The approach of conflict in Luke 12:49–59 through Form Criticism and its application in Nigerian churches

Luke 12:49–59 contains two pericopes whose only bond of unity is conflict. The first pericope (49–53) deals with the kind of conflict best described as persecution because of Jesus, whereas, the first part of the second pericope (54–57) is a call for the Lukan community to understand various signs which mark a transition from the first to the second pericope. The second half of the second pericope (58–59) deals with inter-personal conflict among community members as it is seen and documented by the evangelist. In it, Jesus gives advice on how to avoid falling victim to legal justice. This research examines Jesus’ stance in handling conflict, and to observe if the contemporary Christianity in Nigeria understands conflict management as Jesus did in Lk 12:49–59, and how far the church has applied Jesus’ conflict management styles. The tools of exegesis and hermeneutics were employed to reconstruct the two pericopes and their various life situations.

Intradiciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The study’s implication is an approach with New Testament using Form Criticism to challenge the docility often seen in the (Nigerian) church each time there is a conflict situation. Peace and conflict study is analysed from the perspective of New Testament studies in order to cancel this stereotypical docility that is misunderstood as ‘Christian pacifism’. It then argues that the life situation of the conflict (whether it is intra-mural or extra-mural) should guide Christians to make the right choice towards conflict management.

Keywords: conflict; church; Jesus; life situation; Nigeria.

Introduction

Scholars have lately increased their interest in discussing conflict (Leas 1992:vii), its causes and management.1 However, discussing conflict including its management from a biblical perspective2 and moreover from the person and the teachings of Jesus is an under-researched area. This study succinctly discusses conflict from the New Testament passage of Lk. 12:49–59, and to also understand Jesus’ very opinions about conflict and conflict management from that passage. Jesus’ opinion is assumed to be the dynamic approach to an equally dynamic conflict situation. The study asserts that the contemporary Nigerian Christianity’s stereotypical approach to conflict and its management does not reflect Jesus’ position. That is to say, the contemporary church in Nigeria does not seem to understand that Jesus’ approach to conflict and its management is dynamic; such ignorance has adversely affected the Nigerian church by making it a recipient of several violent attacks from rival religions when they are supposed to in fact defend themselves. A summary of the studied text (Lk. 12:49–59) would be necessary for further clarity. In the passage, Jesus talks about the fire he has come to cast upon the earth. He talks about the baptism he is meant to undergo and how distressed he is until it is accomplished. He asks a rhetorical question furthermore, ‘do you think I came to bring peace on earth?’ he supplied the answer as No! and added that he came to bring division. He talks about how such division would go to severe even family ties and make enemies of familial persons. Conclusively, he gives a personal note of advice on how to treat one’s adversary before it becomes a legal matter, which is ‘on-the-spot settlement’. This narrative leaves the reader of this text with the

1 Motornaya’s (2019:1) study on conflict produces the result that discourse (discourse) ‘plays a crucial role in...conflict management’. Kusztal (2002:232) uses a ‘discourse-focused approach’ to tackle organizational conflict. However, Fomin and Yakimova (2016:66) argue that ‘conflicts normally occur in communication’. All these suggest that oral communication has a strong influence on starting conflict or managing it.

2 The church is said to have the belief that conflict is sinful (Jones 2000:14). This has therefore affected the quality of preparedness Church leaders receive in handling conflict in the Christian faith among church leaders. However, in Cunningham (1996:22) the ‘sinful’ attribution of conflict is cancelled. Oppenschaw, Nel and Louw (2018:3) insist that ‘Conflict is inescapable and is both good and necessary because it elicits different points of view, clears the air, and makes it possible to resolve extraordinarily complex issues’. See also Osterhaus, Jurkowski and Hahn (2005:14).

3 Cunningham (1996:39) opines that, ‘it appears that [Jesus’] approach to conflict varied according to the situation’.

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understanding that Luke presented his Jesus as having discussed more than one kind of conflict\(^8\) and therefore, as a consequence more than one kind of conflict management is required. As the founder of Christian faith, Jesus’ opinions in handling conflict become invaluable.\(^5\) This is based on the reason that he has been portrayed both by gospel evangelists and theologians as the Lamb and peaceful Messiah (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue World Council of Churches 2019:3). This portrayal in fact, has coloured the representation of Christianity as a non-violent,\(^6\) non-partisan religion both intra-murally and extra-murally even in the face of affronts and unmitigated provocations and attacks.\(^7\) Such colouring has projected Christianity as a religion whose adherents ‘must love their enemies because God loves everyone’ Fränkli (2016:26).\(^7\) It has been argued that ‘the New Testament text, church tradition, and cultural mores converge in establishing non-violence as the pre-eminent mark of those who would be faithful followers of Christ’ (Brown 2019:2). This necessitated that the person and teaching of Jesus, especially as it concerns conflict and conflict management should be subjected to critical study in order to confirm or affirm that the popular opinions attributed to Jesus in matter of handling persecutions and conflicts are true. This is where a study of Luke 12:49–59 comes in. The study aims to correct

\(^6\)The church has received several unmitigated and unprovoked attacks with Nigeria as a case in point. The church’s pacifist position has no strong basis in the NT or patristic writings. (see Ambrose, De Officiiis xxvi, 129; Augustine, Contra Faustum xxii, 74; Horsley 1986:24; Weaver 1992:35). Though Reid (2006:32) believes that certain portions of the NT text support non-violence, she however, sets out eight parables which she insists, talks about God as a violent being. This, Reid argues, puts Christians in a dilemma. She resolved the dilemma by setting out seven possible solutions of which the second reads as follows: ‘A reading of Jesus as advocating active, nonviolent resistance to evil could be an anachronistic reading’ (Reid 2006:32). Reid’s view is corroborated by this study’s position. To lend credence to Reid’s initial argument, Brown (2019:2) argues that the gospel, especially Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, is a pivotal text in forming the theology of non-violence. Klassen (1992:9) also discusses what he called ‘enemy love’ as foundational in Jesus and contained in the gospels. He believed that ‘Luke and Matthew appear to be drawing from a common source that included at least the “words: [agapate tous echthrous hyman”’ (Klassen 1992:9). That, said Reid, is clearly an attempt to balance a long standing 20th century tradition of blaming every religion and are held by people who sincerely call themselves Christian’ (Fahey 2018:8).

\(^7\)Though these are strata in life situation studies, they can also apply to individual pericope or to multiple pericopes, just as two or all of them can complement each other in a pericope.\(^9\)

as an aftermath of its exegesis and hermeneutics, any wrong impression associated with Jesus on conflict management. It also aims at stating that the pericopes under study carry more than one type of conflict management and to opine that different approaches (dynamism) were suggested by Jesus for the different kinds of conflicts.

**Life situations of Luke 12:49–59**

The Sitz im Leben of the studied text shows multiple life situations, though they are applied to different pericopes in the text. Form Criticism distinguishes three layers in textual analysis. The three life situations which Marthaler (2007) captures more vividly are:

1. The scope of this article does not allow for the discussion of the cosmic conflict involving Jesus. However, for more studies on the cosmic conflict see Boyd (1997), White (2002) and White (1898).

2. The church’s pacifist position has no strong basis in the NT or patristic writings. (see Ambrose, De Officiis xxvi, 129; Augustine, Contra Faustum xxii, 74; Horsley 1986:24; Weaver 1992:35). Though Reid (2006:32) believes that certain portions of the NT text support non-violence, she however, sets out eight parables which she insists, talks about God as a violent being. This, Reid argues, puts Christians in a dilemma. She resolved the dilemma by setting out seven possible solutions of which the second reads as follows: ‘A reading of Jesus as advocating active, nonviolent resistance to evil could be an anachronistic reading’ (Reid 2006:32). Reid’s view is corroborated by this study’s position. To lend credence to Reid’s initial argument, Brown (2019:2) argues that the gospel, especially Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, is a pivotal text in forming the theology of non-violence. Klassen (1992:9) also discusses what he called ‘enemy love’ as foundational in Jesus and contained in the gospels. He believed that ‘Luke and Matthew appear to be drawing from a common source that included at least the “words: [agapate tous echthrous hyman”’ (Klassen 1992:9). That, said Reid, is clearly an attempt to balance a long standing 20th century tradition of blaming every religion and are held by people who sincerely call themselves Christian’ (Fahey 2018:8).

3. The church has received several unmitigated and unprovoked attacks with Nigeria as a case in point. The church’s pacifist position has no strong basis in the NT or patristic writings. (see Ambrose, De Officiis xxvi, 129; Augustine, Contra Faustum xxii, 74; Horsley 1986:24; Weaver 1992:35). Though Reid (2006:32) believes that certain portions of the NT text support non-violence, she however, sets out eight parables which she insists, talks about God as a violent being. This, Reid argues, puts Christians in a dilemma. She resolved the dilemma by setting out seven possible solutions of which the second reads as follows: ‘A reading of Jesus as advocating active, nonviolent resistance to evil could be an anachronistic reading’ (Reid 2006:32). Reid’s view is corroborated by this study’s position. To lend credence to Reid’s initial argument, Brown (2019:2) argues that the gospel, especially Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, is a pivotal text in forming the theology of non-violence. Klassen (1992:9) also discusses what he called ‘enemy love’ as foundational in Jesus and contained in the gospels. He believed that ‘Luke and Matthew appear to be drawing from a common source that included at least the “words: [agapate tous echthrous hyman”’ (Klassen 1992:9). That, said Reid, is clearly an attempt to balance a long standing 20th century tradition of blaming every religion and are held by people who sincerely call themselves Christian’ (Fahey 2018:8).

**Sitz im Leben Jesu**

The situation in the life of Jesus is the context upon which the passage of Luke 12:49–53 is studied. Being ‘the circumstances that surrounded an individual story or saying in the actual life of Jesus and its meaning’ (Marthaler 2007:142), the text deserves a look, at first, from the Old Testament background. As the Christian Messiah whose Messianic mission contradicts Jewish Messianic expectations (see Evans 2006:19–20; Scott 1893:408), there was naturally a conflict set in his eschatological teaching as reflected in the pericope. One can identify the said pericope with Isaiah 8:14 and Micah 7:6, even though the expression of the Isaiah passage in LXX makes the interpretation of the passage with Jesus’ statement in the studied pericope problematic. For example, LXX reads, ‘καὶ ὁ ἄγιος ὁ λόγος προσκλημα συναντήσετε οὖς συναντήσετε συναντήσετε συναντήσετε’ οὖς συναντήσετε συναντήσετε. That sounds like present imperative passive, comes against the idea conveyed in MT. Despite that Isaiah 8:14 is textually unclear, it seems that this Messianic prophecy which alludes to ‘a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offence’ finds a common genre and root of context with Jesus’ referent to himself as an agent of division.\(^10\) While the context of Luke 12:49–53 reflects Jesus assignment ‘to cast

\(^9\)In his study of Matthew, Viilesen (2012:256) was one of those who believe that ‘the Sitz im Leben der alten Kirche can indirectly be recognized in the Sitz im Leben Jesu as described in the Gospel’s material’. So far as it is hypothetically claimed that two life situations can indeed play out in a particular pericope in the study of Matthew, this hypothesis is rejected in Luke's text. This is not true in pericopes of other synoptic gospels.

\(^10\) Though Parihala and Busro (2020:4) interprets this ‘division’ as eschatological, yet religious distinctions which results from eschatological divisions are major causes of physical conflict (see Cunningham 1996:41).
down upon the earth the fire of eschatological purgation’ (Parihala & Busro 2020:3) ‘its purging flames are anticipating Jesus’ coming fate and the divisive strife to come upon his disciples’ (Parhala & Busro 2020:3). ‘We [must] see it as not only about the passion of Jesus, but also about the passion of the followers of Jesus facing contradiction and conflict’ (Parhala & Busro 2020:3). This conflict found its historical connection to the fall of Jerusalem (Parhala & Busro 2020:3), a time when the Birkath ha-Minim was promulgated.11 Martyn is a major scholar who has argued that the Messianic Jews were excommunicated from the temple just as the promulgation of the Birkath ha-Minim was taking place (Klink 2008). This also goes with the persuading of ‘other Jews to ostracize them in social and even in commercial life’ (Alexander 1992:6).12 According to Peters (2020a):

This move was to incriminate [them in order to] bring God’s curse on them by reciting three times daily the words ‘God curse the Nazareans’ (Mayo 2006:331; Nadler 2012:2) in order to ostracize them from general synagogues. (p. 2)

Sitz im Leben der Kirche

Another set of discourses find themselves in the next pericope, the first of the two discourses reflect in the situation in the life of the Lukan community (Lk. 12:54–57). Here the Lukan church applies Jesus’ admonition to the crowd, to a distinct condition namely, discernment of the time (Caird 1980:218): this was done through obvious eschatological signs contrasted with weather signs. Jesus chides the crowd for being expert weather forecasters, who are not able to discern the looming situation in the form of division which his teaching and its belief would cause. Palestine weather is said to be ‘more even and has less variety than that in other lands’ (Joy 1915:670) which makes it easy to predict; how much less an eschatological movement which has the propensity towards separating even familial bonds. Referring to the crowd as ὑποκριτης does not carry the import of duplicity especially as it reflects the origin of ὑποκριτης which is a stage actor. One who assumes a role he is not, who reverts back to his real self when the audience is gone (Pope 2012:online). οὐκ οἴδατε suggests that the crowd do not know what Jesus was informing them about, even though, in their religiosity, they assume to know it.

Sitz im Evangelium

In the same pericope where the previous life situation applied, another Sitz im Leben played out (Lk. 12:58–59), presenting double life situations in one pericope. It is possible that, according to Kloppenborg (1987:152–153) in Howes (2017:1) the two verses brandishes on the one hand, ‘a sapiential admonition’, and on the other a ‘more typical of a prophetic judgment statement’ respectively, yet, considering its parallel in Matthew 5:25–26, where it appeared as one of the aftermaths of the Beatitudes, or more properly, an antithesis, in Luke, the narrative was an obvious redaction by the Lucan evangelist to agree with the bulk of his teaching on conflict and conflict resolution. Howes (2017) brings out the true nature of conflict and conflict management in the pericope when he stated that:

[C]ausality is central to the rhetorical approach of the logion, which argues that if you fail to make amends with your legal opponents (the cause), you will be at the mercy of the legal system and end up in prison (the effect). (p. 4)

This cause and effect approach not only enlightens us about the possible outbreak of conflict between the debtor and the adversary, but also about a way to manage the conflict, which is out-of-court settlement. This life situation therefore relates to inter-personal conflict among community members (intra-mural conflict). By understanding that Luke redacted the passage to fit a particular form, there is therefore need to understand the correlation of Sitz im Evangelium and the redaction of a particular passage. This will lead us to ask, ‘what did the evangelist mean to teach by recording this particular event in this particular setting?’ (Kselman & Witherup 2000:1137). This question undoubtedly points to an overlap of Form and Redaction criticisms in the text. The entire life situations in the two pericopes suggest that the story is of distorted sequence from different sources.13 Luke redacted the very sayings of Jesus on conflict to fit into a premeditated agenda, which is to set various precedents for his community on how to react to different conflict situations. And since two different styles of conflict appeared in two different contexts in the same Lukan passage, this study analyses Jesus’ suggestions towards managing them and to apply those suggestions in the Nigerian church depending on the type of conflict that arises.


The two pericopes in the passage of study provide us with two outstanding conflict samples which coincidentally are very relevant in today’s conflict management; the Offensive and the Defensive strategies are duly suggested by Luke’s Jesus.14 In the first pericope, there was the employment of an offensive approach by Jesus over and against whoever

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11. There are however arguments that the Birkath ha-minim was enacted soon after 80 CE. See Trues (2001:6), Martyn (1979:57), Fritz (1988:103).

12. Brown (1966:380) in Doole (2021:389) dates this ‘experience to around 90 CE’, even after the fall of Jerusalem while Bernier (2013:138) sees threats to excommunicate Jesus’ sympathisers from the synagogue as imminent within the time of Jesus himself.


14. The Offensive and Defensive conflict strategies seem to be directly responsible for the production of offense-defense balance which ‘has become one of the most widely used theoretical constructs in international relations. The theory posits that technical and geographic factors affect whether the offense or defense has the advantage in any potential war, and that this will influence how two potential combatants prepare for conflict and react to a crisis’ – Ryseff (2017:2). For more discussions on the offense-defense balance theory, see Jervis (1978:167–214).
would find the message of his emerging kingdom both offensive and antagonistic. Although there was no instruction from Jesus towards violence or reprisals at worse, there was however, no attempt by Jesus to sue for either reconciliation or acquiescence. This suggests that, in a situation where the first kind of conflict appears (case of antagonism to the Christian or the church), his or their approach is self-defence. While a Christian in Nigeria or the church is not supposed to unleash violence against his adversaries, he is at the same time not to display cowardice before such adversaries by not defending himself robustly. The words of Jesus were matched with action somewhere (Jn. 2:13–16), an action which Cunningham (1996:39) see as confrontational. Ituma and Solomon (2012:21) consider Jesus’ cleansing of the temple in John 2:13–16 as a non-violent act, yet one imbued with such boldness that the church leaders must follow suit. Therefore, Christians’ dilemma of approach during conflict and war (Palmer n.d.:1), especially as it relates to Christians in Nigeria must be resolved into being steadfast against and firmly resisting the onslaught of the adversary. There are recorded cases in Nigeria of extreme conflicts between Christians and Muslims. The main cause of this conflict is the excessive persecution witnessed in the Muslim dominated north which is borne out of the desire to initiate Islamic dominance in the country, and even in the whole West African sub-region (Kpughe 2017:2). The words of Joseph and Rothfuss (2012) supports this claim. They inform that:

Endemic religious intolerance, which has been the order of the day in northern Nigeria, and the struggle to reintroduce historic Islamic dominance in the region through the vehicle of religious extremism, are the twin drivers of Christian persecution in Nigeria. The daily experiences of Christians, who are marginalized and deprived of their citizens’ rights in many parts of northern Nigeria, especially in the Sharia states, have been largely overshadowed by the frequent reports on sectarian violence by Boko Haram and ‘clashes’ between Muslims and Christians. (pp. 74–75)

Fisseha (2016:i) confirms the relentless efforts by Moslem north to dominate the country with their religion through the agency of Boko Haram. He said, ‘The Boko Haram (BH) Islamic fundamentalist emerged in Nigeria in 2002 with the idea of turning Nigeria into an Islamic country to be ruled by the Sharia law’. This was the same terrorist group that ‘conflict can also lead to a new social or political organisation and therefore be explainable by his enquiry from his audience: how it is they cannot discern the dynamic situation of things as easily as they discern the dynamism of weather. ‘To discern’ (δοκιμάζαν) in that passage is variously interpreted. While most authentic manuscripts (MSS) κ Β, Λ Θ read it as a Present Infinitive Active, πῶς οὐκ οἶδατε δοκιμάζετε (how do you not know how to discern). Making reference to Sellew, he presents an exegetical conclusion on verse 52 concerning ‘the division – as Luke writes, or a sword as Matthew says’. Making reference to Sellew, he presents an exegetical conclusion on verse 52 concerning ‘the division – as Luke writes, or a sword as Matthew says’. Making reference to Sellew, he presents an exegetical conclusion on verse 52 concerning ‘the division – as Luke writes, or a sword as Matthew says’. Making reference to Sellew, he presents an exegetical conclusion on verse 52 concerning ‘the division – as Luke writes, or a sword as Matthew says’.

On this first conflict paradigm Luke was clear that the gospel they are to preach will generate unwarranted controversies that will lead to conflict and no efforts should be made towards quelling it. That necessitated the use of such words as διαμερισμόν ‘division’ and πῦρ ‘fire’ which he wished were already kindled. It is hermeneutically lopsided to refer to this figurative designation πῦρ (fire) as ‘spiritual baptism’, considering its Sitz im Leben; rather it fits the context to be considered as ‘spiritual excitement’ which initially leads to Jesus’ death and then to the severance of familial bonds between his followers and their kin, a subject of offense indeed. This conflict precedes the kindling of the fire.

In the succeeding pericope, Jesus advocated for defensive approach in the Lukian community’s conflict management. Although the pericope reflects eschatological metaphor as earlier stated, it also relates to inter-personal conflict among community members. Jesus’ switch of conflict management from offensive to defensive at this point, is probably explainable by his enquiry from his audience: how it is they cannot discern the dynamic situation of things as easily as they discern the dynamism of weather. ‘To discern’ (δοκιμάζαν) in that passage is variously interpreted. While most authentic manuscripts (MSS) Κ Β Λ Θ read it as a Present Infinitive Active, πῶς οὐκ οἶδατε δοκιμάζετε which translates as ‘how do you not know how to discern’, less authentic MSS A Δ Ψ has πῶς οὐκ οἶδατε δοκιμάζετε which translates as ‘how do you not know how to discern’.

15. Pia and Diez (2007-2) agree that conflict is not always violence though it can transcend to a justifiable violence as conflict intensifies. However, they realised that ‘conflict can also lead to a new social or political organisation and therefore be productive if the parties involved are able to deal with their incompatibilities so that such a new organisational form is achieved’. However, this study argues that, new organisations formable as an aftermath of conflict also include religious, as Christianity was one of such at its beginning. Neander (1847:70) describes how earlier stated, it also relates to inter-personal conflict among community members. Jesus’ switch of conflict management from offensive to defensive at this point, is probably explainable by his enquiry from his audience: how it is they cannot discern the dynamic situation of things as easily as they discern the dynamism of weather. ‘To discern’ (δοκιμάζαν) in that passage is variously interpreted. While most authentic manuscripts (MSS) Κ Β Λ Θ read it as a Present Infinitive Active, πῶς οὐκ οἶδατε δοκιμάζετε

16. It is reported that Nigerian Christians face a high spate of persecution through the ‘endemic religious intolerance, which has been the order of the day in northern Nigeria, and the struggle to reintroduce historic Islamic dominance in the region through the vehicle of religious extremism’ (Joseph & Rothfuss 2012:74).

17. Using ‘data from Open Doors field workers and external experts to quantify and analyze persecution worldwide’, World Watch List talks of 50 countries where Christians are persecuted for their faith yearly and Nigeria featured prominently (For detailed methodology visit ODUSA.org/WWLMethodology) Also see World Watch List (2019:3).

18. Girolami (2017:114) believes that Marion’s Jesus ‘is not a peacemaker, but one that brings division – as Luke writes, or a sword as Matthew says’. Making reference to Sellew, he presents an exegetical conclusion on verse 52 concerning ‘the division in a house – three against two and two against three – is closely tied to the meaning of the following verses about the divisions between generations’. This exegesis is important here because it entrenches the deepness of Jesus’ influence towards global conflict; cf. Sellew (1987:617–668), ‘Reconstruction’, 649: Luke 12:52, on the basis of some literary elements (emphatic position of enosai gar; apo tou sun is typically Lucan), it must be seen as editorial. Diasmemenos is added to better connect the two logos; eni is presumably a variant that Luke seems to preserve from the version of Q.


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