

A CRITIQUE OF  
**BOBB BIEHL'S *STRATEGIC PLANNING* METHODOLOGY.<sup>1</sup>**

**INTRODUCTION:**

We hear a great deal today in the corporate business world about “*strategic planning*.” Not surprisingly, more and more Christian colleges, mission boards, denominations and churches are also emphasizing “*strategic planning*” and engaging in such exercises. This is being done with the admirable (and biblical!) goal of wanting to be as effective as possible in gospel ministry, as well as good stewards of the time, talents and treasure God has given each of us.

But while the Bible says a great deal about stewardship, we would do well to be cautious, and carefully examine popular planning methodologies before adopting them in seeking to more effectively do God’s work. A first-hand personal experience in “*strategic planning*” by a Christian organization which I was previously associated with, initially triggered my thinking and study in this area. Somewhat ironically, the Christian organization that I am presently a member of has also recently engaged in a lengthy “*strategic planning*” exercise. I have been struck by the major difference between how the two procedures were carried out. In the former one, appeals to God and the Bible were sparse, even non-existent. In the other, the “*strategic planning*” methodology seemed to have grown directly out of a study of Scripture. The contrast was striking and dramatic.

With that brief historical background, I would like to critically review Bobb Biehl’s book “*Master-Planning*”, and his strategic planning techniques. Biehl’s methodology has been adopted and used by a number of well-known Christian organizations.<sup>2</sup> His book is published by a Christian publisher,<sup>3</sup> and comes highly recommended by some very well known Christian leaders.<sup>4</sup> However, having personally experienced Biehl’s “*Master-Planning*” technique, I find myself unable to endorse it.

At the outset I would point out that Mr. Biehl makes some good statements and advances some helpful concepts, a number of which are basically common sense (e.g. the necessity and value of anticipating roadblocks, the importance of noting accomplishments, cataloging resources, and setting measurable short and long-term goals and maintaining regular accountability to them, etc). Nor should this critique of his book and methodology be viewed as an attack on a book, a person, or an organization. My motive for writing has been a desire to follow the Scriptural admonition to “*examine all things and hold fast that which is good*” (I Thess. 5:21).

Most anyone who has been paying attention will probably acknowledge that in the past decade or two the body of Christ has been inundated-to the point of nearly being overrun-by business and management techniques, especially those that are secularly based. It seems that “*professionalism*” has become a crucial goal and the watchword of the day, particularly in Christian circles. However I’m not convinced that God is impressed by how professional we are, or whether or not we are using the latest “*cutting edge*” business management methodologies. I think He is much more concerned that what we are doing and how we are doing it is thoroughly, intrinsically, and fundamentally biblical.

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<sup>2</sup> e.g. Campus Crusade for Christ, World Vision International, Focus on the Family, the Association of Baptists for World Evangelism, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Broadman & Holman Publishers, Nashville, Tennessee, copyright 1997.

<sup>4</sup> The dust jacket includes endorsements by the late Dr. Bill Bright, Howard Hendricks, Josh McDowell and R.C. Sproul, among others.

In the remainder of this paper I wish to review Biehl's methodology, enunciate some of my concerns, challenge our thinking, and hopefully cause all of us to biblically examine what we use in attempting to improve ourselves in Christian ministry planning. I will begin by listing what I perceive to be several general problems in Biehl's Master-planning methodology. I will then present what I trust will be some constructive thoughts and observations to hopefully lead in a more biblical direction. My desire is that these thoughts will provoke all of us to further constructive discussion and biblical thinking in this area.

## **I. PROBLEM #1: APPROACHING STRATEGIC PLANNING FROM A MAN-CENTERED STARTING POINT, INSTEAD OF A GOD-CENTERED ONE.**

To begin with, Biehl's "*Master-Planning Arrow*" technique, particularly the foundational steps, make no conscious appeal to Scripture. The starting point, instead, is a focus on people's *needs*.<sup>5</sup> Having had the opportunity to be involved in a week long strategic planning conference using Biehl's "*Master-Planning*" methodology, several concerns stood out to me. Foremost among them was the fact that in doing our Master-planning exercise, we began by trying to think up and write down what *we* perceived were peoples' "*needs*," instead of first going to Scripture to see what God had declared were the needs of the people to whom we had come to minister. In fact in that instance we never went to Scripture at all! Perhaps I should not have been surprised. In the first sixty one pages of Biehl's textbook which my colleagues and I were required to read and work from during that conference, and which instructed us in how to begin to prepare our "*MasterPlanning Arrow*", the book was almost completely devoid of any biblical content. I may have missed a verse somewhere, but in reading over the "*Arrow-Planning*" material two or three times I could find only *one* reference to a Scripture passage on page twenty-one,<sup>6</sup> & one four word "*piece*" of a Bible verse, (neither referenced or noted), on page sixty-one.<sup>7</sup> That, in the entire sixty-one pages that we were instructed to read, refer to, and work from in doing the foundational segments of our *Master-Planning Arrow*!<sup>8</sup>

Certainly no one expects planning sessions & materials to be loaded with Bible verses. But the problem was, to the best of my recollection, in four mornings of planning sessions that I was personally involved in, we *never once* consciously, deliberately, purposely focused on the Bible for direction! Instead, we turned to Bobb Biehl the "*expert consultant*," & his *Master-Planning Arrow* as our focal point. Please bear in mind that this was a Christian mission organization.

**Let me be very clear here: The issue is not a matter of theology versus no theology. The issue under discussion here is the place of theology. The place of God & His Word, in our endeavor.** David F. Wells, in his highly respected book "*No Place for Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?*"<sup>9</sup> makes some very perceptive statements about the drift in Bible-believing circles from an explicit reliance on God's Word, to looking primarily to "*management techniques*" & "*professional experts/consultants*" as the preferred methodology. I'd like to share with you some of Wells' comments. I think they will clearly illustrate the difference between the two, and the point I'm trying to make here:

*"It should now be clear that there are two quite different models of ministry at work in the evangelical Church today, and theology is located quite differently in each. In the model of the Church that has its roots in the Reformation and in the Puritanism that followed, theology is essential and central; in its modern-day evangelical descendants,*

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<sup>5</sup> More will be said about focusing on needs later in this paper.

<sup>6</sup> James 4:14-15.

<sup>7</sup> the phrase "*As iron sharpens iron...*"

<sup>8</sup> Not counting the identical Jas. 4:15 verse which is found on the Master-Planning "*Arrow*" diagram.

<sup>9</sup> William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 1993.

*however, theology is often only instrumental and peripheral. In the one, **theology** provides the culture in which ministry is understood and practiced; in the other, this culture is provided by **professionalization**. The difference between the two models is not that theology is present in one but not the other. Theology is professed and believed in both. But in the one, theology is the reason for ministry, the basis for ministry; it provides the criteria by which success in ministry is measured. **In the other, theology does none of these things; here the ministry provides its own rationale, its own criteria, its own techniques. The second model does not reject theology; it simply displaces it so that it no longer gives the profession of ministry its heart and fire.***

*"This shift from the older theological model for ministry in the Church to the newer professionalized model has produced an entirely different understanding of the relationship between theory and practice. In the older model, theology was synonymous with the knowledge of God, the inward disposition that this knowledge produced, the wisdom for life that it generated, the inclination to serve God and his truth in the world, and action in the world was always implied in what was known. It was not another kind of knowledge with a set of separate rules and operation procedures... It was to have found the center from which all practice, including that of the ministry, should flow.*

*"In the new model, however, theology and practice have disengaged from one another, and the center around which Christian thought turns has shifted from God to the Church... The life of the Church provides a surrogate 'truth' for Christian thought in this model... The skills and techniques requisite for the management of the Church determine what theology should be studied, not the importance of the truth itself.*

*"What this means in practice is that the minister like a small boat cast loose upon the high seas, has become vulnerable to a multitude of perils. Within the Church, strong winds are blowing from a range of religious consumers who look to the churches and ministers to meet their needs--and who quickly look elsewhere if they feel those needs are not being met. **Basically, these consumers are looking for the sort of thing the self movement is offering; they just want it in evangelical dress.** A genuinely biblical and God-centered ministry is almost certain to collide head-on with the self-absorption and anthropocentric (man-centered) focus that are now normative in so many evangelical churches. The collisions take place in the soul of the minister and at the expense of his or her career." (Wells, pp. 254-256)*

In light of Wells' comments above, it was interesting to note that during the last half-dozen years that we were associated with our previous mission organization, many of the special seminars, training sessions, and week long conferences our field was required to attend, to a very large extent emphasized business techniques and management styles, with only minimal attention to Scripture. While the change was slow and almost imperceptible at first, there eventually appeared to be a fundamental shift regarding the way we were seeking to do ministry as an organization, much as Wells described above.

And in regard to Biehl's methodology, on the purely practical level sometimes his techniques don't even seem to be time-efficient! For example, at the strategic planning conference previously referred to, we spent three full mornings literally covering the walls of our conference room with lists of every "*Felt Need*" we could think of (as well as many other things), per Biehl's methodology. Looking around at our work taped to the walls, we couldn't help but feel that we were being really "*productive*." Our administrator who attended the sessions and oversaw the process also commended us highly, only adding to our feelings of accomplishment. A few

days after the conference was over he even wrote all of us who had engaged in Biehl's "MasterPlanning" process a follow up letter and stated: "*I especially want to commend (named) for his outstanding work to prepare for that week and lead the team through the planning process. I am very encouraged by the product (sic) and am praying that each team member will endorse the plan and contribute to it for the glory of God and the advancement of the gospel... That was a historic week in the formation of team strategy for ministry.*"<sup>10</sup> But when we sat down and honestly reflected on what we had produced & accomplished, what did we have to show for our efforts and hours together? **What had we "discovered" at the end of three full mornings of work, regarding what our purposes in ministry should be? Answer: a) Evangelism, b) Discipleship, c) Church Planting, & d) Training Leaders.**

Without trying to be too hard on my myself or my colleagues, I subsequently wrote them regarding the above four purposes and commented: "*Is that rocket science? We could have accomplished the same thing and come up with the same ministry purposes by simply going to Scripture to discover our life's purpose, as well as our ministry purposes... And I dare say we could have done it in less than 30 minutes!*"

During the third morning of that "Master-Planning" exercise I quoted questions one and two from the Westminster Shorter Catechism, to try and illustrate the point I was trying to make:

Question #1: "*What is the chief end of man?*" Answer: "*...To glorify God & enjoy Him forever.*"

Question #2: "*What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him?*" Answer: "*The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him.*"

I mentioned that we could have saved ourselves a lot of time (and certainly have been more biblical), if we had simply gone to Scripture to determine what our ministry purposes should have been. There in the Bible one finds very familiar passages that the greatest missionaries and pastors in history have followed (many of which we probably could have quoted from memory) which teach, command &/or instruct regarding all four of those *purposes* that took us three entire mornings to "*discover*", i.e.

- a) **Evangelism** (Mt. 28:18-20; Mk. 16:15; Acts 1:8; etc.),
- b) **Discipleship** (Mt. 28:19; II Tim. 2:2; etc.),
- c) **Church Planting** (Acts 11:20-26; 13:1-3; 14:21-28; 15:35-36; 16:5; 20:7; etc.), &
- d) **Leadership Training** (Acts 11:25-26; 18:11; 20:17-36; Phil. 2:19-23; etc.).<sup>11</sup>

Let me be very clear here. While I can certainly improve a great deal on my planning ability, frankly, my main problem ministry-wise is not that I need to plan more, plan further ahead, etc. (though I can certainly improve much in that too!) And it certainly isn't that I need to learn how to do "*Arrow Thinking*." No, my main problem as a missionary was, and still is, that **I need to do by God's grace, what I already know the Bible says I should do!** I need to pray more. I need to get involved more in the lives of individuals. I need to witness more. I need to get out among the people I've gone overseas to minister to more. I need to work harder and be more involved in ministry activities (e.g. preaching, teaching, passing out tracts, discipling, giving seminars, etc.).

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<sup>10</sup> From an email, Oct. 15, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> These were just a few quick verses I culled out in 10-15 minutes, when I originally wrote my colleagues to express my concerns. Undoubtedly they are many others.

In other words, in total dependence upon God, His Word, His Spirit, and His strength alone, I need to do what I already know I need to be doing-but often fail to do! And lest I be tempted to wallow in self-pity, or think I'm sacrificing greatly, I need to be challenged by a statement by the great 17<sup>th</sup> century evangelist George Whitefield who said:

*"I am never better than when I am on the full stretch for God."*<sup>12</sup>

To summarize, the lack of a truly God-centered approach to planning is first and foremost what I believe is wrong with Biehl's approach to *Strategic-Planning*, and what was wrong in the strategic planning conference in which I participated. It is a serious mistake to go first to Bobb Biehl's book "*Master-Planning*", instead of *God's book* the Bible, in seeking to do "*Ministry-Planning!*"

**II. PROBLEM #2: "MASTER-PLANNING" SEEMS SERIOUSLY DEFICIENT IN REGARD TO A BIBLICAL BASIS AND VIEWPOINT.** As already noted, in Biehl's entire foundational section on how to develop a Master-Planning Arrow, I was able to find only **one** verse and a part of another (& not a whole one at that, neither italicized or referenced) in the entire sixty-one pages summarizing how to do a "*Master-Planning Arrow*" (not counting the same verse on the Arrow chart). This, in a book written by a Christian, published by a Christian publisher, and designed primarily to lead Christian organizations and ministries through the steps of proper planning! In fairness to Biehl I would point out that there are a few more biblical references later on in the text<sup>13</sup> However they appear in the text *after* the reader/follower has already been instructed on how to create and do his "*Master-Planning Arrow*", and after he has completed the crucial foundational steps which are the focus of the entire process.

Again let me emphasize, I do not wish to imply that Biehl should have had a verse/page or something similar. Nor am I opposed to planning, or setting goals! Every time that I taught a class on *Youth Ministry* at the Bible college where I previously served, I distributed and discussed with my students material on planning & goal-setting by a well known seminary president! They would testify that I often said to them: "*If you don't have a goal, you'll probably hit it*" (i.e. you will accomplish nothing). I am certainly not opposed to planning and goal setting. I would also acknowledge that I can certainly improve much in that area.

However to spend, in the case I previously referred to, a whole week using Biehl's text (actually it turned out to be significantly longer than that),<sup>14</sup> yet find hardly anything of the Bible in the pivotal chapters which instructed us in how to discover the vaunted "*needs*" & "*purposes*", and which laid out the entire seven "*arrow*" steps that we were supposed to be striving so hard to discover and meet, was disappointing to say the least. Yes, there are some "*big name*" recommendations on the dust jacket of the book. However the question we should be asking is this: "*Is the Master-Planning Arrow plan and methodology biblically based and directed, or is it just another popular, marketing-driven program similar to anything one can pick up from secular sources such as Barnes & Noble or Amazon.com?*"

#### PRAYER PAUSES?

I suspect that one of the leaders of our previous mission organization may have noticed the pronounced absence of God's Word in the whole Master-Planning process. I say that because in the official textbook

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<sup>12</sup> George Whitefield, *Journals* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960, p. 136), cited by Os Guinness in *Dining With the Devil*, p. 85.

<sup>13</sup> e.g. Three references on page 91, Notably, *after* the Master-Planning Arrow have been fleshed out and developed i.e. after all seven of the "Arrow" steps have been presented and taught ("*Needs*," "*Purpose*," "*Objectives*," "*Milestones*," "*Ideas*," "*Roadblocks*," & "*Resources*"-pp. 25-62)

<sup>14</sup> At the time all of the personnel on the mission field we previously ministered on were scheduled to continue the process at several future field-wide meetings (originally March, July, & September, 2003-though I believe the schedule ended up being delayed and carried over into the following year or so).

version of the MasterPlanning Arrow process, there is only one place in the "Arrow" process (after step 3), where participants are asked to pray.<sup>15</sup> However in the "Arrow" chart supplied to us at the time by that organization, someone had inserted two more "prayer pauses" into the chart (without acknowledgement).<sup>16</sup> These were two additional places where we were supposed to stop and ask for God's blessing on what we were planning to do.<sup>17</sup>

#### WHOSE NEEDS? WHOSE CARES?

Whether there are one, three, or seven places on the "Arrow" chart where one is instructed to "pause for prayer" and ask God to bless the Master-Planning Arrow, is perhaps a minor point. There is however a much more significant problem. It is that those who have followed Biehl's Master-Planning path up to that point, have never gone to God and His Word to find "...those things for which God cares...the needs that God sees...(&) God's purpose for (the) team..."<sup>18</sup> Instead, **those have all been thought up by the participants themselves!**<sup>19</sup> For example, in the conference I was involved in, the answers we came up with were actually the things that *we* cared about, the things that *we* perceived as needs, the things that caused *us* to "weep or pound the table...", and the purposes of the team as *we* perceived them! *We* had determined what the peoples' needs were, what our purposes were supposed to be, etc., apart from God & His Word. And then, apparently lest we feel guilty that we were doing things on our own, we were encouraged to pause and ask God to bless what *we* felt we ought to do! Participants (like ourselves in that conference), are supposed to retroactively have the chutzpah to call *our* desires the things that God cares about; the needs *we* perceive, the needs that God sees; the things we "weep or pound the table over," the things that God "weeps and pounds the table over."<sup>20</sup>

**So the blank spot on the "Arrow Chart" is there because the readers/participants are supposed to stop and pray and ask God's blessing on what they've decided to do, based on what they think and care about.** At that stage in the planning process, we had already gone several points deep into the process-with the points and goals having all come from our own heads. The "needs" were the ones we ourselves perceived the people as having. We had not gone to God and His Word first-*or even at all!*-to determine our purposes in ministry and the alleged needs the whole diagram is based on. The process strikes one as being man-centered, audience-driven, and backwards at best-and completely unbiblical at worst! I do not believe that "tacking on" retroactive prayers is able to redeem it.

#### AN EMOTIONALLY BASED PLANNING SYSTEM?

A related problem is that **Biehl's version of strategic planning is emotionally based and driven.** Consider the following statement by Biehl in chapter 4, called "Arrow Step 1: Needs" "NEEDS

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<sup>15</sup> Biehl states: "...you can see that there is a break in the Arrow...May I suggest that you write a word in that white area vertically? Write the word prayer." (Biehl, p. 46)

<sup>16</sup> After steps 3, 7, & 8, copy on file.

<sup>17</sup> Biehl: "Pause at this point to ask God to continue to help you care about those things for which God (?) cares. First, that you would see the needs God sees. Second, that you would truly understand God's purpose for your team. Third, that He would work through you to move in the directions of the objectives that you've defined." (Biehl, p. 46).

<sup>18</sup> Biehl, p. 46.

<sup>19</sup> "The needs you list...are very specific. For example, the needs we feel deeply burdened by and uniquely qualified to meet are: homes for unwed mothers, troops for Boy/Girl Scouts, retirement housing, and so forth...**Ask yourself**, 'What makes me weep or pound the table?' ...what are you deeply concerned about? What would you give your money to? What needs are really important to you? ...As you begin to identify the needs you care deeply about and are uniquely qualified to meet, paint word pictures of the needs to your board, your staff, and your constituents in 'living color.' The more 'living color,' the stronger your emotional motivation to meet those needs." (Biehl, pp. 27, 28, 31); "Once you complete a Masterplanning Arrow, the furthest you will ever be from crystal-clear focus is probably about ten to thirty minutes. You simply get out your Masterplanning Arrow and ask: 'Are these still the needs we care deeply about? Is this still our purpose? Are these still our objectives?'" (Biehl, p. 20).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, pp. 27-28.

SHOULD MAKE US FEEL EMOTIONAL(!) Determining needs involves the **'feeling'** side of planning. Ask **yourself**, 'What makes **me** weep or pound the table?' You may say, 'Bobb, I'm just not an emotional person.... Well then, what are **you** deeply concerned about? ...Seeing and **feeling** needs deeply is what moves **your** plan in the minds of board members from 'your ego trip' to 'what we must do!'"<sup>21</sup> A primary reason given for why the needs that drive the planning process should get our emotional juices flowing, is because when you or I are emotional and "worked up" about them, we can get others, especially colleagues and co-workers, to get on-board and "buy into" those objectives.<sup>22</sup> Biehl goes on to point out that another advantage (sic) of having needs that we are emotional about, is that it can also help in raising money!<sup>23</sup>

### III. PROBLEM #3: THE USE OF "NEEDS" TO DETERMINE GOALS & PLANS IS HIGHLY QUESTIONABLE. Biehl states:

*"If you serve on a board, lead an organization, or pastor a church, one of the things you want to be able to do at any point is always get your head straight and land on your feet. The way you do that is to follow a systematic, step-by-step process. No matter what you are asked to plan, you always start at exactly the same point. That point is: 'What needs are we trying to meet? What needs do we feel deeply burdened by and uniquely qualified to meet?' Need or greed is the starting point of most planning. When the needs are identified, then you ask, 'Why does our organization exist?'"<sup>24</sup>*

*"The first thing you need to do in developing a plan is to ask the following: What needs do we feel deeply burdened by and uniquely qualified to meet? What needs make us weep or pound the table? Second, you ask, 'In light of these needs, why do we, as an organization, exist?' Third, 'In what three to seven areas will we continue being actively involved in the future?' In other words, what must we continue doing if we are to meet the needs we have identified and fulfill the purpose we have defined"<sup>25</sup>*

When I initially read the first paragraph above, I wrote in the margin beside it: "What about the Bible as a starting point?" In the margin beside the second quote I jotted: "So purpose is defined by need!" Having already dealt with Biehl's failure to be biblical, I would like to discuss the idea of making "need" the starting point for strategic planning. I would contend that there are at least two problems in regard to making "needs" our starting point: a) It's unbiblical, & b) It's fraught with actual and potential

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<sup>21</sup> Biehl, pp. 28-29, capitalization in the original, bolding added.

<sup>22</sup> "Seeing and feeling needs deeply is what moves your plan in the minds of board members from 'your ego trip' to 'what we must do!' (Biehl, p. 29).

<sup>23</sup> "THE MASTERPLANNING ARROW CAN HELP IN THE FUND-RAISING PROCESS. Without a clear plan, fund-raising is more difficult. People rarely give money if there isn't a clear vision. Let me tell you a true story. I got a call one day from Rudy Howard, an inner-city director of Young Life's Urban Program in Houston. He said, 'Brother Bobb, I just called to bless your heart.' I said, 'Great Rudy! Tell me what's up.' He said, "you remember that Masterplanning Arrow? Remember you told us to get out the Masterplanning Arrow when we were going to make a financial request from someone? You told us to tell them what the needs were and start weeping and pounding the table about the needs. Then tell them why our team is here and tell them what we're going to do about the need... Well I went to this foundation and I told them what the needs of the Houston inner-city kids were. I told them some stories about those kids, and I started to cry, and I started to pound the table. I told them why we're here. I did just exactly what you told me. At the end of that time, they said, "Brother Rudy, would you mind waiting in the outer office while we discuss this?" My heart sank because I thought they were going to say, "Well, not this year, Rudy." They called me back into the room. You won't believe it. They told me, "Rudy, you've asked for five thousand dollars. We're not going to give you five thousand dollars." My heart sank even lower. They said, "We're going to give you ten thousand dollars. We have never seen a clearer presentation of what someone planned to do in the inner city of Houston than you have presented. We're going to give you ten thousand dollars, and if you'll just keep us up-to-date, you can come back, and we'll give you some more as you need it."'" (Biehl, pp. 20-21).

<sup>24</sup> Biehl, p. 19, bolding added.

<sup>25</sup> Biehl, p. 22, emphasis in the original, bolding & underlining added.

problems.

In discussing the above two concerns I will quote extensively from two well-respected authors and thinkers: Trevor McIlwain, author of the well known "*Chronological*" teaching series "*Firm Foundations-Creation to Christ*," published by New Tribes Mission; and Dr. Os Guinness, veteran Christian philosopher and writer, who has authored a number of insightful books.<sup>26</sup> I will also include comments from some other sources. In regard to the subject of a "needs-based" approach to planning, you may protest: "*But Mike, meeting needs is what Jesus was all about.*" There is certainly a degree of truth to that statement. However, I would contend that it is not by the practice of preaching & teaching on subjects related to peoples "felt needs" that such individuals become responsive and trust Christ. There is a fine but important distinction that Guinness points out:

*"At first sight, a ministry based on meeting needs is surely unobjectionable. After all, its ultimate sanction is the saying of Jesus: 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance'.*<sup>27</sup> *Need is thus the proper first step toward both true faith and prayer... need (though) is not the first step toward faith because searchers believe in God because of (those) needs. **Rather, searchers become searchers because they come to disbelieve what they once believed, because of needs that their previous faith could not answer. They are then open to discovering the truth of the good news of Jesus Christ.**"*<sup>28</sup>

In other words, it is not finding & relating to an individual's needs that draw them to Christ. Rather it is their discovering the bankruptcy of their previous belief systems to meet their needs, which will sometimes cause people to turn and consider the claims of Christ. (cf. Jn. 17:17; Rom. 10:17; Heb. 11:6; etc.)

That distinction being made, McIlwain points out that when we go to the Bible, we find that using "felt needs" as the starting point for planning appears to be completely contrary to the biblical model seen in both Jesus' and Paul's ministries:

*"In recent years, in many missionary circles, an unscriptural emphasis has been placed on culturally felt needs as the basis for the presentation of the Gospel. Some teach emphatically that, if the Gospel is to be acceptable, meaningful, and relevant to our hearers, we must first find and understand their felt needs and then offer the Gospel as God's answer to these felt needs.*

*"Those who stress culturally felt needs as the key for understanding and accepting the Gospel are confusing the results and blessings of the Gospel with the Gospel itself. The true Gospel is never culturally relevant. The Gospel was not given by God to satisfy the natural desires of any human being, regardless of his culture. **Jesus Christ's prime mission in the world was not to make people happy, peaceful, secure, or even to provide them with a sense of belonging and feeling loved. These blessings are the fruit of the Gospel and should be experienced in the lives of those who believe the Gospel.** The Gospel which we preach, however, is not sent by God as good news to those whose basic quest is to be happy, peaceful, secure, healthy, or who simply want to go to heaven. **These are natural desires and may also be the fruit of the evil, self-centered nature of man and are usually the desires of the most ardent atheist or depraved criminal.**"*<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> e.g. "*Dining With the Devil-The Mega church Movement Flirts With Modernity*"(1993); "*Time for Truth-Living Free in a World of Lies, Hype & Spin*"(2000); "*Fit Bodies, Fat Minds-Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to Do About It*"(1994); "*Unriddling Our Times-Reflections on the Gathering Cultural Crisis*"(1999-editor); & others.

<sup>27</sup> Luke 5:31-32.

<sup>28</sup> "*Dining With the Devil*," Os Guinness, pp. 64-65

<sup>29</sup> Trevor McIlwain, "*Firm Foundations: From Creation to Christ*," p. 16.



**A. BIBLICAL PROBLEMS OF "NEED BASED" MINISTRY PLANNING.** McIlwain makes several important observations:

### **1. IT PLACES MAN AT THE CENTER.**

*"Offering the Gospel on the basis of natural desires or culturally felt needs places man and his desires at the center of our message. Thus, man and his happiness are enthroned; and God's objective through the Gospel, when presented this way, is to satisfy man's needs, whatever man feels them to be. This is not scriptural. **God does not exist for man. Man exists for God.** Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power; for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created' (Rev. 4:11).<sup>30</sup>*

### **2. JESUS DID NOT MEET FELT NEEDS.**

*"Did Jesus come into this world to meet felt needs? No! He came to settle the problem of sin...(I Jn. 4:14). The angel told Joseph, '...thou shalt call his name JESUS; for he shall save his people from their sins' (Mt. 1:21). '...the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost' (Lk. 19:10). The mission of our Lord was to deal, first and foremost, with the matter of man's lostness in sin, because sin is an affront to God and His position as sovereign creator and ruler. This is why the Son said to His Father, '...Lo, I come to thy will, O God...' (Heb. 10:9)."<sup>31</sup>*

### **3. "JESUS DID NOT TRY TO MEET PEOPLE ON THE BASIS OF THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR NEEDS.**

*"In Jesus' day, the natural desire of the average Jew was for a king or political figure who would deliver Israel from the yoke of their enemies. After Jesus had fed the five thousand, He realized that the people were going to try to take Him by force and make Him their king, so '...he departed again into a mountain himself alone' (Jn. 6:15). The following day, the crowds looked for Jesus because they wanted to be fed. Jesus, however, did not respond to them on the basis of these felt needs. Instead, He told them their real needs as God saw them. He offended so many by His message that John tells us, '**From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him**' (Jn. 6:66). Most Jews rejected Jesus' assessment of their needs, for they did not see their great need of a Saviour to release them from the bondage of sin (Jn. 6).<sup>32</sup>*

### **4. PAUL ALSO MODELS A "NON-NEED MEETING" PHILOSOPHY!**

*"Paul records that the Gentile world was more interested in human wisdom and philosophy than in salvation from the depravity and condemnation of its sins. To both the Jew and Gentile, unprepared by God, the preaching of the cross was irrelevant and foolish, but Paul did not accommodate the Gentiles' quest for wisdom or the Jews' desire for signs and miracles. Paul preached the Gospel, God's power which saves believing sinners. He said, 'But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness' (I Cor. 1:23).*

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, emphasis in the original.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

"...when I came to you,' Paul reminded the Corinthian believers, 'I came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom... my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom...' (I Cor. 2:1,4). Paul knew the felt needs of the people in wicked Corinth were not sound foundations for the Gospel. Paul knew that '...the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.' (I Cor. 2:14)."<sup>33</sup>

**Charles Ryrie** in his commentary on the book of Acts **likewise observes that Paul's ministry was not based on "needs"**:

*"After preaching in Phrygia and Galatia, the group tried to go into Asia Minor but were forbidden by the Spirit. So they turned north to Bithinia but were again prevented by the Spirit. So they awaited further leading from the Lord in Troas. Asia needed the Gospel, but this was not God's time. **Need did not constitute their call.**"<sup>34</sup>*

## **5. THE FATHER AND THE HOLY SPIRIT ALSO DEMONSTRATE A "NON-NEED MEETING" EMPHASIS.**

*"The Holy Spirit came into the world to convince the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (Jn. 16:8). Jesus came to call sinners to repentance (Mt. 9:13). God '...commandeth all men everywhere to repent' (Acts 17:30). The biblical basis for the Gospel is a sense of our sinfulness before God and the recognition that only God's mercy and grace can provide us with forgiveness of our sins. **No culture naturally recognizes this spiritual need.**"<sup>35</sup>*

McIlwain goes on to give a very interesting story from the island of Palawan in the Philippines, which illustrates the dangers of trying to identify and tailor our ministries and message to fit "felt needs."<sup>36</sup>

Finally McIlwain Concludes:

***"Having said this, I am not implying that the Lord does not care about people's feelings or their needs. He does, but He knows that no one's needs can ever be met unless he first allows God to meet his primary and greatest need-to be reconciled to God. Because God cares about feelings and hurts, we should also. Even so, if we really want to be ministers of good to them, we must prepare sinners to see their REAL needs from God's perspective.***

*"Although the presentation of the Gospel should not be based on felt needs, missionaries must have a good knowledge of the culture of the people who they are teaching. Jesus and the Apostle Paul presented the Gospel within the cultural context of their hearers. In the same way, missionaries should use appropriate cultural illustrations and idiomatic expressions to communicate effectively within the cultural context of their hearers... In addition, we need to be aware of the cultural felt needs of the people so we can, through corrective teaching, guard against misunderstanding and syncretism as we teach them the Scriptures."<sup>37</sup>*

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, pp. 16-17.

<sup>34</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *The Acts of The Apostles*, (Moody Press: Chicago, IL, 1961), p. 88, bolding added.

<sup>35</sup> McIlwain, op cit., p. 17, bolding added.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, emphasis in the original.

**B. SEVERAL NON-BIBLICAL PROBLEMS AND DANGERS OF DEVELOPING A PLAN or MINISTRY, BASED ON "NEEDS."** Os Guinness highlights several important points regarding the deficiencies of a "Needs-based" ministry focus.<sup>38</sup> His observations and warnings in regard to using "Needs" as the driving force in ministry include the following:

1. **"(The) NEED MEETING APPROACH HAS NO MATCHING EMPHASIS IN TRUTH.**

*"... people who use the modern need-meeting approach overlook certain things. First, this approach has no matching emphasis in truth, and leaves the church carelessly vulnerable to intellectual dismissal. The heirs of Ludwig Feuerbach and Sigmund Freud, for instance, attacked the church by charging that 'the fundamental dogmas of Christianity are (just) fulfilled wishes of the heart'-which is in fact a fair description of much modern evangelical believing."*<sup>39</sup>

2. **"MEETING NEEDS DOES NOT ALWAYS SATISFY NEEDS; IT OFTEN STOKES FURTHER ONES AND RAISES THE PRESSURE OF EVENTUAL DISILLUSIONMENT.**

*"As Immanuel Kant said to a Russian historian Karamzin: 'Give a man everything he desires and yet at this very moment he will feel that everything is not everything.' The outcome is a massive pandering to the pathology of a consumerist age."*<sup>40</sup>

3. **" (the world) ... HAS EXPANDED AND CORRUPTED THE VERY NOTION OF NEED BY CREATING A 'NEED ON COMMAND' SOCIETY.**

*"Needs, consumerism, and professionalism are the three pillars of our modern service society. To be need-less is to be (considered) less than human. As sociologist Tony Walters points out, modern consumer society is built on a grand reversal of the Beatles' song: 'All you love is need.' ...Today...need-used as a noun-has become socially respectable and even fashionable. To be ignorant or unconvinced of one's own needs,' says Ivan Illich, 'has become the unforgivable anti-social act.' And unlike natural resources, such as land, needs have no natural limits. **There is no end to the needs and need-meeting services that can be manufactured and distributed.**"<sup>41</sup>*

*"Strikingly, the new status of 'need' has simultaneously debased true needs and elevated a new generation of experts-because of their authority to describe and prescribe (cf. Biehl). Need, subject to consumer fashion, becomes shallow, plastic, and manipulable. Needs induced by advertising slogans are often merely wants; as such, they become commodities that are purchased on command through expert prescription. **Thus from books to newspapers to movies to television to videos...culture is becoming a vast, lucrative exercise in need-meeting and appetite satisfaction on a mass scale...the result is a descent into vulgarity and adolescence that stands as a warning to any who make Need primary and find meeting Need easy... As one Christian publisher cautions:***

*'Do books which speak to and resolve basic human personal needs. Puff the benefits and chase celebrities... Promise them the stars, the sun, and the moon, and you will gain the world. It's as easy as that. It's no secret. But watch the soul!'"<sup>42</sup>*

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<sup>38</sup> See especially chapters 4 & 5 of Guinness' book "*Dining With the Devil*." These brief chapters raise and address several very important issues which I am not able to deal with in this paper, such as, a) *the danger and steps toward compromise*, and, b) *some problems of trying to be relevant*, a serious danger to churches, denominations, and mission boards today.

<sup>39</sup> Guinness, op cit., p. 65.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, bolding added.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, pp. 65-66, bolding added.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 66, bolding added.

In other words, appeal to people's self-centeredness and you'll sell a lot of books-but don't get too spiritual or biblical!

**4. "...IT DEBASES THE BIBLE'S REVOLUTIONARY ATTITUDE TO NEED AND BECOMES A WAY OF ADJUSTING THE NEEDY TO THE STATUS QUO.** Guinness:

*"A need met this way is a needy person quieted and potential disciple co-opted. In the Scripture, by contrast, cries of pain and grief are an important step toward repudiating the numbing wrongness of the status quo. 'Never soul was set free,' George Macdonald writes, 'without being made to feel its slavery.'"*<sup>43</sup>

In that regard, it is important to point out several important differences between the biblical meaning of need, and today's self-centered version:

*"...(in Scripture) cries of pain and grief have a different audience than modern notions of need. In rising to God, cries of pain and grief turn decisively from all (non)-gods and non-listeners. Second, they have a different content than modern notions of need. The Hebrew notion of crying out is more a complaint and a deliberate legal plea (rather) than a lament. Third, they have a different purpose than modern notions of need. In the Scripture, meeting the need is only the prelude to meeting God and thus to a life of worship and radical freedom that includes a dismantling of the old orders of injustice through the new realities of God's rule."*<sup>44</sup>

**5. "...AN OBSESSION WITH NEED RESULTS IN CONSUMER INDIFFERENCE TO SPECIFIC, GENUINE, REAL NEEDS.**

*"People skilled in learning to need the needs that the professional elites identify, become deaf to their own true needs-their needs as GOD, not the world, defines them."* (p. 67)

**6. "...'NEEDS' ARE OFTEN TIED TO AN UNHEALTHY EMPHASIS ON 'MARKETING CHRISTIANITY.'**

*"But for Christians the most important impact of marketing is always on the message itself. One church-growth marketer claims that the difference between 'growth' and 'evangelism' and 'marketing' is only semantics. He is absolutely wrong. As historian David Potter pointed out... once marketing becomes dominant, the concern is not with 'finding an audience to hear (the) message, but rather with finding a message to hold (an) audience.' After all, when the audience and not the message is sovereign, the good news of Jesus Christ is no longer the end, but just the means. As a result, when...pastors seek to mold a message to their 'market' of constituent needs, their preaching omits key components. Gone are the hard sayings of Jesus. Gone is the teaching on sin, self-denial, sacrifice, suffering, judgment, hell. With all its need-meeting emphases, there is little in the church-growth movement that stands crosswise to the world."<sup>45</sup>*

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, bolding added..

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 67, bolding added.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p. 78, bolding added.

## GUINNESS SUMMARIZES:

*"In short, the exaggerated half-truth about the church's 'needing to meet needs' once again breeds unintended consequences. Just as church-growth's modern passion for 'relevance' will become its road to irrelevance (see below), so its modern passion for 'felt needs' will turn the church into an echo chamber of fashionable needs that drown out the one voice that addresses real human need below all felt needs. After all, if true needs are a first step toward faith and prayer, false needs are the opposite. As George Macdonald observed again, 'that need which is no need, is a demon sucking at the spring of your life.'"<sup>46</sup>*

**IV. PROBLEM #4: “NEEDS” ARE ALSO AN INSUFFICIENT MOTIVE FOR MINISTRY.** Here I would like to broaden the subject somewhat, and ask whether or not “needs” is a sufficient basis for ministry. The two are intrinsically related, since any planning we do has as its goal the accomplishing of what we perceive is our ministry. I will attempt to demonstrate that “need” is an insufficient basis for ministry, just as it is flawed in relation to planning.

When it comes to finding a sufficient motivation to engage in Christian ministry-especially foreign missionary service-I’m afraid some of us in missions have made the mistake of feeling “called” to a field after hearing about and being moved by the “need” or “needs” of a particular people, country, or region of the world. It is a mistake, first of all, to be *primarily* motivated by *needs*. The reason is because even though a person, ethnic group or country has needs, it does not necessarily mean that they perceive of their needs. Nor does it mean that they are ready to abandon their present belief system or manner of life, in exchange for a relationship with Christ.

That being the case, when we go somewhere based on peoples’ “needs”, we will almost inevitably be disappointed and discouraged. Let me illustrate. Only about 15 percent of the people of Australia attend church regularly anywhere at all. So obviously there is a big need (and a big opportunity!). Yet if you go there as a missionary, don’t expect to be met with brass bands at the Sydney Harbor bridge. While Aussies are very friendly people, they are typically quite unfriendly to those who wish to witness and tell them of Christ, and are generally uninterested in hearing of their need of salvation. The people of India likewise have many needs. Most of them are lost in the darkness of Hinduism. But if you go there you will find them very reticent to change from the belief system they have held for generations, even if they are on the lowest rungs of the caste system. And in virtually every Muslim country the people have profound needs. But trying to discern and meet their needs will not necessarily produce a fast-growing ministry. Nor will the motive of meeting needs sustain a missionary long-term, who seeks to labor in such an Islamic country. So a call to ministry, should avoid being primarily based on “need”, otherwise one is likely to be sadly disappointed, and may end up quitting altogether.

Tom Wells’ book “A Vision for Missions” contains some very thought-provoking statements in this regard:

*“Not long ago I heard a missionary say, ‘A need will not keep you on the mission field. People will rebuke and repel you.’ I have no doubt that he spoke the truth. What he said agrees with what other missionaries have told us. The need is overwhelming on many fields. But that very fact can be a source of frustration. The task seems so large and the missionary seems so small. Once it is apparent that the people do not want his efforts, what is left? The answer to that question is the key to whether he keeps on or gives up. And what is left? In one way or another, the only adequate answer is **God**.*

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 67.

*“Some months back I talked with a veteran woman missionary to Thailand. I asked her why she had stayed all these years. Without hesitation she said, ‘**God’s command. If it wasn’t for God’s command I wouldn’t be here.**’ Some may think that that answer sounds cold and hard. The stars were gone from this woman’s eyes. She had not lost her ideals, only her idealism. Neither response to human need nor the ‘spirit of adventure’ could have kept her at her post. Yet she had an answer. She fell back on God’s direction. She was under orders, so she stayed. God had commanded her.”<sup>47</sup>*

Wells continues: “(My) thesis... is: **God is worthy to be known and proclaimed for who He is, and that fact is an important part of the missionary motive and message.**”<sup>48</sup>

I would like to rephrase the above statement slightly, in order to apply it to the subject under discussion here, i.e. strategic planning: “*God is worthy to be known and proclaimed for who He is, and that fact is an important part of the planning motive and message.*” In other words, our first motive and methodology when we engage in planning, strategic planning, or any other kind of planning, should be God and His Word.

(Tom) Wells wisely observes: “*Yes, men are needy. And yes, they will perish without Christ. Let us never forget those truths. Let us emphasize them. But our danger, it seems to me, lies in another direction. It lies in forgetting God in our zeal for men (and in our zeal for planning-mwe)... I fear this is a missing note in much of modern evangelicalism. I hope I realize how easy, how cheap, it is to say such a thing. But I believe it is so. I may use myself as an example of what I am decrying. Over the years I have given many missionary appeals. **Yet to this day I find it easier to speak of men’s needs than to speak of the privilege of making Christ known.** And I say this as one who is well aware of how much the emphasis on Christ is needed. My head tells me what to do, but so often I fail to do it. Why? My sinfulness helps to explain the failure. But beyond that, I have to ask myself a question. How far am I a product of my Christian culture? How far am I molded by our evangelical ‘climate.’”<sup>49</sup>*

**V. TOWARD A BIBLICAL PATTERN OF “PLANNING” & “MINISTRY.”** Even assuming the validity of the points and concerns I have raised on the previous pages, it is not enough to simply point out some of the problems in much present-day “*strategic planning*” methodology. We need to go beyond that, and ask ourselves, “*Is there a “right” way, a biblical way, to do planning and ministry?*” Certainly, being good stewards is a very biblical concept. And a prime motive of planning is to cause us to be better stewards of our time, gifts, and abilities in the service of our great King. So before closing, I wish to put forward a few general thoughts to lead us in the direction of biblical planning that will glorify God.

- A. CORRECT MINISTRY PLANNING IS GOD-CENTERED NOT MAN-CENTERED, & SHOULD HAVE THE BIBLE AS ITS BASIS.** In contrast to the strategic planning experience I related earlier in this paper, it has been refreshing to see how the organization we are presently affiliated with has engaged in an exercise in strategic planning. I attended one session at a major conference, in which the president of the mission addressed several hundred members of that organization on the subject of strategic planning and how it had been undertaken. He also fielded questions from them regarding it. The very first thing that he did as he began to address the topic of strategic planning was to turn to the book of Philippians. He then proceeded to exegete a passage from that book, advancing it as a biblical basis for the strategic planning the mission had been engaging in! He pointed out that the phrase “*I press toward the mark...*”(3:14) gives a clear

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<sup>47</sup> Tom Wells, *A Vision for Missions* (The Banner of Truth Trust: Edinburgh, Scotland, 1985), p. 7, bolding added.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p. 9, bolding added.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 110, bolding added.

scriptural foundation for everything that the mission had been seeking to do in the area of strategic planning. He explained that the word “*mark*” carries the idea of a goal—the clear implication being that Paul had a plan in his mind in how he was to run towards that goal. He then went on to expound on that passage further.<sup>50</sup>

Four months later, while attending this mission board’s candidate seminar, the president again addressed the subject, explaining that the whole mission-wide strategic planning endeavor had initially sprung from his study of a passage in the book of Genesis (& an obscure one at that!). The whole motive behind this mission board’s engaging in “*strategic planning*”, and the foundational pattern for how it was to be done, appeared to have been taken from Scripture. In pointed contrast to Biehl’s strategic planning methodology, a number of pastors, in addition to missionaries from fields around the world, had been sought out for their input and involvement in helping to steer the planning process, to ensure that it was done in a biblical, God-honoring way.<sup>51</sup> As far as I know, Harvard Business School materials and “*expert consultants*” from the business world played little if any part in the planning process.

That is not to say or imply that we cannot learn anything from secular sources. And it is certainly not to say that Christian businessmen should be banned from being involved in planning exercises, or from serving on the boards of Christian organizations. Many Christian businessmen are godly individuals who are solid as a rock biblically. Moreover, it is wise to have some individuals who have business acumen on boards, in order to keep an organization stable in areas such as financial integrity and accountability. Those of us in ministry have a notorious reputation, whether justified or not, of being naïve in regard to business and finance.

There is a potential danger though, if the board of any college, mission, or denomination becomes top-heavy with businessmen with only a minority representation of pastors and theologians. The danger is this: decisions and policies may tend to become pragmatic, “bottom-line” oriented, & concerned with numbers and technique—instead of whether or not something is biblical and/or pleasing to God. This was first mentioned to me by a pastor friend. He pointed to the downward slide of a formerly conservative Christian liberal arts college. He noted that shortly after that school’s board had appointed a new president, he publicly stated that he and the board had agreed to take the school in a broader, “more progressive”, direction. In checking the composition of that school’s board, my friend noticed that the vast majority were secular businessmen. Only three were pastors—one of whom also ran his own business! Not surprisingly, many of the changes the board instituted were long on business savvy, and short on biblical standards. The desired pragmatic results were achieved i.e. an increase in student numbers and the achieving of professional respectability and status in the eyes of the world. But at what price, spiritually speaking?

As a *general* rule businessmen, because of the different direction of their academic study, may not possess the biblical/theological background that pastors and missionaries do, even if they have graduated from a Christian liberal arts college (There are of course many exceptions, as all would acknowledge). Once Bible and business majors have graduated from college and undertaken their separate callings, one spends forty hours or more per week in business-related activity, the other spends (or at least should!) dozens of hours in biblical study. That is simply a fact of their differing occupations. It is definitely not to say or imply that Christian businessmen

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<sup>50</sup> From notes taken at this mission-wide meeting held in Union Grove, North Carolina, March, 2004.

<sup>51</sup> This mission board president stated that there were 17 individuals who were members of their strategic planning committee, 12 of whom were missionaries “...*chosen, not as representatives from their fields, but for their ability to think creatively and who had shown a capacity to do ‘theologically grounded forward thinking...for what we will be and do.’*” (From personal notes taken from a Candidate Seminar, 22 July, 2004, Cleveland, Ohio, underlining added).

are less spiritual, or do not know their Bible well. They do! In fact many Christian businessmen are as godly (or more so!) than those in full-time ministry, and many regularly and faithfully preach and teach God's Word in a variety of ministry settings. It is simply to state that any Christian organization will do well to maintain a very careful balance on their board between pastors/theologians and businessmen, seeking to err on the side of the former.

Dr. Peter Masters, the pastor of Spurgeon's Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, in a brief but very helpful book, has endeavored to go to the Bible first, in seeking to develop a plan for ministry. He uses as his key text II Timothy 3:10 ("*But thou has fully known my doctrine, manner of life, purpose...*"). Masters contends that:

*"Paul had a very definite policy, and Timothy knew exactly what it was...The word translated purpose is 'prothesis', which means – a plan, design, purpose or aspiration, clearly set forth, exhibited or displayed. It refers here to Paul's **plan** and **strategy** for the conduct of his life and ministry, which was 'fully known' to Timothy his pupil. Paul did not keep his strategy for the churches locked away in his mind, as if it were a secret or purely personal method. Having received it from God, this wise master builder displayed it before his junior workers, just as a craftsman would teach his apprentices, or a general would share a battle plan with his immediate subordinates... In the case of the ministry there is a once-for-all policy which should be the approach of every 'workman that needeth not to be ashamed'. Ideally, if one set of officers passes from the scene and another is raised up, the overall policy should not be interrupted any more than if one doctor replaces another in the local surgery."<sup>52</sup>*

The ten chapters that follow present in succinct form, a consciously biblical plan of action for any church that seeks to do the work of God in a way that is pleasing to Him.<sup>53</sup> The contrast between this kind of biblio-centric planning, and the man-centered, management-based type of strategic planning discussed earlier in this paper, is dramatic and self-evident.

**B. THE MINISTRY PATTERN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT WAS CHRIST-CENTERED, NOT "NEEDS" CENTERED.** Wells draws some insightful observations from Jesus' example, as well as from what the disciples did in the book of Acts:

**1. The Example of Jesus:**

*"The New Testament shows a great awareness of the needs of men. The Lord Jesus sets the example of compassion for the lost. He felt keenly the needs of the masses. He helped them in their physical need. He fed the five thousand. He fed the four thousand. Above all He helped them in their spiritual need. He taught the truth. He pointed to Himself as the way to God. Finally He died for needy men. All of this is true, and immensely important.*

*"How surprised we are, then, to read the Great Commission! Each of the Gospels tells us that Jesus sends His servants into the world. The Book of Acts also tells how the Lord Jesus commissioned them. But these various accounts of what we call the 'Great Commission' say virtually nothing about what men need. Listen to the Lord Jesus speaking in Matthew (28:18-20 is quoted) ...It is not that the needs of men are unimportant. But this statement(Mt. 28:18-20) is made from another standpoint. Listen to the Lord Jesus once more. 'Ye shall receive*

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<sup>52</sup> Peter Masters, "*Do We Have a Policy: Paul's Ten Point Policy for Church Health and Growth*" (The Wakeman Trust: London, England, 2002, 95pp) pp. 10-11.

<sup>53</sup> Chapters address ten "Policy Ideals" including: "A Worshipping Church," "A Sanctified Church," "A Working Church," "An Evangelistic Church," "A Separated Church," "A Loving Church," etc.



power after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth (Acts 1:8). Here again is the same standpoint.

*“How shall we describe these statements? They are kingly. They are royal. They show the Lord’s consciousness of His own majesty and standing. We may see this in two ways,*

- a. **“The Lord commands His subjects.** ‘God’ is not optional. The King speaks. We must obey.
  - b. **“The commission is designed to create more subjects.** ‘Tell them who I am,’ the Lord Christ says in effect. ‘And tell them to submit themselves to Me! Tell them to do everything I have commanded you!’ Luke alone mentions any benefits they may receive. In Luke 24:47 the Lord Jesus holds forth ‘remission of sins’. In all the rest there is no mention of advantages to men at all. The King speaks. Let men listen! **Men’s needs are not unimportant. But they do not come first in the Lord’s thinking.**<sup>54</sup>
2. **The Practice of the Disciples.** *“The apostles, of course, were the first Christian missionaries. The Book of Acts tells us of their work. If what I have said is true, they will show it by the way they preach and teach. **That should be an acid test.** Let us look for their motives. Then let us look at what they said. We have already seen the commission Christ gave these men. They were to tell about Him (see Acts 1:8). Did they understand that? Did they know what Christ wanted them to do? Yes, they did!”<sup>55</sup>*
- a. Acts 1:21-22. *“Our first clue comes in that same first chapter of Acts. Peter says that some man must be found to take Judas’ place. Why? Look at Peter’s answer: ‘Wherefore of these men which have companied with us... must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection (vv. 21,2).’ **Peter knew that men were needy. But that is not what he talked about.** Instead he mentions the resurrection. That is, he points to a fact about Christ. He is thinking in the same terms as the Lord Jesus did when He sent Peter and the others forth.”<sup>56</sup>*
  - b. **Acts 2:1-37.** *“Peter’s preaching in Acts 2 shows the same understanding. What did he preach about? God and Christ! He refers to his hearers in passing. He tells them that they are wrong in thinking that the disciples are drunk (v.15). He reminds them of some things they knew (vv. 22,29). And he points out his hearer’s wickedness (v.23). But these things are not the burden of this message. The message is Christ. Or-to enlarge- God and Christ and the Spirit. ‘God,’ says Peter in effect, ‘sent Christ. Christ sent the Spirit. That is why you see and hear these things.’ Then Peter reaches the climax, and once again he mentions his hearers. ‘Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ (v.36).’ **It is not that his hearers were unimportant. Peter, no doubt, longed to help them. But something came before that concern. He had to tell of Christ. And his hearers were not to ask, ‘What is there in it for me?’ They had to know that Jesus is Lord. And they had to act accordingly! No wonder ‘they were pricked in their heart’!(v.37). No wonder they asked what they must do to be saved!***

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<sup>54</sup> Wells, op cit., pp. 111-112, bolding added.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 115, bolding added.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 115, bolding added.

*They had not been told that God had sent His word to them to make them happy. They had been told that they stood before a King whom they had offended. **This was God-centered preaching. Peter preached that God was worthy to be known and proclaimed for who He is.**"<sup>57</sup>*

- c. **Acts 4.** *"Look at what Peter and John do when they are arrested in Acts 4. Their whole message is Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 4:8-12)... We read these words nineteen centuries later. They do not carry the sting to us that Peter intended. Take the word, 'salvation'. To us it suggests pleasant thoughts. To 'be saved' means to have all the benefits of the gospel. But put yourself in the rulers' position. Then listen again. 'You set Jesus aside,' says Peter. 'You did it! How then can you be saved from the effect of what you have done? I will tell you. You must be saved by this same person. You must be saved by Jesus Christ!' **Not a word here of peace and joy! They had offended God. They must be put right. And only Jesus Christ could do it!***

*"Why do Peter and John speak in this way? When the rulers forbid them to preach, they tell us: 'Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard (vv. 19-20).' Here is their commission. They will carry it out. It comes before their own needs. They must tell what they have seen and heard of Christ. They dare not hesitate, whatever the cost. That is why they pray, 'And now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they speak thy word'(v.29).' They know their own weakness. And they pray to be protected from it. Nothing else matters. They must boldly speak God's word. And what is that word? Luke tells us in verse 33: 'And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.'*

*"**When God answered their prayer they spoke of Christ. They knew that the people needed their message. But that was not their chief motive. Their whole bearing said, 'We are under orders!'** The gospel was delivered to them. They had to pass it on. That was their first concern. They could have said what Paul said later: 'For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me: yea, woe is me, if I preach not the gospel! (I Cor. 9:16).' **They dare not neglect men, but God is their first reason for spreading the gospel. The God who is supremely worthy of being known has sent them.**"<sup>58</sup>*

- d. **II Cor. 4:1-6.** This passage evinces the same mentality, i.e. that Paul was under orders from God. Consequently his main motive for ministry was not the people's needs, but because he was under God's command.

C. **ANSWERING A COMMON OBJECTION.** Wells addresses a question that will almost inevitably be raised by those who disagree with the position enunciated above:

*"I can imagine someone saying: 'It is all well and good to play down the needs of men, but the fact is this. If men were not needy Christ would not have come. If men were not needy Jesus would not have died. If men were not needy, there would have been no*

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, pp. 115-116, bolding & underlining added.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, pp. 116-118, bolding & underlining added.

*“Great Commission”! So it still comes back to this. The need of mankind is the reason for it all. The need of men, then, is the chief motive for getting out the gospel. And it is the chief part of the message. We must tell men that Christ will meet their needs.’*

*“It is not hard to imagine someone saying this. Some such thoughts as these must lie behind much that we hear today. Why else would there be such an emphasis on the needs of men in our missionary appeals? Why else would we hear so little of the greatness of Christ in these same appeals? Why do I myself have such difficulty in putting God and Christ first in my own missionary appeals? Is it because I myself have not grasped the very truth I am trying to teach others? Each of us must answer these questions for himself. May God help us!*

***“But the objection misses one point. The needs of sinful men could not have been the whole story. Why? Because there need not have been any sinful men! God could have made a world in which no such men ever existed. Certainly we want to tread carefully here. We do not know all that God thought in allowing sin. Perhaps we do not know a millionth part. But we know one thing. Sin did not surprise God. The God who knows all has not learned anything. He knew all things before He made man. He foresaw the entrance of sin, and yet He made man.***

*“If we ask ‘why?’ we must balance our ignorance against our knowledge. Here we will ask Paul to take us by the hand... ‘O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! (Rom 11:33).’ ‘For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen (Rom. 11:36).’*

*“In verse 33 Paul makes this point: how little we know! The ways of God are beyond us. We cannot trace them out. We are but men! Yet that is not all that Paul says. There are things we can know. We can know what God tells us. **And God tells us, through Paul, that all things serve His purposes. All things are for His glory. Behind all else lies the glory of God.** Always and everywhere, God is to shine forth. This is true in missions, as in all else. This is why God is forming His church. As Paul puts it again: ‘Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen (Eph. 3:21).’ And once again: ‘Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God (I Cor. 10:31).’*

***“Does this keep us from remembering the needs of men? Absolutely not! But it puts those needs in perspective. They are not first. Our first goal is ever and always the same. We seek to bring praise to God. That – above all – is the purpose of missions! (and planning-mwe)”***<sup>59</sup>

**D. STRIKING A BALANCE.** I realize that I run a great risk in this paper of being misunderstood. Just because I do not believe that “needs” is the right starting place for either planning or ministry activity, is not to imply that the needs of people are unimportant. Nor are they to be ignored. Tom Wells again enunciates a needed balance:

*“When I say that God was the apostles’ first reason for spreading the gospel I do not wish to be misunderstood. **‘First’ does not mean ‘only.’** There is a large difference here; I must not overlook it. Is it possible to be God-centered and to ignore the needs of men?*

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, pp. 112-114, underlining to indicate emphasis in the original, bolding added.

*Certainly not! That must be the farthest thing from our minds. Let me give you two reasons for saying so.*

1. ***“First, to be God-centered means, in part, to think as God thinks ...As far as possible we are to adopt God’s thoughts. When God says, ‘Come now and let us reason together’ on any subject, it is because He wishes to lead us to think as He does. Or, to use New Testament words, we are to have ‘the mind of Christ’. Always - on everything - so far as that is humanly possible!***

*“And what does God think of human need? Can any Christian doubt the answer? God is so intensely concerned for needy men that He has sent His Son to die for them. The heart of God towards poor, distressed sinners is fully unveiled at the cross. For us to be God-centered means to have this same compassionate heart!*

2. ***“We must also remember one other fact. The same God who has saved us and sent us to the lost...commanded us to love our neighbors as ourselves. And He has told us that we must not ‘love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth’ (I Jn. 3:18). The profession of love is easy. We all know that talk is cheap. But God Himself has set us the example we must follow. In John’s words again: ‘Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins’(I Jn. 3:10). God’s love for men sent Christ to the cross. That is our example; that is our model. It is the example the apostles followed. Nothing that I have already said above is intended to deny that. When we have loved our neighbors to the extent of dying to bring them the gospel we will have fulfilled our debt to them. Until then our duty is plain. Our hearts must long for, and cry over, the sinful burdens of dying men. And the longing and cry must be translated into action. Then, and only then, will our lives be fully God-centered.”***<sup>60</sup>

## **SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS:**

1. **God is interested not only in what we do, but also in how we do it.** He not only desires that we plan, but is concerned about *how* we plan.
2. **God does not believe that the end justifies the means-regardless of who says otherwise** (cf. Rom. 3:8). When Moses struck the rock the second time in Numbers chapter twenty, he got great results (i.e. enough water to slake the thirst of two million people). But God judged him for having gotten those results in the wrong way, and he was never allowed to go into the Promised Land because of it.
3. **God’s way of measuring and ministering is often very different than ours** (cf. I Sam. 16:7). Americans tend to put a primary emphasis on numbers and technique. That doesn’t mean that God does.
4. **Pragmatism (i.e. whatever works) is not a biblical philosophy or way of doing things...** even though it may be the modus operandi of today.

May God help us to be good stewards. May we do our planning in a biblical, God-centered way. May we engage in ministry for the right reasons and with the right motives. And in everything we do may He alone receive the glory, for He alone is worthy.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, pp. 118-120, bolding added.