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The First Church: A New Cultural Experience

Hartwell T Paul Davis

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Abstract

Following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, the first church was an anomaly of new experience. Culturally the church represented a new belief system, and although it began among the Jews, it was soon evident that there would be a clash of cultures between the old and the new. One early cultural shift was the evangelism of Samaritans and Gentiles. New to the human experience was the preponderance of miracles that began in the ministry of Jesus but now marked the church. The Bible records, “And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people” and continues, “And of the rest dared no man join himself to them: but the people magnified them.” (Acts 5: 12-13, KJV). The beginning of the church was full of uncertainty but it is significant that the leaders of the first church, the apostles, were endued with power as a means of validating their authority in order to establish what would be a dynamic and volatile transition from the old to the new.

### The First Church: A New Cultural Experience

Morgan (2006) observes, “When we talk about culture we are usually referring to the pattern of development reflected in a society’s system of knowledge, ideology, values, laws, and day to day rituals” (p. 116). The agriculture metaphor of being “cultivated” implies a process over time. There is soil preparation, seeding, and growth each with its own seasonal event. Culture does not develop overnight but tends to develop in sequential steps depending on the environmental mix, the social mix, and the symbols and routines that are presented in varying stages and varying quantities. The norms and behaviors once developed are ingrained in the social fabric of a nation, organization, or social group. To change the culture requires a new “cultivation” also over time and following the process of soil preparation, seeding, and growth. The cultural metaphor is a powerful reminder that typically no single event is likely to quickly change cultural norms. In order to do so the event would have to be on a massive and cataclysmic scale.

Morgan (2006) notes, “When we observe a culture, whether in an organization or in society at large, we are observing an evolved form of social practice that has been influenced by many complex interactions between people, events, situations, actions and general circumstances” (p. 146). The nation of Israel as God’s first choice for the gospel in itself presented the most powerful example of a cultural minefield in which to bring a new religious experience. One might ask if it would have been easier to first convert the gentiles. There are several considerations that made Israel uniquely difficult as a place to begin the church.

Gentile nations in that period were primarily polytheistic. The Greek influence of philosophy was strong even though the Roman Empire controlled the political power. The Athenians at Mar’s Hill were typical of the educated class. The Bible notes “For all the

Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing” (Acts 17:21, KJV). When Paul told them, “I perceive that in all things you are too *superstitious*” (v.22), modern translations render the word to mean *more religious*. What can be suggested is that a polytheistic culture may have been easier in one sense in that adding Jesus to what was already a pantheon of Gods would have at least met with less resistance to the idea of a new God entering into the world.

In contrast, Israel was not only monotheistic but strongly culturally resistant to the worship of any other God. While Israel had its own experience with idols, the Babylonian captivity had all but eradicated idol worship. Later, Greek Hellenization impacted Israel and DeSilva (2004) notes, “Hellenization did not mean the eradication of native languages or cultures but rather the coexistence, and to a large extent, the blending of Greek culture with native culture” (p. 40.) Israel under the Greeks and Romans coexisted but had returned to God with fervor for keeping the Sabbath, Torah, and temple traditions. DeSilva writes, “First century Judaism was a highly diverse and variegated phenomenon. The basic, unifying principle that held the different expressions of Judaism together was commitment to the one God through the keeping of Torah, the covenant made with God at Sinai and mediated through Moses” (p. 73).

It is in the context of rites of purification, temple worship, sacrifice, tradition, and Sabbath worship that God was going to create a new organization, the church, and the first members were to be from among the Jews.

One consideration of cultural significance was the Jewish nation’s own social structure which held strong bias toward Samaritans and Gentiles. The concepts of purity and holiness were strongly rooted in much of the pharisaical tradition, as in washing of hands, but these concepts were grounded in the fundamental terms *clean and unclean* which were parts of the

Law of Moses. The story of the “good Samaritan” (Luke 10: 30-37, KJV) and the account of Cornelius’ conversion (Acts 10) are examples of the mindset among the Jews concerning Gentiles. The book of Acts reveals as one of its themes the challenges faced by the first church in “breaking down the middle wall of partition” (Ephesians 2:14) that divided the Jews and Gentiles.

### *Environmental uncertainty*

Jesus stated, “Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish: but they put new wine into new bottles, and both are preserved” (Matthew 9:17, KJV). The first Christians were unaware of what was facing the church. The teaching of Jesus that the disciples were to be “hated of all men” (Matthew 10:22, KJV) and the persecution to come each were not yet reality. The gospel message was not yet clear for there were no book of Acts, Romans, and other epistles to explain the full significance of the message. Most notable is the miraculous growth experienced by the first church. On the day of Pentecost, “about three thousand souls” were added to the church (Acts 2:41, KJV). The Bible then declares, “And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (Acts 2:47, KJV). A short time later, the Bible records, “Howbeit many of them which heard the word believed; and the number of men was about five thousand” (Acts 4:4, KJV). This exceptionally rapid growth surely added to the level of uncertainty that would require uniqueness in leadership. The Bible declares,

And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people; (and they were all with one accord in Solomon's porch. And of the rest durst no man join himself to them: but the people magnified them. (Acts 5:12-13, KJV).

The miracles, signs, and wonders were necessary validation of the authority given to the apostles for leading the fledgling church. Apostolic leadership created an organizational perception that only added to the uncertainty of whether the church could be viable or whether it was considered a radical movement that would quickly face extinction.

Hatch (2006) writes, “Environmental uncertainty is defined by the amount of complexity and the rate of change in the organization’s environment” (p. 79). Complexity existed not only because of the overwhelming growth, but from the onset there were problems to be faced which included a backlash of the religious authorities, but also because there were social norms that were a part of the Jewish culture that could not be ignored for the new church. Community concern for the poor was covered by the Law of Moses and the first Christians did not disregard Torah when they became Christians. The “all things in common” passage of Acts 2:44, the incident Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5), and the problems with the support of widows (Acts 6) contributes to a narrative in which the primitive church faced structural challenges.

Hatch notes “An organization’s vulnerability to its environment is the result of its needs for resources, such as raw materials, labor, capital, equipment, knowledge and outlets for its products and services – resources that are controlled by the environment” (p. 81). While the first church did not manufacture a product, each of the environmental requisites was an important elements of sustainability.

The prevailing need for the first church was for the new converts to be grounded in the gospel. All organizations recognize the need for the mission and vision of the organization to be a part of the understanding of a community. In the case of the church, knowledge was the primary service. The mission was to preach the gospel and to prepare individuals to serve Jesus

Christ. The growth of the church wherein more than 8,000 members were a part of the community reveals the Lord's wisdom in preparing not one but twelve for the first work of ministry and leadership. The challenge of where to meet and how to minister was answered in Acts 2:46, "And they continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart".

The matter of resources brought a second challenge to the church. Principles of tithing and giving were already practices of the Jewish faith. Of significance is the Biblical description of a community that "had all things common" (Acts 2:44, KJV). One interpretation suggested a communistic or communal culture where all resources are shared among members. Walton (2008) writes, "Thus Holtzmann argues that [sic Acts] 2:44-45 and 4:32-35 presents a community with 'all things common' who sold their belongings and gave them into a common fund, thus practicing a form of communism" (p. 100). However, Walton observes that Acts 6:1-6 indicates "that the earliest believers were far from well-organized in their provision for needy people, and thus undermines any suggestion that there was a genuine common ownership" (p. 100). Later allusions to the church at Jerusalem being poor and the request by the Jerusalem elders to Paul to "only remember the poor" (Galatians 2:10, KJV) indicates that there was a variance in the worldwide church as to the matter of resources. There is no indication that the selling of property to donate to the church was prevalent as in Jerusalem, but the support of widows and the role of deacons continued as a part of the church community beyond Jerusalem (I Timothy 3 and 5) indicating that a structural change resulted that would impact the whole church.

*An open system model*

The record of Acts 2 and in Acts 6 suggests one of the first executive decisions by the apostles that would have structural significance for the church. Katz and Kahn describe *adaptive activities* as a part of an open systems model for the development of organizational structures. Hatch (2006) “At first a primitive organization emerges from cooperation between individuals who wish to pool their efforts to achieve a common goal, such as bringing a new product on line” (p. 121). The open systems model identified three stages including support activities, maintenance activities, and adaptive activities all of which are in flux as an organization responds to its environment. The church in its primitive stage reflected such a model, without professional leaders, a state of flux between leaders and followers, and the great deal of uncertainty as to identity. The common thread that joined the multitudes together with the leadership of the apostles was the power of Holy Spirit, the gospel, the miracles, and the belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

While the original voluntary contributions by members allowed the church to attend to primary first concerns such as providing places to preach, the “breaking of bread” during meetings, and possibly early support for the apostles the support of widows and orphans was a part of the ingrained Jewish culture. It was a part of the framework for the use of tithes (Deut. 14:29, 16:14, 24:19, 26:12, KJV). There would be no consideration of other aspects of tithing or giving without recognition of Torah commandments for such support. Watson (2008) notes, “Thus Luke presents the messianic community in Jerusalem as fulfilling the hopes and ideals embodied in the Torah for a community life in which no one was poor or in need.” (p. 105). For the Jerusalem church, the practice related to widows and orphans provided the incentive for making one of the first major structural adjustments that would become a part of the church – the



office of deacons in the church (Acts 6: 1-6). The resulting structural change created a new level of leadership further described in I Timothy 3 and Philippians 1:1 that would become recognizably the Biblical model for church leadership.

### *Male dominated Leadership Structure*

Morgan (2006) states, “A focus on the links between leadership style and corporate culture often provides key insights into why organizations work the way they do” (p. 131). The complaint that “traditional forms of organization are often dominated and shaped by male value systems” (p. 131) applies to the church for most of its history. There are many Biblical texts that reinforce the male culture including Paul’s teaching on women being silent in church (I Timothy 2:10-12), on wives being submissive to husbands (Ephesians 5:11), or for men being a woman’s covering (I Corinthians 11). Each of these principles is established by relationship to the creation story, gender roles, marriage, and the fall of man. The significance of the male dominated leadership structure suggests the cultural importance of maintaining gender roles and marriage more than the question of power and authority. The marriage metaphor used for both Israel (Isaiah 62:5) and the church (Ephesians 5:23) suggest that there were cultural norms that transcended the old and new which gives roots to the phrase “Judeo-Christian” tradition.

### *Collegial eldership*

A question may be asked – is the modern church structured like the Acts church? Davis (2004) observes the tragedy for ministry today is “the ministry itself has become something entirely different from that which God has ordained for his church” (p. 2). Davis comments that the prevalent single pastor concept of the modern church has destroyed the Biblical pattern of collegial eldership, but also the understanding of pastor as only one of the ministerial gifts of

Ephesians 4:11. Instead of pastoring being a *gift of ministry* it has become a *vocation of administration* in an ecclesial setting (Davis, 2004, p 2). The leadership of the first church was patterned as *collegial eldership*, a term used where authority and power were shared equally among a college or group of elders. In cases where leadership structure is discussed in the New Testament, a plurality of collegial elders stands in stark contrast to the suggestion of a sole individual exercising complete authority in the church. Paul calls for the elders of the church of Ephesus. Acts records, “And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church” (Acts 20:17, KJV). The Bible records, “And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed” (Acts 14:23, KJV). The rule by elders was always mentioned in plurality (1 Timothy 5:17 and Hebrews 13:17, KJV). In quoting the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Davis (2004) writes,

During the 2nd century the ministry was subject to a change. The ruling body of office-bearers in every congregation received a permanent president, who was called the pastor or bishop, the latter term being the commoner. The change came gradually. It provoked no strong opposition. By the beginning of the third century, it was everywhere accepted. (Davis, 2004, p. 5).

### *Summary*

A change in leadership style including the theme of male dominated leadership and collegial eldership is worthy of further research. Organizations are shaped by social culture and environmental changes, but it falls to the leadership the responsibility of managing and directing change. Morgan (2006) speaks of environmental uncertainties and operational uncertainties

noting that the ability to cope with uncertainty depends on one's position in the organization.

The ability to handle uncertainty depends on two factors, "the degree to which their skills are substitutable, and hence the ease with which they can be replaced; and the centrality of their functions to the operations of the organization as a whole" (p. 178). It is a significant statement when Jesus stated, "Smite the shepherd and the sheep will scatter" (Matthew 26:31). In this regard, the cultural norms concerning leadership style will be the first to be attacked or replaced that subsequently produces the leaven of cultural change. The modern church appears to have little semblance to the apostolic church in the first century.

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