

DIALOGUE AS A BIBLICAL PRINCIPLE FOR PREVENTING, RESOLVING AND MANAGING COMMUNAL CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the biblical principle of dialogue as a means for preventing, resolving, and managing communal conflicts. The study addresses the persistent challenge of communal conflict, which often arises from power struggles, resource competition, and socio-political inequalities. The main objective is to demonstrate how biblical teachings, particularly those of Jesus and early biblical figures, can guide contemporary conflict resolution practices through dialogue rooted in humility, reconciliation, forgiveness, and community involvement. The methodology is qualitative, involving close reading of biblical texts like Genesis 13 (Abraham and Lot) and Matthew 18:15-20, alongside theological literature analysis. The findings highlight key biblical principles that can inform conflict management, such as prioritizing relationships over material concerns (as seen in Abraham's dialogue with Lot) and promoting reconciliation over victory (as emphasized in Jesus' teachings). The paper also examines the contributions of early Christian figures like St. Augustine and St. Basil, as well as recent papal teachings, which underscore the

importance of dialogue in fostering peace, justice, and mutual understanding. The study concludes that dialogue, when grounded in biblical wisdom, offers a transformative approach to conflict resolution that can bridge divides in contemporary communal settings, promoting lasting peace and social harmony. This research contributes a unique theological perspective to conflict resolution, complementing existing secular approaches and providing practical applications for communities in conflict.

KEYWORDS: dialogue, conflict, preventing, resolving, biblical.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict, both at the individual and communal level, remains a pervasive challenge across societies worldwide. It often arises from competing values, resources, and power struggles between groups or individuals (Galtung 348). In communal settings, where conflict can become organized and deeply rooted, the stakes are even higher, as these conflicts typically involve shared identities such as ethnicity or religion, and may escalate into violence when unresolved (Brosché and Elfversson 9). Understanding and addressing the causes of such conflicts is crucial, as they often result from complex socio-political dynamics, including disputes over resources, power, identity, and socio-economic inequalities. This paper seeks to explore dialogue as a biblical principle for preventing, resolving, and managing communal conflicts, offering a unique perspective that integrates theological insights with contemporary conflict resolution practices.

Drawing on the teachings of scripture, this paper aims to investigate how biblical principles, particularly those found in the teachings of Jesus and the examples of early biblical figures, can inform and guide effective conflict management strategies. Through an examination of biblical texts such as the story of Abraham and Lot (Genesis 13) and Christ's teachings in Matthew 18:15-20, this research seeks to demonstrate how dialogue, rooted in humility, reconciliation, forgiveness, and community involvement, offers a transformative approach to managing conflicts in contemporary communal settings.

The methodology employed in this study is primarily qualitative, utilizing a close reading and analysis of biblical texts alongside relevant theological literature. By doing so, the paper contributes to the existing literature on conflict resolution by highlighting the importance of spiritual and ethical considerations in addressing communal conflicts. While existing scholarship on dialogue in conflict resolution focuses largely on secular or political solutions, this paper's unique contribution lies in its emphasis on dialogue as a divine, biblically-grounded practice that fosters peace, reconciliation, and mutual understanding. This approach not only bridges the gap between religious teachings and conflict resolution practices but also provides valuable insights for contemporary leaders and communities seeking sustainable peace.

In this context, the research will also explore how early Christian teachings, particularly those of the Patristic Fathers, as well as the more recent papal teachings, align with biblical principles of dialogue in managing conflicts. By synthesizing these perspectives, this paper seeks to offer a lucid framework for communal conflict management, one that is deeply rooted in biblical wisdom and applicable to today's world. This research not only fills a gap in the existing literature by addressing the theological underpinnings of dialogue in conflict management but also provides a practical approach that can be applied to real-world communal conflicts, particularly in regions marked by ethnic, religious, or socio-political tensions.

This paper seeks to make a distinctive contribution to the body of knowledge on conflict resolution by exploring the biblical principle of dialogue, offering both theological insights and practical applications for preventing, resolving, and managing communal conflicts in a manner that promotes lasting peace and mutual respect.

UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT

Defining Conflict: Conflict arises when two or more parties engage in struggles over values, resources, or power, often aiming to neutralize or eliminate their rivals (Galtung 348). This state of disagreement can manifest as hostility between individuals or groups.

Nature of Communal Conflict: Communal conflict is characterized by organized struggles over control of scarce resources along shared communal identities (Galtung 349). Such conflicts often occur when competing groups lack shared rules governing resource allocation, leading to attempts to undermine one another (Lyam 45). They can escalate from early signals of tension to violent crises or wars, as noted by Imobighe (67).

The Role of Dialogue: Dialogue is a traditional method of managing conflicts (Pasricha 115). Defined as an open-ended communication between conflicting parties facilitated by a third party, dialogue aims to foster mutual recognition, understanding, empathy, and trust. It seeks to create constructive engagement that paves the way for mutually acceptable solutions.

The Concept of Communal Clashes: Conflict is a broad term encompassing incompatible goals, cognitions, or emotions within or between individuals or groups (Cheldelin and Druckman 23). It can be categorized into three primary types:

1. Goal Conflict: Incompatible desired outcomes.
2. Cognitive Conflict: Inconsistent ideas or thoughts.

3. Affective Conflict: Incompatible emotions leading to anger and hostility (Cheldelin and Druckman 24).

Communal conflict, particularly, refers to violent confrontations between non-state groups organized around shared communal identities, such as ethnic or religious affiliations (Brosché and Elfversson 9). In contemporary contexts, this often manifests as tensions between "indigenous" inhabitants and "settlers" in various regions, particularly in West and Central Africa (Brosché and Elfversson 12).

CAUSES OF COMMUNAL CONFLICT

The roots of communal conflict often lie in the desire of one group to assert its identity and interests over others (Mengistu 29). Conflict erupts when this desire is confronted with sharp resistance from the affected party. Common causes in Nigeria include:

Indigene and Settler Dynamics: It becomes difficult to understand why in many regions of the world various groups interact as they do because of the intricate political and social systems. Such of them include the Indigene and Settler Dynamics which covers the relations between the indigenous people (indigenes) and immigrants or settlers. This relationship may be aggravated by tensions such that settlers take discriminated against and equality and use of resources, entitlements or even culture may cause social strife. When they are accompanied by Land Disputes, these issues form the basis of further disagreement over the ownership or use of land when civil and local solutions make conflict escalate due to a divergence in cultures and laws.

Socio-economic and Political Power Struggles involve competition, mainly out of power over economic resources or political authority within any society thus resulting to social vane. This is well illustrated by areas where power is vested in some people thus relegating others into the background. More often, these battles are driven by Illiteracy and Lack of Education, which denies the individuals chances at better lives to improve their standards. Other negative effects of education lead to the lack of meaningful political participation, and work towards enhancement of socio- economic status of a given community.

Frustration and Displacement: Violence, poverty and economic strife are the main causes of displacement. Displaced individuals can become hopeless and alienated, because they cannot reintegrate into new communities as before. Besides displacement, the Wealth Inequality has a strong, positive correlation with the societal cleavages. Because it leads to inequality between the haves and have nots there is always conflict between the two parties.

Oppression by Dominant Groups refers to a social, ethnic or political stratified system in which some groups dominate other subjugating them to low chances of improving their status. This oppression is manifest in what is commonly known as Allegations of Neglect

where the oppressed, in this case minorities feel that their requirements have not been considered by other entities such as the government. Thus, these groups are deprived of requisite services like health, facilities and even education.

Human Right violation happens when some people or some form of authorities denies equal privileges to others or even ill treats them. These violations may include prejudicial interferences with freedom of speech, extrajudicial arrests or detentions, or acts of physical force against certain individuals and communities. Discrimination and Victimization also common, where such groups are treated more unfairly depending on their ethnicity gender, or status. Exclusion from social services seems to be the least severe which such discrimination can manifest, not to mention physical violence, which deepens this social segmentation.

Resource management and control: Communities endowed with valuable resources are susceptible to conflict especially when they are poorly managed. Issues like; who own the resources, who controls the resources, who benefits more from the resource are potent triggers of communal conflicts.

These and many more lead to poverty which is the state of being or lacking the essentials necessities in life which may include food, water, shelter as well as healthcare. The lack of funds is not poverty: it is a state that hinders individuals and families from accessing the things they need for a decent life free from hunger or despair and sets up a pattern of deprivation that can be grimly hard to escape. These social policies are connected issues of poverty and socio political situation indicating the life challenges of different individuals and groups at the society.

THE NATURE OF DIALOGUE

The term "dialogue" combines two Greek words: An emphatic of dia, meaning "through," and logos, meaning "word" or "meaning" (Sukdaven 45). Thus, dialogue entails meaning making by oral or written language where people construct and interactively co-create their lived experiences of the reality. Such interaction enables the use of a more appropriate media to facilitate interaction, enabling the participants to develop a deeper level of interaction. The act of dialogue transcends plain speaking and examines the ways in which true conversation is an effort to really listen and gather information in order to arrive at a platform for concern. Dialogue is characterized by:

I. Mutual Exchange: A procedure that enables one or more parties to share experience, ideas or opinions (Turner 67). Such an exchange enhances the input and output process as well as the overall input and withdraw process, enables new information to be introduced to the participants as well as fosters different experiences amongst the participants. It not only provides a platform for the sharing of knowledge but goes further in fostering respect

as well as cooperation as there are always new points of view brought from the different participants. This is the process through which people can understand other persons' insights and perceptions clearly and accurately.

II. Two-way Communication: All having the permission to respond and to think more deeply (Dajwan 12). Different from an ordinary conversation, everyone involved in the dialogue is supposed to share information and answers and even give feedbacks. The end user model with the use of an interactive approach tends to encourage participants to think critically and to challenge ideas while at the same time reinforcing tolerance for different opinions. Linked communication guarantee equal voices, giving the participants an active role in the communication process.

Four conceptions of dialogue emerge in contemporary literature: 1. Human Relationships: Dialogue as a form of human connection; 2. Communication Study: Examining the intricacies of conversation; 3. Cultural Understanding: Dialogue as a means of cultural knowledge; and 4. Text Interpretation: Understanding and interpreting textual meaning (Arnett et al 4).

The attributes of effective dialogue include immediacy of presence, emergent consequences, and recognition of otherness, collaboration, genuineness, and authenticity (Boyle et al. 2). Successful dialogue requires a commitment to respond to conflict with maturity, wisdom, and a focus on achieving godly resolutions.

TWO BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF DIALOGUE FOR PREVENTING AND RESOLVING CONFLICT

Abraham and Lot: A Model for Conflict Resolution

Then Abraham said to Lot, let there be no strife between you and me and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen, for we are kinsmen. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand then I will go to the right, or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left. And Lot lifted his eyes and saw that the Jordan valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt in the direction of Zoar. (This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah). So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan valley and Lot journeyed east. Thus they separated from each other. Abram settled in Canaan, while Lot among the cities of the valley and moved his tent as far as Sodom (Gen. 13:8-12).

The narrative of Abraham and Lot in Genesis 13 illustrates key biblical principles for preventing and managing conflicts. Abraham's proactive dialogue with Lot serves as a powerful example of humility, communication, and relationship prioritization. Their interaction emphasizes the importance of addressing potential conflicts before they escalate

and prioritizing the well-being of the relationship over personal desires or material gain. Through this biblical example, we see how conflicts can be prevented by fostering understanding and cooperation, rather than allowing them to spiral into division.

Humility is a central theme in this narrative, as Abraham demonstrates his willingness to let Lot choose the land first, exemplifying a conflict-preventive measure. Abraham's act of selflessness in offering Lot the first pick of the land reflects his understanding that peace and unity are more important than asserting personal rights. By practicing humility, Abraham creates an opportunity for both parties to thrive without competition or resentment. His actions teach us that humility can diffuse potential conflict and build trust, fostering a cooperative environment that prevents disputes from escalating.

Open communication is another key insight drawn from this story. Abraham directly addresses the situation with Lot, making it clear that he values their relationship over the land they both desire. Their open dialogue prevents misunderstandings and allows for a peaceful resolution to what could have been a contentious issue. Instead of allowing tensions to build silently, Abraham's willingness to discuss the issue openly sets the stage for mutual understanding. This principle of transparent communication helps avoid unnecessary conflict by ensuring that concerns are addressed before they grow into larger issues.

Abraham's willingness to prioritize relationships over material concerns is another profound lesson from this narrative. While the land might have been a source of wealth and security, Abraham places his relationship with Lot above these worldly considerations, promoting community harmony. This decision highlights the biblical value of reconciliation and unity, as it underscores that personal relationships should take precedence over possessions or resources. By valuing relationships in this way, Abraham exemplifies how communities can thrive when people are willing to set aside personal interests for the sake of mutual respect and harmony.

Trust in divine provision is evident in Abraham's actions throughout the story, as he relies on God's guidance to make decisions. His choice to allow Lot the first pick is rooted in a deep trust that God will provide for him, regardless of the outcome. This demonstrates the importance of seeking spiritual insight in conflict management, as divine guidance can lead to peaceful and just resolutions. Abraham's trust in God highlights the role that faith and reliance on spiritual wisdom play in navigating conflicts with integrity and grace.

Finally, Abraham's proactive approach to avoiding strife speaks to the biblical teachings against unnecessary quarrels. Instead of allowing the situation to deteriorate into a dispute, Abraham takes deliberate steps to avoid conflict, suggesting that peace requires intentional action. This reflects the biblical wisdom of addressing tensions early and working towards resolution before disagreements become entrenched. By focusing on

avoiding strife, Abraham sets an example for us to take proactive measures in conflict resolution, always aiming for peaceful outcomes that benefit all parties involved.

Christ's Teachings in Matthew 18:15-20

If your brother sins against you go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a gentile or a tax collector (Matthew 18:15-18).

In this text, Jesus offers a structured approach to conflict resolution within the community of believers. This process emphasizes dialogue as a means of restoring relationships. The passage describes a process of solving interpersonal conflict which basic aim is reconciliation and preservation of harmony in the community. Jesus' instructing on peace include speaking or coming to the point of talking in order to solve conflicts which include humility, reconciliation and forgiveness in order to heal relationships.

The following principles are outlined in the passage starting with the first one: Punctuality. It is the following command that Jesus wanted people to adhere to by solving all problems the moment they arise. He calls for believers to act quickly, not let anger grows or misunderstandings remain unresolved. Since its formation, people of the community base should address complications as they occur in order to avert sophistication of rifts that can adversely affect the habitation. This is considered as positive response to show that any conflict is likely to be immediately handled to maintain order.

The second is the principle of humility. Following is one reason Jesus says that, whoever is handling a problem between two people should do so gently. Although it does not mean posturing to be superior to the other person, it is equally about acknowledging the worth of that person. Although there is need to consider the best approach when it comes to humility is the fact that both parties must be willing to be willing to listen and understand that to de-escalate the tension, there is need for peaceful compromise.

Another is reconciliation over victory. Jesus again teaches that, it is important to work on healing the broken relationship and not necessarily trying to find out who was at fault. Even in a disagreement the aim is to seek reconciliation not victory in an argument or to prove a point. This principle requires the believers avoid personal self-assertiveness or desire to win especially in a dispute preferring instead unity and peace.

Forgiveness is also a key aspect of Jesus' teaching. He emphasizes the necessity of forgiveness for healing to occur. Holding onto grudges or seeking retribution only prolongs the pain and division caused by the conflict. Instead, forgiveness offers a path toward healing and reconciliation, allowing both parties to move forward in mutual respect and harmony.

Finally, community involvement is highlighted in situations where direct confrontation fails. If the conflict cannot be resolved through personal dialogue, Jesus suggests that mediation by others in the community is necessary. This could involve bringing in witnesses or leaders to help facilitate the resolution process. Community involvement ensures that the conflict is handled fairly and that both parties feel supported in their pursuit of reconciliation. Through these principles, Jesus provides a clear and compassionate framework for conflict resolution that prioritizes peace, healing, and the restoration of relationships within the community of believers.

ECHOS OF DIALOGUE IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

From Some Patristic Fathers

When it comes to conflict management, the early Church Fathers established standard rules and regulation., which are still applicable. For instance, St. Augustine who thought that love is a strong force that would lead conflicting parties to a compromise. He said that, ‘this has overcome the world-love,’ on another occasion he added that “Love Conquers All.” This indicates that love should be the cornerstone of any efforts to stitch together any form of division or conflict. For Augustine, love was not something abstract, but the active attitude, which may find in the conflict the chance of reconciliation.

In the same vain St. Basil the Great exhorted the people of God to be proactively merciful and kind in order to avoid giving occasions for giving offenses. According to him, the key message was about the need to prevent situations that would lead to misunderstanding and increased interpersonal conflict in the society by considering the needs of other members in the society (Basil 45). Such an orientation in conflict management had its roots in the Christian charitable feelings that Basil regarded as effective remedies for many social ills.

Another Church Father was St. Ambrose who agreed with the opinion that wisdom is effective when it comes to solving conflicts. He penned what he considered as the philosophies of conflict resolution by describing wisdom as the key to life (Ambrose 78). According to Ambrose, good wisdom results in peaceful methods of solving such matters, and therefore enhance orderliness in the society.

From the Papacy

The principle of dialogue in the resolution of conflict has a long history of development in the Catholic Church and over the past several decades has been stressed extensively by the popes. The Pope John Paul II echoed this reality in his encyclical, *That They All May Be One*, and observed that; ‘Dialogue is an indispensable means for achieving peace, justice and development’ (Tulowiecki 106). He pointed out that dialogue is something more than a verbal communication it is a unique process of comprehension,

appreciation and the attempts of finding similar grounds for cooperation (106). To John Paul II, dialogue was a significant way of building up relationship and promoting peace because of discrepancies.

Subsequently, an extension of dialogical approach and philosophy was done by Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical *Spe salvi* and more explicitly in *God is Love*. He defined dialogue as, ‘a basic mode of the love that God bears towards all humanity’ (Balasuriya 229), this seeing dialogue as a way of emulating God’s love on the world. Pope Benedict XVI also pointed to dialogue as an essential component in the process of establishing a civilised world which is free from injustices replacing enmity with harmony.

The ardent advocate of dialogue that Pope Francis has been during his reign is a good example. He asserts in his apostolic exhortation, “The Joy of the Gospel,” that, “dialogue is a process that can help us to have a better understanding of the other person and ourselves” (Catalano 279). He advocated for a “culture of dialogue” that could help in the fight for peace as well as contact building that can be reached over the bridge, he encouraged people to discuss instead of the conflict. The Papacy’s teaching on dialogue is built on several core principles: it is rooted in the love of God, it is a process of mutual understanding and respect, it seeks common ground, it fosters trust, and it is a transformative process that can heal divisions and promote unity.

From Some Renowned 21st Century Theologians

In this and many other cases, theologians have been able to provide important insights into conflict management processes. For instance, the late Desmond Tutu strongly supported the idea of reconciliation as a form of progress for the sake of the future of nations. He underlined the fact that people all around the world desire peace and he was sure that forgiveness may restore even the coldest relationships (Tutu 45). Tutu’s stress on reconciliation is anchored on the fact that there can be no lasting peace that does not take into account the pain of the past. Indeed, Desmond Tutu advocated for reconciliation as essential for the future of nations. He emphasized that peace is a universal aspiration, and he believed that the process of reconciliation can lead to healing even the deepest divisions. Pandang Yamsat described reaching peace as a combative endeavour that demands work and spiritual growth of believers in conflict prevention and resolution. He argued that achieving peace is a complex process that requires both effort and maturity from believers. He holds the view that on the basis of the general meaning of the concept of peace, the latter does not represent a simple or immediate result but a process, which requires ongoing development in relation to the involved persons. He insisted that it is not accidental but it is a process and calls for effort and personal change (78).

Reinhold Niebuhr agreed with the fact that part of the conflict involves possibility for growth. Niebuhr wanted the big idea to be: “The only way to overcome evil is through

the triumph of forgiveness.” In this he recommended forgiveness as a powerful way of addressing the clash to enhance opportunities for spiritual and personal transformation.

Karl Rahner underlined the aspect of listening as being one of the partitions of dialogue. According to him, active listening and respect of the other party is an important foundation for communication and conflict solving (Rahner 89). Listening makes the people to understand each other hence developing a strength of one accepting the other peacefully.

Leonardo Boff described the need for justice in the making of true peace. He said that, for peace is not just a superficial balance of relations, but it also tackles the question of power. For Boff justice and peace go hand in hand and authentic peace can only be attained if systematic factors of injustice and inequity are addressed. For Boff justice is central to the search for conflict resolution as it looks to the root causes of the conflict for a solution.

Together, these theologians have contributed to a richer understanding of conflict management, emphasizing forgiveness, reconciliation, justice, and dialogue as key elements in the quest for peace. Their teachings continue to inspire efforts for healing and understanding in diverse communities around the world.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the role of dialogue as a biblical principle for preventing, resolving, and managing communal conflicts. Through the examination of key biblical narratives, such as the story of Abraham and Lot, and Christ's teachings in Matthew 18:15-20, the research highlighted the importance of humility, reconciliation, forgiveness, and community involvement in conflict management. Additionally, the insights from early Christian thinkers and recent papal teachings further emphasized dialogue as an essential tool for fostering peace and unity.

The findings underscore that biblical principles of dialogue are deeply rooted in values that promote peace, mutual understanding, and reconciliation. These principles provide a framework for conflict resolution that is not merely theoretical but practical and applicable in contemporary communal settings. Dialogue, when guided by humility and a commitment to reconciliation, can effectively de-escalate tensions and build stronger, more harmonious communities.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that leaders and communities adopt dialogue as a central practice in conflict resolution. Emphasizing humility, active listening, and forgiveness can transform conflicts into opportunities for growth and reconciliation. Additionally, promoting community-based dialogue processes can ensure that conflicts are addressed promptly and constructively, preventing escalation and fostering long-term peace.

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