



Congregational Bible Study



Serving in God's Mission
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Serving in God's Mission – Congregational Bible Study

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Introduction

The Bible is not a how-to manual for strategic planning.

While the Bible is not a manual on strategic planning, it does speak to some of the same issues that strategic planning addresses. Both the Bible and strategic planning deal with topics like understanding God's purpose for our congregation, making good use of the gifts that the Lord has entrusted to us, and working together to accomplish God's mission for our congregation.

This study is meant to help you see how strategic planning can be a useful tool for planning and implementing a faithful response to the Lord's call to carry out His mission through the work of our congregation. It draws on God's Word and His gifts, but it doesn't try to make the Bible into a strategic planning handbook.

The Bible is not a how-to manual for strategic planning. It's so much more than that. It's God's Word of life and salvation.

1. God Has a Purpose for You

"The purpose of life is a life of purpose"
Robert Byrne, American author, 1930-2016

If you think about this quote from Robert Byrne about purpose it doesn't make much sense. It sounds like circular reasoning – and it is. If the purpose of life is a life of purpose, then what is a life of purpose? Does any purpose fulfill the purpose of life or are there some that do and some that fall short? And, if not just any purpose will do, how can we know which purposes are meaningful and which purposes are meaningless?

These questions are important because people want to know that their lives have purpose. We live in an era in which the main view of our lives is that "we come from nothing and we go to nothing." With that view of life, it's hard to find purpose in anything. But that isn't how God's Word describes our lives. God has given us purpose.

Psalm 138:8

The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.

Proverbs 16:4

The Lord has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble

2. God's Purpose and the Shape of the Body

Isaiah 14:8-10

⁸ *“Remember this and stand firm, recall it to mind, you transgressors, ⁹ remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, ¹⁰ declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,’”*

God acts with intention. He purposes to do something and then He works things out to accomplish His purpose. One example of this is how He shapes a congregation.

In 1 Corinthians 12:12-18, the church is described as a body.

1 Corinthians 12:12-18

¹² *For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴ For the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.*

We should think of our congregation as an instance of the body of Christ. According to His purpose, God has set this body in a place, at a time, and for a people. He has “arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose” (1 Cor. 12:18). In other words, God has shaped the body for a purpose.

A very important insight into God's purpose for our congregation is to look at the shape of the body. What people has the Lord gathered into this congregation? What kinds of gifts, education, and experience do they have? How has He equipped this body?

God doesn't not act haphazardly. He shapes the body for a place, a time, and a people according to His purposes.

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- 2a. Using one of your favorite team sports (e.g., basketball, football, soccer, etc.), give an example of how the shape of an athlete's body plays an important part of what role he or she has on the team.

- 2b. In what ways does the shape of our body as a congregation limit what ministry options we have (including things we can't do now that we were once able to do)?
- 2c. In what ways does the shape of our body as a congregation point us to ministry options that we haven't considered before?
- 2d. How do Isaiah 14:10 and 1 Corinthians 12:18 reinforce each other?

3. First Article Gifts

When we consider the shape of the body of our congregation in terms of the people who belong to it, the financial resources available to it, our location, our community, the property we own, the equipment we have, and the other resources at our disposal, we're considering our First Article gifts.

First Article gifts are the gifts that God has given to us that fall under the First Article of the Apostles' Creed. They include everything that God has entrusted to us apart from Word and Sacrament. These gifts are described in Martin Luther's explanation of the First Article found in the Small Catechism:

The First Article:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

What does this mean? I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil. All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true.

Notice the variety of things that Luther includes in his list of God's First Article gifts. The list includes everything from our bodies to our clothing to the people in our lives. As extensive as this list is, Luther shows the full extent of God's gracious giving by summing up His First Article gifts as "all that I need to support this body and life."

The gifts that God gives to us individually and collectively are given for His purposes. We should find great joy in the gifts that we have been given and find our purpose for life in making good use of God's gifts to respond in love to the Giver of these things and to share His love with our neighbors. But sin has a way of distorting our view of God's gifts. Rather than being elated over God's choice of gifts for us, we are often dissatisfied with God as a giver. Luther observed:

This is the universal bane of our nature, that we are not satisfied with God's gifts but abuse them and thus mock their Donor and Creator ... The purpose for which God gives us good health, wife, children, and property is not that we might offend Him by means of these gifts, but that we might recognize His mercy and give thanks to Him. For this reason He has granted us the enjoyment and, as it were, the rule of almost all the

*creatures. But how few there are who do this! Do not almost all of us live in the most shocking abuse of the gifts of God?*¹

Perhaps the most “shocking abuse of the gifts of God” is our failure to make use of them to carry out His mission as the body of Christ in the place, at the time, and with the people of His choosing. Yet, in most cases, this is more a matter of neglect or fear than of intentional abuse of God’s gifts.

Strategic planning involves assessing the shape of the Body, taking stock of the gifts that God has given to our congregation, and working together to understand and respond to God’s purpose for us. Strategic planning is both a First Article gift and an effective way of making good use of First Article gifts. Like other First Article gifts, strategic planning can be abused. But when we use it properly, strategic planning can help us carry out the work that the Lord has entrusted to us as a congregation.

3a. According to Luther’s explanation, why does God give us First Article gifts?

3b. According to Luther’s explanation, what are we to do with our First Article gifts?

3c. Of the First Article gifts listed in Luther’s explanation, which are related to strategic planning?

3d. What proper use of strategic planning and what abuse of strategic planning are addressed in Proverbs 16:1-4?

Proverbs 16:1-4

¹ The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord. ² All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirit. ³ Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established. ⁴ The Lord has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble.

¹ *Luther’s Works*, volume 1, pages 244-245

4. Strategic Planning as a First Article Gift – Provides a Focus

1 Corinthians 9:24

²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ²⁵ Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶ So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air.

Running aimlessly. Beating the air. These word pictures describe how many congregations end up functioning. They don't mean to run around aimlessly, but that's what they end up doing. They are faithfully trying to do God's work and they are very dedicated to the work that they are doing. But despite their good intentions, the congregation is struggling. The people lack the proper focus.

Having a shared focus is important to any organization. Without one, people tend to go off and do whatever it is that they think is best or whatever is most appealing to them. Things deteriorate to the situation described in Judges 21.

Judges 21:25

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

Strategic planning guides the congregation through a process that helps people understand and agree upon the congregation's focus. With a clear focus, people are able to work together toward a common goal – they can run together with purpose.

Philippians 3:12-14

¹² Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

4a. In what ways is our congregation “running aimlessly”?

4b. What is the focus of our congregation's efforts right now?

4c. What is the “prize” referenced in 1 Corinthians 9 and Philippians 3?

4d. What “prize” should be the focus of our congregation’s efforts?

5. Strategic Planning as a First Article Gift – Prioritizes Use of Limited Resources

Psalm 24:1-2

¹ The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein, ² for he has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers.

Psalm 24 reminds us that God has and controls unlimited resources. Everything that has ever been created belongs to the Lord. Psalm 50 reinforces this:

Psalm 50:10-12

¹⁰ "For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. ¹¹ I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. ¹² If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine."

God has unlimited resources, but every congregation has limited resources. The Lord could provide an abundance of every kind of resource on every one of His congregations, but He chooses not to do this. Instead, He gives different gifts to different congregations according to His will.

The Parable of the Talents found in Matthew 25 is a familiar parable to many of us. However, we tend to focus on how the parable ends and often overlook an important aspect in how it begins. The parable starts with the owner of the property entrusting his money to different servants in different amounts "each according to his ability."

Matthew 25:14-15

"For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away."

Each congregation has been entrusted with God's property "each according to [its] ability." How does the Lord know the ability of each congregation? Like a potter who shapes clay (see Romans 9:20-21), He is the one who has shaped and fashioned each congregation according to His purpose for it. By God's design, every congregation has been provided with a set amount of resources. Some congregations are "one talent congregations," some are "two talent congregations," and others are "five talent congregations."

Because resources are not unlimited, every congregations faces limitations of time, money, people, etc. Without a clear purpose and focus, there is bound to be conflict in the congregation over how these limited resources should be used. Strategic planning provides a means to minimize that conflict.

- 5a. Why does everything in all of creation belong to the Lord? What does 'everything' include?
- 5b. For what purpose does God limit the resources available to a congregation?
- 5c. What resource limitations does our congregation face?
- 5d. In what things are we a ...
- "one talent congregation"?
 - "two talent congregation"?
 - "five talent congregation"?

6. Strategic Planning as a First Article Gift – Builds Consensus

Before going any further, check the box of the statement that best describes your perspective on strategic planning right now:

- I think strategic planning is a good First Article gift and we should make full use of it.
- I can see that strategic planning is a First Article gift and I think that we could benefit from using it.
- I'm not convinced that strategic planning is a First Article gift, but it wouldn't hurt to try it.
- Whether strategic planning is a First Article gift or not, I don't see how it could benefit our congregation.
- I think that this strategic planning baloney is a waste of time.

In all likelihood, if you compared what everyone in this Bible study selected from the above statements there would be a variety of responses. People are different. We have different perspectives. Our personalities are different. Our experiences are different. That isn't bad. In fact, according to 1 Corinthians 12, it's a good thing.

1 Corinthians 12:18-27

¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." ²² On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, ²⁴ which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, ²⁵ that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. ²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

Our different perspectives on things are a strength. When we listen and learn from each other we gain a deeper and more broad understanding of what we're discussing. Unfortunately, sin often turns this strength into a weakness. When people insist on their perspective as the only correct perspective and refuse to consider how other people view

things, we end up polarized and entrenched. This can lead to factions forming and divisions in the body.

How do we avoid factions and divisions in our congregation? It starts by recognizing that our congregation, as the body of Christ, is arranged according to God's purpose and desire. This means that the people who make up our congregation are different by His design. It is a blessing to have these multiple perspectives (even when the voters' meeting goes long!).

We should recognize that the different kinds of people who make up our congregation and the various perspectives that they bring to a discussion are gifts from God. When we do, it helps us be patient with each other and value one another. It also helps us achieve agreement as a group – what is called 'consensus' in strategic planning terms.

Consensus is an integral part of strategic planning. It is much more than deciding matters by majority voting. Consensus is reaching a level of agreement that the congregation as a whole can and will support. It is an expression of the call of 2 Corinthians 13:11.

2 Corinthians 13:11

Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

- 6a. Why is it a good thing that the Lord brings together different kinds of people with differing perspectives to make up our congregation?

- 6b. How does having people in our congregation with differing perspectives make reaching agreement on important matters more challenging?

- 6c. When we are working to reach agreement on important matters, in what ways are we living out the ideal "that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another" (1 Corinthians 12:25)? In what ways are we struggling with this?

- 6d. How do we currently reach agreement on important matters as a congregation? How well does that approach line up with 2 Corinthians 13:11?

7. Strategic Planning as a First Article Gift – Fosters Objective Decision Making

Defining and agreeing on the congregation's purpose, focus, and stewardship priorities sets the stage for discussions and decisions on how to carry out the work that the Lord has given to our congregation. While God has made our work clear in general terms, He has not spelled out the specifics. The details are left to us. We need to make the decisions necessary to plan and execute the work required to carry out God's mission in our context.

We may not feel that we're qualified to make such important decisions. Martin Luther argues that we are, provided that we are relying on God's Word when deciding things.

This much is certain: anyone who knows the Ten Commandments perfectly knows the entire Scriptures. In all affairs and circumstances he can counsel, help, comfort, judge, and make decisions in both spiritual and temporal matters. He is qualified to sit in judgment upon all doctrines, estates, persons, laws, and everything else in the world.
(Martin Luther, Large Catechism, Preface)

Luther may have been overstating things a bit to make his point. After all, apart from God Himself, who knows God's Word perfectly? But because we know God's Word, we are able to make God-pleasing decisions. As Proverbs says,

Proverbs 2:6:11

⁶ For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;
⁷ he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk in integrity,
⁸ guarding the paths of justice and watching over the way of his saints.
⁹ Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path;
¹⁰ for wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;
¹¹ discretion will watch over you, understanding will guard you,

It's important to remember that there are some things that are not for us to decide. When God's Word speaks to an issue, the decision has been made. But there are many decisions that a congregation needs to make within the boundaries of God's Word. Those decisions should be made collectively rather than by a single person.

There are several reasons why decisions for the congregation should be made collectively.

- Many decisions for the congregation impact the entire congregation. People should have a voice in the things that affect them.
- No one person has a monopoly on knowing or discerning God's will. We need to seek His will together and discuss what we understand His will to be.
- The responsibility of the decision should be shared so that whatever results from the decision is owned by the whole congregation.
- God's Word encourages us to seek out each other's understanding when making a decision (e.g., Proverbs 11:14).

Proverbs 11:14
*Where there is
no guidance, a
people falls, but
in an
abundance of
counselors
there is safety.*

-
- 7a. What are the dangers of having a single person make decisions for the congregation?
- 7b. How would you respond to a person who is insisting on a particular course of action by saying, "God put it on my heart"?
- 7c. According to Luther's Preface to the Large Catechism, what qualifies us to make decisions? What kinds of decisions does this qualify us to make?
- 7d. How does Proverbs 2:6-11 give us the confidence we need to make God-pleasing decisions?

8. Strategic Planning as a First Article Gift – Promotes Continuous Improvement

Luke 8:11-15

¹¹ Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. ¹² The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. ¹³ And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. ¹⁴ And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. ¹⁵ As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.

2 Peter 1:5-8

⁵ Make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. ⁸ For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Christian life is a life of growth. In Luke 8:15, Jesus uses the image of seed planted in good soil as those who “bear fruit with patience.” 2 Peter 1:5-8 explains the qualities that the Lord works in us to keep us from being “ineffective or unfruitful.” It explains that we are effective and fruitful when “these qualities are yours and are increasing.” In strategic planning terms, this is called continuous improvement.

Continuous improvement is not “in every way, every day getting better and better.” Instead, it is the ongoing discipline of evaluating what we are doing, how well we are doing it, and striving toward doing it better. It’s easy to fall into routines (sometimes called ‘ruts’) and fail to step back to evaluate them to see if they are still the best ways of doing what we want to do. Continuous improvement calls us to look at things with a fresh set of eyes.

Strategic planning provides a basis for measurement and adjustment. It increases our awareness of our strengths and our weaknesses as a congregation to identify what we should continue doing well, what we could do better, and what we need to focus on because we are doing it poorly.

An honest assessment of what we’re doing and how well we’re doing it followed by corrective action leads to improvement. Doing it on an ongoing basis leads to continuous improvement. If we assess ourselves but don’t change anything, we’re behaving like the

person described in James 1:22-25. If we act on what we learn about ourselves, we can improve how well we serve through our ministries and activities.

James 1:22-25

²² But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. ²⁴ For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. ²⁵ But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

- 8a. In what ways can a congregation grow? Which of those ways can we control or influence?
- 8b. 2 Peter 1:5-8 speaks about “supplementing your faith.” With what are we to “supplement” our faith? Why?
- 8c. In Luke 8 Jesus speaks of “bearing fruit with patience.” Why does He add “with patience?” What does that tell us about continuous improvement?
- 8d. How does the image used in James 1:22-25 illustrate an ineffective approach to continuous improvement? How does it illustrate an effective approach?

9. Strategic Planning as a First Article Gift – Clarifies Purpose

While the circumstances are different for each congregation, every church shares the same overarching purpose: to proclaim Christ in its community. There are a number of supporting purposes, but the primary reason any congregation exists is to share the Good News of Jesus – to bring “life and immortality to light through the gospel.” This is the “holy calling” spoken of in 2 Timothy 1:9-10.

2 Timothy 1:9-10

⁹ [God] saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, ¹⁰ and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel ...

1 Peter 2 states this purpose in terms of who we are in Christ.

1 Peter 2:4-5, 9-10

⁴ As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, ⁵ you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ ...

⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

The ways in which our identity as God's people is described in 1 Peter 2:9-10 are directly related to a two-fold purpose to be “built up as a spiritual house” and to “proclaim the excellencies of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

As a congregation, everything we do should be derived from this two-fold purpose. Strategic planning clarifies this overarching purpose by extending it into practical actions that capture how we aim to carry out the work that the Lord has called, equipped, and blessed us to do.

9a. According to 2 Timothy 1:9-10, what is the overarching purpose of every congregation?

- 9b. Which of the two parts of the overarching purpose of every congregation does 1 Peter 2:4-5 address?
- 9c. Which of the two parts of the overarching purpose of every congregation does 1 Peter 2:9 address?
- 9d. How is each of the ways in which 1 Peter 2:9 describes us as God's people related to our purpose as a congregation?
- Chosen race
 - Royal priesthood
 - Holy nation
 - A people for His own possession