

Partnership in the Workplace: Covenant and Management-Labour Relations

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In recent years, most industrialized countries have seen the emergence of new forms of production and service provision. Work in plants and in offices is increasingly done by project teams. Often these mini-organizations are established for a set purpose and for a limited time. Further, the advent of modern communications technology has enabled such teams to carry out their tasks at a distance. Charles Handy and others have thus identified a new form of commercial organization called the “virtual organization.”¹ Its shape is provided not by a physical plant but by pathways of telecommunications. Workers do not need to assemble in a particular place to do their work; e-mail, the internet, and mobile phones put them in touch with each other no matter where they are. These developments, along with others, have meant that, now more than ever, trust is a key organizational factor. The changed situation, in which trust is a prominent value in business and industry, raises questions with which practical theologians need to wrestle. This essay is based in the premise that practical theology can, in fact, make unique contributions to this emerging discourse.

In general, both management and labour value trust in the workplace. Managers view trust, as they do everything else, primarily in terms of profitability. The efficiencies associated with the new manufacturing and service provision modes are only optimally achieved in a trust-based environment. Trust reduces uncertainty about the future and the necessity for continually guarding against opportunistic behaviour. It facilitates smooth, harmonious organizational functioning by eliminating friction and minimizing the need for bureaucratic structures to monitor behaviour. On the whole, workers also acknowledge the importance of trust. On the one hand, they want to be able to trust management to provide good pay and conditions. On the other hand, they generally appreciate being trusted. When they are given responsibility and when monitoring is minimized, they feel valued as workers and as persons. Moreover, when they are

1 See: Charles Handy, Trust and the Virtual Organization, in: Harvard Business Review 73, 1995, 40–50.

entrusted with a high level of self-direction and self-control, they have an opportunity to express creativity.

These considerations point to the pastoral implications of trust in an organization. A trust-based work environment produces a sense of well-being and enhances job satisfaction. When managers feel confident that staff members are committed to organizational goals and will perform their tasks accordingly, a considerable source of stress and frustration is removed. On the other hand, while an increased level of responsibility and expectation adds a certain stress for workers, it can be a positive stress when workers are given adequate training and support to meet those responsibilities. Monotony and boredom in work are replaced by a sense of challenge and satisfaction when workers are allowed significant levels of autonomy and participation in decision-making.

In this essay, I view this vitally important issue of organizational trust through the lens of covenant theology. I will show how the covenant theme informs and illuminates the discussion of trust that is taking place amongst organizational theorists. It is not immediately obvious that a covenant relationship between God and God's people, established in a cultural setting of the distant past, could speak in a meaningful way to the issue of trust in labour relations today. In order to show that there is, in fact, a strong connection, I will demonstrate that *partnership* is an appropriate link term. The recent conceptualization that has been done on partnership helps bridge the time and cultural gap, and it opens access to the biblical theology of covenant for contemporary labour relations.

A partnership is built through dialogue. Dialogue, in turn, has at least two basic requirements. First, the parties must be able to include themselves in each other's aims, needs, and aspirations. That is, each partner must be able to experience reality imaginatively from the side of the other. Second, management and workers must commit to work together in achieving their respective legitimate aims. My argument is that, in the covenant relationship with Israel, and later with all people, God established ideals that resemble these two essential characteristics of dialogue.

The essay is structured as follows. First, I develop the idea that partnership is in fact an appropriate covenant rubric. Next, I discuss the contemporary emphasis on partnership as developed in the literature on human resources management. I then interpret the shape of this partnership with reference to covenantal theology in Christian traditions.

Linking Covenant and Management-Employee Relations: The Partnership Metaphor

Other scholars have also endeavoured to use the theology of the covenant as an interpretive tool in analyzing relationships in the business or industrial firm. For example, Stewart Herman argues that vulnerability is the rubric

that links covenant thinking with the realities of the management-employee relationship.² I believe, however, that the way he uses the term *vulnerability* in relation to the covenant is problematic. Let me briefly indicate why I think that this is the case.

Herman suggests that contingency, risk, and vulnerability are key terms in a covenant ethic and that, as these factors are also crucial in management-employee relations, the possibility of covenant theology's informing organizational theory is indicated.³ While vulnerability is clearly a central factor in relations between management and labour, it is not necessarily an appropriate rubric to apply to covenant relations. Certainly the people of Israel were vulnerable to Divine chastisement. In fact, the covenant promises carried with them the threat of curse if Israel was unfaithful (as in Deut. 28:15–46, 29:20–28). However, an unfortunate consequence of selecting vulnerability as a covenant metaphor is that it highlights judgment. The *primary* aim in God's relationship with Israel is God's gracious self-communication through acts of protection, provision and deliverance. Divine chastisement is aimed at keeping Israel in that spiritual condition which allows the bestowal of blessings.⁴ The curse of the covenant has a very definite role, but it is a subsidiary one. In using the covenant to interpret vertical workplace relations, it seems odd to make a connection via a sub- rather than a super-ordinate principle. Moreover, what is really striking about early Israel's perception of its situation is that it is characterized not by a sense of vulnerability but of confidence and hope.⁵ See, for example, the oracles of Balaam (Num 23–24); the blessing of Moses (Deut. 33); the blessing of Jacob (Gen. 49); the song of Miriam (Ex. 15:1–18); and the song of Deborah (Jdg. 5).

If the use of vulnerability is problematic in characterizing the human relationships within covenant, its use with reference to the Divine involvement is even more so. How, I want to ask, can the notion that God is vulnerable to the people be squared with Israel's testimony to God's unlimited sovereignty and power? To suggest that the people's waywardness renders God vulnerable to frustration in the Divine project of fashioning a moral and faithful community implies that God is somehow in a position of reli-

2 Stewart W. Herman, *The Potential of Building Covenants in Business Corporations*, in: *On Moral Business: Classical and Contemporary Sources for Ethics in Economic Life*, eds. M. Stackhouse/D. McCann, Grand Rapids (Eerdmans) 1995, 514–520, esp. 518 f; Herman, *Durable Goods: A Covenantal Ethic for Management and Employees*, Notre Dame (University of Notre Dame Press) 1998, 34–38, 45–46.

3 Herman, *The Potential* (n. 2), 32.

4 Terence Fretheim, *Some Reflections on Brueggemann's God*, in: *God in the Fray*, eds., T. Linafelt/T. K. Beal, Minneapolis (Fortress Press) 1998, 24–37. Fretheim notes that, even in judgment, "there is within God a leaning toward Israel and being for Israel by virtue of the divine purpose and promises ..." (30).

5 John Bright, *Covenant and Promise*, London (SCM Press) 1977, 45 f.

ance. Such an implication runs counter to the biblical affirmations of Divine power and authority (as in Job 22:23 and Is. 46:8–10).

In moulding a moral community, God's ultimate aim is for Israel to be "a light to the nations" (Is. 49:6). God uses the chosen people as a witness so that the nations may know God and the offer of salvation. God thus constantly calls the people to fidelity in service of Divine purposes. But God does not rely on them in any ultimate sense; the Divine project can be actualized with or without Israel's help. God uses the people of Israel as a witness to the nations and forms them in the Divine way in order to strengthen their testimony. When the people are wayward the witness is weakened, but that does not mean that Israel has the power ultimately to frustrate God's project.⁶

Given the seemingly insurmountable problems associated with the choice of vulnerability as a term linking the biblical covenants with management-employee relations, we need to find a more appropriate one. Whatever rubric one chooses, it is not possible, of course, to set up a perfect match between the two sets of relational realities. Nevertheless, the metaphor chosen should at least draw upon a central aspect of the covenant tradition, on the one hand, and have the potential to illuminate the vertical workplace relationships, on the other. With this in mind, I suggest *partnership* as the connecting term. A genuine partnership is built on trust, and trust, in turn, is established in dialogue.

We will have to interpret the dialogue between God and Israel carefully, however. It does not exactly parallel the ideal for communication in the contemporary workplace. Whereas modern workers demand equal status and power symmetry in pressing their demands, Israel's pleas and protests could ultimately be put only as prayer. That it was nevertheless a real dialogue is due to God's grace, solicitude, and absolute commitment to the people's well-being. Here, I suggest, is the point at which the style of partnership expressed in the covenant can speak to the management-employee relationship. While words such as "grace," "mercy," and "lovingkindness" may not connect with the hard realities of industrial relations, the fidelity and integrity demonstrated by God in God's covenantal relationship with Israel surely do represent an ideal.

The partnership between God and Israel, to be sure, is not an equal one. It is founded on God's command and Israel's obedience. But this should not be taken to mean that Israel is simply the passive recipient of Divine law. The people have their own particular part to play in establishing and maintaining fellowship. As Ernest Nicholson points out, the bilateral nature of the covenant can be seen in a reference to what is probably the earliest de-

6 Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Minneapolis (Fortress Press) 1997. Brueggemann notes that, in the testimony of Israel, God is filled with "sovereign power to override all settled structures of power" and that "[n]either Israel's despair nor arrogance (nor the arrogance or despair of anyone or anything else) will stop [...] this God" (178 f).

scription of such a covenant – namely, Ex. 24:3–8.⁷ Here one finds an emphasis on Israel's obligation *vis-à-vis* the commandments, but the pledge of obedience to the commandments is related to a ceremony that effected a solemn consecration of Israel as God's holy people. The covenant is not solely a question of God's announcing of the Divine promises and imposing obligations on the people. The people are given obligations, but they also enjoy *fellowship*. The making and keeping of this covenant involved Israel in the acts of choosing and deciding over time. At Sinai, Israel chose to enter the covenant. On two occasions the people responded to Moses' reading of the commandments with a commitment to fidelity (Ex. 24:3–8). On the plains of Moab the next generation chose and declared that "this day" YHWH had become its God (Deut. 26:17). God did command, but Israel chose to commit itself to God and to his redemptive program.

This partnership between God and Israel had a very definite objective. Hebrew Bible scholars debate whether the term that primarily expresses the purpose of the covenant is redemption, relationship, or revelation.⁸ For our purposes, we can simply observe that the three are indissolubly linked together. The Hebrew Scriptures tell a story of God at work in the world revealing the Divine self – its nature, will and purpose – in order that Israel first, and then all peoples, might enter into a redemptive relationship. The covenant plays a central role in God's program of revelation and redemption.

The partnership between management and labour is, of course, oriented to quite different goals and objectives. It is appropriate to connect covenant and the employment relation, nevertheless, because both partnerships involve the same general principle. Both in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the contemporary workplace we find two parties working together in pursuit of a common goal. At least this common goal was then, and is today, the ideal; Israel sometimes failed and industrial relations are sometimes dysfunctional. We learn from scripture that covenants are often flawed. The people of Israel often lost sight of where God was leading them. All too often the goal of achieving constructive working relations is also thwarted by mistrust, power asymmetry, and opportunism.

7 Ernest Nicholson, *God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament*, Oxford (Clarendon Press) 1986, 210–215.

8 Communion is the focus in: Theodorus Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology*, London (Basil Blackwell) 1970. The accent is placed on redemption in: William Most, *A Biblical Theology of Redemption in a Covenant Framework*, in: *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 29, 1967, 1–19, esp. 2; Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology I*, London (SCM Press) 1975, 133 f. John Walton assigns primacy to revelation in: *Covenant: God's Purpose, God's Plan*, Grand Rapids (Zondervan Publishing House) 1994, 24.

The Partnership between Management and Labour

A covenant between two parties is built on mutual trust. The organizational theorists, Douglas Creed and Raymond Miles, contend that managerial assumptions and expectations are the key factors in building trust within the firm. “Managerial philosophies,” they write, “are the mechanisms that serve to focus expectations about people and so shape trust in organizations.”⁹ It is true that management must take a lead; however, I suggest that trust is built in a dialogue between the two partners. Labour has its own contribution to make. It is not the case that employees are like lumps of clay ready to be molded by managerial policies. They have their own unique views of the realities within and beyond the firm and, unless this fact is taken seriously, there can never be a genuine partnership.

A partnership is founded on, and strengthened by, dialogue. Dialogue requires a willingness both to include oneself in, and to commit oneself to, the legitimate aims and aspirations of the other. Put simply, the parties must be ready to listen and to act. The first step is an imaginative entry into the concerns and hopes of the other. If the dialogue is to be ongoing, beyond openness to the other party’s appeals, a committed follow-up must be made on all agreements between the parties. Concerned listening and fidelity to pledges are, it goes without saying, basic requirements for trust. Dialogue needs trust as a platform on which to build; and, to the extent that the dialogue is successful, trust grows stronger.

Keeping in mind the fact that trust is a dialogical reality, it is still true that managerial philosophy is a critical factor in the process. The analysis by Creed and Miles shows how the moves from a traditional understanding of labour (the 19th century), through the human relations approach (early 1900 s to early 1950 s), to the current human resources model have increasingly tended to engender trust.¹⁰ The traditional model was conditioned by social Darwinist thinking. In this view, a “natural law” functions in the economic sphere, as elsewhere; according to this so-called natural law, the fit survive and the unfit perish.¹¹ A “fit” business, according to this way of

9 W. E. Douglas Creed/ Raymond Miles, *Trust in Organizations: A Conceptual Framework Linking Organizational Forms, Managerial Philosophies, and the Opportunity Costs of Controls*, in: *Trust in Organizations: Frontiers of Theory and Research*, eds. R. Kramer/ T. Tyler, Thousand Oaks, Ca. (Sage Publications) 1996, 16–38, esp. 20.

10 *Ibid.*, 20–23.

11 On the link between social Darwinism and Smithian philosophy, see: Charles McCoy, *Management of Values: The Ethical Difference in Corporate Policy and Performance*, Marshfield, Ma. (Pitman Publishing) 1985), 168 f. Adam Smith had a “providential” view of economic activity. When individuals act self-interestedly in the marketplace, he argued that an “invisible hand” guided the process so that workers aiming at their own interest would, at the same time, contributed to the common good. Linked with the social version of Darwinism, the view also arose that the law of the survival of the economically

thinking, is one in which managers are able to elicit from a generally unwilling workforce optimal effort through close control. Workers perceive work as a burden and, in order to get the best from them, management needs to be both vigilant and firm.

The new approach to human resource management focuses not on control of employees but on winning their commitment. In this view, managers recognize that employees value not only extrinsic but also intrinsic rewards.¹² Intrinsic rewards are associated with the work itself. Employees feel satisfied with their work, motivated, and ready to commit themselves to the organization when their activity generates a sense of purpose, challenge, and involvement, and when it builds their self-confidence and self-esteem.

This new model is based on an appreciation of basic human aspirations. People want to belong, and they want to be recognised as persons and as workers. Francis Fukuyama observes that ample empirical evidence exists for such a view:

[W]orkers do not want to be treated like cogs in a large machine, isolated from managers and fellow workers, with little pride in their skills or their organization, and trusted with a minimal amount of authority and control over the work they do for a living. A number of empirical studies from Elton Mayo have indicated that workers are happier in group-oriented organizations than in more individualistic ones.¹³

In sum, contemporary research in human resource management repeatedly highlights the importance of persons' experiencing a sense of belonging, work satisfaction, affirmation of talents, and self-actualization.

One can turn to any current text to verify that this is the case. The standard lists in these texts identify the following human resource management practices as vital for business and other organizations: (a) offering incentive pay to show that managers value performance and desire to share performance gains, (b) utilizing teams to increase communication and coordination, (c) sharing information, (d) encouraging participation and empowerment through decision-making at lower organizational levels, and (e) encouraging each individual to take responsibility for her or his learning.¹⁴

fit has a positive social function. Thus, virile businesses contribute most to the commonwealth.

12 Ashly Pinnington/ George Lafferty, *Human Resource Management*, Oxford (Oxford University Press) 2002, 6.

13 Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*, London (Hamish Hamilton) 1995, 355 f.

14 See, for example: Shaun Tyson, *The Changing Nature of Human Resource Management*, in: *The Changing Patterns of Human Resource Management*, ed. F. Analoui, Aldershot (Ashgate) 2002, 1–12, esp. 5 f. See also: Ronald Burke, *Why Putting People First Matters*, in: *The Human Resources Revolution*, eds., R. J. Burke/ C.L.Cooper, Amsterdam, Oxford (Elsevier) 2006, 13–30, 21 f.

The progression in managerial thinking from the nineteenth century to the present time began with a pessimistic assessment of worker motivation and capability, and it ended with the recognition that most people desire opportunities for participation and responsibility. As a result, the potential for trust-building has dramatically increased. At the turn of the last century, a gulf divided management and labour. Authoritarianism and lack of respect on the part of the former, and fear and suspicion in the ranks of the latter, meant that the idea of partnership was nowhere to be seen. When, however, the executive sector began to recognize workers' needs for belonging, recognition, and participation, the workplace relationship started to move in the direction of mutuality and co-operation.

The human resources philosophy is shaped around the aspirations of the majority of workers. In this model, all parties work toward a convergence between managerial perceptions and worker preferences. The human resources approach has thus led to studies of worker preferences. One finding is that those in the labour force do, on the whole, aspire to participation, autonomy, and creative self-expression. In an article describing a normative view of work, Ulrich Mückenberger employs the suggestive metaphor of "citizenship" to capture these desiderata of workers.¹⁵ Citizens, he notes, recognize each other as equals.¹⁶ In this relation of mutuality, an individual is able to communicate her concerns, interests, and aims. When two people or two parties communicate in the full sense, Ulrich Mückenberger suggests that dialogue takes place, and out of dialogue community is formed.¹⁷

Along with these emphases on equality and communal sharing comes recognition of rights.¹⁸ Any note of authoritarianism, any thought of employee dependency, must be eschewed by management. Rather, managers need to give a full recognition to workers' rights. These include the right of workers to: (a) organize their own lives, including their time; (b) access education, training, and periods of leave; (c) refuse work that is potentially harmful either to them personally, to the society at large, or to the environment; (d) participate fully and equally as women; and (e) shape work to mesh with parenting responsibilities. As to last point, Sweden provides wage compensation as an incentive for parents to share the parenting role. These five rights are the principal rights of a citizen in a commercial

15 Ulrich Mückenberger, *Towards a New Definition of the Employment Relationship*, in: *International Labour Review* 135, 1996, 683–693. The article is a commentary on a report Mückenberger co-authored with a group of German colleagues entitled "*Arbeit 2000*" ("Work in the Year 2000"). The study was conducted on behalf of the Hans Böckler Foundation. See Hildegard Matthies et al, *Arbeit 2000: Anforderungen an eine Neugestaltung der Arbeitswelt*, Reinbeck bei Hamburg (Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag) 1994.

16 *Ibid.*, 684.

17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*, 685.

enterprise. For worker citizenship to become a reality, however, people need trust and dialogue. According to Mückenberger: “The underlying aim of all these proposals is to develop in the wage employment sphere a form of dialogue based on genuine communication, on freely consented co-ordination and mutual trust.”¹⁹

Unfortunately, the conditions for trust in the management-labour dialogue are too often absent. Each social actor, observes Mückenberger, tends to de-emphasize or even discount the values and aims of the others. Managers and workers have a proclivity to judge the preferences of others as incomprehensible and irrational. When this happens, a dynamic of “mutual obstructionism” arises.²⁰ Good will is almost entirely absent and a power struggle develops that makes dialogue impossible. Mückenberger calls for a movement beyond obstructionism to a “modern and intelligent approach to conflict resolution.”²¹ Such dialogue and consultation creates the conditions for mutual recognition of aims, interests, and values.

Mutual recognition is what Martin Buber calls “inclusion.” It involves “the extension of one’s own concreteness, the fulfilment of the actual situation of life, the complete presence of the reality in which one participates.”²² In order to include oneself in the reality of the other, one must be able to “swing” imaginatively into the other person’s way of engaging with friends and colleagues, (in some cases) God, work, and the society at large. Dialogue fails when one or both parties have not been able to grasp the preferences of the other. In the absence of any real receptivity to the fears, hopes, and values of the other party, people fall into monologue, with all of its unwholesome and ultimately destructive possibilities. If partnership is to be established between the two sectors in the employment sphere, it must be based on management’s recognition of the citizenship of workers and on workers’ commitment to contribute optimally to productivity. This requires genuine communication and a dialogical relationship. Without such inclusion, there is no basis for workplace dialogue.

Something that Mückenberger does not address directly, but is implied in his analysis, is the fact that trust, which is foundational in dialogue, can only be established when the parties have previously demonstrated fidelity to pledges they have made. Beyond the rhetoric of agreements, people need to demonstrate their commitments and develop a record of enactment. A counterfeit form of commitment to action is sometimes referred to as an “instrumental” or “strategic” ethic.²³ Those with an instrumental emphasis, have a tendency to use others to achieve goals by acting with just enough

19 *Ibid.*, 687.

20 *Ibid.*, 688.

21 *Ibid.*, 689

22 Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, London (Routledge & Kegan Paul) 1947, 97.

23 Dennis Quinn/ Thomas Jones, *An Agent Morality View of Business Policy*, in: *Academy of Management Review* 20, 1995, 22–42, esp. 22–23.

integrity to convince others that they really can be trusted to enact agreements. The obvious problem with this policy is that, sooner or later, others will see that these persons are operating with a thin veneer of integrity and cannot be trusted. If their plan has been to operate with minimal levels of openness, flexibility and respect, and with just enough collaboration to convince the other party to contribute to their program, they are on shaky dialogical ground. The other will soon become aware that integrity is lacking, and any trust that existed will be shattered. Rhetoric and posturing, with a sprinkling of actions in support of pledges offered, cannot establish a long-term record of genuine commitment and integrity. Yet, these qualities are required for enduring trust, communication, and co-operation.

The Workplace Partnership in a Covenantal Perspective

Above we have considered general conditions for establishing trust and co-operation between management and employees. A modern and research-based interpretation of work includes recognition of the legitimacy and value of worker participation and autonomy. Is it now possible to contribute something new to this contemporary definition of the employment relation through a theological analysis? More specifically, we need to ask the question: What illumination can the theology of the covenant provide? It will be immediately obvious that the parallel between covenant thinking and a modern reading of the work situation has limits. In the employment relationship the ideal is equality between the partners, i.e., symmetry in their power relations. In the covenant partnership, as we saw above, humans are not full partners in the sense that they are entitled to assume equal responsibility with God in determining the project that shapes their lives and destiny. The partnership between God and Israel is structured most commonly around Divine command and human obedience.

Despite the gap between covenant theology and the employment relation, I suggest that the former does in fact have within it the capacity to inform our understanding of the latter. The theology of covenant does this by providing an ideal to which both parties in a workplace partnership should aspire. As we have seen, two basic conditions are required for dialogue in the employment sphere. The first is that the parties must include themselves in each other's concerns and aspirations. Fidelity to pledges is the second condition. In relation to these two conditions, the divine participation in covenant partnership sets the standard.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, Divine transcendence is emphasized. One cannot, in Israel's world, look upon the Divine visage and live. God reveals the Divine self through a series of theophanies. In a burning bush and in lightning, thunder and smoke, God is present to the people. The absolute holiness of God establishes this distance from God's creatures. And yet,

God comes very near in loving concern. God meets with the people at a distance, but at the same time draws near to them in their suffering and distress. At the scene of the burning bush, God refers to a “coming down” to deliver the Hebrew slaves:

I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey... (Ex 3:7–8)

God took into the Divine heart the aspirations of the slave people for freedom, land, and a prosperous life.

At the time of the Babylonian Exile, the people were again in a state of deep mourning and despair. They had experienced one of the worst possible disasters, which was being wrenched from their homeland. The captivity meant that the fabric of cultural and religious life was torn apart. Life was now extraordinarily difficult for the people; they struggled with feelings of profound alienation, lostness, and hopelessness. They felt as if God had forgotten them. But God never loses touch with the plight of God’s chosen ones. Empathizing with the pain of the other is at the heart of the Divine nature. Through the prophet Isaiah, God reminds the people of this fact: “Israel, why...do you complain that the Lord doesn’t know your troubles or care if you suffer injustice?” (40:27). God knows the troubled state of Israel and its full constellation of feelings. Indeed, God has just the right image to describe it. The plight of Israel can be likened to that of the poor man desperately looking for water:

When my people in their need look for water,
when their throats are dry with thirst,
then I, the Lord, will answer their prayer;
I the God of Israel, will never abandon them,
I will make rivers flow among barren hills
and springs of water run in the valleys (Isa 41: 17–18a).

This brief review highlights important aspects of the covenant relationship God shares with the people of Israel. God’s involvement is characterized by attending, empathizing, helping, and liberating. It is important to note that God expects a similar commitment in human to human relations. God commands everyone in the covenant community to commit him- or herself to the cause of justice. Each one is exhorted to look beyond his or her own needs and desires to ensure that everyone, especially the most vulnerable, is adequately provided for (see, for example, Deut 10:18–19, 14:29, 24:19; Is 1:17, 23; Jer 7:6, 22:3).

When it comes to the covenant established in Christ, God’s inclusion of Godself in the realities of human existence reaches a high-point. The bearer of the second covenant of salvation is the God-person. Once God engaged with the realities of human existence “in the spirit”; now the engagement is

in the flesh. “Incarnation represents the possibility of crossing over fully, of genuinely entering another world.”²⁴ Here, then, is another rich and evocative metaphor for the mutual recognition that Buber describes as inclusion in the reality of the other.

Even this brief recounting of some of the major redemptive acts in the history of God’s encounter with humanity reveals much about covenant. It highlights God’s strong commitment to experience life from the other side. God’s commitment to involving the Divine self in the fears and hopes of God’s covenant partner is revealed, along with God’s expectation that this commitment will also shape human-to-human relations.

Here is where the connection with management-labour relations becomes relevant. Mutual empathy is essential if management-employee relationships are to move beyond “mutual obstructionism” to constructive dialogue. Management needs to put itself in the employees’ position. It needs to engage, for example, with their fears concerning potential abuses arising from a new piece of government legislation that grants employers higher levels of freedom in determining pay, entitlements, and dismissals. On the other hand, workers and their representatives need to be able to swing imaginatively into management’s reality. They might, for instance, connect with the strain of trying to find strategies that will allow the firm to compete in the difficult and uncertain situation of a global economy.

Dialogue also needs a backdrop of fidelity to the pledges made by all parties if it is to be successful. If either party has previously demonstrated unwillingness to honor commitments, people have no platform of trust on which to build constructive communication. God’s fidelity in the covenant relationship presents as an ideal for the partnership between management and labour, as does the covenantal expectation that people will be trustworthy with one another. If the management-labour relationship really is a partnership, as I have argued that it is, it must be bilateral in nature.

William Most suggests that God’s covenant with the people is also bilateral, at least in the sense that both God and the people take on obligations.²⁵ A question of primary interest to him is why God keeps God’s commitments. It cannot be that God owes the people anything. The obvious answer to the question is that Divine righteousness initiated and bound God in the covenant. Most expands on his answer as follows.²⁶ The psalms abound with appeals to the covenant bond, *chesed* (grace, lovingkindness): “Turn, O Lord, and deliver me; save me because of your *chesed*” (Ps 6:4). We also find pleas based on God’s *sedaqah* (righteousness): “In you, O Lord, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame. Rescue me and deliver me in your *sedaqah*” (Ps 71:1–2).

24 Marie McCarthy, *Empathy: A Bridge Between*, in: *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 46, Summer 1992, 119–128, esp. 128.

25 Most, *A Biblical Theology* (n. 8), 2.

26 *Ibid.*, 4–5.

Most points out that these appeals seem parallel to the appeals of the covenant; thus God's dispensing of *chesed* is a matter of *sedaqah*. Indeed, this possibility is confirmed through a reference to a number of psalms in which *chesed* and *sedaqah* are intimately linked: "Continue your *chesed* to those who know you, your *sedaqah* to the upright of heart" (Ps 36:10). And similarly: "For your name's sake, O Lord, preserve my life; in your *sedaqah*, bring me out of trouble. In your *chesed*, silence my enemies, destroy all my foes, for I am your servant" (Ps 143:11–12). Most concludes that: "...God's exercise of *chesed* is considered to be an exercise of *sedaqah*. That is, for him to keep his part under the covenant, is a matter of moral righteousness. Hence, he must have bound himself."²⁷ In this view, God's commitment to the covenant is a question of moral integrity. To the cause of Israel's liberty, peace, and prosperity, God was totally committed. Owing nothing to the people, God bound Godself as a matter of *sedaqah*.

As we link these views of covenant with industrial relations, some aspects translate more directly than others. For example, the term "integrity" fits the context of industrial relations much better than "righteousness." In the covenant relationship, God displayed time and again God's integrity, fidelity, and total commitment to the people. Though at different times the people fell into waywardness and rebellion, in their better moments they knew that they could trust in, and rely on, God.

In the covenantal relationship with Israel, God showed a deep capacity for involvement in Israel's situation on the one hand, and absolute fidelity and commitment to the task of redeeming the nation on the other. The partnership between God and the people was built on this strong foundation. Though the ancient and contemporary situations are very different in a number of respects, I contend that we have here important ideals for shaping dialogical relations between management and employees.

Conclusion

I have sought to use the theology of the covenant to bring fresh insights to the issue of trust in management-labour relations. Given that it is not immediately obvious that the ancient covenantal relationship between God and Israel, and later between God and the Church, has anything to say to the complex issues associated with modern industrial relations, I sought to show how the two realities might be linked. The concept of *partnership* provides an appropriate connector.

A genuine partnership has its foundation in a relationship of trust. Trust, in turn, is built through constructive dialogue. Two basic conditions are essential for dialogue in the employment sphere. First, the parties must

²⁷ Ibid., 5.

include themselves in each other's concerns and aspirations. They must be committed to empathic listening in the discussions that take place. Second, fidelity to pledges is critical. Setting the standard for these two conditions of empathic inclusion and fidelity are the covenants of Jewish and Christian traditions. In particular, the standard in the covenant partnership is set by God. Time and again God shows a deep capacity for imaginative participation in Israel's situation and for redemptive action characterized by absolute commitment, fidelity, and integrity.

Clearly, a large gap exists between the cultural situation in management-labour relations and biblical covenants. Among other differences, biblical covenants lack the equality and power symmetry that are considered essential in a modern, intelligent approach to workplace relations. Nevertheless, the long experience of covenantal relations captured in the Scriptures is a useful resource for developing a fresh understanding of what is required to build genuine trust in management-labour relations.

Abstract

This article represents the standpoint that the relationship between employers and employees has to be characterized by the term "partnership". A genuine partnership is based on trust. On the other hand, trust results from constructive dialogue. Concerning the issue of employment, that kind of dialogue can only take place if two conditions are fulfilled: firstly both parties have to commit themselves to listen to each other in a sympathetic way. Secondly both parties have to keep their promises. The author argues that the ideals needed for such a relationship can be found in the theology of covenant.

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Artikel wird der Standpunkt vertreten, dass die Beziehung zwischen Unternehmern und Angestellten durch den Begriff der „Partnerschaft“ zu definieren ist. Eine ehrliche Partnerschaft beruht auf Vertrauen. Vertrauen wiederum entsteht durch konstruktiven Dialog. Ein solcher Dialog kann in der Beschäftigungssphäre nur dann stattfinden, wenn zwei Bedingungen erfüllt sind: Die erste besteht darin, dass beide Parteien sich zu einem einfühlsamen Zuhören verpflichten müssen. Die zweite besteht darin, dass die Parteien ihren Zusagen treu sind. Der Autor argumentiert, dass die Ideale für diese Beziehung in der Bundestheologie zu finden sind.