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Educational Leadership, Relationships, and the Eternal Value of
Christian Schooling.**

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Abstract

Anyone who has engaged in the calling of Christian education knows that it can be – and usually is – one of the most exciting, delightful, fulfilling, and joyous ministries that a believer can know. Its golden days are a real “foretaste of glory divine,” its opportunities for those who truly love the possibilities of the mind and heart of Christ in the lives of our students are the very aroma of the Lord in our work. Lives are changed; parents are supportive; administrators are helpful; the board is productive. Sacrifices are engaged willingly, trials are gladly borne. We go home at the end of the day, and can hardly wait to return in the morning...

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Book Review: James L. Drexler, Editor. *Schools as Communities: Educational Leadership, Relationships, and the Eternal Value of Christian Schooling.*

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James L. Drexler, Editor. *Schools as Communities: Educational Leadership, Relationships, and the Eternal Value of Christian Schooling.* Colorado Springs: Purposeful Design Publications, 2007. 392 pp. \$33.80 (paperback). ISBN-10: 1583310835; ISBN-13: 978-1583310830.

“Where there is no vision, the people perish...”
Proverbs 29:18a (KJV)

Anyone who has engaged in the calling of Christian education knows that it can be — and usually is — one of the most exciting, delightful, fulfilling, and joyous ministries that a believer can know. Its golden days are a real “foretaste of glory divine,” its opportunities for those who truly love the possibilities of the mind and heart of Christ in the lives of our students are the very aroma of the Lord in our work. Lives are changed; parents are supportive; administrators are helpful; the board is productive. Sacrifices are engaged willingly, trials are gladly borne. We go home at the end of the day, and can hardly wait to return in the morning...

And anyone who has engaged in the calling of Christian education also knows that it can be — and usually is — one of the most daunting, exhausting, demoralizing, and frustrating ministries that same believer can know. Golden days can morph into drabness from one year to the next, or even overnight; its opportunities can suddenly vanish, with the mind and heart of Christ being trampled underfoot by institutional change, upheavals in leadership, financial uncertainty, or divisions and offenses within the school community... and suddenly, the aroma of Christ is seemingly nowhere to be found. Lives are no longer transformed; parents are arguing among themselves or sniping the administration/board; administrators run for the

bomb shelter; the board seems unable to resolve the issues. Sacrifices now seem imposed, with trials producing grumbling, not grace. We go home at the end of the day, and are tempted to circulate our résumés...

Strange to say, this roller coaster ride is well known to all too many Christian school teachers, administrators, parents, students, and board members. The shift can happen over time, or even overnight. The results are commonly tragic (and predictable) if resolution and healing are not accomplished in time: high rates of teacher turnover; a loss of students and their families; the demoralization of the remaining students, faculty and staff; friction between boards and administrative leadership that leads to recriminations, or even terminations; and so on. And so the question is: How can Christian schools resolve the chasm between the experiences of the first and second paragraphs above, prevent the sort of divisions and offenses within the educational body that the scriptures warn about, embody healthy and continuous educational improvement, and become the dwelling places of *shalom* and *agapé* that will transform the lives of all who are touched by that community?

This is a daunting question, cutting to the heart of what every generation of Christian educators and academic leaders must face, ready or not. In the case of *Schools as Communities*, it is addressed by James L. Drexler and the excellent group of nearly two dozen scholar-practitioners that he assembled for this volume. As the title states, the main theme of the work is that of community. All eighteen of the essays are represent separate explorations of particular subsets of the main challenge of fostering *koinonia* within the imperative for continuous school improvement in the service of

Christ and our students. This is a worthy but highly ambitious task; frankly, as I read it, I wondered how well Drexler and his collaborators would carry it off.

Drexler and company proceeded by dividing the task into four main sections: “Building Community: Foundational Principles”; “Building Community Among Faculty and Staff”; “Building Community for Students”; and “Building Community with Others.” Drexler doesn’t leave community without conceptual support, however; he explicitly adds supportive themes of grace, scriptural priority (“the weightier issues of the Law,” prophetically stated by the Lord in Matthew 23:23), and cultural relevance/engagement to the content of the book (xiv-xviii). Nor is the work merely theoretical; each chapter concludes with a call to praxis entitled “Now What? Application to Practice”. Its purpose is to help the reader understand how the contents of each chapter might be used in their school setting and their own ministry of leadership. Finally, each chapter has a references section that provides useful sources and online links for the reader to extend his or her ongoing exploration of educational leadership and community.

In Part One, foundational principles are explored in essays examining the primacy of grace in Christian school settings (Bruce Hekman); mercy, justice and social change as imperatives of transformational Christian education (Vernard T. Gant); the life of the leader and his or her grace-filled life as an embodiment of the Lord’s grace (Jeff Hall); and godly risk taking on the part of the school leader (Stephen R. Kaufmann and Kevin J. Eames).

Hekman encourages the Christian school to embody true grace to its students, eschewing both “sloppy grace” and formal legalism as it becomes a real community in pursuit of a profoundly Christian educational mission. In Gant’s contribution, the Christian school is viewed from the vantage point of God’s call to mercy and justice. Rather than harboring bias or prejudice, for example with respect to lower SES students and their families, our schools ought to be seeking opportunities to reform all aspects of their operations — from their curriculum to their service programs to the “habits of the heart.” As we seek to serve the Lord in our schools, we should turn away from the all-too-

prevalent paternalism within our educational work, from the majoring-on-minors that so easily entangles us, and strive for a deeply Christ-like way of life (cf. Galatians 3:26-28). Faithful educational leadership will seek real community with all people, and not merely those within comfortable shouting distance. Hall’s article shifts the focus to the educational leader, to the very life and calling of the one who shepherds a school. The love of Christ must compel leaders to love those who are collaborators in their school community, so that they are effective models of His grace to those who work in that setting. The first section rounds out with Kaufmann and Eames’ very interesting chapter on educational leadership and risk taking. Christ’s call to His people often involves radical, transformational living; a Christian school that seeks to follow Him faithfully will find itself pressing against social conventions and embedded attitudes among its own constituencies. The authors argue that Christian school leaders should look for opportunities “to engage students in culturally relevant ideas and activities,” even when they involve the risk of controversy and discomfort (76).

Part Two shifts focus to the question of community building with the faculty and staff. Gordon Brown addresses the important question of leadership models and decision making. His survey covers an impressive amount of ground in short order, with discussions of models that concentrate on the leader, models that emphasize the instructional enterprise, and models that focus on community transformation. Kevin J. Eames then shifts our gaze to organizational theory, and the ironic fact that organizations do not organize themselves. Eames draws our attention to the fact that older hierarchical, top-down, and linear organizational models have been supplanted in recent decades by approaches based on systems theory. He builds a convincing case for a biblical basis for systems theory in Christian education; all that I need point out is that anyone who links Herman Dooyeweerd’s extraordinarily important framework of domains, modalities, and sphere sovereignty to organizational theory and praxis is on the trail of something big. Really big. (Yes, that is your warm invitation to further study.)

Neil Neilson then introduces us to the notion that tensions within Christian educational enterprises are

common, inescapable in this age, and actually should be “welcomed as friends” (cf. James 1:2-8), since these “liberating dichotomies” actually spur our growth and development, both personally and institutionally. He lists six provocative oppositions, and makes a good case for their role in stirring up our leadership and vision in response. Jack Beckman then takes up the baton, looking at the vital issue of professional development as a means of community building within our schools. I view such work as a vital outworking of “the equipping of the saints” (Ephesians 4:11-13), one that Beckman clearly advocates for school leaders.

In Part Three, Drexler’s team moves to the central question of community formation with and for our students. Barrett Mosbacher summarizes the challenges facing our schools in a very informative chapter on strategic stewardship. I found myself agreeing strongly with his comments about the need for an understanding of the economic underpinnings of stewardship and development work in our Christian schools, an area that is regularly bedeviled with sentiment, pietism, and even presumption masquerading as “faith.” Mosbacher’s essay is a call to arms, a medicine that can bring healing in such things; our school community will be strengthened as its leadership adopts a more focused approach in its strategic financial vision. Derek J. Keenan then shifts our attention to the question of curricular leadership. His essay calls us to consider curricular formation to be a wonderful opportunity for gathering all the stakeholders in our educational community around the challenge of creating a dynamic, holistic, Christ-honoring course system for our students. Our curriculum ought to be a profound expression of our deeply-held values, our commitments to the Lord, the world, and each other; Keenan encourages us to act on these beliefs, and to make them real in our schools.

From this platform, it is a natural progression to shift from reaching inwards — building community at home — to reaching outwards. Daphne Wharton Haddad and Susan Schneider Hasseler follow Keenan’s essay by discussing the need to construct culturally inclusive communities in Christian education. For far too long, our “outreach” to our world has reflected a paternalistic “tolerance” (“I put up with you because it makes me feel good.”) rather than a truly transformational way of living.

(“We are one in the Lord, and we all have things to teach and learn from each other.” Romans 1:11-12; Galatians 3:26-28; and Romans 12:2... enough said!) Haddad and Hasseler’s call is to reform all aspects of our school community, from relationships to curriculum to classroom practice, to produce a true model of the Lord’s kingdom.

In chapter twelve, Matthew Lucas gives a framework for the very important — and very misunderstood — process of assessment. Too many in Christian school leadership map “assessment” to standardized testing alone. Lucas posits that we must move to a much broader, multi-modal approach to truly assess the effectiveness of what we are doing in our schools. All of this must be done in a way that reflects a Christian worldview in all aspects; a willy-nilly adoption of the techniques of the world without deep reflection on the values of the Lord’s kingdom will actually harm our work, giving us a “form of godliness, but denying the power thereof” (2 Timothy 3:5a; KJV). James L. Drexler follows Lucas by addressing the question of discipline and community building within our Christian schools. Drexler points out the plethora of books on this topic, and then espouses a biblical approach for the development of godly discipline. A proper anthropology allows us to avoid mere sentimentality, and also to avoid a purely legalistic/punitive view of school discipline. The scriptures do provide us with guidelines for a redemptive approach to such matters — 2 Timothy 3:16-17 comes to mind immediately, as an example — and Drexler advocates such a stance. In a community that “cares enough to confront,” many discipline issues can be prevented entirely, or can be dealt with locally and privately, as the Lord instructed us in Matthew 18. For the balance of issues, the *agapé* community can escalate properly through a sequence of corrective steps, always seeking to give a student the opportunity to truly repent and experience restoration to the community.

Part Three concludes with David L. Roth and Jon Keith’s examination of changing the culture in Christian schools. Anyone familiar with Christian education is aware of the problem; as the traditional Spanish proverb put it quite succinctly, “*Que no haya novedad.*” Or in modern English, “Let no new thing arise.” (Even more loosely: “All change is bad.”) Resistance to change, regardless of how

faithful or promising it is, is a fact of organizational life. Educational leaders who assume that their vision of new opportunities will automatically be accepted by their constituencies is cruising for a bruising; a reading of the life of Moses alone would cure any romanticism on this topic. Roth and Keith advance Jesus Christ as the model for generating change in our schools, and advocate that school leaders take key elements of His leadership as a template for their own practice.

Schools as Communities concludes with Part Four, a survey of our relationships with others. Whether we know it or not, the constituencies that a Christian school addresses include those who may be far outside of our immediate school setting. In chapter fifteen, Bruce Young makes the case for collaboration in Christian education. No community can exist without working together to achieve common goals and a mission shared by all. Drawing on Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, Young usefully restructures that multi-level model (once again, via Dooyeweerd's pioneering schema) to produce a biblical framework for envisioning the larger perspectives of our work within the kingdom of God, and under his sovereign reign.

James C. Marsh then moves to the very significant question of the relationship between the educational leader and his or her board. Any leader who doesn't realize fully the critical nature of this connection is a leader who will probably not last very long in that position. Marsh points out that statistics bear out the fact that there is trouble in paradise: according to a 2005 study, some 70% of all school leaders are fired, and do not leave voluntarily. There is no optimistic reading of this number; clearly "churn and burn" has become the model for many Christian schools. The author surveys the three main models of Christian school governance, and then outlines a number of recommendations for a redemptive, rewarding relationship between school leadership and its board. Only in this way, says Marsh, can we have any hope of reversing the current dreary attrition in Christian school administration.

Scot Headley and Stephen Cathers follow Marsh in their essay on continual school improvement. Drawing an important distinction between assessment and evaluation, Headley and Cathers seek to enhance educational community by the

creation of a culture of quality, reflection, and ongoing reformation involving all members of a school. Their school evaluation cycle (Planning, Action, Assessment, and Reflection, 350) is a concise and very useful model for practicing excellence in all realms while simultaneously maintaining close relationships throughout the process. I see this as a very well-focused embodiment of the biblical principle that the apostle Paul stated when he advised Timothy, "Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save [that is, 'benefit and bless'] both yourself and your hearers." (I Timothy 4:15-16, NIV) In other words, our schools can only progress towards the standards of our Lord in these things if it constantly watches its life and teaching, thus blessing all the members of its community.

In the final chapter, Brian Fikkert reminds us that our schools should be places of *shalom*, seeking to produce students who fully and radically embody a biblical world and life view. To do this, they will need to be lovingly and wisely trained in how to engage every dimension of the world around them in the name of the Lord's kingdom. There are significant challenges to every aspect of traditional Christian school operations here, but also prospects for very significant blessings in the lives of every member of a Christian school community as a result. James L. Drexler then concludes quite fittingly on how all these things, wisely and lovingly accomplished in our school communities, can redound to the glory of God, and the praise of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Early in this review, I mentioned the fact that I was curious to see how well Drexler and company delivered on the ambitious promise of the full title of *Schools as Communities*. I don't think that anyone could be more sympathetic to their stated aim, but I also have seen enough of educational tomes to be a bit skeptical of whether or not this volume would delight more than it would disappoint. I am pleased to say that my doubts were unjustified, and that my hopes were fulfilled. *Schools as Communities* does a fine job of treating its subject from a number of vectors, giving its reader a well-balanced view of the challenges and possibilities for leaders in Christian school

community building. Even those new to this world — for example, prospective Christian board members, or parents, or staff members — will find this book to be very useful as a guide to the issues and possible answers that they face.

Christian colleges and universities will also find it to be useful as a candidate textbook for undergraduate studies in education, and as an adjunctive textbook (at least) in graduate schools. Certainly graduate and doctoral programs will use this as a survey-level point of departure for further studies, but *Schools as Communities* will function quite well in that application. The resources listed are a treasure trove for the student, and will provide the researcher with a number of leads for improving their own professional library — always a good thing!

In conclusion, *Schools as Communities* turned out to be a genuine delight: a pleasure to read, well grounded in scriptural principle, current theory and practice, and embodying the very sort of Christian community that it advocates. What could be better? Consider this to be an enthusiastic recommendation by a person who is not usually impressed by many educational books, even those done in the name of the Lord. . . .