

Applying the *Imago Dei* Using Agency Theory: An Intuitive Active Learning Exercise for the Management Classroom

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ABSTRACT: A management instructor and a religion instructor collaborated to create an instructional exercise for the application of agency theory using the theological concept of the *Imago Dei*. The result is a simple method for management instructors to help business students understand the roles of a manager from a biblical worldview. The attributes of God and the *imago Dei* are common elements of most Christian traditions but are often difficult concepts to introduce to undergraduate students as they apply to management theory. This exercise offers an intuitive approach for management instructors using agency theory.

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to manage and lead well? A quick Google search will net hundreds of articles, book recommendations, and leadership blogs seeking to answer this question. For the Christian business instructor, one must start with the primary nature of humanity—being made in the image of God. Genesis 1:26-27 informs the reader that God has created humanity in God’s image, followed by a direct command for humanity to manage and steward all of creation (English Standard Version Bible, 2001). The fundamental role of humanity is to be a “good” manager of a “good” creation.

This seems like basic Sunday school education, yet one must dig down to unearth the layers of ideas that come with being image bearers. As God’s image, humanity is tasked with being God’s agents on the earth. As God’s instruments of management, believers are called to be revolutionary in their leadership to mirror the ways of God—to be *imago Dei*. As the *imago Dei* informs the nature of man, agency theory informs the role of the manager in business. A study of the attributes of God breaks God’s image into understandable facets. These three important

concepts—characteristics of God, the *imago Dei*, and agency theory—are explored below. The exercise offered at the end of this article combines these three concepts into a classroom exercise intended to inform the undergraduate management student as they develop a Christian worldview of management.

The *imago Dei* has been related throughout the Christian Business Faculty Association’s two journals to specific business topics, such as to human resource management (Busuttil & Weelden, 2018; Jonsen, 2017), economics (Tucker et al., 2017), investing (Beavers & Saunders, 2023), marketing (Busuttil, 2017; Hagenbuch, 2015), leadership (Franz, 2014), strategy (Bretsen, 2011), marketplace (Peach et al., 2017) and business ethics (Gratton & Dukas, 2023), and corporate social responsibility (Stuebs & Kraten, 2021). It has also been related to business generally (Bosch et al., 2015), to general education courses (Dose, 2019), and to student advising (Kocur, 2023). In this article, the authors seek to expand this application of the *imago Dei* to the integration of faith into classroom instruction using agency theory.

Table 1: Attributes of God with Consensus from Christian Traditions

Characteristic	Theological Pseudonym	Nicene Creed	Westminster Confession	39 Articles of Religion	Catechism of the Roman Catholic
Active in the world	Providence	x	x	x	x
All knowing	Omniscience	x	x	x	x
Almighty	Omnipotence	x	x	x	x
Cannot be fully known	Incomprehensibility	x	x	x	x
Creative		x	x	x	x
Eternal		x	x	x	x
Everywhere	Omnipresence	x	x	x	x
Good	Beneficent	x	x	x	x
Gracious		x	x	x	x
Holy		x	x	x	x
Love		x	x	x	x
Near	Immanent	x	x	x	x
One		x	x	x	x
Righteousness		x	x	x	x
Self-sufficient		x	x	x	x
Spirit		x	x	x	x
Sovereign		x	x	x	x
Transcendent		x	x	x	x
Triune		x	x	x	x
Truthful		x	x	x	x

LITERATURE REVIEW

The three concepts applied in the learning activity—attributes of God, the *imago Dei*, and agency theory—are explained briefly. Each concept represents a field of study impossible to explicate in one article, but summaries are included to inform the instructor as they guide students from concept to application during the activity.

Attributes of God

It is true that humans, finite creatures speaking of an infinite God, can produce only an incomplete picture of His character. God cannot be fully known, yet when God reveals Himself, people can know truths about how God relates to creation. The characteristics of God's nature are His attributes, made known through His Word, through nature and ultimately through Jesus. God has sent Jesus to show humanity the way of God. Although there is no standard list of attributes agreed upon within Christianity,

throughout the history of the Church, there have been moments when theologians sought to clarify and explain the nature and ways of God. These statements of belief and doctrine are how the Church has sought to make the truth known to the world with the goal of a unified understanding of truth and greater clarity. The attributes in Table 1 are agreed upon by these historically significant documents and provide a helpful reference for instructors as they lead students through the exercise provided in this article.

The *Imago Dei*

The *Imago Dei*, the image of God, is a foundational concept within Christianity, but it is not without debate. The doctrine of the *imago Dei* has been interpreted using a variety of lenses throughout history. The earliest formalized ideas came from Irenaeus (1953), who posited that the image consists of humans' rational faculty and ability to choose (p. 457). Irenaeus (1953) also made a distinction between image and likeness. Later, Augustine argued that

the image consists of humans' immortal nature and rational soul, which is gifted with a triune nature to remember, to understand, and to will (Schopp, 1947, pp. 43-48). Thomas Aquinas (1952) identified the image of God first in a person's rational abilities, intelligence, or reason. For John Calvin (1975), the image of God was found within a person's soul, which is the gift of God. For modern theologian Jurgen Moltmann (1951), the image of God was the ability of humanity to ascend toward God, just as God descends toward humanity. Beyond these most famous thinkers, Christians have discussed the image as something external or visible, a physical attribute (Olariu, 2013), the immaterial nature of a human soul (Churchouse, 2021), and the human capacity for spiritual abilities (Lemke, 2008).

Within debates, a most helpful discussion was offered by Hebrew Bible scholar Dr. Michael Heiser (2015), who wrote, "[H]umans are created as God's imagers—they function in the capacity of God's representatives. The image of God is not a quality within human beings; it is what humans are" (p. 50). People are literally the agents of God who do God's work in the world (Smith, 2014). Just as God told the first humans to have domain and care for the creation (Genesis 1:28), today humanity is to represent God on earth by doing the work of God within creation. God has given humans the authority to do and to be within the creation. Heiser's view seems to most closely align with agency theory and helps prepare the instructor to guide students from concept to application during the activity offered herein.

Agency Theory

Agency theory, developed by Jensen and Meckling (1976), added an ethical twist to the way the academic world thinks about management, although they did not intend a religious perspective. Their original work was applied immediately to corporate governance—the relationship between business owners and hired managers. Subsequently, as Eisenhardt (1989) noted, agency theory has been utilized in accounting, economics, finance, marketing, political science, organizational behavior, and sociology. Agency theory separates constituents into the *principal* (the one giving the right for decisions and actions to be made on their behalf) and the *agent* (the one making decisions and acting on behalf of the principal). The *agency problem* refers to the conflict that can and arguably does arise when (a) the desires or goals of the principal and agent conflict or (b) it is difficult or expensive for the principal to verify what the agent is doing. Such conflict may occur within the mind of the agent, within the mind of the principal, or in the relationship between the agent and the principal. Cafferky (2014) referred to this as one of the organizational paradoxes managers naturally

encounter. The term *moral hazard* refers to the possibility that the agent will act in their own interest to the detriment of the interest of the principal (Becht et al., 2003).

Franz (2015) explained that many organizational theories are missing elements such as the *imago Dei* when those theories are applied without recognizing God's design and ownership of creation. In this article, the authors propose that agency theory is incomplete without considering the *imago Dei* and offer a method of resolving this deficiency. Humanity, as *imitato Dei*, manifests God's characteristic of bringing order to chaos by self-organizing (Brown, 2017; Franz, 2015). Agency theory represents one of the ways scholars have identified that humanity tends to organize itself. The study of agency theory in management at multiple levels throughout an organization is complex, and it is not the goal of this work to explain that complexity. Rather, agency theory is applied here in a broader sense to identify God as the ultimate principal and managers as God's agents first. It is in humankind's nature to organize by assigning roles and establishing hierarchies, introducing order to chaos (Brown, 2017; Franz, 2015). Agency theory attempts to explain the complexity of conflicting roles. For the Christian, as *imitatio Deo*—an intentional image-bearer—considering and conscientiously managing these roles in a way that reflects God's primacy is crucial.

SYNTHESIS

The characteristics of God, the *imago Dei*, and agency theory were reviewed to explain their interaction within the provided learning activity. Agency theory provides a way for students to understand their place in an organizational hierarchy specific to their role as manager in a particular firm, in society, and (primarily) in their relationship to God.

The reality of agency as it applies to a manager is that managers are involved in multiple agency relationships where they serve simultaneously as principal (in some) and agent (in others). For example, a manager may at the same time and in the same decision be concerned for their own interests and the interests of their community, employees, suppliers, customers, and others. The manager might make one decision when weighing the interests of the firm more heavily and another decision when weighing another set of interests more heavily. The point the instructor can bring across to students to put these in perspective is the ultimate agency of God. Man in general and the manager especially (due to their increased responsibility derived from increased influence) are agents of God whose goal is that man be molded in God's own image—the *imago Dei*.

Thus, if there is a misalignment of goals and interests between the principal (God) and the agent (man), God (as the ultimate principal) and God's goals and interests subsume the goals of the manager and all other interested parties. If the manager wishes to better understand this ultimate principal's (God's) goals and interests, they need only to refer to God's intention for man to be more like God—the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. As previously noted, God is incomprehensible in that God can never be completely understood while living with creation. Reviewing man's attempt to describe God in the form of characteristics/attributes (such as those provided in Table 1) should, however, help bring this incomplete earthly view of God into focus.

It is in God's providence, the caring actions that guide and provide for people through life, that God empowers people for this holy calling as His agents. Each person is an agent of God whether they embrace this responsibility through service or not. Managers bear a greater responsibility for agency because they are responsible for others, for others' possessions, and for others' actions through the formal and informal authority given to them by their earthly principals. Further, in this providence, God is guiding the world toward God's ultimate purposes of redemption and new creation. As one explores God's providence, one is also encouraged to know God's nature as the One that generously gives. The graciousness of God is the truth that God continually provides gifts to creation because of His nature and giving heart. Ultimately, God is providential, giving, and powerful. As God leads, guides, gives, and shares, the power of God is made available to humanity. God's power is not only seen in God's character and being but in the way that He reveals Himself in creation. As this revealing is happening, God limits His invisible power to be comprehended by what is seen. God creates the space for humanity to be endowed with power from on high to work in this world as He intends. Through the process of this divine exchange, people are called to live in a way that makes God's character and attributes known.

CLASSROOM EXERCISE

Duration

Approximately 20-30 minutes, depending on discussion.

Instructor Preparation

Before leading a class in this activity, instructors may find it beneficial to:

- Research different traditions' explanations of the attributes of God

- Consider how these explanations might be combined
- Consider how the students might view God
- Complete the exercise themselves, aligning commonly stated attributes to management roles
- Prayerfully consider the multitude of roles God plays in the lives of humanity

Student Preparation

One of the wonderful things about this exercise is the lack of biblical or theological preparation needed by students. However, students do need academic preparation; they should have (recently, if possible) reviewed Mintzberg's (1989) breakdown of managerial roles and/or other categorizations of managerial roles, such as the common POLC (plan, organize, lead, control) framework used by many lower-level management texts (as cited in Williams, 2021, pp. 188-189). Thus, this exercise is most useful well into a survey course in management or within an upper-level course where students will be expected to have a good working knowledge of management roles. This understanding will help students categorize information more quickly and store learned relationships into long-term memory more readily. The exercise can be done with or without the students being exposed to agency theory, as it is a concept with which they will be familiar in practice.

Materials Needed

Depending on the method chosen, supplies should include:

- An ample supply of note cards or sticky notes (super-sticky notes work best)
- A collaborative space such as a physical dry erase board with different colored markers (at least one color per group of 3-5 students or a collaborative online tool)

Phase I: Consensus on Attributes of God

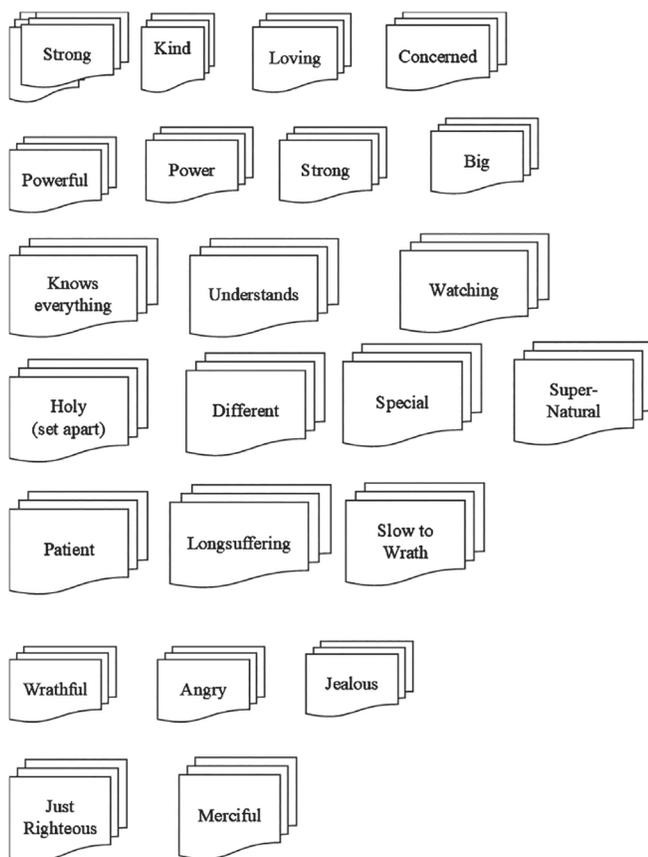
This exercise has been developed using the you/you all/we pedagogical method for active learning attributed to Lampert (2001, p. 21). This method allows students to individually generate ideas, move to small group consensus, then move to large group consensus before the instructor summarizes and applies the results of an exercise. Phase I is arranged by these titles. Though this exercise has been used successfully in many forms, the you/you-all/we method is highly effective.

You—Individual. Before they begin writing, prompt students to consider the question "What is God like?" Clarify the question by soliciting answers to "What do I mean by that question?" or by specifying that this is not the same as "What does God like?" Rather, students are expected to identify attributes, characteristics, traits of God. Once

the question seems clear, allow a couple of minutes of silent thought, then instruct the students to list the attributes they generated, one per sticky note or note card.

You All—Small Group Collaboration. After students seem to have exhausted their individual ability to generate answers, put students into groups of three to five and have them compile their answers, discussing similarities and trying to come up with a few more. To minimize social loafing, do not tell students there will be group work before this point.

Figure 1: Phase III - Beginning

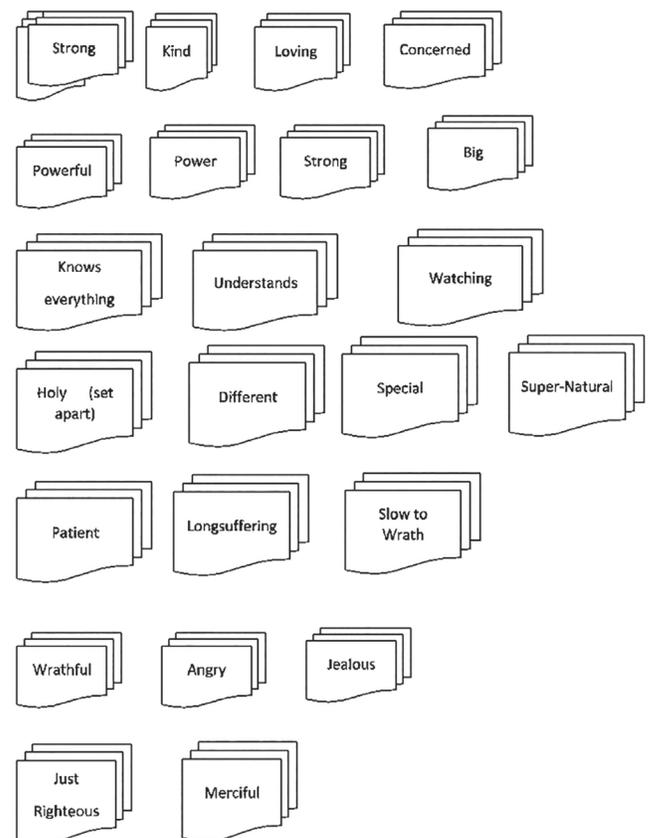


We—Whole Class Collaboration. After the small groups of students have exhausted their ability to generate answers, the instructor can begin combining the ideas in any of several ways, some more chaotic than others.

1. The most chaotic approach: Reserving the color black for the next phase, choose a marker color to represent each group and have a member of the first group that finishes write their answers on the dry erase board. Then, invite other groups to come to the dry erase board and write their answers—grouping similar terms together, with group members offering guidance on placement and grouping from their seats.

2. A slightly less chaotic approach: Have the groups combine their sticky notes on the dry erase board, making sure the sticky notes are sticky enough to cling to the dry erase board. Alternatively, have them arrange their index cards on a tabletop; if the classroom has individual desks, bringing in a table or lining up desks in a row might be helpful.
3. The least chaotic approach: Reserving the color black for the next phase, choose a marker color to represent each group, and have the groups call out their answers as the instructor writes and organizes them.
4. The technological approach: Using a collaborative online tool, have a student within each group send in the groups' answers electronically, and display the results on the classroom screen.

Figure 2: Phase III - Middle

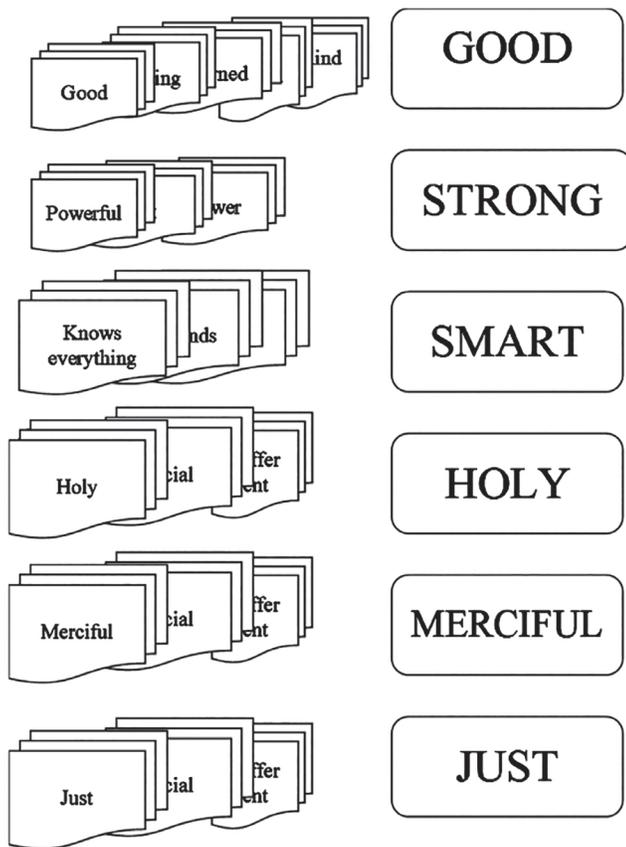


Regardless of the approach, which can be adjusted based on the instructor's level of comfort with classroom chaos, students will quickly come to the realization that their suggested attributes/characteristics of God are centered on seven to ten common themes. At this point, the instructor can show one or two of the theological/denominational standards for the attributes of God to demonstrate to students that they have essentially come to the same conclu-

sions, using their own words as theologians and to provide theologically sound labels for the students' groups of words.

The instructor can then add any attributes to the working list that the class might have missed. In this author-instructor's experience, *jealous* and *wrathful* are usually the two attributes that students do not readily offer, but they are important for the concluding application to the role of manager. Explaining the relationship between jealousy and righteousness and between wrathfulness and righteousness is a great lesson for students.

Figure 3: Phase III – Relating to Management



Phase II: Integration

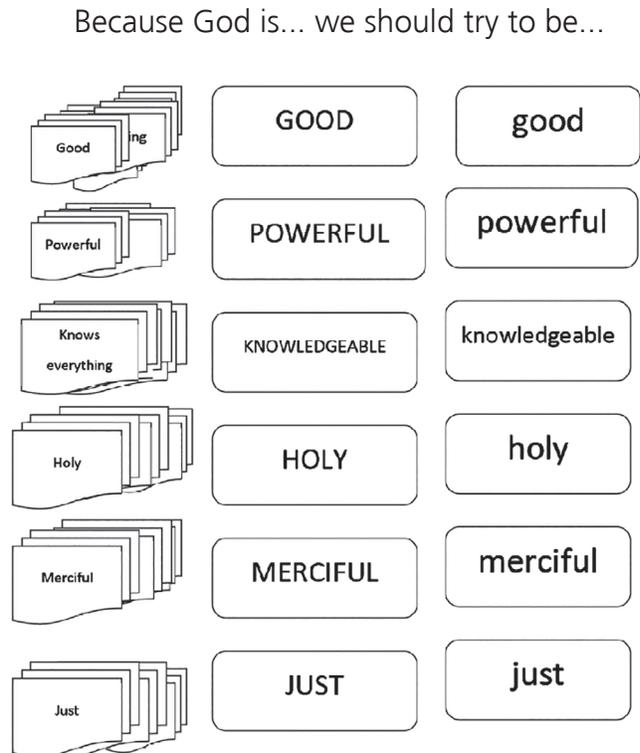
At this point, returning the conversation to the topic of management guides the students to apply what they have just learned/discussed about God to what they have recently learned/discussed about the role of management. Begin this part of the activity by having the students return to their groups to formulate an answer to “What are good managers like?” Again, clarify this question by asking “What are the attributes/characteristics/traits good managers should have?” Allow the students to generate their own list of requisite managerial attributes, either verbally or on paper. This phase is usually completed very quickly or could be given a time constraint such as five minutes.

Phase III: Relating to Management

Ask the groups to name their attributes one at a time, without repeating any. As they name each one, ask if that requisite managerial attribute correlates to any of the attributes of God already on the dry erase board. Rotate among groups until the requisite managerial attributes are exhausted.

At some point in this progression, a student will likely challenge the similitude of these relationships by pointing out that God is viewed as ultimate in these ways (i.e., completely righteous), while mere mortals can only show each of these attributes to some extent (i.e., somewhat righteous). This is a great point and should be met head-on. This is where the theological idea of sanctification can enter the discussion. The goal of the Christian is to become more like God. This is the Christian paradox: knowing that Jesus' sacrifice makes up for the difference if the person has accepted Christ and knowing that glorification is unattainable on earth. Our goal, then, should be an ever-increasing balance of these attributes to live as He would have us live and to become more like Him. This plays out in the manager's life by continuing to learn how to manage well, even when unethical decisions present easy shortcuts. Finally, if there are any attributes of God listed that have not been associated with a requisite managerial attribute, ask the students, “Should managers also try to be x as God is X?”

Figure 4: Phase IV – Integration of The *Imago Dei* & Agency Theory



God's Goal is for us to be more like God.

Phase IV: Summarizing with Agency Theory

Introduce or review agency theory (refer to the appendix) showing students the multi-layered agency relationships with a company, a church, etc. End this section by showing God as the ultimate principal and emphasizing that all other agency relationships are subject to our agency to God. Revisiting the parable of the talents, the vineyard, or the good steward and the creation mandate, explain to students that God has created us to be inclined toward self-organization and to yield some autonomy to those we see as better suited to lead/manage. God holds those in positions of authority to a higher standard due to their influence over others (Luke 14:28).

Summarize and reiterate the crux of the lesson by reminding students that just as God manages his world by putting talented, responsible leaders in place, they will be responsible in their management roles for attempting to maintain the same attributes (the best they can) that God maintains perfectly.

CONCLUSION

As a person dives into the intersections of theology and management, the task can be daunting to say the least. In this article, a simple activity is offered to help management instructors more effectively integrate faith into a discussion of the roles of the manager. A brief review of the three main concepts integrated in the activity were offered—a consensus of theologians' views regarding the attributes of God, the *Imago Dei*, and agency theory. The authors hope that this discussion and exercise will make the management instructor more confident and effective when integrating faith in the classroom. The exercise has been used successfully in undergraduate residential and adult education courses and could be adapted for graduate courses by requiring reading of peer-reviewed journal articles on agency theory and faith integration before or afterward. With its specific reference and deference to God, the assignment is not designed for use in the secular classroom. However, a similar exercise based on natural law and the modern view of relative ethics could be created separately.

If successful, the result of this activity will be more informed students who are more able to recognize the importance of their work as managers as they come to understand God's supreme agency. The ultimate task of the professor is to facilitate a student's deeper quest of self-reflection into their own management styles and how this relates to God's own character. Students seem to enjoy the exercise. For example, one student noted in an end-of-

course survey, when asked about faith integration, "One of my favorites was when he asked our class [about] God's attributes, and then wrote that list on the dry erase board. He then went into detail about each attribute and how these are also qualities of a good manager—just, loving, compassionate, wrathful, etc." (anonymous, end-of-course survey, April 2023). May this exercise help your students engage more deeply with the God who eternally manages them.

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APPENDIX: AGENCY THEORY CONCEPTS

Principal	Has legitimate power within an organization, often an owner or officer of a firm who Delegates task(s) to an agent
Agent	The person who agrees to perform a task on behalf of the principal/organization, usually an employee
Agency	An informal contract in which the principal delegates a task to the agent
Agency Theory	The principal expects the agent to act on behalf of the principal/organization
Agency Problem	A conflict between the interests of the principal/organization and the interests of the agent
Moral Hazard	A lack of effort on the part of the agent to complete the task agreed upon
Solutions	Transparency and profit-sharing are ways to proactively combat the agency problem (see Becht, Bolton, and Roell (2003))

For further explanation, examples and application to corporate governance, the authors recommend Becht, Bolton, and Roell's (2003) entry in *Handbook of the Economics of Finance*.

The Agency Relationship