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THRIVING IN ADVERSITY: THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGY THAT TRANSFORMED A CITY

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This paper argues that an organization which faces extreme hostility can not only survive but thrive in adversity. Acts 19 highlights Paul's three-year "consultation" with the Ephesian church, the principles of leading them through stages of pioneering a Christian ecosystem to having an established structure designed to transform the broader community. Key to this development was Paul's commitment to align the internal culture by identifying its core competencies, strategic intent, and competitive advantage. His centrifugal missiological strategy provided a plan to expand the core values and virtues of the Church into the Ephesian city and the province of Asia. Facing a syncretic cultural and religious ecosystem that was hostile to these values, Paul's investment resulted in such success that it radically changed the entire economy of Ephesus. The principles studied through this biblical account provide a guide for how organizations can thrive in the midst of adversity.

I. INTRODUCTION

At the end of Paul's second missionary journey, Paul departed Cenchreae with Priscilla and Aquila to scout out a new group of believers in the city of Ephesus, the "governor's seat" of the Roman province of Asia (Acts 18:18f.; Elwell, 1988a; Elwell & Yarbrough, 1998). Meeting with Jews in the local synagogue, Paul encountered significant interest in the gospel and saw an excellent opportunity for missional expansion. However, the pressing need to return to Jerusalem and Antioch after an extended missionary journey into the Greco-Roman empire required his departure,

leaving his colleagues there to grow the church and expressing his wish to return (v.19-21). Less than a year later after a tour of Galatia and Phrygia, Paul returned to Ephesus as part of his third missionary tour. He would invest almost three years, the longest time Paul would spend in one location in this city (Stott, 1990).

II. THE ALIGNING AND EXPANDING OIKONOMIA OF THE EPHESIAN CHURCH

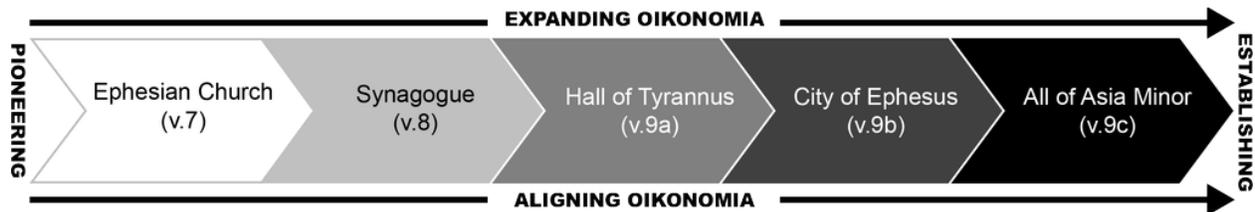


Figure 1: The Aligning and Expanding Oikonomia of the Ephesian Church

Internal Alignment of Structure to Strategy

Ephesians 1:10 provides insight into Paul's strategy in Acts 18-19 to renovate the structure of the Ephesian church. The Greek word *oikonomia* means "household management," but Paul uses the term to refer to a "sovereign plan" or "a great household of which God is the Master and which has a certain system of management wisely ordered by Him" (Kittel & Friedrich, 1974, 5:151f.; Snyder, 1992, 134; Foulkes, 1989, 61). When Paul returned to Ephesus during his third missionary journey, he discovered that the eloquence and burning enthusiasm of Apollos had attracted many to "the Way of the Lord" (Acts 18:24f.). While what Apollos had shared about Jesus was accurate (v.25), he required a deeper understanding of the gospel by Priscilla and Aquila (v.26). Paul needed to bring into alignment the internal culture of the Ephesian church by baptizing them in the name of Jesus and by their being filled with the Holy Spirit (19:2-5; Eph. 1:1-14; Ravasi & Phillips, 2011; Galbraith, 2014; Daft, 2016, 48). These ontological truths were critical to the structural plan of the church and to create a spirit of unity, interdependence and oneness (Eph. 2:11-22; Drane, 1986, 310; Foulkes, 1989, 61; Elwell & Yarbrough, 1998, 266). During his three years in Ephesus, Paul wrote to the Corinthians where Apollos had also visited, to emphasize this lesson to the broader church. Without Christ as the unifying foundation, any local church would crumble (1 Cor. 3:10f.; Eph. 2:21; Barclay, 1965, 139; Fee, 1996, 17-22; Elwell & Yarbrough, 1998, 266f.). The ordering of the Ephesian church (*oikonomia*) was critical, "since the gospel does not come as a disembodied message, but as the message of a community which claims to live by it and which invites others to adhere to it, the community's life must be so ordered that it 'makes sense' to those who are invited" (Newbigin, 1989, 141; Schnabel, 2012). The *strategy* and purpose of Acts 1:8 required the ordering of *structure* witnessed in these passages to accommodate the expansion of the gospel into the broader culture (Chandler, 1962; Stott, 1990; Nadler et al. 1992, 16; Van Gelder & Honsberger, 1996; Galbraith, 2014).

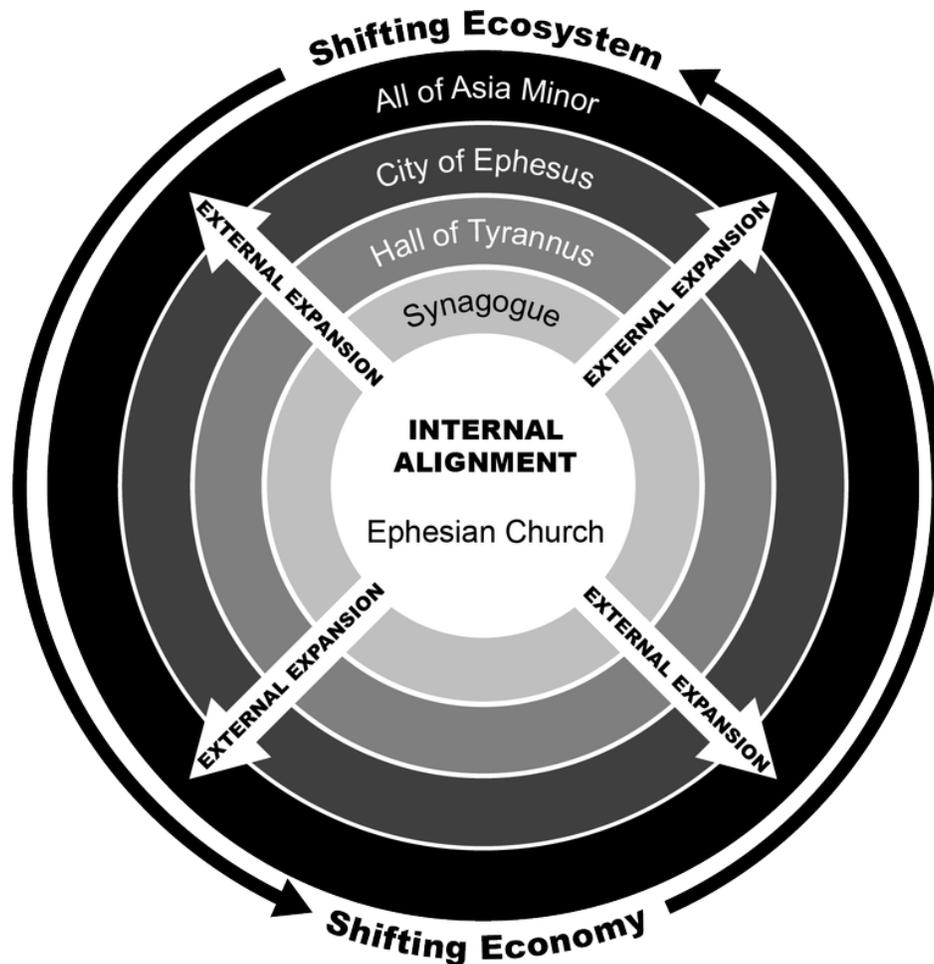


Figure 2: The Role of Alignment and Expansion in Shifting the Ecosystem and Economy of Ephesus

External Expansion: The Broader Oikonomia of Ephesus

Paul's investment in identifying the weaknesses of the Ephesian church and his strengthening of the foundations was key to the expansion of the gospel into the broader culture (Schnabel, 2004, 2008; Plummer & Terry, 2012). Foundation-building would be critical in differentiating the church from other religious groups seeking to dominate the city of Ephesus (Porter, 1980). Ephesus was a port city on the Aegean Sea and was considered to be the "chief" city of Asia Minor for nearly two hundred years when Paul arrived. The city was considered distinguished and prosperous as it hosted the seat of the proconsul (Elwell, 1988a; Arnold, 1989, 13). Two major highways crossed there, creating a highly cosmopolitan and urban culture driven by commerce and communication (Magie, 1950; Koester, 1982, 1995; Oster, 1982; Arnold, 1989, 13; Horsley, 1992; Keener, 2014, 382). The *official goal* of Acts 1:8 shifted the church from the traditional Jewish centripetal strategy of cultural assimilation to a centrifugal strategy of contextual missiological expansion (Bavinck, 1961; Verkuyl, 1978; Terry, 2015).

Therefore, following his time of alignment with the twelve Christians in Ephesus (Acts 19:7), he entered the Jewish synagogue, the seedbed for expansion, for three months, arguing persuasively and boldly about the expanding kingdom of God (v.8). This strategy had worked for Paul previously in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:13-52; Green, 1970, 234-236). However, it proved unsuccessful in Ephesus (Acts 19:9a), resulting in Paul relocating to the public lecture hall of Tyrannus (v.9b). For three years, he applied a strategy of *dialeghomenos* (public debate) and philosophical *pethon* (persuasion), convincing many including some of the most prominent leaders in the city. Those convinced included *Asiarchs* (significant civic leaders), until “all the residents of Asia, both Jews, and Greeks heard the word of the Lord” (v.10; Green, 1970, 246-249; Keener, 2014, 382f.). Paul planned not only to align those who were believers in the values of the gospel but to expand the foundations of the household of God (*oikonomia*) aggressively. This expansion would dramatically shift the broader ecosystem (*oikos*, house; *systema*, system) or worldview of Ephesus (Kuhn, 1962; Geertz, 1972; Mayers, 1974; Miller, 1998, 23; Hiebert, 1994, 35-51). This centrifugal, advancing approach placed the church on a path that would be key to fulfilling Jesus’ command to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth.

III. THE SYNCRETIC RELIGION OF EPHEBUS

Following three years of *allegiance-* and *truth encounters*, the Ephesians would witness some extraordinary or remarkable miracles (*tychousias*) or *power encounters* (Acts 19:11-12; Kraft, 2009, 449). These encounters weakened the syncretic approach of Roman imperial religion in Ephesus (Stott, 1990, 306f. Tippett, 1973, 88-91; Hiebert, 1994, 189-201). Asia Minor had first been Hellenized by the Greeks followed by the Romans. Building on the Greek polytheistic approach of colonization, the Romans applied *Interpretatio Romana*, in which they translated and assimilated religious ideas of smaller nations into the Roman religious culture (Assmann, 2008; Smith, 2010, 246). Many thought that Jesus was merely another syncretic amalgamation of a minor mystery religion (Freke & Gandy, 2001, 2002).

Ephesus was known as a center for occultism, with exorcism being an economically lucrative industry (Josephus, 94; Barclay, 1976; Arnold, 1989, 1992; Brinks, 2009; Keener, 2014, 383). In the entire Roman Empire, the city was considered “the most hospitable to magicians, sorcerers, and charlatans of all sorts” (Metzger, 1944, 28; Arnold, 1989, 14). The city collected *Ephesia Grammata*, one of the largest collections of magical spells and literature, which encouraged individuals to forge charms and amulets for uses as diverse as marriage and battle (Arnold, 1989, 15f.; Strelan, 1996; Brinks, 2009). Paul’s encounter with the seven sons of Sceva and their inability to manipulate the name of Jesus nor the evil spirits they sought to control (Acts 19:13-17), rippled through the larger ecosystem of Ephesus. This encounter caused many to realize that Jesus is not merely one of many options but exercises a power that exposes the deception and moral error of the “principalities and powers” behind magicians (Ephesians 3:16, 20-21; 6:11f.; Arnold, 1989, 51-62; Elwell & Yarbrough, 1998, 310; Fee, 1996). The combination of both power- and truth-encounters led to an *allegiance encounter* in which a large percentage of those engaged in syncretic

occultism collected the *Ephesia Grammata* and burned them publicly, a total equal to fifty-thousand days' wages for the average worker in that day (Keener, 2014, 384).

The *oikonomia* (plan or household) of Christianity was now dramatically transforming the *oikonomia*, (economy) of Ephesus. The heart of the Ephesian economy was the Temple of Artemis or Diana, the famed goddess in the Greek and Roman pantheon, a huntress dressed for battle with bow and arrow and accompanying dogs (Grimal, 1986; Elwell, 1988a, 622; Arnold, 1989, 20-27; Brinks, 2009, 777-779). Her temple was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, paralleling and even eclipsing imperial shrines. The Temple of Artemis was the central bank for Ephesus, making it a critical economic landmark not only in the city but also the Roman Empire. Ephesus was granted permission to even mint coins with both the image of the emperor and Artemis (Strelan, 1999, 57-59; Shauf, 2005, 244; Brinks, 2009, 781f.).

IV. GROWTH, HOSTILITY, AND THE METAPHOR OF CHURCH MILITANT

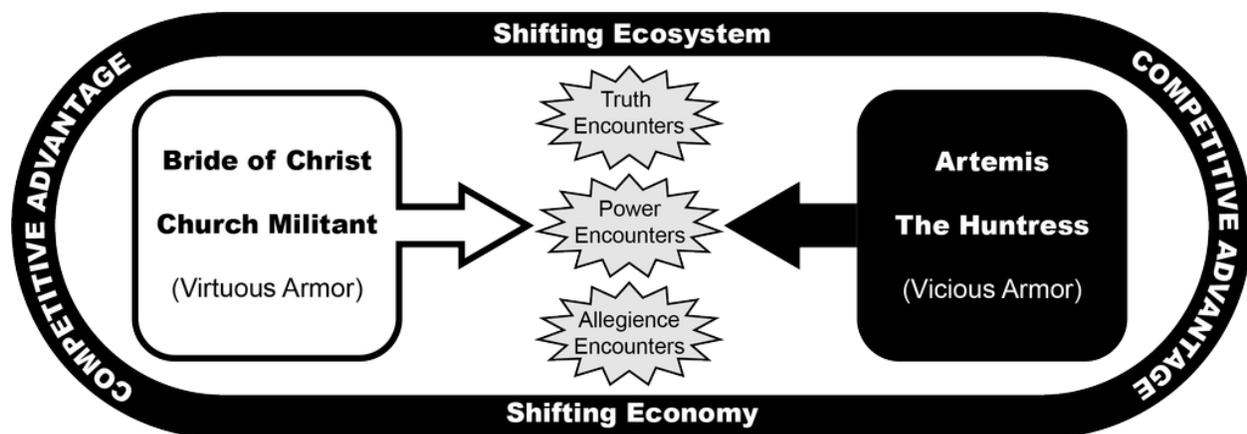


Figure 3: The Battleground of Competing Oikonomias in Ephesus

Those profiting from the dominance of a syncretic Artemisian worldview saw a threat in the Lordship of Jesus Christ, a threat they did not even perceive in imperial worship (see fig. 3; Keener, 2014, 384). During a season of the year which several scholars believe to be the “Artemisium Celebration,” honoring the birth of Artemis (Price, 1999; Strelan, 1999, 77; Brinks, 2009, 782; Keener, 2014, 384), Demetrius, a silversmith who profited from selling silver shrines, stirred up his artisan trade guild against Paul and Christians who were denouncing “gods made with hands” (Acts 19:23-27). The Ephesian battle of worldviews escalated into a riot, an act which threatened Roman retribution, resulting in two Christians, Gaius and Aristarchus being dragged into the theater, most likely to be martyred (vv.28-32). When even a Jewish leader named Alexander could not quiet the crowd, the town clerk had to use his full civic authority to quell the riot (vv.33-41).

Paul had been in the process of leaving Ephesus at the time (Acts 19:21-22), but waited to intervene in the conflict, but his disciples and other leaders implored him not to go to the theater, fearing he would be killed (vv.30f.). While Paul did not return to Ephesus, the church continued to flourish. Paul had laid the groundwork in Ephesus for a vital characteristic of kingdom activity in structuring the Ephesians into a church

militantly engaged in battle (Bosch, 1994, 32; Schnabel, 2012). Nearly a decade after his departure, Paul wrote the Ephesians to further equip the church with virtuous spiritual armory including truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and the word of God (Eph. 6:13-17). He reminded them that while the opposition, illustrated by the riot instigated by Demetrius, might cause them to perceive the battle as being against flesh and blood, the real battle was with the principalities and powers behind the Artemesian stronghold (Barclay, 1965; Arnold, 1989; Foulkes, 1989; Keener, 2014). This adversity required the bride of Christ to be virtuously armored to engage in combat with the viciously armored Huntress, Artemis (fig.3). Paul implored Timothy, who continued to serve in Ephesus, to “share in suffering like a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 2:3; Stott, 1973). While Acts 19 and Ephesians 6 identify a cosmic battle and a clash of worldviews, the Ephesians required constant reminding in the midst of the toil, endurance and aggression to not abandon a spirit of love (*agapaos*) for their neighbor (Rev.2:1-5; Winston, 2002; Patterson, 2003). Referring to the Ephesians’ loss of “the love you had at first” (v.4) beckons back to the church’s first encounters with Paul in Acts 19 (Michaels, 1997). The writer of Revelation reminds the Ephesians, “to everyone who conquers; I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God” (Rev.2:7b.).

V. ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PRINCIPLES FROM THE EPHESIAN CHURCH

Stages of a Business Ecosystem

Moore (1996, 69) has presented a model of stages in a business ecosystem, which parallels the growth of the Ephesian church. The first phase is the *pioneering* phase of a new ecosystem in which capabilities are linked together to “create core offers on which to build.” Paul’s initial work consulting and aligning the church helped to “create a value much superior to the status quo” of other belief ecosystems in Ephesus (p.71). The second phase is the *expansion* of the ecosystem through “a core of synergistic relationships and investment in increasing their scale and scope” (p.72). Paul’s investment of time in the synagogue and lecture hall of Tyrannus helped to expand the Christian ecosystem to establish a “critical mass” (p.74) in Ephesus. Third comes the *authority* in an *established* ecosystem. The gospel was embedded into the “heart of the ecological community” (p.75) and was able to stand up against immense opposition with significant spiritual authority (p.76). Fourth, Paul engaged the Ephesian church in renewal by injecting the “new idea” of the church militant into the existing order of the church (see figs. 1-3).

Process Consultation

The growth of the Ephesian church witnessed in Acts 19, and the supporting passages reveal some profound lessons to be applied to the field of organizational development. Several theorists acknowledge the church as being one of the earliest expressions of organizational theory (Morgan, 2006, 15; Boggs & Field, 2010; Daft, 2016). When Paul encountered the small Ephesian church on his third missionary

journey, he encountered a church misaligned in its internal culture. Paul's role is similar to the role of a consultant (Block, 2011; Conner, 2012). However, unlike expert or patient-doctor models, Paul engages in the process of consultation whereby he enters into the transformation process, learning from the culture and the local situation and providing relevant, fresh solutions drawn from both the wisdom of prior experience and the assets of the local context (Schein, 1988).

Organizational Alignment

Paul's realization of the Ephesians' lack of knowledge regarding the whole gospel led to a time of internal alignment within the church. Similarly, an organization needs to discover or rediscover their purpose and values in order for them to have legitimacy (Daft, 2016, 51). Just as Paul assisted the Ephesian church in discovering their identity, the discovery of an organization's mission reinforces the foundations necessary for it to have an impact (Collins & Porras, 1994; George, 2003). During this time, he assisted them with double-loop learning, realizing their lack of growth and effectiveness directly correlated to deeper beliefs and values that inhibited growth (Argyris, 1977, 1997; Boa, 2005). Once aligned, the church of Ephesus began to flourish.

Strategic Intent & Competitive Advantage

Jesus' mandate in Acts 1:8 provides a clue to the strategic intent of the church. Paul helped the Ephesian church to focus "all the organization's energies and resources... toward a focused, unifying, and compelling overall goal" (Hamel & Prahalad, 2005). Their message was not able to have any impact, until the Holy Spirit empowered the Ephesian church, giving them a distinct competitive advantage over the entire *oikonomia* of Ephesus (Porter, 1980; Kim & Mauborgne, 2005). While not explicit in Acts 19, Revelation 2 gives insight that key to the success of the Ephesian church was the core competency of love (Mascarenhas et al., 1998). If the Ephesians lost this, their militancy would result in "organizational drift" from their founding vision (Felin & Foss, 2009).

Contingency Factors

Daft (2016, 13) defines an organization as "an open system that obtains internal inputs from the environment, adds value through a transformation process, and discharges products and services back to the environment." Through Paul's leadership in a hostile environment, the Ephesian Church was strengthened and equipped with virtuous spiritual armor to fulfill Jesus's commission to take the gospel into the whole world. His interaction with contingency factors such as the synagogue, Tyrannus' lecture hall, the burning of the *Ephesia Grammata*, and the impact of the Temple of Artemis all provided opportunities and threats, resources and even uncertainty. Each of these interactions contributed to transforming the Ephesian church into a mighty and powerful army that was transforming the entire ecosystem of the city of Ephesus. Organizations will encounter significant obstacles that provide opportunities and threats,

and these contingency factors “will influence the appropriate degree of specialization and formalization” (Daft, 2016, 21). Through his ability to innovate, Paul armed the church to navigate through the uncertainty and threats in order to take full advantage of the opportunities to expand the gospel (Miles et al., 1995).

Organizational Virtue

Finally, Paul continued to interact with the Ephesians, advising them to equip themselves with virtues such as truth, peace, God’s word, and salvation. The underlying virtues and values which shape an organization can have a dramatic effect on the resilience of an organization, particularly when confronted with adversity (Winston, 2002; Patterson, 2003; Payne et al., 2011). Companies today can look to the church at Ephesus to see a model that inspires how businesses today to not only survive but thrive in adversity (see fig. 3).

VI. CONCLUSION

In this paper, the study of Paul’s encounters with the Ephesian Church in Acts 19 reveals a story of organizational resilience in the face of extreme adversity. Paul aligned the internal culture and equipped it to engage the external environment, providing a competitive advantage, which speaks to the value of organizational alignment. In the midst of overwhelming obstacles, clarity on organizational identity and competitive advantage combined with a loving tenacity and innovative spirit are some best practices gleaned from the Church of Ephesus that remain relevant for today’s world.

About the Author

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