

**Apostolic Knowledge Creation:
A Sacred Texture Analysis of the Apostle John's Third Epistle**

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Abstract

As the early church grew, it became apparent that innovative ways to spread knowledge would need to be cultivated. Just like a modern day organization, the early church needed to develop a competitive advantage against the establishment of Rome. The apostle John created such an advantage when he established a network of churches, each receiving and sharing information through traveling messengers. Through a sacred texture analysis John's Third letter to the churches in Asia Minor, a method for growing and spreading knowledge is revealed. Implications for current organizations are discussed.

The growth of the early church was greeted with many challenges. As it grew from a sect of Second Temple Judaism, it was met with outright resistance and attempts to eliminate it entirely (Shelly, 1996). Despite this resistance, it grew to become the dominant religion of the West within three centuries. In order to accomplish this, the church developed innovative ways to spread ideas and aid growth in new knowledge of God. Through a sacred texture analysis of John's third letter to the churches in Asia Minor, a method for growing and spreading knowledge is revealed. This innovative method helped the church survive and grow, as well as produce and spread new revelations about the ways and kingdom of God. However, it was not without internal challengers.

Sacred Texture

Sacred Texture is the fifth of five textures according to Robbins' (1996) Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation model. Sacred texture is best visualized as intertwining with the other four textures (inner, inter, social/cultural, and ideological) and considers the manner with which a text gives insight into the connections between humans and the divine. Sacred textures develop in communication from one religious person/community to another (Shillington, 2002) and can yield valuable insight when combined with theological interpretation (Fowl, 1998). There are various sub-textures within sacred texture, in 3 John several are quite present: deity, holy person, human commitment, religious community and ethics.

The deity sub-texture refers to God, or a divine being, that exists either in the background or directly involved in the text (Robbins, 1996). Robbins (1996) states that identifying the presence of God in scripture serves as the starting point in sacred texture analysis and interpretation. In John's letter, the deity is revealed through references to "the truth" (3 John 1:3-5 NRSV), the "sake of Christ" (3 John 1:7) and "a manner worthy of God" (3 John 1:6). In all of

these references, John is making clear that there is a standard of living that God desires from believers, and some he is writing to are falling short.

The holy person sub-texture refers to those with a special relationship with God (Robbins, 1996). In the New Testament, Jesus is considered the ultimate holy person, but John has a special relationship and connection to Jesus. John also writes concerning messengers he sent, who could be considered lesser holy persons, that some in the church were rejecting. These messengers hold John's message for the church, which is inspired by God. Those rejecting the messengers are rejecting that chain of holy persons that includes John and ultimately Jesus.

The human commitment sub-texture refers to the faithful following and support of individuals who play a role in the revelation of God to humans (Robbins 1996). In 3 John, the apostle acknowledges and praises the human commitment of several groups. First, he praises the church he is writing to for faithfulness and acceptance of his messengers (3 John 1:3-6). Second, he refers to the messengers themselves, who took on the task of spreading the faith for the sake of Christ and were relying only on the support of other believers (3 John 1:7). Third, he challenges the human commitment of Diotrephes, "who likes to put himself first, [...] does not acknowledge our authority," (3 John 1: 9) and spreads "false charges against us" (3 John 1:10). Lastly, he acknowledges the faithfulness of Demetrius, who "has the truth itself" (3 John 1:12).

The religious community sub-texture refers to the formation and development of the community of believers and therefore surpasses human commitment to the individual and includes participation with other believers (Robbins, 1996). John takes great joy in the faithfulness of the community he writes to and their ability to "walk in the truth" (3 John 1:2-4). He is further joyed by their acceptance of his messengers, who themselves represent the larger

community (3 John 1:5). However, Diotrephes rejects these messengers and, from John's perspective, is not respecting the religious community (3 John 1:9).

The ethics sub-texture refers to the responsibility of humans to think and act according to the ways of God despite the circumstance (Robbins, 1996). John presents a simple framework for establishing the ethics in 3 John 1:11: "Beloved, do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God." Many in the church to which John is writing are acting ethically, aligned with God and what is good. However, some have rejected the authority of his messengers, which John expressed as evil and therefore, those people have not seen God.

Discussion

As the early church was growing rapidly, the apostles also sought to make sure it was growing appropriately and growing in the knowledge of God. John did this by sending out messengers he had trained and who carried his knowledge and instruction. These messengers are supported by the goodwill and respect of those in the churches they visit. However, some in the church he writes this text to are rejecting their authority and refusing to let them speak. Diotrephes, the leader of this opposition, is even excommunicating some from the community (3 John 1:10).

This situation is similar to what is experienced by many modern day organizations. In order to develop and sustain a competitive advantage, many organizations must cultivate creativity (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller & Staw, 2005). This creativity yields inventions, which lead to organizational innovation (Oster, 2011). One of the most efficient ways to develop creativity, innovation and new knowledge is by creating a culture, which supports knowledge creation (Von Krogh, Ichijo, & Nonaka, 2000).

However, often just the opposite occurs. Organizational departments can become silos where information is stored, but not shared (Von Krogh, Ichijo, & Nonaka, 2000). Such knowledge is hoarded in an effort to attain the power that comes with possessing that knowledge. This is a modern day version of the dilemma John faces. John seeks to share information among the many churches in Asia Minor by sending out traveling messengers. These individuals share the knowledge John reveals to them and also share the knowledge each church has discovered with John. This is John's strategy for cultivating innovation and stimulating the growth of the church. This strategy is similar to the phenomenon of liquid networks, which are diverse networks of thinkers and organizations where ideas can combine, germinate and spread (Johnson, 2010).

However, Diotrephes is barring John's messengers from the church, spreading false charges and even removing members of the church in an effort to put himself at the top of the local church. Diotrephes seeks to make his church the ancient equivalent of organizational silo, a repository for information that he controls. Such knowledge hoarding is one of the most damaging issues to modern business organizations (Von Krogh, Ichijo, & Nonaka, 2000) and is apparently equally damaging to ancient ones.

John's solution is to address the issue head on. He openly confronts Diotrephes in his letter and tells the church that such actions are evil. Indeed, to modern organizations, this *not at my table* approach to knowledge and ideas could be called evil (Von Krogh, Ichijo, & Nonaka, 2000). However, John doesn't just address the evil. In fact, he spends more time cultivating the good. He praises those who have welcomed his messengers, even praising specific people by name. In doing so, he develops a *join us* mentality to encourage the sharing and spreading of information (Von Krogh, Ichijo, & Nonaka, 2000). He establishes a precedent that believers

ought to care for each other, especially those who travel. This type of caring and support within an organization is equally successful in modern organizations (Von Krogh, 1998).

Conclusion

As the early church grew, it became apparent that innovative ways to spread knowledge would need to be developed. Just like a modern day organization, the early church needed to develop a competitive advantage against the establishment of Rome. The apostle John developed such a method when he established a network of churches, each receiving and sharing information through traveling messengers. A sacred texture analysis of 3 John reveals the care with which John cultivated such knowledge transfers, and the steps he took to fight against attempts by individuals to hoard such knowledge. Similarly, leaders of modern organizations must keep silos of knowledge from being built and establish a precedent of caring and inclusion in order to facilitate knowledge creation and innovation.

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