



Confronting Bureaucracy: Insights from Matthew 12: 1-8

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Bureaucracy is a common form of organizational structure that is still in operation today. It consists of rules, policies, procedures, and hierarchies of authority. The Pharisees functioned in a bureaucratic manner. Their strict interpretation of the Torah often placed them in direct opposition with Jesus so, therefore, Jesus dealt with bureaucracy. An intertexture study of Matthew 12:1-8 reveals that Jesus exhibited the characteristics of charismatic leadership in his dealings with bureaucracy. The charismatic leadership style remains a viable option when dealing with bureaucracy today.

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Bureaucracy as we know it today, as an overly structured organization, has been recognized for over 200 years. Some might say all true reformers have confronted bureaucracy. Although bureaucracy and the structuring of collectivities has many strengths, it can display great weaknesses, namely that of a lack of adaptability to change, and a restriction of their greatest resource – people (Weber, 1968). Jesus took on the bureaucracy of his day and exhibited the characteristics of a charismatic leader while doing so. The bureaucracy that Jesus faced was fronted by the Pharisees, the religious leaders of his day. In Matthew 12:1-8 Jesus was confronted by the Pharisees who accused him of breaking the Sabbath. Jesus responded by stating that plucking grain on the Sabbath does not profane sacred writ. In doing so he reinterpreted the Torah and clarified the true nature of sacred endeavor.

Matthew 12:1-8 also presents insights into how Jesus looked toward a future beyond both Torah and Temple. The Matthean text views him as leading Israel into a new era of mercy, beyond Torah compliance, or narrow sacrifice. This paper examines Jesus' approach to dealing with bureaucracy through the lens of an intertexture exegesis of Matthew 12:1-8.

Intertexture

According to Robbins (1996), “intertexture is a text’s representation of, reference to, and use of phenomena in the world outside the text being interpreted” (p. 40). An intertexture analysis produces “a rich configuration of texts, cultures, and social and historical phenomena” (p. 40). Matthew 12:1-8 describes a scene in which the disciples of Jesus plucked grain on the Sabbath; the Pharisees accused Jesus of failure in keeping the Law; and Jesus’ two-part response to his accusers. The intertexture analysis reveals: (a) that verses 3-4 are an historical analogy found in I Samuel 21:1-6 where David’s hunger supersedes the Law; (b) verse 7 is a reconfiguration of Hosea 6:6 (New Revised Standard Version), “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings;” (c) verses 1-8 is likely a recitation and reconfiguration of Mark 2:23-27; and (d) verse 5 is a reconfiguration of Numbers 28:9-10 and Exodus 35:3. Additionally, a textual analysis finds that the key elements of Matthew 12:1-8 include: (a) the Pharisees, (b) the Sabbath, (c) the Torah, (d) the Temple, and (e) the authority of Jesus.

Pharisees and the Sabbath

The Pharisees, who were the “authorized teachers of the Torah,” were deeply committed to their understanding of truth (Rabbinowitz, 2004, p. 430). Their original intention was to make the Law relevant in all situations of daily life, but they became “obsessed with the minutiae of the Law” (Rabbinowitz, p. 442). Consequently, they viewed Jesus as profane. In Matthew 15:1-7 Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for distorting God’s word for the sake of their traditions. He referred to them as “fools” (Matt 23:17) and “hypocrites” (Matt 23:23, 25, 27, 29) and “blind guides” (Matt 23:16) who lead people astray.

The Gospels indicate that keeping the Sabbath was the number one issue of contention between the Pharisees and Jesus (Hicks, 1984). The Sabbath was of extreme importance to the Jews, and from the Pharisees outlook it appeared that Jesus did not consider it to be nearly as important as they did (Boerman, 2005). Matthew 12:1-8 records the first instance in the book of Matthew (cf. Matt 12:9-12) in which the Pharisees denounced Jesus’ failure to keep the Sabbath. In all actuality, the breaking of the Sabbath in Matthew 12 involved the disciples plucking grain, but since Jesus was their teacher he was seen as being held responsible for their actions (Meier, 2004).

The Torah and the Temple

The keeping of the Torah was central to Judaism as was the temple. According to DeSilva (2004), “Together with the Torah, the temple formed the center of Jewish identity and piety” (p. 216). The temple was the place where God met with Israel, to hear the people’s prayers and accept the people’s sacrifices. The temple embodied the primary system by which Israel related with God (Friedrichsen, 2005). God’s blessings were associated with the temple and the keeping of the Torah.

The Pharisees’ zeal to keep the Torah often placed them at odds with Jesus (DeSilva, 2004). This can be seen in the Pharisees’ response to Jesus’ disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath. Their interpretation of the Law superseded the hunger of the disciples and was in opposition of the intent of the Sabbath. They had elevated their interpretation of the Law above the spirit of the Law.

In response to the Pharisees' accusations Jesus gave two reasons why the Sabbath could be broken: (a) David ate bread that was meant only for the priest; and (b) the fact that the priest violated the Sabbath in carrying out their obligations. Jesus referred to David's story (I Sam 21:1-6) to associate the temple with the alleviation of hunger and to make the point that hunger supersedes form and tradition. Furthermore, Jesus referred to Hosea 6:6 as the principle that underlined his two examples – human need holds preeminence over tradition. Finally, the Matthean text reports Jesus' self-statement that he superseded the Law as Lord of the Sabbath (Matt 12:8).

Meir (2004) remarks, Jesus “consciously challenges the experts in the Scriptures to recall and then properly understand a given text of Scripture” (p. 574). According to DeSilva (2004), Jesus “presents his own teachings not as a replacement for Torah but as a guide to its fulfillment” (p. 263). DeSilva suggests that, ultimately, the Torah was to reflect “God's character of love, mercy, and generosity” (p. 267). Jesus did not disregard the Torah; rather, he redefined or reinterpreted the Torah. Human need was to be placed above religious observance. Mercy was, and is, more in line with God's intentions for the Sabbath rather than the strict obedience of the Sabbath such as the Pharisees advocated. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees because they had forsaken the truths of justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Rabbinowitz, 2004).

The temple played a vital role in God's plan and purpose of making people whole, but the Pharisees had failed to meet that purpose (Driggers, 2007). Chance (2007) suggests, “The temple came to stand as a symbol of exclusion, resisting the liberating mission of the reign of God that Jesus announced and embodied” (p. 288). If the temple were to be dissolved, Israel's nationalistic hopes would also be dissolved (DeSilva, 2004). Jesus confronted this mindset by implying that he was greater than the Herodian temple (Matt 12:6; 23:17-21). He was on a mission to change mindsets (Koyama, 1996). According to Hicks (1984), Jesus' argument was as such: If the priest were allowed to break the Sabbath because of their duties of service in the temple, then his disciples were allowed to break the Sabbath since their service to the kingdom was of greater importance than the temple.

The Authority of Jesus

By necessity, Jesus instituted a new way of living and spirituality that was intended to carry Israel beyond the demise of the temple (Gary, 2007). In doing so, Jesus' authority was seen as a direct threat to the Pharisees' claims to authority among the people (Driggers, 2007). Boerman (2005) states:

Instead of being a person held in bondage to the Sabbath law as were most of the Jews of his day, Jesus claimed that he was totally sovereign over that law. He controlled the law: the law did not control him. (p. 324)

The disciples plucking grain was not just about human need taking preeminence over tradition; it was about Jesus' authority over the Sabbath (Parsons, 2005).

Application

The times in which Jesus lived presented great challenges of “militarization, urbanization, and commercialization brought by the Roman Empire” (Gary, 2007, p. 96). In the midst of this change were the Pharisees, who had become so rigid and steeped in tradition that they were losing their ability to adapt to change. Jesus stepped on the scene with what appeared to the Pharisees to be a radical message and a new way of doing things (Gary). He saw a day coming in which the post-Herodian world would worship Yahweh in something greater than an earthly temple.

Looking back from today, the Pharisees operated in what is known as a bureaucracy structured organization. According to Morgan (2006), bureaucracy and hierarchy still dominate organizational form. Bureaucracy consists of rules, procedures, policies, standardization and hierarchy of authority (Daft, 2006). While in many ways bureaucracy has its pluses, bureaucracy also has its flaws. Bureaucracy is a mechanistic structured organization, and mechanistic structured organizations do not adapt well to change because they were built for predetermined goals (Morgan).

Jesus was leading Israel into a new era that was based on the internalization of traditions and laws. As leaders we can learn from his example. Jesus did not waver in spite of the opposition he faced. He was intent to transform the structure of the prevailing organization of his day. In doing so, he exhibited the characteristics of a classic charismatic leader. His motive was his agenda and his vision of the way things should be.

According to sociologist Max Weber (1968), “Charisma is self-determined and sets its own limits” (p. 1112); “it transforms all values and breaks all traditional and rational norms” (p. 1115); it compels “the surrender of the faithful to the extraordinary and unheard-of, to what is alien to all regulation and tradition, and therefore, is viewed as divine” (p. 1115). Furthermore, a charismatic leader is seen as being able to “produce social and cultural change” (Trice & Beyer, 1991, p. 151). Finally, Daft (2006) suggests that charismatic leaders determine the direction and order of an organization.

According to Trice & Beyer (1991), “Leaders who go into an existing organization and seek to change its culture must find ways to discredit portions of the existing culture and replace its champions lest they try to maintain it” (p. 163). As Trice & Beyer state:

Members are unlikely to give up whatever security they derive from the existing culture and follow a leader in new directions unless that leader exudes self-confidence, has strong convictions, a dominant personality, and can preach the new vision with drama and eloquence. (p. 163)

Charismatic leadership is well-suited to confront bureaucracy structured organizations, especially when dealing with change. Although the list is not exhaustive, leaders who are dealing with change and bureaucracy structured organizations should consider exhibiting the following charismatic leadership characteristics: (a) a strong sense of vision and direction in spite of obstacles, even when the obstacles include the voices and opinions of others; (b) a healthy dose of self-confidence that enables them to weather opposition; and (c) a commitment to personal convictions regardless the cost. These are the types of things that constitute the charismatic leadership style that Jesus often exhibited when confronting the bureaucracy of his day and age. He

was motivated by an agenda and vision of the way things should be; an agenda and vision that he had personalized within himself. Such style of leading remains a viable option in dealing with bureaucracy today.

Conclusion

The Pharisees' intention was to safeguard God's blessing through the strict observance of their interpretation of the Torah; the end result, however, was that people were restricted from God's presence (Diggers, 2007). Likewise, bureaucracy is often guilty of restricting people from what is most beneficial to the organization. Strategies have a rightful place, but one must not forget that ultimately people are the strategy (Pfeffer, 1998).

So how does one confront change in a bureaucracy structured organization? Is there a model one can follow? An intertexture exegesis of Matthew 12:1-8 suggests that a charismatic style of leadership is one possibility. Piocanelli states (2005), "The strength of the Weberian charismatic approach lies precisely in the universalistic and idealistic fashion in which it has elaborated" (p. 421). Charismatic leadership is neither time conscience nor culture exclusive. The intertexture analysis of Matthew 12:1-8 revealed that hunger supersedes protocol. Jesus suggested that what was permissible for David was also permissible for his disciples. In doing so he implied that people's needs took precedent over institutional rules. As Lord over the Sabbath he also implied that his authority was greater than the Torah. Jesus took on bureaucracy and exhibited the characteristics of a charismatic leader while doing so. Charismatic leadership remains a viable option for confronting bureaucracy today.

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