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Book Review: Soul Care: Christian Faith and Academic Administration

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Abstract

Soul care: Christian faith and academic administration. Edited by Heie, H. and Sargent, M. (2012). Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press.

As the editors of this book state in the introduction, little has been written about how to provide effective academic leadership to a Christian institution of higher education. This collection of essays was written for an audience of academic administrators under the assumption that most individuals who find themselves in such a role have very little formal preparation for their responsibilities. Furthermore, academic leaders in Christian higher education in particular generally come into such positions with a great deal of experience in their respective fields, but with very little theological preparation needed to make day to day decisions in a faith-based environment. The 16 essays in this 17-chapter book are written by practitioners in the field of academic administration in Christian higher education and are designed to offer new and prospective academic administrators insight into the highly complex and nuanced field of academic leadership set within a Christian context.

Book Review

Soul Care: Christian Faith and Academic Administration

Heather Hall Lewis, University of Portland

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Each chapter is theologically or biblically-based. Some authors utilize direct scriptural references and quotes; others utilize parables, such as the parable of the mustard seed from the book of Matthew. The authors intentionally weave their own faith journey into each essay, giving the reader theory-to-practice examples of how to incorporate Christian faith into work in academic administration in Christian higher education.

The authors in chapters 1 through 4 establish some key elements to being a leader in Christian higher education. These four chapters lay the groundwork for the remainder of the book. Claudia Beversluis, author of the essay in Chapter 4, states,

Christian colleges have always claimed to be about much more than bringing students to academic

excellence and right ways of thinking. They aim toward formation at the deepest level: educating hearts and minds so that students hear the call of God in their lives and then lead lives that glorify God in every way. (p. 58)

To this end, it is important for academic administrators in Christian higher education to understand how to cultivate and nurture such a culture on campus. In order for faculty to be able to provide this kind of education for their students, they need to be supported in such a way that promotes their own spiritual growth and renewal. Darryl Tippens, author of the essay in Chapter 1, believes that this is the most critical role of an academic administrator. Christian higher education should provide opportunities for spiritual restoration, such as honoring the Sabbath, learning to listen, and encouraging self-care among faculty members. These are just a few of the practical suggestions for encouraging education beyond what can be taught in the classroom. Faculty should be the example for their students in this arena and academic administrators in Christian higher education can help them fulfill this responsibility to their students.

Chapters 5 through 10 delve deeper into the nuts and bolts of academic administration. These chapters provide readers with practical advice for academic governance from a Christian perspective. Betsy Morgan, author of Chapter 5, encourages academic administrators in Christian higher education to move beyond the hierarchical structure of the institution and develop a more collaborative decision-making system. Morgan states that academic administrators should follow Jesus' example and develop a community of learners and leaders rather than maintaining a stringent hierarchical structure where administrators make decisions with little input from the faculty. "Shared governance in a Christian context should mean that responsibilities are shouldered by a wide variety of persons and that no one need bear the nightmare alone" (p. 85).

The author of the essay in Chapter 6, Ed Ericson III, further develops the idea of collaborative decision-making. Ericson states that academic administrators should involve the campus community, particularly faculty, in important decisions since they are the closest to the impacts and outcomes of such choices. Faculty should certainly be involved in curriculum development for their individual classes and departments, but they should also be involved in decisions about the university's core requirements, how degree programs are structured, and the general direction and growth of the institution. Just as the body of Christ has many valuable members with gifts and talents to share, so should a Christian institution value its diverse faculty and the gifts they bring to the institution.

Chapters 11 through 16 discuss the development of relationships within the academy. According to the editors and authors, academic administrators in Christian higher education should be as concerned - if not more so - with the development of relationships with faculty, staff, and other administrators as they are with budgets, fundraising, and curriculum development. Relationships sustain the individual faculty member in his or her own work; relationships also promote collaboration and generativity throughout the institution. These relationships make the collaborative decision-making process discussed previously easier and more productive.

Carla D. Sanderson, author of the essay in Chapter 11, uses God's Great Commandment to Christians - to love God with all our hearts and to love our neighbor as ourselves - as a foundation for building relationships within a campus community. Sanderson defines three key relationships - God, family and friends, and colleagues - that should be developed and nurtured, in that order. In the concluding paragraphs of this chapter, Sanderson states, "Doing things right is only a part of academic leadership. Whereas doing things right depends upon strong relationships with others, I think of doing the right thing as a God-sized task accomplished through dependency on him" (p. 173). Sanderson emphasizes the importance of a relationship with God first which will naturally lead to strong relationships with family, friends, and colleagues as well as doing the right thing for one's institution and faculty.

The remaining chapters in the last section of this book

discuss how relationships can affect some very practical and often unpleasant aspects of academic administration. These include faculty performance evaluations, tenure decisions, assessment of institutional fit, and sometimes breaking relationships between an individual and an institution. David A. King, contributor of Chapter 14, states, "...we who labor in Christian institutions are expected to handle tough personnel decisions in a Christlike manner" (p. 201). While decisions to terminate a member of the faculty are rarely easy or well-received, developing relationships and a collaborative work environment can make these conversations more productive and developmental for the departing faculty member.

The concluding chapter of the book provides an excellent summary of the preceding 16 chapters. Written by the editors, this brief chapter summarizes the book in the following three elements:

1. Academic administration in Christian higher education is a form of ministry and should be treated as such.
2. Renewal and soul care are critical to being a successful academic administrator.
3. Relationships built through mutual respect and trust make academic administration in Christian higher education a joyful profession.

The authors do not claim that academic administration is easy, but they do assert that academic administration in Christian higher education is a fulfilling profession for those who practice in a Christlike manner.

In conclusion, I found this book to be very well-written and informative. While it was clearly intended for an audience of academic administrators - deans, department chairs, provosts, etc. - the advice and reflections contained in the volume are applicable to other members of a Christian college or university community, such as staff and other administrators. For those without much time to devote to an entire text, each chapter can be read individually without losing the meaning of the individual essay. However, the entire book is valuable and each chapter is connected in some way to the chapters that precede and follow it. As a potential prospective academic administrator - and current staff member at a Christian university - I will be adding this book to my resource library and will come back to selected chapters as I grow and develop in my career.