

TURNING VISION INTO REALITY

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Many pastors and ministers have had a vision for their Church in the past but the vision has turned to a far distant dream. True, the Bible promises visions and dreams and both can turn to reality but how does one do it? That is the real question. There is a lot of hard work between receiving a vision and seeing it in reality. Many give up long before that goal is realised. The promise in the last days is:

“And it shall come to pass afterward That I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your old men shall dream dreams, Your young men shall see visions . And also on my menservants and on my maidservants I will pour out my Spirit in those days.” Joel 2:28-29

The reason that in these last days visions are common is that the Holy Spirit is moving in the earth like never before and in each church grouping a vision given by that same Spirit should be common.

The Bible is a book of visions and dreams. The writers of the Books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Daniel and Zechariah were visionaries who heard from God. Parts of Malachi and the main characters of the Old Testament including Abraham and Moses were moved upon by visions. In the New Testament Luke talks of visions of angels at the birth of Christ. Joseph had a vision of an angel warning him to take the child Jesus into Egypt. Paul and Peter had visions. The Apostle John had a complete vision of heaven and the last days as he wrote his Book of Revelations.

Defining a Dream or vision

There is a difference between a vision and a dream but both can result in change and development of either the individual life or the life of the Church.

Definition of a dream:

“A dream refers to the sensations or images passing through one's mind during sleep, usually during the night. A vision is received generally while not fully asleep while a dream is while one is sleeping.”

Definition of a vision

Dictionary has this definition:

“The ability to see a vivid mental image produced by the imagination. A hallucination caused by divine inspiration, a person or thing of extraordinary beauty.”

A spiritual definition

My definitions is

“Some aim, objective or desire given by revelation of the Holy Spirit that drives an individual to fulfil the purposes of the kingdom of God. It cannot at first be seen but the one

who has it is so convinced of its reality that it drives him or her forward to its goal until the vision becomes reality.”

Visions in the Old Testament

How God speaks to the man of God

‘Then He said, "Hear now My words: If there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, make Myself known to him in a vision; I speak to him in a dream. Numbers 12:6

Notice that both vision and dreams can be used by God to communicate to the man or woman of God. From this text God reveals himself in the vision and speaks through dreams. Spoke to Israel in the vision of the night’ (See Gen 46:2 & 1 Sam 3:1). There is a sermon there on just that concept.

Death of Hezekiah reveals Isaiah as a visionary.”

2 Chronicles 32:32 clearly shows that the Book of Isaiah is a Book of Vision. Daniel’s writings also contain many visions and dream about the future.

Vision in the New Testament

At the Day of Pentecost Peter repeats the prophecy of Joel regarding the coming of the Holy Spirit and young men having visions and old men dreams (Joel 2:28-30. See Acts 2:17-20). He fails to fully explain what is happening because the Old Testament has no mention of tongues as was demonstrated on the Day of Pentecost or fire falling upon each head but obviously it was the nearest text he could recall. This may be an important clue to vision and dreams in the twenty-first century. A vision truly given by God does not go against anything in scripture but it may not be found in the Bible. Evangelicals are great at making texts fit round everything they do. I have seen the gross misuse of scripture in this way.

Peter experienced at least two visions during his ministry. Peter was led to the House of Cornelius by a vision while he was in a trance Acts 10:17. He also had a vision of an angel releasing him from prison Acts 12

Paul had an extraordinary ministry which included visions and dreams. A vision knocked him to the ground while on a journey into Damascus (Acts 9:4-6). Right at the beginning of Paul’s conversion God gave Ananias a vision bringing him direct to minister to the then blind Saul who was to become Paul the Apostle (Acts 9:10). Paul had a vision of the Lord encouraging him in the preaching of the Gospel. Acts 18:9-10

The Lord appeared as a vision to Paul Acts 18:9-11 .On another occasion he had a vision one night of a man from Macedonia calling for help (Acts 16:10). He also had visions of an angel in Acts 27:23. Apart from Stephen seeing the Lord in heaven as he was being stoned, Paul had a vision of heaven which was so overwhelming that he could not describe it in any detail (2 Cor 12:2-4). He was not afraid to tell people of influence about his vision (Acts 26:19). Finally, Paul received most of his doctrine by direct revelation. See as an example 1 Cor 11:23.

Revelation of the Apostle John

John had a revelation and vision that was so detailed that he wrote twenty two chapters about it in the Book of the Revelation.

Jesus had a vision that drove him to the cross

The vision of Jesus was,

“To fulfil the will of the Father which was to establish the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.”

The Disciples prayer indicated the Vision of Jesus.

“Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed by Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

That very vision is being fulfilled today as a person comes to faith in Christ. The vision that drove Jesus with relentless force and energy to the Cross was evident when he was twelve years old Luke 2:49. The purpose of his coming and his burning desire and vision was to usher in the kingdom of God to men and women exercising faith in Him.

Faults with those receiving a vision.

The one who receives a vision always believes that he or she has to carryout the workings of that vision to its ultimate. That may sometimes be right for the personal life but for a Church or other organisation it may be completely wrong.

Let us consider the life of Joseph. I do feel sorry for Pharaoh because no preacher ever gives him more than a few words of recognition. However, without Pharaoh's vision there would have been no mention of Joseph in the Bible. Pharaoh had the vision given by God and Joseph had the interpretation. Likewise today, a leader may have a vision given to them but may need another to interpret and even carry out some of the vision. This is where pride, selfishness and jealousy can come into the picture and spoil what God wanted to do. God may well want a church to grow from 200 to 6,000 but the capabilities of the pastor may only be to pastor 500. What does he do? Recognise that fact and bring others beside him to promote the vision or take the view that because God gave him the vision he intends for him to carryout its plan to fruition alone? Another problem is to share the vision too quickly with others. If only leaders would wait on God to receive instruction on how and when to proceed they would save themselves a lot of misunderstanding and possible antagonism from some in the congregation. God never seems to be in a rush but we are. There is an excitement in receiving something from God that puts a person into overdrive. The result can be utter disaster. I knew of a Church who had about 50 attending the Church when God gave a vision to the pastor of 800 people. Remembering it was in a country area with few people living there. Nevertheless the Church membership was persuaded by the pastor to purchase a large plot of land and started building. The Church shrank to thirty people and still they continued. The vision was never fulfilled and those remaining are trying to pay off an enormous debt. It destroyed the local Christian testimony. Seeking God for more guidance would have saved a lot of pain and anxious thought.

When we received a clear vision through our senior pastor that our white Caucasian church that had precisely two mixed colour couples in it was to become a multi-cultural church in a 98% white Caucasian town we wondered what we should do. We prayed as elders and pastors to support the senior pastor and the answer was nothing. It is harder to do nothing when God has given a vision than to do something. Within a few weeks people started attending from other nations. Seven years later we have fifty-one nations represented. We show the vision to the people in the following way. When a person or family have been with us for three months we have their nation's flag made and it is processed to the platform, the family prayed for and their nation and then their flag flies with the others at the back of the church. People entering the Church have to walk beneath the flags to get a seat and is a constant reminder of what God said all those years ago. When those new people realise that God intended them to come to us it is for some a mind exploding situation. In fact we did do something about fulfilling the vision but did not realise at the time. We had had feedback from visitors that we were not very welcoming to strangers. We did not believe it at first because we showed such love to each other. We found people who really had a gifting for welcoming people and made them Welcome Stewards. Now every new comer gets about six handshakes and welcome in the foyer before being shown to their seat by a steward already designated as an inside church steward. We began to realise that for a black person particularly to come to what was then a white church was very intimidating. To be welcomed so warmly by so many people brought tears to some. They had never felt welcomed in a white church before. What an indictment on the Christian Church! The handshake we began to realise was a very important function as many people visiting for the first time may be lonely, far from their own home or in need of close contact of some kind. The stewards need to be seen as a representative of Christ in their manner and demeanour. We now have people from the Indian continent, Europe, Asian, African, West Indian, North & South America and even as far away as Australasia. Our pastoral team reflect many of those nations.

When it is the right time the vision should be shared with men and women of utmost integrity and holiness in the personal life. How do they react to such a vision? Do they understand the implications? Does even the leader know? There is such flippant thought in many Christian circles to patient examination of the detail of what God is saying. Remember, God created the world in incredible detail.

Vision in the local Church today.

Without vision the local Church has little meaning. Once obtained and vision shared there should be a considerable effort to make sure everyone understands the actual vision and its implications for the Church and themselves. Depending upon the vision it should be written in the building and on all publications. Everyone should subscribe and live the vision for it to have maximum impact. It is nothing for large companies to have clear and precise vision and for that vision to be turned into a Mission Statement. They are proud to spell it out in their annual report and literature. This statement tells customers as well as staff how they are going to achieve their vision. The front cover of a leading nursing journal, the *Nursing Times* recently had across its front page, 'Turning vision into Reality.' It seems that commerce have stolen from the Church the ability to have and carryout a vision.

Vision in the personal life.

The vision for my life started when I was eighteen years old. Having finished my first shift as a ward orderly at a hospital I caught myself in a mirror. At that moment I felt God gave me a vision of running a large hospital. He gave me a specific age of 40. I was poorly educated at the time having left school at fourteen and went to work in a large factory and could see no way of fulfilling that vision. I spoke to nobody about it but rather hid it in my heart. I found that I was able to apply for nurse training. Once qualified, I received promotion and held various nursing positions in the country. I always had the ultimate vision of a large hospital in mind. No man at this time was in charge of a general hospital, it was a woman's prerogative. I became a district nurse then took charge of a new but small hospital. Joined the Royal College of Nursing full time to learn negotiating skills then took on a principal's position in a management training residential college. That position was given to me by God speaking direct to the person charged with making the appointment who was not a Christian and had only met me for a few seconds some years previously. I had no qualifications for the position whatsoever. Yet in two years the college was radically changed by the courses offered and the money made allowed the interior of the College to be totally renovated. All my colleagues suggesting that the last two positions would get me nowhere. Eventually at the age of 37 I was appointed to head up nine hospitals in the Wirral, Cheshire. Even I thought this was the ultimate vision fulfilled but something within me started to question that thought. At the age of 39 years an eleven months I was appointed chief nursing officer of the largest group of hospitals in the country totalling seventeen hospitals. This was God's ultimate goal for me. From that position I was able influence the English nursing scene, sit on national committees and chair an important working party that radically changed the education and training of district nurses and indirectly the training and education of all nurses in the United Kingdom.

With a clear vision a man or woman must also have high levels of motivation.

A vision has to motivate the person to achieve something vital. This does not mean that everyone will support you in that vision. Some may be violently opposed while others say or do nothing. You know the silent opposition! They are the worse because you never know until it is too late which side they are on.

I am told that virtually every President of the USA had a burning desire to be the president at an early age. I had the pleasure of sharing about six hours with twelve other people with the then British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson in July 1974 in the Cabinet Room of Number Ten Downing Street. After the formal business was completed and while waiting for a joint press statement to be issued, I spoke to him. He told me the well known story of him asking his dad to take a photo on the steps of number 10 Downing Street when he was nine years of age. When his Dad asked why Harold replied that one day he would live there. His father laughed and said that folk like them, working class, never achieved that ambition. From that day Harold Wilson was determined to become prime minister. A vision had been born within his breast and nothing would take that away. I understand that he was the only prime minister of the twentieth century to leave at his own accord. You see, it does not matter if your own family laugh at you as long as you keep the vision burning deep in your soul. Vision has to have behind it a motivation that drives everything else towards the ultimate goal.

My own Church's experience of vision

I was a pastoral elder of a church that had an excellent senior pastor and saw through his vision a church grow from about 150 to 720 in about five years. We built a new church to

accommodate the growth then within three years extended the size of the building by a third then stopped when the church became full. The Holy Spirit started doing most unusual things in the services. Two of us leaders seem to receive a particular anointing for praying for people and they would fall down. This upset the senior minister and he forbade us to touch people. Upset but willing to obey, the next Sunday folk came out for prayer and the other seven leaders laid hands on the folk while we two stood helpless. Then we had an idea. We would go up to an individual and just speak the word. This we did and they all fell down. So we were banned from speaking to them and I developed a critical spirit and through it resigned. Having a critical spirit is wrong and I had to seek forgiveness from the leadership. The church went into decline and now struggles to keep a congregation. God was good and eventually the senior minister retired to another town and helped another church develop. I visited it several years later and the things happening there were exactly what had happened in our church some years previously. Through tears we restored our fellowship together. I learned that when God starts to do extraordinary things then we must seek him about it and not allow preconceived ideas to block what God might be doing. This senior pastor was protecting his flock in the best way he knew how at the time. At the same time was preventing a surge of the Holy Spirit to take them to a new dimension in God and I did not help him.

Who has vision in the Church?

Most churches I have visited have no vision for the future at all. Rather they are on a maintenance programme. Very busy in many things but no clear objectives laid out. A church may have a good Sunday service plan, a school of evangelism, good Bible school, feeding the poor programme, excellent youth programme and many other very good ideas but how do they relate to each other? Is it more that we have talent and every leader is making his or her own individual empire and unrelated to the other parts of the church? The question to ask is, Is this God's plan for this Church and this community? How do the different parts relate to the vision or are they irrelevant to what God has said?

How do we get vision from God?

I believe God is more willing to give vision to the lead person in every church than they are to receive it. You can call him or her whatever name you wish but I think the Scripture is clear that the leader is the key to Church vision. A leader (pastor) must be accountable to a group of other leaders otherwise there is a great danger in a one man ministry leading to extremes of doctrine or behaviour. I have studied the seven congregations of Revelation and visited their sites twice. This is what John writes about the seven Churches in Turkey.

“The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches.” To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, “These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands. Rev 1:20, 2:1.

The “stars” are the messengers within the seven churches. A messenger, one who is sent in order to announce, teach, perform, or explore anything. Notice that each of the seven letters is addressed to The Angel not angels in the plural. He holds them in his right hand.

There is also the word 'angel' is an uncommon one when related to a church. Haggai `1:13 does give some understanding to this verse. "Then Haggai, the LORD's *messenger*, spoke the LORD's message to the people, saying, "I am with you, says the LORD." The Hebrew word for messenger is angel meaning 'despatch as a deputy, a messenger specifically of God, i.e. and angel (also a prophet, priest or teacher).

If this is the true interpretation then one must be careful how we treat the one who is held in the Lord's hand and receives instruction or vision from the Lord. He or she may not be particularly explicit in the way they interpret vision but the people are there to help not criticise. Be careful therefore how you treat your local pastor as they are held in God's right hand.

Your leader's vision for your church must match up to Scripture and the leading of the Holy Spirit. No vision truly given by God contradicts Scripture and elders must search the scriptures to satisfy themselves that the vision is from God. Managing the vision is not a dictatorship but one of checks and balances from the leadership. Notice the Lord did not say he had a church committee in his hands, or even a body of elders. He held the one person overall responsible for the church. All organisations need an identifiable leader. God will give vision to a man or woman but it needs courage to declare it.

Be careful not to touch the Lord's anointed.

I do not want this part of the paper to be used by crafty men to avoid criticism but rather for members to understand the high calling there is in ministry. Story of Saul and David is a powerful reminder of how we should treat the Lord's anointed. For years I could not understand how David could say that this demon oppressed king, Saul, could be the Lord's anointed when his mind was set on killing God's chosen man to replace him as king. Remember the incident in the cave of Abdullum?

Now it happened afterward that David's heart troubled him because he had cut Saul's robe. And he said to his men, "The LORD forbid that I should do this thing to my master, the LORD's anointed, to stretch out my hand against him, seeing he is the anointed of the LORD. 1 SAM 24:5-6

Then I understood that Saul was anointed to be king of the people and rule over them as one anointing but he also held office as king and he was to keep that until God removed him. His first anointing had been taken from him and given to David but the office had not been transferred that is why David rightly could say that he had touched the Lord's anointed.

A man in a study group I was running attempting to form a satellite church, some years ago asked for immediate advice about a problem he had. A new woman minister had come to the church and had tried to stop him from praying for the sick saying it was not for today. He had responded angrily to her and refused. He added that she was not even 'born again.' What was my advice? I at first declined as it was personal to him but not encouraging. However, he and his wife insisted that I gave them advice now. I repeated it was personal to them and not what they were expecting. After again insisting I told them what God had given me. The Lord that he was a stench in his nostrils and if he did not repent and ask the minister for forgiveness then God would judge him severely for opposing the Lord's anointed. He had then two options sit under the ministry of this minister or graciously leave and try his ministry elsewhere. 'How could she be the Lord's anointed when she did not believe like he did?' I pointed out this text to them both. They rejected this advice and continued to oppose the minister. I met him about five years later in the last stages of cancer still unrepentant and he died that way as far as I know.

Do we reject vision for our church because of the person who brings it to us? Here was a man who perhaps had more vision than anyone else in the Old Testament yet as far as I can see no one ever listened to him! How would you like a ministry like that?

“Go now, write it on a tablet for them, inscribe it on a scroll, that for the days to come it may be an everlasting witness. These are rebellious people, deceitful children, children unwilling to listen to the LORD's instruction... They say to the seers, "See no more visions!" and to the prophets, "Give us no more visions of what is right! Tell us pleasant things, prophesy illusions. Leave this way, get off this path, and stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel!” Isa 30:8-11

Before we reject the vision given to us undertake this exercise.

Have I had a living encounter with the Christ of the Cross?
Do I die to the world daily or is the world integral part of it?
Do I bear the marks of the dying of the Lord Jesus Christ?
Do I think differently to those in the world?
Do I have compassion for the unlovely?
Do I love the unlovable?

This is the way we test who we are in God. This way of life will influence us on the way we receive vision or our church.

Finally, do a Church check list

- a. Does this church wish to grow in spirituality, seeing God move in its midst, bringing the kingdom of heaven to earth in this town by way of the cross?
- b. Where are you now in God and do you need to change so that the purposes of God made be achieved among you?
- c. We need to live daily in forgiveness among husband and wife, parents and children, among church members and their pastor and leaders, with our work colleagues and our neighbours. Are we doing that?
- d. Are we a praying church and a church who hearing from God works out the vision that he has given?
- e. How do we affect our community? Do they even know we exist? Do the lonely, depressed, weary, folk find their way to us?
- f. Do we feed the hungry, nurse those who are sick, visit the elderly, help the poor. Give hope to no hopers?
- g. He has promised to build his church. Will leaders have the grace to stop trying to build it and let Him get on with the job with your help?
- h. Do we need to repent that is changing our minds and attitudes today?

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- i. Are we as individuals preventing the power and grace of God reaching out into this community by our attitudes?
- j. Do we need to come to God and ask him to re-assess our walk with him and adjust our life-style more in accordance to scripture?

Finally, do not let vision cloud the reason for our preaching. It is not to preach vision but Christ and him crucified. That is the real vision. We need to remind our people that Christ is coming again and that only those who are saved by grace through the blood of Christ will gain heaven>

. The vision of the Church should enhance the Kingdom of God and fulfil the vision of Christ 'Thy kingdom come on earth has it is in heaven.'