

CONFLICT AS A FACTOR FOR CHURCH GROWTH IN ACTS 15:36-40: IMPLICATIONS FOR QUA IBOE CHURCH IN EKET SENATORIAL DISTRICT

**Gabriel Sunday Oton,
Dr. Vincent A. Olusakin**

&

Dr. Stella P. Essien

*Department of Religious and Cultural Studies,
Akwa Ibom State University, Obio Akpa*

Abstract

Conflict, though commonly viewed as a threat to ecclesiastical unity, has played a paradoxical role in shaping the growth and structural evolution of the church. This study investigates the relationship between conflict and church growth, using Acts 15:36–40 as a theological lens for interpreting the historical and contemporary experience of Qua Iboe Church in Eket Senatorial District. Employing a combination of exegetical and descriptive methodologies, the study interprets Acts 15:36–40 within its historical and theological context, particularly focusing on the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas and its resultant impact on early Christian mission. This exegetical insight is then brought into dialogue with qualitative data gathered through personal communications with church leaders and members in Qua Iboe Church. The findings of the study reveal that while conflict brought significant emotional and structural strain to Qua Iboe Church, especially during the separation that birthed the United Evangelical Church, it also facilitated growth in unexpected ways, resulting in increased congregational spread, leadership opportunities, and missional engagement. The study concludes that, as seen in Acts 15:36–40, conflict can be redirected towards positive outcomes when navigated with spiritual discernment and missional focus. It recommends intentional leadership formation, conflict literacy, and theological reflection as tools for managing church disputes in ways that promote long-term vitality and expansion.

Key Words: Conflict, Church Growth, Exegesis, Acts of Apostle, QuaIboe Church

Introduction

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of human interaction and social development, arising from divergent views, values, and interests (Peter, Olusakin and Essien, 2025:324). It transcends secular institutions and permeates religious spaces, including the Christian

church. Within ecclesiastical circles, conflict is often perceived negatively, as a destructive force that fractures unity, hinders spiritual growth, and tarnishes the moral image of the church. However, history and scripture alike reveal a more complex dynamic: that conflict, when managed wisely, can become a catalyst for growth, renewal, and wider mission impact. A striking biblical precedent for this assertion is found in Acts 15:34–40, where a sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas led to their separation and the multiplication of missionary efforts, thereby advancing the cause of the gospel.

This theological framework provides a meaningful lens through which to view contemporary disputes within the church. The case of Qua Iboe Church in the Eket Senatorial District of Nigeria exemplifies this tension. Qua Iboe Church was once a unified body characterized by evangelistic fervour and a shared identity. However, the church began to experience internal agitation and identity crises, particularly around the mid-1990s. Debates concerning the church's nomenclature and perceived ethnic exclusivity prompted some members to advocate for a name change to reflect a more inclusive, national identity. Others, however, staunchly defended the traditional identity and resisted this change. These opposing views eventually culminated in a schism that birthed the United Evangelical Church (UEC) in 2002.

The conflict, which was particularly intense in Eket Senatorial District, escalated into physical confrontations, legal disputes, and the fracturing of congregations. These developments severely undermined the unity of Qua Iboe Church and posed serious questions about the integrity of its gospel witness. Yet, paradoxically, it seems the same conflict also led to the expansion of both Qua Iboe Church and United Evangelical Church into new territories, marking a new chapter of growth and outreach. Therefore, this paper aims to assess how conflict within Qua Iboe Church has, through fragmentation and realignment, fostered church growth in Eket Senatorial District, using the apostolic disagreement in Acts 15:36–40 as a biblical and hermeneutical point of reference. The evaluative model of Justin Ukpong is used to assess the implications of Acts 15:36–40 on the situation in Qua Iboe Church, Eket Senatorial District. The evaluative model of African Contextual Hermeneutics, especially the second approach, among others, examine the implication a Biblical text has on a particular situation in society or church (1999:319)

A Conceptual Examination of Conflict

Conflict is an ever-present phenomenon in human societies, manifesting at interpersonal, group, institutional, and national levels. In its simplest form, conflict arises from perceived or actual incompatibilities in interests, beliefs, values, or goals between individuals or groups. Bassey (2014) defines conflict as a clash or disagreement resulting from opposing views or needs. He asserts that this disagreement may be verbal,

emotional, or physical, depending on the nature of the opposing parties and the context in which the dispute arises. On a broader scale, conflict often plays out externally, especially when parties pursue mutually exclusive goals or contest over resources, power, or recognition. Essien (2020:140) asserts that conflict becomes more intense when these goals are not just incompatible, but grounded in ideological, religious, or cultural frameworks. This perspective is reinforced by Oko's assertion that conflict is inherent in plural societies characterized by diverse goals and individual interests, which often lead to clashes between different groups.

Elom (2000) expands the definition of conflict by describing it as “armed fighting; a war, struggle that occurs between opposing groups over clash of feelings and interests.” Although Elom’s emphasis on physical struggle highlights the extreme end of conflict, it is important to note that many conflicts, particularly those within the church or among faith-based institutions, may never escalate to physical violence. Instead, they manifest through leadership disputes, doctrinal disagreements, and subtle power dynamics that affect cohesion and mission. In fact, as Okai (2008) rightly observes, “Conflict can take place wherever people have contact.” Thus, the formation of social groups, while essential for progress, is inherently fertile ground for conflict. However, conflict is not completely negative. While it is often perceived as a destructive force, several scholars have challenged this notion, stressing the potential of conflict for positive transformation. Nmah (2009) argues that conflict, when properly managed, can become functional rather than dysfunctional. Functional conflict may stimulate growth, encourage self-reflection, and bring about structural or theological reform within institutions. Hazim (2008) supports this claim, noting that properly managed conflict can become a “catalyst for development, tolerance, and peace.” Conversely, poorly managed or suppressed conflict may lead to division, resentment, and long-term instability. From a sociological standpoint, conflict is often associated with the competition for scarce resources. Hill and Turner (2002) argue that many conflicts emerge from group struggles to control material or symbolic resources such as land, leadership, doctrinal authority, or legitimacy.

The above assertion is especially true within churches and religious movements, where questions of spiritual authority and doctrinal purity often spark conflict. Yahaya (2009) laments that churches in Nigeria have increasingly become breeding grounds for conflict, often resulting in splits and leadership tussles; he explains that such conflicts, if unresolved, not only undermine spiritual unity but also negatively affect church growth and witness. Yet, even in such circumstances, conflict has been known to spark innovation, stimulate theological debate, and lead to the founding of new congregations or denominations, demonstrating its complex role in ecclesiastical development. It is, therefore, critical to understand conflict not simply as a problem to be eliminated but as a

social and organizational reality that must be understood, managed, and, where possible, harnessed for constructive purposes.

Church Growth

Benson (2007:62) defines church growth as the physical development of the church building, spiritual development of its members and numerical expansion of the congregation. In this definition, Benson sees church growth as all encompassing, touching not just the *ekklesia*- the called out, but all involving the structural growth or development of the place of worship. McGavran (2000:69) defines church growth as “the planting and care of self-propagating churches.” His view of church growth was championed by the Church Growth Movement (CGM), which he founded in 1955. The theological assumption of the movement is that people need to hear and receive the Gospel in order to be saved (1 John 5:12). McGavran thus defines the notion and principle of church growth by placing evangelism as the top priority of the mission of the church. However, this is not sterile evangelism of ‘search theology’ without addition to numbers of the saved. Evangelism, within the concept of church growth is only valid when it leads individuals to becoming committed to Jesus Christ as Saviour and to His church as a responsible member (Wagner, 1996:57). Therefore, this is the evangelistic mandate that defines the existence of the church growth movement and serves as impetus to the definitions of church growth promoted by its members. The concept of Church growth is sometimes used in referring to the quantitative and qualitative growth of the Church. At other times, it is used to denote a discipline; and it can also be used to mean a movement (Oslon, 2008:39).

McGavran (2000:64) points out that church growth and development can be used interchangeably. He identifies four typologies of church growth, including financial church growth, numerical church growth, spiritual church growth and expansion church growth. Financial church growth, according to him, is the ability of the church, through the contributive power of its members to have financial wherewithal to solve its immediate and societal problems such as building a worshipers’ friendly auditorium, giving to the needy members, carrying out humanitarian and community development projects, etc. Numerical growth is the sporadic increase in the number of members evident in church attendance. Although spiritual church growth is harder to quantify, McGavran notes that it is even the most important part of church growth. According to him, this type of church growth involves the spiritual development of the lay people and the clergy. It is a process by which the church becomes mature and perfect in Christ. The expansion church growth refers to the ability of the church to grow by expanding to other regions or

places. This situation is similar to the case of the early church where the church despite being seriously persecuted grew numerically and spiritually.

For Adesanya (2004:39), church growth is the physical development of the church and the spiritual maturation of its members. Adesanya's definition highlights a salient point that must not be overlooked. That is, the physical and spiritual development of the church is a vital part of church growth. It is in tandem with the above position that Danielson (2002:70) sees church growth as the collective effort of the member to ensure the development of the physical place of worship, attraction of new members and the spiritual development of the members of the church. From the above, it can be seen that church growth is holistic. It must necessarily involve the development of the physical and the spiritual aspect of the church. While evangelism serves as the foundation for church growth, drawing new people into the church through the sharing of the gospel, the growth of the church also depends on creating a welcoming and inclusive environment that helps newcomers feel accepted and valued. Strong leadership plays a pivotal role in guiding the church, setting a clear vision, and inspiring the congregation toward collective action. Moreover, churches that provide opportunities for members to deepen their faith, engage in spiritual disciplines like prayer and worship, and develop their spiritual gifts are more likely to experience vibrant growth. The New Testament shows that God wants his church to grow in its entire dimension. The Matthean Jesus in 16:18 states that he would build his church and the gate of hell would not prevail against it. The world build connotes growth.

Biblical Perspective of Conflict

Conflict is a prevalent theme in the Old Testament that is depicted in a variety of forms. These conflicts include interpersonal conflicts between individuals, conflicts between nations, and spiritual conflicts between good and evil. Interpersonal conflicts often arise due to jealousy, betrayal, or other personal grievances. For example, the story of Cain and Abel in the book of Genesis illustrates the destructive consequences of jealousy and sibling rivalry. Cain's jealousy towards his brother Abel leads to conflict and ultimately to murder. According to Coogan (2006:94), this narrative functions as a warning about the devastating consequences of unaddressed interpersonal conflicts. Other instances include the rivalry between Jacob and Esau, the betrayal of Joseph by his brothers, etc. These stories demonstrate the complex and often tumultuous relationships between individuals in the biblical narrative. Interpersonal conflicts also encompass a broader spectrum of issues, including power struggles, deception, and betrayal, as seen in the conflicts between David and Saul. These conflicts serve as a reflection of human nature and the complexities of relationships, showcasing the consequences of unresolved conflicts and the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Further, conflicts between nations feature conspicuously in the Old Testament, particularly involving the Israelites as God's chosen people. In many occasions, these conflicts usually arise due to issues related to land, power, and religious beliefs. The Israelites frequently find themselves in conflict with neighbouring nations, leading to wars and battles throughout the Old Testament. A clear example and a well-known conflict involving the Israelites is the Battle of Jericho, as described in the Book of Joshua. The Israelites, under the leadership of Joshua, waged war against the city of Jericho in order to claim the land promised to them by God. The conflict between the Israelites and the Canaanites in this instance was primarily about land and power, as both groups sought control over the territory.

Another example of conflict in the Old Testament is the rivalry between the Israelites and the Philistines. The Philistines were a neighbouring nation that frequently clashed with the Israelites over land and resources. The conflict between the two groups is spotlighted in the story of David and Goliath, where a young Israelite shepherd defeats a giant Philistine warrior in battle. Religious beliefs also play a significant role in the conflicts between nations in the Old Testament. The Israelites were monotheistic, worshipping only one God, while many of their neighbouring nations were polytheistic, worshipping multiple gods. This difference in religious beliefs often led to tensions and conflicts between the Israelites and other nations. A notable example of conflict arising from differences in religious beliefs between nations in the Old Testament is the conflict between the Israelites and the Baal-worshipping nations, particularly the encounter between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 17-18). Spiritual conflicts between good and evil is equally a notable issue in the Old Testament, with the concept of a cosmic struggle between forces of good and evil being central to many stories found in the Hebrew Bible. This theme is evident in various narratives, such as the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the fall of Lucifer, and the battles between the Israelites and their enemies (Collins, 2004:183).

In the New Testament, with various instances of disagreement and tension among individuals and groups; a clear instance of conflict in the New Testament is the opposition faced by Jesus Christ from religious leaders and authorities. The Pharisees and Sadducees, who were prominent religious figures in Jewish society, often clashed with Jesus over his teachings and actions. Brown (1997:58) notes that the Pharisees were a Jewish sect known for their strict adherence to religious laws and traditions; they viewed Jesus as a threat to their authority and teachings, as he often challenged their interpretations of the law and criticized their hypocrisy. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus condemns the Pharisees for their outward displays of piety while neglecting justice and mercy (Matthew 23:23). This conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees ultimately led to his crucifixion, as they

conspired with the Roman authorities to have him arrested and executed (Keener, 2003:82). The Sadducees also clashed with Jesus during his ministry (Mark 12:18-27).

The New Testament also provides a rich narrative of conflicts between believers and non-believers, particularly in the context of the persecution of early Christians by the Roman authorities. The book of Acts, in particular, offers a detailed account of the challenges faced by the early Christian community as they sought to spread the message of Jesus Christ. As noted by Ehrman (2018:291), the persecution of early Christians by the Roman authorities was a significant aspect of the early Christian experience. Ehrman notes that the Roman authorities viewed Christianity as a threat to the social order and stability of the empire, leading to the persecution of Christians who refused to renounce their faith. This persecution is vividly depicted in the New Testament, particularly in the book of Acts, where early Christians are shown facing imprisonment, torture, and even death for their beliefs.

Another point of conflict in the New Testament is the disagreement among the early Christian communities. The letters of Paul, for example, address various issues and conflicts within the churches he founded. These conflicts ranged from theological disagreements to disputes over leadership and moral conduct. According to Ehrman (2018:294), the early Christian communities were not always in agreement on matters of theology. In his book *Forged: Writing in the Name of God*, Ehrman discusses how some of the letters attributed to Paul were actually written by later authors who held different theological beliefs. This led to conflicts within the churches as different factions vied for control over the interpretation of Christian doctrine. In addition to theological disagreements, there were also disputes over leadership within the early Christian communities. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul addresses a faction within the church that was claiming allegiance to different leaders, such as himself or Apollos (1 Corinthians 1:12). This division over leadership threatened to tear the church apart and required Paul to intervene and remind the Corinthians that they were all followers of Christ (1 Corinthians 3:4-6). Moral conduct was another point of conflict within the early Christian communities. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul admonishes the church for engaging in immoral behaviour such as jealousy, fits of anger, and factions (Galatians 5:19-21). Paul emphasizes the importance of living a moral and upright life in accordance with the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Conflict in Qua Iboe Church, Eket Senatorial District

Eket Senatorial District is one of the three Senatorial Districts in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. It was created in 1996 as part of the administrative restructuring that took place after the creation of Akwa Ibom State in 1987 (Udoudo, 2016:50). It is made up of several

Local Government Areas, including Eket, Esit Eket, Ibeno, Ikot Abasi, and Onna. These areas are culturally and historically linked, with the Ibibio-speaking people being the dominant ethnic group in the district. Incidentally, the Qua Iboe Church began at Upenekang in Ibeno Local Government in Nigeria, a Local Government in Eket Senatorial District. The history of the Church traces back to the evangelical labours of Samuel Alexander Bill, an Irish missionary who arrived at Ibeno in 1887. Responding to a call from the chiefs of the Ibeno tribe who requested a white man to teach them about God, Bill set sail from Belfast and began his mission among the people of the Niger Delta (Odey, 2010). Settling initially in Mkpanak and later at Upenekang, he founded what would become the Qua Iboe Church, named after the Qua Iboe River near which the first mission was established. From humble beginnings, the church spread rapidly across Nigeria and became one of the largest indigenous churches, characterized by its evangelical zeal and self-supporting structure. It has since undergone structural evolution and faced numerous administrative challenges in the course of its development.

In Eket Senatorial District, the presence of Qua Iboe Church is profound and historically significant. From Upenekang in Ibeno Local Government, where Samuel Bill established his base, the church expanded to other regions such as Ukat in Onna and Afaha Eket, where a congregation was planted in 1903. This marked a pivotal moment in the growth of the church in Eket Senatorial District. The spread was facilitated by water transport, and the church soon had a wide reach, with over 200 congregations and approximately ten thousand members in the area today (Ekong, 2003). However, the vibrancy of Qua Iboe Church in Eket Senatorial District has been disrupted by persistent conflicts. One of the most divisive issues has been the controversy over the church's name change affecting the national church. While the national leadership attempted a transition to "United Evangelical Church" in a bid to reposition the church's identity and correct what was perceived as tribal or occultic connotations associated with "Qua Iboe," the decision was met with strong resistance from large segments of the Eket Senatorial District. Many local congregations felt emotionally attached to the original name, which they saw as a sacred emblem of the church's heritage (Paul, 2019). As Usen Joe (Personal Communication, March 2025) notes, "Changing the name felt like cutting off the church from its roots. It was not just about a name, it was about the historical root of the church. "Beyond semantics, the name-change debate masked deeper leadership conflicts. Several interviewees in the district view the change as a political move aimed at shifting leadership power from Akwa Ibom indigenes to other ethnic groups. As Ekong (2003) explains, one of the major reasons behind the agitation was the belief that the church's leadership had been too concentrated in the hands of Akwa Ibom people. Similarly, Effiong Bassey (Personal Communication, March 2025) observes that "the name-change

issue opened a door for leadership tussles. It became a game of who controls the church's direction." Indeed, these views seem to buttress that leadership struggles significantly contribute to the conflict.

Apart from leadership and name identity, conflict in Qua Iboe Church in Eket Senatorial District has also been fueled by administrative grievances, personality clashes, and resource control. Iniobong Udo (Personal Communication, 2025) shared that "some members are more interested in managing church money and influencing church boards than they are in preaching Christ." This aligns with the findings of Gifford (2015:76), who notes that internal church politics, particularly over finances and positions, often ignite disputes. The impact of these conflicts has been profound. The church has experienced splits along factional lines, with congregations disintegrating and members shifting allegiance to different camps. In some cases, congregants have left Qua Iboe Church entirely. Nsikak Udoh (Personal Communication, March 2025) laments that "The unity we once had is gone. Now, we enter church watching who is on the other side." The consequences of this prolonged conflict are both spiritual and structural. One of the most visible effects is the fragmentation of congregations. Several churches now run parallel services or refuse to fellowship with other congregations that do not align with their faction. Some congregations have split entirely, with members leaving to start new congregations or joining other denominations. In some towns, there were times when one building hosts two services on different days, each conducted by rival ministers who lay claim to the same congregation. There have also been instances of violence and public embarrassment. Etim Okon (Personal Communication, 2025) recounts a day when an ordination service was interrupted by a rival group that stormed the church mid-service. This story corroborates incidents reported in other parts of Akwa Ibom, where services were held at rented town halls because churches were locked by opposing factions.

Additionally, the conflict has damaged the spiritual vitality of the church. Members report a decline in enthusiasm for worship, Bible study, evangelism, and youth activities. The energy once channeled toward missions and outreach is now consumed by factional politics and survival strategies. Effiong Bassey (Personal Communication, 2025) observes, "We used to be known for strong evangelism and youth revival. Now, people just attend service to show loyalty. The fire is gone." His words reveal the internal collapse of momentum in many once-thriving congregations. Moreover, the church's public image has suffered. Incidents involving police presence during services, legal battles over property, and public exchanges of accusations among leaders have attracted negative attention in the community. Some believers have distanced themselves entirely, while others remain in the church but with deep disappointment and emotional fatigue. According to Gifford (2015:76), internal religious conflict that spills into the public

square often undermines the credibility of the church's witness to the world. The situation in Eket seems to confirm this.

Lastly, spiritual apathy and cynicism are spreading among the younger generation. Mma Grace Ekanem (Personal Communication, March 2025) notes that most youths now come to church passively, if at all. "They do not want to inherit the fight. They just want to worship God without being dragged into who is right or wrong." Sadly, many youths are either leaving or staying with indifference, seeing the church less as a place of refuge and more as a battleground for the older generation. In totality, the conflict in Qua Iboe Church, Eket Senatorial District, has taken a heavy toll. It has fractured the unity of the body, strained relationships, damaged institutions, and compromised the church's gospel mission. While some voices still call for reconciliation and healing, the path forward remains uncertain unless honest conversations, humility, and inclusive dialogue are prioritized over factional loyalty.

Exegetical Examination of Acts 15:36-40

Acts 15:36-40 in Greek

36 Μετὰ δὲ ἡμέρας τινὰς εἶπεν Παῦλος τῷ Βαρναβᾶ· Ἀπελθόντες ἐπισκεψώμεθα τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς τοὺς κατὰ πόλιν πάντη, οὓς κατηγγείλαμεν τὸν λόγον τοῦ κυρίου, εἰ ἔχουσιν.

37 Βαρναβᾶς δὲ ἐβούλετο παραλαβεῖν καὶ Ἰωάννην τὸν καλούμενον Μάρκον.

38 Παῦλος δὲ ἔκρινεν μὴ παραλαμβάνειν τὸν ἀποστάντα ἀπ' αὐτῶν ἀπὸ Παμφυλίας καὶ μὴ συνελαθόντα αὐτοῖς εἰς τὸ ἔργον.

39 Ἐγινε δὲ ῥηγμα μέγα, ὥστε αὐτοὺς ἀποστῆναι ἀπένταντι ἀλλήλων· ὁ μὲν Βαρναβᾶς παραλαβὼν τὸν Μάρκον ἀπέπλει εἰς Κύπρον.

40 Παῦλος δὲ ἐπιλεξάμενος Σιλᾶν ἐξῆλθεν, παραδοθεὶς ὑπὸ τῶν ἀδελφῶν τῇ χάριτι τοῦ κυρίου.

English Translation of Acts 15:36-40 (Nrsv)

36 After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing."

37 Barnabas wanted to take with them John, called Mark.

38 But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work.

39 The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus,

40 but Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord.

Background of Acts 15:36–40

The Book of Acts, traditionally ascribed to Luke, the beloved physician and companion of the Apostle Paul (cf. Col. 4:14; Philem. 2:4), provides a historical-theological narrative of the birth and growth of the early church. It is the second volume of a two-part work that begins with the Gospel of Luke and continues with Acts. The earliest external affirmations of Luke's authorship are found in the Anti-Marcionite Prologue and the Muratorian Fragment (Bruce, 1990). Church Fathers such as Irenaeus and Eusebius also supported this view. Internally, the presence of first-person "we-sections" (e.g., Acts 16:10–17) suggests that the author was an eyewitness to parts of the events described, lending further credibility to the traditional claim. Schroter (2013) regards Acts as unique in its blend of historical reporting and theological purpose, framing early Christian history from a Spirit-led perspective. Acts of the Apostles was likely written between A.D. 62 and 68, sometime before Paul's death and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. The book's closing with Paul under house arrest in Rome (Acts 28) and the absence of later events suggest a date in the mid-first century. Scholars continue to debate the exact dating, with some proposing an earlier time and others favoring a post-70 A.D. composition due to theological and stylistic development (Longenecker, 2016). Acts 15:36–40 is set in a critical phase of the church's development, immediately after the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1–29). That council addressed the controversial issue of Gentile inclusion, particularly whether Gentiles must observe the Mosaic Law, including circumcision. The apostles and elders, after much deliberation, ruled that Gentile converts need not adhere to the full law but should avoid certain practices offensive to Jewish Christians (Acts 15:28–29). This compromise upheld the gospel of grace while fostering unity in a culturally diverse church. It is in the aftermath of this council that the narrative of Acts 15:36–40 unfolds. Paul proposes a return visit to the cities where they had previously preached, intending to strengthen the believers (Acts 15:36). However, a sharp disagreement erupts between Paul and Barnabas over whether to include John Mark, who had previously deserted them in Pamphylia (Acts 13:13). The text presents this as a profoundly emotional and divisive moment, resulting in the separation of these two key missionary partners. The disagreement between Paul and Barnabas reveals the human element within early Christian leadership. Both men had valid concerns: Barnabas, ever the encourager, wanted to give Mark a second chance; Paul, more pragmatic, feared risking the mission again. Their separation led to two missionary teams instead of one, Barnabas and Mark sailing to Cyprus, and Paul choosing Silas and embarking on a new journey through Syria and Cilicia.

A Close Reading of Acts 15:36–40

Acts 15:36 begins with the phrase: Μετὰ δὲ ἡμέρας τινὰς εἶπεν Παῦλος τῷ Βαρναβᾶ· Ἀπελθόντες ἐπισκεψώμεθα τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς... translated as, “After some days Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.’” The verb ἐπισκεψώμεθα (episkepsōmetha), meaning “let us visit” or “look after,” conveys a deliberate pastoral concern or overtone. As Marshall (2004) observes, the term shows Paul’s commitment not just to evangelism but to follow-up. This re-visitation was to ensuring that the spiritual health of the young churches was preserved. Paul’s mindset reflects what Bruce (1990) calls “apostolic shepherding,” a desire to nurture believers after initial conversion. Therefore, this introduces a key theme in Pauline mission, which is the continuity of care and discipleship beyond initial conversion (cf. Acts 14:22). Verse 37 records Barnabas’s response: Βαρναβᾶς δὲ ἐβούλετο παραλαβεῖν καὶ Ἰωάννην τὸν καλούμενον Μάρκον. (“Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark.”) The imperfect ἐβούλετο indicates an ongoing desire, not a casual thought (Longenecker, 2021). Barnabas, consistent with his character as the “Son of Encouragement” (Acts 4:36), advocated for a second chance for John Mark, who had earlier abandoned the mission in Pamphylia (Acts 13:13). As noted by Dunn (1998), Barnabas’s leadership style was restorative. He saw potential in Mark where Paul saw risk. His proposal reflects a grace-oriented theology, a belief in redemption and growth through failure.

In contrast, verse 38 introduces Paul’s firm resistance: Παῦλος δὲ ἔκρινε μὴ παραλαμβάνειν τὸν ἀποστάντα... (“But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work.”). The aorist verb ἔκρινε (ekrine) suggests a firm, resolved judgment. Paul viewed the mission as demanding and could not afford to be encumbered by someone who had previously retreated. The participle ἀποστάντα (apostanta), “the one who had defected,” carries strong connotations of betrayal or abandonment. For Paul, the mission’s urgency required dependable co-labourers. Hayes and Holladay (1987) explain that for Paul, reliability was essential to the gospel mandate. His rejection of Mark was not personal; it was instead missional. Then comes the emotional climax in verse 39: Ἐγένετο δὲ παροξυσμὸς... (“The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company”). The Greek word παροξυσμὸς (paroxysmos), used only a few times in the New Testament, indicates a “provocation” or a clash intense enough to rupture fellowship; it suggests an immensely felt disagreement, perhaps with raised voices or strong words. Johnson (1992) calls this a “serious fracture” in the team. But notably, the text does not cast blame. Luke does not portray one side as right and the other wrong. Rather, he lets the narrative unfold with

realism. This end product of the disagreement led to “ὁ μὲν Βαρναβᾶς παραλαβὼν τὸν Μάρκον ἀπέπλευσεν εἰς Κύπρον ("Barnabas took Mark and sailed away to Cyprus"), while Παῦλος δὲ ἐπιλεξάμενος Σιλᾶν ἐξῆλθεν ("Paul chose Silas and departed")”.

Each of them continued the work in different directions. Barnabas returned to his home territory, Cyprus (Acts 4:36), with the aim of continuing the mission in a familiar region. Paul, commended by the Antiochene church (παραδοθεὶς ὑπὸ τῶν ἀδελφῶν τῇ χάριτι τοῦ κυρίου), set out through Syria and Cilicia with Silas, a trusted prophet and Roman citizen (Acts 15:22, 32; 16:37). The use of παραδοθεὶς (paradotheis), meaning “entrusted” or “commended,” shows that despite the conflict, Paul’s ministry retained the affirmation of the broader Christian community. Though the split hurt, it resulted in two mission teams rather than one. The gospel spread in multiple directions. As Keener (2016:72) puts it, “God’s mission is not stalled by human disagreement; it multiplies through it.” This narrative is theologically significant. Rather than suppressing the disagreement, Luke includes it to show that the early church, even in its most Spirit-led expressions, was not immune to relational tensions. However, the sovereignty of God is seen in the way this conflict leads to mission expansion. Two teams are now active instead of one. Longenecker (2001) and Peterson (2009) both affirm that the incident brings to light a vital truth, which is that conflict, when handled with integrity, can become a means of missional multiplication. Moreover, this passage provides a biblical model for understanding disagreement in ministry. Neither Paul nor Barnabas is presented as morally inferior. Each acts according to his convictions and gifts. Barnabas invests in people; Paul prioritizes the task. Both roles are needed in the church. And ultimately, their relational fracture did not close the door to future reconciliation, Paul would later speak warmly of Mark (cf. 2 Tim. 4:11), indicating that time and grace healed the wounds.

Conflict and the Growth of Qua Iboe Church, Eket Senatorial District in Relation to Acts 15:36-40

The relationship between conflict and church growth is one of the most surprising and paradoxical aspects of the experience of Christianity. Throughout ecclesiastical history, conflict has been an inevitable part of the development of the Christian church, often sparking both division and expansion. From theological disagreements to disputes over leadership and practice, conflicts have shaped the trajectory of Christianity in unimaginable ways. While conflicts are typically viewed as disruptive and divisive, they have, paradoxically, played an important role in the growth and spread of the church. The Great Schism, the Protestant Reformation, and various denominational movements all arose out of conflicts that led to new theological perspectives, organizational structures, and geographical expansion. For example, despite the violence and division that ensued,

the Protestant Reformation had a substantial positive impact on church growth. Noll (2011:79) notes that the Protestant Reformation opened the door for the evangelical movement to spread rapidly across the globe, particularly to the Americas through the colonial expansions of European powers such as England, Spain, and Portugal. The Reformation also gave rise to a plurality of denominations, each contributing to the diffusion of Christianity to regions where it had not previously been established. The missionary efforts of Protestant churches, particularly in Africa and Asia, were directly influenced by the theological innovations of the Reformation. For instance, the establishment of Protestant mission stations in Africa was closely tied to the theological emphasis on the priesthood of all believers and the need to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth (MacCulloch, 2011:40).

It seems the similar situation of the paradoxical relationship between conflict and church growth in ecclesiastical history is playing out in Qua Iboe Church, Eket Senatorial District. While conflict is typically seen as a destructive force within religious communities, testimonies from members and leaders suggest that, in some cases, it has also contributed (perhaps unintentionally) to the expansion of the church. The prolonged division between Qua Iboe Church and the United Evangelical Church, while painful and disheartening in many ways, has led to developments that echo a familiar biblical narrative, the separation of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:36–40. According to Enefiok Umoh (Personal Communication, February 17, 2025), who served as the former secretary of the church in Ibeno, the church before the conflict had a membership of approximately 5,000 people. According to him, “Today, Qua Iboe Church alone has over 9,000 members, and the United Evangelical Church in the same district has gathered over 4,000 members.” From his perspective, this growth is not coincidental. It could be attributed to the conflict and eventual separation of the church into two factional groups. Hence, the conflict has prompted the establishment of new congregations in locations that had not previously been reached by either group. This is in tandem with the view of James Okon (Personal Communication, February 17, 2025), who points out that in an effort to win members and create congregations, each faction, forced by the reality of conflict have sought to establish new branches in both urban and rural communities. Okon remarks thus: “The breakaway forced us to organize and extend ourselves. We had to create room for ourselves and reach new grounds.”

What is particularly striking about these accounts is the repeated notion that the conflict and division served as a catalyst for geographical spread and institutional expansion, much like the biblical account of Paul and Barnabas. As it has been explained in the preceding section of this paper, the sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark led to their separation. While their split might have appeared as a failure in

fellowship, it resulted in two missionary teams instead of one, Paul with Silas and Barnabas with Mark, each going in different directions to spread the gospel. In a similar way, the conflict within Qua Iboe Church has not halted ministry; rather, it multiplied it. Congregations once limited to specific locations found themselves expanding into new neighbourhoods, towns, and even Local Government Areas. Ministries that were once centralized became localized and diversified. Some members have come to view this expansion as a sign that, despite human weakness and disagreement, God can still bring fruit out of division. However, not everyone views the growth in such theological or missional terms. For some, the increase in numbers and congregations does not necessarily equate to healthy or meaningful church growth. Mma Grace Ekanem (Personal Communication, 2025) expressed caution: “Yes, we have more churches now, but at what cost? Many of them are products of conflict, not mission. The spirit of bitterness still hangs in the air.” Her concern brings to fore the distinction between expansion by strategy and expansion by survival. While the church’s footprint may have increased, the internal wounds of the conflict remain largely unhealed in many places. Similarly, Aniefiok Sampson (Personal Communication, 2025) pointed out that some congregations only sprang up because of leadership disagreements or competition, not because of any intentional evangelistic efforts. He explained, “In some towns, two churches stand a few meters apart, same doctrine, same worship style, but divided because of who they follow. That is not true growth. That is duplication born out of division.”

Despite these reservations, even those who are skeptical admit that the conflict has had a visible impact on the presence of the church in the district. Whether or not the growth is considered ideal, the number of congregations, leadership structures, and church activities has undeniably increased since the split. More people have been drawn into leadership roles, more fellowships have been created, and more communities are now served by at least one branch of either Qua Iboe Church or United Evangelical Church. The account in Acts 15:36–40 provides a powerful framework for grasping this development. In that biblical story, disagreement did not destroy the mission, it redirected it. Likewise, the experience of Qua Iboe Church in Eket shows that, while conflict often wounds, it can also propel the church into new territory. It may not be the ideal path to growth, but it is nonetheless a path that God, in His sovereignty, can use to fulfil His purposes.

Conclusion

Conflict is an unavoidable aspect of human interaction and organization, and the church is not exempted from it. While conflict is often perceived as detrimental to the growth and development of organizations, scholars of conflict have argued that, in some cases, it can positively contribute to growth and development. The biblical passage in Acts 15:36-40

underpins this idea, where the disagreement and eventual separation between Paul and Barnabas, though initially unpleasant, led to the expansion of the gospel and the broadening of their missionary reach. This understanding of conflict as a potential driver of growth is not just a biblical concept but it is relevant to the contemporary situation of Qua Iboe Church in Eket Senatorial District. Although the conflict in the church has had detrimental effects, leading to the fragmentation and polarization of the congregation, it has also spurred significant growth and advancement. The division between Qua Iboe Church and the United Evangelical Church has led to the establishment of multiple congregations and ecclesiastical offices, which might not have been possible under a united front. The membership strength of the two factions now stands at a remarkable 13,000, a substantial increase from the initial 5,000 members before the conflict began. This growth clearly illustrates that, in some circumstances, conflict can serve as a catalyst for expansion rather than stagnation.

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