

# Acts 6:1-10: An Example of Conflict and Organizational Change in the Early Church

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## Introduction

Luke's account of the choosing of the seven in Acts 6:1-10 is a story of both the emergence and resolution of conflict in the early church.<sup>1</sup> An understanding of the conflict, especially in regard to its development, will reveal that Luke's account also serves as a positive model for implementing adaptive organizational change.

Organizational change is adaptive<sup>2</sup> or transformative<sup>3</sup> when it threatens core beliefs and values, or the hierarchy in which they are arranged. Responses to the threat can jeopardize the survival of organizational leadership, as well as the viability of the organization itself.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, transformative leadership pays attention to the role that values play in the implementation of adaptive organizational change, understanding that the "most common mistake made by change agents is introducing a new program or ministry, without introducing a new accompanying value."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert C. Tannehill, *The Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation* (Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress Press, 1994), 80-81.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston, Mass: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 13.

<sup>3</sup> I first heard the word "transformative" used as a synonym for "adaptive" at a pastor's luncheon during a talk by Kevin Ford, Chief Visionary Officer of TAG Consulting, which is located in Fairfax, VA.

<sup>4</sup> (Heifetz and Linsky, 9-48)

<sup>5</sup> Munday, Paul, *Unlocking Church Doors: Ten Keys to Positive Change* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 47.

Even if the particular value at stake during the adaptive change process is not entirely new,<sup>6</sup> connecting new courses of action to values high in an organization's hierarchy of values makes sense.

Values are like stepping stones across a vigorous and swift stream. If we expect people to cross new currents, we first need to provide a foundation. Otherwise, the journey is too intimidating and the possibilities of being knocked off balance too likely.<sup>7</sup>

This intentional connection between values and a future course of action in response to organizational adaptive challenges propelled the early church forward as they responded to the particular crisis of neglected Greek-speaking widows.

### Background

The conflict Luke identifies in our text escalated as “the Greek-speaking Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food” (6:1). The distinguishing characteristic between the two groups seems to have centered on the former's lack of linguistic ability in Aramaic, and possibly Hebrew, though both groups would have been capable Greek-speakers.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the early church's center of gravity under the leadership of the apostles was from the community of Hebraic Jews.

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<sup>6</sup> The concept of a “new” value in the case of a Christian group does not refer to one that is new to biblical Christianity per se. All the values of Christianity exist and are well-established in the Word of God. Nevertheless, a value can be “new” to a particular group within the Church, if for that group it has gone missing, been neglected, or otherwise assigned to a lower rank in a hierarchy of Christian values. In either case, it then can be “newly” discovered, re-discovered, or promoted to a more fitting place in the hierarchy.

<sup>7</sup> (Munday 1997, 47)

<sup>8</sup> Brian Capper, “The Palestinian Cultural Context of Earliest Christian Community of Goods,” in *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, vol. 4 by Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting* by Bruce W. Winter, ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1995), 353.

Some ground their understanding of “the daily distribution of food” in the historical Rabbinic system of collecting alms and food through the Temple for widows, orphans, and the poor. Such a grounding casts Peter and the Twelve in poor light, since it leads to the possibility of establishing an unfavorable moral equivalence between their response to the needs of the widows and the entrenched neglect of widows, orphans, and the poor at the hands of Temple elites during Jesus’ earthly ministry.<sup>9</sup> Peter and the apostles led to solve the dilemma, while seemingly distancing themselves from any responsibility to participate more personally in the remedy. Therefore:

For all its efforts to meet the needs of the congregation (2:42-47; 4:32-37), when it comes to caring for poor Hellenist widows, the church finds itself in an unholy alliance with unjust judges (Luke 18:1-8), hypocritical scribes (20:45-47), and an exploitative temple system (21:1-16).<sup>10</sup>

According to this view, Peter undergoes a personal transformation by the time of his encounter with Tabitha, taking more personal initiative to raise her back to life for the sake of the widows who had become dependent on her good deeds.<sup>11</sup>

An alternative and more likely explication of the background to the conflict of Acts 6 fits better with relevant historical data and with other details in Luke’s narrative overall. It also casts Peter and the other apostles in much better light and turns their approach to conflict and organizational adaptive change into a positive model.

Luke’s description of the distribution of food as “daily” in 6:1 indicates that the neglected-widow conflict does not center around the historical Rabbinic system of caring

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<sup>9</sup> F. Scott Spencer, “Neglected Widows in Acts 6:1-7,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (1994): 729-730.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 726.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 731-732.

for orphans, widows, and the poor.<sup>12</sup> The Rabbinic system did not feature a *daily* distribution of bread, but rather a *weekly* one.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the presence of so many poor and needy widows in Jesus' day, coupled with other evidence, suggests the Rabbinic system did not emerge until a later time.<sup>14</sup> The system of a "daily distribution" is more likely linked historically to certain practices of the Essenes, a closely-knit Jewish community coexisting with the early church, but also predating it by nearly 200 years.<sup>15</sup> The Essenes provided evening fellowship meals for their members each day, while, in some cases, also practicing a "formal community of goods" to care for other daily needs.<sup>16</sup>

The early church seems to have organized itself initially in a manner similar to the Essene community;<sup>17</sup> however, two developments in particular seem to have catapulted the church toward adaptive organizational change. The first was explosive growth. The early church began with just 120 Hebraic Jews huddled into an upper room somewhere in Jerusalem. Then, on Pentecost, the number of believers exploded into the thousands (Acts 2:41), with more and more being added to their number each day (Acts 2:47). A short while later, the number of men alone grew to 5000. Finally, after an unspecified period of time, Luke introduces the conflict in our text with: "In those days when the number of disciples was increasing..." (Acts 6:1). What began as a fairly small and homogeneous group

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<sup>12</sup> (Capper 1995, 323-356).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 350-351.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 352.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 327-335.

<sup>17</sup> Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37; and 5:1-16.

multiplied into a large and more diverse group with both Hebraic and Greek-speaking Jews.<sup>18</sup>

As the church grew, the apostles would have found it increasingly difficult to continue administrating the life of the community as before; besides, regardless of how many administrators there were, the Greek-speaking Jews might not have felt comfortable joining in with Essene-like community life with the Hebraic believers for linguistic reasons. Furthermore, the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 only exasperated the problem. Ananias and Sapphira had made application into the inner circle of believers who were formally sharing property,<sup>19</sup> and they died as a result. To be sure, it was their own fault; still, their deaths made a decidedly negative impact on the prospect list of others who might have followed in their train. People continued to believe on the Lord as a result of the ministry of the apostles (Acts 5:14), but “no one else dared join them” (Acts 5:13). The explosion in sheer numbers of people coming to Christ combined with the fear of formally participating in the existing system made it inevitable that more and more would slip through the safety net of support, held in place to that point by the apostles among the Hebraic believers.

#### The Apostles’ Innovation Based on Values

The apostles responded to the conflict that stemmed from the new realities they faced not by defending or propping up the status quo, but by innovating on a foundation of

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<sup>18</sup> For an analysis of the size of Jerusalem’s population in the first century, see Wolfgang Reinhardt, “The Population Size of Jerusalem and the Numerical Growth of the Jerusalem Church,” in *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, vol. 4 by Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting* by Bruce W. Winter, ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1995), 237-266.

<sup>19</sup> (Capper 1995, 337-341)

certain core values. Their proposal can be called an innovation since its implementation required neither their control nor a formal community of goods, both of which had been integral parts of their system to that point. Nevertheless, on the basis of certain core values, the apostles' willingly decided to share power and to embrace a legitimate alternative to their former established way of doing ministry.

In their response to the disciples gathered before them, the apostles identify one of the core values driving their innovation: "the ministry of the word of God" (6:2). The main strategy they go on to propose, the selection of the Seven, manifests the additional overall priority of effectively ministering to the widows. As the details of the proposal unfold in 6:3-4, several other motivating core values become clear; for example: (1) humility; (2) the nature of leadership as service rather than lordship; (3) the imperatives of wisdom and the Spirit's control; (4) the involvement and development of others in ministry and in ministry decisions; and (5) the removal of stereotypes in Christ.<sup>20</sup> The apostles assured the implementation of this last value by directing their Greek-speaking brethren to "choose seven men *from among you*" (6:3, italics mine). According to the list of names in 6:5, the people cooperated and chose all Hellenists to lead the project. The apostles demonstrated the sincerity of their own commitment to the values and priorities they articulated by

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<sup>20</sup> Luke's Gospel shows that each of the values mentioned were explicitly taught and modeled to the apostles by Jesus himself during his earthly ministry: humility in Luke 18:14; the nature of leadership as service in Luke 9:46-48 (see also Mark 10:35-45); the imperatives of wisdom and the Spirit's control in Luke 21:15; the involvement and development of others in ministry in Luke 10:1-17; the removal of stereotypes in Christ in Luke 10:25-37. Luke Gospel also reveals Jesus' emphasis on the ministry of the word (Luke 8:1-18) and on having compassion for widows and others who were poor also (Luke 4:24; et Al.). Interestingly enough, the Apostle Paul noted to the Galatians that remembering the poor was a top priority of the other apostles (Galatians 2:10).

following through with a formal installation of the new leaders: they “prayed and laid their hands on them” (6:6).

According to 6:7-10, not only was the crisis resolved, God blessed the innovation in obvious ways. The “word of God spread” (6:7), finding especially fertile soil among “priests”, indicating perhaps that the believers also used the occasion of their new approach to shore up their “system” for obeying the rest of Deuteronomy 14:29.

Meanwhile, Stephen, one of the Seven, who no doubt had begun to faithfully discharge his duties toward the widows, also began to duplicate the apostles’ ministry of the word with “great wonders and miraculous signs” (6:8). Stephen did this not of out of personal ambition, but rather because he was under the control of “God’s grace and power” (6:8). The mention of Stephen’s “wisdom and the Spirit by whom he spoke”, based on Jesus’ words in Luke 21:15, signals that Jesus himself placed his stamp of approval on this new ministry innovation.<sup>21</sup>

### Conclusion

No church or Christian organization is exempt from adaptive challenges brought on by growth (or the lack thereof), cultural diversity, and conflict. Such challenges often call for innovations, rather than defensive continuations of the status quo. In Acts 6:1-10, the Twelve model a willingness to innovate for the sake of resolving conflict and restoring ministry effectiveness. They also model the imperative of grounding innovation in values that are clearly articulated or just as clearly reflected in specific strategies, while being thoroughly biblical. Innovative and transformation leaders who wish to follow the example

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<sup>21</sup> Douglas Buckwalter, *The Character and Purpose of Luke's Christology* (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 198.

of the apostles will exercise similar concern, carefully building a case for biblical values when necessary, but always even more carefully connecting those values to the ministry innovations they advocate.

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