

**Organizational Design and the Early Church:
A Social and Cultural Texture Analysis of Acts**

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Abstract

This article examines the growth of the Early Christian Church through the lens of our modern understanding of organizational design. Through a social and culture texture analysis, insights on organizational design within the Book of Acts reveal that the early church used fairly modern methods to grow their community while under pressure from various opponents. Implications for modern leaders are discussed.

Every organization starts as a small group. This group often works furiously to achieve rapid growth and, along the way, experiences several growing pains. Organizational design attempts to use elements of the organization to alleviate these growing pains and provide the organization with a competition advantage (Galbraith, 2002). As the Early Christian Church grew, it experienced many challenges brought on by its vision and its growth (DeSilva, 2004). This article examines the Early Church as recorded in Acts using a social and cultural texture analysis of several key verses. The Early Church experiences similar growing pains to those of modern organizations; pains such as growth, competition and change. Their response, by designing organizational structure and systems, provides lessons for modern day organizational leaders.

Social and Cultural Texture

Social and cultural texture is the third of the five textures of a text according to Robbin's (1996) Social-Rhetorical Interpretation model. The social and cultural texture of a text considers the characteristics of the text as a part of a larger culture and society. Social and cultural texture develops by considering how the text perceives the world around it (specific social topics), how it reveals the attitudes and norms of the culture (common social and cultural topics) and how it exposes a dominant cultural system (final cultural categories).

The book of Acts was written by Luke as a follow-up to his gospel of Jesus Christ (DeSilva, 2004). It follows the work of the apostles as they spread the gospel to Jerusalem and then outward to the ends of the earth. There are many themes within Acts (DeSilva, 2004), but three in particular pertain to organizational design: Growth, Competition (Persecution), and Change.

Growth. Luke documents the rapid growth of the Christian movement's early history. The book documents the missionary work of the apostles from Jerusalem to Syria and outward to parts of Africa, Asia and Europe (DeSilva, 2004). The apostles are directly responding to the mandate found in Acts 1:8 (NASV): "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." This text has a strong conversionist response. A conversionist response is based on the view that the world is corrupt; corrupted by people (Robbins, 1996). The apostles knew that the world needed Christ and their growth was motivated by this desire to recruit and convert disciples.

Competition (Persecution). The Early Church grew despite fierce competition. Unlike modern day competition among different religions and denominations, early competition took the form of persecution. Persecution by the mainline Jewish establishment drove Christians either into hiding or spread them out in all directions from Jerusalem (DeSilva, 2004). Acts 8:1 outlines this persecution saying, "On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria." The motivations behind this persecution stemmed from a cultural norm of honor. Honor is a declaration of worth and social acceptance through worth (Robbins, 1996). This new system of beliefs threatened the traditional route to honor in society and hence threatened the honor of the honored.

Change. The apostles sought to convert the world by spreading the good news. They first did this by seeking to convert Jewish believers, however they quickly realized a change in strategy. Paul would often enter a city and speak at the synagogue, but after being driven out he'd preach to Gentiles (DeSilva, 2004). In Acts 13:46, Paul tells a group of Jews of their need to change their strategy: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do

not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles.” Paul words contain a revolutionist response. This type of response stems from a belief that salvation requires drastic changes brought about through the destruction of the current social order. Paul is changing the traditional establishment and offering that the Jewish people, a nation chosen by God, are no longer the route to God. This belief also requires the apostles to change how they evangelize and establishes churches in new cities.

Discussion

As the Early Church grew from a group of apostles into an organized church, they began to establish a design to their organization, one that changed over time as growth, persecution and a strategy change affected the needs of the organization. Initially, the church resembled a traditional organization, with the apostles at the top experiencing a “cooperation/control” bias (Keidel, 1995). As a team of apostles, cooperation was necessary in order to ensure unity and share information. However, the need for control was very present as well, as the apostles needed to act as a leadership team, influencing the rest of the early church believers.

As the Jewish establishment began to persecute the early church, believers began to scatter. This created the need to change the organizational structure slightly, into one that resembled a “spider-plant” (Morgan, 1997). Spider-plant organizations are characterized by a central organization, that reaches out and “plants” smaller organizations that are semi-autonomous while still tying back to the authority and resources of the main plant. Paul, and other apostles, travelled to visit these various “plants” to ensure healthy growth, in roles similar to what Morgan (1997) labeled “bumblebees.” This change also brought with it a shift to an “autonomy/control” bias (Keidel, 1995). There was a lot of autonomy within the individual city

churches, however the apostolic leadership team still maintained control over the larger organization.

This spider plant structure would also serve the Early Church well as the strategy shifted from preaching to the Jews to evangelizing the Gentiles. As the Gentile church grew and eventually overtook the Jewish Christians in number, the organization of the Early Church made one more shift toward decentralization. The church morphed from a spider-plant to a federal organization (Handy, 1989). Federal organizations are composed of small, individual groups allied together with a shared identity. Federal organizations benefit from their ability to scale to a large organization while still feeling local to those members of the smaller groups. The central group of apostles (and the church at Jerusalem) remained a unifying theme, however the individual churches had very different features.

Implications

Examining how the Early Church responded to the challenges of growth, persecution and strategy shift yields many lessons. For leaders of modern organizations, there are at least three lessons to be gleaned from shifting organization design of the Church.

Don't be afraid to decentralize. As the Early Church grew into new cities, it needed to decentralize its organizational structure and rely on models such as the spider-plant and federal organization. These structures retained a central influence but were largely decentralized federations of smaller groups. As Modern organizations grow, they'll be tempted to retain their traditional structure but should consider whether a decentralized organization can yield a better competitive advantage.

Threats can yield advantages. As the Early Church expanded by preaching to the Jews about the Messiah, the Jewish establishment began to persecute believers. This initial threat

forced believers to scatter outward from Jerusalem. Their new, decentralized structure allowed them to preach to Gentiles and expand even further. Many modern organizational innovations can likewise arise from initial setbacks or unplanned events.

Form follows function. As the Early Church strategy shifted from preaching to Jews to preaching to Gentiles, their structure also had to change. A decentralized structure stood a better chance of unifying the Church while respecting the varying cultures of its many cities. As modern organizations shift their strategy, they must also reorganize their design in order to stand the best chance of attaining their objectives.

Conclusion

The growth of Early Church mirrored the growth of modern organizations in many ways. A social-rhetorical texture analysis of the book of Acts reveals three themes or stages in the Early Church: growth, competition and change. These themes are also experienced as growing pains in modern organizations. The church responded by shifting their organizational design from centralized to decentralize in response to a shifting strategy. Modern organizational leaders can benefit from their example and learn to constantly examine and reexamine their organizational design to ensure it is optimally positioned to handle growth, beat competition and pursue strategic objectives.

References

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