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abstract

Planning often gets a bad rap in churches that are centered on God's Word, even though planning helps us to be wise, be good stewards, and express our faith in God. This article focuses on the nature of biblical planning as seen in Scripture, as well as three specific instances in Scripture where planning was an essential element of accomplishing God's purposes. We see that planning is not a twentieth century invention, but something that is core to who God is and how we express our faith in Him.

"I don't know about all this planning. As long as we are teaching the Word, why do we need to be so concerned with where our church is going in the future? Can't we just have faith in the Holy Spirit to lead us?"

"Long-term planning in the church today is just like corporate planning—church leaders may have good intentions, but their strategic planning has strategized the Holy Spirit right out of church ministry!"

Somewhere deep inside many churches there is a sense that planning is not biblical—that those who really trust the Lord will accomplish things in a more

spiritual way. They believe that strategic planning for the future leaves God out of the picture and rests entirely on human strength and insight. Others assert that strategic planning is a corporate concept that churches have hastily borrowed from the business world.

These conclusions are born out of a poor understanding of what planning really is. Planning is simply attempting to understand the will of God and respond to it by our actions. It is not an independent, humanistic activity that thwarts God's ability to work. It is a spiritual activity that is an expression of our faith in God.

Sensing where the Lord is leading and making a unified effort to move in that direction actually honors God and displays our trust in Him. Planning is not a faithless activity or a trendy technique stolen from corporate America—it is what believers do as faithful stewards of God's resources. When we see planning in this light, we see it emerge as a key theme throughout Scripture. This article will focus on the nature of biblical planning as seen in Scripture, as well as three specific instances in Scripture where planning was an essential element of accomplishing God's purposes.

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Planning and giving forethought to decisions is described as wise behavior throughout the book of Proverbs. Those who plan, seek guidance, and give forethought to their future are considered wise and contrasted with those who do not. Proverbs 13:16 says "A wise man thinks ahead: a fool doesn't and even brags about it!"(NLB) and Proverbs 14:15 says, "The simple believes anything, but the prudent gives thought to his steps." Those who do not think about their future are considered foolish, while those who plan and spend time seeking the Lord's direction are wise and prudent. Additionally, Proverbs suggests that those who make hasty decisions make poor, uninformed decisions (19:2), while those who seek the Lord together and commit their plans to Him will experience success! (15:22, 16:3)

Even Paul, in 1 Corinthians, explains his behavior in light of these principles. His ministry plans changed, but he wanted the Corinthians to know that it wasn't on account of carelessness or a lack of planning. He had significant spiritual reasons for postponing his visit to them, and he felt the need, as a minister of the gospel committed to their spiritual growth, to explain his rationale for the change in plans.

Not only is planning a wise activity with great benefit, it is good stewardship of the resources that God has entrusted to us. We as church leaders are responsible to handle the resources of the church in a way that furthers God's kingdom, and sometimes this is only possible when we take time to plan. Good stewardship is more than simply spending a budget wisely; good stewardship is using the

resources God has given us to minister to others in an intentional way. We want our churches to move forward in a way that honors God, honors the resources He has given to us, and honors the opportunities He places before us. When we operate on a short-term basis or fail to recognize the significance of our decisions in the present, we miss opportunities to be faithful and fruitful in the future.

In Acts 6, we see a picture of a growing and disorganized church that was missing opportunities to minister. The Holy Spirit was at work transforming lives, and the church was bursting at the seams with new believers. However, there was a problem involving the growing number of widows in Jerusalem. A conflict arose because some of them were going without food and getting overlooked in the distribution intended to help them. The issue was finally brought to the attention of the leaders, and they put a plan in place to solve the problem.

Even though this new church had the people and material resources needed to care for the widows, they were unable to respond to the needs of these widows because they did not yet have a plan. They had not taken the time to coordinate, decide what their priorities must be, or delegate. When we fail to plan, we fail to be good stewards of the opportunities God gives us to meet needs and minister to those around us.

Scripture is clear that God is the one who develops plans and brings fruit through our plans. When we see planning in this way, we see how it becomes an expression of our faith in Him. We do our best to listen and discern His voice as we plan, but biblical planning recognizes the role of God to empower the plans. Proverbs 16:9 says that, “The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.” Although we make plans and work hard to accomplish them, ultimately we trust in the Lord to accomplish anything and make any spiritual progress.

Paul recognized the unique role God plays in advancing or prospering ministry. “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” (1 Corinthians 3:6). True spiritual change and growth comes from the Lord, and our long-term planning honors the vital role that the Lord plays in the realization of any goals.

Planning is also an expression of our faith when we put our confidence in the Lord to work and *expect* Him to work. We can plan confidently because God is faithful, and we know His purposes will be accomplished. Proverbs 19:21 says that, “Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand” (Proverbs 19:21). We may not know exactly how certain needs or goals will be met (especially in the initial stages of planning), but we move forward trusting in His guidance and provision. Even if our plans do not entirely align with God’s purposes, planning is not futile. We can plan confidently because we know His purposes will ultimately prevail.

God may sometimes alter our plans to accomplish His purposes, but this does not diminish the significance or value of seeking Him and developing plans. This point is well illustrated in Acts 16, where Paul and his companions plan to preach and minister in Asia. They attempted to go to Asia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them to enter Bithynia and minister there. Instead, in a vision, they were directed to Macedonia. They decided to change their travel plans and minister to a different part of the world once they determined the change in direction was initiated by God.

It is interesting to note that Paul and his companions were not in the wrong for having a plan, nor were they reprimanded for attempting to accomplish a plan different than what God wanted. However, they were open to changing their plan and willingly responded to it after concluding that the Lord wanted them to minister in Macedonia instead of Asia. There are times when God's plans will trump our plans, but that does not diminish the value of planning.

106 Planning is not, then, something reserved for corporations or something that is unspiritual. It is a wise activity that allows us to be good stewards of the opportunities for ministry that God brings our way, and when we plan we are expressing our faith and confidence in the Lord.

Planning is central to accomplishing God's will and purposes on earth, and the following three examples in Scripture affirm the significance of planning. First, we see that God Himself plans and interacts with humanity based on His good plans and purposes for humanity. Second, we see the necessity and significance of planning in the building of the tabernacle in Exodus. Third, we see how God uses the plans and leadership of His servants to accomplish specific tasks, like Nehemiah with the rebuilding of the wall in Jerusalem.

God was deliberate about the way He created the world and the order in which He created things. There is a logic and progression to the seven days of Creation described in Genesis 1 and 2 which reveal His thoughtfulness and intentionality. He has the power and the authority to do what He pleases when He pleases, yet we see that He deliberately chose to create the world with forethought, order, and systems.

He carefully developed complex and intricate systems for humanity to co-exist and interact with nature, which is reflected in Genesis 1:28 when He spoke directly to Adam and Eve.

“‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’ Then He said, ‘I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be

yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.’ And it was so.”

God designed the world to operate in a specific way to provide for and bless humanity. The instructions he gave to Adam and Eve reflect His plan for the created order.

God also knew, from the beginning of time, that sin would destroy His relationship with people and that He would need to provide a solution to the sin problem. Although Christ did not come to earth as a man until the first century, He was part of God’s plan and existed with God at Creation. In reference to Christ, John 1:1–2 says, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.” Christ existed before Creation and was part of God’s plan to redeem humanity. The profundity of God’s activity is highlighted for us in Ephesians 1:4 when Paul says, “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.”

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The Old Testament is the story of God’s plan—His work to redeem His people, reveal His gracious plan for them, and prepare them to receive Christ as Savior. Before Adam and Eve were even able to begin grasping the depth of the consequences of their choices, He began revealing His solution—or plan of redemption—to them. After the Fall in Genesis 3, the Lord says to the serpent, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” The Lord is recognizing the spiritual battle that will ensue because of the power of sin, but He offers hope in the offspring of Eve who will have victory over Satan. Christ is the fulfillment of this promise, demonstrating that God was prepared even in Genesis to address the sin problem through the person and work of Christ.

God is not haphazard, casual, or unintentional about addressing the sin problem of humanity, nor does He approach the Christian life that way. God is intentional about calling His people to serve Him and equipping them to do so. Ephesians 2:10 says that we are “his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” God has already prepared opportunities and placed circumstances in our lives to serve, and our responsibility is to simply accept them. Believers do not have to orchestrate opportunities for themselves or desperately search for some way to serve and live out the Christian life. God has already done the work and prepared opportunities for us in advance.

Planning characterizes the way in which God works, and it is through His plans for creation, redemption, and service that we see how integral planning is to

realizing His good purposes in our individual and corporate lives. God's value for planning is also reflected in the process of building the tabernacle in fifteen chapters of Exodus.

The instructions and specifications for the tabernacle in Exodus 25–40 provide a great example of the importance of planning. These chapters are filled with detailed descriptions on such things like the color and pattern of the curtains, the measurements of certain beams, the type of wood to be used, and the exact items that are to be inside the tabernacle. Why is there such great detail about the building of the tabernacle in these passages? What does this tell us about planning and the significance of the tabernacle?

The detailed descriptions and the specifications given to Moses in Exodus reflect the significance of the tabernacle as a place for God to dwell. Building the tabernacle was not just a worthwhile endeavor; it was the best investment God's people could make with their time and energy. The tabernacle was so special as a place for God's presence that it required a detailed plan to ensure its proper completion.

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The same is true for ministry today. God has given us wonderful opportunities that are worth the investment of our time and energy. Although we may not be building a literal tabernacle (well, some of you may be in the midst of building programs!), He has given us opportunities and ministries that deserve our attention and care. When we commit the time and energy to plan, we are recognizing the spiritual value of these opportunities and honoring the ministry God has entrusted to us.

We also see planning emerge as a crucial activity for many leaders in the Old Testament. Nehemiah is an example of a leader who planned well, led diligently, and successfully completed the task God called him to. Nehemiah was in a great position of influence as cupbearer to the king, and he used this position wisely to accomplish great things for the city of Jerusalem. When he learned about the state of the walls and gates of Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile, God laid it upon his heart to lead the rebuilding process. He did not rush into the task and begin the rebuilding process hastily. Instead, he sought the Lord's guidance and direction from the moment his heart was stirred. He approached the king with his requests only after approaching the Lord in prayer, and he was intentional in the way he approached the king.

His requests were specific and his decisions were wise because he spent time observing, gathering information, and calculating what it would take to rebuild the walls. He was intentional about developing a plan to rebuild the wall, acquiring the necessary resources, delegating and utilizing the skills of others, and remaining

focused amidst great opposition. Nehemiah did not act independently of God, but rather Nehemiah's skills and plans provided the vehicle God used to accomplish His purposes for Jerusalem.

After the completion of the wall, Nehemiah asked the Lord to honor his hard work. "Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services" (Nehemiah 13:14). Nehemiah faithfully served the Lord through planning and intentional leadership, and the Lord blessed his commitment and diligence in the rebuilding process.

Whether it is through God's plan for creation, redemption, or good works, we see in Scripture that God is a planner. God brings about His good purposes for us through His plans, and any activity or task of significance, such as building the tabernacle or rebuilding the wall in Jerusalem, is worthy of a comprehensive plan to ensure its completion. Planning reflects an aspect of God's character as well as the spiritual value of the tasks at hand.

Whether you find yourself on a planning team for Vacation Bible School or whether you are part of a task force to create a long-term plan for your church or denomination, rest assured that there is great spiritual significance to what you are doing. You are not simply generating agendas or copying the latest trends in business—you are figuring out God's will for your church and how to respond to it wholeheartedly.

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