

Looking Ahead... Far, Far Ahead

By Tony Guerrero

In Romans 15:23-25, Paul tosses out a little statement that, to my knowledge, doesn't get a lot of attention. He says, "But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to see you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while. Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there."

Paul's letters are often very personal, and while they contain lots of pertinent information, they also include many personal notes, small asides, inside stories and more. To the average reader, even the scholar, this passage may seem like nothing more than a personal note letting the letter's recipient know of Paul's future plans. But the implications of his statement caught my attention this morning.

Committed

What really strikes me is that, in Paul's day, traveling great distances was not a small task. For us living in the modern era, going to Spain and Jerusalem might take a day or two. For him, this commitment no doubt consumed months of his life. I can pretty much guarantee that if I had to walk everywhere, you'd never see me outside of a couple mile radius of my home.

Why is this an important thing to consider? Paul was in ministry for the long haul. He had to plan his ministry out months, even years, in advance. While many of us also see ourselves in ministry for the long haul, we are often blinded by our short-term goals and disappointments. We rarely think about our day-to-day work in terms of how it affects us ten, twenty, forty years down the road. We set our plans a few days, maybe weeks, occasionally months ahead. But how many years ahead is your goal list?

Long-Term Plan

A close friend of mine was hired as the worship director at a small church. He was handed a ministry consisting of little more than a three-chord guitarist and an amateur tambourine player. Not exactly the hippest or most inspiring worship band.

He realized that if anything were to change for the better, it would take effort and time. He set up a plan to train his existing musicians, but also began to develop a long-term goal of developing musicians from within the church. He began to offer music training to the kids in the Sunday school programs. This kind of program could only have its payoff years down the road, so he knew from



the start that he was still going to endure years of frustration. But, in the end, ten years later he had multiple worship bands, all made up of high school and college-age kids he had helped to train and mentor.

The end result was exciting, but the fruit of his efforts could only have happened with his commitment to staying at his church long term. It is an unfortunate fact that many people in ministry look at their current positions as somewhat temporary. Just think about how many people have come and gone at your church—pastors, elders, worship leaders, ministry leaders, office workers, etc. Many current ministry jobs, while staffed by well-meaning Christians, are sometimes merely looked at as “stepping-stones” to the next big opportunity or ministry.

Dropping Roots

One of the most admirable things I have learned about my own pastor is that he made a commitment to God that once God planted him somewhere, he would stay there for at least forty years. It is a well-known fact that Saddleback Church has become a successful church both in terms of sheer numbers as well as in far-reaching effects for the Kingdom. But when Saddleback started, there were relatively few people living in the area, and the first meetings were held in an apartment. Yet, this commitment had to be made before any assurance of success. It is my belief that part of Saddleback's success is simply God's reward for Rick Warren's obedience when there was little light at the end of the tunnel.

How long are you committed to your job or church? Does your ministry have five-year, ten-year, twenty-year plans? Or does your planning process only reach to the short-term future? Are you committed to staying for the long haul even if (or, I should say, “when”) things go bad? Or might you miss out on the fruits of your labor because by the time they ripen, you're stationed at another church?

There is nothing inherently wrong with changing jobs or being promoted. The issue really is, how much time are we allowing God to work through us in our current positions? Are we limiting Him to only how long we can stay planted before we get bored, frustrated or ambitious? What might our obedience yield twenty years down the line? There's really only one way to find out.

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