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# ANDREW L. CAVINS INNOVATION PRINCIPLES FROM EARLY CHRISTIANITY FOR TODAY: SACRED TEXTURE IN JAMES

*Note: The views represented in this article are the author's own and do not reflect the views or opinions of the U.S. government.*

Despite initially being small and relatively isolated, the first-century Christian church grew exponentially over the subsequent centuries. Geographically, it spread over much of the world. This could not have occurred without some degree of creativity and innovation. This article seeks to examine principles of creativity and innovation in the early church by applying Robbins's (2012) sacred texture analysis to the letter of James. It then applies these principles to organizational leadership today, shedding light on fostering creativity and innovation.

## Definition of Sacred Texture

Vernon K. Robbins, an American New Testament scholar and historian of early Christianity, has identified five socio-rhetorical textures of text; these include: (1) inner texture, (2) intertexture, (3) social and cultural texture, (4) ideological texture, and (5) sacred texture. Robbins likens scriptural text to textures within a larger tapestry. The full effect of the tapestry is best appreciated when explored from different perspectives, each being unique and adding something to the whole composition.

Diving further,

Sacred texture is a texture that is intertwined with each of the other four textures (inner, inter, social/cultural, and ideological), and refers to the manner which a text communicates insights into the relationship between the human and the divine. This texture includes aspects concerning deity, holy persons, spirit beings, divine history, human redemp-

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tion, human commitment, religious community (e.g. ecclesiology), and ethics. (Robbins, n.d., n.p.)

The James 1:2–12 pericope contains a rich content of all Robbins’s socio-rhetorical textures. To narrow the scope to principles that inspired creativity and innovation in the spread of early Christianity, this article limits its analysis to the sacred texture aspects of (1) deity, (2) human redemption, and (3) human commitment and ethics.

### *Deity*

Two key deity-related textures emerge in verses five and twelve. In James 1:5, James writes, “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him” (NASB). We see here that God is described as a “generous” giver. When a believer requests wisdom, God not only gives it generously, but He gives it “without reproach” (Jas. 1:5; Perkins, 1986).

Moo (2015) illustrates that the Greek word for “generously” in this verse is *haplos*, which literally translates as “single,” “simply,” or “without reservation” (pp. 85–86). Thus, the meaning of “reproach” here is equivalent to “without finding fault” (Moo, 2015, p. 86). James is saying that it is in God’s nature to give wisdom to Christians without reservation. Moreover, God gives without limiting the gift. The only caveat is in the spirit in which the believer makes his request; God cannot stand for a request to be made in doubt (Jas. 1:6–7). James’s texture of divine nature here echoes the principles of Matthew 7:7–11.

Verse 12 again illustrates God’s giving spirit: “Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.” This time, James links God’s desire to rewarding those believers who persevere through trials. Endurance through trials, as other sacred textures will show, becomes a central theme to this pericope.

### *Human Redemption*

Since James’s most likely audiences were early Christian Jews (deSilva, 2004; Moo, 2015), they already had a working understanding of the role Jesus Christ played in human redemption. The redemption texture in the James 1:2–12 pericope reveals a process model for obtaining spiritual perfection. Spiritual maturation comes from trials that test believers’ faith, which produces endurance and, after an indefinite repetition of this sequence, perfection (Garland, 1986; Gideon, 1986). This results in one of the paradoxes God maintains. Where conventional wisdom holds suffering to be bad and avoided at all costs, James contends that suffering is to be expected and welcomed as a

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mechanism for ultimately perfecting believers in preparation for the eschaton (Jas. 1:2–4; Hartin, 1996). Adversity, therefore, becomes the catalyst by which believers may achieve moral progress. Since verses two and twelve form an inclusio in their regard of trials as blessings (Isaacs, 2000), they establish the importance of this as a theme for the pericope. Indeed, some argue that James 1:2–12 forms a larger inclusio, encompassing the entirety of the letter with James 5:7–11 on the same grounds (Campbell, 2017). Ultimately, believers' commitment to perfection gained through trials will result in an eschatological reward of undying life (i.e., eternity spent in Heaven with Jesus).

### *Ethics and Human Commitment*

Regarding ethics as rules for thinking and acting, James urged Christians to ask for wisdom without doubting (Jas. 1:6–8). In the equation James presented for achieving perfection through enduring trials, there is a critical link between verses 4b and 5a: wisdom (Moo, 2015). In verse four, James recommends letting this painful process play out in believers' lives so that they may “be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (Jas. 1:4, NASB). The phrase “*But* if any of you lacks wisdom . . .” (Jas. 1:5, NASB) immediately follows. This suggests that wisdom is the component that is often missing, yet is necessary for help during trials (Poirier, 2006).

Wisdom also enabled Christians to follow James's ethic, look to the future, and model their behavior with that future in mind wherein worldly fortunes will reverse (Jas. 1:9–11; Williams, 2002). Ultimately, the ethics of this pericope show that believers will repeatedly face the choice between enduring trials or succumbing to other desires (Kloppenborg, 2010). This requires a supernatural commitment—a stark contrast to the advice Job's wife gave him (Garland, 1986; Job 2:9). James continued to pull from this example in the latter half of the larger inclusio by appealing to the heroism of Job and the prophets, using them as examples of the ideal level of commitment while enduring through trials (Garland, 1986; Hartin, 1996; Jas. 5:10–11).

### *Summary of Sacred Texture Principles*

The overarching principle that emerges from the James 1:2–12 sacred texture regarding innovation is God's creative use of trials as a means of improving and preparing Christians for perfection in the eschaton. While trials and suffering, by nature, are an unpleasant result of sin's corrosive assault on the world, God created a use for them to work an opposite effect. (See also 2 Kings 14:26–27 and Genesis 50:20.) The way in which James shared this truth with the early Christians was innovative and inspiring. This audience already understood the Great Commission; James prepared them with realistic expectations to whole-

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heartedly model the spiritual heroes of the past and commit their lives to the mission. This helps explain the explosion of the early church. The innovation of this message was this: Even if the trials you will face result in death, the reward is eternal life. This established a Christian culture in which believers had nothing to lose and everything to gain.

### **Application to Organizational Leadership**

One of the most challenging concepts for leaders to embrace is the risk—real or perceived—of investing in and focusing on innovation without having a clear, guaranteed picture of the reward. Martin (2009) describes this tension as the age-old battle between reliability and validity. While organizations undoubtedly need to optimally balance reliability and validity, they often fall back on reliability due to its short-term safety and predictable outcomes (Martin, 2009). The James 1:2–12 principles offer examples that challenge this tendency. First, fostering an innovative culture should include collective learning that explores turning innovation “misses” into opportunities. Second, leadership should inspire the organization to innovate despite difficult circumstances by drawing upon innovation “heroes” from history.

#### *Turn “Misses” into Opportunities*

Innovation is risky. The question of failure for innovative organizations is not if but when, as there is no one method for successful innovation (Berkun, 2010). Like God’s innovative transformation of humankind’s failure into a refining process for perfecting the spiritual maturity of Christians, innovative leaders must turn the inevitable innovation “misses” into opportunities. One such way suggested by Michalko (2006) requires one to ask of himself, “What have I done?” instead of, “Why have I failed?” (p. 104). The key to this idea of failure conversion is viewing experiments as learning opportunities (Eckfeldt, 2017; Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Morin, 2016; Oster, 2011). Leaders should focus on fostering a learning community within their organizations (Cahill, 1997). Doing so enables employees to try out creative ideas and share lessons learned when failures occur so others can improve innovation and avoid the same mistakes (Oster, 2011). Learning is critical to innovation, just as wisdom is critical to spiritual completion through trials.

#### *Inspire the Will to Persevere in Innovation*

Leaders should inspire followers to take the risks involved in innovating. Leaders can address failures as trials that are to be expected (Jas. 1:2), and will ultimately work toward employees’ improvement (Jas. 1:3–4)—as long as employees endure them by habitually seeking wisdom through the learning

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process (Jas. 1:5; Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Anderson and Adams (2016) argue that creative leaders must make room for failure to foster an innovative climate in their organizations. If employees fear failure to achieve perfection on every project or task, they will avoid necessary risks and resort to innovation-stifling reliability (Anderson & Adams, 2016; Martin, 2009). Failure can be *valuable* and actually aid innovation (Michalko, 2006; Oster, 2011). Leaders should follow James's example and inspire followers by using relevant examples of innovation "heroes," such as Thomas Edison and his many failures.

## Conclusion

The first pericope in James contains profound principles for leaders seeking to foster creative, innovative organizations today. Suffering and trials were not part of God's original design. Yet, after the human failure of sin cursed the earth and introduced suffering, God graciously developed a way to use failure's aftermath to work for good. Moreover, James illustrated how that process works while inspirationally preparing the early Christians to habitually persevere. Innovation leaders would do well to emulate this. Learning how to turn mistakes into opportunities and inspiring followers to stay determined to innovate are firm steps toward successful innovation in organizations.

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