

Learning from First Century Dynamism and Early Church Strategy: A model for today

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Christianity had an inauspicious beginning, but rapidly achieved a dominant role in world history. By the time of Constantine, scarcely three centuries from its origination, it had spread over most of the Roman Empire and achieved a dominant social and political position in the western world. In spite of determined opposition and state-sponsored efforts to eliminate this offshoot of Judaism, the first-century Church survived and spread from its upper room start in Jerusalem, to the Goths in Britain, and to the plains of Persia (Shelley, 1982). How did that happen and what are the implications for such innovation in the Church today?

Strategic innovation in the Early Church centered on its stratagem of targeting geographic (urban) and social (institutional hubs) centers of gravity. Whether by Providence or by the guidance of exceptionally astute leadership, the Church in the first and second centuries fashioned a strategy which leveraged the dominant social, political, and economic driving force of its day—the growth of Greco-Roman urban culture.

Like the men of Issachar, they “knew the times and what to do” (1 Chronicles 12:32). They leveraged for the Church’s purposes factors that served as catalysts for the growth of cities in the eastern Roman provinces. They also directly targeted the institutions that served as hubs around which the growth of cities across the Roman Empire flourished. Success in this approach meant that as the cities grew and prospered, the Early Church was destined to likewise prosper, in spite of other social and political factors which attempted to stamp out this new, so-called Jewish cult.

Social Change in the First Century

The institutional driving force for change in the first century was the Greco-Roman city. The Early Church tied its strategy to this driving force and effectively targeted the dominant institutions of the Greco-Roman cities (See Figure 1). Roman cities, particularly in the eastern Roman Empire, became the incubator for the Early Church in its mission to spread the Good News and its revolutionary set of values, even if at times their welcome was not entirely friendly.

In this period, cities along the perimeter of the Mediterranean represented hope to many generations for escape from the social, economic, or political braces of their ancestors. They were, “...at the leading edge of the great political and social changes that occurred during the six and a half centuries from Alexander to Constantine ... where the new civilization could be experienced, where novelties would first be encountered ... where, if anywhere, change could be met and even sought out. It was where the empire was, and where the future began.” (Meeks, 1983, pp. 14-16).

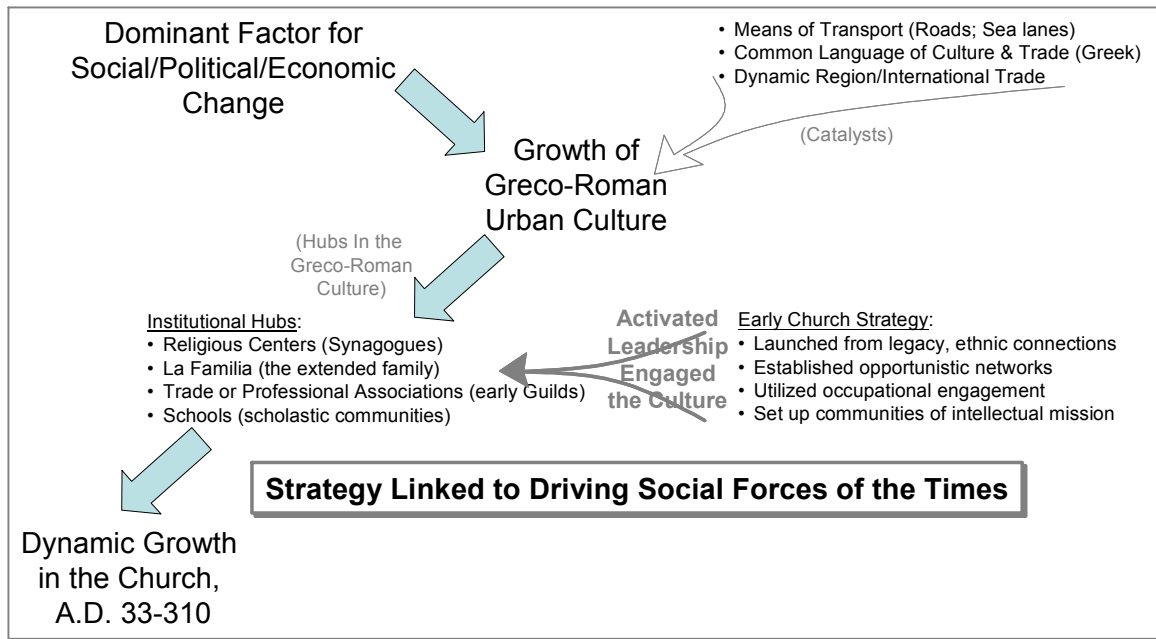


Figure 1. Model of First Century Social Dynamism

The ascendant role these cities played was accelerated by three factors: the ready means of transportation; a common language that was predominant in culture and trade; and main routes of East-West trade which ran through them.

- **Transportation**
Rome maintained an impressive program of road construction and repair, and the Apostle Paul may have traveled nearly ten thousand miles in the book of Acts alone. "People of the Roman Empire traveled more extensively and more easily than had anyone before them—or would again until the nineteenth century." (Friedlander, 1968, p. 17).
- **Language**
A common language served equally well in trade and other venues of the culture. Greek was the *lingua franca* within the confines of all the larger cities in the Eastern Mediterranean. It is no coincidence that all the New Testament documents from the first two centuries are in Greek (Meeks, 1983, p. 15).
- **Trade**
Ready means of travel and a common language fueled a high level of economic activity in these Mediterranean provinces. Tombstones from this period preserve testimony to a commuter society, including one merchant who traveled to Rome from Phrygia in central Turkey seventy-two times (Meeks, 1983, p. 17). The two most important East-West highways for trade ran through the eastern Roman provinces and made this level of regional commerce possible.

Identifying driving factors for change as a key element in organizational strategy is an approach that is now formally recognized in the field of organizational theory (Slaughter, 1999; Schwartz, 1991). In the first century, the strategy of the Church to ride the wave of these developments was an act of creative genius.

Early Christian Church and Urban Institutions

Aided by these factors, the Greco-Roman urban culture grew and specific institutions became social hubs within the cities that proliferated across the Roman Empire. These social hubs included religious centers, the extended family, trade or professional associations, and various types of schools. The record of the Early Church is replete with examples in which it effectively used these emerging urban institutions for its own purpose of propagating the Good News.

- **Religious Centers**

The Diaspora had resulted in a significant Jewish population in nearly every town of any size in the lands along the eastern Mediterranean. The fact that there are three times as many references (18) to the ‘synagogue’ in Acts, than in all the Gospel accounts combined (6), reflects the central role it played in the early stages of the Church.

- **Extended Family**

At this time, Romans defined *la familia* more broadly than just shared blood lines. As far back as Cicero, the Romans understood ‘family’ to be based on dependence and subordination (Meeks, 1983). This included slaves, former slaves who may have turned into clients, hired laborers, as well as other clients or tenants (Judge, 1960, pp. 30-39). Early accounts contain many references to the role individual homes played in the strategy of the Church at this time (Acts 16:15; 17:5-9; 18:2-4; 18:7). The family “was the basic unit in the establishment of Christianity in the city, as it was, indeed, the basic unit of the city itself.” (Meeks, 1983, p. 29).

- **Trade or Professional Associations**

Clubs and associations of many sorts were also important and the typical structure of these Roman cities provided a natural locus for various trades and those of similar interests (Leon, 1960; MacMullen 1974). This was very useful to Christian missionaries for making contacts when traveling to distant locations. In Philippi, they were readily able to locate a ‘place of prayer’ (Acts 16:13); and in Corinth, Paul was able to make contact with others in the tent-making profession (Acts 18:2).

Activities of the early Church to outside observers may have had all the appearances of an association. “The *ekklesia* that gathered with the tentmaker Prisca, Aquila, and Paul in Corinth or Ephesus might well have seemed to the neighbors a club or of the same sort.” (Meeks, 1983, p.32).

- **Schools**

Greek philosophical schools are reported far back into antiquity. Various ancient accounts exist of the famed Pythagorean school (Hadas & Smith, 1965; Smith, 1971, pp. 236-249). Early Christian groups were compared to these ancient schools from accounts as early as Justin Martyr, in the second century (Meeks, 1983, p. 81).

Paul taught for extended periods in some type of organized school in Antioch, where they were first called “Christians” (Acts 11:26) and in Ephesus (Acts 19:9). The precise format may have had more resemblance to some type of debating society than a formal educational institution (Judge, 1960). The point is that philosophical schools of learning were a recognized institution and were utilized on more than one occasion to notable effect by the Early Church.

The leaders of the Church in the first century aggressively engaged their culture, and in the process targeted these social hubs of the typical Roman city culture. Their strategy effectively targeted Jewish synagogues; included opportunistic networks established via the common ethnic and cultural environments; seized opportunities for social discourse in occupational settings; and established communities of intellectual mission along the pattern familiar to their cultural environment. This strategy may be credited, at least in part, with a dynamic growth that rapidly projected its influence around the western world, and eventually around the globe.

If the Church today were to adopt a similar strategic approach, what would it look like and what would its distinguishing characteristics be? What level of creativity and innovation would be required in its implementation?

Social Change and Implication for Church Strategy in the 21st Century

The scope of this analysis does not permit going further than attempting to infer the right questions the Church should be asking today. Rather than provide definitive answers to such strategic questions here, this article merely hints at such lessons from the first century. There are several elements from the strategy of the Early Church that might prove useful to the Christian Church at the beginning of the 21st century, if it were to update the approach taken by the Early Church.

1. What is the dominant factor driving social, political, and economic change at this junction in history?

What is playing the role in society today that cities and urban culture provided in the first century? Friedman has suggested that the proliferation of rapid, global, inexpensive communications has created a “flat world” in which previous geographic and cultural boundaries must be understood in an entirely new context (Friedman, 2005). This is not the only potential answer for what will drive macro-change in this century. One may read almost daily of rapid advances in such diverse fields as nano-technology and bio-chemistry based on DNA engineering (Bainbridge & Roco, 2006).

Apart from secular and business attempts to discern which of these may emerge over this century as *the* driving factor, the Church needs to be aware of and alert to these developments. These are not merely new advances with new challenges to certain aspects of Church doctrine and practice. They are also fundamentally reshaping the landscape for the Church and its mission. In spite of the fact that many in the Church may have disdained Futurology (the disciplined study of future trends and directions), in such an era of rapid change it may be as important to the Church as Missiology (the study of missions practice and technique) has traditionally been.

2. What are the ‘social hubs’ around which such a driver or drivers are operating and how might the Church engage them to further its mission?

What are performing the central leverage points within today’s culture that correspond to the central roles played by religious institutions, the extended family, trade or professional associations, and scholastic communities of the first century? An exhaustive answer is not possible within the context of this article, but it may be reasonably observed that global business, media and entertainment and education may be current-day analogies to the factors on which the Early Church piggy-backed its growth. If this surmise is even close to reflecting the dynamic reality of the 21st century, it poses some urgent questions for the Church.

- First, what is the current posture of the Church with regard to business in general, much less the growth of globalization and business processes that intertwine around the globe, 24/7? Has the Church even begun to consider the implications for its mission in anything other than a ‘defensive crouch’?
- On the second factor, has the Church so completely ceded the arts, media and entertainment to secular influence as to make them beyond the keen of the Church? Or might it yet reassert itself in art forms in which it played such a central role during major eras in human history? Or are there those who would not merely pick up the tools of media and entertainment, but advance them to another level in effectiveness as well as artistry in the service of the King and the kingdom of God?
- Third, are there visionaries who would pursue excellence in education, not merely out of some sense of siege mentality and retreat from worldly influences, but rather out of inquisitiveness and thirst for knowledge of the infinite Creator? Is there a passion for education, in its broadest sense, resident within the Church today? How might the Church be creative in education to re-establish itself again in an arena in which it once dominated the field?

These surmises regarding the role of business, media and entertainment, and education may bear only minimal resemblance to a more exhaustive and studied response. The questions they generate, however, at least illustrate the type of analysis and thoughtful consideration that such factors demand of the Church.

3. What are the implications for leadership in the Church of such a strategic approach?

What kind of leaders does the Church need at this junction in its history? The Early Church was blessed with leaders who boldly engaged at the highest levels of the synagogue, felt comfortable in discourse among the extended family, may have actually taught doctrine while busy with trade and business transactions, and led scholastic communities in the pursuit of eternal wisdom.

What type of leaders might we need in the 21st century to establish the Church on the frontiers of business, media and entertainment, and education—in the pursuit of explosive growth as was done in the first century? God is sovereign, now, just as He was then. However, if one takes even a peremptory look at the training being provided to the vast majority of those entering the ministry today, it raises some challenging issues with regard to the role such individuals may need to play in the Church of Jesus Christ in the 21st century.

Innovative and creative leadership will be required to move outside the Church’s recent comfort zone. As previously noted, in some aspects this will represent a ‘back to the future’ approach. It will require technical preparation as well as broad managerial capabilities to provide leadership of organizations composed of individuals with highly advanced technical, artistic, and intellectual abilities. The fact that each of these professions is highly competitive in the secular market will place additional demands for commitment as well as creativity upon such ecclesiastic entities.

While it is possible that the Holy Spirit may call leaders with technical preparation in these professions, for the Church this in itself may constitute a significant challenge. Church partnerships with lay leaders in these areas of outreach and mission would represent a miracle of grace and divine insight rivaling that of the original Apostolic era. Once again, the Church needs leaders “who understand the times and know what to do”. Miracles, like those in the Book of Acts, may be

required again, if the Church is to experience the level of dynamic growth experienced by the first century Church. Even so, may that be our prayer.

About the Author

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