this does not mean that we cannot find models of this common life inside the Jewish set up. Josephus reports of the Essenes: “There is no buying or selling among themselves, but each gives what he has to any in need and receives from him in exchange something useful to himself; they are, moreover, freely permitted to take anything from any of their brothers without making any return.” Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.127.

³⁵ This conclusion is also reached by C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles: Volume 1:1-14* (London, T & T Clark, 1994), p.258.

interrogating Ananias, Peter acknowledges that they had no obligation to surrender the proceeds (Acts 5:4) which means that private ownership of goods was still allowed. On hearing the words of Peter, Ananias fell down and died (Acts 5:5). The result of this tragic event was fear and the immediate burial of Ananias (Acts 5:6). The same sequence of events also played out with Sapphira about three hours later (Acts 5:8-11). This could be seen as a punishment miracle³⁶ or a rule miracle.³⁷

Many ancient and modern commentators have found the story not to be in the spirit of the new movement founded by Jesus. Even Jerome, who found himself defending the apostle Peter, could not but concede to the severity of the punishment to the couple.³⁸ This severity becomes more picturesque in view of Peter's sins and his obtaining forgiveness from Jesus.³⁹ Perhaps Marshall has captured well the apparent historical incongruity of

³⁶ Other punishment miracles in the Acts of the Apostles include the blinding of Saul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:8f), the slaying of Herod by an Angel (Acts 12:23) and the blinding of Elymas by Paul (Acts 13:9-12).

³⁷ Among scholars who argue for a rule miracle here include Theissen, *The Miracles Stories of the Early Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1983). On p.110, Theissen argues that "in the Jewish rule miracles, the issue is almost always one of life or death. Breaches of law lead to death; observance of the law preserves from death. The law does not chastise; it kills...The Greek punishment miracles are more humane, more educative, and that is certainly no accident."

³⁸ Cf. J. G. Cook, *The Interpretation of the New Testament in Greco-Roman Paganism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), p.155, citing Jerome, Ep. 130.14

³⁹ Several studies have seen this puzzling pericope from different angles. It has been seen as a story originally told to address the issue of members who have died before the Parousia (P-H. Menoud, "La mort d'Ananias et de Sapphira (Actes 5. 1-11)," in *Aux de la Tradition Chrétienne Mélanges offerts à M. Maurice Goguel* (Bibliothèque Theologique; Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1950), pp.146-154) or to show how a community member violated sacred law and was anathemized and ostracized by the leader of the community (G. Lüdemann, *The Acts of the Apostles: What Really Happened in the Earliest Days of the Church* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005), p.81.

the passage: “the story appears to present the working of the Spirit in almost magical fashion. Neither Ananias nor Sapphira is apparently offered any chance of repentance, and the way in which the former was buried without his wife’s knowledge sounds heartless, to say nothing of being improbable.”⁴⁰

But many factors could give credence to the historical plausibility of the story. First, Derrett has pointed out that part of the money kept back by the couple could be her own ketubah or share of her husband’s estate.⁴¹ This part of the estate usually belonged to the woman and was a sort of social security in the case of divorce. Again, the interrogation by Peter corresponds to those evident in the Pythagorean movement and in those contained in the Qumran rules. With regard to the Pythagorean system, if any novice is rejected, he would be regarded as dead by the hearers.⁴² For the Essenes, first, the novice has to be interrogated by an examiner or guardian and made to swear by the oath of the covenant.⁴³ “If one of them has lied deliberately in matters of property, he shall be excluded from the pure Meal of the Congregation for one year and shall do penance with respect to one quarter of his food (1QS 6.24–25).”⁴⁴ Finally, the divinely afflicted death of both Ananias and Sapphira could be the reason for a quickened burial. In the words of Derrett, “when a man has been struck down by the hand of Heaven (as Joshua specifically said was the case with Achan: Josh 7:25) his corpse must surely be consigned rapidly and silently to the grave. No

⁴⁰ I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p.110.

⁴¹ J. D. M. Derrett, “Ananias, Sapphira and the Right of Property”, in *Studies in the New Testament*, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1977), pp.193-201, esp. p.195f.

⁴² See Iamblichus, *Pythagorean Life*, 17:73.

⁴³ An indepth analysis has been made by C. Murphy, *Wealth in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the Qumran Community. Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah 40* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

⁴⁴ Quoted in C. Murphy, *Wealth*, p.519-522.

one should mourn him. The suicide, the rebel against society, the excommunicate, the apostate, and the criminal condemned by the Jewish court would be buried...in haste and without ceremonial, and no one might (or need) to observe the usual lengthy and troublesome rituals of mourning for him."⁴⁵

Therefore, we have two historically reliable texts (Acts 4:32 and Acts 5:1-11) that show the true nature of the early Christian assembly. It was a community of love but in which conflict was an integral part. This could be a lesson for the Nigerian church in particular and the Nigerian nation in general.

Ecclesial Quota System: The Template of Acts 6:2-5

So far what we see in Acts 4:36 and 5:1-11 are two sides of the early church. In my opinion, the first text is the idea of the author to concretize the ideal already stated in 3:32a. However, the second text shows, in no small measure, how far this ideal is from reality. Similar passages in the narrative show that the second pericope comes closer to the real state of affairs. Hardly had the puzzle of the fate of Ananias and Sapphira settled in the mind of the reader than he/she is presented with the murmuring of the Hellenists against the Jews because of the neglect of the formers' widows in the daily distribution of things (Acts 6:1). This led to the creation of the diaconate.

In choosing the deacons, certain criteria were taken into consideration. They have to be men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom (Acts 6:3). The following were chosen: Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas. It is not accidental that all the deacons had Greek names. One of them (Nicolas) was even a proselyte from

⁴⁵ J. D. M. Derrett, „Ananias, Sapphira, p.198.

Antioch. It seems that we are dealing with the value of numbers in the Jewish culture. If twelve represents the Jews, seven represents the Gentiles.⁴⁶ Therefore, if the twelve apostles, who are all Jews, could not take care of the affairs of the Hellenists, the seven Hellenists would take this responsibility. The early church has come to realize the need for diversity in the ranks of her leaders. The fact that the Acts of the Apostles never presented these deacons in any way as fulfilling the function of daily distribution of food but of active involvement like the apostles themselves (this was the case with Stephen and Philip), makes the careful reader to sniff some form of quota system in the early church.⁴⁷ The Gentiles are now as actively involved in the ministry as the Jews. This gives the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch, through the preaching of Philip (Acts 8:26-40), a prominent place in the conversion of the Gentiles. In summary, the first early preacher to the Gentiles was a Gentile convert.⁴⁸

It is in this same line of argument that one understands the similarities between the preaching of Peter on Pentecost day (Acts 2:14-40) and that of Stephen (Acts 7:2-53). Later, the ministry of Peter in the house of Cornelius (Acts 10) would mirror the ministry of Philip to the Ethiopian Eunuch. Evidently, the death of Stephen also mirrors that of Jesus. Remarkably, Luke places in the mouth of Stephen (Acts 7:60) a similar

⁴⁶ This idea could give a different meaning to the passage of Mt 14:20 and Mt 15:29.37. The first miracle saw the picking up of twelve baskets while the second miracle which happened in a Gentile territory witnessed the picking of seven baskets.

⁴⁷ Some of the points in this section have been elaborated by U. Schnelle, *100 Jahre*, pp.141-144.

⁴⁸ Arguments to the pagan status of Ashdod and Caesarea where the spirit led Philip have been fronted by R. Genz, *Jesaja 53 als theologische Mitte der Apostelgeschichte: Studien zu ihrer Christologie und Ekklesiologie im Anschluss an Apg 8,26-40*, *WUNT* 398 (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2015), p.163

exclamation as the one he places in the mouth of Jesus on the cross, (Lk 23:34). Both acknowledge the ignorance of the Jewish leaders while praying God to forgive them.

However, this implicit quota system in the Jerusalem community was hampered when persecution rose heavily against the early church after the death of Stephen. It is apparent that it was the Hellenists that were driven out of Jerusalem, suggesting that the harmony in soul and heart may not have been as strong as presented by Luke.⁴⁹ This conclusion is carried forth in the later parts of the Acts of Apostles. Despite the conclusion of the first apostolic convention in Acts 15, theological differences still existed among the early followers. In many places, these differences reached a status of theological crisis to the extent that the early writings of the church were inundated with warnings against false teachers. Perhaps, in no other place is this crisis brought to the fore than in the Antiochian incident (cf. Gal 2:11-21). It is noteworthy that this incident happened between the recognized pillars of the church. The theological tension between the two is then fine-tuned in the passage of 2 Pt 3:15f which speaks of the difficulty writings of Paul which can lead the unwise into error. The fact that the final editors of these pericopes have allowed them to remain in the canonical writings implies that there is a teaching the Holy Spirit wants us to learn from it. After all, every scripture is inspired by God for teaching and correction (cf. 2 Tim 3:16).⁵⁰

⁴⁹ For analysis and critique of such a conclusion, see C. M. Pate, *The Reverse of the Curse: Paul, Wisdom and the Law*, WUZNT 2. Reihe 114 (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2000), pp.429-34

⁵⁰ Finally, towards the end of his life, Paul complains that all the disciples deserted him at his prosecution (2 Tim 4:16). This could also be seen as very close to the truth considering Luke's meticulous description of the trials of Paul. From the time of his arrest (cf. Acts 21:30-36) to his defense (Acts 22-

Conclusion

The few passages surveyed can effectively be said to capture the soul and heart of the early Christian gatherings. It was a community on a journey to a better understanding of her mission and identity. A veritable character of this communion is the inevitable tension and crises. In the mind of this author, these crises are necessary as the air is to humans. They go a long way to confirm the saying that unity does not mean uniformity. Hence, it might not be worthwhile applying the passage of Acts 4:32a as perfect description of the early church to the neglect of other important passages like Acts 5:1-11 and 6:2-5. Doing that would be tantamount to presenting a distorted image of the early followers of Jesus.

In the same way, our time is experiencing various forms of ecclesial tension and crises. In a nation like Nigeria where religion is endemic to the people, such conflicts have shaped the politics to a great extent. The Muslim north and the Christian south have never agreed in reality to form a functioning nation.⁵¹ This has been the reality in Nigeria even prior to independence. For instance, at the budget session of the Nigerian legislative council in March, 1948, Nnamdi Azikiwe introduced a motion urging a united Nigerian outlook. In answer to this, the northern leader, Tafawa Balewa, made the following remarks: "Many [Nigerians] deceive themselves by thinking that Nigeria is one...This is wrong. I am sorry to say that this presence of unity

26) and his eventual chained voyage to Rome (Acts 27), no single mention was made of the early Christians intervening on his behalf or praying for him as was the case with Peter (cf. Acts 12:5).

⁵¹ In the mind of some authors, true federalism is the solution to Nigeria's recalcitrant problem. See, for instance, R. T. Suberu, *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria* (Washington, US Institute of Peace, 2001), especially chapter three.

is artificial and it ends outside this Chamber...The southern tribes who are now pouring into the North in ever increasing numbers, and are more or less domiciled here do not mix with the Northern people... and we in the North look upon them as invaders."⁵² There is a sense of "ancient hatred"⁵³ running through the veins of Nigerians because of religious and ideological differences. These differences could have been seen as varieties that could have added colour to a bountiful growth of the nation by decision makers. The affirmation of ethnic and religious diversity can give the citizens a sense of cohesion, especially when it does not become a primary criterion for acceptability or recognition. The primary concern should be the depth of capability as shown in the selection of the seven deacons by the early church. There could be unity in diversity. There is identity in difference.

⁵² Quoted in J. S. Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), p.361. I have expressed the implications of such remarks in my *Appraising the Nigerian Problem through Education and Religious Dialogue: A Cognitive Approach* (Frankfurt, Peterlang, 2013), especially pp.17-19.

⁵³ The term "ancient hatred" was used by M. Ignatiff to describe the disintegration of groups in a nation due to the absence of legitimate authority. See his *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism* (Toronto, Farrar, 1993), p.16. The theory of ancient hatred contends that intrastate violence arises as a result of ill-feelings among groups in a state that have been suppressed but never removed.