

Is the future pre-determined?

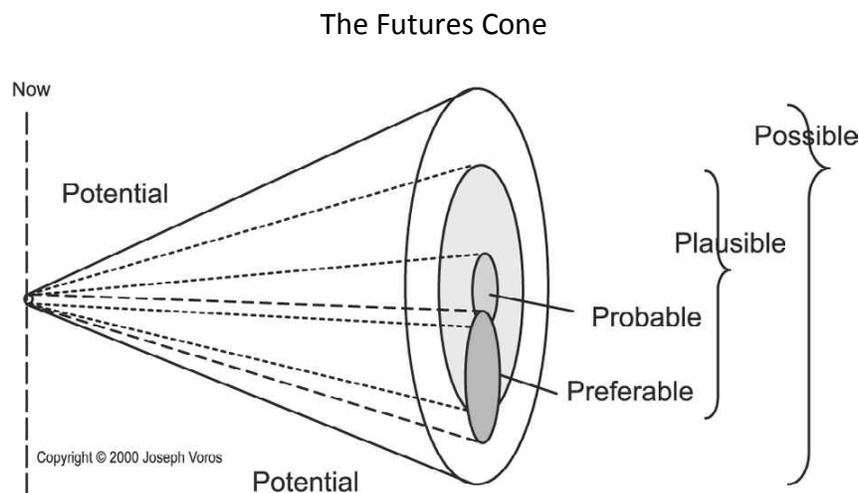
By Stephen E. Brimmer

God is the designer of the ultimate future. However, for some space of time known only to Him human beings possess freedom of choice and ability to act in ways that significantly impact our planet as well as future generations.

We cannot know what the 21st century will mean for the church. One can imagine many possible directions things could go. While God remains sovereign, his people should be wise like the 200 leaders of the tribe of Issachar who “understood the temper of the times and knew the best course...to take” (1 Chronicles 12:32, NLT).

Christian leaders should be alert to changing conditions and should explore what is yet beyond the horizon in order to garner respect in the face of ubiquitous change and offer confident guidance in these uncertain times. One tested and proven approach is to consider a wide range of alternative futures.

Joseph Voros (2003) distinguishes between five classes of alternative futures to help organize and clarify the range of possibilities. Illustrated in his “futures cone” below are potential, possible, plausible, probable, and preferable futures.



Source: Joseph Voros, A generic foresight process framework (2003)

Potential futures

This is the universe of futures thinking in which all the classes of futures exist, including those not yet imagined. Intentionally general, this is the term many futurists prefer when speaking broadly about alternative futures as a whole.

Possible futures

This class is based on the question, what *might* happen? It is the broadest of all the classes in the 'potential futures' universe because it remains open to the use of new knowledge – knowledge we do not yet possess – to achieve things that are currently out of reach but not necessarily ruled impossible.

Plausible futures

This class is based on the question, what *could* happen? It is limited to our current knowledge of how things work such as physical laws, cause and effect, and how the world operates. For example, Voros (2003) suggests that an attempt to fix the global economy by replacing the equivalent of dollars and cents with hugs and kisses would seem implausible to most people.

Probable futures

This class is based on the question, what is *likely* to happen? Most often, it is viewed simply as an extension of the present from the past and a continuation of current trends into the future. Many people never get beyond this approach to thinking about the future. However, business as usual can suddenly change when discontinuities occur. Some trends also disappear unexpectedly. Reading and extrapolating trends is useful but all by itself gives rise to a smaller class of futures than the previous two.

Preferable futures

This class is based on the question, what do we *want* to happen? The preferable future is different from the previous classes in that it is more emotional while the others are largely concerned with informational knowledge. The preferable future can also cross boundaries and choose from probable, plausible, and possible futures.

Optimistic vs. pessimistic views of the future

Jesus taught us to pray, "Your [the Father's] will be done here on earth just as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10 NLT). If that is the future Jesus dared imagine for this planet, what does it mean for us?

Many Christians have allowed the modern theology of millennialism to turn them into planetary pessimists. They believe things can only get worse and our best hope is that they get so bad God destroys it all while Christians escape just in time. Unchecked, this kind of thinking leads to dystopia, or a doomsday outlook on our world and its future.

When God finished creating the world, he "looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was excellent in every way" (Genesis 1: 31, NLT). We do not know how many years, decades, centuries, or millennia God may still intend to populate planet Earth with people he loves. So, do we not have a responsibility to pray as Jesus did and give our best efforts to improving our world for future generations?

Reference:

Voros, Joseph. (2003). A generic foresight process framework. *Foresight*, 5(3), 10-21. <http://www.agri-peri.ir/AKHBAR/cd1/FORESIGHT%20METHODOLOGY%20&%20FORECASTING/FORESIGHT%20METHODOLOGY/related%20articles/philosophy/A%20generic%20foresight%20process%20framework.pdf>