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## *The Power of the Covenant Idea for Leadership, Reform, and Ethical Behavior*

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### **Introduction**

The study of leadership is awash with numerous concepts, many of which overlap. To the student and the scholar, finding a starting point and integrative theme for leadership ideas which extend from interpersonal to organizational contexts can be dizzying. This paper proposes the idea of covenant as a unifying metaphor for these valuable and often overlapping leadership ideas. The covenantal approach has had a tremendous impact on the history of Western legal and perhaps, more importantly, social and cultural thought and therefore might offer us a realistic and practical approach to effective leadership. In particular, we will see that a covenantal model emphasizes the following:

- 1) An ethos of empowerment, mutual care, and mutual accountability;
- 2) A leadership style of servant leadership;
- 3) A process of participative decision-making;
- 4) A structure of non-centralization; and
- 5) A culture of spirituality in the workplace.

### **Defining Covenant**

Elazar (1995) defined covenant as:

*A morally informed agreement or pact based upon voluntary consent, established by mutual oaths or promises, involving or witnessed by some transcendent higher authority, between peoples or parties having independent status, equal in connection with the purposes of the pact, that provides for joint action or obligation to achieve defined ends (limited or comprehensive) under conditions of mutual respect, which protect the individual integrity of all the parties to it. Every covenant involves consenting (in both senses of thinking together and agreeing) and promising (pp. 22-23).*

Covenants are means of “constitutionalizing” relationships within a political context, in that their “bonds are used principally to establish bodies political and social” (p. 23). Indeed, Bratt (1980) argued that covenants are the means by which entire societies constitute themselves. Covenant is such a “worldview” idea, as Elazar, (1980b) argued, that it speaks to its role as both a theological and political construct. According to Bratt (1980), “politically, covenants have been made by entire societies — with God, each other, and/or themselves — and by single groups (the Puritans and Covenanters) or institutions (churches of various types) within societies. Such compacts, far from being token gestures, have often been regarded as the very foundations of corporate existence and well-being” (p.1).

Theologically, covenants from a Judeo-Christian perspective reflect an understanding of God's relationship with man "based upon morally-sustained compacts of mutual promises and obligation" (Elazar, 1980, p. 6). Politically, "covenant expresses the idea that people can freely create communities and polities, peoples and publics, and civil society itself through such morally grounded and sustained compacts (whether religious or otherwise in impetus), establishing thereby enduring relationships" (p. 6). Covenant, then, is at its core a relationship.

It is this emphasis upon relationships that distinguishes the idea of covenant from other political ideas, which generally emphasize just structure (Elazar, 1980). The covenant emphasis upon relationships comes in the form of autonomous members freely choosing to come together to enter an agreement. As Kincaid, (1980) argued:

*Since there is no need in this view to adopt all members into the same family or unite them into a homogeneous organism, the covenant community has the character of a matrix or mosaic of diverse partners who retain individual integrities. Unlike the organic order, it is plural. As such, covenant is not limited to the small spaces characteristic of most organic orders; covenantal arrangements can create large civil societies based upon consent and freedom rather than a conquest or extended kinship. At the same time, unlike contractual conceptions of civil society, covenant does not aggregate radically dissociated individuals (pp. 44-45).*

Undergirding this conception of relationship is the concept of *federal liberty*, (the term *federal* refers to covenant, as *fedis* is the Latin word for covenant). Federal liberty does not mean total, unlimited freedom, but rather the liberty that comes when parties enter into a covenant, agreeing to serve one another and to protect and affirm one's another rights and consensual goals (Elazar, 1995). Mutual accountability enhances federal liberty, and in this liberty, members of the covenant find the freedom from both anarchy and tyranny.

Covenant members choose to love one another, and this love is not based upon kinship (Kincaid, 1980), but upon moral obligations and divine command to love one another and go beyond the "letter of the law" (Elazar, 1995). Kincaid further argued, "Covenant love directs attention beyond the self to the good and goods of others and to a common good of the community, thereby tempering individualism without destroying individuality. Such affection may also curb the emergence of autocratic structures and narrow legalisms because, as trust and affection decline, people tend to retreat into stronger, more elaborate, protective structures" (1980a, p. 45).

A covenant's emphasis upon relationship further distinguishes it between terms such as contract, compact, or constitution. A contract, for instance, is "a matter of private usage," and therefore private law, whereas a covenant is a matter of "public usage" (Elazar 1977, p. 3). McLean (1980) agreed, arguing that a covenant speaks more to multi-faceted, community-based relationships and interactions, whereas a contract focuses on a more explicit and specific relationship. In addition, a contract does not include any relational understanding of forgiveness. Because a covenant is established to fuse parties together in a long-term relationship, it allows for the process of forgiveness.

The relational component also explains the interconnection between the terms *constitution* and *covenant* because a "covenant precedes a constitution and sets the frame for it" (Elazar, 1977, p. 4). Thus, a constitution is created to bear written record to the stipulations,

terms, and agreements ratified in the negotiation process. However, because the covenant is a reflection of the wills and desires of the members, the constitution can be amended “as new conditions present themselves because it is a process oriented metaphor in which community, personhood, and ultimate reality are dialogically-dialectically understood” (McLean, 1980, p.13).

### **The Biblical Basis of Covenant**

Covenants are explicitly religious whereas contracts and compacts do not explicitly invoke the name of God. Covenant “refers to a situation where a moral force, traditionally God, is a party, usually a direct party to, or guarantor of a particular relationship” (Elazar, 1977, pp. 3-4). Though the idea of covenant existed in the Near Eastern culture outside of the Biblical tradition, the Biblical tradition influenced this idea substantially (Elazar, 1977, 1978, 1981; Walzer 1985). According to Elazar (1978):

*The Israelites took over the idea and techniques of covenant-making from their neighbors but turned the idea on its head. Mesopotamian and West Semitic covenants were designed to limit previously independent entities by making them vassals, regulating their external behavior but leaving their internal life alone. Israelite covenants, on the other hand, functions as liberating devices that call into existence new entities. God, by entering into a covenant with humans, accepts a limitation on the exercise of his omnipotence, thus endowing mankind with freedom but the price of that freedom is the acceptance of an internal reform, as well as external obligations. The covenant becomes the framework for mutual obligation and the basis of a new law and politics internally and externally (p. 7).*

As Perry (1990) argued, God’s covenant with the Israelites affirmed their ability and authority to act as freely-choosing moral agents, giving them both the ability and the responsibility to choose to obey God and love one another. It is this enabling feature of the Biblical covenant, according to Walzer (1985) that distinguishes it from the “suzerainty treaties” that marked the Exodus era. He noted:

*There is no precedent for a treaty between God and an entire people or for a treaty whose conditions are literally the laws of morality...popular recalcitrance and vanguard initiative, murmuring and purging, make only a part of the Exodus story. Indeed, it is central to the narrative strategy of the author (or the final editor) of the story that the purges come after the covenant, though the murmurings begin before. The ultimate justification for the purges...lies not in divine will but in popular willingness ... (p.74).*

Kincaid (1980) echoed Walzer’s (1985) sentiment, noting that the Eastern worldview is a closed system, where even the gods are limited to the creation. The God of the Bible however, is separate from creation; indeed, since creation emanated from His Word, man had hope of being more than just a product of the physical environment. Man could indeed operate as a free moral agent. Further, progress comes with the Hebraic covenant as demonstrated by God making a promise with man for redemption at the appointed time (McLean, 1980). Unlike the cyclical views of time in the Eastern worldview, this approach values both the past and the future as significant, since, after all, progress and redemption are promised by the God of the covenant.

Elazar (1977, 1978, 1980a, b, c, 1981, 1995) argued that not only did the Old Testament substantially develop the idea of covenant, it relies heavily upon covenant as a means of

explaining God's relationship with man and the divinely-mandated relationship between man and his neighbor. God made covenants with man in the form of the Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, Davidic, and Mosaic covenants (Elazar,1995), and the books of the Prophets remind the Israelites that they have abandoned the terms of the covenant:

*It has been suggested that the prophets even presented their critiques of Israelite society in the form of covenant lawsuits. . . . If this indeed the case, then the prophets help to round out the covenantal system by suggesting that it has a negative dynamic as well, that is to say, it provides a framework for bringing charges against Adat Bnei Yisrael [the nation of Israel] for violating the terms of the covenant, and this is one of the major tasks of God's messengers, the prophets (pp. 338-339).*

Three key terms from the Hebrew Old Testament serve to illustrate the Biblical distinctiveness of the covenant idea and the important role that covenant plays within the Biblical tradition. The first term is *brit*, or *berith*, which are the Hebrew words for covenant (Elazar, 1979, 1995; Torrance, 1980), and appears in the Old Testament 286 times. It essentially means "to bind together or fetter" (Elazar,1995, pp. 64-65). This definition speaks to the process of how members are bound together into a new entity as they enter into the covenant agreement.

A second Hebrew term is *shamo'a* and/or *vayishma*, which means hearkening, or hearing and choosing to respond. Elazar (1995) noted, "hearkening is a form of consent whereby the individual receives an instruction and in the process of hearkening makes a decision to accept and follow it" (pp. 70-71). Therefore, hearkening is not merely obeying, because obeying is an involuntary response engendered by the nature of hierarchical relations.

The third Hebrew term — *hesed* — means loving fulfillment of covenant obligations (Elazar,1995). It plays an essential role in explaining the Biblical idea of covenant, and has garnered extensive study (Clark, 1993; Elazar, 1977, 1995;Glueck 1967). Elazar (1995) noted:

*The operative mechanism of brit [covenant] is hesed. The biblical term hesed is often mistranslated as grace but is better translated as covenant love or the loving fulfillment of a covenant obligation. Hesed is the operative term in a covenantal relationship, which translates the bare fact of a covenant into a dynamic relationship. It prevents the covenant from becoming a mere contract, narrowly interpreted by each partner for his benefit alone, by adding a dynamic dimension requiring both parties to act toward each other in such a way as to demonstrate their covenant love; that is, beyond the letter of the law (p. 71).*

The strong emphasis upon covenant in the Old Testament is carried into the New Testament (actually, Amos [1996] argued that the word "Testament" may be a poor translation, where the correct word should be covenant). The New Covenant was actually promised in Jeremiah 31:33, in which God promised to write His law in man's heart via a "new covenant" (McLean, 1980). It was the law of the Mosaic Covenant which the Apostle Paul called a teacher—it taught man that he could not live up to the righteousness of God on his own. As a result, the relationship which God initiated with man in the Old Covenant has been fulfilled through Jesus Christ (Glueck 1967; McLean 1980; Torrance 1980). Related to the continuity of the covenant idea found in the Old and New Testaments is the idea of marriage as a covenant. Marriage, insofar as it too is a covenant relationship, is

used to demonstrate the relationship between God and His people, both in the Old and New Testament (Elazar & Kincaid, 1979; Freeman 1981; McLean 1981).

### **Leadership Application**

As noted above, covenant provides several meaningful points of application for leadership best practices. First, covenant provides an ethos of empowerment, mutual care, and accountability. Covenants can neither be coerced nor reduced to *quid pro quo* contractual relationships. Pava (2001) emphasized the fact that equal yet independent agents come together to create a “shared community.” All parties to a covenant do not only carry out certain agreed upon duties, but also care for one another and encourage meaningful relationships. The very essence of a covenant is people coming together and choosing to care for and submit to one another — remembering again the act of *hearkening* — of choosing to listen and engage. In this way, covenant affirms both individual rights and what is best for everyone because individuals retain their own rights by caring for one another. Covenant relationships emphasize trust, mutuality, and shared values (Neuman & Kickul, 1998). Therefore, covenant relationships are based upon and require a deep sense of trust among all engaged parties (Arjoon, 2006). It is worth nothing, of course, that this sense of *hesed* — this sense of mutual care and accountability — was demonstrated first by the God of Scripture, both in Old Testament covenants and in embodiment of God as man — Jesus Christ. If Christ demonstrated *hesed* to the same humans who would later want him crucified, no leader can justify operating in a paradigm of leadership that is coerced or uncaring of followers.

This point serves as a nice transition to *leadership* offered by a covenantal perspective. In a covenant, leaders serve followers and are accountable to them. We see parallels to this in ideas like servant leadership, where leaders are encouraged to serve, develop, empower, and provide for followers (Tuan, 2016). In turn, SL leads employees to be more engaged with the group and to care for customers because they have been cared for and acknowledged as meaningful contributors to the organization (Ljungholm, 2016). The research on servant leadership continues to abound today, and it would be helpful to understand how an interpretation of *hesed* contributes to servant leadership. But we can also see important tie-ins to the study of transformational leadership. In this perspective, leaders inspire followers by creating a sense of shared vision, and letting followers contribute to the formation and implementation of that vision. This is similar to the very nature of creating and ratifying the covenant. Transformational leaders are also urged to see the potential in followers — to call out those gifts which followers might not even recognize, and to show followers how much they can actually contribute to organizational success. Thus, empowerment is a key facet of TL (Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009). This encouragement and empowerment again fulfill the covenantal ethos of mutual care and accountability.

The *process* of covenant is again based upon mutual accountability and care, and the result is participative decision-making. This is again an organizational best practice that involves the process of ensuring that followers have a meaningful say in organizational decisions and outcomes. PDM can lead to better decision-making because those impacted by the decision have a say in crafting the decision itself, ideally leading to better outcomes (Yeung, 2004). In turn, PDM has been found to lead to both perceived supervisor and organizational support (Reeves, Walsh, Tuller, & Magley, 2012). If leaders understand the importance of

being accountable to followers, they will remember that PDM is an important practical step in doing so. On a related note, a whole host of best practices falls under the umbrella of human resource management, which places an emphasis on practices such as self-managed teams, teamwork, job rotation, cross-training, pay-for-skill programs, and profit-sharing (Cappelli & Neumark, 2001). Likewise, HRM has been linked to enhanced organizational citizenship behavior (Paillé, Chen, Boiral, & Jin, 2014) as well as decreased employee turnover (Alfes, Shantz, Truss, & Soane, 2013).

The *structure of* covenant is non-centralization. Non-centralization does not describe chaos or anarchy, but rather a living, vibrant organization wherein individuals and groups have all taken an ownership stake in seeing the organization succeed. Thus, power is shared among various centers or “spheres” of influence, and these various spheres defer to and collaborate with one another in a spirit of mutual care and accountability. Instead of battles over turf or resources, teams and departments come together to find the best solution for the organization and for one another. Instead of advancing individual agendas, people engage in “big picture thinking” and frame their concerns and initiatives in terms of what is best for the organization and those it serves. Instead of being over-reliant upon one charismatic leader whose departure can often lead to chaos and a decline in performance, non-centralization reflects an active and constant development of new leaders who are willing to step forward as the organization grows and changes. As noted above, this is different from decentralization. Decentralization describes what is often mandated from the top down for the purposes of the removal of organizational layers, perhaps to save costs or increase responsiveness and flexibility. The research reveals a mixed bag for the benefits of decentralization. When it is done well, it empowers lower-level decision-makers to actually make and implement decisions (Hempel, Zhang, & Han, 2009). When it is done poorly, it can lead to confused lines of decision-making and lack of accountability and focus (Bannik & Ossewaarde, 2011; Esmail, Cohen-Koehler, & Djibuti, 2007).

Finally, the *culture of* covenant is self-sustaining and again supported by empowerment, mutual care, and accountability. A close interface from the research literature is that of Spirituality in the Workplace (SIW). SIW encourages leaders to foster an atmosphere where as much as possible, followers can see the link between their personal contributions to work and their own personal fulfillment and sense of meaning in life (Batcheller, Davis, & Yoder-Wise, 2013). This sense of fulfillment is in turn aided by a sense of teamwork, collaboration, and again, empowerment (Gatling, Kim, & Milliman, 2016). It is no surprise that SIW has been linked to increased profitability, productivity, and long-term success for the organization (Khasawneh, 2011; Wang & Han, 2016). It can be said to be an outworking of covenantal ideals.

### **Historical Roots of the Covenant Idea — Does Covenant Work in the Real World?**

Looking back at the history of how the idea of covenant influenced society is instructive to the question of whether a covenantal model might work in real-world contexts. Covenant originated in the ancient era of history, particularly in the Biblical emphasis. Because the New Testament took the idea of covenant from the Old Testament and expanded its application through the words and work of Jesus Christ, the idea of covenant was poised to influence the world through the influence of the early Church. Says Kincaid (1978, p. 70): “Growing up on the soil of the Roman Empire and reflecting a mix of covenant and polis

teachings, Christianity taught that the new covenant, which tended to be more personal-individual than that of the Old Testament, made possible an entire human community based upon love and faith.” This idea of covenant — a community of love and faith — allowed for ethnic diversity under the common faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, it was within this context that the idea of separation of powers — a covenantal framework of action concept — came into play as the early Church asserted its independence from any Roman law that prompted disobedience to the Gospel and Jewish societal norms (Adams, 1981). So here we see an organization birthed and sustained out of love and empowerment of its members rather than a hierarchical creation and assignment of value and structure.

The idea of covenant was initially diluted in the Medieval Era due in part because of the ways in which the Hebrew terms were translated into Greek. When the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek, the Hebrew terms *brit* and *berith* were translated into the Greek term *diatheke* (Amos, 1996; Freeman, 1980). The problem with this term is that it does not connote a sense of covenant, in which parties come together to agree upon terms, but rather a last will and testament, in which one party stipulates to another party without any negotiation (Amos, 1996b; Freeman, 1980). Furthermore, when the Latin *Vulgate* was written, translators went directly from the Greek into Latin, meaning that *diatheke* was translated into *testamentum* (Amos, 1996), thus depriving the covenant idea of the power and strength of the original meaning of the Hebrew term.

Despite this, Medieval Jews still kept alive an understanding of covenant as they sought to preserve their identity in Europe through the establishment of “inter-community federations” (Elazar, 1978, p. 16). The legal discussions and debates in these federations dealt with questions of participatory leadership and rule by consent. Elazar wrote:

*In short, the greater part of Jewish public law in the medieval period had to do with interpreting the meaning of compacts and the rights and obligations of those who came to be party to them, so much so that several historians of the period have suggested that Jewish thought on these matters anticipated the political thought of Hobbes, Locke, and other seventeenth-century social compact theorists—in my opinion, a correct observation on their part, particularly since both schools flowed from a common source (pp. 17-18).*

Indeed, it was Hebrew scholars who helped introduce the idea of covenant into Western Europe. In the 5<sup>th</sup> Century, Jerome, studying with Hebrew rabbis, translated the Scripture into Latin directly from the Hebrew and therefore recaptured the covenantal idea through terms like *fedis* and *pactum* (Amos, 1996).

Furthermore, it was this emphasis upon covenantal principles that strongly specifically influenced both the Reformation and the American founding era and the modern era as a whole. To understand this influence, Reformational theology and its history must first be examined. A key component of Reformational theology—federal or covenantal theology—was developed by Reformational thinkers who accepted Jerome’s emphasis of the covenant idea in his translations (Torrance, 1980). Amos (1996b) wrote:

*The age of federalism began when the Reformers criticized the existing translations of Scripture and used the word "covenant" in many places that older translations had used "testament"... After the sixteenth century, the Puritans, the Huguenots, the Calvinist*



*Anglicans, and the Scottish Presbyterians moved away from a "testamentary" view of God and religion, and adopted a "federal" or covenant view of Scripture (pp. 17-18).*

This emphasis upon covenant led to radical political implications as Reformers began to challenge not only the hierarchical power of the Catholic Church and the divine right of kings, but also hierarchical relationships in general. What the early Church had lost – the political implications of covenant – the Reformers embraced (Elazar, 1979) and with it embraced the notion of empowerment and mutual accountability.

All of this was due to their understanding of covenant. Walzer (1965) argued that the Medieval conception of the “chain of being,” with its permanent hierarchical social order, was rejected by Reformational thinkers because of their understanding that in the Old Testament, the Israelites reaffirmed relationships between God and man and between man and man via periodic reaffirmations of the covenants between them. Therefore, “the idea of divine calling, in contrast to that of natural hierarchy, did not necessarily suggest a permanent social position” (pp.168-169). Hence, no one could claim ultimate, permanent authority over another, “unlike the bonds of nature and blood that of consent must on occasion be renewed or else it lapses” (pp. 168-169).

The non-centralized nature of covenants led many reformers to challenge political authority (Reid 1981; Skillen 1980; Torrance 1980; Walzer 1965, 1985). Rulers had an obligation to protect the people, and were bound by covenant to do so. Furthermore, if the rulers broke such a covenantal bond, the people had a right to overthrow the king. This belief passed from Calvin to Knox, and from Knox to French Huguenots like Theodore Beza, who further developed the idea of civil resistance (Reid, 1981). Indeed, the idea spread throughout much of Europe (Skillen 1980; Torrance 1980).

In Geneva, Calvin called for a social covenant in which rulers and citizens alike would proclaim obedience to God’s law (Walzer, 1985). Within this voluntary, non-coerced consent came a sense of mutual accountability and submission. Walzer (1965) declared that:

*The covenant, then, represented a social commitment to obey God’s law, based upon a presumed internal receptivity and consent. It was a self-imposed submission to divinely imposed law, but this self-imposition was a social act and subject to social enforcement in God’s name. With the covenant, Christian discipline was definitely substituted for secular repression; all the citizens of the new commonwealth conscientiously accepted an absolute dominion which they recognized as godly. And this presumably brought with it an end to such anxiety as could have an earthly end, for it vastly increased the effectiveness of the repression of the old Adam (pp. 56-57).*

Calvin also developed a theory of civil resistance known as *interposition*, in which the lesser magistrates have the authority and duty to remove a leader who is violating God’s law (Amos, 1994). Such action assumes a material breach of the covenant, in which the ruler has violated the nature and integrity of the agreement made with God and the people.

Knox, influenced by his readings of the covenant between Old Testament kings and the people and Calvin’s writings on covenant, concluded that “drastic action was needed to remind the rulers that with the Reformation, England had become a nation covenanted to God. The new rulers therefore, were under obligation to govern the country in accord with God’s will” (Reid, 1981, pp. 4-5). He furthermore argued that the people had the right to

armed resistance against a king or queen who behaved as a “tyrannical and idolatrous ruler” (p. 16). The Scottish reformers followed his lead, “making ‘bands,’ ‘pacts,’ ‘covenants,’ ‘contracts,’ and ‘political leagues’ to defend their freedom, to preserve the rights of a people vis-à-vis their sovereign, and to stipulate the rights of a sovereign vis-à-vis his subjects” (Torrance, 1980, p. 2).

The *Vindiciae contra Tyrannos*, (*Vindication against Tyrants*) written by Philippe du Plessis-Mornay, discussed the idea of a “double covenant” which comprises the relationship between the ruler, the ruled, and God. In the first covenant, the ruler is responsible to God, and in the second covenant, the ruler and the people together are responsible to God. It was the people who have the authority to choose the ruler (Hill 1965; Reid 1981; Torrance 1980). Under the theory of divine right, the king rules by heavenly mandate and is ultimately not chosen by the people. Samuel Rutherford’s *Lex Rex*, or the *Law of the Prince*, echoed this argument, and became a political manifesto for Scottish Covenanters (Torrance, 1980).

Covenant ideas also played a role in the establishment of the United Netherlands in 1609 after the expulsion of the Spanish, including its emphasis on religious tolerance (Elazar & Kincaid, 1979). In order to fight the oppression of the Hapsburg empire, Switzerland applied “the same federal principles to the confederation of communities that they had to earlier unions of individuals and families” (Elazar, 1980b, pp.25-26). Furthermore, covenantal theology influenced key political philosophers like Locke, Montesquieu, and Hobbes, who spoke of the importance of social contract (Elazar, 1979; Elazar & Kincaid 1979; McCoy 1980).

Inherent to the idea of challenging hierarchical, arbitrary power was the idea that individuals are empowered when entering into a covenant with God. Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669), one of the most influential federal theologians of the Reformational era, helped develop this idea. McCoy (1980) argued that because Cocceius viewed history as a process of divine-human interaction through covenants, the actions of men played a key role in advancing God’s plan, both at a socio-political level, but also in the personal and corporate struggle against sin. According to covenantal theology, humans are responsible for being just and upright. With this emphasis upon individual human responsibility came continued religious freedom within the political regime (Skillen, 1980).

Dutch Reformed theologians Groen, Kuyper, and Dooyeweerd (1980) introduced and developed the idea of “sphere sovereignty,” where church and state, as separate and Godly-mandated entities, have certain freedoms and responsibilities and that one cannot coerce the other. This argument reflects the development of furthering separation of church and state, which began in Europe and continued in America. This trend was a result not of secularists who felt that religion should be kept out of the public square, but rather of devout Christians who, because of their covenantal worldview, believed that liberty is best protected for all by keeping church and state from interfering with one another’s God-given affairs. Note that this idea of sphere sovereignty also affirms the idea of non-centralization where members have taken ownership of the organization and defer to and collaborate with one another to achieve success.

As seen, the political ideas inherent to the covenantal worldview — rule by consent, mutual accountability, non-centralization, and empowerment — contributed to many of the political upheavals in Europe (Elazar, 1980a; McLaughlin, 1961; Walzer, 1985). These changes

were due to an application of the Biblical definition and explication of the covenant idea. In fact, Elazar argued that a key political impact of covenantal theology was that “*covenant, natural law, and constitutionalism* became to a degree intertwined” (p. 10), meaning that political radicals had an extensive and well-developed political worldview, allowing for individuality and compacting (Amos, 1994; Elazar, 1980).

The changes wrought by covenantal ideas in Europe spread to America as well (McCoy, 1980). As mentioned above, rulers with a Catholic perspective, and therefore a testamentary view of ruling, did not welcome the emphasis upon covenantal principles. Therefore, all across Europe, persecution of Protestants was rampant (Amos, 1996). Many Protestants fled their home countries to avoid this persecution, and often they fled to America. Amos pointed out that:

*All throughout Europe adherents of federal theology who also favored a covenantal view of government came under severe repression, including not only the Puritans of England, the Presbyterians of Scotland, but also the Huguenots of France. Decade after decade, large numbers fled or migrated to America. They brought with them their stories of suffering and injustice, and they made sure that their new neighbors, their children, and their grandchildren knew the intimate details. The memory of these atrocities was still very much alive and current at the time of the American Revolution. It was remembered by Puritans and Presbyterians in New England, by Huguenots in North Carolina, by Baptists throughout the middle colonies, and by Scottish Presbyterians in the Blue Ridge. . . . In America, federal theology flourished from the very beginning* (p. 25).

America, therefore, was greatly influenced by covenant (or federal) theology (Elazar, 1979; Lutz, 1988; Schechter, 1980). The covenant idea was a large part of the Puritans’ approach to life (Greenstone, 1985; Miller, 1956; Miller, 1963; Rothman, 1980;). They “sought to place all human relationships on a covenantal basis...Secular government among the Puritans was also instituted by compact among the residents (or potential residents) of every town. The Mayflower Compact was the first such act” (Elazar & Kincaid, 1979, p. 6). McLaughlin (1961) also emphasized the covenantal nature of the Mayflower Compact. Winthrop argued that the good commonwealth was one committed to “federal liberty” (Elazar, 1981).

The other colonies also adopted a covenantal approach to forming political governments, a practice which continued on in the era of statehood (Elazar, 1980a, b, 1981; Elazar and Kincaid, 1979; Lutz, 1980, 1988; McLaughlin, 1961; Schechter, 1980). Lutz (1980a) argued that “regardless of how we label specific early American documents, it is clear from their consent and the context in which they were written that there was a strong if not dominant communitarian basis. The use of ‘compact’ rather than ‘contract’ implies community, or the desire for community” (p. 6). Furthermore, state constitutions and various other legal documents contained frequent references to covenantal terms and concepts (Lutz, 1980; 1988). In short, constitutionalism as seen in the colonies — and which later evolved into what we know as the American Constitution — were covenantal derivatives and an expression of the importance of mutual care and accountability. People who seek to be empowered — that is, people who seek both liberty and order — ensure that power is shared among all relevant members and that no one entity is able to consume and abuse power. Rights, liberties, and divisions of power are in turn recorded in

constitutions. It is no surprise that during the Founding Era, the source quoted the most by the Founders was the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, which itself is the constitution of the Mosaic covenant. If God would limit himself to a written accord, surely human leaders can see the value of mutual accountability.

Americans' understanding of liberty during the founding era mirrored Winthrop's (1980) emphasis upon *federal liberty*. He noted that "this concept of liberty had its roots in the Christian notion that men have free wills and are morally responsible creatures as a result of their being created by God in His image and likeness. Men are thus meant to be self-determining creatures, limited in their actions only by the laws of God" (pp. 7-8). In turn, the Puritan's emphasis upon liberty, framed within the context of covenantal principles, set the tone for future American political developments:

*The covenant principle has also served the cause of individual and social liberty. In its most basic meaning, the right to contract implies the freedom of all the contracting parties. This is one reason why the Puritans, even though aspects of their regime in Massachusetts would be considered repressive by contemporary democratic standards, can be regarded as the fathers of American liberty. Their application of the daring biblical idea that people are free enough to make pacts with God became one of the bases for all people's claims to liberty in relation to one another (Elazar, 1980d, pp. 24-25).*

We can use this notion of federal liberty as a helpful guide to understanding what empowerment truly is. Ostensibly, empowerment is about the designation of freedom and power to a particular individual, but if that is all it is, an organization would be crushed under the weight of this type of competitive and selfish empowerment. On the contrary, for empowerment to work, it must work within the context of covenant. Each member must realize that individual empowerment occurs within the restraints of covenant, of mutual care and accountability, and of *hesed*. These are the ties that bind and sustain. Thus, empowerment is not about unlimited freedom or anarchy, but about federal liberty — freedom with restraint.

The idea of the covenant formed the basis for its Declaration of Independence from Great Britain (Elazar & Kincaid, 1980; Lutz, 1988) as well as its government (Lutz, 1980). If one reads the Declaration of Independence, the covenantal ethos can be seen throughout. It provides an affirmation of human dignity and empowerment, and also provides a list of grievances perpetrated against the colonies. The document recounts the numerous instances the American colonies sought to mend the damaged relationship with Great Britain, without recourse. We can see the same approach as a model for the working through conflicts in an organizational setting. Terminations or departures should be rare, and only after a strong effort to make things right — to clarify expectations, resolve misunderstandings, and preserve the relationship.

Indeed, federal theology was a large part of the American tradition in 1787 because "it was not the property of philosophers, theologians, or intellectuals alone. In its various adaptations, it was used for a variety of very public enterprises from the establishment of colonial self-government to the creation of the great trading corporations of the seventeenth century. Americans made covenants or compacts to establish new civil societies regularly" (Elazar, 1979, pp. 7-8).

This covenant emphasis, of course, ensured that American citizens were protected from arbitrary rule and therefore disempowerment (Elazar & Kincaid, 1979). The American emphasis upon individual liberty represented a step forward in covenantal ideas, since American colonies and eventually its national government allowed for a much higher degree of popular sovereignty than did her European counterparts (Lutz, 1988). It should come as no surprise then, that it was the disregard of the covenant idea that led to a justification of slavery (Greenstone 1985; Kincaid 1978).

Madison, who was influenced strongly by Locke, who was in turn influenced by federal theology, also espoused separation of powers as the best way to ensure liberty (Adams, 1981; McCoy 1980). Hence, American federalism contained a strong emphasis upon separation of powers, both within the national government and between the state and national government, as a means of ensuring the liberty of vast nation with competing interests (Elazar, 1979, 1982; Elazar & Kincaid, 1979; Lutz, 1988). The emphasis upon covenant found in the American founding continued throughout America's westward expansion, in the creation of new states and towns (Elazar, 1980 b, c).

The Dutch Reformed Church's understanding of covenantal theology is indicative of how the covenant idea speaks to modern society, with particular emphasis on the family structure. Indeed, the Dutch Reformed Church, as it applied covenantal principles, interacted with and critiqued modern society as a whole (Bratt, 1980). Furthermore, the Dutch Reformed Church drew from Abraham Kuyper's emphasis upon "sphere-sovereignty" in which church, state, and family all have key separate yet interrelated roles in society. This understanding helped the Dutch Reformed Church to critique and interpret modern society (Bratt, 1980, 1981). The church started with an emphasis upon the family as the key social unit in society, from which the institutions of church and state properly derived. Bratt (1980) contended that "In Dutch Neo-Calvinistic political theory, the family constituted the seed and basis of society; in fact, society was really just the family writ large" (p. 18).

From this emphasis upon the family sphere, the church was able to provide an understanding and critique of the current status of both church and state. For example, through an understanding of covenant, the Dutch Reformed Church critiqued Protestantism for the two extremes it denigrated into as it ignored covenantal concept of individuality within the community context:

*The great national churches...[followed] the tendency to live by the organic emphasis and to neglect the personal, [while] the minorities, the disenfranchised sects...led in the direction of forgetting about the organic and of cultivating only the personal aspects of the Covenant doctrine...The failure, on both sides, to make serious business of the truth of the Covenants must be put down as the beginning of the modern apostasy. The dangers...of an inclusive ecclesiasticism which ignores and neglects the cultivation of personal piety in its members, and...of a separatistic individualism which lacks all appreciation for historical continuity, are continually with us (Bratt, 1980, p. 13).*

The Dutch Reformed Church also critiqued modern societal ills as it drew from covenantal theology:

*Though, in the wake of 1929, for example, Kuyper denounced "the boundless greed" and "unscrupulous money-changers" of Wall Street, he would have no part of the New*

*Deal's recovery and reform plans: "We are now specially concerned with the vicious principle underlying the persistent efforts of our administration to extend the powers of the State into fields which are not its own...Any intrusion of the State into matters which can be taken care of by the people themselves...is an evil and to be regarded as a menace to civilization (Bratt, 1980, p. 20).*

The strong overall influence of covenant in America, argued Elazar (1961), allowed American churches to both address the social evils which European liberals and radicals sought to address while at the same time preserving a sense of order and community structure which the liberals and radicals abandoned when they left the European churches. The key difference between European and American churches, Elazar argued, was that in American churches, the laity controlled the membership:

*In the United States, on the other hand, these same churches were voluntary organizations usually controlled by the lay membership (if for no other reason than that they paid the bills). Consequently, when and where the spirit of change was abroad, either the traditional church itself changed, becoming less orthodox religiously, politically, or both; or the liberals joined other religious denominations that already represented more of the new liberal spirit of the age (p. 2).*

The American church was non-centralized, non-hierarchical, separate from the state, and this was due to the strong influence upon covenantal theology upon its psyche. But these covenantal ideals transcended church life and influenced the rise of modern organizations in America. Elazar (1980b) wrote that:

*Scientific and reform societies, labor unions, and professional associations as well as business corporations were formed on the basis of compacts or contracts. In many cases, they also contracted with one another to form larger organizations while preserving their own integrities. In so doing, they extended federalization into new nongovernmental areas, a pattern which continues to this day (pp. 23-24).*

And it is important to note that in a covenantal framework, contracts are based upon the foundation of *hesed* – the spirit of going the extra mile to serve the other members of the covenant. This is, of course, in contrast to *contractualism* (the author's term) – where contracts are written with much fine print and legalese so as to prevent the other side from finding loopholes in the agreement. Though often necessary, we can agree that ideally, all parties to a contract would understand not just the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law (*hesed*).

The covenant idea, introduced in the Bible, rediscovered in the Middle Ages, articulated in the Reformational Era, and reinforced in the American founding and Westward expansion continues today throughout the world:

*Today some forty percent of the world's population lives within the 19 polities which have adopted constitutions that at least purport to be federal in character, while another 32 percent live within the 18 political systems which utilize federal principles to some degree within a formally unitary framework. If we were to add into our calculations supranational federal arrangements, such as the European Community, the number of polities would be even larger and the share of the world's population directly touched by the federalist revolution substantially increased. While the variety of forms which the federalist revolution has taken is great, the American federal system*

*remains the single most influential standard against which all others are measured, for better or worse (Elazar, 1982, p. 1).*

### **Summary: Covenant as Unifying Leadership Metaphor**

In review, examining the theological and historical roots of the covenant idea allows for a detailed application of covenantal principles into leadership. First, the covenant idea stands in contrast to other philosophical and organizational approaches. In short, specifically because covenant properly posits a sound foundation for interpersonal relationships, it can then be applied to other organizational contexts, including structure, culture, and processes. Leaders accept the importance of covenantal duties to empower, care for, and collaborate with followers (Caldwell & Hasan, 2016). In turn, it is not surprising that covenantal relationships have been found to support organizational citizenship behavior (Matherne, 2015). Covenant then provides us with a guiding perspective for ethics, leadership, and organizational behavior. Ethical perspectives struggle with properly balancing the importance of individual rights and responsibilities with collective, socialized justice. A perspective on virtue ethics, while rightly emphasizing having the right attitudes such as justice and love, fail to provide a meaningful framework to ensure that those virtues are actually in full operation. Utilitarian approaches, while favoring the good of the many, may fail to protect the rights of individuals. A covenantal approach affirms the good of the many specifically by protecting the rights of each individual who freely consents to the terms of the covenant. Meanwhile, the operative principle behind covenant — *hesed* — assures that the ethical emphasis on virtue is also upheld.

This covenantal approach, which has already born fruit in the American democratic tradition, can in turn be applied to an organizational perspective. Covenant operationalizes the idea of empowerment in all of its facets. This in turn engenders a leadership approach based upon servant leadership and mutual accountability and organizational processes which encourage participative decision-making and non-centralization, and a culture based upon mutual care and concern (Fischer & Schultz, 2010). Non-centralization, is not to be confused with decentralization, because non-centralization, rather than just being about a “flatter” chain of command, involves the sharing of power among various sources so that all have a meaningful say and so that all can be involved in supporting the organization with integrity and care (2010). In short, covenant has much to offer us as we seek to build organizations and society on ethical leadership, mutual care and support, and justice. It is hoped that this discussion will lead to further study of the covenantal idea.

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