

CHRISTMAS: A SEASON OF PARADOX

An Example of Great Leadership

Leadership Advance Online – Issue VIII

by Bruce E. Winston

Before the birth of Christ, the prophets foretold of a series of paradoxes surrounding the coming of the Messiah in that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, from Egypt, from Galilee, would be born of a virgin, would be meek, etc. – all of these things that did not fit the expectations of the people.

The Jewish people expected a warrior that would overthrow the Roman power base and re-establish Jerusalem as the center of power, re-establish the Torah (as interpreted by the Pharisees) as the law of the land and the temple (directed by the priests) as the controller of cultural norms.

It is interesting to see that the theocracy of the Old Testament's first books changed to a plutocracy in which the wealth of resources and power – held by the church – controlled or sought to control, the social organization of the day.

Unfortunately, this focus on plutocracy, rather than theocracy, has been evident again and again in history – just examine the Catholic Church, the Church of England, Colonialism, etc. As I reflected on this, I realized that today's organizations are not immune to this problem of preferring plutocracy over theocracy. The foundational thinkers and writers in the 1920s, 30s and 40s created organizations in which the leader was the technically superior person and everyone below the leader had to get information and approval through the power base – in essence, a plutocracy.

What would happen if our organizations moved back to the ideals of theocracy where God selected the leader who fit the image of Jesus? When people want a strong leader who “forces” situations to conform to the organization's advantage, they would, paradoxically, get a leader who is humble. Isn't it interesting that Collins, in his book *Good to Great*, found humility as a key factor in “great” leaders? Humility, like all virtues, is not an opposite of a vice, but a balanced point between two vices: pride and lowliness.

In a theocracy, when people want a leader who will give in to fit the political pressures, they would get a leader with fierce resolve. Collins found this virtue among great leaders. Fierce resolve is the balanced point between zealousness and laissez-faire.

Why did the angels announce the birth of Christ to the shepherds rather than to the kings of the world? Why this paradox? In our organizations, who gets the PR releases first – the front-line employees or the financial markets? Why don't we follow the behavior of the angels? Who needs the good news the most? Leaders in today's organizations should consider emulating the angels and announce good news to the shepherds of the organization first.

Why did the angels declare that there was glory to God in the highest places and peace on earth among people of goodwill? What is the paradox here? In a plutocracy, the leaders seek to have glory among themselves and work to remove peace so there is fear instead. Jesus came to bring peace, rather than fear.

The angels announced that the birth of Christ was a reason for joy. I wonder how often leaders in today's organizations are the cause of joy?

Why didn't the three wise men report back to Herod as Herod wanted? Wouldn't the political benefits of keeping Herod happy be worth it? Why the paradox of the wise men not doing what a king asked? The answers all point to doing the right thing rather than the expected thing. Most devout Christians in the Western world might say that we would give our lives for Christ—but would we give our jobs if asked to do what is not right? Jesus called us to do the right thing as did the wise men who came to see the Christ child.

Jesus came to serve and to be an example. A paradox of what was expected. The rulers in today's organizations seek to make examples out of others rather than to be the examples to others.

As we move into and through this Christmas holiday season, I encourage you to pause and reflect on the paradoxes of Jesus' birth and life, and then examine your own leadership to see if you are living the paradoxes. If you're not, how might they strengthen your leadership in the new year? May you have a merry paradoxical Christmas!

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