

## **A Biblical/Covenantal Perspective**

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## A BIBLICAL/COVENANTAL PERSPECTIVE

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The Biblical idea of covenant provides not only a unifying theme for understanding leadership, but also a guiding normative framework for doing so.

A covenant is a morally informed agreement among various parties to ratify and establish a longterm, mutually-affirming relationship. This idea is largely a Biblical one. In Scripture, God covenants with man, and in so doing, affirms the dignity of man. The result is that humans not only have free will and importance, but also responsibility to choose wisely.

Furthermore, a covenant protects the right of all members by protecting the rights of every individual. Mutual accountability and affirmation are key aspects of any covenantal agreement and relationship: members in a covenant are accountable to one another. No one is an island. By caring for another, covenant members find that they themselves are cared for.

### IMPORTANT COVENANTAL TERMS

There are three key terms associated with the notion of covenant and covenantal behavior. The first is the Hebrew term *hesed*, which means “loving fulfillment of covenant obligation.” In Scripture, love and duty are intertwined and it is related to what Christ said when He told His followers to “go the extra mile” in serving one another. We see in Scripture that not only did God keep His promises to His people, but He went above and beyond His stated duties in showing mercy, forgiving, and caring for His people, ultimately through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We are required to do the same. We shouldn’t view our relationships with others as merely contractual obligations, but rather we should see our obligations as opportunities to truly love and care for one another. The implications for this interlinking of love and duty in an organization are significant. We all know leaders who have abused their powers and treated employees poorly, and we all know employees who have done the bare minimum (or worse) to collect a paycheck.

**Mutual accountability** describes the process of interaction in a covenant in which everyone is accountable to everyone else. Not only are followers accountable to leaders, but leaders are also accountable to followers. Regardless of the nature of the relationship, be it peer to peer or leader to subordinate, mutual accountability is a requirement. This because in a covenant, no one enters into the covenantal agreement without first securing this obligation. Because no one can be coerced into such a relationship, the only reason for doing so is to create a binding relationship that assures everyone’s mutual benefit. An organization that applies this will have greater integrity, teamwork, and decision-making because everyone is committed to serving and caring for everyone else, and leaders, as a general rule, cannot act arbitrarily and in a manner that mistreats employees.

**Federalism** is a specific term in the field of covenantal theology that describes the sharing of power among all members of the covenant. It is therefore related to the notion of mutual accountability and is embodied on the organizational level by the ideas of empowerment, participatory decision

making and decentralization (or more accurately, non-centralization, which signifies a sense of teamwork and shared responsibility regardless of organizational structure and departmental guidelines).

## **HISTORY OF COVENANT**

Having laid that conceptual foundation, it is helpful to look at how the covenantal idea has influenced the history of mankind by ensuring greater freedom of common people and limiting the excesses of arbitrary leadership. In the **Old Testament**, the covenant idea was introduced by God to man. As mentioned earlier, by entering into a covenant with mere mortals, God affirmed their dignity and gave them both the freedom to choose to enter into the covenant and the responsibility to act within the moral terms of the covenant. It is no surprise, then, that even in Old Testament Israel, during the time of the judges and kings, that no one ruler had all the power nor was free from the accountability of the people and the prophets. Power was further shared among the twelve tribes, and the prophets criticized not only the king but also the people when they forgot the terms of the covenant, became greedy, pursued idols, and stopped caring for one another and for the poor. In the New Testament, the covenant idea is affirmed and expanded upon by Christ, who ushered in a new covenant with God that was now available to all of mankind, and not just the Jews. As the Gospel message spread throughout the world, so did the notion of covenant.

During the **Middle Ages**, the covenantal idea was largely overlooked because Catholic theology emphasized a more hierarchical worldview in which Popes had absolute control and kings were not accountable to the people because they were viewed as being appointed by God. But during the **Protestant Reformation**, Reformers reclaimed the covenantal idea as they articulated the notion of the “Priesthood of all believers.” Protestants argued that the only priest believers needed was Christ, and therefore they could have a personal relationship with God through Christ. This principle once again affirmed the value and dignity of each individual, and many have argued that it played a key role in not only developing the notion of capitalism in the West, but also contributed greatly to the notion that kings are accountable to the people and that Popes should not try to control political affairs. In fact, John Calvin, John Locke, John Knox, among others, argued that when leaders significantly abuse their power, a “material breach” of the covenant has occurred, meaning that the people are no longer under the kings authority because the very covenant has been absolved through the tyrannical behavior.

This theory of civil resistance and covenantal principles in general were carried into the **American Founding Era**. In an effort to flee religious and political persecution in Europe, many Protestants fled to the New World and brought their ideas with them. Research reveals that many of the colonies were further influenced by covenantal pacts and agreements. Often, church covenants made by various groups of Protestants as they came to the New World became the foundation for local governments and state constitutions. As the colonies became more established, the American colonists continued to base their notion of political freedom upon covenantal ideas by providing a rationale for breaking away from Great Britain based upon covenantal principles. Furthermore the very nature of American federalism, in which the national government shares power with the states, is a covenantal notion, as already mentioned. In fact, the word *foedus* is the Latin word for covenant. So America, with all of its political freedoms, has been greatly influenced by the notion of covenant.

The question that we ask here is, given this impressive track record in political development, can these covenantal ideas and principles be **applied to the field of organizational leadership in some way**? Certainly, there is a difference between the relationship of ruler with citizens and business leaders with employees, but it will be demonstrated in this presentation and throughout subsequent presentations that there are indeed many points of application. This is due in large part because God has commanded all of us to love one another. Covenant is the means by which we do so in real and practical ways.

## **A COVENANTAL MODEL FOR LEADERSHIP**

Truly effective leadership is not just about what the leader says and does. It's about how the leaders creates a healthy, self-sustaining organization that does things the right way. The covenantal idea provides a unifying theme for organizational leadership. First of all, the idea of **hesed** provides the **attitude** necessary for successful leaders. This attitude embodies notions such as servant leadership, mutual affirmation and care, teamwork, shared vision, "big picture" thinking, and customer care and community service. Big picture thinking is defined as organizational selfawareness, where employees understand the organization-wide goals, constraints, and strategies and where employees furthermore see how their job as well as their department fits into all of that. If leaders can impart that attitude to employees, they will be well on their way to helping the organization grow in a successful manner.

The principle of **mutual accountability** provides the foundation for organizational **processes**, and includes notions such as conflict resolution, participatory decision-making, empowerment, and an active process of dialogue between leaders and employees. These are the types of processes that successful leaders must ensure.

The notion of **federalism** provides a **structure** for healthy organizations, and relates to ideas such as noncentralization, "boundaryless organizations", and organic structures. In a highly competitive, global marketplace, today's organizations need to be able to adapt quickly.

Clearly, all of these concepts are related to one another, and this division of covenantal principles into attitudes, processes, and structures therefore allows for a lot of overlap. The goal of any organization and its leaders should be to create a self-sustaining, healthy culture where employees have taken ownership of organizational processes and goals and are working together to get things done and care for one another. In the next lesson, further application of covenantal principles to the field of organizational behavior will be demonstrated.