

PROVISIONAL PLANNING

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When it comes to planning, the Christian lives between two seemingly irreconcilable positions. One position is characterized by the old adage, “He who fails to plan, plans to fail.” The other position is summed up by the bumper sticker, “Man plans; God laughs.”

Many Christians seek to resolve the dilemma in this way: “If I plan and commit my plans to the Lord, He will bless them.”

At first glance this third position is appealing. It seems to let us have our cake and eat it too. In reality, however, it can lead to considerable frustration.

We have had numerous conversations with Christian business people who have adopted this third position, only to see their businesses struggle, their profits dwindle, their employees become disgruntled and leave, and little evidence of blessing, at least as “blessing” is normally calculated. As one friend of ours stated it, “I don’t get it. I’ve turned my business over to the Lord. I tithe on everything I make. I use the profits to support a number of ministries. Why is God allowing my business to struggle?”

Before addressing that question in greater depth, it’s important to understand the whole concept of planning.

A quick search of the words ‘plan’, ‘plans’, ‘planned’, and ‘planning’ in any modern version of the Bible shows one thing very clearly. No one plans more than God does. In more than half of the instances of those words, it is God who is engaged in planning; the remaining instances refer to a number of different individuals.

So let's be clear that planning is a God-honouring activity. Jesus admonished people to plan before putting their hand to the plough (don't look back, since that disqualifies you from fitness for the kingdom of God), to count the cost before starting to build, to plan for a rock solid foundation rather than erecting a structure on shifting sand. To fail to plan does not honour God.

It's easy to rationalize lack of planning. Did not Jesus himself point to the lilies of the field and the birds of the air as prime exhibits of God's care for His creatures? So, says, Jesus, "Don't worry." However, it's one thing not to worry because we trust in God's provision; it's quite another to have a la-de-da attitude toward life that results in drifting and total reliance on others to provide for us. Tearing down structures to build bigger ones to accommodate the results of one's planning, as the wealthy farmer did in one of Jesus' parables, is only wrong if our focus is on the "more" rather than on praising God and seeking His guidance before the wrecking ball swings for the first time.

Therein lies the clue to planning for the Christian, what we refer to as "provisional planning." If planning is important enough for God to do, it's important enough for us to engage in as well. To expect God's provision without planning for how that provision might come is to not honour God (note the words "might come", not "must come"). It is foolish to expect vine-ripened vegetables to appear outdoors in mid-winter, but it's not foolish to expect them to appear in stores out of season, as a result of careful planning. God is the source of the vine-ripened vegetables, but the timing of the appearance has a great deal to do with human planning.

So, planning is essential for the Christian.

The key lies in the timing of when we seek God's guidance. Our friend assumed that since God had clearly blessed his business through many years, the blessing would continue in the future. So to him it made sense to bring his plans to the Lord for the Lord's blessing. After all, he'd sought God's guidance in the past and God had blessed him, so it seemed reasonable to assume that the blessing would apply to future plans.

Since those plans were focused on expanding and improving an already successful business, why wouldn't God continue to bless the business?

However, God's plans for us don't necessarily imply more in the future of what we have enjoyed in the past. At the same time as our friend was telling us of his frustration, he was also saying that he had a sense that God might be calling him into a different form of ministry. For years he had supported others, and he wanted to continue doing that. Now he seemed to be getting a call to a more direct form of ministry for himself. His assumption was that if his call was truly from the Lord, he would be able to do both – engage in direct ministry himself while continuing to keep his business and use the profits to support other ministries.

What if the Lord has other plans? What if the Lord has in mind something so engaging for our future that our current activities or businesses would be a distraction? What if the Lord is trying to get us to leave our current activity entirely? Can we hear that part of the call, or do we have to lose our business or other distractions before we gain our hearing?

Our friend serves as a reminder of the importance of maintaining the proper sequence in planning. God says through the prophet Jeremiah, "I know the plans I have for you." He does not say, "I know the plans you have for me" – though of course He does know them. Our plans for God aren't likely to be of much import to Him. It's His plans for us that really matter.

When we plan first without reference to God, then bring our plans for blessing, we miss the point. Our greatest task as Christians is to seek first to discern, then to understand (as fully as that is humanly possible), God's plans for us, and then seek His guidance in planning how to bring that about.

Such an approach doesn't diminish the importance of planning; it simply ensures that our plans are an elaboration of what God has already planned for us.

By constantly seeking His plans for us first, we can be attuned to when God has finished using us in one set of His plans and is wanting us to get on with a whole other set of plans.

Our friend is now letting go of using past successes as an indicator of future direction and is listening more closely for God's plans for his life at this stage of his life. For God, the past is not a reliable indicator of the future.

Planning is essential for the Christian. But it is always provisional planning, taking God at His word ("I know my plans for you," declares the Lord), seeking His plans for us, then making provisional plans to help bring about what we know to be God's plans for us.

Such provisional planning is always done with an eye to the possibility that God's plans for our future may be very different from His plans for our past. If we're running into insurmountable roadblocks, and we have prayed without effect that those roadblocks be removed, then we need to once again seek out God's plans for us. The problem may not be with our plans; it may simply be that they are *our* plans, not God's. It very well could be that He is trying to get our attention in order to get us to recognize His plans. God will speak clearly if we are open to hear and willing to trust. He may have withdrawn His hand of blessing from our old plans, but He will surely bless His new plans for us.

There's an amusing story in the Bible about a man named Balaam. He was riding his trustworthy donkey when suddenly the donkey balked. Thinking the donkey was being recalcitrant (as donkeys can be), he beat it until it did what he wanted. Then, coming to a place in the road that narrowed between two stone walls, the donkey suddenly moved to the side, rubbing Balaam's leg painfully against the wall. Infuriated by the donkey and the pain, Balaam launched into a ferocious beating of the donkey. Miraculously, the donkey spoke, asking Balaam why he wouldn't get the message that something out of the ordinary must have happened in order for the always reliable donkey to change his behaviour. At that point, God revealed His angel blocking Balaam's path – something

the donkey had already seen. Having finally gotten Balaam's attention through extraordinary means, God then gave him specific instructions for a change in Balaam's carefully thought-out plans.

In our provisional planning, perhaps it's time to stop beating the donkey and start seeking out God's new plans for us.