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## ARTICLE

### Leader-Member Exchange in Scripture: Insights from Jesus, Noah, and Abraham<sup>1</sup>

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#### Abstract

*Although much has been written about leadership from a Christian perspective, Christian principles have greater potential to be integrated into the academic research literature than has yet been realized. Leadership theory and practice is one area in which Scripture can contribute significantly, leader-member exchange theory (LMX) being one example. LMX states that leaders have limited personal, social, and organizational resources (e.g., time, energy, personal power); thus, rather than interacting similarly with each follower, leaders have different relationships with different followers. Some followers receive a higher degree of social exchange including increased levels of information sharing, interaction time, mutual support, and informal influence. In contrast, other followers receive a lower level of social exchange and are treated in a more formal, “by-the-book” manner. This paper applies biblical*

*principles to LMX with the goal of making recommendations regarding the desirability and possible limitations of building differential relationships with followers as a leadership practice. Jesus’ relationship to the twelve disciples in comparison to other followers, as well as God’s relationship to Noah and Abraham, are used to derive principles for effective LMX practices. Distinctive qualities of these high LMX relationships are shown through the instruction, unique experiences, empowerment, and higher expectations that these followers received. Unique relationships between a leader and followers are appropriate, but must be established based on appropriate criteria, e.g., values rather than demographic variables. Additionally, followers can, in turn, develop LMX relationships with others, thus allowing the leader to influence a greater number of individuals, though indirectly, and to support organizational goal accomplishment.*

*Finally, a leader has a minimum responsibility and expectation for all followers, not just those with high LMX. These principles have implications for activities such as increasing workforce diversity, span of control, succession planning, and strategic leadership.*

### **Leader-Member Exchange in Scripture: Insights from Jesus, Noah, and Abraham**

Both secular and Christian academic circles have viewed leadership as an important topic; however, there has been little integration of scriptural teachings and research findings. Since all truth is God's truth, a complete examination of the topic using scriptural examples to illuminate organizational models would be informative and beneficial. God's choice to fulfill His will using organizations, and the people and processes underlying them, means that our understanding and application of scriptural principles to organizational issues is crucial. This paper examines one particular theory of leadership, Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, through the lens of Christian faith.

Leadership theory and research can be divided into three streams (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000). The first, strategic leadership theory, involves how organizational leaders develop ideas, make decisions, and implement these strategies to facilitate organizational success. The second stream focuses on charismatic, transformational, and visionary theories of leadership. The final stream is labeled the emergent theories of leadership and includes theories that involve social exchange, behavioral and cognitive complexity, and social intelligence. Writing in the area of Christian leadership, both popular press and scholarly literature has focused almost exclusively on the second stream, offering Jesus as the model of a transformational and servant leader (e.g., *Developing the Leader Within You*, Maxwell, 1993; *Lead Like Jesus*, Blanchard & Hodges, 2005; "Stewardship-Leadership: A Biblical Refinement of Servant Leadership," Beadles, 2000; *Transformational Leadership*, Ford, 1991).

The third stream, the emergent theories of leadership, merits

greater focus by Christians. The relational nature of leadership as depicted by the emergent theories captures an important aspect of leadership, as well as being consistent with the relational emphasis in Christian life on fellowship and discipleship. In particular, LMX theory is appropriate in light of its emphasis on the interpersonal relationship between a leader and individual followers. This is not to detract from discussions of visionary or strategic leadership; it is simply recognition that a Christian worldview and a theory of leadership focusing on relationships can do much to inform each other. This article applies biblical principles to LMX theory. Following a review of the present state of knowledge with regard to LMX theory and research, the paper describes examples of LMX from Scripture, specifically regarding Jesus' relationship with His disciples and God's relationship with Abraham and the nation of Israel. From these examples, principles are derived that can be used to make recommendations regarding the practice of LMX as an approach to leadership.

## **Leader-Member Exchange Theory**

Most theories of leadership assume that leaders display an "average leadership style" in which they interact with all of their followers in basically the same manner. In contrast, LMX theory describes leaders as having limited personal, social, and organizational resources (e.g., time, energy, personal power), a situation that discourages them from having the same type of interaction with each follower (e.g., Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Mueller & Lee, 2002). Instead, each leader-follower relationship is unique, falling on a continuum such that some followers receive a relatively lower and some a relatively higher degree of social exchange. Followers receiving a lower level of social exchange are treated in a fair, but more formal and contractual, "by-the-book" manner. In contrast, a higher level of social exchange may include increased levels of information exchange, mutual support, informal influence, trust, and greater input in decisions (Mueller & Lee, 2002). Although high LMX followers

receive more resources, leaders also expect more from them in terms of effort and going beyond the established job description. For both the leader and the follower, the extra effort is directed toward the goals of the organization. Consequences of receiving high LMX may include higher performance (Graen, Novak, & Sommerkamp, 1982), job satisfaction (Graen et al., 1982), organizational commitment (Nystrom, 1990), organizational citizenship behavior (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Hui, 1993), increased delegation (Schriesheim, Neider, & Scandura, 1998), empowerment (Gomez & Rosen, 2001), and lower turnover (Graen, Liden, & Hoel, 1982).

### ***Antecedents***

The variables that predict differential relationships between leaders and subordinates have been of particular interest to researchers. Models of the leader-member exchange development process depict two alternate paths that can determine the quality of LMX (Bauer & Green, 1996; Dienesch & Liden, 1986). Graen and Scandura (1987) have

depicted one path as a process of role development occurring as leaders and followers begin to interact. Initial interaction leads to delegation of a trial assignment: the role-taking phase. The leader then assesses the follower's performance, makes causal attributions, and decides on future action. In the role-making phase, the relationship between the leader and member develops through working together on tasks. Role-making, if successful, generates a high LMX relationship (Uhl-Bien, Graen, & Scandura, 2000). As the relationship stabilizes, roles become routinized. This is the more desirable path because the LMX relationship is predicated on organizationally relevant, relatively objective criteria such as the follower's actual performance (e.g., Kim & Organ, 1982) or the leader's perception of the subordinate's competence (Dansereau et al., 1975). Research investigating these variables has achieved mixed results (Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997), however.

Instead of relying on performance evidence, leaders often take a second, less deliberate

path. Similarity between the leader and follower, particularly when salient (Dienesch & Liden, 1986) or during initial interactions (Bauer & Green, 1996) can directly predict LMX, without using performance as a basis. Research findings have shown strong support for this path. Liden, Wayne, and Stillwell (1993) found that overall similarity based on an index of demographic variables (gender, race, education, and age) was not related to LMX; however, research addressing specific attributes has shown that similarity in sex typically has demonstrated a positive relationship to LMX (Duchon, Green, & Taber, 1986; Green, Anderson, & Shivers, 1996; Larwood & Blackmore, 1978; Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989). Similarity in education (Basu & Green, 1995; Green, Anderson, & Shivers, 1996) has received mixed results. In addition to demographic variables, attitude (Phillips & Bedeian, 1994) and values similarity (Ashkanasy & O'Connor, 1997; Dose, 1999; Steiner, 1988) also predicted LMX. Perceived similarity is a more powerful predictor of LMX

than is actual similarity (Liden et al., 1993; Phillips, 1992). Other perceptions such as liking (Engle & Lord, 1997) and trust (Gomez & Rosen, 2001) also show a positive relationship with LMX.

### ***A Prescriptive Direction and Unanswered Questions***

The LMX research literature primarily has been descriptive. Only recently have scholars begun to deal with the issue of the extent to which the LMX leadership style is recommended (Yrle, Hartman, & Galle, 2003), and questions yet remain. Is it "fair" for a leader to treat certain followers differently, or is it favoritism? Yes, followers with a high degree of exchange with their leader may have higher performance, lower turnover, higher job satisfaction, etc., but what about the rest of the followers or the organization as a whole? Do leaders conscientiously select high performers for high LMX?

In attempting to resolve the justice issue and enhance organizational performance, Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) have suggested that leaders begin with a contractual relationship with all follow-

ers, but at some point offer high-quality LMX to each subordinate rather than differentiate between them. The relationship will advance more strongly in some cases than in others. Hiller and Day (2003) echoed this recommendation, particularly for diverse groups. Mueller and Lee (2002) have sought to provide further direction by suggesting that followers can take a proactive role in determining the quality of the exchange relationship by demonstrating high performance in task assignments, engaging in effective communication behaviors, and utilizing impression management strategies. Scandura and Graen (1984) have offered evidence that leaders can be trained to offer high LMX, improving both satisfaction and overall performance of the subordinate; however, it is unclear whether this practice can be maintained over time.

Although the prescriptive view of LMX that recommends against differentiation does attempt to provide leaders some guidance in building relationships with multiple subordinates, this logic contains some flaws.

One difficulty is that it discounts the issue of the leader's resource constraints and the reality that high LMX relationships require substantial investments of a leader's time. Furthermore, it contradicts scholarship that emphasizes the importance of differentiating among followers (e.g., Krackhardt & Brass, 1994; Liden et al., 1997) and conserving time for strategically valuable relationships (Brass, 1995), thus suggesting instead that leaders should give priority to intentionally developing followers who have the greatest potential. Although to some extent the non-differentiation view provides a means for limiting the number of subordinates to which the leader has a high exchange relationship by leaving it in the hands of the followers (e.g., Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), this approach does not guarantee that the most deserving followers will accept the "offer" rather than those with the greatest motivation for impression management. Neither does it allow leaders to discern the followers with the greatest performance potential in the first place and to invest the

greatest level of time and resources with them.

One way to evaluate the prescriptive view advocated by these researchers is to examine the practices of a highly regarded leader in the context of LMX. With that goal in mind, the following section describes the practices of Jesus, widely acknowledged to be an effective leader by both Christians and others. Scripture demonstrates that Jesus did form differential relationships with followers, He did so in an effective manner, and doing so was instrumental in accomplishing His purpose of spreading the Gospel to the whole world.

## **LMS Theory in Practice: Jesus and His Disciples**

### ***Jesus as an Example***

Scripture describes that although Jesus had many followers, He selected twelve with whom He spent significantly more time and to whom He devoted more teaching. Even among these twelve, He had a more focused relationship with Peter, James, and John. Importantly, Jesus used this strategy

with a purpose. Thornton has written, “On the whole it is evident that His aim is not present success or number of adherents, but the preparation of a solid nucleus . . . absolutely committed to the service of the kingdom. This withdrawal onto the few . . . is but the forging of an instrument to save the whole” (1956, pp. 37-38). Differential relationships were part of how God’s ultimate plan (in which He offers salvation to all who believe in Him) was put into effect.

One might ask whether Jesus truly had limited resources as is the case for human managers and other leaders. He was fully human as well as fully divine. On the one hand, He had self-imposed limited resources; for example, the time constraints of His three-year ministry; on the other hand, surely He had greater personal resources than the typical leader. Thus, it is significant that He chose not to foster the same level of exchange relationship with each of His followers. Leadership theorists have noted that the study of leadership has not adequately considered the situational context (House & Aditya, 1997). It may

be that Jesus chose twelve disciples because that was an appropriate group size; if larger, they could not effectively gather, each ask questions, travel together, etc.

**Antecedents.** It is difficult to answer entirely the question of “Why these particular individuals?” The situation was not a contractual employment setting (as is most LMX research), nor are we privy to God’s ultimate plan; however, some things are apparent. The reasons for the selection of these individuals were not the same as those valued by society. Matthew, one of the twelve disciples, was a tax collector (Mt. 9:9), and several were uneducated fishermen (Lk. 5:9-10). Jesus was scolded by the Pharisees for associating with tax collectors and sinners (Lk. 5:30). Nor do these relationships necessarily demonstrate the characteristics found in LMX research: Jesus, the twelve disciples, and His other followers were mostly working-class Galileans; therefore, Jesus did not share greater demographic similarity with His disciples than with other followers. Neither had the disciples previously demonstrated superior performance

in ministry. On the other hand, Jesus did appear to have a purpose for choosing these individuals, and they did go on to play an important role in the development of the early church. He perceived that the disciples were teachable and had potential to grow in the characteristics and values such as those He described in the Beatitudes (Mt. 5).

### ***Distinctives of Jesus’ Relationship with his Disciples***

Scripture depicts many examples of Jesus’ relationship with His disciples, beginning with calling brothers Peter and Andrew, James and John as the first disciples (Mt. 4:18, Mk. 1:16, Lk. 5:8-11). He appointed twelve from among all His followers and designated them as apostles (Mk. 3:13-14, Lk. 6:12). His purpose was for them “to be with Him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons”<sup>2</sup> (Mk. 3:14-15). Significantly, at the point at which many of His disciples “turned back and no longer went about with him” (Jn. 6:66), none of the core disciples left. Consistent with LMX theory, Jesus’ interac-

tion with the twelve disciples, and in some cases Peter, James and John, was different from that with His other followers in several ways, including the amount of teaching they received, specific experiences, expectations, and empowerment.

**Teaching.** Scripture gives several examples of instances where Jesus gave further instruction to the disciples, either to the twelve versus the other followers (e.g., Mt. 11:1) or to His disciples versus the crowd: “He did not speak to them [the crowd] except in parables, but He explained everything in private to His disciples” (Mk. 4:34). At one point, He told the disciples, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given” (Mt. 13:11). Jesus gave further commentary on events, such as the rich man’s questions and how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God (Mk. 10:23). At times, He instructed them not to share all they had seen (Mt. 16:20, Mk. 8:30, Lk. 9:21), at least not at that time. He gave the disciples greater explanation of His purpose and what would

happen in the future, even though they did not understand. The primary example of this was that He must go to Jerusalem, suffer, die, and be raised (Mt. 16:21, Mk. 8:31). Manson (cited in Thornton, 1956) has calculated that seventy percent of the Lord’s teaching was given privately to the Twelve.

Conversation was not only in one direction. As part of this instruction, the disciples also felt free to question Jesus, such as by asking for further explanation of the meaning of a parable (Mt. 13:36, Mk. 4:10, Lk. 8:9), a reaction of the Pharisees (Mt. 15:12), or what will happen at the end of the age when He returns (Mt. 24:3). The disciples also asked Jesus to teach them to pray (Lk. 11:1). Peter, James, John and Andrew asked Jesus questions privately as well (Mk. 13:3). Once a leader has this high-quality exchange relationship with a subset of followers, there is a great deal of potential to influence them and to model appropriate behavior (Dansereau et al., 1975; Maurer, Pierce, & Shore, 2002). Jesus’ relationship with the disciples allowed them to get to know Him quite well,

to witness His values and how His behavior was consistent with them. This was particularly important in that His Kingdom was different from their previous understanding of a Messiah coming to bring political victory to the Jews.

**Experiences.** The miracles and other events that the disciples alone experienced also exemplify the high LMX relationship that Jesus had with certain of His followers. Leaders often provide professional development experiences for high LMX followers (Graen, 2003). At times, Jesus simply withdrew with His disciples away from the crowd (Mk. 3:7). Often these experiences were related to things Jesus wanted them to learn. The disciples witnessed Jesus calm the storm (Mk. 4:37-39, Lk. 8:22-25) which strengthened their faith. Jesus' relationships with Peter, James, and John qualify strongly as high LMX. Only Peter, James and John accompanied Jesus into the house of Jairus (Luke 8:51). Peter was able to walk on water (Mt. 14:28-29). Peter, James, and John witnessed the transfiguration (Mt. 17:1-2, Mk. 9:2-3,

Lk. 9:28-29) and accompanied Jesus to Gethsemane to keep watch with Him (Mt. 26:37, Mk. 14:32-34).

One type of experience for the disciples, also related to teaching, was to see Jesus modeling appropriate relationships with non-Jews. In addition to the benefit for the individual with whom He was interacting, the purpose of this role modeling was to equip the disciples for further ministry by demonstrating how to share the message of the Gospel and to fulfill the work for which He commissioned them in Matthew 28. One example is Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn. 4). Jews did not associate with Samaritans, yet He conversed with her and explained that He was the Messiah, and that "... salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship Him" (Jn. 4:22-23). A further example is Jesus' exchange with the Canaanite woman who sought healing for her daughter (Mt. 15:24-28). In these instanc-

es, the disciples initially were astonished (Jn. 4:27) at the interaction or criticized His actions saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." (Mt. 15:23). Jesus, however, was able to demonstrate that one does not have to be a Jew in order to have strong faith.

**Expectations.** As LMX theory predicts (e.g., Schriesheim et al., 1998), greater time and resources given to followers is matched by greater expectations of them. Coleman (1963) also notes the importance of expectations. In Luke 12:48, Jesus stated, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded." (See also Mt. 13:12). The parable of the talents (Mt. 25:14ff) also expresses this theme: Although the master entrusted a different number of talents to each servant, he expected all of them to use the talents wisely in accordance with what they had been given. It also should be noted that the talents were given according to ability (Mt. 25:15), and that those who were found to be able and

trustworthy were then given more over which to be responsible (Mt. 25:21). Ability is the recommended criteria for LMX. When Peter declared Jesus to be "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Mt. 16:16), Jesus affirmed that Peter would be the rock upon which Jesus would build the church (Mt. 16:18), not an easy task. He also referred to Peter as "Satan" when Peter failed to understand (Mt. 16:23). Jesus had high expectations and a close enough relationship that He could be harsh if warranted. While on the cross, Jesus gave the care of Mary, His mother, to John (John 19:27). Peter and John were chosen to select and prepare the Passover lamb (Luke 22:7-8). Later, Peter and John's letters refer repeatedly to Christ as the Lamb, demonstrating their understanding of the concept of the Paschal Lamb like no other New Testament writer (Moore, 2003, p. 53). Peter, James, and John were referred to as pillars by Paul (Galatians 2:9). When Jesus was no longer physically present, the disciples would need to function with greater autonomy; high LMX, as illustrated by the preceding examples, leads to the

development of this characteristic (House & Aditya, 1997).

**Empowerment.** Consistent with LMX research (Deci, Connell, & Ryan, 1989), Jesus exhibited differential relationships with His followers by giving high LMX followers empowering experiences. Many of the disciples' experiences served to prepare and empower them for ministry in which Jesus was their role model. Jesus involved the disciples and encouraged them to learn by doing or apply what they had learned, such as when He asked them to give the five thousand something to eat (Mk. 6:37). A culminating experience was when Jesus sent the twelve (Mt. 10:1, Mk. 6:7, Lk. 9:1) and also the seventy-two (Lk. 10:1) off two by two to preach and heal, applying what they had learned from Jesus. At the end of His earthly ministry He prepared them for their future work saying, "For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (Jn. 13:15). At the Last Supper He commands, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me" (Lk. 22:19). Finally, He commis-

sioned them, saying, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt. 28:18-20). Jesus transferred some of His authority to the apostles. He repeated a theme they did not yet quite understand about going to all nations. Finally, He assured them that His relationship with them would continue.

### ***Equal Treatment***

It is also important to note when Jesus does not treat followers differentially.<sup>3</sup> This distinction helps indicate under what circumstances LMX is appropriate and when it is not. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5) explicitly includes individuals (e.g., meek, poor in spirit) who could otherwise be perceived as having less value (Willard, 1998). Jesus had compassion on the crowd as a whole because they were

like sheep without a shepherd (Mt. 9:36). I Cor. 12 likens workers in the Church to a body with many parts each necessary to the whole. The parable of the workers in the vineyard (Mt. 20) depicts workers receiving the same pay no matter when they started working: Believers are received into the Kingdom of God no matter how early or late they come to Christ. Jesus offers the opportunity to be a follower to everyone: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11:28). He also stated, "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Mt. 12:50), not just the disciples or His earthly mother and brothers. Acts 10:34 states that "God shows no partiality," offering salvation to believers from every nation.

Although the twelve disciples were given higher expectations, all followers of Jesus must meet certain expectations. Several Scripture passages require any disciple to take up his or her cross and follow Him (Mt. 16:24, Mk. 8:34, Lk. 9:23, Lk. 14:27). Jesus illustrated the sacrifice

of following Him: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (Mt. 8:20). Thus, even in the context of LMX, there is a minimum acceptable level of relationship and mutual expectation between a leader and his or her followers. This is analogous to the work setting where all must meet the contractual expectations of their job.

### ***The Result***

Scripture shows that Jesus used LMX in an unbiased way, giving fair treatment to all, and requiring more from those in whom He invested more time and energy. Notably, although the disciples did grumble about other things, there is no place in Scripture depicting complaints about their status relative to one another (Coleman, 1963). Coleman viewed this as "proof that where preference is shown in the right spirit and for the right reason, offense need not arise" (p. 31), further stating that for this to be true, the ultimate goal must be clear and there must be no hint of selfish favoritism. The disciples learned from

the teaching and events they experienced and were able to use this experience to fulfill their commission, build the Church, and spread the Gospel to other nations.

## **God and the Nation of Israel**

Although certainly the richest example, Jesus' appropriate use of differential relationships with the disciples was not an anomaly in Scripture. God had high LMX relationships with individuals such as Noah, Abraham, Jacob/Israel, Moses, and others that were distinct from His relationships with other Israelites, and through which He worked to build the Hebrew nation. As with Jesus, these relationships worked to further the purpose of advancing the kingdom of God. The following section describes God's relationships with Noah, Abraham, and the Nation of Israel as examples of effective LMX being used to further God's ultimate purpose.

### ***Evidence for High LMX***

The fact that God demonstrated high LMX relationships

supports the legitimacy of this leadership practice. God's special intimacy with those whom He had high LMX relationships, the fact that He gave them new names, and the covenant He established express the quality of these differential relationships.

Noah and Abraham's relationship with God is described in an **intimate** way, indicative of high LMX. "Noah walked with God" (Gen. 6:9). In Isaiah 41:8, God referred to Abraham as His friend. Abraham spoke with God and was able to ask Him direct questions (Gen. 15:8). God included Abraham in the decision-making process for Sodom and Gomorrah, saying, ". . . Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" (Gen. 18:17). Abraham spoke on behalf of what righteous people may yet have been in Sodom, "Far be it from you to do such a thing — to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare with the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Gen. 18:25). Eventually, as it became clear that Sodom and Gomorrah must be destroyed, "God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out

of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot had settled” (Gen. 19:29). This is not the contractual exchange that a low LMX relationship would evidence.<sup>4</sup>

A significant aspect to many of God’s high LMX relationships was that He gave these individuals a **new name** indicative of His purpose for them. Abram became Abraham, “father of many,” a symbol of God’s promise to him and his role in God’s purpose. Jacob became Israel, the name of a new nation. (Later, Jesus renamed Levi as Matthew, “gift of the LORD,” and Simon became Peter, “the rock.”)

God’s **covenant** expresses the formalization of the high LMX relationship as a means to accomplish God’s purpose. The parties to the covenant have higher mutual expectations of each other. God established a covenant with Noah regarding the ark (Gen 6:18); Noah’s response prompted God’s pledge, “I will never again curse the ground because of humankind” (Gen. 8:21), and blessing (Gen. 9:1) to Noah and his descendants. This covenant is a precursor to the one made with Abraham, which looks

ahead to choosing and building a nation through this individual. Consistent with LMX theory, God makes a special request: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Gen. 12:1). In exchange, God promised to make Abraham and his descendants into a great nation, blessed, and a blessing to all peoples on earth (Gen. 12:2-3). God reiterated this covenant many times (e.g., Gen.13:15; Gen.15:18; Gen. 17:2).

God’s relationship with specific individuals had all the earmarks of a high LMX relationship. In addition, God’s relationships with these individuals provide a good example for leaders on how to choose high LMX followers: based on character, values, and performance, not demographic similarity. One characteristic evidenced by Noah and Abraham was their **righteousness**. “The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. . . . But Noah found favor in the sight of the LORD” (Gen. 6:5,

8). Abraham “believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen.15:6).

### ***Choosing a Nation***

An example of LMX on a larger scale is God’s relationship with the nation of Israel versus followers from other nations. In addition to leading certain individuals such as Noah and Abraham, God also specifically chose and led the Nation of Israel. After the Tower of Babel resulted in multiple nations, God decided to choose one nation through which to bring forth the Messiah (Icenogle, 1994; Moore, 1995). Election is “the act of choice whereby God picks an individual or group out of a larger company for a purpose or destiny of his own appointment” (Packer, 1982, p. 314). God illustrated this choice and destiny when He stated, “You shall be holy to me; for I the LORD am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine” (Lev. 20:26).

God did not turn his face from other peoples, instead blessing them through Abraham

and his descendants (e.g., Gen. 12:1-2). Belief in God was not limited to the Jews; His ultimate plan was to work through the Jews to reach all peoples: “And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you’” (Gal. 3:8).<sup>5</sup>

Just as the relationships described by LMX theory are not simply an ingroup and an outgroup, but rather a continuum, so the LORD’s choice of Israel does not mean Israel had carte blanche nor that other nations had no status. Consistent with LMX theory, those with high levels of exchange have greater responsibilities and expectations as well as rewards; they are held to a strict standard. Israel’s special relationship with God did not free the people from being subject to discipline for disobedience. Thus, in fact, Israel’s punishment for their sin was a *consequence* of their chosenness: “You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities” (Amos 3:2). Also, consistent with LMX,

followers from other nations were to be treated fairly. For example, Israel was forbidden to abhor the Edomites (Dt. 23:7-8), descendants of Esau, and were commanded to treat kindly the Ammonites (Dt. 2:19), who were descendants of Lot (Gen. 19:38). Ruth, a Moabite woman, gained prominence as an ancestor of David (Ru. 4:17; Mt. 1:5-16).<sup>6</sup>

### ***Summary***

The preceding paragraphs have shown that God expressed a more personal, intimate relationship including higher mutual expectations with some followers than with others, although all were treated fairly. Abraham and Noah, especially, provide a good example of certain characteristics, e.g., righteousness, being appropriate antecedents for the high LMX relationship. It is also true that these differential relationships were conducted for a purpose: focusing on a few, to later spread the gospel to the whole world.

### **What We Can Learn: Principles and Applications**

The preceding examples show how carefully-considered,

selective, high LMX relationships can be effective in bringing about fruit. Followers benefit from the relationship and can, in turn, develop relationships with followers of their own. In this fashion, leaders and members work together to fulfill the organizational goals. In the following section, principles are derived from the scriptural examples; in many cases these principles contradict prescriptive LMX theory as it is currently stated. Applications for LMX practice are also described. These applications address the problems that LMX research has been trying to solve, but do so through different mechanisms, ones which are consistent with Scripture but not necessarily with prescriptive LMX research in its current form, as described earlier.

### ***Principle 1: Limiting High LMX Is Valid***

The relationships between Jesus and His disciples and between God, Abraham, and others support the premise that it is appropriate for a leader to establish unique relationships with followers, some receiving a higher level of exchange than

others. As exemplified in Scripture, such relationships can be characterized by intimacy, involving teaching, shared information and experiences, greater influence and involvement, and higher mutual expectations. This model runs counter to the current thinking in LMX theory which advocates that leaders should foster high LMX relationships with all followers.

Succession planning can be positively impacted by the practice of choosing a limited number of followers with whom to foster high LMX. Succession planning focuses on high-potential employees, assessing them, giving them special assignments, and preparing them for future leadership positions. Today's fast-changing business environment means that succession planning is vital (Wells, 2003), yet about one-third of companies are concerned about being able to find suitable replacements (Bohlander & Snell, 2004). Often CEOs are so concerned about holding on to power that they fail to make a significant interpersonal investment in their subordinates (Sherman, 2004), thus highlighting the importance

of high LMX for human resource management.

Limiting span of control, the number of subordinates a manager has, may mitigate some of the concerns over the fairness of differential relationships. Research has found that the number of employees a manager supervises is negatively correlated with LMX (Schriesheim, Castro, & Yammarino, 2000). As work-unit size increases, relationships between supervisors and subordinates typically became less positive (Green et al., 1996). Recent trends in organizational design, including the virtual organization and reducing middle management have moved in the opposite direction, increasing span of control. Although self-managed teams and empowerment are positive ways to give employees more responsibility, the relationship between managers and employees remains an important consideration. This implies that organizational design should consider LMX issues in determining the optimal span of control, taking into consideration that a smaller span of control will allow the leader to have more time to

develop high exchange relationships with subordinates as well as to give subordinates an opportunity to develop their job-related skills.

***Principle 2: Appropriate Basis for High LMX***

It is important for LMX to be established based on appropriate criteria. The parable of the talents expresses the importance of managers giving responsibility based on ability and trustworthiness. Scripture shows that similarity in values and enacting those values is important both for initiation and continuation of a high LMX relationship, whereas simply demographic variables or similarity are not. Abraham and Noah were known for their righteousness. The disciples, particularly Peter, James, and John, were able to understand Jesus' ministry more fully than others. Peter, especially, showed that he was teachable with regard to interacting with Gentiles. Basing high LMX on similarity in values is consistent with prescriptive LMX research but not with typical practice, as described previously.

When left to their natural tendencies, research has shown that leaders are significantly influenced by perceived and demographic similarity (e.g., the similar-to-me bias; Rand & Wexley, 1975). Leaders need to be conscious of the basis upon which they choose followers for high LMX relationships. An affective rather than cognitive choice can limit the diversity of those who have access to a greater share of the leader's time and other resources and can be discouraging to minority employees (Douglas, Ferris, Buckley, & Gundlach, 2003). This is problematic in light of an organization's need for diverse members who can make a contribution to organizational goals. Fostering LMX relationships that cross gender and racial boundaries, in fact, may be the key component in a successful diversity initiative (Douglas et al., 2003). High LMX relationships should be based on ability or performance potential and congruence with the values of the organization. Using these criteria reduces the potential for favoritism (warned against in James 2:9) by the leader and

the danger of prejudice against low LMX individuals (e.g., Jews' attitude toward Samaritans).

***Principle 3: Working Through High LMX Members to Lead Others***

Having established high LMX relationships with the appropriate followers, one way to deal with the reality of limited resources is for leaders to work through their high LMX followers to develop others. This is exactly what Jesus did with His disciples. The things that the disciples learned and experienced with Jesus enabled them to continue the mission of spreading the gospel. Noah and Abraham had important roles in furthering God's plan for the Nation of Israel and ultimately reaching the whole world. The idea of a system of relationships is consistent with the biblical plan stretching over thousands of years and many sets of relationships. Aside from Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) preliminary ideas about LMX as a network of interdependent dyadic relationships, this principle has not been addressed by LMX theory.

The series or system of dyadic

relationships throughout the organizational hierarchy proposed here implies that it is also worthwhile to look at LMX at the macro or organizational level. Followers initially benefiting from high exchange relationships could be trained and motivated to develop high exchange relationships with their own followers, thus effectively connecting them to the organization as a whole. This would not necessarily be in the context of formal reporting relationships, but could be in the form of more experienced members of a team mentoring and developing newer members. The initial high LMX followers would be seen by others as being trustworthy and having legitimacy and credibility through their relationship with the leader (Liden et al., 1997). This allows the primary leader to influence a greater number of individuals (though indirectly), ultimately furthering the organizational purpose.

A benefit of using high LMX followers to develop other employees is that it is a way of providing more organizational members with the opportunity to develop a high-level exchange

relationship. It would also mitigate the potential negative effects on coworker relationships of some subordinates having high LMX with the supervisor and some not. Additionally, Maurer et al. (2002) have proposed that when LMX is high, employees will be motivated to engage in developmental activities (going beyond the usual job responsibilities) that benefit the organization as well as their own supervisor.

Although there has been little LMX research in non-business organizations, other types of organizations, such as churches, clearly are settings in which LMX will occur and can provide an illustration of this concept. Evangelism and church renewal experts have recognized the value of focusing on giving teaching or spiritual direction to a small set of committed church members. Although some, such as Robert Coleman in *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (1963) have recognized the value of these concentrated relationships for teaching still others to lead, evangelize, and create disciples, not all take the logical next step of proposing that this small

group of high LMX followers each develop similar relationships to other church members, in turn strengthening the commitment of these individuals. Thornton (1956) stops with the focus on committed members. Other recent church growth and renewal experts (e.g., Warren, 1995) recognize that different levels of relationship and commitment exist within the church body; however, they imply that the pastoral focus should be on individuals at the lowest level of commitment. The discipleship literature and LMX research clearly have significant relevance for each other and would be a fruitful subject of future research and integration.

#### ***Principle 4: High LMX Leads To Organizational Goal Accomplishment***

High LMX relationships play a role in working toward the accomplishment of God's plan throughout Scripture. Jesus' relationships with His disciples played a role in fulfilling the Great Commission. God's relationship with Noah, Abraham, and the nation of Israel as a whole provided a foundation

for the ministry of Jesus on earth. Research shows that high LMX leads to higher performance on an individual level, but there has been little investigation of LMX and organizational performance.

In *Christian Reflections on the Leadership Challenge*, Kouzes and Posner (2004) emphasize that leaders are influencing their followers to accomplish some broader goal. The LMX relationships described in Scripture provide excellent examples of how effective use of LMX combined with working through high LMX followers to lead others can be instrumental in implementing strategy; however, LMX research has typically focused on supervisory leadership (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000). The processes by which strategic leaders affect the organization has received little research attention (House & Aditya, 1997), and investigating the efficacy of LMX in this regard would be beneficial.

LMX research has not extensively addressed the importance of a leader's vision. Although Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) do make a connection between high-quality exchange and transformational leadership (Bass,

1990; Burns, 1978), the LMX literature has not completely recognized the value of a social exchange relationship for transmitting the leader's vision to a relatively small group of followers who have the ability to carry on that vision. It has been recognized to a somewhat greater extent in the Christian leadership literature, however. Maxwell (1993) commented that leaders spend eighty percent of their time with twenty percent of their followers, enabling these followers to carry on the vision.

### ***Principle 5: Equitable Treatment for All***

Again, it is important to emphasize that having high LMX relationships with only some does not mean that other followers are discounted or treated unfairly. Equitable does not mean equal. The parable of the talents illustrates that to whom much is given much is also expected. God's choice of Israel did not show favoritism; Israel's disobedience merited judgment while other nations also experienced God's mercy. Jesus offered a relationship with Him to all who would accept it.

In an organizational context, there is a minimum appropriate level of relationship with followers; even though some have a higher level of exchange than others, the leader has a certain responsibility to and expectation for all followers. LMX theory has not addressed how other followers should be treated apart from the injunction to give high LMX to all followers.

Although giving certain followers high LMX is justifiable, leaders must be concerned about low LMX followers as well, particularly minority employees. Dee Hock, founder of Visa International, has noted, "Any leader worthy of the name makes sure that *all* people for whom they have responsibility have open and equitable opportunity to develop their abilities to the maximum" (Bennis, Murphy, Hock, & Muldroom, 2003, p. 64). This is indeed a challenge, yet an important one. Nystrom (1990) found that low LMX led to low organizational commitment which in turn led to turnover. Although minority employees sometimes may feel stigmatized, resulting in lower job satisfaction and organizational

commitment (Milliken & Martins, 1996), individuals with a strong organizational identity perceived that they were treated fairly, regardless of racial identity (Dovidio, Gaertner, Niemann, & Snider, 2001). This organizational identity may be strengthened by values congruence.

Furthermore, leaders should realize that LMX level is not set in stone. High LMX members who do not meet their (perceived) potential or subsequently reduce their output may receive lower LMX (Nystrom, 1990; Steiner, 1997) or be sanctioned (consistent with God's treatment of Israel, e.g., Amos 3:2) while retaining high LMX. Scarce resources should be used in the most effective way, while maintaining respect for individuals.

## Conclusion and Limitations

Although there is merit in developing as many high LMX followers as possible, given the positive outcomes associated with these relationships, resource constraints limit the number of high exchange relationships leaders can realistically cultivate. As a result, leaders would do well

to conform to the principles modeled in Scripture. Five principles emerge from a scriptural examination of LMX. These principles are that limiting high LMX is valid, using an appropriate basis for LMX, working through high LMX members to lead others, high LMX leads to organizational goal accomplishment, and equitable treatment for all.

These five principles are somewhat at odds with current scholarship and practice. Current LMX theory advocates fostering high LMX relationships with all followers; however, highly effective leaders such as Jesus appropriately fostered differential relationships with followers. These relationships involved greater intimacy, teaching, shared information and experiences, influence, and expectations. High LMX relationships were based on characteristics of the followers such as righteousness and greater understanding, not just similarity of demographic characteristics. High LMX relationships became part of a larger organizational plan in which these followers, in turn, developed relationships with others to further the organizational goals; current scholarship

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has not focused on this macro view. Finally, LMX theory has not focused on appropriate treatment for low LMX followers.

It is important to recognize that there are limitations in the extent to which we can apply these scriptural examples to organizational life in general. Human leaders are not omnipotent; they cannot entirely recognize their followers' potential and, therefore, cannot always select the most appropriate individuals for high LMX. Although working through high LMX followers to lead other subordinates is a viable option, human leaders do not have the luxury of working over thousands of years to bring a plan to fruition. Limited time may also interfere with working through high LMX followers to lead other subordinates to bring a plan to fruition. Additionally, some valid recommendations for applying LMX cannot be derived from scriptural examples (e.g., training leaders in order to increase LMX; Scandura & Graen, 1984). Nevertheless, application of scriptural principles can give leaders assurance that it is both reasonable and productive to have unique relationships with subor-

dinates, provided that this practice is implemented both fairly and with concern for effective human resource development and organizational performance.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup>All Scripture references taken from: *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. (1989). New York: American Bible Society.

<sup>3</sup>At the same time, Jesus makes a clear distinction between His followers and those who are not. One example of this is the passage about separating the sheep (followers) from the goats (Mt. 25:31ff). Jesus states that only the ones who do the will of the Father will enter the kingdom of Heaven (Mt. 7:21); to the rest, He will declare “I never knew you” (Mt. 7:23). The statement, “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters” (Mt. 12:30), also expresses the clear distinction of who are and are not Jesus’ followers.

<sup>4</sup>Additionally, Abraham’s reasoning parallels the passages in Matthew discussed earlier in which Jesus made a clear distinction between those who are His followers (the righteous) and those who are not. God did not relinquish His standards of justice as a favor to Abraham; Abraham knew those standards and spoke within those parameters.

<sup>5</sup>Jesus, the Messiah, was a descendant of Abraham. Jews of Jesus’ day knew that Israel had a destiny meant to affect other people (Kean, 1956), but they did not understand just what that destiny was. At the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus charged the disciples to “make disciples of all nations” (Mt. 28:19). As Paul said of Abraham, “For he is the father of all of us” (Rom. 4:16).

<sup>6</sup>Moabites were also descendants of the children of Lot (Gen. 19:36-37). Additionally, Moses married a woman from Midian, and his father-in-law Jethro gave Moses important advice about delegating responsibility for the governance of Israel (Exodus 18). The episode of Jonah the prophet journeying to the foreign city of Ninevah is another example of God’s mercy and compassion on people other than Israel (Jon. 4:10-11). Ninevites were descended from Ham, the youngest son of Noah (Gen. 10:6-12).

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