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# EXPLORING THE FUNDAMENTAL PARADOX OF BEING AN ORGANIZATIONAL LEADER

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores a fundamental, universally experienced leadership tension of caring for the needs of the individual and caring for the needs of the organization. The paper draws a distinction between the three concepts of paradox, dilemma and tradeoff. It describes the nature of the individual-community tension. It reviews the tension from the perspective of management scholarship and themes found in Biblical theology. The exploration reviews some of the issues that Christian leaders face as they attempt to manage this tension. It concludes by offering implications for leadership education.

## INTRODUCTION

Management decision-making is complicated by organizational paradoxes, dilemmas, and tradeoffs. How is a Christian leader to serve when, for each significant leadership principle, a plausible opposite and even contradictory principle for the same situation also exists and may be called for (Simon, 1946)? Should, for instance, a manager care more for people or more for the organization that serves the greater good in society?

The purpose of this paper is to explore how the Christian leader should view the management of a fundamental, universally experienced tension between caring for the needs of the individual and caring for the needs of the organization.<sup>1</sup> We might metaphorically refer to this tension as one of the great polar opposites, the Arctic and Antarctic of organizational leadership. As an exploration this paper does not attempt to resolve all the questions and issues. Rather, it seeks to better understand the tension in the light of Bibli-

cal theology and what this tension might mean for leadership education.

To accomplish the purpose the paper will employ the following outline:

- Define the concept of paradox and distinguish this concept from dilemma and tradeoff
- Describe the nature of the individual community tension
- Review management scholarship on this fundamental tension
- Present relevant themes from Biblical theology to use as a lens through which to explore the tension
- Review three secular approaches to managing the paradox

- Discuss some of the issues that Christian leaders face relevant to managing this tension
- Discuss implications for leadership education

### DEFINITION OF TERMS

Paradox has been defined in various ways, but in terms of organizational life one of the most common definitions describes paradox as a situation where contradictory, mutually exclusive yet interdependent elements co-exist for which no permanent resolution is possible or desired (Calton & Payne, 2003; Clegg, 2002; Lewis & Dehler, 2000; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Cameron & Quinn, 1988). Paradoxical tensions are perceptual. They cause cognitive tension though not necessarily emotional tension. They “mask the simultaneity of conflicting truths.” (Lewis, 2000, p. 761). Many paradoxes have been identified in organizational management literature. The one chosen for consideration here is the paradox of meeting individual organizational member needs while advancing the goals of the organization. Examples of this will be provided below.

While paradox is the main focus of this paper two other terms deserve definition and distinction with paradox. Sometimes the word dilemma has been used in an informal way as a synonym of paradox (Aram, 1976; Benner & Tushman, 2003). To make a finer cut between the two ideas we might say that a dilemma is a situation that can require a choice between two mutually exclusive elements. We sometimes talk about a situation where a person is caught in a predicament having to choose between the lesser of two evils (“caught on the horns of a dilemma”). In this type of dilemma the person is required to give up one unfavorable alternative for another that is not quite so bad. For example, In a paradoxical situation the person cannot choose between two opposing alternatives if a positive outcome is to be expected. Both opposing alternatives must be preserved in whatever choice is made.

Managers also face tradeoffs in their work, but not all tradeoffs are dilemmas or paradoxes. Tradeoff, as used here, is rooted in the economics

of opportunity cost (Maital, 1994; Pindyck & Rubinfeld, 2001). When one managerial decision is made, this often requires the foregoing of other next best alternatives each of which offers anticipated or known benefits. Like the dilemma, in a tradeoff the manager is required to choose between two or more alternatives. For example, assuming limited resources a manager must decide where to invest available capital on property, plant, and/or equipment. Making a strategic commitment for one item means that the manager forgoes the opportunity to spend the money on something else. With paradox the decision-maker has the challenge of not choosing between best and next best alternatives but rather choosing in a way that fully embraces both simultaneously.

### INDIVIDUAL – COMMUNITY TENSION

The tension between caring for the needs of the individual while also caring for the needs of the group illustrates the interesting nature of paradoxes (Aram, 1976; Smith & Berg, 1987; Langfred, 2000). For example, a manager who supervises two workers will periodically ask himself, “How can I manage these people as individuals with their particular needs and wants and at the same time promote the interests of the organization as a whole and its shareholders such as achieving a profitable return on investment?” When a manager appeals to employees to commit to the shared organizational vision this may subvert employees maintaining a realization that multiple goals exist among various stakeholders (Calton & Payne, 2003). The individual-community tension may be represented at the nexus of two competing theories: agency theory and stakeholder theory. Agency theory focuses primarily on the manager’s duty to serve the needs of the organization. Stakeholder theory argues that managers must serve the needs of a variety of stakeholders (Crowther, 2002).

The individual-community tension, is an example of a fundamental tension that managers in all types of organizations face. It also is interesting since it offers a chance to consider how the Christian manager’s religious beliefs might be applied. It is believed that the poles of these tension points are interdependent opposites. Managerial

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actions that support one pole have a corresponding (and sometimes unintended) impact on the other pole since the two extremes are interrelated. What adds to the difficulty is that these opposites are actually inverse functions. One pole, if left to itself, sows the seeds of destruction of the other.

defense. In the end, Moses' decision was that Reuben and Gad's request to settle on the east side of the Jordan River would be granted but only on the condition that these two tribes would assist the other ten tribes in securing their new homeland.

## How can I manage these people as individuals with their particular needs and wants and at the same time promote the interests of the organization as a whole and its shareholders such as achieving a profitable return on investment?

This is one of many business paradoxes that have existed for hundreds of years and continues to exist in all organizations, regardless of culture. Another assumption is that many fundamental organizational paradoxes are inescapable and inherently unresolvable in favor of one pole or the other, and that attempting to do so would be destructive to both polar opposites and possibly the organization as a whole.

To give legs to this abstract concept of individual-community tension,<sup>ii</sup> consider a few examples.

In Numbers 32:1-32 we have an interesting narrative of Moses being faced with the need to care for the desires of two individual tribes (Reuben and Gad) as well as the needs of the whole nation. If these two tribes had located on the east side like they wanted, they would have available some of the best grazing lands for their flocks and herds. They would gain this benefit at the expense of reducing the mutual support they could offer the rest of the nation. Being on the east side of Jordan would geographically cut them off from the other tribes and they would be less able to help or be helped by the other tribes in common

In his second epistle to the Thessalonians Paul (2 Thessalonians 3:6-15) discusses the importance of individual responsibility to the community. Paul was a proponent of freedom in Christ (Rom 6:18; Gal 5:1). But freedom does not mean license to become a burden to the community.

Consider the situation as simple as the company lunch room. To take care of some of the individual needs of employees, all employees have the privilege of using the room with its equipment. At the same moment that any given individual exercises this freedom in using the room, that person is expected to fulfill a responsibility in keeping the room clean for everyone in the organization. At the heart of this tension is that at the same time individuals have freedoms and group responsibilities. Freedom constrains responsibility and responsibility constrains freedom. Managers of all organizations build a system of constraints in the form of company rules, policies and procedures. They also give employees a measure of freedom within the constraints.

An organization's wage and benefit pack-

age is one way to manage the tension between individual interests and organizational interests. Contributions to retirement plans and the compensation bring together the individual's financial interest and the organization's need for a stable workforce (Aram, 1976, p. 14).

This individual-community tension occurs at the macro-international-level, too. For example, one country's refusal to accept participation in the Kyoto Protocol occurs within the context of a world community of nations the majority of which have agreed to the terms of the Protocol.

Another setting in which this tension plays out is when an employee requests her employer to make a workplace accommodation for religious practices. Depending on the nature of the request and the type of work that is being performed an individual's personal beliefs may either be in alignment with, not opposed to, or in conflict with the goals of the organization. As a manager attempts to apply the provisions of the law, he will need to make the judgment whether the request for accommodation requires an unreasonable burden be carried by the organization.

There are times when leaders require of subordinates to perform work tasks that while moral are unpleasant. The leader can be courteous and caring in demeanor when delegating the tasks. Nevertheless the tasks need to be done. Employees may disagree and even wave the flag of unfairness at the leader in an attempt to avoid having the tasks given to them. Leaders are sometimes in an unenviable position of having to listen to the concerns of employees and in the end giving them the task assignment.

Every leader has been faced with the challenge of giving individual team members freedom and caring for their individual needs (Johnson, 1996, p. 56, 251). The more the leaders emphasize the individual needs, individuals are likely to become isolated from the group, more focused on their personal goals and interests. More than that, the more individuals are the dominant concern, the more likely the whole team will begin to lose its central focus or common direction. Team support will start to suffer. Individual self-interest can turn into individual selfishness. But the other extreme also is risky. Emphasizing team work structuring the team to promote cohesion, solidarity and

team support will require increased sacrifices on the part of individual team members. The more connected the individuals become to the team the more isolated they become from their personal goals and interests. Leaders who give all for the sake of the team end up creating stability, as well as excessive conformity, staleness, loss of creativity and groupthink. Individual personal needs are neglected. Community self-interest can turn into group selfishness.

### SCHOLARSHIP ON THIS PARADOX

The tension of individual freedom and responsibility to the common good has been at the foundation of political philosophy discussions during the last three hundred years (Locke, 1690/1823; Hobbes, 1660/1996; Rousseau, 1762/1913; Milne, 1968; Lukes, 1971). Although this tension point appears to be at the root of the difference between a constitutional, free-market democratic approach and a centralized socialist approach to governing the individual-common good question, it applies to more than just the level of the State (Koslowski, 2005).

This tension seems to be at the heart of social and cultural studies. Sociologists Parsons and Shils (1962) included a form of this tension in their general action theory of social interaction in which they observed a framework of choices that all social entities must make in a given situation. In terms of the topic of this paper and seen from the point of view of the individual organizational member, the self-collective choice involves an individual deciding whether an action should be on behalf of private interests or of collective goals. Hofstede's (1984, 1993) research has raised our awareness regarding how different cultures view the individual-community tension (see also Ketcham, 1987; Kim *et al.*, 1994; Triandis, 1995; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998, p. 51-69). This tension exists in all social relationships from the family, dormitory or apartment roommates, marriage, organizations, domestic society, the relationship between a company and its market, and in the relationships among the world of nations. It is at the root of the moral and social challenges that contemporary business faces (De George, 2006, p. 10, 13). As such,

this social paradox of belonging is a discussion relevant to organizational leaders and managers (Aram, 1976, p. 3; Lewis, 2000, p. 769; Smith & Berg, 1997; Amason, 1996; March, 1991; Keidel, 1995; Bouchikhi, 1998; Collins, 2001). It is at the heart of transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1990, p. 21).<sup>iii</sup>

In the management literature the inseparable connection between managing individual needs while managing the organizational needs to get tasks accomplished was recognized nearly a century ago by Henri Fayol (Sheldrake, 2003, p. 49). As Fayol put it in 1916

*Two interests [general interest of the firm, personal interest of the individual] of a different order, but claiming equal respect, confront each other and means must be found to reconcile them. That represents one of the great difficulties of management. (Fayol, 1949, p. 26)*

Fayol believed that the natural human tendency is toward promoting their individual interests rather than promoting general interest of the organization. Thus, workers need constant supervision and firmness but fairness.

Fayol's assertion about the importance of this issue agrees with Charles Perrow (1986) who has called this the "basic and enduring problem for all organizational theory" (p. 66). This belief has been echoed by other management thinkers, too. Organizations are at the same time economic systems and social structures (Selznick, 1948). In order for the organization to succeed, the contradictory dimensions of both organizational control and individual consent must be in place. Selznick (1957) states that

*within every association there is the same basic constitutional problem, the same need for an accommodative balance between fragmentary group interests and the aims of the whole, as exists in any polity" (p. 9).*

This individual-community tension is implicit (and at times explicit) in the writings of Barnard (1938), Argyris (1957, p. 66-74, 175-208), March and Simon (1993) and Simon (1997). The issue underlies leadership behavior studies

(Katz, Macoby & Morse, 1950; Fleishman, 1953; Blake & Mouton, 1964; Fiedler, 1967; House, 1971). More recently the persistent nature of this tension was raised by Hamel (2007, p. 7, 36).

The Scientific Management approach espoused by Frederick Taylor (1911) in handling this problem attempted to balance the strong need to constrain the autonomy of individual workers for the sake of the organizational goals. The Hawthorne studies revealed to scholars the importance of caring for the economic interests of the organization at the same time as caring for the individual and small group social interests and social meaning that workers bring to their economic tasks. Scientific Management principles alone cannot solve the core problem of human collaboration (Mayo, 1933; Roethlisberger, 1941).

Max Weber's celebrated approach to handling this problem was in the context of creating impersonal bureaucracies where policies and procedures guided individual behaviors toward achieving organizational goals (Weber, 1947). If individual workers believed that their personal needs were not being cared for, policies were in place directing the workers on how they should pursue a complaint.

Later scholars developed the contingency theory as a means to consider a given situation and then apply one pole of the paradox or the other, whichever was needed at the time and circumstance, to resolve the tension (Clegg, 2002). Following the contingency theory approaches, early leadership/motivation researchers implicitly incorporated this individual-community tension into some of their research. The University of Michigan and Ohio State University studies are notable examples. Successful leaders, it was thought, are those who keep a healthy emphasis on both concern for production (the organization) and concern for people (individuals) (Stogdill & Coons, 1951; Fiedler, 1967).

Individual organizational members can find their individual needs met as the needs of the organization are being met. But sometimes the individual needs conflict with organizational needs (Aram, 1976). A degree of individual self-interest is allowed. But when self-interested behaviors exceed organizational needs, the

organizational leaders will attempt to place limits on self-interested behavior. Likewise if the other extreme occurs, i.e., the organization self-interest becomes too dominant, individuals will respond by attempting to limit the organization (e.g., terminate employment, form a collective bargaining unit, go on strike).

We can think of this cognitive tension being self-imposed. Every individual willingly joins an organization to work to fulfill vocational drives and for economic survival. On becoming an employee (or volunteer) the individual voluntarily gives up a measure of individuality in favor of pursuing the goals of the organization. The person is willing to submit to and cooperate with authority and as a result is willing to be organized according to the wishes of organizational leaders or negotiated among peers. Thus, on the one hand the organization

*contains free, creative, independent human subjects; on the other hand the relation between these subjects aspires to be one of organization, order and control (Clegg, Cunha, & Cunha, 2002, p. 483).*

As soon as an individual joins an organization an interesting independence – dependence relationship is established. To fully experience independence in the context of group life, one has to constantly be giving expression to one's dependencies. "For only as reliable dependencies are established does interdependence emerge" (Smith & Berg, 1997, p. 142). It is as individual members come to depend upon each other as individuals that the group as a whole becomes a dependable entity to serve society.

According to Mulhare (1999), the term administration, comes from the Latin *administrare*, when translated means "to serve." The Latin word *administratio* means, among other things, "giving of help," which has a similar connotation as does "serving." But the Latin root also includes the idea of directing. The difficulty comes in that serving can be thought of both in terms of serving the organization and in terms of serving individuals.

In order for an organization to develop a strong culture, its leaders must require conformity to the shared organizational values (Pas-

cale, 1985). At the same time intellectually and culturally individuals are opposed to manipulation of individuals for organizational purposes. We want all new employees to become socialized into the organizational values such that they internalize these values into their being-thinking-doing patterns. Yet we also value new employees who bring us new ways of being-thinking-doing that, if we incorporated what they bring into the organization, we could become stronger. This challenge is important for the Christian manager who values human freedom – derived from the image of God at creation – but also values the stewardship responsibility of watching out for the interests of the organization and its goals.

#### RELEVANT BIBLICAL THEMES

The subject of tensions in organizational leadership is not presented *per se* in Scripture. Nevertheless Scripture offers some insights that can guide our thinking about this tension. Three themes from Biblical theology, one metaphor from the New Testament, and several corollary passages and concepts need to be considered with respect to the tension point in leadership in focus for this paper.

Mead (2007) describes the usefulness of Biblical theology not only in terms of the foundation for doctrinal and confessional theology but also for addressing matters in national or global communities which this author takes to include issues of organizations and organizational leadership (p. 169). Concerned with the theological message of the whole Bible, Biblical theology attempts to understand the theological subject matter of Scripture as it was understood during the times, languages and cultures of the Bible itself (Barr, 1999, p.4; Rosner, 2000, p. 3). Biblical themes were chosen that appeared to have *prima facie* direct relevance to the topic of this paper. There is insufficient space here to thoroughly review all these themes.

Two intertwined themes that run through Scripture seem especially central to the task of grounding our understanding of the individual-community paradox on the Bible: God's creative and covenant-making activities for redemption.

Biblical scholars who have highlighted these two apparently inseparable themes include Mead (2007), LaRondelle (2005), and Dumbrell (1984). Mead states that “in one sense, the entire Biblical story plays itself out in terms of decisions that God makes in the spheres of creation and redemption” (p. 187). Both creation and redemption are about establishing “special relationships with individuals and groups” (p. 187). A third theme from Biblical theology, inseparable from the preceding two, is that of community.<sup>iv</sup> In addition to these three Biblical themes, the New Testament teaching on the incarnation of Jesus Christ is used by Paul as a metaphor to discuss relationships in the human sphere (Philippians 2:1-11). Because of how Paul uses this metaphor it is worthy of consideration here.

## CREATION

Creation theology has an interesting perspective to offer. The Scripture message that “it is not good for man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18) indicates the importance of the individual’s interdependent relationship with community. No one person is an island. We are all our brother’s keepers (Genesis 4:2-9). Just the same, Adam and Eve each were created as autonomous creatures with the freedom to make choices. In addition, we see early on through the conversation between Adam and Eve and then between the couple and God how important is the interrelationship between the individual and the community.

It is at creation that we first see the Biblical teaching on wholeness. Human beings are whole creatures as individuals (Hoeksema, 1966, p. 199; Berkof, 1941, p. 192). However, wholeness by nature is not complete until it is seen as both individual *and* communal *and* environmental. We were created free, autonomous beings that are responsible to the greater community and to God. It is at creation (before sin) that we see established the inseparability of the individual from community. Satan’s lie, in part, was that humans would be able to survive as completely autonomous beings living apart from a temporal existence in the creation community. He implied that individual behavior has no affect on the social group.

Two points seem particularly relevant when

considering creation theology. First, this tension may reveal the aesthetic value of the created world given by a loving God who values complex social relationships. When He had finished His creative work, He pronounced the whole created order as “very good” (Genesis 1:31). Although this work of art is more abstract than the beauty inherent in physical creation, the beauty of the structure of social relationships is no less stunning when its full significance settles into the mind.

With this God gives leaders the privilege of continually standing in front of one of His great works of art (the complexity of social relationships) and soak up the beauty with awe. At the moments when the individual-community tension is acute leaders may not at first see the aesthetic value of God’s creation. As they become open to experiencing God at work in their life as a leader in the midst of these tensions, they will come to appreciate the inherent beauty of preserving both individual needs and community needs.

Second, the individual-community tension is an amazing opportunity for the Christian leader to exhibit the image of God when, like Moses and Solomon, using creative power to come up with solutions that meet the needs of both individual and community. As the leader in humility repeatedly helps a community work through this tension, the work of creation continues as humans participate as co-creators with God in providential behalf of all of God’s creation (cf. Stevens, 2006, p. 6 – 9, 22 – 25).

## COVENANT

Another interesting perspective is the Biblical theology of covenant relations (Rendtorff, 1998; Walton, 1994; McComiskey, 1985; Eichrodt, 1961). One of the central unifying themes of Scripture, the idea of covenant “becomes the interpretive lens for seeing clearly the conceptual and historical unity of the Bible in the midst of its diversity” (Hafemann, 2007, p. 23).

McCann (1997) and LaRondell (2005) believe that the theme of God’s covenant relations should be imitated by humans in their interaction with each other. McCann, emphasizing the covenant of redemption, says,

*The Biblical idea of covenant is the tem-*



*plate for all social relationships, especially those that become institutionalized. Its basic structure is an interactive relationship between God and humanity that is asymmetrically reciprocal. God and humanity collaborate in fulfilling God's purpose in creating the world; hence, the covenant is a structure of reciprocity.*

McCann states that the Bible insists that human institutions “must embody covenantal norms” (McCann, 1997, p. 12). LaRondelle, emphasizing the covenant at creation, says that “the reality of a human being as the *imago Dei* (humans created in the image of God) implies the call to the *imitatio Dei* (humans called to follow God's example).”<sup>v</sup>

If the Biblical idea of covenant is used as a model for managing the tension explored here, it matters whether you view the covenant as first being between God and community or between God and individuals (Novak, 2000, p. 78). If the covenant is viewed as primarily between God and the community, the Christian organizational leader will attempt to model this and will likely manage the individual-community tension in favor of the organization and its goals. But, if the locus of the covenant is with the individual, the leader may likely manage the tension in favor of individual interests.

*Creation in the image of God means that every human being is capable of a direct relationship with God, and that relationship is the basis of the dignity of each and every human person, a dignity that any human society is obligated to respect and enhance (Novak, 2000, p. 84).*

Covenantal loving-kindness (Micah 6:8) will be the guiding principle. According to Novak in the Jewish tradition the communal needs of humans take precedence over individual needs since “communal needs are greater” (Novak, 2000, p. 157).

If Christians are to use the covenant relationship model in their leadership, we find that the Biblical covenants were both corporate and individualistic. If either pole is left out of the picture, the entire covenant relationship God would be undermined.

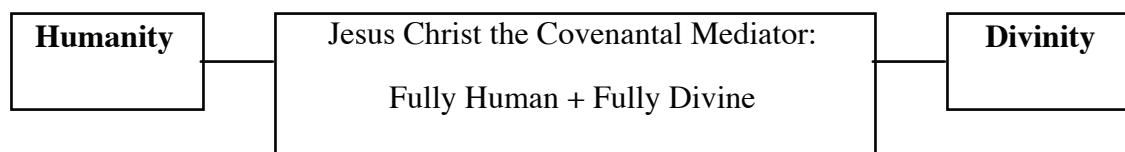
## COMMUNITY

Even though the scripture describes the relationships established at creation and through God's covenantal promises as encompassing whole groups of people, the Bible emphasizes individual responsibility. When the law was given by God at Sinai the nation as a singular whole was addressed but the provisions of the law were meant for each person to obey. The hierarchical organization recommended by Jethro to Moses

*gave each member of the community a sense of connectedness to the whole while also ensuring their sense of belonging to an intimate fellowship (Mead, 2007, p. 237).*

The organization of families and the nation enabled individuals to experience the blessings envisioned in God's promises while also considering the needs of the whole community. The fundamental principle of doing unto others what you would have them do unto you and the

**FIGURE 1**  
**THE PARADOX OF THE INCARNATION**



second great command given by Jesus to love others as you love yourself (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 7:12; 19:19; 22:39-40; Mark 12:31-34; Luke 6:31; 10:27-37; Galatians 5:14) are not just isolated maxims but are firmly rooted in the understanding of what it means to be a member of a community where covenant principles guide all relationships.

What was promoted in the Old Testament is consistent with the record in the New Testament. New Testament writers are adept at moving from describing individual responsibilities and benefits to discussing the church as a whole. The Old Testament describes life in God’s community in terms of community members imitating the God of creation and redemption. This life of imitation, not to earn salvation but in loving response to God’s work of salvation, brings about a life of true peace (*shalom*) – peace for individuals and peace for the community as a whole. The mutual care of individuals for each other and for the group as a whole is described in the New Testament in terms of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12).

From his review of the individual-community theme Mead (2007) concludes that individuality is not to be “swallowed up in the community but rather to find full expression there” (p. 237). Scobie (2003) suggests that God’s call is not just to individuals but also to the community as a whole. Referring to Jesus’ proclamation of the “inbreaking of the kingdom of God” Scobie says that sanctification should be “understood in corporate and not just individual terms; it is the new *community* that is called to be ‘a holy nation’ (1 Peter 2:9)...” (p. 766-767 italics in the original).

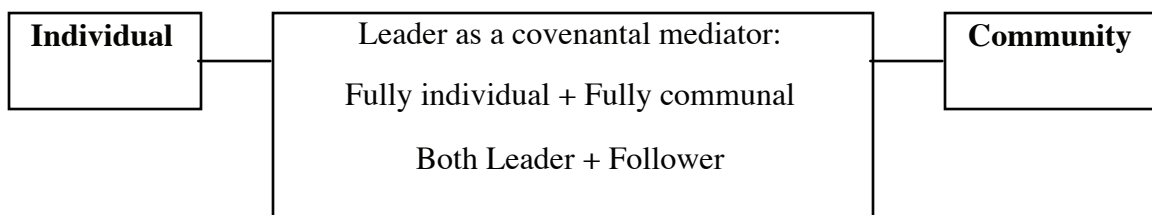
## INCARNATION

An additional Biblical teaching highlighted in the New Testament that seems relevant here is the incarnation. Paul states in Philippians 2:1-11 that the incarnation is a metaphor to be emulated for human relationships. It is in the incarnation that we see the humble person and work of Christ shown in a compelling manner. The person of Christ being fully human and at the same time fully divine is inseparable from the covenantal mediatorial work relationship He took on by coming to this earth. Here the covenantal Messiah, the creator and redeemer, engages humanity in a self-imposed humility as a servant toward both the divinity and humanity. Paradoxically, a fully-human, fully-divine person was needed for God’s covenantal promises to be fulfilled in Christ. (See Figure 1)

Following Paul’s example in Philippians this can be appropriately applied to the work of leaders in an organization. The Christian leader, whether official or unofficial, is part of the community like any other individual in the organization. As such the leader has personal interests as well as communal interests like any other member. In following Christ’s model, the leader will completely identify with the individual follower who expresses a particular need at the same time as fully identifying with the community humbling himself/herself toward both the individual and the community as a servant.

Only in this broader context of covenant and incarnation can true servant leadership be understood. Here the leader’s work is to encompass the mind, heart, and soul of the community as well as that of one person in that community. At times

**FIGURE 2**  
**LEADERSHIP MODELED AFTER CREATION,**  
**COVENANT, COMMUNITY & THE INCARNATION**



the leader must speak to and for the community as well as advocate for the individual. The leader is truly a covenantal mediator embracing both individuals and the social group being a servant not just to individuals (the most common understanding of servant leadership) as well as the group and its needs. (See Figure 2)

Other teachings of the scripture add rich guidance on how this tension point will be worked out in the life of a leader; to these we turn next.

### **COROLLARY TEACHINGS FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT**

With so much emphasis placed on authority and dominion over others, the Hebrew words for managing might give the impression that managers were expected to lord it over their subordinates. Here the Hebrew Scriptures present another tension point. On the one hand managers are expected to look out for the interests of the organization they serve. They have a job to do. They delegate tasks to subordinates and they expect subordinates to obediently follow their direction. If subordinates do not perform, their managers might punish them (Prov 12:24; 14:35). On the other hand, managers are seen as having disproportionate amounts of power compared with subordinates. Because of this, managers must use this power responsibly. Managers must not forget that like their subordinates they were created in the image of God. Following God's character of loving kindness and faithfulness is the goal for managers as they exercise their authority just as God exercises his authority over the whole earth (Prov 20:28).

Managers should act with integrity and justice. (Deut 1:17; 2 Samuel 23:4–4; Prov 10:9–10; Prov 11:1, 26; Prov 12:17–19; Prov 16:11–13; Prov 17:23; Prov 21:3; Prov 23:24–25; Prov 24:28; Prov 25:13; Prov 28:16; Prov 29:4; Eccl 7:7). Managers will destroy their own soul if they are cruel to their subordinates. But if they are good, their soul will be nourished (Eccl 8:9; Prov 11:17; Exod 21:20). The wise leader will not speak in anger but will control his or her emotions (Prov 12:16; Prov 14:29; Prov 16:15, 32; Prov 19:11, 19; Prov 29:11). When it is in the manager's power to do good to a worker

who deserves it, the manager must not withhold this (Prov 3:27). In every thing that is done as a manager it is honor to God and obedience to Him that is paramount (Eccl 12:13, 14).

### **COROLLARY TEACHINGS FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT**

New Testament teachings related to the work of a manager also offer some important insights regarding managing the individual-community tension. Reference was made above to the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12) and the incarnational model of ministry (Philippians 2:3–4). To these we should compare other teachings.

Whoever desires to be a great leader of a group will be a servant to others (Matt 20:20–28; Matt 23:11; Mark 9:35–37; Mark 10:35–45; Luke 9:46–48; Luke 22:24–27). Some of Jesus' strongest criticisms of leaders of His day were directed toward injustice and lack of integrity. Followers of God have a responsibility to serve those in need, to correct injustices and to serve with integrity (Matt 8:1–3; Matt 21:12–13; Matt 23:13–29; Mark 2:15–17; Luke 11:42–52).

Church leaders should serve willingly as gentle shepherds. They should avoid serving for the purpose of dishonest personal gain. Subordinates are submissive to those in authority; those in authority are submissive to their subordinates. Leaders should be sober and vigilant (Gal 5:13–14; 1 Peter 5:1–10). Leadership is shared among many people in the faith community. It is not only the elders and deacons who serve. Many others have been given gifts that are useful for the faith community. Each one with his or her spiritual gift will be used by the faith community in some leadership capacity (1 Cor 12).

Sire (1990; p. 25, 58–59, 64–67) sees in Paul's writings the individual and communal connections (See Ephesians 6:11; 1 Corinthians 12). Sire states that the

*Christian world view avoids the fatal traps of both individualism and collectivism. It declares from the outset that each of us is unique and in the image of God, but that the God in whose image we are made is communal (p. 64).*

## SECULAR APPROACHES TO MANAGING TENSION

If this tension is one of the basic elements of organizational life, how should the leader manage the tension? Various approaches to managing paradoxical tensions have been considered by scholars. Johnson, (1996) and Smith and Berg (1997) portray the management challenge as one of facing the paradox head-on. Johnson recommends that the manager involve the members of the organization (or team) in dialogue so that the discussion can become a learning process. Smith and Berg recommend confronting paradoxes since ignoring them or attempting to resolve them ultimately will fail.

Clegg, Cunha & Cunha (2002) see three standard approaches to managing leadership tensions. The first approach is to attempt to eliminate the opposites. Here the leader chooses between the opposite poles. This is the simplicity approach that discounts the relationship between the two opposites. Besides the belief that eliminating the tension is impossible, attempting to eliminate the paradox removes one of the most important forces in the organization to keep all the members “in a continuous awareness” (p. 487). This can be destructive.

A second approach is to attempt to strike a balance between the opposite poles through compromise. The problem with this approach is that opposites don’t easily lend themselves to balancing since each polar opposite requires *full* emphasis. In terms of the tension explored in this paper partially emphasizing one pole is an attempt a compromise that ultimately undermines both poles and results in destruction of the organization.

The third, more popular approach takes into account an assumption that both polar opposites require equal emphasis. With this the leadership task is to integrate the opposites through synthesis of on-going dynamic tension. Concertive control is a possible synthesis between individual autonomy and group control (p. 488). Synthesis emerges in the specific situation (p. 498) when

*both poles of a paradox are present simultaneously. It differs from a compromise because the latter results*

*from forsaking part of each opposite whereas, in a synthesis, opposites are present in their full strength (p. 494).*

This view of synthesis is similar to that described by Ming-Jer (2002) from the Asian perspective.

In the idea of synthesis may be an element of truth supported by Scripture that guides the Christian leader. This will be considered in the discussion that follows.

## DISCUSSION

Several implications of the individual-community tension for the Christian leader follow from the review of the tension in light of Biblical theology.

One can conclude from the findings of management and leadership scholarship confirmed by the Biblical record that the fundamental individual-community tension exists in society. It very likely is a world-wide, universally experienced phenomenon (Triandis, 1995). Perhaps we can see in this tension the work of a wonderful and wise Creator (Psalm 104:24; Proverbs 3:19-20; Jeremiah 10:12; Romans 11:33).

Sire (1990) asserts that the Christian world view “avoids the fatal traps of both individualism and collectivism” (p. 64). This may be true in theory, but is it true in practice? Some scholars believe that individualism may be the dominant experience for those whose faith community is aligned with Protestantism while collectivism may be the dominant experience for those aligned with Roman Catholicism (Triandis, 1995, p. 23; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998, p. 53-54). If this observation is valid, one implication is that Christian leaders from differing faith traditions may manage the individual-community tension slightly different from each other.

Central to the individual-community tension is the element of interdependence.

*Part of the Christian understanding of reality is that human beings are interdependent, and they have to rely on and serve one another (Rossouw, 1994, p. 563).*

This makes ethics a communal activity and

not merely an individual or private matter. An important implication for the Christian leader is that part of the leadership role is to manage the community dialogue as decisions regarding what is right and wrong are made.

Attempting to untangle this fundamental tension of leadership may lead to conflicts and group paralysis (Smith & Berg, 1997) while attempting to preserve and even celebrate, it offers hope for conflict resolution and successful, dynamic group life. For groups to effectively work together, individual group members must immerse themselves into rather than attempting to flee from the opposing forces inherent in their work. Organizational leadership, in part, may be the attempt of one or more members of the organization to encourage immersion into these opposing forces. However, leaders who attempt to over-simplify or eliminate this paradox may be creating a default choice that undermines true service to both individuals and the organization.

When faced with a difficult individual-community decision it can be tempting to simplify an answer to the question “What would Jesus do?” by emphasizing the need to care for individuals. The assumption is that the needs individual persons should always take precedence over the organization. But, to simplify such decisions in this way is to see Jesus in an isolated, minimal role in salvation history as the Savior of individuals only. If Jesus is Creator, Covenant-promise Giver, and head of the community in which individuals and communal needs are both important, wouldn’t Jesus as leader care for both individual needs as well as communal needs?

Applicable here may be Chris Blake’s (2000) assertion that “the closer we get to truth, the closer we get to paradox” (p. 19). If a Christian manager expects to discern God’s will in a specific individual-community decision, yet is unable to achieve this discernment quickly, this leaves the Christian in a potentially precarious position of apparently either lacking faith or lacking the proper understanding of how to discern God’s will. But if we allow for the possibility that God reveals His will to us through providential paradoxical situations in organizations, managing paradox as God would have the Christian to do might mean capturing the “enlightening po-

tential” (Lewis, 2000, p. 763) of those paradoxes as they emerge. If the advice of organizational scholars can be relied upon, paradox management “entails exploring, rather than suppressing, tensions” (Lewis, 2000, p. 764). For the Christian this will be of interest. Believing in the midst of this paradox one can find God’s truth, the Christian manager will desire to bring every thought of this cognitive tension into captivity to Christ by preserving the integrity of both the individual and the community.

Paradoxically God is both immanent and transcendent.<sup>vi</sup> He reveals Himself through Scripture and through the person and work of Christ. He also may reveal himself through the nature (Gaebelein, 1968, p. 29, 30) of this created social paradox. When a Christian leader feels caught in the crucible of this paradox not knowing immediately how to give due regard to both individual and organizational needs, it could be that both the immanence and transcendence of God are at work at that very moment. On one hand, the leader desires to know God’s will but on the surface God may not reveal His specific will (Transcendence) immediately. On the other hand, if the leader stays with the cognitive tension and listens to the wisdom of others in the community, the situation itself may become a Providential leading to understand God’s will (Immanence).

Leaders (and their followers) become obsessed with the product of a leadership decision or action. They cry out, “Decide and tell us your decision!” When faced with the individual-community cognitive tension, perhaps it is the community journey or process through the ambiguity that is just as important as the product of the decision. When the leader is given the opportunity from the organizational community to walk alone (yet in community) in dealing with the tension, the leader may find God in the paradoxical still small voice (of aloneness) and in the storm (of the competing voices in the organization) (cf. 1 Kings 19:11-12).

Another fundamental issue that Christian leaders should address is whether or not the demands of contradictory leadership behaviors undermine, have no effect on, or actually support integrity. On the surface and to the person who is unable to see beyond personal self-interests, the

apparently contradictory behaviors of serving the needs of the individual and serving the needs of the organization can appear to be a sign of lack of integrity. But at a deeper level, once the issues of the paradox are explored and once the person has the benefit of actual experience in dealing with the paradox, one might say that to simplify the situation ignoring the paradox will undermine integrity. It might be debated whether integrity is merely an individual matter or both an individual and a communal matter. If the latter is true, to allow for simultaneous contradictory behaviors may actually foster true integrity.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP EDUCATION

Several implications derive from the review of this tension. First, business, management and leadership students in higher education might receive benefit from being exposed to the idea of paradox – especially the fundamental individual-community tension. Such exposure should naturally lead to consideration of the Biblical expectations of what it means to be salt and light in society. This exposure can be in the form of classroom lectures and discussions. However, personal experience in leadership at the same time as classroom learning might give the best opportunity for learning the issues. If this is true, Christian business or leadership professors would do well to encourage (or require) students to take an active leadership role in an organization during the same semester as leadership concepts are learned in the classroom. Student leadership experiences that align with this and other paradoxes considered here can be explored in personal journals as well as during class discussions and personal mentoring. During these discussions the professor can ask the students to share their stories and to reflect on what this has taught them about leadership and about themselves. These discussions can then be used to reinforce the importance of listening to God, to individuals and to the community when making a decision.<sup>vii</sup>

Professors in leadership can remind students that the Christian leader who faces a paradoxical tension point is at an amazing point of sacred

leadership space (cf. Holmes, 1985, p. 21; Sire, 1990, p. 17) of working alone on behalf of the community and paradoxically at the same time also working with the community through listening to the voices in the community. These moments are some of the holy ground locations, small Sabbath-like times when Christian leadership occurs (cf. Exodus 3:5 – 6; Joshua 5:143 – 15).

Our definition of servant leadership should be revisited with the understanding of the tight individual-community interconnection in mind. (Cf. Greenleaf,<sup>viii</sup> 1977) Organizational scholars and Biblical theology both suggest that individual and communal interests are inseparable. If this is true, servant leadership cannot be seen in a narrow way as applying only to serving the interests of individuals, individual customers, or individual suppliers. Rather, to be truly servant leadership, such leadership must be a humble stewardship that serves the individual needs *and* the organizational or communal needs as well as environmental needs.

Numbers 32 can be used as a Biblical case study. The professor can assign students to read just the first part of the story (Numbers 32: 1 – 15) and then discuss various options that Moses might use for resolving the situation. With each option evaluated students can consider both the long-term and the short-term impacts. At the end of the discussion students can be asked to read and evaluate the choice that Moses made (Numbers 32: 16 – 32).

Giving voice to the import of a paradoxical situation recognizing both the needs of the individual and the needs of the community helps community members continue to give their consent and support to the leader. Here is where visioning on a day-by-day basis is helpful to both the leader and the community. When we confine the discussion of visioning to the strategic planning process, we unintentionally leave out a major portion of the operational visioning work of the leader. Visioning is not just talking about the great things that will come in the future when a new strategic plan is implemented. Visioning also is about taking what is going on right now in the community in terms of the tension points and giving voice to opposing sets of needs. The

professor can help students practice giving voice to the issues contained in this sacred space. Taking situations from the students' experiences and then showing the different ways in which the leader can talk about the situation to all involved. Students can role play and explore the advantages and disadvantages of creatively framing the vision in particular ways.

Paradoxes such as the one explored in this paper provide the professor an opportunity to teach Christ-centered leadership from a perspective that students are unlikely to receive from religion classes (Cf. Gaebelein, 1968). This will give students an opportunity to see an adult Christian explore their own personal challenges within the context of Scripture principles. As the professor discusses personal experiences where this paradox was prominent, it provides an additional opportunity to explore the question, "Where is God during ambiguity?" The emerging paradox revealing God's will in the context of providential events in organizational life of a community, provides the professor the opportunity to discuss creation theology, covenant theology, the incarnation, providence and related topics.

Professors also are classroom leaders. How lecturers care for both the individual needs of students in a course as well as the group needs models for students the leadership potential in this tension point. Preparation of the course syllabus, day-to-day course management, and classroom discipline all are opportunities for modeling these principles. When individual students come with requests, discussing the matter in terms of both individual needs and group needs with the student (or when appropriate, with the class), can help the student understand the point of tension that the professor is at and in so doing to walk in the shoes of the other class members.

Finally, this tension also offers an opportunity for the professor to explore the calling of the Christian leader with students. Each community needs a leader to whom the community gives or shares the power to make decisions on behalf of individuals and the common good. This sacred space of decision making illustrates an important element in the leader's sacred calling. When the community asks a leader to carry this community burden of decision-making in the midst of ambi-

guity one mile, the Christian leader will carry it two miles (cf. Matt 5:41).

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The author acknowledges the traditional distinction that is often made between being descriptive and prescriptive in an academic paper. When we consider Scriptural principles potentially imbedded in this fundamental tension, to be either descriptive or prescriptive limits the ability to explore the tension point. By their nature, paradoxes are complex. Just like the reality they represent, they deserve exploration rather than either description or prescription.

<sup>2</sup>Sometimes referred to simply as individual-collective, individual-group and freedom-responsibility. For discussions of the historical development of individualism (which dominates American style democracy), and how this tension is lived differently in the USA compared with an Asian country such as Japan, see: Ketcham, R. (1987). *Individualism and public life: A modern dilemma*. New York: Basil Blackwell, Inc.; Lukes, S. (1971). The meanings of 'individualism.' *Journal of the History of Ideas*. 32(1), 45 – 66; Parsons, T. & Shils, E. A. (1962). *Toward a General Theory of Action: Theoretical foundations for the social sciences*. New York: Harper & Row.

<sup>3</sup>Notice the unmistakable connection of the individual-group tension and transformational leadership: "Superior leadership performance – transformational leadership – occurs when leaders broaden and elevate the interests of their employees, when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, and when they stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group. Transformational leaders achieve these results in one or more ways: they may be charismatic to their followers and thus inspire them; they may meet the emotional needs of each employee; and/or they may intellectually stimulate employees... transformational leaders are individually considerate, that is, they pay close attention to differences among their employees; they act as mentors to those who need help to grow and develop." (Bass, 1990, p. 21)

<sup>1</sup>Griffiths (1986) has pointed out that the doctrine of the Trinity also can be seen as a Biblical model of the individual-community interdependence (p. 53 – 55).

<sup>1</sup>Imitatio Dei is sometimes referred to as Conformitas. Direct Biblical support for the idea of humans imitating God include: Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; Deuteronomy 7:6; Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 6:35-36; 1 Corinthians 11:1; Ephesians 4:32; 5:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:6; 1 Peter 1:15-16; 1 John 4:11.

<sup>1</sup>Bible verses typically offered in support of the immanence of God are: Exodus 19:4; 25:8; Deuteronomy 4:5-7; Psalm 27:14; 73:28; 119:151; 139:7-12; Isaiah 12:6; 40:28-31; Ezekiel 43:7; Zephaniah 3:15-17; Zechariah 2:10; Luke 17:20-21; John 1:14; John 15:4; Acts 17:26-28; Romans 8:10; 1 Corinthians 2:1; 2 Corinthians 6:16; 13:5; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 4:6; Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3; Hebrews 4:16; 10:22; James 4:5, 8; Revelation 3:20; 21:3. Bible verses typically offered in support of the transcendence of God are: 1 Kings 8:27; 2 Chronicles 2:6; Job 11:7-9; 36:26; 37:23; Psalm 90:2-4; 139:6; 145:3-5; Isaiah 40:13, 18; 57:15; 66:1; John 4:24; Acts 17:24; Romans 11:33; 1 Corinthians 2:6-16; 1 Timothy 6:16.

<sup>1</sup>The author has used this approach for several years in two undergraduate leadership courses: Organizational Behavior and Organization Theory & Design.

<sup>1</sup>Like many of his time Robert Greenleaf was an outspoken critic of organizations. His concept of servant leadership is focused primarily on serving individual members of the organization. His assumption seems to be that if you serve individuals, the organization and its needs will automatically be taken care of – an assumption that should be evaluated in light of the issues raised in this paper and in light of organization theory.

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