

Ephesians 4:1-16: Paul's Cosmic Ideology for Global Leadership

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Abstract

Paul's formative experiences as a "Hebrew of Hebrews" and yet as "one untimely born" into the Christian community dramatically shaped his ideological outlook. As reflected in his eminent treatise on Christian unity within Ephesians 4:1-16, this seemingly providential combination of ideological perspectives led him to overcome the perpetual challenge of integrating the universal and particular into a coherent worldview and, subsequently, formulate an unconventional relational-leadership ethic as the church spread rapidly across the eastern Mediterranean and Asia Minor. Most importantly, Paul's ideological stance, in light of evident Trinitarian realities, as well as Christ's cosmic exaltation and subsequent bestowal of myriad gifting upon the church, dictated reconciliation of the one with the many, resulting in an uncompromising position on Christian unity while affording paradoxical consideration for diversity as well. Applying the corresponding principles derived from unity in diversity to the organizational landscape, Paul's ancient yet undeniably eloquent appeal to the Ephesian churches has reverberated through the corridor of time and, subsequently, resulted in nothing less than cosmic ideology for the practice of global leadership in the modern context.

Keywords: organizational leadership, unity in diversity, Trinity, humility, ambidexterity

"As a prisoner of the Lord" (Eph. 4:1, New International Version), Paul, in the opening verse of his eminent treatise on Christian unity (vv. 1-16), urged the Ephesian congregations to live lives worthy of their universal calling. While Paul's prolific stature (DeSilva, 2004) quite possibly obscures his self-deprecation as a prisoner of Christ, the subsequent appeal to humility and unity (vv. 2-3) flowed directly from deep-seated ideological commitments regarding the discharge of power and authority within the organizational context (Chamblin, 1993). Indeed, by peering beneath the layers of textual evidence (Robbins, 1996), a rather robust image of Paul's ideological stance crystalizes that, in turn, fundamentally informs the application of theological principles to leadership within the global environment.

In that vein, Paul's understanding developed as a result of his membership within two distinct ideological groups (Robbins, 1996). On the one hand, Paul's Jewish heritage formed the basis of his ideological convictions; yet, on the other, his rather recent conversion to the Christian sect created a bifurcation of ideological thought (DeSilva, 2004), drastically altering his notions on how power and, therefore, leadership should be exercised within the confines of the fledgling community. Particularly relevant to the practice of global leadership, Paul's letter to the Ephesian churches epitomized his masterful harmonization of the one and many into a coherent vision for organizational life. Through the lens of ideological analysis (Robbins, 1996), Paul's celebrated discourse has been interpreted for the purposes of establishing a model of global-leadership practices meant to foster organizational cohesion and innovation across cultural borders.

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1. Ideological Implications

Ideology, as Robbins (1996) suggested, encompasses far more than how individuals view the world, but rather, results from the value system espoused by social groups to which individuals belong. Ideology, in essence, constitutes the normative beliefs shared, whether consciously or unconsciously, within any given community. What follows, then, attempts to peer behind the text in order to understand these seminal ideological influences which ultimately informed and found expression in Paul's instructions to the members of the Ephesian church. Of particular relevance, Paul's formative experiences allowed him to seamlessly integrate the proverbial conundrum of the universal and particular which has plagued every philosophical system since time immemorial (Van Til, 1955).

While current purposes prohibit a protracted discussion on this point, suffice it to say that non-Christian modes of thought tend to equivocate between irrationalism and rationalism, claiming either that God is conveniently absent or that man reflects the pinnacle of creative and intellectual reasoning (Frame, 1987). In Frame's haunting words, "rationalism gives us a perfect knowledge—of nothing" and "irrationalism leaves us ignorant—of everything" (p. 61), preventing human beings from satisfactorily describing and successfully negotiating the world around them, especially the intricacies of man-made institutions. In the organizational context, such ambivalence translates into the inability to reconcile individual and corporate interests in a mutually beneficial manner without emphasizing one at the expense of the other (Cafferky, 2011)—anyone who has spent time within the organizational environment can attest to this fundamental contradiction which frequently results in conflict, strife and less-than-optimal performance. The Pauline epistles offer ample evidence of this same phenomenon occurring within the multi-cultural congregations of the early church. Embedded within the very fiber of Paul's ideology, however, resided extraordinary insight into overcoming this challenge. Consequently, Paul's ideological perspective was forged within the confrontation between his former life as a Pharisee and his new-found calling as Christ's emissary to the Gentiles (Carson & Moo, 2005; DeSilva). Undoubtedly, somewhere in the nexus of these two ideological outlooks, Paul's leadership ethos transformed into a vibrant expression of simultaneous unity *and* diversity—a profound revelation for an increasingly multi-cultural and interconnected world.

1.2 A Hebrew of Hebrews

Of course, Paul's Hebrew roots are well attested. Although born a Roman citizen in the city of Tarsus (Carson & Moo, 2005), he was educated in Jerusalem and thoroughly inculcated within the Pharisaic branch of Judaism (DeSilva, 2004)—a "Hebrew of Hebrews," (Phil. 3:5, New International Version) in Paul's own words, with no equal in zeal for the law and righteousness (v. 6). Unquestionably steeped in monotheistic theology, Paul's emphasis on unity (vv. 3, 13, 16) comes as no surprise. Unique among the ancient Near East peoples, the Jews worshipped a single God as sovereign creator of the universe rather than many gods like their pagan neighbors (Kalland, 1992). Memorialized in the Hebrew declaration of faith, the conviction that the "Lord is one" (Deut. 6:4) characterized a fundamental ideological conviction (Hill & Walton, 1991) which pervaded Jewish and, therefore, Paul's thought.

Consequently, as evidenced within his repeated references to "one" (vv. 4-6), Paul's commitment to monotheistic ideology remains irrefutable. At the same time, in the process of upholding a supreme Christology (vv. 13, 15; Ladd, 1974), Paul adapted monotheism into a conspicuously Trinitarian formulation, simultaneously invoking the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (vv. 4-6) in striking yet harmonious unison with the theological tenets implicit within the call for Christian unity (v. 3; Ballenger, 1997; Snodgrass, 1996; Stott, 1986). In this manner, Paul safeguarded the foundational tenets of Hebrew monotheism while never undermining Christ's divinity. Accordingly, Paul's unequivocal exhortation for unity existed within the paradoxical tension between oneness and otherness as exemplified in the vibrant communion of the Trinity (Dockery, 1991; Tumblyn, 2007).

The Trinity, after all, best exemplifies not only the ideological foundations of Christian thought but organizational cohesion as well. Ultimately, all human institutions struggle, as Cafferky (2011) insisted, with developing the appropriate balance between individual and collective interests, frequently emphasizing one at the expense of the other. Born of mankind's sinful nature, human beings, at once, both attract and repel one another (*cf.* Gen. 3:16), antagonizing relationships and undermining the collaboration implied within the cultural mandate. Yet, Paul's ideological formation, latent within his theology, reconciled the one and many into an organizational blueprint for unity and cooperation, especially within the global and, by obvious extension, multi-cultural environment.

1.3 As One Untimely Born

Unfortunately, the "peculiar" (Deut. 14:2, King James Version) national character of Israel, as God's chosen people, often resulted in blatant ethnic as well as religious prejudice of which Paul himself previously had been guilty (*cf.* Acts 8:1; Gal. 1:13-14). As "one untimely born" (1 Cor. 15:8, New American Standard Bible), however, Paul, although a Hebrew like his fellow apostles, knew all too well the sting of derision from the Jerusalem leadership, who questioned his "apostolic" credentials and authority. Having not walked with Christ in the flesh and as a former vehement oppressor of the then burgeoning sect, Paul faced tremendous suspicion from the Christian community (Acts 9:26) as well as open hostility from his countrymen (9:29). In this light, Paul's own peculiar membership (1 Cor. 15:9-10) within the Christian community came at great personal expense and potential peril. Yet, undoubtedly, this "crucible experience" (Mendenhall et al., 2013, p. 19) completely altered his ideological assumptions, cultivating a humble demeanor which allowed him to address the Ephesian congregations from a position of weakness rather than prominence (v. 1; Chamblin, 1993). For Paul, then, an ideological posture of humility pervaded his theology and, practically speaking, mediated unity within the rapidly expanding congregations (vv. 2-3). Through the willful suspension of otherwise egotistical attitudes, individuals resist feelings of self-importance and, instead, prostrate themselves in deference to others (Isaacs, 1998; Jensen, 2001). In seeking the welfare of others, cooperative relationships naturally emerge amidst mutual respect and trust versus the suspicion and rivalry fueled by self-preservation and competition (McKenna, 2013). For this reason, Paul urged the members of the Ephesian church to treat one another with the abundant humility and grace necessary to galvanize the "body" (v. 4) into harmonious and unified effort in advancing the Kingdom of God.

At the same time, Paul's unique ideological outlook also evolved out of the rather transient structure within the growing Christian community as well. As the church expanded throughout the Mediterranean and Asia Minor, most congregations existed as relatively modest meetings within households (White, 1987). While the eventual tension between itinerant and local leadership would eventually transition into formal ecclesial government (Horrell, 1997), Paul often deferred his apostolic authority as a courtesy to those who led the local congregations (White, 1987). In this way, Paul exhibited an ideological position that reflected a distinctive blend of Hebrew and Christian thought, evidencing his willingness to subvert conventional hierarchical relationships built on notions of honor and patronage (DeSilva, 2004; Robbins, 1996; Witherington, 2007) in favor of a more egalitarian approach (vv. 1-3, 12-13; 15-16; Chamblin, 1993; Shaw, 2006; Strom, 2006). Most assuredly, Paul's utterly unconventional approach genuinely reflected his status as one truly born out of time, indeed.

1.4 Cosmic Community

Ultimately, however, it was Christ's cosmic victory over the powers of evil which most influenced Paul's ideology (vv. 9-10; Gombis, 2005).

A faithful member of the Christian community, Paul's foremost conviction resided in the belief that Christ had triumphed over death, and, having subjected all demonic forces (foreign gods) to utter defeat, that victory was universal in scope and conclusively demonstrated Christ's divinity (Arnold, 2010; Hendriksen, 1979; Wood, 1981). Assured of this fact, Paul resisted any doctrine which might undermine the veracity of this foundational truth, especially any pagan ideology contrary to Trinitarian unity (vv. 4-6, 14). Yet, on the other hand, Christ's cosmic victory also provided the impetus for diversity within the church (Garland, 1979; Snodgrass, 1996; Stott, 1986). That is, Christ apportions grace equitably across the Christian community (vv. 7-8, 11), affording all the opportunity to serve the ministry of the Word (v. 12). While some have been apportioned with the grace for positions of responsibility they are (v.11), in turn, to develop the members of the community who can then exercise their talents for optimal impact in the world (v. 12; Arnold, 2010; Stott, 1986; Witherington, 2007). All Christian's, in fact, embody the gifts which Christ has bestowed upon humanity (Gombis, 2005; Snodgrass, 1996; Wilder, 2010). Through the application of leadership, those "gifts" attain their fullest expression as tangible instruments of Christ's cosmic reign (v. 13, 15; Strauss, 1996).

In light of such overwhelming grace, power structures evaporate and, in their place, mutual respect and solidarity materialize (vv. 1-3). This reflected, of course, Paul's overriding purpose—to galvanize the Christian community through the application of what Shaw (2006) referred to as "vulnerable authority" (p. 129). In this sense, leadership not only encompasses authoritative character because it has been bestowed under the auspices of Christ's cosmic lordship but also, paradoxically, resists competitive impulses for the very same reason (*cf.* Phil. 2:5-8). The subsequent realization that every individual fills an integral role within the Kingdom (v. 16) quickly diminishes any notion of superiority. Rather, bound together by unqualified grace, the community engages in extraordinary collaboration through a multitude of diverse talents.

2. Global Ramifications

In the end, Pauline theology, as presented within Ephesians 4:1-16, offers a glimpse into the dialectic between Hebrew and Christian modes of ideology that reverberates throughout Paul's thought (Mouton, 2012). At once both universal and particular, Paul's ideological position resulted in a relational ethic genuinely committed to the preservation of unity between Christians of different backgrounds, yet authentically concerned with permitting the fullest and, therefore, most diverse expression of that unity (Snodgrass, 1996). For Paul, such a relational ethic manifested within and through the practice of leadership (Strom, 2006) that was, by nature of the Christian mandate, global in scope.

2.1 Liberated by Loose-Couplings

Paul's seminal experience, as one untimely born, developed within him a certain appreciation for shared leadership (Shaw, 2006). That is, thoroughly inculcated in Hebrew ideology yet supernaturally indoctrinated into Christian ideology, Paul rejected traditional hierarchical leadership paradigms. Instead, he formulated a permeable leadership mesh which encouraged the seamless transfer of authority between himself and the local congregations as situations dictated (vv. 1-3, 16; White, 1987). Such "loose-couplings" (Weick, 1976, p. 3) have been shown to foster innovation by allowing local organizational units to revolve interchangeably and spontaneously around the central core (Galbraith, 2010). In the global context, loose-couplings translate into what Devanna and Tichy (1990) coined the "boundaryless organization" (p. 464) in which organizational diversity, both structurally and existentially, drives transitory configurations that can be rearranged quickly as environmental conditions change suddenly—the key lies in maintaining a solid organizational core and, therefore, identity (vv. 3, 13; Burns, 2002; Tetenbaum, 1998). In this way, organizations remain nimble under conditions of extreme complexity and turbulence (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997).

However, more than producing organizational ambidexterity (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2004), loose-couplings promote the learning behaviors essential to sustaining competitive advantage. By developing temporary and reconfigurable structures, leaders encourage the organic transfer of diverse perspectives across the entire organization. In other words, expanding organizational pathways dramatically increases information-processing throughput and power (Galbraith, 1974). Imperative to innovation, diverse thought exposes the organization to a wider spectrum of available options that might otherwise remain obscured or altogether unnoticed. As members begin to share knowledge for mutual benefit, such benign actions are interpreted positively and reciprocated in kind, causing virtuous cycles to form which amplify and accelerate learning throughout the system (Caza, Barker & Cameron, 2004). Of course, the extraordinarily rapid spread of Christianity epitomized the exponential effect virtuous cycles have upon the organizational environment.

2.2. Cementing Core Values

While diversity fuels innovation, sustaining organizational identity requires, however, absolute conviction and commitment to core values. For this reason, Paul refused to compromise on the essentials of the Christian faith, namely the inherent oneness of God (Garland, 1979). It was, on this point, the mixture of Hebrew monotheistic ideology reconciled with the reality of the Incarnation that pressed Paul to adopt a Trinitarian ideological standpoint (vv. 4-6). Consequently, the perfect union between the one and the many was articulated into a vibrant relational-leadership ethic (vv. 1-3; Cafferky, 2011; Snodgrass, 1996) which commended diversity through loose-couplings yet demanded unequivocal agreement on foundational ideological commitments.

A delicate balance to be sure, establishing a limited number of guiding principles prevents the system from careening into utter chaos while simultaneously allowing an appropriate measure of novelty to penetrate (Burns, 2002; Tetenbaum, 1998). Said to reside at the very edge of chaos (Pascale, 1999), innovative organizations harness diversity in order to stimulate creativity but maintain system integrity by staunchly observing and defending core values with ferocious vigor. In this way, core values regulate the organizational system through minimal yet tremendously influential norms much like Christ himself condensed the entirety of the Law into two fundamental principles: (1) love of God and (2) love of neighbor. Likewise, Paul, in exhorting the imitation of Christ's example (Bekker, 2007; Clarke, 1998), advocated the exquisite simplicity of Trinitarian faith. Such undivided belief binds organizations in common purpose and prevents fragmentation from occurring. Implications in the global arena are obvious. Maintaining uncompromising core values shapes consistent organizational identity across cultural borders (Caliguiri, 2013; Mohamad, 2010; Morrison, 2001), and leaders must exemplify those values in word and practice (Morrison, 2001; Voegtlin, Patzer & Scherer, 2012). At the same time, more than simply tolerating alternate views, Paul's corresponding notion of diversity required ample reciprocity between local and global elements, affording local members a substantial measure of respect and decision-making ability (White, 1987). Loose-couplings, then, unite, not through rigid structures or dogmatic assertions, but rather, through resolute adherence to a core set of guiding principles (vv. 13, 15). Surrounding these guiding principles (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989), however, resides the opportunity for vibrant expressions of local interpretation (vv. 12, 16; Ezigbo, 2015).

2.3 From Hubris to Humility

In the end, however, Christ's cosmic triumph equalizes power structures (Tumblin, 2007), dampening competitive behaviors (Cavanaugh, 2008).

Indeed, the realization that Christ has gifted the entire Christian community on an individual basis deflates egotistical assumptions regarding any supposed superiority of leadership offices (vv. 12-13; Arnold, 2010; Lunde & Dunne, 2012). Leadership, then, is not to be coveted by the chosen few, but rather represents a shared resource designed to enable the fulfillment of individual talents for the benefit of the whole (Loscalzo, 1988). For this reason, Paul considered himself no better than any other member of the community, allowing him to engage with unparalleled humility and grace (Strong, 1996; Thomas & Rowland, 2014).

Of course, Collins (2001) confirmed the critical need for the paradoxical blend of humility and firm resolve as a precursor to extraordinary organizational performance. Due to his distinctive ideological background and unique application of Christ's universal victory (Lunde & Dunne, 2012), Paul also instinctively recognized that humility and respect beget trust which, in turn, engenders organizational cohesion and resiliency in the face of turbulent conditions (Morris, Brotheridge & Urbanski, 2005). Indeed, virtuous cycles form as a result of the trust gained through mutual knowledge transfer. More than merely disseminating information, however, virtuous cycles teach organizational members that they can rely on one another. In times of crisis or rapidly-shifting environmental circumstances, this bond produces the steadfast resolve needed to withstand the buffeting winds of often unprecedented change and, sometimes, outright distress (Schein, 2010). In the complexity and unpredictability of the global climate, organizations must strive to cultivate the resilient behaviors which generate and enhance adaptation.

Above all else, a humble demeanor epitomizes authentic global leadership (vv. 1-3). Only by suppressing normally ethnocentric behaviors do leaders, in the global context, create the opportunity to entertain other perspectives (Schein, 2013; Caliguri, 2012). It is only within the illuminating light of Trinitarian identity, as Paul well understood, that the necessary space exists to adequately and genuinely appreciate other perspectives without pride or prejudice (Tumblin, 2007). At the same time, such humility does not, in any way, dictate universal agreement or absolute abdication of personal values. On the contrary, complete unanimity will likely not exist in this life; however, as Snodgrass (1996) eloquently quipped, do such "differences actually *require* separation" (p. 222)? Humility opens the door for genuine inter-cultural dialogue to occur and, in this manner, stimulates consideration for otherness (Buber, 1958).

3. Paul's Cosmic Ideology for Global Leadership

In the final analysis, Paul's formative experiences as a "Hebrew of Hebrews" and yet as "one untimely born" into the Christian community dramatically shaped his ideological outlook. As reflected in his eminent treatise on Christian unity within Ephesians 4:1-16, this seemingly providential combination of ideological perspectives led him to overcome the perpetual challenge of integrating the universal and particular into a coherent worldview and, subsequently, formulate an unconventional relational-leadership ethic as the church spread rapidly across the eastern Mediterranean and Asia Minor. Most importantly, Paul's ideological stance, in light of evident Trinitarian realities, as well as Christ's cosmic exaltation and subsequent bestowal of myriad giftings upon the church, dictated reconciliation of the one with the many, resulting in an uncompromising position on Christian unity while affording paradoxical consideration for diversity as well.

Indeed, by applying such principles to the organizational landscape, perhaps Paul's most significant contribution to the practice of leadership lies in healing the unfortunate rift between individual and collective interests, which has plagued organizations since the Fall. Through fierce solidarity in the midst of vibrant expression, organizations reclaim the position of honor ordained at creation to fill and rule the earth in collaborative harmony. Incorporating unity in diversity into design thinking, boundary less and reconfigurable organizations promote accelerated learning while remaining firmly anchored by guiding core values.

Most of all, however, unity in diversity deflates egotistical impulses and diminishes the desire for power, breaking down the barriers which impede mutual respect and appreciation and, as a result, ultimately flattening hierarchical structures into a distributed and relational leadership ethos that seamlessly integrates normally disparate, and often competitive, organizational elements into a unified whole. In this manner, then, Paul's ancient yet undeniably eloquent appeal to the Ephesian churches has reverberated through the corridor of time and, subsequently, resulted in nothing less than cosmic ideology for the practice of global leadership in the modern context.

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