

**What's New in the New Testament?  
Scriptural Resources for Orthoprax Innovation in the Church**

*March 16, 2010*

Darin H. Land

“There is nothing new under the sun,” so said the teacher of Jerusalem (Ecc 1:9). In some times and places, such a statement could be viewed as positive. It expresses a stability and predictability to life. In other contexts, however, the statement could be seen as a kind of curse: you may think you are doing something new, but in actuality it’s all been tried before.

The polyvalence of such a simple statement regarding newness highlights a problem of Old versus New. This problem can be brought into focus by noting that not everyone is comfortable with change, an observation that seems to pertain across time. There was a saying in the ancient world that the old is better.<sup>1</sup> Yet the modern world often exhibits the same tendency, especially when it comes to religion. As New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce said, “New teaching is disturbing; it forces people to think, to revise their ideas and attitudes. Religious people tend to be conservative, to suspect innovations.”<sup>2</sup> Yet Christians embrace the new when we call a significant portion of our sacred writings, the *New Testament*. Still, some people are uncomfortable with the contrast implied in the word, new, as applied to the Testaments. Thus, the terms Hebrew Bible and Greek Testament are sometimes used in place of the more common terms, Old and New Testaments.

Nevertheless, there is a need for the new! In the world, new solutions are needed because the old ones have left us with old problems, not fixed problems. Modern inventions create opportunities unknown before, but with new opportunities come new problems. The shrinking of the world causes us to encounter people who are different from us, thus confronting

---

<sup>1</sup> The saying is reflected in Luke 5:39. See Walter C. Kaiser et al., *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Accordance electronic ed. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 457.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

us with challenges previously un-encountered. Exploitive systems exacerbate inequitable distribution of wealth, compounding human suffering and leading to violence of many kinds.

Even the church is not immune to these kinds of problems, or at least from the results of these kinds of problems. The church experiences resistance to its message because of entrenched beliefs that Christianity is a Western religion. We find ingrown, self-serving congregations, unwilling to embrace the inevitable change accompanying the welcome of strangers. We see denominational protectionism rather than unity-seeking interaction. Leadership is associated with power, wealth and position rather than with spiritual giftedness. Too often we encounter stagnation and a settling for the status quo. Our leaders prefer to be known as effective managers rather than agents of innovation.

### **Innovative Leadership in the Early Church<sup>3</sup>**

When we look to the early church, we find strong exemplars of innovative leadership. There is problem-solving leadership, honor-sharing leadership, Gospel-spreading leadership, and counter-cultural leadership. In Acts 21, we find an example of leaders solving a self-identified problem, when James and the elders identified a potential problem for Paul. In a certain sense, this problem solving ended badly, since Paul was thrown into prison. But one thing to take away from that very fact is that there is room for mistakes in innovation. We shouldn't be paralyzed by fear that our innovations are going to fail, because God is able to turn our failures to His purposes. Another take-away here is the pro-activity of the leaders. A useful image is the leader as a fellow traveller with the followers, but one who is thinking ahead, anticipating the next move, and preventing problems.

But what happens when unforeseen problems arise? That seems to be what occurred in Acts 6, where the congregation, rather than the leaders, identified the problem. In this well-known episode, the Hellenistic widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food (v. 1). As a result,

---

<sup>3</sup> For further elaboration of many of the points mentioned in this section, see my work, *The Diffusion of Ecclesiastical Authority: Sociological Dimensions of Leadership in the Book of Acts* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2008).

the Hellenistic believers began complaining against the Hebrews—and ultimately, I would argue, against the apostles, who were the ones responsible for the distribution (vv. 1–2). The apostles recognized the grumbling—even though it seems to have been done behind their back (v. 1–2). Rather than respond in kind, the leaders solved the problem by addressing it directly (v. 2). Even more than that, they demonstrated great innovation by raising up additional leaders (v. 5–6). Rather than squelching protest and ruling with an iron fist, they worked with the offended party to arrive at a real solution. Moreover, the new leaders selected to address the problem were themselves from the offended party, as their Greek names indicate. Interestingly, the book of Acts never tells us that they actually “waited tables,” the task for which they had been selected. Instead, we are told of their miracle working and powerful preaching—the very tasks that the apostles were doing!

This brings us to a second feature of innovative leadership in the early church, namely, honor-sharing leadership. In the Hellenistic widow’s episode just mentioned, the apostles seem to have recognized that honor is increased incrementally through hoarding of leadership, but exponentially through shared leadership. They could have resolved the distribution problem themselves, and their honor would have increased among the group. But by sharing leadership, the honor of the whole group greatly increased among whole Jerusalem community (v. 7). Thus, the apostles demonstrated that giving away authority does not diminish the power of the giver, but augments it. Failure to understand this point cripples the church, as leaders place stumbling blocks in the paths of those with the greatest capacity for innovative leadership. When this happens, the potential for church growth is limited to the abilities of the current leadership. Vast though those abilities may be, they are less than the multiplied abilities of multiplied leaders.

A third characteristic of innovative leadership in the early church is Gospel-spreading leadership. The repeated refrain in Acts is, “The Lord added to their number... those who were being saved” (2:47 TNIV; cf. 2:41, 5:14, 11:24). Sometimes the growth was the direct result of narrated leadership actions, as we have just seen in Acts 6. Other times the growth was the result of quiet leadership. After the disciples were scattered due to the persecution that broke out after the martyrdom of Stephen (8:1), the

people took the gospel with them (8:4). This is innovative leadership because they did not become discouraged; rather, they took a bad situation and orchestrated a good result.

This characteristic should become a criterion for effective leadership. Ask yourself: does this proposed innovation lead to people being saved? If the innovation does not have this outcome, then perhaps it should be abandoned. The same could be said, of course, for old forms. If the old leadership patterns and churchly functions are not resulting in people being saved, then it is time to reconsider those activities.

Counter-culture leadership is yet another aspect of leadership visible in the accounts of the early church. Leaders in both the Greco-Roman religions and in Second Temple Judaism—those functionaries who would have comprised the most likely models for leaders in the early church—were not interested in innovative leadership, but in preserving the status quo. Despite these precedents, however, the early church leaders looked for ways to change their present situation. For this reason, it is accurate to describe them as counter-cultural leaders, leading in new ways that differed from the cultural scripts laid down by their counterparts in the established religions of their context.

The early church leaders were also counter-cultural with respect to honor and power. Leaders in the first century were generally concerned for increasing their own personal honor. There was even a special word for this practice, *philotimeomai*, which was used to honor benefactors who paid for the construction of civic facilities such as amphitheaters and temples. Herod the Great was one of the leaders who aggressively pursued *philotimeomai*, building temples, not only to the true God in Jerusalem, but also to Greco-Roman gods in other cities. But the early church leaders demonstrated that increasing honor for subordinates, rather than for self, also increased the honor for all group members. This is clearly seen in Acts 6, when the apostles were instrumental in the selection the Seven. As noted earlier, the result of their action was that “the word of God spread [and] the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly” (v. 7 TNIV). In other words, the whole church was honored in the eyes of the wider community.

Counter-cultural leadership was also displayed in the early church in reference to the availability of leadership. In the wider cultural context,

only certain people could hold religious office. In some instances, only people with the right ancestry could be priests, as was the case in second temple Judaism. In Greek religion, since priesthoods were often attained by purchase, only people with the right wealth could become religious leaders. Elsewhere, only people with the right social standing could aspire to religious leadership. Such seems to have been the case, for example, in the Jerusalem Sanhedrin, comprised, as it was, of the elders. But in the early church, leadership was shared widely, not reserved for the elite alone. This sharing was already noted earlier with respect to the Seven in Acts 6. It is also evident in Acts 12, where Peter empowered the leadership of James upon his departure from Jerusalem. Indeed, an examination of Acts as a whole suggests that the early church leaders, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, actively looked for ways to empower others for leadership. In addition to the instances just mentioned, consider also the empowerment of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13, of Judas and Silas in Acts 15, and of the Ephesian elders in Acts 20.

These instances of innovative leadership inspire and challenge leaders of the church today to do both more and less—more with respect to creatively providing solutions in our increasingly complex and challenging world, and less with respect to placing hurdles and barriers in the way of Spirit-filled prospective leaders. Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary (APNTS) is in a privileged position to assist with the development of these emerging leaders.

### **The Role of the Seminary in Innovation**

Many of our students come to APNTS seeking answers to questions arising out of prior ministry experiences. They have encountered issues that need innovative solutions, and they are looking to the Seminary for help in finding those solutions. The bad news is, the Seminary cannot give you innovative solutions. As soon as you copy the innovation, it ceases to be innovative! The better way is to provide you with resources in order that you create the innovation, not try to copy it. Thus, I see the role of the Seminary as offering three benefits to its students.

Students coming to APNTS benefit from exposure. They are exposed to the solutions used in the past and present, giving them perspective on the pitfalls and successes of those solutions. They are exposed also to deep

thinkers in theology, education, and missions—both in the persons of their professors, as well as in the books they read. Exposure also comes in the form of informal discussions with fellow students from across the region and beyond, whereby students encounter the practices attempted in areas beyond their local or national contexts.

Ideally, students also benefit from the modeling of innovation by the Seminary. If the Seminary expects its graduates to be innovative, it must be innovative itself. Seminaries must grow and adapt, not in a reactive way, but in proactive ways. APNTS's partnerships undergirding the StepUP program are an example of such innovation within a seminary. Our Ph.D. program in Holistic Child Development is another example of how APNTS is leading the way with groundbreaking approaches to the needs of people in the world today. But the modeling of innovation is not a checklist, as if we as a Seminary can check "Finished" on innovation. The Seminary must consistently reevaluate its programs for ways of better encountering our world.

An education at APNTS also benefits students by allowing space for reflection and experimentation. As a Seminary student, you have the opportunity to reflect, not just on the courses requirements, but also on your ministry experiences. Consider what you did right and what you could have done better. You also have space for experimenting with innovations. Try different things, and see what works and what does not. Do not expect the Seminary to give you all the answers, but use your time here to learn how to be innovative.

### **The Role of New Testament Studies in Innovation**

Within the Seminary—and in the church more broadly—disciplined study of the New Testament offers resources for innovative leadership. New Testament Studies points the way to the empowerment of leaders, it offers a prophetic critique of the world and the church, and it provides a framework for constraining and evaluating innovation.

Turning again to Acts, we see that empowerment for leadership comes from spending time with Jesus. In Acts 4:13, the opponents marveled that Peter and John had such courage. They rightly attributed their boldness to time spent with Jesus—but they failed to recognize that the two had an ongoing relationship with Jesus, for Jesus was no longer in the grave! We,

too, must spend time daily with Jesus, in prayer and in the Word, if we are to exhibit empowered leadership. Like the early church leaders, we also must receive empowerment through dependence on the Holy Spirit. The power of the Christian leader is ultimately the result of the activity of the Holy Spirit in his or her life. As expressed in Acts 13:3–4, although the leaders of the Antioch church released Paul and Barnabas for missionary service, it was the Holy Spirit who sent them. The Holy Spirit is the leader of the church. For this reason, human church leaders really have no right to hoard their power; instead they must follow the example of the leaders throughout Acts of sharing their power. As a leader, you may be tempted to suppress the leadership opportunities of those under your charge, thinking that your position may diminish if you are surpassed. But the example of the New Testament, as I have shown, proves that that is simply untrue. On the contrary, empowering new leaders enhances the honor of all group members.

However, despite your efforts to empower new leaders, some followers will resist taking on leadership roles. You yourself might be one of those followers, thinking that you will not be an innovative leader but merely a manager of the existing forms passed on to you. As far as I can see, there is no example of how to deal with such a situation in the book of Acts. Those whom God and the community called into leadership responded. However, perhaps that is already resource enough. It challenges us to continually remind people that others before have changed from followers to leaders. If others have done it, they can, too.

The study of the New Testament provides empowerment for innovative leadership in the church, and it also provides prophetic critique. It does so, first, by consciousness raising. Many people, both inside and outside the church, feel that their world is fixed: the way it is now is the way it has always been and always will be. One role of New Testament Studies is articulating for our contemporaries the vision of life that God intended. This is consciousness-raising in that it exposes people to the way that life could and should be. But New Testament Studies must also expose those areas where the church is not functioning as God intended, thereby charging the church to live up to its high calling in God.

The study of the New Testament provides constraints on the direction and extent of innovative leadership, and it also provides resources for

evaluating innovations. The New Testament is a recognizable extension of the Old Testament; if it were not, there would be no meaning to the words “Old Testament” and “New Testament.” Thus, the very existence of the New Testament cautions us to temper our innovations. Our innovations are not to be radical breaks with the past, points of discontinuity. Rather, our innovations should be recognizably connected to the past, even as they are creative, reforming, and new. To achieve this kind of constrained innovation, there are two more resources from Acts to which I want to refer. First, waiting for God’s timing. In Acts 1:4–8, Jesus commands the disciples to wait until they had received power. Prior to the coming of the Holy Spirit in fulfillment of Jesus’ words as narrated in Acts 2, the disciples’ actions were forgettable, at best. God’s timing is perfect, and when we follow His plan, we operate in His strength. Secondly, operating from the right motives. I need only to mention the cases of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 or of Simon in Acts 8 to make this point abundantly clear. The question for us becomes, are we innovating to draw attention to ourselves, or to bring glory to God?

### **Orthoprax Innovation**

The title of my reflections today refers to orthoprax innovation. There is irony in this juxtaposition, for someone might argue that orthopraxy involves static forms—doing, as one of my mentors used to say regarding a particular kind of religion, “the right things in the right way at the right time by the right people.” But as I have hoped to demonstrate, there is room for innovation within the orthopraxy that I believe the New Testament envisions. Therefore, I charge you: Be innovative!

### **Bibliography**

- Kaiser, Walter C. et al. *Hard Sayings of the Bible*. Accordance Electronic Edition. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996.
- Land, Darin. *The Diffusion of Ecclesiastical Authority: Sociological Dimensions of Leadership in the Book of Acts*. Princeton Theological Monograph Series 90. Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2008