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How servant leaders navigate conflict: An analysis of Acts 15:36–41

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Greenleaf's foundational work on servant leadership has evolved considerably over the past 50 years. Servant leadership has been found to have positive outcomes on group and organisational effectiveness. While servant leadership characteristics and outcomes have been measured, is a need to be better understand how servant leaders navigate when they disagree. Using a social and cultural analysis, the conflict between Paul and Barnabas is explored. Social and cultural analysis allows interpreters to understand what the characters in the narrative 'see and hear.' The analysis of Acts 15:36–41 yielded three emerging themes related to how these servant leaders navigated conflict: (1) the tension created by conflict, (2) leader maturity and conflict and (3) the effectiveness of servant leadership amid differences. It was found that servant leaders are not immune from conflict, and when two servant leaders disagree it creates tension between the various servant leader behaviours. Furthermore, a leader's experience and maturity influence their responses to conflict. Lastly, it was found that servant leaders do not allow conflict to derail their mission.

Contribution: This article contributes to the body of knowledge on servant leadership by exploring how servant leaders navigate conflict from a biblical perspective. By exploring servant leadership behaviours from a biblical perspective, this article contributes to the interdisciplinary focus of *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, engaging social scientific constructs through a New Testament paradigm.

Keywords: servant leadership; conflict; leader maturity; leader effectiveness; leadership development; Acts 15.

Introduction

Servant leadership has proven to positively influence group effectiveness (Allen et al. 2018; Zhang et al. 2019). Like all leadership theories, servant leadership continues to be explored for greater validity and impact across organisations (Allen et al. 2018; Eva et al. 2019). While organisations and followers have benefited from this leadership style, much of the literature has predominantly focused on measuring the attributes and the effects of servant leadership on followers, leaving a gap in the area of leader-to-leader conflict. The focus of this article is to address this gap by discussing the issue of leader-to-leader conflict and its impact on organisations. Jesus and his disciples consistently encountered conflict internally and externally, and this continued in the New Testament Church (See KJV, Mt 20:20–28, Lk 22:24, Ac 6:1–8, Gl 2:11–21).

Servant leaders are not without conflict, and neither are groups of people. Conflict can lead to improvement and destruction (Capobianco, Davis & Kraus 2005). Since its inception in Greenleaf's (1970) essay on servant as leaders, scholars and practitioners have embraced, developed and operationalised servant leadership in many contexts (Barbuto & Wheeler 2006; Greenleaf [1977] 2002). The study of servant leadership has grown substantially over the past 40 years; however, an opportunity exists to explore how servant leaders address conflict among themselves when followers are the reason for the conflict. Understanding the attributes of servant leaders and how to measure them is valuable to organisational health and productivity (Allen et al. 2018). Still, it is impractical to think that servant leaders will always agree and that a conflict will not arise. It is necessary to understand that conflict does not negate servant leadership traits, because without a proper understanding, individuals can lose trust and hope in servant leaders (Covey & Merrill 2006). While there is vast research on the positive aspects of servant leadership, consideration must be given to how servant leaders handle conflict and how servant leadership can accelerate group effectiveness and organisational support.

Servant leadership has proven to improve organisational health and productivity; however, this does not guarantee an absence of conflict. Key attributes of servant leaders such as emotional

healing, creating value for the community, conceptual skills, empowering, helping subordinates grow and succeed, putting subordinates first and behaving ethically are linked to group effectiveness (Allen et al. 2018; Charles 2015; Eva et al. 2019; Focht & Ponton 2015). While research shows the benefits of the demonstrated attributes of servant leadership within group and organisational environments, there is a need to explore the effects of group conflict on group effectiveness when servant leaders disagree.

Henson, Crowther and Huizing (2020) argued that scripture is relevant to all seasons and times; therefore, the Bible can provide insight into how biblical servant leaders dealt with disagreement and its outcomes on group effectiveness. The Apostle Paul self-identified as a servant (Rm 1:1, 9; Gl 1:10; Agosto 2012), while Barnabas, the son of encouragement, exemplified servant leadership characteristics (McRae Jr 2020). Taylor (2004) wrote that in the beginning of their partnership, Barnabas trained Paul in leadership (Ac 11–12), and as Paul developed as a leader, the roles were reversed, with Barnabas's primary ministry tasks being to provide support for Paul's leadership.

In this article, servant leadership amid conflict is explored from a biblical perspective to better understand what lessons can be gleaned from the relationship of Paul and Barnabas as presented in Acts 15:36–41. Following previous research using biblical narratives as case studies (ed. Henson 2020, 2021, 2022; Hiigel 2003; Lovett, Borek & Towns 2005; Winston 2004), the analysis explored the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas regarding a follower, John Mark. Paul practised servant leadership by teaching the ways of Jesus' servant-leader model (Flanike 2006) and by leading by example: 'Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ' (KJV, 1 Cor 11:1). Barnabas was also an example of a servant leader, as he encouraged others and had a tremendous ability to serve alongside and support other leaders (Taylor 2004). Although both men were Christian servant leaders, they were not immune to relational conflict, especially as it related to the treatment of John Mark. This article was guided by a central research question: what lessons can be learned about servant leader conflict through a social and cultural analysis of Acts 15:36–41?

The authors began with review of the origins, emergence and characteristics of servant leadership theory as well as servant leadership in scripture. Next, they conducted a social and cultural analysis of Acts 15:36–41. Social and cultural analysis allows the interpreter to explore the impact of the social and cultural context of the passage and how it influenced the narrative (Henson et al. 2020). Through this analysis, the authors were better able to understand the passage through Paul and Barnabas's perspective: what they heard and saw (Henson et al. 2020). By interweaving the analysis of the text with servant leadership literature, it is possible to identify key themes from the passage that aid in comprehending how Paul and Barnabas navigated significant conflict while ensuring positive outcomes for their followers.

Servant leadership theory

Servant leadership theory is rooted in the writings of Robert Greenleaf in the 1970s (1970 [1977] 2002). Greenleaf's definition of servant leadership was simple: the servant leader serves first. There are, however, varying conceptualisations of servant leadership. Recognising a severe culture of hopelessness predicted by internal and external stresses, servant leaders can transform organisational culture by bringing hope to followers (Charles 2015).

Looking for a leadership solution that could improve the effectiveness of people and groups in a meaningful way, servant leaders act in the interests of followers with prosocial motives (Vasquez, Madrid & Niven 2021). While impactful and evolving over a period of time, it would not be until 2004 that the servant leadership theory would be explored in an empirical manner, and since then, multiple conceptualisations and components of servant leadership have been developed (Parris & Peachey 2013).

The emergence of servant leadership

Since Greenleaf's original work, many scholars have continued to develop the theory, including Spears (1998) and Laub (1999). Spears (2020:4) said that servant leadership 'continues to create a quiet revolution around the world'. Now recognised as a major leadership theory (Bass & Bass 2008), studies of servant leadership are being conducted across the globe in for-profit and nonprofit, large and small settings (Allen et al. 2018; Kim 2020; Liu et al. 2014; Van Winkle et al. 2014). With its emergence, studies now show a positive relationship between servant leadership and group effectiveness (Allen et al. 2018; Zhang et al. 2019); however, there are discrepancies as to how this positive relationship is conceived. For instance, Greenleaf broadly defined servant leadership as the leader serving first (Bass & Bass 2008), whereas Eva et al. (2019) more strictly defined the theory as others-oriented through one-on-one follower prioritisation with an outward orienting of follower concern for others and the organisation. Furthermore, research has identified over 100 characteristics of servant leadership, and this uncertainty can lead to confusion and a lack of trust, which negatively impact group effectiveness (Focht & Ponton 2015). Trust and communication are essential elements of the health and effectiveness of groups (Giessner & Van Knippenberg 2008). As the servant leadership theory continues to emerge, the continued clarity of Greenleaf's founding vision of leaders serving first should not be lost. Greenleaf wanted people to be hopeful and effective, regardless of the challenges they faced from internal and external environmental conditions. The highly anecdotal nature of servant leadership has created an under-defined theory (Van Dierendonck 2011), with multiple descriptive conceptualisations of the theory (Parris & Peachey 2013). However, the characteristics of the theory have been theoretically validated and practically effective.

The characteristics of servant leadership

Whether born or taught, Greenleaf believed that all people could be servant leaders (Dittmar 2006). As previously noted, over 100 characteristics have been attributed to the field of servant leadership; however, others have significantly condensed these characteristics (Focht & Ponton 2015). One Delphi study (Focht & Ponton 2015) narrowed the field to 12 primary characteristics: valuing people, humility, listening, trust, caring, integrity, service, empowering, serving others' needs before their own, collaboration, love/unconditional love and learning (Identifying Primary Characteristics of Servant Leadership: Delphi Study). Other studies reflected similar characteristics but also included authenticity, stewardship, empathy, altruism, modesty, fairness and training and development (Allen et al. 2018; Charles 2015; Kumar 2018; Van Dierendonck 2011).

Of the core characteristics, the most commonly noted characteristic is humility (Sousa & Van Dierendonck 2017). In most leadership domains, humility is often ignored (Poon 2006; Van Winkle et al. 2014); however, to the servant leader, it is not about being in the spotlight but serving first (Bass & Bass 2008). Ego-driven leaders are not mindful of the emotional aspects of group members, which can negatively impact the effectiveness of the group (Vasquez et al. 2021).

Humility confronts ego and properly places personal ambition and goal accomplishments within the right constructs across groups (Bass & Bass 2008; Brière, Le Roy & Meier 2021). Humility creates space for the other characteristics of servant leadership to operate properly. Followers or groups recognise the presence of humility and attribute this to leader motives (Vasquez et al. 2021). Servant leaders must also demonstrate that they are acting in the interest of the group (Vasquez et al. 2021). The two-sided approach within the group creates a positive and helpful social order which strengthens group effectiveness. Operating in humility results in valuing people, listening to others, trust, caring for others, integrity, service, empowerment, serving others, collaboration, love, unconditional love and learning (Foncht & Ponton 2015). As groups or teams continue to see dramatic increases across organisations, valuing emotional well-being will remain vital, as a workgroup's emotional climate positively relates to workplace performance (Liu et al. 2014).

The benefits of servant leadership

Common benefits that are associated with servant leadership include job satisfaction, organisational commitment, trust, collaboration, talent development and empowerment (Allen et al. 2018; Charles 2015; Focht & Ponton 2015). In the review of the six primary benefits, one can quickly see the positive association with group effectiveness. Employees see empowerment as commitment and therefore offer it back in reciprocal measure. The benefit of empowerment is so impactful that employees do not even have to find their jobs personally meaningful to increase organisational commitment (Allen et al. 2018). When servant leaders are placed in proper leadership roles, there is a moderately strong correlation with team effectiveness (Holtzhausen & De Klerk 2018). While psychological safety is seen to benefit team performance, Holtzhausen and De Klerk found that this translation is not as positive without the presence of servant leadership. Servant leadership positively relates to group attitudes, behaviours, group climate and performance, and it is effective across different levels in organisations (Zhang et al. 2019).

Servant leadership can positively affect group performance regardless of whether the organisational structure is informal or hierarchal and bureaucratic (Kim 2020). As servant leadership models are established, leaders can further enhance group effectiveness by placing the right talent on the right teams. Better group talent can raise the overall group output, as association is powerful (Groysberg, Polzer & Elfenbein 2011). When talent no longer needs to compensate for leader inconsistencies, they are more empowered to operate in their giftings and callings to maximise individual and group performance.

Servant leadership in scripture

To properly understand servant leadership from a Christian perspective, one must look to the life and teachings of Jesus (Niewold 2007). Servant leadership existed in the beginning and became the way through Jesus Christ (KJV, Jn 1:1, 14; Jn 14:6; Col 1:16). In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah prophesied of King Jesus coming as a servant (KJV, Isaiah 53). In the New Testament, Jesus said his purpose was that of a servant while also informing his disciples that they too were to be servants (KJV, Mt 20:25–28). In their New Testament writings, the authors continued with Jesus' example of servant leadership in the books of Philippians, Galatians, James, 1 and 2 Peter and Hebrews. Jesus modelled empowerment; he delegated the leadership model and task to his disciples. Not only did he empower his disciples through teaching but also by his Spirit (KJV, Ac 1:8). Without him, it was impossible to be Christian servant leaders or to create a Christian servant leadership culture (KJV, Jn 15:4–5). Even after his death, burial, resurrection and ascension, Jesus would remain the supreme servant leader in their lives, teaching and developing them through the internal work of his Spirit abiding in them (KJV, Jn 16:7, 15). Servant leadership maturation would continue as long as they remained obedient to the Lord (KJV, Lk 11:28; 1 Th 5:19). Christian servant leadership is not divided from the Christian (Niewold 2007). When the Christian is born into Jesus Christ (KJV, Jn 3:3–5; Ac 2:38), the nature of servant leadership becomes a part of their new identity. As the Christian servant leader grows in Christ, the attributes of servant leadership will mature and make greater impacts on multiple levels (KJV, 1 Cor 2:11–16; Mt 25:23). As evidenced in the dispute between Paul and Barnabas, it is possible for Christian servant leaders to behave such that they are able to navigate the disagreement, and even choose to part ways, without disrupting the vision and purpose of those around them.

Paul and Barnabas in conflict (Ac 15:36–41)

To better understand the nuances of the conflict between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:36–41, social and cultural texture analysis was utilised. Social and cultural analysis addresses the behind-the-text issues in regard to background, cultural and societal issues. 'This texture deals with the impact of society and culture on the text just as society and culture impacts a person' (Henson et al. 2020:123). According to the principles of hermeneutics, scripture cannot be interpreted without historical-cultural and contextual analysis (Henson et al. 2020). Henson et al. (2020:125) stated, 'the question here is not *what do we see or hear*, but the question is *what did they see or hear*'. While looking for applications of servant leadership in Acts 15:36–41, the social and cultural realities that guided Paul and Barnabas' behaviour are paramount; however, scripture is informative to all cultures, seasons, purposes and times. Therefore, understanding biblical accounts of servant leadership in action can aid group and organisational effectiveness (Henson et al. 2020). Servant leadership is not necessarily absent amid group conflict. An analysis of Acts 15:36–41 yielded three emerging themes related to how these servant leaders navigated conflict: the tension created by conflict, leader maturity and conflict and the effectiveness of servant leadership amid differences.

The tension created by conflict

Paul and Barnabas both demonstrated servant leadership qualities within Acts 15:36–41. Servant leadership includes empowerment, accountability, standing back, humility, authenticity, courage, interpersonal acceptance and stewardship (Eva et al. 2019). Each of the attributes to some degree are evidenced in this and corresponding passages. The conflict illustrates the tension that is created in conflict: empowerment vs. accountability, standing back versus courage, acceptance versus stewardship. Paul and Barnabas were no strangers to conflict with others (Ac 15:2); however, there is evidence that there had been growing tension between the two leaders over an issue between Jewish and gentile believers in Antioch (Gl 2:13; Fernando 1998). This seems to have come to a tipping point such that John Mark and his previous actions became the focal point of the disagreement. Paul wanted to hold him accountable, while Barnabas preferred to empower John Mark by giving him another chance. Both leaders were demonstrating servant leader behaviours. Paul wanted to hold Mark accountable while empowering Silas (Ac 15:38, 40). Barnabas preferred to empower Mark just as he had done previously with Paul (Ac 9:27).

Acts 15 illustrates a clear shift in the relationship between the two leaders as Paul began to take the initiative for planning missionary journeys (Longenecker 2004). While Barnabas had demonstrated a willingness to stand back and let Paul grow and develop as a leader, he now challenged Paul on the treatment of Barnabas. In Galatians 2:13, Paul recounted that he vigorously confronted Peter, Barnabas and the Jewish Christians in Antioch. The two men had reached an impasse in their relationship, and they chose to separate because of it. Both men demonstrated courage and conviction; however, their perspectives on the matter were irreconcilable. What do servant leaders do when they cannot agree?

The words and actions of Paul and Barnabas after the incident is just as important as during the disagreement. The significance of the disagreement should not be understated. It was a 'sharp disagreement', one that speaks to furious anger (ed. Arnold 2002). However, both men moved forward and continued to serve the church and serve others. Paul would eventually empower men like Silas, Timothy and Titus to serve the mission of the church. Barnabas continued empowering John Mark, even after his failure. These mentor–protégé relationships are essential to servant leadership, as leaders invest in the needs and development of others (Barbuto & Wheeler 2006). While Paul and Barnabas moved forward by training and empowering others, there is evidence of continued mutual respect and cordiality, as Paul defends Barnabas in 1 Corinthians 9:6 and encourages the church in Colossae to welcome John Mark in Colossians 4:10. The conflict between Paul and Barnabas demonstrates that there is tension that exists in disagreement; however, their responses illustrate how servant leadership behaviours will be present even amid conflict.

Leader maturity and conflict

Although servant leadership attributes were identified among both leaders, the passage reveals a difference in maturity between the two. It was Barnabas who vouched for Paul before his leadership was ever accepted by the church leaders, demonstrating that he had an earlier start in the spiritual formation process of servant leadership (Ac 9:26–30). Barnabas empowered others while Paul tried to establish his credibility. Paul came to the church with a dark history (cf. Ac 8:1–3); however, Barnabas served him anyway by showing humility, love, courage, stewardship and acceptance. Barnabas recognised that Paul had been born again and that the spirit of Christ was in him; therefore, he respected the spiritual formation process (Jn 16:13–15). Servant leaders recognise the need for identifying and developing others to increase service (Du Plessis & Nkambule 2020). In this case, Barnabas remained consistent in his leadership in dealing with Mark. Although others may not agree with the past mistakes of Mark, Barnabas chose to serve him as a mentor (Barbuto & Wheeler 2006). Barnabas was mature enough to see Mark through the eyes of hope (Fernando 1998).

Paul, being young, passionate and eager to prove himself, appeared to show less maturity at this point in his formation process. Paul seemed to be battling between two cultures: (1) honouring the leader as superior or (2) the leader serving the follower (Henson et al. 2020). This is why it is important for servant leaders to serve other servant leaders – to prepare them for leadership (Du Plessis & Nkambule 2020). Barnabas

chose to mentor Paul when others were afraid of him; however, Paul seemed unwilling to do the same for John Mark. Paul's zeal for the mission lacked a perspective that comes through experience: understanding that serving those beside you is just as essential as reaching the communities and cities before you. He was on a mission to strengthen the churches (Ac 15:36, 41); however, John Mark needed strengthening as well (Ac 15:38). Paul's handling of the situation reflects the actions of a novice leader (Fernando 1998). Paul's growth and maturity is evidenced in his later writings, as he was mindful of Timothy's pain as a young pastor in Ephesus (cf. 2 Tm 1:4) and wrote to encourage him. In his letter to Timothy, he even expresses a different perspective on John Mark. Paul's growth as a leader demonstrates that servant leaders are at different levels of their leadership development, and their maturity as leaders influences the way they respond in disagreement. One could make an inference that the elder Paul had a different perspective of the disagreement later in his ministry. It should be expected that servant leaders would do the same.

The servant leader cannot forget where they started from as they seek to lead and work with others. Failure to do so can lead to a false humility in the formation of this attribute within the servant leader (Eragula 2015). Forgetting starting points can cause the leader to blow past the development of others in the formation process, leading to group conflict (Wilson 2016). Before his conversion, Paul's (Saul) starting point to the new servant leadership structure was total rejection (Ac 8:3; Gal 1:13). He rejected the founding leader, Jesus Christ, and all of his disciples, even to the point of death (Ac 7:54–58:2). However, neither Jesus nor his disciples gave up on Paul because of his lack of commitment or support of the kingdom mission (Ac 9:1–19). They served him even as their enemy. Self-reflection is important to the servant leader when working with others (Thakore 2013). Self-reflection is key to continuous growth (Wilson 2016). Later in Paul's ministry, there is evidence of a shift in his leadership perspective as he called upon his readers to prefer others over themselves (Rm 12:10). Furthermore, the kindness and compassion that Paul showed toward his mentee Timothy as he faced significant challenges (2 Tm 1:6–14; ed. Henson 2022). A far cry from his conflict with John Mark, the elder Apostle Paul became a father-figure for Timothy and Titus (Clarke 2008) and demonstrates the personal and leader development of the Apostle.

Effectiveness amid differences

Although there was a sharp disagreement and splitting of the group within this pericope, time and principle demonstrate that servant leaders can still be effective. While Paul rejected the notion of moving forward with John Mark (Ac 15:38–39), approximately 20 years later Paul would write, 'Get Mark, and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry' (ESV, 2 Tm 4:11). This account demonstrates maturing of a servant leader who recognised the value of everyone and especially the call to live according to the word of God. If there had not been a transformative work in Paul, he would not have recorded these words to his young

followers either: 'Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity' (ESV, 1 Tm 4:12–13). Additionally, Paul would later pen his starting points as he instructed others – he knew he had received something he did not deserve (1 Tm 1:13; 2 Cor 11:16–33). Even after Mark received unfavourable treatment from servant leadership in the Apostle Paul, he also had another servant leader continue to work with him in Barnabas. In spite of the conflict and challenges, Mark continued to grow and even authored one of the four gospels (Jensen 1981). Additionally, although Paul did not favour well with Mark early on, Paul remained committed to growth and spiritual formation, which yielded a tremendous servant leader. Yes, there was early conflict, but Paul grew from it and wrote 13 of 27 books of the New Testament, which was more than any single author (Painter 2016). The strength of servant leadership demonstrates that the mission will still prevail amid conflict if servant leaders will remain faithful to the maturing and spiritual transformation process. Just as Jesus did not give up on Peter, he did not give up on Paul, Barnabas or John Mark (1 Cor 15:58). Servant leaders do not allow conflict to destroy the group or the mission. Instead, they learn from it, grow and become more effective. While Paul and Barnabas chose to take separate paths, they remained part of the great mission of the gospel and serving the kingdom. Servant leadership is ideal for group effectiveness because it is rooted in valuing others – serving first to lead (Bass & Bass 2008).

Conclusion

For some, group conflict among servant leaders can seem like a major failure; however, scripture declares that 'all things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose' (ESV, Rm 8:28). The Acts 15:36–41 pericope recorded a significant division between two servant leaders on whether to empower a follower based on a past failure. Upon completion of the analysis, three themes emerged: (1) the tension created by conflict, (2) leader maturity and conflict and (3) effectiveness of servant leadership amid differences. The research concluded that servant leaders and groups can overcome conflict and be more effective if they remain faithful to the continuing work of servant leadership in their lives and mission. Servant leaders look to serve first (Bass & Bass 2008; ESV, Mt 20:26–28); therefore, this foundation will always bring things back into order over time, and people are ready to advance the mission forward. With Jesus being the centre of servant leadership, those remaining connected to him will see that all things are possible, even overcoming conflicts with favourable outcomes (Jn 15:5, Mt 19:26).

Authors' contributions

J.R.C. is the primary author and J.D.H. is the second author of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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