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Mission-Directed Governance: Leading the Christian School with Vision, Unity, and Accountability (Book Review)

Ryan G. Zonnefeld

Dordt College, ryan.zonnefeld@dordt.edu

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intersected three worlds that had never before been so artfully combined on the American political scene—politics, advertising, and religion” (63). By examining in great detail, for example, the words used in the campaign, the images generated in advertising, special lighting techniques intended to give a halo-effect, etc., Taylor fleshes out each of the six elements. He builds the case that Obama was marketed as the one who could save America from its troubles.

Since Obama did not have a record of significant political accomplishments, the author claims that the Obama campaign could not be built on experience. Instead, the candidate had to focus on the future. He did this, according to Taylor, by focusing primarily on himself as a person who represented “change” and “hope.” The chant “Change! Hope! Believe!” drove the campaign forward. “Viewed through the lens of the Devotional Code, Obama personified presidential perfection. Millions of devoted Obamites venerated him as a kind of political savior” (327).

Extensive documentation, particularly from the news media, supports the author’s claims as he develops his case that the six elements were all present in abundance during the Obama ascendancy. Often the media chained into these fantasies and promoted them in ways that demonstrated they had forsaken the old adage that the media constitute the fourth branch of government in their role as critics of processes and programs.

The case Taylor makes for the campaign being marketed as religion is persuasive. It is an easy read with example piled upon example to support his thesis. One wonders, however, if he might have pulled in other rhetorical theory to provide insight into this huge rhetorical movement. For example, it would have been helpful to see how Bormann’s fantasy theme analysis could have demonstrated how these fantasies chained together to form a rhetorical vision.² Or, he could have used Burke’s ethical moments (negative, hierarchy, guilt, mortification, victimage, catharsis, redemption)³ to show how symbols were used to construct a new

religion of rebirth (reducing the essentials of Christianity to language). Narrative theory might have been used to tighten the vision that propelled the campaign.⁴ Application of insights from rhetorical theory would strengthen his case that these elements become powerful means of persuasion.

This book could serve as a case study in a political communication class, and it could also be a fine example of persuasion for courses in rhetorical criticism. And all who are willing to consider what may be behind powerful political campaigns should read this book. While Americans might want to deny that they see government as savior, the success of the Obama campaign suggests otherwise. This book clarifies how campaign managers, the media, and the candidates can manipulate the American public.

Politics as religion is not new, and clearly Obama’s campaign was not the first to use religious imagery. For example, a major theme of the Nixon campaign in 1968 was “Nixon’s the One.” Similar studies could be done to examine how campaigns market candidates to fit with cultural images and myths. This book helps us see how one significant American myth, the “coming of a messiah,” was implemented to drive a political campaign.

Endnotes

1. C. U. Larson, *Persuasion: Reception and Responsibility*, 13th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2013), 262-63.
2. E. G. Bormann, “Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality.” In *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 58 (December 1972): 396-407.
3. These terms are best explained by William H. Rueckert in Chapter 4 (“Dramatism: Language as the Ultimate Reduction”) of his book, *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963).
4. W. R. Fisher, “The Narrative Paradigm: An Elaboration.” In *Communication Monographs*, 52 (December 1985): 347-67.

Stob, Leonard. *Mission-Directed Governance: Leading the Christian School with Vision, Unity, and Accountability*. Grand Rapids: Calvin Press, 2011. 203 pages. ISBN-978-1937555-01-6. Reviewed by Ryan G. Zonnefeld, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Education at Dordt College.

Change. Some embrace it; others fear it. Some long for it; others yearn for things to remain the same. Regardless of how one feels about change, it is

undeniably rampant in our educational systems. Veteran teachers look back and wonder, even marvel, at how the teaching and learning environment has changed during

their careers, especially in the last decade. Teachers see change. Administrators, parents, and students see it. And so do school boards.

In Christian schools, boards have often dealt with change in light of holding true to the mission and vision of the school, an important cause in and of itself. In *Mission-Directed Governance: Leading the Christian School with Vision, Unity, and Accountability*, veteran Christian school administrator Leonard Stob has opened the door to a different view of Christian school governance, one that every Christian school board could look to for guidance. In his book, Stob provides a model for school governance that remains true to the mission and vision of the school and makes the school board even more integral to the Christian school endeavor.

At the outset, Stob is clear that the mission-directed governance model he is proposing involves what some will see as a radical change. The mission and vision of a school, however, do not fade away in this model but remain as the foundation on which the school is built. Indeed, the primary purpose of mission-directed governance is to ensure that the mission has a “permeating influence in curriculum, policies, and practices” (16), remaining at the forefront while providing “agile and flexible decision making” (17) that can adapt to the exponentially changing environment of schooling.

The first few chapters introduce and remind readers about the role of change in education and, more specifically, about how changes in school governance lie at the heart of deep change in Christian schools. A number of arguments are presented, including a statement that those who resist change in Christian schools tend to see themselves as “preservers of the truth and of the essential philosophical principles of the school” (24). I experienced some of this type of resistance in my years as a school administrator, but I believe Stob over-generalizes about resistors to change in Christian schools. While optimistic and forward looking in how he encourages school boards to find “systematic ways of measuring and achieving goals [and] ...anticipate and plan for change” (24), there is in the book, in my mind, an overly pessimistic underpinning of how Christian Schools have addressed change.

Missing from Stob’s discussion on change is holding individual board members more responsible for engaging in change. He appears to fault the system for problems rather than the people within the system. This form of systems thinking could be misread to absolve individual board

members of responsibility even though decisional authority lies only with the board itself. It is my belief that problems may not stem from the *intent* of people, but schools are led by people, and it takes people to make change.

After the discussion on change, Stob examines the current organizational governance models being used in Christian schools, identifying two predominant models—traditional and governance-by-policy—and framing the evaluation of each model around three critical questions: (1) How does the school identify and protect its foundational beliefs? (2) How does the school identify and promote its mission and vision? (3) How does the school identify roles of authority, determine the process of decision making, and ensure accountability? Using these questions in the analysis of each governance model reflects a thoughtful, thorough, and fair evaluation of both the traditional and governance-by-policy models while building a strong case for the mission-directed model.

The first model Stob evaluates is the traditional governance model used by most Christian schools. His extensive experience as a Christian school administrator is reflected in his clear description of how the traditional system operates through its use of multiple committees and a hands-on approach by many boards to manage school operations. He comments on the strengths of the traditional model and draws due attention to its shortcomings. His critique of how the traditional governance model often uses round-table discussion and independent committees and exhibits a general lack of accountability is accurate. And realizing the concern that our foundational beliefs may be at stake if the traditional governance model is abandoned, Stob provides compelling arguments that changing governance practices does not necessarily threaten our mission.

A common alternative to the traditional governance model that Christian schools have considered is the governance-by-policy model. In his analysis, Stob addresses the biggest strengths of this model—trusteeship and flexibility—and how these have the potential to bolster the mission of the Christian school. Governance-by-policy forces a governing board to be more visionary and forward-looking, allowing school administrators to manage school operations more effectively. The drawbacks of a governance-by-policy model—a governing board that is both autonomous and self-perpetuating—are addressed as clearly violating the important relationship between the Christian

school board and its supporting constituency. While a governance-by-policy board may work in the business world, according to Stob, it is an inappropriate model for mission-based organizations.

By completing a solid evaluation of both the traditional and governance-by-policy models, Stob develops his mission-directed model. The mission-directed system is presented as a hybrid model, one that fuses the strengths of both the traditional and governance-by-policy models into a system whereby foundational beliefs are not only protected but are thematically woven throughout all operations of the school. Stob also demonstrates a thorough understanding of Christian schools and change in his description of the mission-directed model, not as a static model but as a dynamic model that must be contextualized within each school community, “always a work in progress” (87). The relationship between the school board and the school constituency is a crucial element of mission-directed governance that other forms of governance do not support at the same level.

Stob’s proposal of a mission-directed model is further strengthened with the inclusion of an ongoing case study of how one school—Ontario (CA) Christian—has traversed the move to mission-based governance, not only showing how the mission-based system works but also including individual steps to consider when moving toward such a system.

The last section of the text includes many useful tools for implementing a mission-directed governance model. Good strategies and ideas are included for not only preserving and protecting a school’s foundational beliefs but also leaving room to challenge and reform these beliefs in a changing context. Additional tools give practical guidance for the board as well as for the head-of-school. Strategies, ideas, and tools taken together, the final section of the book provides school boards with a good starting point for discussing meaningful governance change in their schools.

Whether you are a Christian school constituent that embraces change or runs from it, this book will challenge and clarify your thinking about Christian school

governance. It provides both promoters and detractors of change with a digestible, practical governance model that enables Christian school boards to dig much deeper into the purpose of the board and, more importantly, into the purpose of Christian education itself. The book also gives assurance of how change could be implemented in governance without sacrificing the foundational beliefs of Christian schools.

The book does not have all the answers. It does not totally put to rest the arguments that traditional and governance-by-policy models can be mission-driven, too. It also does not provide sufficient research data to evaluate the effectiveness of the mission-directed model. Without data, school boards may be too quick to buy into this new mission-directed model without taking the time to evaluate how it best fits their individual school. Some initial data on Christian school governance has already been collected (see my dissertation on effectiveness measures of Christian School boards),¹ but research on Christian school board governance has just begun. The book also assumes that the board is working with a capable and visionary head-of-school. That is not always the case. More discussion will be needed on that relationship as well.

The book does give direction to important discussions that every school should tackle, regardless of whether a change in governance models is being considered. “The point of this governance discussion is not merely to solve the problems of the traditional and governance-by-policy models; rather the mission-directed model opens the new possibility of centering on what the school should philosophically advance” (200) as it prepares students to serve their Maker in an exponentially changing world. In that discussion, Stob’s book provides a viewpoint worth considering.

Endnote

1. Ryan G. Zonnefeld, *From vision to learning: Effectiveness measures of Christian school boards*. Unpublished dissertation, 2009. Available electronically at <http://disexpress.umi.com/dxweb>.