

Growth and Stability in the Midst of Adversity: Lessons from the Early Christian Church

Abstract

Today's organizations are faced with different challenges in different dimensions. These confrontations may be internal or external and may inhibit the growth and stability of the organization for healthy advancement. A current paradigm is the national and global economic and financial crises leading to the closure of many businesses and organizations and leaving many unemployed. Most often, the expectation falls on leadership to guide the organization through such storms to move the organizational mission forward. How can leadership achieve these goals of survival through such local and global economic and financial turbulence? A well structured organization can assist. A strategic organizational structure can provide the needed tenacity to remain intact during a time of turmoil and change. This paper seeks to establish the following: 1) Define organizational structure; 2) Spell out the role of organizational structure during turbulent times; 3) Perform an exegetical analyses on scriptures from the book of Acts of the Apostles (Acts 6:1-7 and Acts 14:21-28) using the Social and Cultural Texture Analysis from Socio-Rhetorical Criticism; 4) Suggest four lessons that can be learned from the experiences of the apostles in the early church days and the structure of the early church.

Introduction

Similar to the early church organization in the first-century, 21st century corporate and non-profit organizations are faced with diverse challenges that present both local and global issues. Despite the internal and external challenges in the early church, the first century Christians were able to overcome existing difficulties through the supreme authority of the Holy Spirit by the removal of major hindrances in the way of the apostles and new believers (Copeland, 1976). But most importantly, it became visible that the first century church to a great extent had a structure by which it operated. According to the Book of Acts; there were apostles, elders, and individual leaders who assisted in the ministering of the Word of the Lord and the nurturing of new believers. This essay carries out an exegetical analysis of Acts 6:1-7 and Acts 14:21-28 with a focus on the Utopian and Interversionist views and principles. The scriptures in Book of the Acts of the Apostles are examined to determine the role of structure and design

in the growth of the early church in the first century and how modern-day churches and organizations can utilize these principles of structure and design.

Organizational Structure Defined

The essence of defining structure in organizational terms is relevant for the purpose of clarity and advancement. Organizational structure can be defined as the distribution of work roles and managerial mechanisms to manage and incorporate work activities including those which cross prescribed organizational limitations (Faulkner, 2002). An organization's structure makes it possible for the description of prescribed reporting relationships; including the number of levels in the chain of command and the span of control of managers and supervisors. Thus, it is a means of identifying and aligning together of individuals into departments and departments into the total organization. Ultimately, an effective organizational structure enhances effective communication, synchronization, and amalgamation of efforts across organizational divisions (Daft, 2004).

The Role of Structure and Growth of the Early Christian Church

The early church leaders adopted a decentralized structure in leading and growing the church. The apostles were able to fulfill the great commission (Matthew, 2008) beginning from Jerusalem by making disciples among Jews and Jewish proselytes (Copeland, 1976) throughout the Roman Empire, and throughout parts of Asia and Africa despite the opposition they encountered. Apart from the spiritual components that facilitated the growth of the early church in the first century, structure was engaged in the recreation of the process. The first twelve disciples were designated as the top leaders of the early church and were appointed as elders and group leaders as well as recruiting followers towards the advance of the church (New King James Version, 1985). This is evident in the issue that arose among some of the early believers in the book of Acts chapter 15 concerning the circumcision of new believers prior to joining the body of believers. According to the chapter, Paul and Barnabas were sent by the church to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem to receive counsel on this issue. Structural principles enabled the apostles to assign specific roles and responsibilities to specific individuals and groups as the Holy Spirit led them (Faulkner, 2002), similar to the situation with the widow as shown in Acts 6:1-7 (Spencer, 1994). Such assignments of roles and responsibilities in the early days of the church facilitated development, growth, and stability in the face of hostility.

Exegetical Analysis of Scriptures

Social and Cultural Texture Analysis of Acts 6:1-7 and Acts 14:21-28 with a focus on the Utopian and Introversionist Views and Principles

Acts 6:1-7

1. Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenist, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.
2. Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.

Evidence of Structural Principle: verse 3

3. "Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business;
4. "But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."
5. And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, Prochurus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch,
6. Whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.
7. Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

Acts 14: 21- 28

21. And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch,
22. Strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God".

Evidence of Structural principles in the scriptures: Acts 14:23

23. So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord whom they had believed.

24. And after they had passed through Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia.

25. Now when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia.

26. From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for work which they had completed.

27. Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.

28. So they stayed there a long time with the disciples.

Application of Social and Cultural Texture Analysis of the Selected Text

Taking into consideration social and cultural analysis of the above scripture, the Utopian and Introversionist views were adopted. The Utopian view of the social and cultural texture analysis is defined as a process of restructuring the entire world according to divinely given values. Thus, the Utopian view aims to ascertain a new communal order that will eradicate evil (Robbins, 1996). On the other hand, the Introversionist's observation of the world is that the world is beyond redemption due to all the evil observed. The Introversionist view suggests that a 'new social movement' should be considered for the establishment of a separate group of people to assist in effecting the needed change (Robbins, 1996).

In light of the above social and cultural texture analyses, one can assert that the leadership of the early church introduced a new form of leadership and organizational structure compared to what existed in the Hellenist society. This style of leadership and structural principles were meant to separate the early church organization, its leaders and followers from what existed in the 'then secular Hellenistic society' of the time (Mappes, 2003). Unlike the centralized power and authority they experienced under the Roman Empire, the leaders of the early church sought to decentralize, delegate their power and authority, and

empower their colleagues and new converts in order to accomplish the assignment Jesus left for them (Matthew 28:18-20).

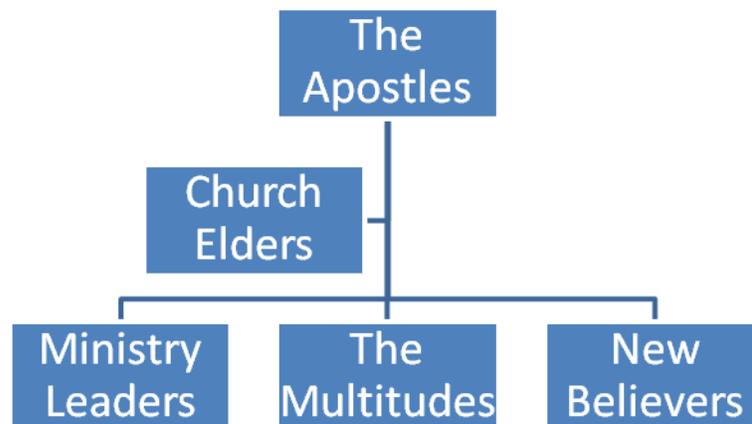


Figure 1. Structure of the First-Century Church

Source: Author's research

The role of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit cannot be underestimated in the growth of the early church. However, the above structure is a proposed structure adopted by the leaders of the first century church believed to have facilitated its growth and stability. This structure encompassed the twelve disciples/apostles of Jesus Christ, church elders (who were appointed by the apostles including Paul and Barnabas to oversee the churches that were planted abroad), ministry leaders (e.g. teachers, prophets and those who attended to table services), and the multitude and new believers who joined the church every day as the word of the Lord grew (Back, 2002).

Lessons for 21st Century Leaders and Organizations

Four lessons can be adopted by today's organizational leaders from the above analysis. These structural principles were adopted by the early church leaders, which led to immense growth of the Church. These lessons can be adopted by today's leaders.

A Decentralized Organizational Structure

Leaders of the early church relied mostly on a decentralized system (Galbraith, 2002) of administration and leadership. In verse three of Acts chapter six, the apostles encouraged the multitude to search for seven men with a "good

reputation and full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom” to be appointed to assume responsibility over what was expected of them.” A high degree of leadership, authority, and power delegation is exhibited here by the apostles. First, they delegated the task of finding the required and qualified people for the job of leading the multitudes with specific instructions. After Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas were chosen by the multitudes, the apostles took the next step to empower them through the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands. Today’s leaders must learn to delegate essential tasks to their followers and seek to empower them with the purpose of accomplishing the mission, vision and set goals of the organization.

Distribution of Power and Departmentalization

Leaders of the early church exhibited the structural principles of distribution of power and departmentalization with their followers and colleagues. This is portrayed in verse four of Acts chapter six. The apostles specifically stated their interest in focusing on “giving themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word” and finding other qualified followers who would pay attention to the attendance of tables and serving of the widows. The apostle’s department was identified as that of “prayer and the ministration of the Word” while the others were assigned to the department of “attending to the need of the widows.” Today’s church/organizational leaders will see ample progress if they can draw a clear distinction between their role as leaders and that of followers as the apostles did. Distribution of power and departmentalization can lead to specialization and effective execution of tasks and responsibilities.

Appointment of Elders in Every Church

Another structural principle used by the elders of the early church was that of appointing leaders over the churches that were planted. In verse twenty one of chapter fourteen of the book of Acts, we are told the apostles Paul and Barnabas appointed elders over all the churches they planted. In principle, this had to be done because they could not be present to oversee all the churches (Back, 2002), and thus needed to place qualified individuals in positions of leadership. Today’s church/organizational leaders must develop an eye for individual followers with the potential to lead specific units of the church/organization locally or internationally and place them in such strategic positions.

A culture of Precedence

Leaders of the early church placed a premium value on their priorities. They were quick to make it known to the multitudes regarding the fact that they wanted to focus on prayer and the ministration of the word of God (Acts 6:4). This allowed them to focus on their calling and the fulfillment of God's will and calling on their lives. Today's leaders can learn from this. There are so many other things that call for the attention of leaders today, but those who set their priorities right will realize the fulfillment of the mission and vision of the church/organization.

Conclusion

A well structured organization facilitates growth and stability (Ferguson, 1973). In the case of the apostles and leaders of the early church, a well structured organization brought about immense growth through the help of the Holy Spirit and the wisdom of God. A strategically structured organization enables leaders to assign roles and responsibilities to colleagues and followers as well as to have control over local and international organizational activities. Structure can be key to effectiveness and efficiency of every organization as it creates clear lines of communication for both leaders and followers. Organizational leaders must seek to design organizations that allow flexibility, delegation of authority, and empowerment of colleagues and followers.

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