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Review of Tod Bolsinger, Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory

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In *Canoeing the Mountains*, Tod Bolsinger, assistant professor of practical theology and vice president and chief of the leadership formation platform at Fuller Theological Seminary, offers “a guidebook for learning to lead in a world we weren’t prepared for” (13). Bolsinger believes that for many ministers, a seminary education has “trained them for a world that is disappearing” (13, 15). He wants his readers to be ready to face the challenge of leading into the uncharted territory of a post-Christian age. The early American explorers, Lewis and Clark, serve as guides in this study of leadership, and their journey of discovery is used as a lens to explore the situation facing Christian leaders today. Bolsinger also draws on his own personal history in pastoral ministry and denominational leadership to connect theory and practice.

The book’s first section addresses “Understanding Uncharted Territory.” Following the conventional wisdom of their day, Lewis and Clark expected to find a waterway that would connect the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. What these explorers found, though, was not a flowing river, but the Rocky Mountains! They had come prepared to explore via canoes, but had to ditch those plans and lead their crew off their “map” to safely cross the mountains. Bolsinger notes that “just as Lewis and Clark functioned under a set of geographical assumptions, leaders of the church in the West today have been operating under a set of philosophical, theological and ecclesiological assumptions” (27). He argues “that leadership—and especially leadership development—must be dramatically different than it was during Christendom” (30). In this new environment, paths for thriving (or even simply surviving) will not be found by trying harder or having greater technical skill related to the solutions of the past. Instead, what is required is a “spirit of adventure” and an ability “to look over Lemhi Pass and let the assumptions of the past go” (33).

In the second and third sections, Bolsinger discusses “The On the Map Skill Set” and what “Leading Off the Map” requires. One of his important refrains is that no one will trust someone to lead them off the map until they have proven their ability to lead on the map. In these sections, he unpacks this core concept from earlier in the book: “transformational leadership lies at the overlapping intersection of three leadership components.” It “begins in technical competence . . . is validated in relational congruence . . . and becomes transformational through the integration of adaptive capacity” (43–44). Bolsinger thoughtfully and effectively addresses each of these three parts of leadership and how they build on each other. Other notable items in these sections were some inspiring and challenging descriptions of Lewis and Clark’s leadership partnership (62, 68–70), an examination of the power that organizational culture has over strategy (73, 77), and a discussion of the necessity for leaders to have conviction that “the mission trumps” all other questions and should be more important than preferences, personalities, or programs (125).
In the fourth section, Bolsinger explores “Relationships and Resistance” by looking at the ways organizations fight against change and encourages leaders to expect sabotage and address it effectively (174–77). In the fifth and final section, Bolsinger focuses on “Transformation.” He weaves in the story of Sacagawea, the young, nursing mother who saved Lewis and Clark’s expedition, and connects that example and others to transformational leadership by reminding us that “those who had neither power nor privilege in the Christendom world are the trustworthy guides and necessary leaders when we go off the map. They are not going into uncharted territory. They are at home” and can help us find our way (191). He challenges leaders to be better listeners by including the wisdom of other voices into the decision-making process (196–7) as well as to experiment with different leadership structures that could better fit what a given context demands (200–1). Finally, he emphasizes that “leadership into uncharted territory requires and results in transformation of the whole organization, starting with the leaders” and reminds us that “God is taking us into uncharted territory to transform us” (217).

Overall, I found Bolsinger’s approach and argument compelling. As a missionary serving in what could be conceived as a “pre-Christian” society, there was much that I resonated with as well. I found myself often nodding along in agreement—that the world he was describing was one strikingly similar to where I find myself in ministry. I was pleased to see Bolsinger’s argument for including marginalized voices from within the West (196–200) but it made me wish he had included a push for more voices from outside the West as well. I think their perspective could help us understand what life and ministry outside of Christendom could and should look like. Bolsinger used the Lewis and Clark narrative so strategically and sparingly that it did not overwhelm the aims of the book. Instead, it was such rich source material that I wished he had included even more of their story. I appreciated his use of sidebars to summarize essential themes and ideas in each chapter. He packed the book with dozens and dozens of memorable quotes on leadership from both the business and church spheres. On a few occasions, though, these became a distraction, with back to back to back quotes in the text, as if the author was trying to make sure to squeeze in all his favorite leadership aphorisms. Those minor critiques, however, do not diminish my appreciation for this well-written book on how to do leadership in the post-Christendom West. It serves as a wake-up call to recognize our new environment and as an insightful introduction to leadership in uncharted territory. Like Lewis and Clark, it thoughtfully explores and clears a new path for us, and I hope it paves the way for further reflection on what leadership looks like in the wilds outside the bounds of Christendom.

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