

WELCOMING THE OTHER IN LUKE 9,51-56: A JOURNEY OF ECUMENICAL UNDERSTANDING

ACOLHENDO O OUTRO EM LUCAS 9,51-56: UMA JORNADA DE COMPREENSÃO ECUMÊNICA

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Abstract: The passage in Luke 9,51-56, where Jesus rebukes His disciples for wanting to use violence against a Samaritan village that rejected them, is a strong example of the Christian values of peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation. This event, which is often ignored, offers an important way to understand the challenges and chances for ecumenical dialogue in the Catholic Church. This paper intends to look at this story not just as a conflict and a warning but also as an important text for grasping the issues of church unity and dialogue between different denominations. By doing a detailed analysis, this study will review the effects of Jesus' reaction to His disciples and the lessons for modern ecumenical activities, especially those promoted by the Second Vatican Council's teachings on unity and interfaith discussions. By placing the conversation in the social and historical conflicts between Jews and Samaritans, the paper seeks to reveal the lasting values of tolerance and acceptance that are vital for Christian unity today. In addition, it will examine how these ecumenical ideas can be applied in today's world, suggesting ways for the Church to engage with society while respecting the inclusive and reconciling spirit of the gospel.

Keywords: Ecumenism. Interdenominational Dialogue. Christian Unity. Nonviolence. Vatican II.

Resumo: A passagem de Lucas 9,51-56, onde Jesus repreende seus discípulos por quererem usar a violência contra um povoado samaritano que os rejeitou, é um forte exemplo dos valores cristãos de paz, perdão e reconciliação. Esse evento, muitas vezes negligenciado, oferece uma importante perspectiva para compreender os desafios e as oportunidades do diálogo ecumênico na Igreja Católica. Este artigo pretende analisar essa narrativa não apenas como um conflito e uma advertência, mas também como um texto essencial para entender as questões da unidade da Igreja e do diálogo entre diferentes denominações cristãs. Por meio de uma análise detalhada, este estudo examinará os impactos da reação de Jesus diante de seus discípulos e as lições que essa passagem oferece para as iniciativas ecumênicas contemporâneas, especialmente à luz dos ensinamentos do Concílio Vaticano II sobre a unidade e o diálogo inter-religioso. Ao situar essa conversa no contexto dos conflitos sociais e históricos entre judeus e samaritanos, o artigo busca destacar os valores duradouros de tolerância e acolhimento, fundamentais para a unidade cristã nos dias de hoje. Além disso, analisará como essas ideias ecumênicas podem ser aplicadas no mundo atual, sugerindo caminhos para que a Igreja se envolva com a sociedade, respeitando o espírito inclusivo e reconciliador do Evangelho.

Palavras-chave: Ecumenismo. Diálogo Interdenominacional. Unidade Cristã. Não Violência. Vaticano II.

Introduction

The Catholic Church has long recognized the importance of fostering unity among Christians. This mission was expressed during the Second Vatican Council and

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subsequently supported by Church teachings. Documents like “Unitatis Redintegratio” show the Church's dedication to ecumenism, marking the restoration of unity as one of its main goals. Pope John Paul II stressed this point when he stated that “the ecumenical task remains a primary duty of our Church.”¹ In his encyclical “Ut Unum Sint,” the Pope expressed the Church's prayerful desire for the Spirit's help to enhance unity and work towards full communion with other Christians.² These teachings connect to the messages in John 17:21, where Jesus prays for unity among his disciples, and ultimately to Luke 9:51-56, where Jesus and His followers face rejection from a Samaritan village, and James and John wanted to punish the village by calling down fire from heaven, which made Jesus rebuke them and continued on without seeking revenge. This Lukan passage, less talked about than other Gospel stories, is important for understanding Christ's message of peace, reconciliation, and acceptance. The conflict between Jews and Samaritans adds meaning to this story, showing age-old animosities that can be seen in today's divisions within Christianity. Jesus' refusal to allow violence stands as a lasting call for tolerance and conversation, pertinent for achieving Christian unity.

This article will look at Luke 9,51-56 not just as a story of conflict but as a valuable source for ecumenical theology. By exploring the historical, cultural, and theological aspects of the passage, this paper aims to reveal its ongoing importance for modern ecumenical efforts. The goals include showing how Jesus' actions represent nonviolence and reconciliation, identifying how Vatican II documents support these ideas, and suggesting practical ways to encourage unity in a diverse Christian world. Through this examination, the study reflects the Church's mission to accept differences while working toward complete communion, guided by the Spirit and inspired by Christ's teachings.

The reflection on Luke 9:51-56 within this proposal finds a strong echo in the theme of the current issue of the Contemplation Journal, which deals with the interfaces between philosophical and theological hermeneutics. The hermeneutical approach developed here seeks to understand the rejection suffered by Jesus in the light of a historical-religious context full of tensions, but which, when interpreted theologically, reveals a path to overcoming the conflict through acceptance and reconciliation. This articulation between biblical exegesis and ecumenical theology offers a key to a current

¹ John Paul II. (1992). "We Must Not Forget That the Ecumenical Task Remains a Primary Duty of Our Church." *L'Osservatore Romano*, 20 November.

² John Paul II. (1995). *Ut Unum Sint* (n.102). Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

reading of the role of the Christian faith in the face of the divisions and misunderstandings of the contemporary world.

1 Brief historical and cultural context between Jews and Samaritans

To understand the complicated relationship between Jews and Samaritans, it is important to look at their social and historical backgrounds, marked by both shared beginnings and significant divides. This separation has its origins in the early post-exile time and has changed over many years due to political, religious, and social influences.

The split between Jews and Samaritans comes from the division of the old Kingdom of Israel. The northern kingdom was Israel, with Samaria as the capital, and the southern kingdom was Judah, where Jerusalem was the religious heart, leading to different religious developments.³ After Assyria conquered Israel in 722 BCE, many Israelites were taken away, and Judah faced a similar fate in 586 BCE with the Babylonian conquest. However, the paths of Samaritans and Jews after the exile were quite different. When the Jews returned, they strengthened their religious and cultural identity and focused their worship in Jerusalem by rebuilding the temple with Persian help. This renewed dedication to Jerusalem led to conflicts with the Samaritans.⁴ (Knoppers, 2013, p. 18).

On the other hand, Samaritans believed their worship on Mount Gerizim followed ancient traditions before the Babylonian exile. They maintained that Mount Gerizim was chosen by Moses as the holy site, a belief supported by their version of the Pentateuch, which emphasizes Gerizim rather than Jerusalem.⁵ Put differently, the Samaritan schism, which became more pronounced during the Persian period, was shaped by their belief that Mount Gerizim is the true old sanctuary. This belief comes from their version of the Pentateuch, which mainly focuses on Mount Gerizim instead of Mount Zion in Jerusalem. This conflict over religion and location is key to understanding the long-standing issues between the two groups. The Samaritans argued that their worship and high priesthood were valid, going back to Eli's time, which the

³ Knoppers, G.N. (2013). *Jews and Samaritans: The Origins and History of Their Early Relations*. Oxford University Press, PDF e-book, p. 3.

⁴ Ibid, p. 18

⁵ Anderson, R.T., & Giles, T. (2012). *The Samaritan Pentateuch: An Introduction to Its Origin, History, and Significance for Biblical Studies*. Society of Biblical Literature, PDF e-book, p. 71.

Jews strongly rejected, seeing Samaritan practices as a departure from the true worship of Yahweh.⁶

Thus, the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and the establishment of a strict monotheistic worship there were seen by Samaritans as a challenge to their religious practices centered around Mount Gerizim. Tensions rose during this time, worsened by political actions from both groups seeking control in the area. The Jews, supported by Persian authorities, often labeled the Samaritans as mixed and not fully loyal to Yahweh, which was used to justify not including them in temple rebuilding.⁷

During the Hellenistic period, the tensions became clearer and turned into conflicts, as both groups needed to show their independence and religious validity due to changing political situations. The Maccabean revolt was partly a response to Hellenistic impacts and also aimed at what was seen as religious betrayal in Judaism, while also affecting Samaritan worship places, resulting in damage and destruction of the temple on Mount Gerizim. This incident increased the divide and confirmed the different directions the two communities would take.⁸

2 James and John's reaction and its cultural implications

The reaction of James and John in the Gospel of Luke clearly shows the tensions and cultural issues between Jewish and Samaritan groups. This response is important for understanding not just the immediate situation but also the overall social and religious climate of the time. They ask Jesus if they should bring down fire from heaven to destroy the village, demonstrating their anger and the strong hostility Jews felt towards Samaritans (Luke 9:54). This request highlights the conflicts and biases that defined relations between these two groups.

For Anderson & Giles, James and John's reaction can be seen in the context of a significant divide in religion and culture. Jews and Samaritans had shared religious origins but differed greatly in practices and places of worship. While Samaritans respected Mount Gerizim, Jews viewed Jerusalem, especially the Temple, as central to their faith. This rift was made worse by accusations and a sense of religious exclusivity,

⁶ Knoppers, G.N. (2013). Op. cit., pp. 45-49

⁷ Ibid, pp. 50-55

⁸ Ibid, pp. 70-75

leading to extreme reactions like those of James and John.⁹ Gary N. Knoppers discusses these tensions further, noting that the response of James and John was not an isolated incident but part of a long-standing conflict rooted in their differing religious ties and worship locations.¹⁰

From the established backdrop therefore, the disciples' response can be viewed as a form of religious fervour shaped by these chaotic conditions, where the distinction between 'us' and 'them' was clear and significant. As a result, we see Jesus' criticism of their suggestion as a denial of their desire for retribution and highlighting his teachings of forgiveness and acceptance. This story illustrates the strong religious and ethnic biases of that time and emphasizes the exclusivity that affected community relationships.

3 Brief theological analysis of Jesus' rebuke, its significance and comparison with other biblical teachings on violence and retribution

In our narrative of Luke, the reaction of James and John to the Samaritan rejection of Jesus prompts one of the notable rebukes from Christ (Luke 9:54-55). Here, the term ἐπιτιμάω (*epitimaō*), often translated as "rebuke," carries connotations of admonishment and censure. According to the Strong's Greek Dictionary, ἐπιτιμάω is used in the New Testament primarily to indicate a stern, corrective command often with a sense of suppressing, forbidding or putting an end to someone's actions.¹¹ What Jesus did shows a key idea in Christian ethics about how to respond to hostility and rejection. Rather than asking for divine punishment as James and John proposed, Jesus guides them toward showing mercy and patience, consistent with his teachings about loving enemies and being forgiving (see Matt. 5:44).

The rebuke of James and John can be further understood by contrasting it with broader biblical teachings concerning violence and retribution. In Romans 12:19, Paul exhorts believers to refrain from vengeance, stating, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord," utilizing the term ἐκδικέω (*ekdikeō*), suggests the execution of revenge

⁹ Anderson, R.T., & Giles, T. (2012), *Op. cit.*, pp. 102-103

¹⁰ Knoppers, G.N. (2013). *Op. cit.*, pp. 115-117

¹¹ Strong, James (1890). *Strong's Greek Dictionary*. Madison, NJ: James Strong, PDF e-book. Entry SG2008

or to retaliate.¹² This directive tallies with the teachings of Jesus, advocating for a relinquishment of personal retribution in favour of divine judgment (cf. Matt. 5:38-42).

Further usage of the Greek term εἰρηνοποιός (eirēnopoios), translated as "peacemakers"¹³ in Matthew 5:9, reveals that those who actively promote peace receive blessings. The term is indicative of not only avoiding conflict but actively seeking to establish peace, which can involve reconciliation and forgiveness.

In addition, the notion of forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:12) uses the term ἀφίημι (aphiēmi). For Strong, this usage provides a sense of sending away or releasing. In biblical context, this word encompasses a range of meanings from literal to figurative applications. It is commonly translated as "to forgive" in the context of forgiving sins or debts, but it can also mean to leave or forsake, to let go, or to put away an object or person. The multiple uses of "aphiēmi" across the New Testament reflect the depth of the concept of release and dismissal, which is central to many of Jesus' teachings on forgiveness and reconciliation, as well as the divine prerogative to release from sin. This concept is pivotal in Christian theology, demonstrating reciprocal forgiveness as foundational to the believer's relationship with God and others.¹⁴

From the foregoing, we have seen the significance of Jesus' rebuke and correction, especially with James and John who wanted revenge. This example reveals a basic Christian idea: the need to show grace and kindness, even when faced with rejection and anger. This moment teaches a vital lesson about how divine love can change human desires for revenge into forgiveness. When looked at alongside other biblical stories, it strengthens a clear theme in the Bible that supports peace, kindness, and forgiveness instead of retaliation and violence. This acceptance of forgiveness and embracing the other is also key to the ecumenical movement, which aims to unite different Christian groups by finding common ground and celebrating shared beliefs, focusing on togetherness and joint efforts rather than disagreement and conflict over doctrines.

¹² Ibid, entry SG1556

¹³ Ibid, entry SG1518

¹⁴ Ibid, entry SG863

4 Brief historical and theological evolution of the term 'Ecumenical' in christian contexts

The term “ecumenical” is derived from the ancient Greek word “*ekoumeni*,” meaning “the whole world.” In the New Testament, it is used this way in Matthew 24:14 and Acts 17:31. However, sometimes, as in Acts 17:16, it focuses on the Roman Empire in the first century. Early Christian writers used it in both meanings. By the fourth century, the Christian Church applied the term to Ecumenical Councils. These were important meetings of bishops and theologians who gathered in certain places to discuss and resolve big faith issues and build unity among different groups. Unlike local meetings, these councils addressed concerns that affected all churches throughout the Roman-Byzantine Empire and beyond, eventually representing the global church.¹⁵

Starting in the sixth century, the title “Ecumenical Patriarch” was given to the patriarch and archbishop of Constantinople. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ‘ecumenical’ started to refer to new Christian or international church groups. By 1919, there were ideas in Europe and the U.S. to create an “ecumenical council of churches” or an “ecumenical conference of churches.”¹⁶ The term became official in 1937, mainly at the Oxford Conference on Life and Work, which described ‘ecumenical’ as a historical sign of the Church’s unity, working towards the ‘*Una Sancta*’ – a community of Christians who acknowledge the one Lord.¹⁷ Since then, ‘ecumenical’ has come to mean meetings of representatives from various Christian groups, including Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Old Catholic, and many Protestant churches, focusing on the common goals of unity and reconciliation. Unlike ‘interdenominational’ or ‘interconfessional,’ which typically relate to Protestant churches, ‘ecumenical’ represents a wider, more inclusive movement toward church unity, addressing and resolving doctrinal differences across Christianity.

5 Review of key documents from Vatican II related to ecumenism

The ecumenical movement in the Catholic Church, gained significance during the Second Vatican Council. This council took place from 1962 to 1965 and looked at

¹⁵ Visser ‘t Hooft, Willem. (1967). “The Word ‘Ecumenical’—Its History and Use.” In R. Rouse & S. C. Neill (Eds.), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press. pp. 735-40.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 737.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 740.

many parts of Church life and teachings, with a strong emphasis on the need for Christian unity. This emphasis on coming together is closely linked to Christ's teachings in Scripture. The passage in Luke 9:51-56, which we have already analyzed is one of them. This lesson pairs with another event where disciples try to stop people outside their group from doing miracles in Jesus' name. Jesus corrects them, stressing inclusivity instead of exclusion (cf. Mk. 9:38-41). Also, in John 17:21, Jesus prays for all believers to be one, highlighting His desire for a united and welcoming faith community. Together, these verses point to key Christian values of acceptance, unity, and avoiding division, showcasing the essence of Jesus' message, which the Second Vatican Council addressed. Put differently, the Second Vatican Council, a pivotal event in modern Church history, addressed numerous challenges of the Church in the contemporary world, especially the need for Christian unity drawing inspiration from the numerous teachings of Christ in Scripture regarding Christian unity – key to the ecumenical aim of the Catholic Church.

Vatican II created some important documents that deal with how the Church sees ecumenism. These documents reflect deep thinking about the Church, its role, and how it interacts with other Christian groups and faiths.

Document like “*Unitatis Redintegratio*” (Decree on Ecumenism) focuses on bringing all Christians together. The decree says this unity is pertinent for the Church's mission and recognizes that past divisions among Christian groups take away from the message of the Gospel. It points out that elements of holiness and truth exist outside the formal boundaries of the Catholic Church and notes that the Holy Spirit works in Christian groups not fully united with Rome.¹⁸ This document correlates with Jesus' warning against revenge in Luke 9:51-56, promoting a dialogue based on love and a shared search for truth.

“*Lumen Gentium*” (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), which is another Vatican II document, although not exclusively about ecumenism, describes the Church as a community that includes the Catholic Church but is not limited to it. It describes the Church as a key sign of unity for all people.¹⁹ This document discusses the mystical body of Christ made up of different Christian groups. The Church is seen as the people of God from varying backgrounds, reflecting the inclusiveness Christ displayed in his

¹⁸ Second Vatican Council. (1964). *Unitatis Redintegratio: Decree on Ecumenism* [Chapter I]. Vatican City: Vatican Publishing House.

¹⁹ Second Vatican Council. (1964). *Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* [Chapter II]. Vatican City: Vatican Publishing House.

life. In line with Jesus' inclusive actions and his correction of his disciples' exclusivity in Luke, *Lumen Gentium* supports an understanding of the Church that appreciates diversity within unity, acknowledging how the Holy Spirit works across different denominations.

Another Vatican II document that readily comes to mind in this discourse is “*Nostra Aetate*” (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions) “*Nostra Aetate*” mainly focuses on relationships with non-Christian religions but also backs the ecumenical call by promoting respect and dialogue, affecting relationships with other Christian groups. This document encourages understanding and valuing the spiritual and moral insights from non-Christian faiths. It advocates for universal dialogue that mirrors the peace and unity taught by Christ.²⁰ Similar to Jesus’ teachings against vengeance in Luke 9, “*Nostra Aetate*” should also motivate Christians to interact respectfully and lovingly with people of different faiths, promoting a wider application of ecumenical ideas.

Thus, the Vatican II documents discussed here provide a solid theological foundation for the Catholic Church's commitment to ecumenism. They echo the scriptural values of kindness, reconciliation, and peace exemplified by Jesus in Luke 9:51-56. This connection illustrates the Council’s vision of the Church as a community that goes beyond cultural and denominational limits to express Christ's unifying love. The ecumenical movement is important for the Church’s work today, aiming to fulfil Christ's request "that all may be one" (Jn. 17:21) – an excellent way of embracing the other in Christendom in a real and impactful manner.

6 Contemporary implications and applications

Our Scriptural passage, Luke 9:51-56, shares important lessons on tolerance, acceptance, and avoiding revenge. These ideas are important for how Christians should act and also help guide efforts to bring different Christian groups together. This passage can help tackle challenges in the ecumenical movement, like bias between denominations, the desire for common beliefs, and the search for peace within Christianity. The following are the suggested contemporary implications and applications:

²⁰ Second Vatican Council. (1965). *Nostra Aetate: Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*. Vatican City: Vatican Publishing House.

1. **Avoiding revenge:** Luke 9 suggests that in ecumenical discussions, Christians should not seek revenge when faced with disagreements over beliefs or past conflicts. Instead, this passage promotes calm reactions to rejection and respectful discussions with those who think differently. Here, Churches can organize shared workshops that focus on resolving conflicts based on biblical teachings, creating a peaceful and respectful atmosphere among various Christian groups.

2. **Embracing the other (Inclusivity):** Jesus' rebuke of the disciples who wanted to prevent others from performing miracles because they were not part of their group (cf. Mark 9:38-41) illustrates the importance of inclusivity. In ecumenical terms, it calls for churches to recognize and value the contributions from different traditions and the work of the Holy Spirit beyond their own boundaries. Here, it would be useful to establish joint service projects and community programs that enable members of various churches to collaborate, learn from each other, and serve the community together.

3. **Fostering Unity:** Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17:21 serves as a strong biblical foundation for ecumenical efforts. This verse encourages a kind of unity that reflects Jesus' connection with His Father, focusing on common goals and spirit rather than identical practices and beliefs. Here, Churches can hold joint prayer services, especially during events like the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. These shared activities can strengthen relationships and help clear up misunderstandings.

4. **Addressing Modern Challenges:** Issues like social justice, caring for the environment, and promoting world peace are areas where churches can work together. Luke 9 tells us to respond to rejection and challenges gracefully, which can guide collaborative efforts on societal matters. Hence, forming ecumenical advocacy groups to confront urgent local and global issues can demonstrate the commitment of Christians to peace and justice, inspired by Jesus' example.

Therefore, the teachings from Luke 9 are highly relevant for today's ecumenical movements. By emphasizing Jesus' messages against revenge, promoting inclusivity, and striving for unity, Christians can create a stronger and more effective presence in today's world. These actions not only honour Christ's wish for unity among His followers but also illustrate the unifying and welcoming spirit of Christianity in a world that often feels divided.

Final considerations

Throughout this work, we have sought to carry out a hermeneutical reading of Luke 9:51-56, based on historical and theological elements, in order to illuminate the ecumenical proposal of the Church in the contemporary world. This reading is part of the contemporary effort of interpretation that unites faith and reason, a characteristic of theological hermeneutics, by showing that Jesus' attitude, in rejecting his disciples' desire for revenge, is also a theological response to the way we interpret the other and deal with religious and ecclesial difference.

This paper has also looked at the ecumenical possibilities found in the biblical passage of Luke 9:51-56, where Jesus tells His disciples to not seek revenge. This illustrates His messages about peace and coming together, which connects with the broader ecumenical aspirations outlined by the Second Vatican Council. Studying this passage in light of the historical tension between Jews and Samaritans and key Vatican II texts shows a valuable path for ecumenical work today.

The analysis pointed out that Jesus' answer to His disciples is an important moment for Christian beliefs about nonviolence and acceptance. The history of conflict between Jews and Samaritans deepens our understanding of this passage, offering insights into intergroup challenges that reflect today's divisions among denominations.

The teachings from the Second Vatican Council, especially in documents like "Unitatis Redintegratio" and "Nostra Aetate," have changed how the Catholic Church views ecumenism. These texts push for unified action rather than just theoretical harmony, urging steps to resolve differences in Christian relationships. By discussing ecumenism in the context of early Christian social and theological dynamics, this paper connects past divides with current issues, showing that a varied approach is necessary for unity.

Moreover, this study has highlighted that the lessons from Luke 9 are very relevant for today's ecumenical missions. By stressing Jesus' calls against retaliation, fostering acceptance, and working toward togetherness, Christians can create a stronger and more united presence in the world. These efforts honour Christ's desire for unity among His followers and showcase how His teachings can heal divisions in a fragmented world.

In conclusion, the story of Luke 9:51-56 not only instructs on the importance of rejecting violence but also provides a framework for how Christians can interact with one another and society in ways that reflect the healing nature of the Gospel. As the Church advances, it is pertinent for these biblical and Church teachings to guide ecumenical efforts, creating a space where all Christians, regardless of their different backgrounds and histories, can unite in Christ's love and peace.

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