THE ETHICS OF INCLUSION: A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF ACTS 6:1-7

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This analysis of Acts 6:1-7 uses Robbins' (1996) protocol for social and cultural texture to discover how the ethical orientations of early Christian leaders contributed to their understanding and practice of inclusion. As leaders of all backgrounds are working in increasingly diverse settings, organizations are being challenged to ensure that they reflect the diversity of the communities that they serve and are equitable and inclusive to all stakeholders. Christian organizations and organizations led by Christian leaders are no exception. Drawing on an analysis of Acts 6:1-7, this paper proposes that three practices are critical for Christian leaders to develop and maintain an ethical orientation that supports the development of an inclusive community: examining the use of cultural symbols, framing issues from the perspective of the aggrieved, and viewing reform as an effort to maintain organizational culture.

I.   INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly diverse world, for-profit and nonprofit organizations alike are reckoning with how to ensure that they are truly diverse, equitable, and inclusive of all stakeholders (Grissom, 2018). Cuilla (2014) noted that organizations can so narrowly define their focus on one group of stakeholders, such as shareholders, that they become unaware of the implications of their actions on other stakeholders. Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (2011) reinforced this idea when they suggested that leaders may not be as ethical as they believe themselves to be and may lead in ways that negatively impact others. For Christian leaders working to embrace the Scripture's call to reach every creature through their leadership, such a tendency can pose significant

challenges to their efficacy as a leader. To that end, understanding how to lead equitably and inclusively in ways that resonate with Christian conceptions of community is a critical ethical issue.

Given its explicit reference to cross-cultural conflict and its depiction of the role that the apostles played in responding to that conflict, Acts 6:1-7 serves as a particularly suitable conversation partner for understanding how a Christian leader's ethical orientation can play a role in shaping their response to inclusion. This paper will utilize Robbins' (1996) protocol for socio-rhetorical analysis to identify how ethics shaped the response of early Christian leaders to inclusion and surface key learning that can help modern leaders avoid pitfalls in implementing inclusion in a manner consistent with the Christian faith. It proposes that three actions are critical to having a Christian orientation towards inclusion, including examining the use of cultural symbols, framing issues from the perspective of the aggrieved, and viewing reform as an effort to maintain organizational culture.

II.   AN OVERVIEW OF THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

An essential step in determining the ethical implications within Acts 6:1 - 7 is to develop a broad understanding of the book of which it is a part. The Acts of the Apostles (Acts) is a sequel to the Gospel of Luke, and readers at the time would have seen it as parallel to Luke and a legitimate attempt to narrate past events as they occurred (Da Silva, 2018; Tyson, 1983). Da Silva (2018) proposed that Acts' main functions were to underscore the reliability of the Gospel, support an apologetic agenda, situate the Christian movement within God's unfolding work among his chosen people, and demonstrate a shift away from authority figures in Judaism to a new set of authorities and a new community (Da Silva, 2018).

Acts 6:1-7 describes Greek-speaking Jews (Hellenists) and Aramaic-speaking Jews (Hebrews) contending over the Hellenists' widows' treatment in the daily distribution of food. Scholars debate the extent to which the passage is indicative of a larger ideological rift between the Hebrews and Hellenists and the extent to which the incident described in Acts 6:1-7 is demonstrative of fully formed factions vying for position within the nascent community (Pao, 2011; Spencer, 1994). While the extent of the issue may be under debate, the story's inclusion demonstrates that a significant controversy developed in the community, generated, at least in part, by important cultural and gender-based differences within the group.

III.   SOCIAL AND CULTURAL TEXTURE ANALYSIS

A critical step in drawing meaning from the text is identifying the framework through which the text will be analyzed. Robbins (1996) proposed socio-rhetorical criticism as a method of textual analysis that can systematically draw learning from the biblical text and use it in conversation with the social sciences. He proposed that several different textures are a part of a socio-rhetorical approach to interpretation, including inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, ideological texture, and sacred texture (Robbins, 1996).

This paper uses an analysis of the social and cultural texture of Acts 6:1-7 to discover the ethical expectations within the early Christian community and understand their implications on how early Christians framed and enacted leadership in a scenario in which cultural and gender-based difference was the focus. An analysis of a passage's social and cultural texture seeks to learn more about the presumptions that arise from an author and audience's worldview to drive the reader's understanding of the text (Robbins, 1996). It includes reviewing the specific, common, and final topics that play a role in informing that worldview (Robbins, 1996).

Specific Topics

According to Robbins (1996), the specific topics within a text reflected how any text with substantive religious texture talks about the world. He suggested that each of the topics reveals the kinds of cultures that the earliest Christians developed and that modern leaders can create (Robbins, 1996). Robbins (1996) proposed seven orientations that those cultures can take concerning how to fix the world. Those topics include the conversationist, revolutionist, introversionist, Gnostic-manipulationist, thamautalogical, reformist, and utopian orientations.

An examination of Acts 6:1-7 reveals a reformist orientation. The reformist orientation proposes that the world is corrupt because its social structures are corrupt and argues that to fix the world, you first have to fix the social structures in the world (Robbins, 1996). Henson et al. (2020) suggested that this change happens by using God-given insights to change the present system into one that functions to good ends.

In Acts 1:1-7, when the apostles received complaints from the Hellenists about the neglect of their widows in the daily distribution, they responded by prompting the congregation to select seven persons to oversee the function while the apostles remained focused on preaching. In addition to its identification of a set of ethical, spiritual, and temporal characteristics for the seven leaders proposed by the apostles, Pao (2011) suggested that the writer's decision to include this passage represented an acknowledgment of the need for successors to the apostles. Pao (2011) argued that this change represents a changing of the guard, fueled, in part, by the reluctance of Peter and the other apostles to seize the aspects of Jesus' mission that focused on the marginalized. Whether or not Pao's proposition is accurate, the apostle's inattention to the needs of the Hellenists' widows reflected a gap in their assessment of the community's needs and created a need to reform the system through new leadership.

Common Topics

In addition to specific topics, Robbins (1996) proposed that examining the common topics within a text was also critical for understanding the social and cultural texture. These topics clarify the relationship between things within a pericope and identify the values, codes, and patterns needed to function in society (Robbins, 1996). Robbins (1996) proposed eight common topics: honor/shame, dyadic/individualist, dyadic agreements, challenge-response, agrarian-based systems, peasant-landowners, limited goods, and purity. Acts 6:1-7 demonstrates an honor/shame, challenge-response, and limited goods orientation.

In honor/shame cultures holding honor brought the holder certain rights, but shame brought a sensitivity to what others did concerning one's honor (Henson et al., 2020). Participants in such cultures either sought to accumulate honor aggressively or were more passive and oriented to others. Spencer (1994) argued that while widows were regarded as outcasts throughout the Lucan texts, they were increasingly positioned as claiming or reclaiming their rights. In the Acts 6 passage, the Hellenists were the aggrieved and dishonored party compared to the Hebrews who hold the honor, as typified by their apparent control of the daily distribution (Pao, 2011; Spencer, 1994). Tyson (1983) underscored the critical role that diet played in demarcating insiders and outsiders within society. In noting the complaint by the Hellenists, Luke is not simply telling a story about who did and did not receive enough food. He is framing a positive view of leveraging humility to prompt ethical change.

In line with the honor/shame motif in Acts 6:1-7, the passage also includes the challenge-response topic. Robbins (1996) noted that the challenge-response orientation concerns itself with one's reputation. Henson et al. (2020) proffered that it was acceptable for a person with lesser honor to publicly challenge a person with greater honor to increase their standing. While the text notes that the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews as a group, the text provides a response from the apostles, not the unnamed believers who oversaw the daily distribution. In response to the complaint, the apostles suggest that the disciples identify seven men, and emphasize a set of characteristics that would have distinguished those who possess them as men of honor. Pao (2011) proposed that the seven were not unknown persons but likely leaders among the Hellenists whose honor and place of leadership were being publicly recognized. The fact that their honorable qualities were emphasized may be a critique of the apostles' and larger assembly's inability to acknowledge and bestow honor equitably (Pao, 2011). More broadly, it recognized the attempt of a marginalized group to challenge such inequitable and unethical arrangements where they existed in the community of faith.

A final orientation present within the pericope is a limited goods view of possessions. A limited goods orientation sees possessions as being in short supply (Henson et al., 2020). Greed, then, is not only immoral but has the potential to impact others significantly and negatively (Henson et al., 2020). That noted, the ethical issue being critiqued in this passage goes beyond greed. As previously alluded to, Spencer (1994) indicated that the control of food reflected more than the greed of a person or group. It was a way to demonstrate who was an insider or outsider of a community and the degree of honor they held within the community. Pao (2011) proffered that the unethical nature of the Hebrews' treatment of the Hellenists' widows is further clarified when the incident is viewed within the Lucan table fellowship motif. In this conception, by excluding the Hellenists from a daily allotment of food the Hebrews deprioritized them in the group's communal meal (Pao, 2011). When the events of Acts 6:1-7 are viewed in light of a worldview that sees goods as limited, it illustrates how the use of artifacts, in this case, food, demonstrates even communal symbols can be used as symbols of status to include or exclude various groups within a community.

Final Topics

Robbins (1996) noted that final topics were also a part of a text's social and cultural texture. Final topics identify the group that a person belongs to and how that group's thinking is distinct from other groups (Henson et al., 2020). Robbins (1996) proposed five cultural topics: dominant culture, subculture, counterculture, contraculture, and liminal culture.

The Acts 6:1-7 pericope demonstrates subcultural rhetoric. In subcultural rhetoric, a group mirrors the values and norms of the dominant culture but seeks to enact them better or change them to some extent (Henson et al., 2020). The elements that remain reinforce the status quo within the dominant culture.

In response to the Hellenists' complaint about the treatment of their widows, the apostles propose establishing an additional tier of leadership as a solution to the issue. Acts 6:5 portrays the entire assembly as being pleased with the decision. As such, in this scenario, the Hellenists seek to maintain communal bonds. In so doing, they enact a subcultural orientation that seeks and obtains some degree of change while keeping other elements. The subcultural theme also extends to the apostles' actions. Spencer (1994) argued that the apostles' focusing of the ethical issue at hand on whether it was right that they stop preaching to serve tables betrays a failure of the apostles to value caring for those who are unable to care for themselves with the call to preach. In so doing, Spencer (1994) argues, the apostles only moderately differentiate themselves from the scribes and Pharisees that the Lucan depiction of Jesus so regularly chides. Instead of directly intervening to ensure that all members of the community were cared for, the apostles delegate the task to others, and center the ethical issue on their rights and not those of the widows (Spencer, 1994).

Examining the subcultural rhetoric present within the text highlights the importance for Christian leaders to take pains to ensure that they consider the ethical implications of a situation from the perspective of the aggrieved group. In Acts 6:1-7, the apostles fail to do so. It could be argued that any attempt by the apostles to address the needs of the widows was a countercultural action that distinguished them from the dominant culture. But, insomuch as they remain aloof from direct action to include the outcast, their actions are only moderately better than those of the dominant culture and fail to meet the progressively positive and empowered depiction evolving in the Lucan texts (Spencer, 1994).

IV.   DISCUSSION

Drawing from an analysis of the social and cultural texture of Acts 6:1-7, three lessons concerning how Christian leaders should approach issues of inclusion ethically emerge. Leaders should a) examine the use of cultural symbols and resources to signal who is included and excluded from the community, b) consider ethical issues from the perspective of aggrieved persons, and c) view reform as an effort to maintain organizational culture.

Examine the Use of Cultural Symbols

The Hellenists' complaints centered on equitable access for their widows to the daily distribution. An analysis of the pericope's common topics suggests that access to

the daily distribution was not only neglectful of the widow's physical needs, it was also a means of clarifying their social standing within the community. Schein and Schein (2017) noted that symbols are critical tools for enacting and reflecting the values and assumptions at the core of an organization's culture. Newton and Hoyle (1994) argued that a change in organizational symbols is a critical part of changing an organization's culture. They warn, however, that a change in symbols without a change in substance is unlikely to amount to much of a change at all (Newton & Hoyte, 1994). In response to using such symbols to marginalize a group within the community, the apostles ask the assembled disciples to choose honorable men from among them who could take charge of the distribution. By doing so, they aim to rectify the harm that the neglect of the widows caused and introduce substantive change through leaders empowered with a symbol of their approval - the laying on of hands. With this in mind, Christian leaders should examine how their use of symbols includes and excludes those who are not in the majority and seek to redress unethical uses of symbols by employing equally substantive symbols and corresponding action.

Frame Ethical Issues from the Perspective of the Aggrieved

In response to the Hellenists' complaints about the neglect of their widows in the daily distribution, the apostles propose a meaningful solution but do so in a way that focuses the ethical issue on them rather than the widows who had been neglected. By doing so, they demonstrate an ethical orientation that prioritizes their experience of the situation. Fedler (2006) noted that it is not necessary to make ethics devoid of self-interest but suggested that it may lessen one's ability to act in the best interests of all stakeholders. In framing the issue in the manner that they did, the apostles limit the degree to which they can understand the matter as the Hellentists understand it, which, in turn, had implications for how they decided to redress the issue.

While the apostles' inability to see the issue from the perspective of the marginalized resulted in a solution that was pleasing to the multitude, it was still ethically inferior to the standard Jesus demonstrated and more aligned with the Pharisees and scribes that Jesus so regularly critiqued. Reflecting on instances like this, Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (2011) argued that leaders can develop a bounded awareness that limits their ability to view the ethical dimensions of their decisions. To improve their ability to see the moral dimensions of their decisions, Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (2011) proposed several actions, including debriefing decisions with a trusted friend.

Sibeko and Haddad (1997) expanded Bazerman and Tenbrunsel's (2011) proposal by emphasizing the need to engage marginalized groups directly. They suggested that different understandings arise when marginalized groups are engaged as dialogue partners (Sibeko & Haddad, 1997). West (1994) extended the point when he argued that such conversations are meaningful because they are instrumental in facilitating liberation or continuing oppression. With this in mind, Christian leaders would be well-served to frame ethical issues from the perspective of the marginalized by engaging them as dialogue and solution-making partners.

View Reform as an Effort to Maintain Organizational Culture

The Hellenists' reformist, subcultural, and shame-based orientation demonstrated that they were focused on reforming and not overturning the community. What is notable about that reform effort is that it was characterized by humility, a trait often presented as a countercultural idea in many places throughout the New Testament (Henson et al., 2020). In utilizing this approach to pursuing reform, the Hellenists position themselves against existing expectations within the larger culture. They reject aggressively seeking honor for themselves in consideration of their larger goal: equal treatment in the community of faith. This statement does not suggest that the apostles should have responded to the Hellenistists' claim only because of how it was brought to their attention. Instead, it highlights that even efforts characterized by values that the Scriptures esteem can be countercultural - a point Christian leaders should consider as they evaluate and react to such efforts.

Despite utilizing an approach grounded in humility, the Hellenists' actions were met with a measure of resistance. Schein and Schein (2017) noted that resistance to change is a common reaction to attempts to reform groups. Often that resistance is focused on preserving what is within one's interests. In framing the ethical issue as an assessment of whether it was right that they should preach or serve tables, the apostles passively resisted the Hellenists' request for change and fell short of the standard Luke portrays Jesus demonstrating throughout his writings (Spencer, 1994). Katoumbe (2018) noted that leaders play a critical role in ensuring collective capacity to create change. To this end, Christian leaders should seek to understand the impetus for prompts for reform and resist the tendency to implement responses that passively reject them by not appropriately defining the issue at hand.

V.   CONCLUSION

As Christian leaders seek to learn from the practices of early Christians to develop in diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, this analysis suggests that focusing on one's ethical orientation and deepening skills at assessing situations from the perspective of the marginalized are critical. These conclusions are only a beginning, and more research should examine these assertions. Future analyses should examine how Christian leaders create an ethic that effectively determines when reforms should not seek to maintain but revolutionize organizational culture and how to pragmatically maintain a focus on marginalized groups in a majority group context.

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