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CARLO SERRANO
**IT SEEMED GOOD TO THE HOLY
SPIRIT AND TO US: A BIBLICAL
EXAMPLE OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL
DECISION-MAKING PROCESS**

Christian leadership involves merging the fundamentals of organizational behavioral theory with the truths of the Scriptures. This allows Christian leaders to maximize the decision-making process in a manner that positively impacts their organization while bringing glory to God. Although there are a variety of definitions and theories regarding the nature of leadership, one thing seems clear: leadership involves decision-making. But the process of organizational and group decision-making involves more than just those occupying leadership positions. Culture, group dynamics, power, and followership all play a critical role in the decision-making process (Ivancevich & Konopaske, 2010). A good way for Christian leaders to better understand the complexities of organizational decision-making is to start with the Scriptures.

A great example of organizational decision-making is found in Acts 15:1-35. The Jerusalem Council narrative demonstrates how the leaders of the early church systematically handled a problem that could have done damage to the organization's ability to effectively expand. This narrative confirms what contemporary organizational behavioral and leadership theory has long asserted: leadership does not happen in a vacuum (Day, Gronn, & Salas, 2006). The problem addressed in Acts 15:1-35 is a strong example of decision-making that takes place at the intersection of crisis, opportunity, and routine.

Acts 15 represents a turning point in the life of the early church (Horton, 2001). At this point (49 A.D.), the Christian church had begun the process of transitioning from a sect of Judaism into a global community of Christ-followers, which included both Gentiles and Jews (Horton, 2001). However, as with any group, a problem arose which threatened the unity and future of the

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church as an organization. Acts 15:1-5 explains the problem:

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the Law of Moses.” (Acts 15:1-5, ESV)

Since the Gospels and the early Acts accounts demonstrate a consistent opposition to Christianity from those who held to the Law of Moses, one could argue that this problem was nothing more than routine trouble for the early church (Matthew 12:1-8, Luke 11:53, Acts 4:1-22). However, the salvific nature of this problem leads one to believe that this problem was more of a crisis than routine. Simply put, “Judaizers” and Christian Pharisees were arguing that full salvation and subsequent membership into the Christian community called for strict adherence to Mosaic laws, such as circumcision and certain dietary restrictions. According to Horton (2001), perhaps the Acts 15 problem was an extension of Paul’s conflict with Peter regarding justification by faith and Peter’s behavior toward Gentile believers (Galatians 2:1-14). DeSilva (2004) suggests that the primary reason behind Luke making no mention of Peter and Paul’s earlier division on this issue was because Luke wanted to present a picture of unity regarding the apostles’ position regarding Gentile believers. Thus, the Acts 15 problem represented a crisis of urgency, impact, and growth.

The problem was urgent due to its connection to salvation. The problem also had great impact because it affected the apostolic ministry of Paul and Barnabas, as well as Gentile believers outside of the Jerusalem context. Finally, if left unresolved, this problem would directly impact the church’s ability to expand beyond Jerusalem and Judea (Acts 1:8; DeSilva, 2004; Horton, 2001). In fact, the believing Pharisees demonstrated behavioral, cognitive, and emotional resistance to any spiritual practice that would change their perspective on godliness (Horton, 2001; Piderit, 2000). However, the employment of a thoughtful, participative, and in some ways, intuitive decision-making process allowed the apostles and elders to transform this crisis into an opportunity for organizational growth and maturity.

The Process

Acts 15:6-21 outlines the process by which the early church addressed their problem:

The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, “Brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, ‘After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.’ Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.” (Acts 15:6-21, ESV)

There are several points to consider when exploring the apostolic decision-making process of Acts 15. As mentioned in the previous section, the apostles and elders identified the problem. Before one can decide, they must first establish that a problem exists (Ivancevich & Konopaske, 2010). In this case, the problem was the “burden” of circumcision, which was placed on Gentile believers by believing Pharisees (Acts 15:1, 5). Next, the apostles and elders engaged in a form of group decision-making. Instead of Peter or James standing up and making an official decree, the Council “gathered together to consider this matter” via debate and discussion (Acts 15:6-7). Since this decision was more of a non-programmed decision, it makes sense that it was made by a group (Ivancevich & Konopaske, 2010). This allowed for the

collective knowledge, experiences, and perspectives of the group to come to bear on the problem, rather than allowing the personal power of one individual to influence the entire decision-making process (Ivancevich & Konopaske, 2010; Orta, 2015). Although group decision-making often involves brainstorming or outside influence, it seems that the apostles and elders chose a form of open discussion in order to reach a consensus rather than seeking the view of Christians outside of the leadership (Horton, 2001; Ivancevich & Konopaske, 2010). It is worth noting that although Peter appeared to have vacillated on his position regarding salvation and the Gentiles, he was the first apostle to go on record regarding the freedom from the law that existed for Gentile believers (Acts 11:17-18, 15:7-11; DeSilva, 2004).

Values often play an important role in decision-making. Values are the filter through which a person passes their choices. The apostles and elders processed their problem by relying on a clear set of Christo-centric biblical values. Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and James all referred to either Old Testament prophecy or the ideals of Jesus as they stated their case before the Council. In this way, personal power became subservient to the positional power that the early church had ascribed to the Sacred Text (Orta, 2015). One could argue that even though the church leaders engaged in a process of discussion, there was virtually no way that their decision would undermine the authority of the Sacred Text and the actions of Jesus.

The Solution

Although the apostles and church elders engaged in a process that resembled the various forms of decision-making, the solution to the problem seemed to flow from the collective “gut” feeling of the apostles. Acts 15:22-31 outlines the solution to the problem:

Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, with the following letter: “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no

greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.” So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. (Acts 15:22-31, ESV)

The church leaders chose to send a letter of encouragement and instruction to clarify the *official* position of the church regarding the Gentile believers. It is important to note the cooperative nature of the letter sent to the Gentiles. Although the request for sexual purity seemed like an appropriate measure to ensure that the Gentile believers were separating themselves from their old way of life and worship, many wonder why the apostles and elders included dietary restrictions in their letter (DeSilva, 2004). Horton (2001) argues that the dietary restrictions were given to promote community and table fellowship among Jew and Gentile believers. This also echoes DeSilva’s (2004) observations regarding the importance of unity in the early church.

Luke mentioned that that “it seemed good” to the apostles to send a letter of instruction to the Gentile believers (Acts 15:22). In the letter, the apostles and elders remarked, “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. . .” (Acts 15:28). This implies that a sense of intuition played the deciding factor in the apostles’ choice of a solution. This also confirms Ivancevich and Konopaske’s (2010) argument for balance between systematic and intuitive decision-making processes. Even though the apostles debated and discussed, their solution came from what felt like the best course of action for the church. Verses 31-35 of Acts 15 make it clear that a type of follow-up took place once the letter was delivered:

And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also. (Acts 15:31-35, ESV)

It seems that Judas, Silas, Paul, and Barnabas implemented the decision and then evaluated if the apostles’ desired result was achieved (Ivancevich & Konopaske, 2010). The letter to the Gentile believers transformed a crisis into an opportunity to codify the rightful place of all who would believe on Jesus for salvation.

Conclusion

Acts 15:1-35 provides Christian leaders with a biblical example of ethical and strategic decision-making. The story described in this text resonates with some current leadership theories dealing with decision-making. The type of ethical and strategic decision-making demonstrated in this article flows from the fact that the apostles and church elders did not set themselves up as *above* the Gentile believers or the believing Pharisees (Horton, 2001). The unity displayed by the Jerusalem Council not only addressed a serious problem for the early church; it also set a timeless example for how the church should handle any future problems. Although it is difficult, if not impossible, for leaders to find solutions that will please an entire organization, Acts 15:1-35 demonstrates that with the right balance of Spirit-led, systematic, and intuitive decision-making, Christian leaders can help their organizations while glorifying God in the process.

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