

# Issachar Thinking

## Strategy Reframed for 21st Century Kingdom Enterprises



*“More than ever before, Christian Leaders need to develop thinking that enables them to understand the times and know what their enterprise should do”*

**By Gordon Gray**

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## **BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION**

Since retiring from full-time employment, I have spent my time researching, reading and ruminating on the theme of Strategy and its use by Christian agencies of various kinds.

My concerns were raised when leading a strategy task-force for one organisation, and I found that all the literature I could dig up utilized secular strategy planning models. At the same time I had become aware that within both the corporate and the academic arenas, strategy planning was on the way out. In fact Henry Mintzberg said "Strategy planning is an oxymoron!"

The deeper I read into the secular strategy literature, the more concerned I was - the focus on competition (with many militaristic references), the drive to win at all costs, the emphasis on humanistic intellect and innovation, etc. The addition of 'prayer' and the impact of the Holy Spirit by Christian consultants seemed tacked on, rather than integral to the model.

Consequently I have tried to 're-frame' strategy from a Biblical Mindset. This document is an overview of my ideas as they stand at this point of time, and I welcome any comments and criticism. Please email them to me at <[issacharthinking@gmail.com](mailto:issacharthinking@gmail.com)>.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gordon Gray', with a stylized flourish extending from the end.

Gordon Gray, 31st March 2009

# ISSACHAR THINKING

## – an Overview

Every christian leader I've spoken to wants to be as effective as possible in the mission to which they have been called and into which they are pouring themselves. But most will acknowledge that they and their enterprise are very often not as effective as they believe they should be. Looking around at faith-based enterprises, one sees a small number of highly effective and dynamic enterprises, a larger number of moderately effective enterprises, and the largest group – the less than truly effective enterprises.

One of the key drivers of effectiveness is a well considered, finely crafted and enterprise-wide shared strategy. To this end most organisations spend days each year in strategy planning sessions, but many of these are little more than operational and budgetary reviews. In fact even in the secular corporate world many leaders are bemoaning the time and cost of strategy planning in the light of the apparent low level of practical return recovered. For leaders of Christian enterprises this is compounded by the fact that the strategy practices used are highly secular, commercial and competitive, and are in many ways non-biblical in ethos.

At the same time the need for a cohesive way forward is being dramatically increased today by both the sheer mass of change taking place as well as the constantly accelerating rate of change – from incremental and gradual change to rapid dynamic

*Christian leaders  
need a way of looking  
at strategy from a  
Biblical perspective*

and discontinuous change.

'Strategy' is not an easy word to pin down. It is used in so many ways. Even in it's

business sense, management guru Henry Mintzberg classifies 5 key understandings of strategy and 10 different schools of thought on business strategy. Strategy is, at it's most basic, a knowledge of where an organisation is at the present, an understanding of where the organisation is trying to get to during a particular period of time, and the awareness of what to do in order to move from the present to that future state.

My definition of strategy is "a conceptual framework which shapes decisions made regarding the future of the enterprise and how that is to be achieved."

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While the word 'strategy' is not found anywhere in scripture, the concept is found in many places. One verse in scripture in particular stands out as speaking about strategy, but in different words. David was about to be made King of Israel, and all the tribes sent men to form his army. The passage lists how many 'men of war' each tribe sent – each tribe sending thousands of men, except the tribe of Issachar. Issachar sent 200 chiefs – far less than any other tribe – but men of a special quality: "of the tribe of Issachar, 200 chiefs and their staff, **who understood the times and knew what Israel should do.**" (1 Chr. 12:32 )

As we read scripture we find many stories of people who also had that ability. While these include the prophets and many of Israel's leaders, it is especially true of people like Joseph, Solomon, and Daniel.

In scriptural thought wise men were those who had unusual insight into human nature and in the problems of life in general.

Thus they were sought out as advisers to kings and rulers. This was the case for Daniel and his three friends. In the first chapter of Daniel we read “God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom (1:17) ... in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king enquired of them, he found them ten times better...” (1:20). In the attainment of results, the securing of a knowledge of the future or of what would be the best decision to make on the part of the government in view of unknown future contingencies, or the like, Daniel and his three colleagues far excelled the professional heathen diviners and conjurers. **It is the application of ‘hokmah’ = “wisdom”.**

The Biblical view of Wisdom is a bit like a three layered onion.

- The outer layer is that of skills and competencies. The skills attributed to wisdom in scripture range over many fields from embroidery to boat-building, including business and governance, from manual skills to intellectual abilities.

- The second layer is that of Life-Skills. This is the main thrust of the book of Proverbs – a book that contains multiple kernels of wisdom about how to live one’s daily life in a godly way.

חכמה  
hokmah  
wisdom

- The core of wisdom is Holy Thinking - discerning the mind of God, e.g.: understanding what should be done and knowing how to do it.

This view of wisdom is the central hub of what I term “Issachar Thinking”. The biblical scholar, J.I.Packer, defines such **wisdom as “the power to see, and the inclination to choose, the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it.”** (Packer 1973)

## Starting point

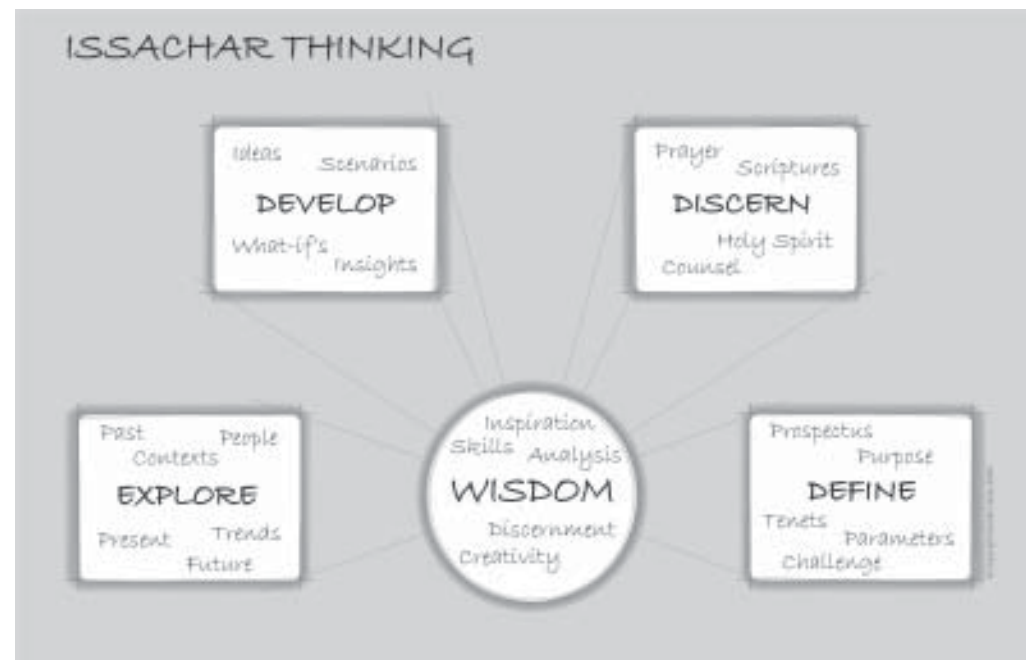
Before we begin our Issachar Thinking journey, we need to ask and answer two vital questions for our enterprise:

- Why do we exist – what is God’s purpose for us?
- Why do we do what we do in the way we do it?

The answer to the first is our Purpose Statement. The answer to the second reveals our Foundational Tenets (or values). I’d point out that in all probability the answers to these questions may not be totally clear until you’ve attended in depth to other considerations.

## Thinking in Four Dimensions

Issachar Thinking has four ‘practice’ dimensions with Wisdom as the central hub. One doesn’t work through these in consecutive order – rather they are like the four squares of a highland sword-



dance – the dancer’s feet are placed in each square in a rapid and constantly changing pattern. While one starts from the ‘Explore’ dimension and finishes from the ‘Define’ dimension, all

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four dimensions are constantly visited and re-visited in an almost random pattern.

And we don’t simply apply the process once every year or every three years. Rather it is some-thing that goes on continuously in our minds. To

assist this it can be helpful for leaders to allocate specific thinking time in their schedules. One secular strategy consultant goes as far as to suggest that senior business leaders should spend 40% of their time on ‘working on the business’, and the remaining 60% of their time ‘working in the business’. Microsoft encourages its senior staff to spend at least one-day a fortnight on strategic thinking.

One organisation I’ve heard of starts each quarterly Senior Management Meeting with time for people to write out (and thus refresh in their minds) the Purpose, Principles and Vision, and finished the meeting with people all writing out the Simple Strategic Rules with any revisions that may have been made.

### **Dimension One** – Exploration (Spy out the Land)

In order to make wise strategies, we must explore the terrain in which we minister using God-centred observation.

*“Be alert, Be present. I’m about to do something brand new.  
I’m bursting out! Don’t you see it? There it is!  
I’m making a road through the desert, rivers in the badlands”  
Isaiah 43:18-19 – The Message*

We need to explore the past, the present, and the future. We need to understand our clients/members/congregants, our competitors and our ministry context. The latter involves our consideration of the **s**ocial, **t**echnological, **e**nvironmental, **e**conomic, **p**olitical, **l**egal, **e**ducation, information and entertainment, and the **s**piritual dimensions of our society (S|T|E|E|P|L|E|S).

In doing this we are seeking to answer the questions

- What is happening?
- What might happen next?
- What has God done?
- What is God doing?
- What does God want to do?

### **Perspective Two** – Development

We take the ideas and insights that come out of these questions, and begin to develop them in ‘what if’s’ and scenarios. What circumstances would we find ourselves ministering in if ‘x’ continue to happen? What would be the impact if we did ‘y’? We develop possible (and sometimes impossible) models of ministry.

This is done in order to find answers to two questions:

- What possible future circumstances might we face?
- What might possible future practices look like, and how might they work?

### **Perspective Three** – Discernment

*“Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God...” 1 John 4:1*

We need to discern which of these ideas and insights are the



best – not from our perspective, but from God’s. This calls for the Spirit of Discernment.

**Spiritual Discernment** has four factors that interact with each other.”

- **The Holy Spirit**, who will lead us into all truth. Discernment requires the leader to constantly be alert to the nudges and whispers of the Spirit. ”
- **The Scriptures**. God’s Will will never contradict

God’s Word. The Scriptures may not tell us how to specifically prioritize between childrens’ ministries, but it does emphasise the importance of children as being especially regarded by God.”

- **Prayer**. Linked to the previous two factors is the freedom and privilege we have to take our issues to God in prayer – and then prayerfully listen for His reply.
- **Wise counsel**. The OT Wisdom literature resonates with the need for leaders to have and to use wise counsellors. Faith-based enterprise Boards and Councils should not limit their considerations to merely the ‘requirements’ (often legal and financial) but should be a sounding board for ideas and direction.

The key question here is:

- What is the best and highest goal, and the surest way to achieve it?

#### **Perspective Four** – Define

Now it’s time to start writing in earnest!

Strategy is not best held as a multi-page document, but as a conceptual framework that can be effectively shared across the enterprise. However, in practice a document is generally needed to support and act as the *aide de memoire* for a reframed strategy. I call this document a ‘**Prospectus**’ to reinforce that it – the document – is not the strategy, but a tool for developing and communicating the strategy and for mobilizing and motivating involvements in the strategy. It seeks to answer the following questions:

- What do we intend to achieve that gives focus to our work?
- What will shape the way in which we undertake this intent?
- How do we see ourselves achieving this?

#### *The Purpose Statement*

Your Purpose is what you are “striving to be”, your reason for being, your very *raison d’etre*. There is a big difference between having a mission statement and being truly purposeful. To be truly purposeful means that key decisions can be referred back to the purpose - your reason for existence. This gives some clue as to why being truly purposeful is not easy. It gets to the core of power and authority. It says in essence that those in positions of authority are not the source of authority. Rather the source of legitimate power in the enterprise is its guiding ideas.

As christian leaders our purpose must be to both do the will of God and allow the will of God to be done in our individual lives and our

*The Prospectus has four sections: The Purpose Statement, the Foundational Tenets, the Enterprise Focus (GHAC), and the Strategic Parameters*

corporate lives. And that 'will' is not normally generic – it is specific to the individual, the body, the location, the times.

### *Foundational tenets*

Foundational Tenets define the character of the organization. They are core beliefs which describe the ideology of an entity. They answer the question "Why do we do what we do the way that we do?" Foundational tenets shape and drive a ministry. They propel the enterprise forward towards achieving its purpose. (Note: some people variously use 'core principles', 'core values', and 'core philosophy' for what I term 'foundational tenets'.)

Unless you are initiating a brand new venture, foundational tenets are not 'created' or 'imposed' – rather they emanate from the very soul of the enterprise. Foundational tenets rarely change – programs and projects may come and go, but tenets are for the long-haul.

### *Great Holy Audacious Challenge*

*"Do something that will change the community  
because you are there"*

Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great* uses the expression BHAG or 'Big Hairy Audacious Goal' as his term for the enterprise focus. In a God-focused enterprise, however, I would suggest that size is not a primary issue – rather it is the attainment of something that is wonderful and has impact for the Kingdom. Thus I would begin with the word 'Great' instead of 'Big'. (In his book Collins himself actually suggests that 'Great' would be a better word to use than 'Big'.) (Collins 2001)

I also find that there are major issues about the use of 'goals' (see Ordonez 2009, etc), and that people will commit themselves to challenges rather than goals.

So I suggest we should have a **GHAC – Great Holy Audacious Challenge**

Great = wonderful, exciting, impactful

Holy = For and of God

Audacious = Bold, adventurous, even impudent

Challenge = a barrier to be broken, a border to be crossed, a new land to be explored.

### *Strategic Parameters*

One of the key needs of strategies in today's world is flexibility. Plans require us to have detailed knowledge of the whole route to be travelled. That's OK if the exact same route has been travelled before and the possibilities of terrain change is remote. However if there is a sudden change our plans are upset. Maps and plans only make sense for managing the knowable. Using parameters instead of detailed plans allows maximum flexibility to action as the needs and circumstances demand.

Strategic parameters are a few "straight-forward hard and fast rules that define direction without confining it" (Eisenhart and Sull, 2001). They are

- ground rules to accomplish the challenge
- expectations and the framework that guide putting the challenge into practice
- self-imposed boundaries that clarify and sharpen the focus of the challenge.

## **IN SUMMARY**

Let's very quickly review these facets of Issachar Thinking as they come together.

***Issachar Thinking is the application of God-given Wisdom and Discernment to the process of understanding the times we live in and what God wants done.***

***It involves continuously observing and considering ongoing opportunities and challenges within complex and dynamically changing environs.***

***It enables us to develop a shared and God-honouring conceptual framework which shapes and guides decisions that determine what our organisation is, what it does, and how it does it, with an eye to the future.***

We begin by seeking and practising Wisdom.

Secondly, we move on to discover what God has done, is doing and wants to do, as we observe the terrain in which we minister through the frame that God has shaped for us.

Third, we take the Insights and develop them into scenarios – asking what if ‘x’ happened... what if we did ‘y’? – and map these scenarios against each other.

Fourthly, we then take time to discern firstly the criteria we will use to evaluate the scenarios and then to select the direction we should take, the GHAC we should focus on.

Fifth, we define and distil it into a simple document,

And finally we enact the strategy (using a plan!), continuously evaluating it and seeking to enhance it.

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Born in China, Gordon studied Print Management at the London College of Printing. He emigrated to Melbourne in 1965, where further studies in Theology (Ridley College), Visual Communication and Communication Psychology (Melbourne State College) were applied during 25 years of running Christian Media, a Communications Design Agency serving Christian organizations. More recently he spent 5 years as international Media Director of OMF International. Gordon has also served on a number of Christian Boards and Councils. In his work Gordon has been involved in Strategic Planning, Organizational Architecture, Scenario Planning, Initiating and coordinating Integrated Communications and Marketing Projects, Book and Magazine Publishing, Website and Video production, IT Development and other key aspects of organizational operation.

During the past 35 years he has had the privilege of working with congregations, parachurch groups, missions, training colleges and denominational departments of most Protestant traditions.

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