

Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development

Volume 14 | Number 14

Article 10

2015

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Recommended Citation

Starr, Brian T. (2015) "Organizational Leadership: Foundations & Practices for Christians," *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development*: Vol. 14 : No. 14 , Article 10.

Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth/vol14/iss14/10

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Organizational Leadership: Foundations & Practices for Christians

Burns, J. S., Shoup, J. R., & Simmons Jr., D. C. (Eds.). (2014). Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Reviewed by Brian T. Starr, Ph.D.

While the practice of leadership is by no means new to the human experience, the study of leadership as a discrete academic discipline emerged quite recently in the modern university. Careful scholarly treatment of this discipline from a holistic Christian perspective is both needed and welcomed, and the recently published *Organizational Leadership: Foundations & Practices for Christians* provides an excellent addition to that body of literature. The concatenated work of evangelical Christian scholars, this text provides its readers a broad introduction to the field of leadership in general, theological reflections on Christian leadership in particular, and practical advice for those Christians who aspire to take on the leadership mantle.

The book is divided into three sections, and the opening chapter is Timothy G. Dolan's reflection on the divine call to leadership. Differentiating between God's primary call to all Christians and His secondary call to certain vocations or tasks, Dolan reminds us that discernment of such important matters must be done in the context of Christian community with careful attention devoted to ascertaining the compatibility of one's gifts, skills, passions, and convictions with the demands of leadership. Gayne J. Anacker and John R. Shoup devote the second chapter to unpacking the meaning and importance of worldview and then laying the groundwork for understanding leadership from the perspective of those who have adopted a worldview that is distinctly Christian. Rick Langer wraps up the first section of the book with an excellent chapter on the theological

underpinnings of Christian leadership and a sobering reminder that a biblical call to leadership “is a striking contrast to the modern American tendency to aspire to lead and to assume that a call to lead is unnecessary or else universally given” (p. 73).

One of the refreshing aspects of any volume with multiple authors is the diversity of writing styles. The second section of the book begins with Jack Burns’ delightful river metaphor for understanding the emergence of leadership theory. Working his way from creation up to the modern “sea of complexity,” Burns discusses ten major leadership schools in a helpful, concise summary of the history of leadership theory. This reflection sets the stage for his next chapter on the tenth leadership school, Christian leadership, nascent in its development within the current context of dynamic scientific discovery. Borrowing from the mathematical discipline of Chaos Theory, Burns challenges Christian leaders and organizations to define properly their “strange attractor” or ultimate goal. His selection of a visual display of the Lorenz Attractor is intriguing and reminds us that the journey from our current place to desired destination is not always linear.

The third and largest section of the volume takes readers from the theoretical realm to the world of actual practice, and those who are looking for deployable tools will be most drawn to these final chapters. Here they will find Ronald K. Pyle’s thoughts on communication in the image of God, with a reminder of the importance of the often-neglected art of effective listening. They will be challenged by Jack Burns to discern when it is best to avoid conflict and, if conflict is necessary, they will find advice on how to negotiate the conflict successfully. They will navigate a very practical chapter by John R. Shoup and Chris McHorney on the process of decision making with a systematic treatment of common decision-making flaws and concrete steps toward making sound decisions. They will be reminded by R. Scott Rodin of the perils of money, frequently and implicitly dismissed by Christians in capitalistic societies, and will hear his critical admonition toward transparency in the raising, investing, and spending of an organization’s financial resources. Finally, they will receive a necessary word from Timothy G. Dolan on the importance of sustaining the leader through personal margin, accountability, and lifelong learning.

Many readers will find this volume to be an engaging and helpful book. Doubtless, some objections will be raised. Theologically, the writers hail from the evangelical tradition and readers from other Christian traditions might find some areas of disagreement, though it seems likely that most resulting critiques will be relatively inconsequential in praxis. While the themes of the book flow logically and cohesively throughout, the diversity in writing styles from chapter to chapter will prove quite energizing to some, but less so to others. And though the book draws primarily from the academic field of leadership and will thus be well-traveled intellectual territory for most readers, Burn’s use of metaphors from contemporary theories of mathematics and physics might prove unfamiliar to some.

Readers would be well advised to resist the tendency to stop reading when the numbered chapters close. The postscript is not an entirely comfortable read, but it is an important one.

Before being properly and ultimately reminded that “Great Christian leaders are never alone” (p. 283), the authors recount the stories of Moses, John the Baptist, and Jesus. These tremendous leaders dealt with obstacles of every sort and magnitude. The temptation to think that Christian leadership will be a road easily traveled is quickly dispatched by biblical evidence that is quite to the contrary. Far too often in Christianity in general, and evangelicalism in particular, the theme of the great prophet Jeremiah is reduced to what we have recorded in verse 11 of the 29th chapter of his eponymous book. It is a great verse and a profound biblical truth. But there are less pleasant, and equally true, themes to be found in Jeremiah, and the rest of the canon too, which we are less likely to ponder and embrace. The editors Burns, Shoup, and Simmons, Jr. end their volume with faithful optimism only after they remind aspiring leaders that the call to follow Jesus, and lead others who would do the same, is a call to death. Readers of spiritual substance and intellectual honesty will appreciate this truth in advertising.

Brian T. Starr serves as the Executive Vice President for Lubbock Christian University, where he also teaches Economics and Finance.