Scaling the Business Enterprise: Lessons from the Early Church

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ABSTRACT: Significant changes, whether at the organizational or social level, are effected only at scale. The early Christian church delivered perhaps the most remarkable scaling phenomenon in history, exhibiting tremendous resilience, resourcefulness, and capacity to leverage adversity. Adherents to the faith manifested the power of a simple vision that spawned a strong culture and elicited behaviors that delivered remarkable outcomes through networking, change management, and incentives mechanisms—lessons with broad beneficial implications for scaling nascent enterprises.

KEYWORDS: scaling, entrepreneurship, early Christian church, corporate culture, network effects, change management, incentive mechanisms

INTRODUCTION

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to follow all that I commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20, New American Standards Version)

From a vulnerable sect of a dozen ragtag followers, Christianity won the professed allegiance of the overwhelming majority of the population of the Roman Empire and even the support of the Roman state within a few hundred years (Latourette, 1964, p. 65). This is perhaps the ultimate example of how one can only change the world *at scale*. Scale underlies all social and organizational progress. Economist John List (2022) studied scaling and concluded that "translating an idea into widespread impact requires replicating it at scale" (p. 6). This study borrows from the lessons of the early church as it successfully scaled up against incredible odds presented by both internal and external forces. Certain unique characteristics of the church shed new light on the design of scale factors where their strategic replication can be done with impact on modern business enterprises, whether the leadership subscribes to the Christian faith or not.

In business, "scale" is often a buzzword taken to mean growth. It is a misconception, however, to equate scale with size. Quantity, be it measured in terms of revenue, customers, employees, adherents, or meals served, does not necessarily convey progress toward a goal riding on a mission. It certainly does not measure a project's sustainability and its ability to fulfill its ultimate vision as time elapses and scope expands.

List (2022) defines scale as the *desired outcome* when one takes an idea from a small group (adherents, customers, etc.) to a much larger one (p. 9). Scale often means impact, but it frequently collapses on its own weight. Hamm (2002) observes,

> It's a cliché to say that founders flounder, but unfortunately, that's usually the case. Wild exceptions like Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Michael Dell aside, executives who start a business or project fizzle more often than not once they've gotten their venture on its feet. (para. 1)

When an enterprise falls apart at scale and positive results fizzle, the organization would have experienced what List (2022) calls a "voltage drop," whose research shows that between 50 and 90 percent of programs will lose voltage at scale (p. 13).

List (2022) highlights three critical scaling factors (enablers) that are particularly relevant as we examine the growth of the early church: *talents and culture, network effects (spillovers),* and *incentives*. In addition, researchers have long established that, at scale, entities invariably encounter growing complexities that could lead to organizational disruptions if not properly managed

(Blau & Schoenherr, 1971; Scott, 1975). Effective *change management* is therefore a necessary condition of successful scaling. This article is organized around a framework built on these four scale factors.

Like lilies that thrive under even the harshest conditions, the early church flourished amidst great adversity and persecution. Pitman (2018), summarizing the reasons why the early church exploded on the scene of Acts 1-2, writes, "[The disciples] had a faith that produced obedience, a passion that produced unity, a desperation that produced prayer, a spirit that produced power." Pittman's observation offers some remarkable insights into the early church's phenomenal scaling success. Faith and obedience, which undergird a movement built on trust and adherence to strict moral standards, help bridge the weak links as organizations scale up talents and culture. Passion and unity, on the other hand, are powerful drivers behind network effects and their institutionalization. The parade of changes, often presented as crises and threats, created a sense of desperation that fostered a discipline in prayer and conviction on providential guidance—the church's unique but amazing approach to change management. Lastly, a spirit driven by *agape* (altruistic love), stewardship, and eternal rewards delivered some of the best incentives for the movement's stunning advance. In this paper these unique church characteristics are discussed, and applications drawn, in the context of the aforementioned scaling factors.

Figure 1

Scaling Factors	Early Church Characteristics
Scaling Talents and Culture	Faith + Obedience
Network Effects	Passion + Unity
Change Management	Desperation + Prayer
Engaging Incentives	Spirit + Power

This essay begins by briefly explaining, in respective sections devoted to each of the factors, their importance in the scaling process. The discussion draws primarily on the economics and management literature. The primary focus of the inquiry, however, lies in extracting the nuggets of truth from the lesson of the early church as it defied human expectation in its march to prevalence and significance. The church's ability to succeed against all odds brings new insights to the design and engagement of scaling factors in human institutions. For business enterprises, it would be reasonable to assume that these insights are beneficial for faith-driven entrepreneurial ventures. The wisdom that God has imparted to those who faithfully abide by his precepts, as manifested in the fealty of the early church, would unquestionably enrich the understanding of any leader who seeks to take a mission driven venture to the next level. In this sense the early church experience is a lesson of universal application.

SCALING TALENTS AND CULTURE

Certain personal traits that make for great early-stage entrepreneurs, such as loyalty (to comrades), task orientation, single-mindedness, and work in isolation, become liabilities when an organization gains scale and complexity (Hamm, 2002). If the success at a small scale rests largely on the people indispensable to the idea or product—what List (2022) refers to as the "chef" instead of the "ingredient" (p. 75)—then there is a natural limit to scale because people with unique skills are inherently unscalable. At its inception, the movement known as "The Way" (Acts 9:2) was anchored in the bold witnessing and Spirit-intermediated "skills" of a few disciples. The phenomenal growth of the universal church, however, was spurred by a fidelity to the core message and its outworking in the unwavering faith and obedience of the believers.

Unlike individual traits and talents, faith is infinitely scalable (see, for instance, Matthew 17:20-21; Luke, 8:13-15). In the context of the early church, faith is the glue that fused the trust between believers with disparate cultural, ethnic, social, and religious backgrounds. List (2022) observes that "deep trust is a powerful factor in enabling organizations to scale, in part because it promotes cooperation and functional teamwork essential for growth" (p. 210). This trust is what defined the fundamental strength of the Christian church. It is the bedrock of social cohesion. As Dodds (1965) comments,

> A Christian congregation was from the first a community in a much fuller sense than any corresponding group… Its members were bound together not only by common rites but by a common way of life…. The Church provided the essentials of social security… But even more important, I suspect, than these material benefits was the sense of belonging which the Christian community could give. (pp. 136-137)

The early church might have lacked physical and financial capital, but it more than made up for this deficiency with its wealth of spiritual capital that underpinned a strong culture. The shared values, or "ingredients" as List (2022) puts it, constitute the touchstone of authenticity for communities of new converts. Adherents to the Christian course of conduct subscribed to a core doctrine. When exercised, this belief would vanquish heresies, uphold the sacred dignity and intrinsic worth of human beings, demolish social boundaries and hierarchy, and offer the promise of an eternal life where suffering and shame no longer reign supreme (Dreyer, 2012). Justin Martyr, the 2nd Century Christian apologist, points out how those opposed to Christianity were sometimes won over as they saw the consistency in the lives of believers, noting their extraordinary forbearance when cheated and their honesty in business dealings (Curtis, 2010). These distinctive attributes were what set the Christians apart, and the amazing expansion of the early church was a testimony to the scalability of a strong cohesive culture.

Culture, however, is the locus of moral standards. A strong culture can be sustained only if the members voluntarily uphold their collective commitment to the moral and ethical expectations that define it. Keeping moral commitments extract cost from members because of the expected adherence to ethical parameters inherent in the rules of "dos" and "don'ts." Whether monetary (e.g., the opportunity cost of not pursuing a profitable project that is morally suspect) or psychological (e.g., reduction in the set of choices that produces a welfare loss for the individual) in nature, moral commitments raise the stakes for members' voluntary contribution to the public interest. Furthermore, maintaining a common good often requires that particular individuals or particular groups (usually those with much to gain by shirking) bear costs that are much greater than those borne by others. As a result, culture suffers from the classical "free-rider" problem inherent in public goods. According to Samuelson (1954), a public (non-excludable) good, also called a "collective consumption good," is that which all enjoy in common in the sense that each individual's consumption of such a good leads to no subtractions from any other individual's consumption of that good (non-rivalry). By scrimping on efforts to sustain healthy culture, free riders can enjoy the benefits of culture without paying their fair share, resulting in incremental underinvestment in the collectively produced commodity.

The free rider problem becomes more prevalent as the community scales. At the societal level, as it expands and becomes more complex with competing interests and demands, this problem of the "cultural commons" would undermine the existence of a high-trust society with moral beliefs necessary for human mass flourishing in a free-market democracy (Rose, 2019). Similarly, in a private enterprise, Elliot et al. (2023) observe that, "workers' incentives to make voluntary contributions to any genuinely corporate (as opposed to more local) culture vanish as an organization becomes large, because their marginal impact becomes negligible while their marginal cost does not" (p. 2). In other words, there is a diminished incentive for a member to contribute when there are "free" communal benefits for all to enjoy.

There is, however, scant evidence of free-riders in the early church. Research has shown that the formation of identity and strict expectations, when it is also socially enforced, is an effective tool in controlling the free-rider problem (Carvalho, 2016; Iannaccone, 1994). Early Christians were expected to do much for their faith. From self-sacrifice to martyrdom, from loving the unlovable to forgiving the enemy, these believers wore sacrifice and stigma as a badge of honor. Stark (1966) summarizes it this way:

> Religion involves collective action, and all collective action is potentially subject to exploitation by free riders.... Costly demands strengthen a religious group by mitigating "free-rider" problems that otherwise lead to low levels of member commitment.... Sacrifice and stigma mitigate the free-rider problems faced by religious groups…. First, they create a barrier to group entry. High costs tend to screen out free riders—high costs tend to increase participation among those who do join.... By demanding higher levels of stigma and sacrifice, religious groups are able to generate greater material, social, and religious benefits for their members. This is necessarily the case with collectively produced goods. As with any organization, commitment is energy. Membership in an expensive religion is, for many people, a "good bargain," and "[a]s a direct result of their sacrifice and stigma, Christians were largely immune to the free-rider problem. Consequently, they were able to produce a very potent religion." (pp. 175-178, p. 188)

What is unique about the early church is that its collective obedience in living out a counterculture of Christian virtues is also organic. The church's message of love, mercy, perseverance, hope, and salvation was able to dislodge paganism which offered no answer to the chaos and human suffering experienced by the masses

in the Greco-Roman world. As Stark (1966) notes, "Central doctrines of Christianity prompted and sustained attractive, liberating, and effective social relations and organizations," and "it was the way these doctrines took on actual flesh, the way they directed organizational actions and individual behavior, that led to the rise of Christianity" (p. 210).

What the early church was able to cultivate, sustain, and scale was a culture that was *visible, thick, consistent,* and *appropriate.* It was *visible* because non-members could observe it from the outside prior to entry. This resulted in lower turnover rates once they signed on. It was *thick* because it had many rules ("dos" and "don'ts") that set expectations, minimizing uncertainty in behavioral norms. It was *consistent* because the rank and file had broad agreement with leadership on the "rules" as common knowledge, which helped to minimize delegation and communicative costs. It was *appropriate* because the behavioral expectations aligned with the strategic vision of the organization (i.e., making disciples and teaching what Jesus commanded), which enabled focused efforts and setting of common goals. These cultural characteristics—*visible, thick, consistent* and *appropriate*—promote economic efficiency (Camerer & Vepsalainen, 1988). In the case of the early church, they anchored the movement in the resilience and cohesion needed for the most challenging of times.

Applications

Some important lessons on scaling culture from the early church can be profitably applied to nascent enterprises:

First, the strength of a culture is defined by the integrity of its moral standards. These standards are best upheld and shared if they can be evaluated universally. Christians believe that morality is both objective and absolute, which allowed the establishment of a set of core beliefs that enabled a culture of trust amongst all believers. A corporate culture that delivers trust amongst all stakeholders is a culture that is infinitely scalable. Trust upholds the integrity of the organizational culture as it scales, which influences not only those inside but also those outside the community (List, 2022, p. 227). Besides, a culture founded on core moral beliefs that are objective and absolute is a culture that can withstand the test of time.

Second, members are admitted for their express willingness and commitment to upholding the core moral standards. An appropriately designed screening and reward mechanism to encourage sustained, strong commitment will prevent free-riding and protect the integrity of the culture.

Third, the rules that govern the behavioral expectations and rewards of the culture must be visible, thick, consistent, and appropriate, as discussed above. These characteristics contribute to the organization's economic efficiency.

Finally, consider what a counterculture of Christian virtues can do for an enterprise that is driven by a mission to advance the common good. There is some evidence that certain expressions of virtues embedded in the Fruit of the Spirit (namely, love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-3)), for example, constitute the basis for assessing worker performance even in secular business entities (Erisman & Daniels, 2013). Imagine what the message of the fruit of the spirit can do when juxtaposed against the contrary messages of hate, despair, intolerance, etc. in today's devolving secular culture. As the Apostle Paul fittingly reminds us, "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Philippians 4:8). An economy that is blessed by God is one that conforms to the desire and expectation of the Creator. An enterprise that seeks to build up its stakeholders honors God, and these virtues define the best of humanity destined for a blessed future. Virtues, in a sense, are the gears that uphold the integrity of the mission engine as it scales. As Stark (1966) concludes, "[V]irtue is its own reward" (p. 215).

NETWORK EFFECTS

Network effect refers to any situation in which the value of a product, service, or platform depends on the number of buyers, sellers, or users who leverage it (Stobierski, 2020). A product that facilitates interactions between its users exhibits network effects if adding users makes the product more valuable to every user. Because the benefits or likelihood of adoption increases as a network scales, network effect is considered a spillover (or externality). Eisenman (2021) suggests that network effects are particularly strong when they facilitate variety (e.g., streaming experiences), mobility (e.g., credit cards), or connectivity (e.g., telephone or social media) (pp. 190-191). Network effects constitute one of the most effective strategies for small businesses to scale quickly.

Network effect is a primary mechanism through which the early church scaled. The passion and unity of the new converts added to the cumulative value of the born-again experience through validation of its authenticity. The new followers were powerful living testimonies to the changed life that the gospel promised. Their obedience to Christ's commands authenticated the message of love, forgiveness, and compassion. Every new convert added to the church's credibility and worked to dispel the myths such as atheism, incest, and cannibalism of which Christians were being accused (Morgan, 2021). As Justin Martyr wrote to Emperor Antoninus Pius in defense of the faith:

> We formerly rejoiced in uncleanness of life, but now love only chastity; before we used the magic arts, but now dedicate ourselves to the true and unbegotten God; before we loved money and possessions more than anything, but now we share what we have and to everyone who is in need; before we hated one another and killed one another and would not eat with those of another race, but now since the manifestation of Christ, we have come to a common life and pray for our enemies and try to win over those who hate us without just cause. (Roberts & Coxe, as cited in Curtis, 2023, para. 6)

The dynamics of the rise of Christianity is underpinned by its unique capacity to supplant lost social attachments with new ones that fulfill the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of the pagans as well as the Hellenized Jews in the Greco-Roman world. Stark (1966) argues that Christianity was a religious system thoroughly adapted to a time of troubles in which gender and racial prejudice, hardship, diseases, and violent death were prevalent. But beyond the ordinary masses, Christianity's message of a loving, merciful God who promises eternal life also appealed to the educated and the privileged, so that "[t]he Christians were not a mass of degraded outsiders but from early days had members, friends, and relatives in high places" (Stark, 1966, p. 46). The church's phenomenal ascendancy in the beginning centuries is a testimony to its passion and unity spreading through open social networks, gaining converts based on interpersonal attachments.

In the presence of positive network externalities, uniformity often follows because there is direct benefit from following the crowd or learning from informed members. Nonconformity, on the other hand, can be costly because it could impair social status and invite censure (Bernheim, 1994). Conformity contributes to network coherence and integrity and is fundamental to preserving cultural values. The institutionalization of the early church was, at least observationally, embodied in the establishment of social practices or rituals, such as baptism, Eucharist, hymns, prayers, and tithing, that conferred identity on the community that was tasked with mutual admonition and even sanctions to minimize deviance (Meeks, 1993, 91-110). The use of rituals to bolster social cohesion is well-established in the socio-anthropological literature (Bell, 2009). The church practices were effectively leveraged to nurture Christian moral dispositions and assume a form of communication that bolstered network formations. As Meeks (1993) observes,

> Like a natural language, these practices "make sense" within a particular social setting. They all have a high degree of regularity, they imply some measure of organization, they press in the direction of institutionalization. They are essentially communal…. The Christians' practices were not confined to sacred occasions and sacred locations—shrines, sacrifices, processions—but were integral to the formation of communities with a distinctive self-awareness. (p. 110)

Applications

The early church experience suggests new strategies that can be tapped for network effects. Not surprisingly, passion and unity remain the impetus behind these approaches.

The first is the recognition that trust plays a vital role in business success, and this is particularly true in the digital era (Ford, 2019). A Christian-led company can build a competitive advantage not only by creating a community of trusted and passionate users of its products and services but also by appealing to customers who value the integrity of the organization and its people who desire to be witnesses of God's faithfulness. Unity and the desire to please God in everything we do are unique strategic advantages of Christ-centered communities. As Green (1993) concludes, "The church is a colony of heaven, and its relationships are meant to be a picture of God's ability to unite the seemingly irreconcilable into a single fellowship" (p. 280).

A second approach is to tap into a macro-network of organizations with similar missions that transcend pure economic profit. An example is the faith-driven entrepreneur and investor movement (Kaestner et. al., 2021). As Jesus commanded in his great commission directive, Christians in the early church were drawn into the movement through direct contact with missionaries

or messages from the apostles. A vibrant network of like-minded entities could serve as ambassadors for its member community and promote the reach and effectiveness of its messages, not to mention the benefit of vicarious learning among members living in a community founded on trust and shared values.

Another possibility concerns the church's unique ability to meet unmet needs of communities and its vision to sustain open networks and capitalize on interpersonal attachments. For mission-driven entrepreneurs, the ability to scale is very much a function of meeting unmet needs of markets, but these needs often extend beyond material to encompass emotional, social, and perhaps spiritual dimensions (Alba & Williams, 2013; Moran & Bagchi, 2019). After all, efforts to connect with, donate to, and serve the broader community outside of transactional activities often pay dividends. Like the early church, these efforts sustain open networks and create opportunities to capitalize on layers of interpersonal attachments.

A lesson can be taken from the church's successful engagement of social practices and rituals in building social cohesion and preserving cultural values in network communities. It points to the potential role rituals can play as communication, learning, and even disciplinary mechanisms in business enterprises. As Smith and Stewart (2011) suggest, organizational rituals are particularly important because they not only illuminate organizational behavior but also entrench or challenge existing cultural values. Properly designed practices that are engaged with regularity and emphasis contribute to organizational identity, serve as reminders of communal goals and values, and encourage the exit of non-conformists who may compromise performance in the long term. In other words, rituals and practices help preserve communal integrity as the network expands.

A final observation relates to the power of operational excellence in cementing stakeholders' loyalty. One reason the early church had so much unity, even in the face of horrific adversity, is because there is universal agreement that excellence is an intrinsic virtue of being a believer. As Peter reminds the church, "Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God on the day of visitation" (1 Peter 2:12). Likewise, Paul counsels, "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord and not for people" (Colossians 3:23).

Excellence creates a barrier for disaffection, i.e., to make switching costs expensive relative to the perceived value of the service or product provided. Kaestner et.al. (2021) observe that Christian entrepreneurs represent more than just themselves and their businesses—they represent the God they worship (p. 87). They therefore should be synonymous with excellence because they reflect the image of a perfect God, and he uses their work to share his love with an unbelieving world. A culture of excellence is reliably an anchor to market success, as Proverbs (22:29) reminds us that such accomplishments will pique the interest of even "kings."

CHANGE MANAGEMENT

In scaling up, the ability of an enterprise to adapt to growing complexity, to innovate efficient structure, and to leverage scale economies would be fundamental to its longer-term success. Research shows that only 30 percent of change initiatives on average succeed (Kotter,1995; McKinsey Research, 2010). Often, leaders sense a need to change but lack wisdom and the efforts are hamstrung by hesitancy and doubt. In contrast, the early church invited changes out of desperation as crises and threats loomed, but with a steadfastness grounded in humility and a trust in God's impartation of wisdom. Importantly, it did so without compromising core values or the mission's objective.

An early crisis that challenged the traditional structure of the young church, as described in Acts 6:1-6, was the complaints lodged by the Hellenistic widows regarding congregational care. The apostles, being church leaders, were wise to adjust existing procedures, alter organizational structure, and appoint new posts of responsibility in response to the crisis without hesitancy while devoting themselves to upholding the core mission of preaching the Word and pursuing wisdom (prayer). There is much to be learned here, as Longenecker (1981) aptly observes:

> Luke's narrative here suggests that to be fully biblical is to be constantly engaged in adapting traditional methods and structures to meet existing situations, both for the sake of the welfare of the whole church and for the outreach of the gospel…. It also suggests that [leaders] (a) refuse to get involved in the practice of assigning blames where things have gone wrong, preferring to expend the energies on correcting injustices, prayer, and the proclamation of the Word, (b) refuse to become paternalistic in solving problems, which implies willingness to turn the necessary authority for working out solutions

over to others—to those who feel the problem most acutely and may therefore be best to solve it. (p. 332)

A different urgency surfaced in Peter's encounter with Cornelius, as described in Acts 10-11. In spite of his initial resistance, Peter was willing to participate in the learning process. His discovery finally led to his advocacy, communication, and empowering of a fundamental change that propelled the growth of the early church with full embrace of the Gentile believers. Paradigm changes are always challenging because they may rock accepted foundational principles (such as the Jewish dietary laws in this case), but as Oster (2010) observes,

> God was at work in every element of the organizational learning process.… [W]ise leaders accept God's willingness to alter their horizons, and those of their followers.… Successful leaders know that significant change requires refinement through an intentional process of discernment and validation incorporating the individual, group, and organization. (pp. 33-34)

In terms of John Kotter's (2012) famous eight-stage process for leading change, the Hellenistic widows and Cornelius experiences described a masterful response by the church. In Kotter's terminology, the church was able to lead change by creating "a sense of urgency," anchoring "a vision which was strategically communicated," and empowering "a broad based change."

A different kind of exigency presented itself when Paul's evangelistic outreach to the Jews was repeatedly stymied by hostile reception, which led him to declare in Corinth that "from now on I will go to the Gentiles" (Acts 18:6). A keen sense of marginal cost relative to benefit sometimes requires leaders to take stock of the cumulative experience and identify inflection points where a pivot in strategy may be in order. This is what Kotter (2012) refers to as "consolidating gains" and "anchoring new approaches in the culture." The willingness to hit "reset" can be a liberating experience because it allows the leader to refresh the perspective as an outsider, perhaps reconnecting him or her with the initial vision and values that now appear to be distant echoes.

In Paul's case, the "reset" ultimately emboldened his resolve to go to Rome as a prisoner, where the "faith is proclaimed throughout the world" (Romans 1:8) because of the imperial capital's strategic importance in the Roman world. It is notable that the last word in Acts is "unhindered." It testifies not only to Paul's passion but the Holy Spirit's power to enable his servant Paul to have productivity that knew no bounds through his prison epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon). God used Paul's imprisonment "for the greater progress of the gospel . . . and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my [Paul's] imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear" (Philippians 1:12–14). In other words, Paul's new vision and a strategy of self-sacrifice not only empowered broad-based change and created short-term wins (another Kotter observation) but also anchored a new culture that changed the world ever since.

As the Christian movement grew and spread in the Roman Empire, it found itself confronted with the same macro challenges from natural and social disasters that had rendered contemporary governmental and (pagan) religious institutions utterly impotent in emergency management. During two particularly devastating epidemics (circa AD165 and AD251), as much as one-third of the population perished (Stark, 1966, p. 73). In contrast, Stark (1966) estimated that the Christian population would have at least doubled as a ratio to non-Christians by the end of the second pandemic (p. 89).

The church confronted the catastrophes as crises of faith, spurring collective actions in organizing and mobilizing for effective responses. Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria wrote that "far from being a time of distress, it [the epidemic] is a time of unimaginable joy" (Stark, 1966, p. 81). His sentiment is echoed by another bishop, Cyprian of Carthage, who wrote, "These are trying exercises for us, not deaths; they give to the mind the glory of fortitude; by contempt of death they prepare for the crown" (Stark, 1966, p. 81). For the faithful, disasters are but opportunities for refining character, learning obedience, and testing the faith. The church embraced the challenge; entered intercessions for strength; responded with discipline in adherence to the doctrinal virtues of faith, love, and charity; and persevered expectantly for the ultimate, divine rewards. The tangible results were superior survival rates among Christians and those they cared for, which in turn uncovered networks through the grateful survivors and their interpersonal attachments (Stark, 1966, pp. 91-93).

Applications

An organization's ability to adjust and thrive in the face of serious challenges (crises and other systemic risks) defines its survivability in the competitive marketplace (Liang, 2012). The early church succeeded in capitalizing on urgencies (even massive, systemic crises) by executing from a playbook that can help business enterprises

not only survive but also benefit from endogenous disturbances and exogenous shocks. The lessons from the early church point to the following critical elements in designing change management strategies:

a. a strong culture

b. a mission-driven ready plan of action

c. a shared vision grounded in strong core beliefs of moral values

d. an understanding that every incident impacting any part of the enterprise is an urgency that demands the same passionate, unified response

e. an understanding that no win is too small, and every win adds to the cumulative, learned experience

f. clear focus on the reward to risk ratio when assessing trade-offs, with primal weight given to the collective good; and

g. a keen awareness of potential, post-crisis network effects, which might demand bold, countercultural actions.

ENGAGING INCENTIVES

Unlike dispositional (i.e., internal) factors that characterize leadership (e.g., styles and personality traits), incentives can be calibrated to engender maximum motivation in specific situations as an organization evolves. As List (2022) observes, "[G]iven that humans don't scale well,… it's good news that even those [*rotten*] apples can behave with integrity and work hard with the right incentives…. Incentives, if designed well, are almost infinitely scalable and can have an enormously positive impact on shaping behaviors and outcomes" (p. 133).

However, improperly designed incentives can produce a high level of individual welfare at the expense of the community. A simple example is if a reward is given to the individual who comes up with the best marketing, cost saving, or product design idea. Self-interest in this case will likely lead to suboptimal solutions because it discourages information sharing or coordination. The design mechanism therefore should take into consideration the positive or negative impact of an individual's action on the rest of the community (known as spillovers—in this case the individual's "success" detracts from the gain the community could have enjoyed as a whole). Economists commonly refer to this as "social cost pricing" (see, for example, Campbell, 2006, p. 4). Pursuing self-interest in the presence of social costs can be self-defeating. The misalignment of interests at the individual, corporate, and community levels will frustrate efforts that seek the best outcome for all (Mishra, 2005).

Amazingly, the core belief of Christianity upends this dilemma of misalignment that is so prevalent in society. The faithful adherence to the faith's core doctrine and its outworking became the force that made the rise of Christianity so unstoppable (Meeks, 1993, pp. 150-153). Jesus makes one of the most astounding declarations regarding the purpose of human life:

> "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments depend the whole Law and Prophets. (Matthew 22:37-40)

Loving God is the ultimate purpose of human earthly existence, and it delivers full fulfillment of a blessed life. Jesus' instruction here aligns one's self-interest in seeking a fulfilled life with an altruistic motive to deliver blessings to others (the community). In fact, these two motives are not intrinsically separable. As John writes, "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us" (1 John 4:11-12). Carson's (1981) insight here is worthy of repeating:

> The two commandments, Jesus says, stand together. The first without the second is intrinsically impossible (cf. 1 John 4:20), and the second cannot stand without the first – even theoretically – because disciplined altruism is not love. Love in the truest sense demands abandonment of self to God, and God alone is the adequate incentive for such abandonment. (p. 464)

Applications

What is the implication of this "community perspective" for the nascent enterprise? Unlike dictates from leadership or rules laid down by the authority, incentives are something we all have the power to influence. A proper recognition of what truly motivates us should take into consideration what we receive in return if everyone else in the community engages in the same behavior. Love is the great mandate in Christianity, and it, through the power of the Spirit, would bring meaning and prosperity to the life that we share with others in the community. This recognition will keep us focused on the greater good as the enterprise scales. The editors of the Theology of Work Project (n.d.) expound on the meaning of this in the context of the workplace:

Work is a primary way through which we love other people. Our workplaces are often the places where we encounter the widest diversity of people, and their nearness to us day after day gives us the unique challenge of loving people who are different from ourselves. We also love others through our work when our work meets the important needs of customers or other stakeholders. But to love a neighbor, *as yourself*, may require taking risks… which loom large when undertaken only for the benefit of someone else. (Bible Commentary section: Matthews 22:34-40)

The focus on others rather than oneself also underlies the concept of stewardship. Stewardship describes the deeply felt commitment of members to the flourishing of the community (or firm) above their own individual interests. There is some evidence that the stewardship climate, which is a composite picture of the different dimensions of stewardship such as intrinsic motivation, organizational identity, and collectivism, etc., is positively related to business performance especially in family enterprises (Neubaum et al., 2016). A robust stewardship climate would help align the interests of stakeholders and the organization.

In the Bible, stewardship is inherent in the creation story (Genesis 1-3) when man is appointed steward of God in his relation to the world and his own life, with the attendant requirement of faithfulness (1 Corinthians 4:2). The failure to exercise faithful stewardship is condemned in Scripture as a matter of principle. In Jesus' parable of the talents (Matthew 25), for example, the "lazy" servant was punished not for the assignment's outcome but for his deficient stewardship of the master's resources (Wilson, 2019, p. 31). The tragic account of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) is a lesson for the communal church about the dire consequence of stewardship failures. It is notable that Jesus himself promises the scalability of good stewardship and the consequent rewards:

His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter the joy of your master'…. For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, *even what he does have shall be taken away*. (italics added) (Matthew 25:21, 29)

Jesus' teaching here points to yet another consideration in the design of incentive mechanisms—the threat of removing something of value that is already earned. The endowment effect refers to our tendency to place a greater value on things (possessions, prestige, reputation, social image, etc.) we already own so that there is strong aversion to their loss (Kahneman et al., 1990), perhaps more so than the motivation to acquire them in the first place. Any mechanism that threatens to take away what is already earned or owned, referred to as the clawback approach, could therefore be a powerful incentive to motivate behavior conducive to the collective good. Clawback mechanisms, properly designed, are able to cement loyalty of stakeholders to mission objectives as organizations scale (List, 2022, pp. 148-152).

In the case of the early church, the Ananias incident that caused "great fear" over the whole church (Acts 5:11); Hebrew's warning against apostasy, which would result in "judgment and fury of a fire" (Hebrew 10:26-27); and Paul's many warnings against sins (e.g., 1 Corinthians 6) offer a type of "clawback" deterrent. Such behaviors disturb the peace and security of a blessed life. For most believers, the desire to preserve a lifestyle that emanates joy and fulfillment would be enough incentive for conforming behaviors that affirm unity, doctrinal purity, and steadfastness in the faith.

One of the most challenging tasks in designing incentives as organizations scale is to help the community overcome the fears of risk taking. Risk-taking means greater likelihood of failure and raises the fear of loss, yet it is essential for succeeding in competitive, changing, and uncertain environments. Taking risks contributes to a habit that enhances confidence on account of cumulative experience. Overcoming fear is thus essential for project success. Byrd (1974) suggests that to overcome the fears in personal risk-taking, the best approach is modeling, showcasing exemplary behavior by a trustworthy role model that could dispel such fears. Using Jesus' example as he invited Peter to walk on the water (Matthew 14:22-33), Clardy and Liang (2023) argue that Jesus is a perfect role model and his actions exemplify the key elements in dealing with the fears of risk-taking: *Encourage risk-taking but not recklessness; encourage the positive; accept mistakes and be supportive; and provide a non-punitive environment.* Indeed, this lesson on risk-taking and faith had so much transformative power that it likely propelled Peter to the top leadership of the early church and sustained him through the subsequent trials.

Balancing the fear of loss are the expectant rewards in risk taking; otherwise, it is merely an act of recklessness. What prompted the early church to exhibit a "contempt of death (and of its sequel) that is patent to us every day,"

as Galen, the distinguished Greek physician to Roman emperors wrote about the bravery and steadfastness of the Christian martyrs (Stark, 1966, p. 164). What motivated the Christians to stay and care for the victims of the plagues that devastated whole cities in the early centuries of the church when entire populations fled in self-preservation? What, indeed, was the reason for the church's inflexible obstinacy and stubbornness when it endured with utter nonchalance and apparent joy the horrific persecutions and unnecessary deaths (Sherwin-White, 1966, p. 699)?

The answer, of course, is none other than that "God has set eternity in their hearts" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). The immensity of eternity is the expectant reward of an obedient Christ-centered life, which dwarfs any cost from risk-taking for the cause. The early Christians, when they looked imminent death in the eye, saw a picture through the right perspective. The best motivator for members in any community to take risks is to frame the expectant reward with the right perspective. Whether it is a perspective of eternity or the promise of collective well-being, the right framework could reshape people's behaviors in support of the eventual vision during the long, tortuous march of scaling up.

CONCLUSIONS

The growth of the Christian church during the beginning centuries of its foundation is a scaling phenomenon that decidedly changed the world for the rest of human history. It is a phenomenon that witnessed the power of a simple message ("the good news") that resonates with the utmost desire of the human heart. From this message sprang extraordinary vision, strong culture, and shared values. It sponsored highly effective communication and change management processes and offered a unique scheme of incentives for bold witnessing and risk-taking. It is the unyielding fidelity to the core message and the values defined by it that sustained the church in spite of all the natural and social adversities. This is, of course, how God designed it to work, in his foreknowledge of human frailties.

To borrow from the blueprint of the early church's success does not have to assume divine intervention for it to work. Business enterprises can take pages out of the early church's playbook and expect to score success as they gain scale. For a modern enterprise, it is easy to overemphasize the supremacy of technology, marketing, or financial resources in building competitiveness and delivering performance. But social and natural crises (the most recent example being Covid-19) have made institutions, public or private, painfully aware of the fragility of these critical systems (Reeves & Whitaker, 2020). As the business environment becomes more dynamic and unpredictable, an organization gaining scale will experience more vulnerabilities. This necessitates the nurture of a resilient entity that can resist, absorb, recover from, or adapt to adverse occurrences. Increasingly, researchers across disciplines have identified faith and spirituality as a key contributor to resilience and thus an entity's vibrancy and sustainability (Liang, 2012). The early church's resilience is a remarkable testimony to this revelation, for faith and spirituality comprise the fabric that weaves meaning and purpose into an economy that honors its Creator. As Liang (2012) concludes:

> For the Christian, the transcendent purpose of life is not anchored in the transient and the destructible, but in the eternal promise of Creator God who is our refuge and strength (Psalms 46:1), and from whom we receive the strength to overcome (Philippians 4:13) all sufferings that pale in comparison with the future glory awaiting believers (Romans 8:18). Jesus himself assures his followers that "in the world you have tribulation, but take courage, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).... Christians who believe in God's trustworthiness live a life suffused with a strong sense of moral purpose, core value, and vision. At the organizational level, especially for small and medium size businesses where individual leadership and small group dynamics strongly influence enterprise adaptiveness and flexibility, these become the critical success factors for the creation of organizational resilience. (pp. 53-54)

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