INNOVATION IN THE EARLY CHURCH: STRENGTHENING THE THESIS

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ABSTRACT

In his response to Oster's article, Cafferky offers commendations for the points that Oster presents when considering the events described in Acts 10-11. Cafferky also explores what he believes is an implicit assumption in Oster's article regarding applying organizational theory from the for-profit sector straight across into the nonprofit sector. Oster's thesis might be strengthened if the literature from the world of organization theory applicable to nonprofits is considered. Finally, Cafferky attempts to strengthen Oster's thesis by exploring the complexity of the identity and purpose that he believes the first century Jewish Christians carried with them as they evaluated the prospects of including Gentiles into the Gospel Commission as well as laying aside Jewish dietary restrictions.

Oster begins his article with the questions:

> *"How does a new and substantively different idea find its way into an organization? What roles do individuals, groups, and the organization play in vetting the new concept, comparing it to established corporate values, and then deciding whether to accept, modify, or reject the challenging idea?"*

The purpose of Oster's paper was to explore the actors and methodologies used by first-century Christians as they considered new concepts: extending the Gospel to the Gentiles and the relaxing of Jewish dietary restrictions.

In this response to Oster's paper I commend Oster for points he has raised in his article regarding leadership. In an attempt to strengthen his thesis I explore an assumption that appears to be at the root of Oster's approach to Acts 10-11 that is relevant to the discussion of organizational innovation and change. Finally, I review the complex religious identity and mission that I believe early Jewish Christians brought to the question of reaching out to the Gentiles and laying aside the covenantal dietary restrictions.

COMMENDATIONS

One of the points that Oster makes is the importance of a leader first experiencing personal change before attempting to change an organization. Peter's experience in coming to embrace a Gentile-focused mission must have required him to evaluate the very foundation of his relationship with God and with his fellow believers. Such a change, as Oster implies, first requires a change at the deep level of the heart. In Peter's case (and Peter may not have realized this at first), change ultimately meant that the Jewish Christians needed to make a full break from Jewish belief and practice since the change they were advocating involved changing core values as these related to the teachings of Jesus.

Oster also highlights the iterative nature of change in an organization where change is taking place simultaneously within individuals, within small groups, and within the organization as a whole. This is a valuable perspective with which to view the events recorded in Acts 10-11.

Organizational leaders must manage the tension between imbedded institutionalized learning from the past and learning from the present. A related and valuable contribution that Oster's

article offers is on the importance of conversation during this bi-directional, iterative process of change. Indeed, just as leadership is shared in the community, leading change also is a communal process that engages individuals (whether or not they are official leaders) and the community as a whole. Peter's conversation with fellow believers was an important part of this communal change process. And so was Peter's conversation with God. (Acts 10:14-15) Dialog with the larger community is important, but so is the internal conversation of the heart with God.

EXPLORING A KEY ASSUMPTION

Oster states that "Christians share the same learning process inputs and outputs as those in secular society…" His statement suggests an assumption that management technologies appropriate in the for-profit sector can be brought across into the nonprofit arena. This assumption seems to be present throughout the article but comes up to the surface when referring to Skarzynski he says that one of the organizational leader's goals is to find the things that hinder new ways of thinking. The implication is that the leader must remove these barriers for progress to be achieved. Another place this assumption appears to come up to the surface is in his statement that "organizations that do not innovate in response to changes in the outside environment will cease to exist."

Given the differences that scholars have identified between for-profit organizations and nonprofit organizations, I believe that Oster's thesis could have been strengthened if he had incorporated into his presentation evidence from the organization theory literature.

If we assume, as Oster seems to do, that the perspective of the literature on innovation and change from the world of for-profit organizations is valid for helping us to understand the story of Acts 10-11, then Child's (2005) discussion on planned versus emergent change, and John Kotter's (1996) review of why change efforts fail might be relevant. If we broaden our horizon to include the analysis of change in organizations representing more than one economic sector, Kurt Lewin's (1941) work and Herbert Kaufman's (1971) survey of the factors that contribute to resistance to change would have been helpful. The literature on change in nonprofit organizations such as that offered by Salipante and Golden-Biddle (1995) should lead us to be cautious when we are tempted to accept the assumptions of the for-profit sector straight across into the nonprofit sector (See also Goold, 1997). Salipante and Golden-Biddle present a cogent discussion of why nonprofit organizations need to resist change. Nonprofit organizations change more slowly than their for-profit counterparts. Religious nonprofit organizations have their own peculiarities when it comes to change that Oster alludes to. (Mellado, Nelson, & Appel, 2008) There are several reasons for this.

Mission and values, rather than financial performance are the starting point in nonprofit organizations (Drucker, 1989, 1992; Oster, 1995; Phills, 2005; McLaughlin, 2006). The mission of the nonprofit is noneconomic in nature (Schendel & Hofer, 1979). Compared with for-profits more goal conflicts exist in nonprofit organizations (James, 1983; Stone, Bigelow, & Crittenden, 1999). This may be because the goals are more ambiguous and intangible (Unterman & Davis, 1984; Nutt & Backoff, 1987; Shoichet, 1998) leaving goals open to more than one interpretation. Oster acknowledges that there was not unity of thought regarding Jewish purity rules. If what appears to be the case in contemporary nonprofit organizations was also true in Peter's day, the issue of whether or not to fellowship with Gentiles and laying aside dietary restrictions very likely could have been a debatable issue where individuals on both sides coming from a good-faith posture talk together in order to clarify the mission.

Webb (1974) studied, through factor analysis several characteristics of religious organizations that have an impact on church effectiveness: cohesion (positive working relationships among church members), efficiency (producing results while minimizing expenses), adaptability (readiness to accept and respond to change), support (for the pastor). He concludes that the development programs used in the world of for-profits cannot be applied directly to religious nonprofits. Three other influences may be at work in

nonprofit organizations to discourage abrupt changes. (McLaughlin, 2006) First, inherent in nonprofit organizations is the instinct to preserve core values and mission. Second, nonprofit organizational leaders work to maintain the trust relationship between the organization and its constituents. Third, nonprofit organizational leaders are expected to react to perceived social dysfunction. Combined, these influences result in relatively slow organizational change when compared to the speed of change that takes place in the for-profit organization.

Another assumption that Oster appears to make is that the Christian church was an organization by the time the events of Acts 10-11 occurred. What might have helped Oster's presentation is a review of the evidence in support of such an assumption. The evidence might be debatable. While Jesus had organized his twelve disciples for mission trips and they had followed him for three years participating in his ministry, the viability of the group as an organization had not been fully tested. We might say that the group of Jewish Christians was in the process of being formed into an organization by the time the events of Acts 10-11 occurred. But was it truly an organization where we would expect to see the organizational dynamics of innovation, resistance and change present? At the time of its emergence Christian church may more appropriately be characterized as a breakaway sect rather than a full-fledged organization independent from Judaism. Just as in the Protestant Reformation the process of breaking away took a few years, this also may have been the case for the first century Christians.

Organizational change almost always has two points of view: the point of view of those desiring change and the point of view of those who believe that change is undesirable. The resisters to change are individuals who were still supporters of the relevant religious organization that existed at the time: Jewish ideology and practice. As Oster says in the religious organization leaders are careful to test new ideas to see whether such ideas are consistent with or undermine the traditional spiritual, mission-oriented values and beliefs. Such tests are administered on behalf of the constituents of the organization whose trust is

at stake. Thus, instead of seeing the early believers as flies in the ointment, innovation antibodies, preventing the good that change would bring, we might celebrate that they were carefully testing the new ideas, fulfilling responsible actions rather than being barriers to progress. Why it was important to test the particular ideas about dietary restrictions and contact with Gentiles stems from the identity and purpose that first century Jews held. To this we turn next.

IDENTITY & PURPOSE

One of the issues that needs further exploration in light of Oster's article is the question of the early Jewish Christian identity and purpose. We can call them "ingrained Jewish prejudices" that needed to go away as Oster does, but from a positive point of view, the identity of the first century Christian Jew may have been more complex than simply chalking it up to prejudice that had a hard time dying. To understand the complexity we need to start by visiting the covenant connection with identity and purpose.

God's covenants to Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Moses must be seen in an international context. (Genesis 3, 9, 12; Exodus 19-20. Scobie,1992; Muilenburg, 1965; Bright, 1959; Kaiser, 2000). These were global covenants. For example, Abraham's descendents were to become a great nation and through such a nation all families of the whole world would receive a blessing. (Exodus 19:4-6; Psalm 96:3, 10; Isaiah 19:23-25; Jeremiah 3:1-4:4; Hosea 4:6; 1 Peter 2:9-10; Revelation 1:5-6) Their character, health, intellect, economic prosperity, skill in craftsmanship and agriculture would contribute to their international reputation. They were to live a life of faithful service to God that resulted in such rich blessings that other nations would seek the same for themselves. Through all of this Israel was destined to be a witness, a light to the Gentiles. (Exodus 15:26; Leviticus 19:2; Deuteronomy 4:6-7; 7:6-15; 8:17-18; 28:1-8; 1 Kings 8:41-43; Isaiah 2:2-4; 42:6-7; 43:10, 21; 44:8; 49:6; 61:9-10; 66:19; Jeremiah 33:9; Micah 4:1-5; Zechariah 8:21-23; Malachi 3:8-12. See on this Kaiser, 2000)

We might conclude from the Bible that

members of the faith community developed their identity and purpose within this international context. It continued to be built through Israel's call out of Egypt. (Exodus 3) One of the punishments for not following the Law given by Moses included displacement from the comforts of their own culture and forced to live in cultures that were foreign to them. (Leviticus 26:34-38: 2 Chronicles 36:20-21; Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10)

the spiritual descendants of Abraham but not his genealogical descendants. Fulfilling that Commission was not an instantaneous event. It was an unfolding process. The events in Acts 10-11 were one step in this process.

The purpose of the ceremonial laws such as the requirement for circumcision and the dietary restrictions find their foundation in covenant theology. The dietary restrictions were not

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Yet, even the captivity as an opportunity for witnessing became a part of this international self-consciousness. (Daniel 1-4)

God's original plan for Israel was conditioned upon Israel remaining faithful to the covenant. We find evidence in scripture that because of unbelief and lowering their own moral standards their international influence was only partially successful. However, the idea that members of the faith community were to influence the world was not totally lost. The hope of Israel was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. As a result there was still a work for the spiritual descendents of Abraham to do in witnessing to the whole world– a belief that was embraced by the early Christians many of whom were Jewish in the formative months and years of the movement. (Romans 11:20; Luke 19:41-44; Matthew 8:10-12; Luke 1:54-75; Acts 3:17-26; 10:34-43; 13:26-43)

The early Christians sensed that their role in extending God's Kingdom was to be an global experience. (Matthew 5:14-16; 28:19-20; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:6-8) The Great Commission included the command to go into all nations to spread the gospel. In this way God's promise to Abraham that his descendents would bless the whole earth could actually be fulfilled through

intended to be important in themselves. Rather, they were linked to the covenant. Changes to the dietary restrictions would be a threat not just to an arbitrary external symbol but to the core of the Israelite identity under the covenant. It should be no surprise that laying aside something as important as a covenant symbol would have been accepted only after careful analysis and extended community dialog. This seems to be what the early Christians did. The issue of circumcision which came up later posed a similar threat to their understanding of the covenant. Circumcision originated with the Abrahamic covenant and remained as a symbol of covenant commitment. (Genesis 17; 21; 34; Deuteronomy 30:6; Joshua 5). Laying aside this requirement for the new Gentile believers could not have been easy.

Oster emphasizes the importance of the Jewish laws that guided Jews away from fellowship with Gentiles even if they served these same Gentiles in the marketplaces by providing goods and services to them. But, wasn't Peter and the others doing precisely the right thing to initially resist the idea of fellowship with Gentiles and the laying aside of purity laws which pointed to the holy relationship that Israel enjoyed with God? The idea of testing new ideas against orthodoxy

was known in Old Testament times, promoted by Jesus, and became an important part of Christian teaching and practice. (See Jeremiah 14:14; 27:14 -15; 29:8-9; Matthew 7:15-16; 24:4-5, 23-26; Mark 13:5-6; Luke 21:8; Romans 16:18-19; 1 Corinthians 14:29; 2 Corinthians 13:5; 1 Thessalonians 5:21; 1 Timothy 4:1; 2 Timothy 3:13; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 4:4; Revelation 2:2) Instead of considering resistance as an innovation antibody as if it is toxic, we might just as well consider the antibody for the good that it does in preserving the organism from an insult to its core mission.

The concept that all people of the earth would be blessed through God's followers was not a new idea. It had been first promised to Abraham and then reiterated later. Israel was to become a kingdom of priests to the whole world as a leader in spiritual worship to the true God. (Genesis 12:1-3; Exodus 19:4-6; Psalm 96:3, 10; Isaiah 19:23-25; Jeremiah 3:1-4:4; Hosea 4:6; 1 Peter 2:9-10; Revelation 1:5-6). Thus, was the inclusion of the Gentiles in the Gospel Commission truly a new concept? Change is sometimes more complicated than it first appears to be if there are conflicting ideas both of which are valid. If we look below the surface of the story in Acts 10 we find a complex cluster of beliefs and expectations that may have, at times, appeared to be somewhat ambiguous if not contradictory to some of Jesus' disciples.

Israel was to live a life of faithful service to God that resulted in such rich blessings that other nations would seek the same for themselves. While the plan evidently did not include aggressive evangelism on the part of the Israelis, it is difficult to see how God's plan could be accomplished without a significant amount of cross-cultural contact between Abraham's descendents and the rest of the world. Some of that contact would be as a result of ambassadors from other nations visiting Israel and then taking the good news back to their own countrymen. Other contacts would come from Israelites traveling and trading with other nations. Through all of this Israel was destined to be a witness, a light to the Gentiles. (Exodus 15:26; Leviticus 19:2; Deuteronomy 4:6-7; 7:6-15; 8:17-18; 28:1-8; 1 Kings 8:41-43; Isaiah 2:2-4; 42:6-7; 43:10, 21; 44:8; 49:6; 61:9-10; 66:19; Jeremiah 33:9; Micah 4:1-5; Zechariah 8:21-23; Malachi 3:8-12. Walter Kaiser (2000, p. 56-58) makes the point that Isaiah's preaching about the Servant of the Lord applied both to an individual (the Messiah) and to the nation of Israel as a whole. (See the passages that apply the concept to the whole nation: Isaiah 41:8-10; 42:6; 43:8-13; 43:14-44:5; 44:6-8, 21-23; 44:24-45:13; 48:1-17; 51:4.).

Like the prophet Ezekiel (Ezekiel 3:5-6) Jesus claimed that he had come to gather the lost sheep of Israel. Jesus' birth is described as a fulfillment of Micah's (5:2-4) prophecy that out of Bethlehem of Judah would come the Messiah who would govern Israel like a shepherd (Matthew 2:5-6). Matthew 9:35-36 describes Jesus as going about showing compassion for the people because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." (RSV) One day a Canaanite woman came to Jesus asking him to cast a demon out of her daughter. Jesus remarked that he had been sent to "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Matthew 15:21-28 RSV) In his teaching he employed this imagery portraying God as the one who seeks the lost sheep imagery from the Old Testament that referred to Israel (Matthew 18:10-14; Luke 15:3-7).

Although he could have traveled widely most of his time in ministry was spent in territory populated by Jews. When Jesus predicts his second coming he describes this event in terms of gathering sheep and goats from among all nations (Matthew 25:31-46). When Mark describes Jesus feeding the 5,000 men plus women and children he says that Jesus had compassion on the people "because they were like sheep without a shepherd…" (Mark 6:30-44) To Mark this miracle of feeding was not just a compassionate deed done by Jesus for hungry people but also a symbolic action that confirmed his role as the Shepherd Messiah gathering to himself the lost sheep of Israel. When the Apostle John comments on the prediction of Caiaphas that one person should die to save the nation from Roman oppression, he states that one of the purposes of Jesus death was to gather "into one the children of God who are scattered abroad." (John 11:45-52) In his most direct teaching on this metaphor of sheep Jesus explicitly states that he is the noble shepherd who has come to save his sheep (John 10:1-18).

Though it is during this discourse that he says that there are other sheep that also need to be gathered (v. 16), the reference to sheep carried with it the weight of the Old Testament metaphors of sheep and shepherd that from the time of Jacob through until Jesus referred to the people of Israel and their relationship with God.

When he sent them out on a missionary trip, Jesus charged his disciples with the same mission: go preach to the lost sheep of Israel. (Matthew 10:5-6). He sent the seventy disciples to the Jewish cities he would later visit (Luke 10:1). However, in the Great Commission he instructed his disciples to preach the gospel first in Jerusalem, then to Judea, Samaria, and to the rest of the world (Acts 1:8; cf. Matthew 24:14). After Jesus' resurrection Peter received specific instructions from Jesus to care for his sheep a use of the metaphor encouraging Peter to share in the gathering ministry that Jesus had begun (John 21:15-19). One can argue that until Peter's experience in Acts 10-11 Jesus' disciples were carrying out his instruction to them. (See Acts 8).

CONCLUSION

Oster presents an interesting thesis exploring Acts 10-11 in light of the concepts of organizational innovation and change. In this he highlights some important dynamics that leaders face. I believe that his thesis could have been made stronger had he presented his assumptions up front and then reviewed the literature on organization theory as it applies to the nonprofit organization. Further, although Oster mentions that the Messiah was the fulfillment of Old Testament covenantal promises, the complexity of the identity and purpose of the first century Jewish Christians enriches his discussion of innovation and change in the context of the early church and the struggle that the early Jewish Christians experienced as the world-wide nature of the Gospel Commission settled into their collective consciousness.

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