

The “Tipping Point” of the Early Church: A Socio-Rhetorical Analysis of Acts 6:1-7

Introduction

When we study organizations, certain events mark their history. Had these events not occurred, the organization may have diverted course and ended up very different than it did. Sometimes these events are the culmination of a plethora of smaller events, creating what Malcolm Gladwell calls the “tipping point” of change. This is where the momentum for change becomes unstoppable after it reaches a certain boiling point.¹

Acts 6:1-7 describes the potential tipping point for the growth of the early church. A critical incident happened, is dealt with, and the resolution fuels the rapid growth of the early church. This passage is a “bridge” between stories. Jesus had recently left and passed along His mission. The Day of Pentecost happened, and the church was “increasing in number” (6:1). A few verses later, the writer of Acts describes the church as “increasing greatly” (6:7). Between these verses, something happened to increase the growth of the church from “increasing” to “increasing greatly”. This incident was not the sole cause, but may have helped, and definitely did not impede the growth. This article focuses on the social and cultural texture of Acts 6:1-7, using Robbins’ methodology to analyze scripture.² Specifically, it focuses on the impact role differentiation can have on organizational design, and how dealing with conflict may actually fuel growth in organizations.

Background to Passage

Growth is challenging to any organization, and the early church was no exception. As it grew, it overcame complications to growth such as differing languages, distant geographies, cultural customs, and varied ethnicities; much like any organization aspiring to grow in today’s global economy. The Hellenist Christians complained that the Hebrew Christians were discriminating against the Hellenist widows in the food distribution. It is possible that this discrimination was intentional by the Hellenists. Whether this perception was true or not, it was perceived, and needed to be addressed.³ The Apostles heard these complaints, and then called everyone together. They then appointed seven Godly men to administrate the food distribution, and the church “increased greatly” after this. This new organizational design then allowed the Apostles to continue on with other work.

The term *Hellenist* refers to the Greek speaking Jews who were not originally from Palestine. Many of these Hellenist Christians may have converted at the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:9-11). The Hebrews generally looked down upon their Hellenist counterparts because they suspected the Hellenists' faith may have been corrupted by Greek thought and influence.⁴ The Hebrews considered the Hellenists to be Jews, but not "pure" Jews. The Hellenists were considered foreign to the area, and may not have had the immense social and family support system that their Hebrew counterparts had. Thus, if a Hellenist woman became a widow, she may not have had any way to support herself.⁵ The Hebrew Jews prided themselves that they had no foreign admixture in their lives and that they still spoke their ancestral language, Aramaic.⁶ They also had a prejudicial sense of superiority over the Hellenist Jews.⁷ The Aramaic Pharisees treated their Hellenist counterparts with utter contempt, and even developed separate synagogues for the different types of Jews.⁸

The Jewish communities had developed a synagogue sponsored welfare system as a way to "execute justice for...the widow" (Deuteronomy 10:18). Some people were temporarily in need, and were given enough food to carry on. A Damascus Fragment speaks of a monthly offering given to help for the needy.⁹ This benevolent fund was called the *Kuppah*. Another fund, called the *Tamhui*, was developed from the house-to-house collection.¹⁰ Two collectors went around the local markets and private houses each week to gather food and goods. They then distributed this to the needy. Barclay argues that "no nation has ever had a greater sense of responsibility for the less fortunate brethren than the Jews."¹¹ The new Christian church seemed to adapt to this historical welfare system and began collecting and distributing food to the needy.

The problem was not in the desire to distribute; that came naturally to the Jewish converts. The problem was in the method and structure of distribution. The discrimination mirrored a traditional cultural bias by the Hebrews towards the Hellenists. It also illustrated the utopia of the Christian church was not operating fully. Many Jewish widows were provided food, but that distribution was still dependent on the previous social stature in Jewish society. This attitude carried forward into the church and created an unhealthy atmosphere.

Importance of Passage

While of course we will never know, would the growth of the church have been different if the Apostles handled this situation differently? Would the church have split over these issues? Would the Hellenist Jews have rebelled against their Hebrew counterparts? These questions require purely speculative answers, but that speculation does not diminish the wisdom that can be ascertained from this passage.

The passage following Acts 6:7 outlines the martyr of Stephen, who was also one of the seven appointed administrators. After Stephen's death, a great persecution began (8:1) and that persecution scattered the Apostles and the recent converts throughout the countryside. Philip, another one of the seven appointed men, proclaimed the gospel in Samaria, and helped convert a Sorcerer named Simon (8:13). Stephen and Peter were operating in a greater role than "just" food administrators. But would they still be the incredible men of faith we regard them as, if they were not initially given an opportunity to lead?

Barclay notes that the first office bearers were chosen to work, not speak.¹² They were initially chosen to do this, but both Philip and Stephen were unafraid of speaking as well. Stephen gave a riveting speech outlining the history of Judaism to the coming of Jesus; a speech so controversial and impacting, he was stoned for it and became the first Christian martyr. Philip taught and baptized an Ethiopian Eunuch about Christianity, which may have been the catalyst to the formation of the Ethiopian church. All seven of the chosen administrators had Greek names. While not conclusive evidence in itself, it does imply that these seven men were probably Greek-speaking Jews, or Hellenists.¹³ This in itself was a miracle: The Hebrew Christians laid aside some of their pride to give office to the Hellenist Christians, illustrating the emerging unity of the early church.

Conflict and Structure

Conflict is inevitable and unavoidable. People are too diverse to always get along, and a primary role of leaders is to navigate the landmines conflict sets up for them. Sometimes, conflict and structural issues can be solved simultaneously. The Hellenist's complaints had the potential to split the early church. The Apostles did not ignore this potential dispute and instead, addressed it head-on. They called the entire community together to address this issue. They were brutally honest in saying that "it is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables" but then suggested an immediate solution that involved input from the entire congregation. They proposed the general structure but did not dictate every little detail within that structure.

Sometimes the structural issues are due to conflict. At other times, the conflict is due to structural issues. Both need to be dealt with and can be dealt with simultaneously. The conflict itself can generate needed change and can right an unbalanced focus. In modern organizations, many teams are severely impacted by inner conflict. Team members mutter at some kind of disparity, and the team leaders ignore this conflict. Unfortunately, that ignorance comes with a price. The Apostles understood that price, and chose to deal directly with this conflict. As part of their solution, they proposed an amendment to the structure of the early church. Previously, the twelve apostles were the only designated leaders. The

appointment of the seven food administrators created additional leadership positions, with the blessing of the Apostles.

The “Star Model” of organizational design incorporates five intertwined elements into an organization’s structure: strategy, structure, processes, rewards and people.¹⁴ Each element is important, and organizations that ignore one or more of the elements tend to have difficulties thriving. In the early church of Acts 6, the *strategy* element was very clear: make Disciples. The *people* element was somewhat clear, although the new Christians brought their previous cultural biases into the new church. Jesus appointed 11 of the Apostles directly, and they changed the world. They obviously had the right leaders. The *rewards* element, if it was not clear then, became clear in the subsequent passage in Acts 6 where Stephen was martyred. The reward system was truly heavenly, not earthly.

On the other hand, the *structure* and *processes* elements were not clear. This unbalanced “star”, with weak focuses on structure and processes helped generate conflict in the church. The people knew that the Apostles needed to make a decision, and understood the authority the Apostles had. But they were frustrated with the favoritism being shown, which illustrates a lack of processes. The Apostles then clarified the structure, and it is assumed that the processes were fixed through that clarification.

Role and Structure

All members of a team, including the leader and his or her followers, must understand their individual roles in the organization. This includes what that role entails, and what it does not entail. Many ineffective teams match people on personality, rather than focusing on the role they should play on that team.¹⁵ The success of the television show, *Undercover Boss*, illustrates a desire by many people to see the boss doing the dirty work. “The mystery of this passage in Acts is that the Apostles bluntly implied that they were too good to “wait on tables”. Spencer argues that the Apostles were different from Jesus in this regard. The Apostles tended to separate “menial” forms of serving from the “spiritual” pursuits of teaching, preaching and prayer. Jesus, on the other hand, blended the two vocations.¹⁶ What exactly did the Apostles mean when they stated “it is not right that we should neglect the Word of God in order to wait on tables” (6:7)? Are the two mutually exclusive for these leaders?

Much of organizational design is spent rearranging organizational charts. Discussions and decisions must be made regarding reporting structures, compensation systems and dissemination of job duties. Our world is just too complex to have everyone be trained in every single task. Some overlap is needed, but the duties must be split-up accordingly, and in a way that makes sense. The dissemination of duties helped formulate a structure and defined roles, but Stephen and Philip were not constrained by their

new roles. They were empowered by their new positions, but they also preached the Gospel like the Apostles did. The immediacy of the passages describing Stephen and Philip implies a causal connection between their new roles and their bold and brazen faith. Leaders must understand and embrace their role, and understand that everyone in an organization has a role to play. The Apostles were not deflecting the waiting on tables for selfish reasons or laziness. They understood that their role was very different. Ultimately, all of these apostles sacrificed their lives for the mission: the ultimate act of service.

Conclusions

The social implications of this passage illustrate a potentially volatile situation that was rapidly and effectively diffused by the Apostles. This diffusion provided the tipping point to the immense and rapid growth the early church experienced. We do not know what would have happened if the Apostles dealt with this situation differently. We do know what did happen, and the principles outlined above can assist and encourage any leader to facilitate growth in his or her organization.

References

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