

Special S.N.A.P. Section

Where There Is No Strategic Plan, the People Perish?

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Dr. Black explores the true meaning of Proverbs 29:18 and emphasizes that we should “consider our business plans and actions in light of God’s instruction” rather than relying on our own personal vision.

Businesses, colleges, churches, and government agencies now regularly speak of vision and the need for some person or document to hold that vision before the community. This vision, to be shared among the participants, would be the focus of new investment of time and money. Pursuing such a vision is to lead to a brighter future of growth as opposed to the economic and emotional decline which attends the lack of a vision. So goes the approach of strategic planning, and to a very good end in many cases.

A layperson, invited to speak at the Wednesday night service of a local church, wanted to inspire the people to develop such a vision of their potential in the community. Without that vision, he thought, the congregation would wither away. They needed a plan, perhaps for programs, perhaps for a recreation building,

perhaps for a better understanding of their role in the community. In any event, they needed a plan outlining their vision for the church’s work.

For a text, the speaker thought he would use Proverbs 29:18: “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” Examining the passage more closely, however, he found a second part: “...but blessed is he who keeps the law.” This second part and scholarly comments on the whole passage showed that the text did not really fit the message. Should he change the message or the text? Because the text held much greater promise for the church’s future, he changed the message. The text holds equal promise for us today. The passage loses its power, however, when we drift from its clear meaning about God’s instruction.¹

In the Company of Many

The Wednesday night prayer meeting speaker is not alone in his initial interpretation of the proverb. Pastors, commentators, speakers, college presidents, and even U.S. presidents have made a similar interpretation and application. Whenever a leader seeks to gather a consensus behind a plan or a motivational speaker seeks to inspire clients to more careful planning, this verse is likely to appear.

For instance, following financial and employment cutbacks at Howard University, its new president, H. Patrick Swygert, presented to his faculty in May 1996 a plan for restructuring the University. In an interview reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (May 17, 1996: A38), Swygert stated, “Simply having a strategic plan does not mandate a result. It points a direction out. Proverbs teaches that ‘without a vision, the people shall perish.’ There has to be a vision.”

At the 1992 Democratic Convention, President Clinton employed the same proverb, “criticizing [President George] Bush for having no vision” (Lofton, 1992:17).

Of all the things George Bush has ever said that I disagree with, perhaps the thing that bothers me most is how he derides and degrades the American tradition of seeing and seeking a better future. He mocks it as “the vision thing.” But just remember what the Scripture says: “Where there is no vision, the people perish.”

I hope, I hope nobody in this great hall tonight or in our beloved country has to go through tomorrow without a vision. I hope no one ever tries to raise a child without a vision. I hope nobody ever starts a business or plants a crop in the ground without a vision. For where there is no vision, the people perish (Clinton, 1992).

President Clinton used the proverb at least two other times in 1997 to indicate the importance to the nation of having a president with vision, particularly *his* vision for the next century, whether it be for education, economic policy, or human relations (Clinton, Sept. 1997 and Oct. 1997).

At least two other U.S. chief executives have also cited Proverbs 29:18. Franklin D. Roosevelt used it to blame the bankers for their lack of vision—a cause of the Great Depression, he asserted. Lyndon B. Johnson

used it to justify funding the National Endowment for the Arts: “For it is in our works of art that we reveal to ourselves and to others the inner vision which guides us as a nation. And where there is no vision, the people perish” (cited in Philp, 1995).

Susan Taylor, in her brief motivational article, compares the proverb to the more recent aphorism, “If you fail to plan, you plan to fail” (1997:18). The context of her encouragement is, however, more closely connected to a chance, materialistic view than to one that is biblical: “Entropy—it’s the natural tendency of things to fall apart. But a positive vision, along with creative effort, organization, and commitment, keeps us from slipping into chaos” (1997:18).

What’s Wrong With Vision in Planning?

Nothing is inherently wrong with planning or having a special human insight into future needs. The proverbs themselves speak repeatedly about plans and, for example, the need for many counselors to “establish” a plan (Proverbs 15:22).

Nor is it wrong to use “vision” to refer to the long-term view of one’s own life or of collective plans, whether

corporate or ecclesiastical. Words have a range of meaning, and among the meanings of vision are “unusual foresight” and “the act or power of imagination,” especially with regard to a future path (*Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate*).

Secular uses of the idea of “having a vision” are often attached to the strategic plan or quality initiative of an organization. The U.S. Air Force, for instance, emphasizes the importance of vision in a joint document about both quality and planning. Vision for the Air Force means understanding and controlling the future:

A quality organization must start with a sound systematic plan....Establishing a strong quality focus requires substantial time and effort from the leadership team as they formulate, deploy, implement, and review their vision, mission, and plans....

Envisioning the future makes strategic planning proactive rather than reactive in nature. Without a vision of the future, it’s hard to plan for anything except sustainment. As Erich Fromm pointed out, “The best way to predict your future is to create it.” A planning team should

visualize the future, develop possible scenarios, and plan the direction of the organization. From there, you can develop a realistic vision, followed by a vision statement, organizational goals, objectives, and metrics (Department of the Air Force, 1996).

Secular users of the proverb itself often paraphrase it for purposes similar to those of the Air Force.² The founder of the consulting firm Think Tank Systems (“Methodology,” 1998) is quoted on the company’s internet site as saying, “Without a vision you cannot have goals, without goals you cannot set a path, without a path you have nowhere to go.” For Think Tank Systems, a vision is a path away from mediocrity in the consulting industry. Kirk McNeil uses a paraphrase closer to the original to motivate professional meeting organizers to better preparation: “Without a vision, the meeting perishes” (McNeil, 1997). For him, vision is “focused hope”—the best of what could be standing in “tension” with “reality.”

Such paraphrases show the power of a great proverb to stimulate related thought, and these modified allusions don’t need to be criticized. What is

more troubling is to see the proverb used as a biblical passage but in a way that mirrors secular interpretation rather than scriptural context. What *is* wrong is to divert this important biblical verse, when used as such, to a less noble task than that for which it was meant.

If planning or purpose were all that was intended in the verse, it would never have come to be known as the law, prophets, and wisdom in a single verse (see Derek Kidner, 1964:173, citing *The New Bible Commentary*). The phrase “law, prophets, and wisdom” implies that this one verse summarizes the Old Testament, a clear indication that planning or purpose is too narrow a meaning.

Laurie Beth Jones uses the verse in her book *Jesus: CEO* to signify how Jesus gave his followers a “higher purpose” for which “people hunger,” a “larger vision of themselves” (1995:177). While Jesus does give us a larger purpose, Jones misses the sense in which Jesus was our prophet, through whom we have a vision of God’s law and the fulfillment of the law under the New Testament. Jones’ metaphor of Jesus as corporate head, while thoughtful in some regards, breaks down in this matter of

“vision.” Only a theological context can adequately express Jesus’ relation to the people’s vision of God’s will for them.

Jesus has a prophetic function to convey a vision of God’s will, and that function is lost in the CEO model. Jesus as a “corporate lawyer” or “chief legal counsel”

might be a better, though still imperfect, metaphor.³

If Jones

and other writers and pastors violate the sense of the passage, what is the meaning of the text, and what is its context?

Text and Context: Law, Prophets, and Wisdom

The verse, as most often quoted and paraphrased from the King James Version of the Bible, is, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” The New International Version’s, “Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint,” indicates, however, that something is radically wrong with the common interpretation.

The common quote is also merely a partial verse, and the remainder of the verse is equally troubling to the planner: “but blessed is he who keeps the law” (NIV) or “but he that keepeth the

law is happy” (KJV). This can be interpreted more broadly as “happy is he who heeds instruction.”⁴

The text itself and the immediate context reveal a much more stern purpose for this verse. Without a vision, oracle, or revelation of the law of God, the

people cast off restraint. The CEO modeling himself after Jesus might do

better to use this verse to keep workers in line rather than to make them feel good about themselves and their purpose in life.

The “vision” here refers to more than just a dream or plan; it is a revelation or an oracle of God. The vision would be the Word or law of the Lord given through the prophet (Kidner, 1964). “Perish” is better interpreted as “loosen,” as in “let down the hair,” “having loose morals,” or “to run wild” (Kidner, 1964). So we might paraphrase the verse as, “without a vision of the word and the law of God, the people will have loose morals and run wild.”

John Lofton, the Harper’s correspondent who interviewed Bill Clinton’s Little Rock pastor, Rex Horne, during the 1992

election campaign, understood the Old Testament meaning of the text:

LOFTON: Did you watch the Democratic Convention?

HORNE: I watched part of it.

LOFTON: What do you think about Governor Clinton (in his acceptance speech) taking Scripture verses and paraphrasing them, and in some cases, quite frankly, saying that they say what they don’t say?

HORNE: The first one—“Where there is no vision, the people perish”—I think that’s accurate. But I can’t speak for him. I didn’t have anything to do with the speech or anything like that.

LOFTON: But that passage was used in the context of his criticizing Bush for having no vision.

HORNE: Uh-huh.

LOFTON: But the proverb (29:18) says: “Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he.” Thus, the vision without which people perish is God’s vision, God’s law, God’s word—

not a reference to someone’s political shortsightedness (Lofton, 1992).⁵

Kidner (1964:173) says that the broader scriptural context is Moses on the mountain receiving the ten commandments and Aaron in the valley leading the visionless people into sin (Exodus 19-32). Kidner contrasts the glory, vision, and law of the hill, Mount Sinai, with the shame, corruption, and reckless abandon below. When Moses withdrew to Mount Sinai, the people lost sight of God’s prophet and had no vision of His Word or law. Consequently, the people loosened their morals and worshipped another god; some literally perished right there and others perished later in the desert.

In this interpretation, we do see the law, prophets, and wisdom converging. All of Proverbs, of course, is wisdom literature. This particular proverb, though, points to the importance of God’s law for his people, the wisdom of seeking God’s instruction, and the important role of the prophet in delivering God’s message to his people.

The proverb’s broad context extends to other Israelite prophets besides Moses. Amos (8:11-12) prophesied that the Lord would

one day *withhold* His Word and law. “Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord God, “When I will send famine on the land. Not a famine for bread or a thirst for water, but rather for hearing the words of the Lord.”

What happens when the Lord withholds His Word and law? Psalm 74:9 records the cry, “We do not see our signs; there is no longer any prophet left, and none of us knows how long this will be.” The psalmist also tells the result of this lack of vision: anguish and destruction overtook the people, and heathen and wicked practices prevailed.

King Solomon: A Case Study

King Solomon, son of Israel’s King David, was a wonderful administrator and builder.⁶ In his youth, he understood and followed God’s instruction for himself, for construction of the Temple, and for leading Israel.

As time went on, Solomon had a continued vision for improving Israel, but the plan placed a heavy burden on the people. II Chronicles 10 reports that this burden contributed to the later split of the kingdom when ten tribes of Israel revolted against Solomon’s son, Rehoboam (who committed his own error of failing to listen to

the elders’ advice to lighten the load).

I Kings 11 shows that the problem was more than overzealous taxation and conscription of labor. Late in his reign, Solomon developed a vision for his own “potential” that focused on his own pleasure in “many strange women” (11:1). A new shared vision developed in the palace, with broad input from his many foreign wives as to the need for a multicultural consensus, including a tolerance for other religions.

When Solomon bowed to other gods (Ashtoreth and Milcom, 11:5), he turned his administrative skills and “vision” to building a “high place for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab, ...and for Molech, the abomination of the children of Ammon. And likewise did he for all his strange wives, which burnt incense and sacrificed unto their gods” (11:7-8).

The Lord had promised early on that, if Solomon would “walk uprightly...in righteousness” and would “do according to all that I have commanded thee, and will keep my statutes and my judgments,” He would “establish the throne of [Solomon’s] kingdom forever...”(I Kings 9:4-5).

While Solomon’s administrative skills and ability to “cast a vision” had not changed, his heart had. “And the Lord was angry with Solomon, because his heart was turned from the Lord” (11:9). For what sins did the Lord blame Solomon? “Because you have done this and have not kept my covenant and my statutes, which I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you, and will give it to your servant” (11:11).⁷

Administrative gifts and vision are no substitute for heeding the instruction of the Lord.

What About the New Testament?

The New Testament does not negate the Old Testament emphasis in the proverb on the law or instruction of God. We have not a new law, but a new understanding and fulfillment of the law. As a result, the proverb does not lose its power in the New Testament era. Indeed, Jesus provides a remarkable case study of the contrasting senses of the proverb: planning versus fidelity to God’s instruction. In Luke 12, the rich land owner had a vision for his business in the sense of a strategic plan, but did not take account of God. He had no

vision, or revelation, of God’s instruction.

And He told them a certain parable, saying, “The land of a certain rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself, saying, ‘What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there will store my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat drink and be merry.” But God said to him, ‘You fool! This night your soul is required of you; and who will own what you have prepared?’ So is the man who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God” (NASB, Luke 12: 16-21).

The rich man had a vision and a strategic plan, but the conversation in which he developed that plan was with “himself” (v. 17). For business applications of the proverb, this insight is crucial. Our conversation must be with God, particularly in prayer and through Scripture. As to strategic planning, this parable does not condemn it at all. The verses that

Business planning and management belong within the sphere of God's instruction.

follow suggest that relying on God's provision is preferred to *worrying*, not that it is preferred to planning: "For this reason, I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, what you shall eat; nor for your body, what you shall put on....And which of you by being anxious can add a cubit to his life's span?" (Luke 12:22, 25).

Books such as Larry Burkett's *Business by the Book* (1990) or Alexander Hill's *Just Business* (1997) serve as valuable examples apart from their details: they start with what they believe to be God's scriptural instruction for appropriate business practice. Business planning and management belong within the sphere of God's instruction. While interpretations and applications of Scripture may vary, Proverbs 29:18 indicates that the businessperson who starts with God's instruction will be blessed. This blessing of heeding God's instruction may extend to those "who in such seasons of lawlessness nevertheless keep God's law" (Zockler, 1869:241; paraphrasing Hitzig⁸). Even when

the business culture is corrupt and lacks vision in the sense of revelation of God's instruction, those who seek the Lord's way may nevertheless benefit or at least be preserved.

It is important to note that in the New Testament, we are not without a prophet to declare the law, will, and instruction of God. Jesus Christ is our prophet and high priest. [See Acts 3:22-24 and Hebrews 5:6.] He is also the one who fulfilled the law. His example is our vision of God's righteousness, and we are to follow in His footsteps (I Peter 2:21-25).

The New Testament application of Proverbs 29:18 to business can only be in the context of Jesus Christ as Lord. Therefore, it cannot be legalism that the proverb promotes but fidelity to a relationship with God through Christ in the conduct of business. The goal is to be holy as God is holy, not legalistic. (See Hill, 1997, ch. 2, especially his comparison of holiness with legalism, judgementalism, and "false asceticism." For example, he says, "Legalism reduces holiness to rule keeping," p. 28.)

To sum up, if we read "Without a vision, the people perish" as a command to hear the

instruction of the Lord, then the Christian business leader would do better to attend more closely to the daily devotional and weekly sermon from Scripture⁹ than to the monthly strategic planning committee meeting. The careful exegesis of Scripture and the application of it to business life are more valuable (though not always more profitable in the short run, perhaps) than attention to the plans of self and other humans. The hope is that exegesis and devotion inform the plan. (See, for example, Burkett, 1990, "Ch. 5: Biblical Business Goals," which is an attempt to incorporate Scripture in the business plan.)

Conclusions

Does a correct understanding of "Where there is no vision, the people perish" have any relation to organizational behavior? One important implication for the strategic plan is that wisdom flows from an understanding of God's law and will. With such a vision comes the godly wisdom needed to make sound plans, whether it is in business, government, or church.¹⁰ The clear mandate of Scripture is to consider our business plans and actions in light of God's instruction.

The proverb also has much broader social implications as well. Without this vision of God's law and will, the people perish today. Without a vision of Jesus Christ, high and lifted up, worthy to be praised, business people cheat and defraud, laborers shirk and steal, governors tend to their *own* welfare, and consumers shoplift. Without this vision, teachers don't always teach and students don't always study. Without this vision, the nation's people loosen their morals and follow other gods as they murder and defile one another.

Vague applications of this proverb are not much better than specifically wrong applications. Harvey Cox (1996), for example, abuses the text by its obscure use in answer to the question, "What is the point of being an American?" Hoping to explain the power of religious insights into questions of national meaning, purpose, and organization, he says:

The moral energy of religions is found not just in the ancient virtues they enshrine. It also appears in their power to generate visions. Religions have a transcendent dimension that could help human beings, now dimmed by media overload, to

imagine creatively different ways of organizing economies and politics. The biblical prophets were not just naysayers. They were also seers and visionaries. They were, to use a term that has fallen into disrepute among both liberals and conservatives, utopians. Isn't it intriguing to remember that it was a Roman Catholic saint, Thomas More, who invented this recently tabooed "U" word? The harsh truth is that with secular utopians having made a mess of our waning century, maybe seers like Isaiah and St. Luke have something to offer as well. As the unknown sage who edited the biblical book of Proverbs in the sixth century B.C. warns, "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Cox, 1996).

What is it that these biblical "seers" saw? Cox's interpretation seems to have little connection to seeing and communicating the law and will of God. He could be referring to such, but if so, why the mystical imprecision? There is no apparent God in Cox's religious input.

As noted at the start, the theme here is not that strategic planning and shared visions are inherently non-biblical. The theme is that a specific, correct

application of Proverbs 29:18 has power far beyond conveying the wisdom of planning, the benefits of a shared conception of purpose, or the vague political need for input from the religious sector of society. The rich man had a strategic plan to build bigger barns, but he had no vision for the will of God (Luke 12:16-22). Stalinists and Nazis shared common purposes and visions in their own times. The Inquisition was driven by "input from the religious sector." This proverb turns our thoughts toward God, not inward, not toward some human in our organization whom we see as "someone with vision," and certainly not toward some modern-day mystic utopian prophet.

But blessed is he who keeps the law and heeds God's instruction. We can only keep the law if we have an example and a supernatural empowering. Through Jesus Christ, we have that example and power. This is no utopian vision. The hope is that Christians, so empowered to be salt and light in a decaying and dark world, will bring God's instruction to the vision statements of organizations in which they participate.

Salt and light are desperately needed in the U.S., but some

evidence suggests the light is dimming. Moral decay and increased lawlessness have recently been accompanied by renewed corporate and governmental interest in establishing a vision. As shown in this article, much of that interest is under cover of the proverb, "Without a vision, the people perish." If, as is asserted here, proper interpretation of the proverb does matter, then we can predict failed plans and unrealized visions for these organizations. Another proverb, one that we do not often quote in the U.S. now, says, "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people."

ENDNOTES

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¹On matters of scriptural use and interpretation, I agree with Richard Chewning's views expressed in his paper "Biblical Orthodoxy Requires the S.N.A.P. of Scripture" (1997). In this article, the key issue is the "perspicuity" or clarity of the scriptural passage (Chewning, 1997:12-13). I believe the passage in Proverbs 29:18 has a clear, unambiguous meaning when read in its entirety and in the context of the biblical uses of terms like "vision" and "perish." Most secular and some spiritual uses, however, have drifted from this clear meaning with loss of potency for the proverb.

²Not only does meaning in secular use change but so does authorship. Alan Powers (1998), for example, attributes the proverb to English poet William Blake. David Whitman (1996) attributes it to Thomas Jefferson.

³In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs as our Lawyer as He corrects the "ancient" Jewish lawyers. For example, he preaches, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:45-47).

⁴Carl Schultz pointed out that "law" in the Hebrew here means "instruction." This instruction could mean the books of the law, Genesis through Deuteronomy, or it could mean special instruction.

⁵Continuing the interview, Lofton then asked about whether Clinton's view was consistent with Scripture:

LOFTON: Do you see Clinton as having God's vision and God's plan and law for America as his program?

HORNE: I don't see any politician with that program. I think the church and Christians are the only ones who have the real answer to the needs of the world. I don't think either (political party) has a corner on that.

⁶This case study developed from Carl Schultz's comment on the contrast between Solomon's administrative skill and the problems caused by his overreaching.

⁷This interpretation reads the biblical text as it is. Schultz notes, however, that some would read this passage about God's punishment of Solomon's infidelity (I Kings 9) differently than the later passage about the people's reactions against Solomon's heavy-handed rule (I Kings 11). Some see the writer in chapter 9 as reading God's judgment into the history after the fact, while in chapter 11 the writer is actually reporting history. The purpose of chapter 9, in this view, is to put the supernatural interpretation into the actual history reported in chapter 11. A difficulty with this is that any historical "editor" who would favor Israel with a fictional supernatural interpretation of Solomon's reign could also favor Israel with a rewriting of history itself. Both chapters would then be unreliable from the critical perspective, and neither could be preferred to the other. The real issue may be that historical events such as chapter 11 are subject to historical methods, while

interpretations of the mind of God are not. In any event, I take a literal reading of both of these passages to be appropriate, recognizing that many scholars disagree.

⁸F. Delitzsch (Keil and Delitzsch, 1980:252) takes issue with Hitzig's reading of the second part of verse 18, thinking that the part applies to all of the people, not to countercultural individuals. If so, the hope of surviving in a world that is corrupted by the absence of godly vision is not supported here, though it may be elsewhere in Scripture. Nevertheless, if the proverb applies to Moses on the mountain and the Israelites in the valley, it is important to note that some Israelites did not immediately perish in the valley. Those who stood with the Lord were saved (Exodus 32). ⁹Delitzsch (Keil and Delitzsch, 1980:252) interpret Proverbs 29:18 as, "Without spiritual preaching, proceeding from spiritual experience, a people is unrestrained."

¹⁰An interview with Laurie Beth Jones in *Industry Week* (Brown, 1995:14) about her book, *Jesus: CEO*, shows that Jones has a different understanding of the causal relation between biblical notions of human wisdom and vision. Jones asserts that wisdom leads to vision:

BROWN: You definitely see Jesus as a visionary leader. Why is that important in today's workplace?

JONES: Technology has quickened the pace, and the stakes, for workers everywhere. Leading a company without having a long-range vision for it is like driving a car looking out only the rearview mirror and occasionally checking the fuel gauge. Yet that is exactly how many organizations are run! The faster the car is going, the more important it is to know what's up ahead.

Leaders who do not have a vision for their company—where it will be and who it will be serving 10 or 20 years from now—might quickly find themselves out of business, despite their having the very best and the most current information. *Vision comes from wisdom, and wisdom is a spiritual gift and pursuit*—one which is said to be more valuable than gold. To quote the Bible, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." The implications are very clear. [Emphasis added]

I think this interpretation of causality is not consistent with the text. Where the vision is a revelation of God's law and will, vision would seem to lead to wisdom. To quote another

somewhat related proverb, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 1:7).

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