

# **Strategic thinking and planning among evangelical leaders: New breed of leaders coming?**

By

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## *Abstract*

Many experts pointed out that leaders should think strategically, which has two components- insight about present and foresight about the future, to survive and thrive in this volatile and ever changing world. However, evangelical scholars such as Os Guinness and Mark Noll lamented that evangelicals aren't using their mind and in turn don't think. Taking these into account, this research aimed at investigating how evangelical leaders succeed unless they use their mind and approach the future through strategic thinking. Accordingly, three evangelical leaders from representative industries- church, corporate, and non-profit, were interviewed. The results showed that anti-intellectualism exists among evangelicals though there have been some improvements in recent years. Furthermore, the investigation found out that all of the leaders view Jesus as a strategist and attend churches that encourage strategic thinking and the use of mind, and in turn practice strategic thinking and planning in their personal and career life.

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## **I. Introduction and literature review**

Looking at the universe filled with interdependent creations and life-sustaining galaxy like ours, it is self explanatory that the Creator had thought strategically and planned it well. "God is a thinking God, and as such must be coming up with new ideas constantly"<sup>1</sup>. In Genesis 1: 26, this thinking God created man after his own image. Therefore, mankind should also be skillful in thinking and planning as like begets like.

There seems a direct correlation between thinking and success in life. The works of authors like Napoleon Hill<sup>2</sup> and Joey Reiman<sup>3</sup> show that people who think critically accumulate wealth. However, not only to prosper, the uncertain future- "that is riddled with change, challenges, and risk"<sup>4</sup>, demands everyone to think. Even if everyone should think critically in this ever changing world, the task becomes more daunting for leaders. "Leaders today must learn to apply their full range of strategic thinking competencies to the complex challenges their organizations are facing"<sup>5</sup>.

Strategic thinking "has two major components: insight about the present and foresight about the future"<sup>6</sup>. The challenge is how leaders spend time to foresight about the future while the pressure from present time mounts high and while survival is at stake. Canton underscored, "While many might seem focused on the present, the most successful leaders- be they business executives or politicians or social leaders- have a keen sense of the future and a sharp ability to see what's next"<sup>7</sup>.

Unfortunately and on top of the above challenge, there are many cultural and religious beliefs that negate the importance of strategic thinking that involves the mind and the future. There has been always a tendency from religious people to undermine the roles of science and mind, and consider them against God and their spiritual life. For that matter, I have spent lots of time to research the very reasons why this attitude has been developed more among evangelicals since I didn't notice such bitter attitude while I was an Orthodox Christian. For the purpose of this particular paper and also avoid biases from scholars who aren't evangelical, I preferred to review the works of two evangelical scholars- Os Guinness and Mark Noll.

Both authors pointed out that evangelicals are undermining the mind and in turn don't think. Though they are addressing the same issue, their approaches differ. Os Guinness pointed out, "Evangelical anti-intellectualism is both a scandal and a sin"<sup>8</sup>. He underlined, "It is a scandal in the sense of being an offense and a stumbling block that needlessly hinders serious people from considering the Christian faith and coming to Christ. It is a sin because it is a refusal, contrary to the first of Jesus' two great commandments, to love the Lord our God with our minds"<sup>9</sup>.

On the other hand, Mark Noll's main quest was to show why this scandal and sin emerged. He wanted to know the historic reasons why "does the characteristic respect for the mind seen both in the sixteenth-century Reformers and in the seventeenth-century Puritans no longer prevail widely among modern evangelicals?"<sup>10</sup> He showed that series of revivals since the beginning of the 18th C, which brought millions into evangelism, were with prices. He laments that since then

evangelicals abandoned universities, arts, science, and replaced study with activism, wisdom that lasted for centuries with populism, and time-tried beliefs with pragmatism.

This led me to question how evangelical leaders enjoy the benefits of strategic thinking if they are anti-intellectual and undermine the functions of the mind. I was wondering how evangelical leaders from various industries succeed unless they use their mind and approach the future through strategic thinking. The following section presents the research question, description of the leaders, and methods pursued to carry out this investigation.

## **II. Research Questions and Methods**

### ***2.1. Research Questions***

The hypothesis of this research is that evangelical leaders who are anti-intellectual and doesn't view Jesus as a strategist, most probably attend churches that discourage activities like strategic thinking that requires engaging the mind, and in turn may not utilize strategic thinking and planning in their personal and career life. The question remains, in this challenging era, how such evangelical leaders survive and thrive as leaders? This paper also intends to investigate whether these leaders utilize creative and innovative socio-technological methods to impart their vision, and align their followers.

### ***2.2. Participants***

Though small sample size may not allow the paper to make far-reaching conclusive remarks, because of time and resource constraints, this investigation involves three evangelical leaders from representative industries: church, non-profit, and corporate. The leader from corporate industry has been working as a CEO for a corporation whose annual budget is estimated 6 million USD. The leader from non-profit is an Executive Director for a non-profit whose annual budget is 100, 000 USD. The third leader is from a medium-sized church and is an Associate Pastor.

### ***2.3. Methods***

General and specific questions, which are divided into four categories, were presented to the leaders to test the hypothesis. The four categories include Background; Strategic thinking and planning, and the Church; Strategic thinking and planning in personal life; and Strategic thinking and planning, and vision. Under each category, background information will be provided to explain why those questions were presented to the leaders. The answers of the leaders for each will be summarized to show whether there is similarity or difference in their response. Based on their collective answer, there will be inference, and recommendations.

## III. Findings and Discussion

### 3.1. Background questions

The following general background questions were presented for each leader to get their opinion. Their responses will be used to correlate their answers in the following section. Therefore, the leaders were asked to say yes or no unless they have some more comments to add.

- 3.1.1. Should science (Strategic thinking and planning as being part of science) and religion complement one another?

The leaders were introduced to the following two quotations from a religious leader and a renowned scientist both of which implied that science and religion should complement each other:

"Science can purify religion from error and superstition. Religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes." Pope John Paul II.

"Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind." Albert Einstein.

All of them said yes they should complement. They were asked to show how faith contributes for strategic thinking and planning. The leader from church noted, "Leaders can employ prayer while engaging in these processes". The leader from corporate shared, "I pray and fast whenever I engage in strategic thinking, and also use discernment as I carry out my leadership responsibilities including strategic thinking, planning, and execution of plans". The leader from non-profit added, "Prophecy as religious tool could play a significant role in complementing strategic thinking as one tries to get foresight about the future".

- 3.1.2. Is there a major difference in using strategic thinking among Christian denominations, for example, among Catholics and Evangelicals?

All leaders said yes, there is a difference and they observed that Catholics are more organized institutionally and structurally. They noted that Catholics must have employed strategic thinking to become organized and well coordinated than evangelicals. Note that Noll also claims that Catholics are in a better position when it comes to learning<sup>11</sup>. That was why in his commentary, he suggested collaboration between the two denominations<sup>12</sup>.

- 3.1.3. Is there a growing tendency of anti-intellectualism among modern evangelicals?

The leaders were presented with some of the criticisms of evangelical authors like Os Guinness and Mark Noll about a growing tendency of evangelicals' anti-intellectualism. All of them said yes but they noted that there have been some improvements in recent years. The leader from non-profit said, "I have seen lots of improvements in my church where the new Pastor who joined the church a couple of years ago encouraging innovative intellectual activities". The leader from corporate, however, showed reservation: "I agree that there have been anti-intellectualism and these authors are right but since I didn't read their books, I cannot completely agree with their criticism". The leader from church stressed, "As a pastor, I myself

encourage the involvement of intellectual activities as far as it plays constructive role in implementing the vision of the church”.

3.1.4. Do you think Jesus would have utilized strategic thinking and planning if he had lived in the 21<sup>st</sup> C?

Three of the leaders strongly believe that Jesus would have employed strategic thinking and planning if he had lived in our generation.

The follow-up question was: how do you know? Each of them gave some examples that portray Jesus as a strategist and noted that his teachings and the way he undertaken his mission clearly shows that he was a strategic leader who thought and strategized before acting. The leader from non-profit noted, “It looks like Jesus took enough time to think strategically and plan in the beginning of his ministry, and that was why he succeeded”. The leader from corporate emphasized, “Everything about Jesus was strategic”. She further recounted his approaches from the very early stage of his life while he was a 12 years boy till he ascended. She described Jesus, “Thoughtful, focused, and strategic”. She narrated how he had been led to the desert to strategically think and plan about what he was going to do in the rest of his stay on earth. She also gave examples like how he strategically selected his successors, mentored, and empowered them.

The leader from church highlighted, “Jesus was strategic”. He related Jesus with God, who is also strategic. He gave lots of examples but let’s see one of them. He said, “God helped Gideon to be strategic when he selected the right warriors. Jesus was also used a parable to strategically advise kings and businessmen concerning how they should approach wars and building towers”.

From the leaders’ answers, one can infer that they are leaders who appreciate the function of the mind, recognize Jesus not as a fanatic but a well-articulated strategist. This agrees with Laura Jones’s description of Jesus. Jones painted Jesus as a CEO, who was thoughtful and extraordinary leader. She pointed out that he had a plan and strictly followed it regardless of numerous challenges<sup>13</sup>.

The leaders have also common stand towards integrating science and faith. This aligns with Noll’s understanding where the broader reality of Christianity calls for Christian consideration in the area of “social theory, the history of science, other historical changes, the body, the arts, literature, or more”<sup>14</sup>. In his 2004 commentary, he mentioned progresses Christian learning institutions are making<sup>15</sup>. This is true when we see Christian universities like Regent incorporate many fields of studies beyond theology. While I am working on this project, I came across an interesting announcement- “Research Initiatives - Integrating Science & Faith” by School of Psychology and Counseling at Regent<sup>16</sup>.

## **3.2. Strategic thinking and the Church**

From the above section, we have seen that all of the leaders were pro strategic thinking and planning. They also viewed Jesus as a strategist. The following questions were presented to know whether the leaders attend churches that encourage or discourage strategic thinking and planning.

- 3.2.1. Do you think the Evangelical Church as a whole should employ strategic thinking and planning herself, and also encourage her congregation?

Three of them said yes. Once their position in this issue is known, the next question is where the church stands in this regard- her status.

- 3.2.2. Please rate the status of the Evangelical Church in using strategic thinking and planning (1- lowest to 5- highest)?

Both the leader from corporate and church rated 2 while the leader from non-profit rated 3. It is interesting to see that these leaders believe that the state of their denomination in thinking is poor. For that matter, the leaders who rated 2 shared with me that they would have rated lower if they were asked a couple of years back.

- 3.2.3. Does your church environment encourage strategic thinking and planning?

All of them said yes. The leader from non-profit noted, "It was not there until a new pastor came in". As predicted, these leaders, who don't portray anti-intellectualism and said that this behavior shouldn't be there, attend churches that encourage thinking and the functions of the mind.

Though churches should encourage activities that involve the mind including strategic thinking, it doesn't mean that modern evangelical churches should be led intellectually. Noll noted that a church solely led intellectually won't be healthy<sup>17</sup>. Creating an environment within the church that encourages thinking, creativity, and innovation doesn't also mean that the mind should be exalted more than the heart (spirit) or the only way to glorify God. For that matter, none of them- whether the Puritans or the leaders of the 18th C revivalists from various denominations "believed that intellectual activity was the only way to glorify God, or even the highest way, but they all believed in the life of the mind, and they believed in it because they were evangelical Christians"<sup>18</sup>.

Unlike the churches of these leaders, many churches discourage creativity and innovation, and consider these kinds of virtues as things of the mind and against spiritual growth. That is why many serious people don't considering Christianity or left it. Many churches save millions through front-doors, win their heart but millions leave via backdoors because churches fail to win their mind, and in turn loss everything altogether. That is why a well known Christian scholar advised evangelicals during his speech for inaugural of Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College in 1980 said, "If you win the whole world and lose the mind of the world, you will soon discover you have not won the world. Indeed it may turn out that you have actually lost the world"<sup>19</sup>. His advice is very important and still applies to contemporary churches: "Responsible Christians face two tasks—that of saving the soul and that of saving the mind"<sup>20</sup>.

### **3.3. Strategic thinking in personal and career life**

From the above two sections, we have seen that the leaders are not anti-intellectual and view Jesus as a strategist. They also attend churches that encourage strategic thinking and planning. The following questions were presented to know whether the leaders employ strategic thinking in their personal and career life.

- 3.3.1. Are there scriptural and/or doctrinal beliefs that deter evangelicals from predicting the future and prepare ahead of time? If there are, please mention them?

All of them believe that there shouldn't be scriptures or doctrines that discourage strategic thinking about the future. However, they noted that many evangelicals believe so because they misinterpret some scriptures. The leader from non-profit believed, "There aren't as such written doctrines that discourage thinking and using the mind; however, there are unwritten doctrines". The leader from corporate gave one example, "The scripture that says we walk by faith not by sight may prone many to think that they don't need to do anything from their side, what they just need is to believe". The leader from church also observed, "Many people think that the end is near and they don't want to think about the future strategically". However, he noted, "Paul had the same challenge with Corinthians who thought the end was at hand where they stopped everything and waited for the Lord's coming".

- 3.3.2. Have you been employing strategic thinking and planning? If yes, since when? And what prompted you to start it?

All of the leaders said yes. The leader from church narrated, "I started to think at age 8 when I was led to start a business". The leader from corporate remembered, "I started in 1990's when I was promoted to a high level position". The leader from non-profit admitted, "I started a couple of years ago and when I founded my non-profit organization".

I asked a follow-up question to learn in which part of the process they are more comfortable- the thinking or the planning. The leader from corporate said, "My strength is in execution. Though I critically think, I don't have strength when it comes to foresight about the future, for which I hire". The leader from non-profit on the other hand noted, "I am fair at both and still learning-doing research myself as well as trying to seek out advice from those more knowledgeable and willing to provide us with their assistance". However, I haven't got an answer by the time I am writing this part from the leader from church concerning where his strength is.

- 3.3.3. How much frequently do you critically think (daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, and yearly, not at all)?

The leader from corporate said, "I think daily as I strategize for my personal and career life". The leader from non-profit thinks weekly. However, the leader from church recounted, "I actually critically think several times a day". He sent me detailed account in this regard via email; however, they are not reported here because of space limitation.

3.3.4. Do you have short (1 – 5 years), medium (5 – 20 years), and long term (20 -50 years) plans for your personal life and at your job?

The leader from non-profit has had plans for short and medium terms while the remaining two have all. This shows that these evangelical leaders not only think strategically but plan.

3.3.5. Do you evaluate them, if so, how frequently? What are the strategic tools you use to evaluate?

All of them evaluate their strategies and plans. The leader from non-profit underlined, “I don’t use any strategic tools like SWOT to evaluate; instead, I follow my own approach. I call it objective approach where I break my goals into quarterly and evaluate them at the end of each quarter”. The leader from corporate noted, “I have been using SWOT and other tools”. The leader from church said, “I do evaluate my strategies and also the evaluation tools themselves”.

As we have read, all of them practice strategic thinking and planning. However, two of the leaders admitted that they need to improve the part that requires foresight about the future. What is interesting is that both of them seek help from others in this area. In this case, the service of consultants is very important. Canton underscored, “Subtle signs, often overlooked by the untrained eye, reveal entire worlds to someone who knows how to read them in context”<sup>21</sup>. He continued, “Tracking the future, figuring out what is going to happen when, is as much art as science”<sup>22</sup>. Consultants should use their artistic skills in defining and redefining the context in which clients are operating to help them project the future and get prepared ahead of time by employing strategic thinking. Peter Block noted that the skill of an artist (or philosopher or therapist) is to come up with questions that demand “a hard inward look, without any implication that there is one right answer”<sup>23</sup>. He wrote, “The greatest value of questions is to deepen our mutual understanding of people and the world in which they live. Our goal is depth, not speed or quick resolution”<sup>24</sup>.

### **3.4. Strategic thinking and the vision**

In the previous section, we have seen that the leaders utilize strategic thinking and planning in their personal and career life. The next question is whether they involve strategic thinking as they impart their vision and align their followers.

1.1. How do you impart your vision to your followers and make sure they are aligned?

The leader from church noted, “I post various pictures on the wall of the church, and also go out to use word of mouth as the main avenue to impart our short and long term visions about the church”. The leader from corporate shared, “I talk about it constantly. I use lots of mechanisms to impart it such as posting the vision on walls, cups, pens, notepads, etc”. The leader from non-profit underscored, “I use one-on-one meetings, testimony sharing, brushes, and recorded videos”.

Later, as a follow-up question, I asked whether they use social networks like facebook and twitter to reach out their followers and learned that leaders from church and corporate don’t use but the leader from non-profit uses facebook but not twitter. I asked why the leaders don’t use facebook and learned that they once used it but had bad experience like identity theft.

1.2. What are the roles of strategic thinking and planning in crafting, imparting, executing, and evaluating/monitoring your vision?

All the leaders said that they employ strategic thinking and planning as they craft, impart, and execute their vision, and evaluate them.

1.3. Do you employ some socio-technological tools to interpret and impart your vision to your followers, as you study trends, implement your plans, and as you evaluate them?

All of them use socio-technological tools to interpret, execute, and evaluate their vision. The leader from non-profit enlisted, "We use web site, donor software, fund raising and annual dinner events, and annual run". The leader from corporate recounted, "We use employee gatherings, get together, luncheons, dinners, incentives, and many business software to illustrate their vision, demonstrate their strategies, plans, analyze results, and prepare reports". The leader from church said, "Our main method is to use pictures and gatherings".

From the above answers, one can appreciate that the approach of the leader from church is traditional. However, this looks like a universal problem where the traditional and mainline church has been lagging behind other industries in using the available new technologies<sup>25</sup>. Not only they lag behind technology wise, they are unable to create conducive cyberspace that attracts the NET Generation. The latter prefer the anonymous nature of the cyberspace where they could discuss faith issues more openly, which they couldn't be able to enjoy in traditional church settings<sup>26</sup>. However, this problem is not specific to the traditional church, "Even the most progressive online ministries seem to be clueless about the nature of the Internet culture they hope to influence"<sup>27</sup>. Considering the future stake of Internet in shaping Christianity, church leaders should give it their prime attention; otherwise, as Adam Lashinsky of Fortune predicted, "Digital Darwinism implies that organizations which cannot adapt to the new demands placed on them for surviving in the information age are doomed to extinction"<sup>28</sup>.

#### ***IV. Summary***

This quick investigation proofed that leaders who are not anti-intellectuals, view Jesus as strategist, and attend churches that encourage the use of mind, employ strategic thinking and planning in their personal and career life. However, these leaders admitted that there is a growing tendency of anti-intellectualism among evangelicals and they attributed this problem to misinterpretation of scriptures. Nevertheless, they pointed out that, there have been some improvements in recent years.

Looking forward, further research should be carried out among wider representative industries to gain more experiential data. The research should also consider larger sample size. The participants should include evangelical leaders from various sub-denominations, age group, and education.

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