Visionary Leadership in the Church

"VISION" is the catchword in church circles. It's a good word. One that Webster defines as "unusual discernment or foresight." Some people have it, some don't—it seems. What makes the difference? When we see mega-churches with engaging, super-gifted pastors-communicators, who each have their own pastors conference to share their strategies and insights, hoping that attentive listeners will replicate their success in many satellite areas—we can measure ourselves up short, those of us who lead smaller congregations. But, if Jesus commended the offering of a poor woman for giving her two coins as being worth more than those that have much to give (with great audiences in tow), then God's idea of a great visionary is not measured in the size of the church buildings or the number of attendees. A great vision is not something that comes from the ingenuity of a charismatic preacher-leader but comes from God.

They were your basic plodders—that team of men who would later revolutionize the world as appointed witnesses of Christ (Acts 1:8). The disciples of Jesus were not inherently men of vision. They came from the humdrum of life, caught up in daily, dull routines of life like everyone else—without much glimmer of hope beyond their practical existence. Men and women of vision don't jump out like hot pop-tarts on hurried mornings. Jesus planted the first flicker of light in his novice followers, saying, "*Blessed are your eyes, because they see*" (Matt 13:16 NASB). And then He worked pretty hard to fan their flicker into flames!

How can we become a people of vision? This question challenges the church today.

The answer is quite simple: incubation of godly character breeds godly vision. A brief look at the Apostle Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20) reveals some of these basic character requirements. Paul had spent three years stoking the young faith that had flared in their hearts (Acts 20:31). Now, he was giving the fire one last aeration. He would never see them again—and he left no strategic and detailed plan for them to build the future of their church. Instead, the apostle's discourse conveyed the qualities necessary to apprehend a vision from God for themselves.

Every generation, every new guard, must possess its own vision from God. But the most incredible heritage to be passed from one generation to the next is the Christ-like character that engenders sacrificial vision for the kingdom.

Godliness differentiates between a vision of God and a vision of man. In this magnificent discourse, we see the character necessary for gaining a vision from God.

Godly Vision Requires Humility

"… *serving the Lord with all humility* …" (Acts 20:19). Humility proves to be one of most elusive of all Christian characters. The very effort of ascending to this trait seems to betray arrogance. Yet, Scripture is saturated with teaching on this subject! (See, for example, Rom. 12:3, Phil. 2:1-11). For a vision to be godly, we must forgo the need to draw attention to ourselves. "*For it is not he who commends himself that is approved, but he whom the Lord commends*" (2 Cor. 10:18). If it is God's vision, He will commend us. We are free to direct all credit and attention to Him.

Some helpful measuring sticks are: 1) How frequently do I use the personal pronoun when discussing "my" vision? 2) How do I react when people disagree with or oppose "my" vision? 3) Do I complain about others who don't share the vision? A godly vision is not self-affirming—nor is it about hype:

> *"For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as men. We are fools for Christ … up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world". (II Cor 4:9-13)*

So, how do we get humility? Indeed, the harder we try by human means, the worse it gets! Only God can fashion it in our lives, and we must welcome the tools He uses: trials, oppositions, adversaries, and humiliating circumstances. These things either bring out the pride in us ("Why me?") or develop humility ("Lord, thank you for cutting me down to size.")

Godly Vision Requires Passion

"… with tears …" (Acts 20:19). Paul modeled the passion of Jesus. Not a sterile, logical choice, Paul's passion catalyzed his vision. According to Webster, passion is "an intense, driving feeling." There is no vision without passion.

In our busy lives, much spiritual sight seems to be lost for lack of time. Nowhere does Scripture say, "If you have time, then help with the vision." The question is not one of time but of priority. We always make time for that which grips us deeply. What our passion is becomes our priority. What our priority is, we give our time to.

The Lord himself was motivated by his passion for humankind. "*For God so loved the world …*" (John 3:16). The Creator longed for his image-bearing creation to be reconciled to Himself. The Apostle Paul's heart was on his shirt sleeve when he said, "*I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh*." (Rom. 9:2-3). John Knox reportedly proclaimed, "Lord, give me Scotland, or I die."

How can we develop this kind of passion? I find myself praying, "O Lord, break the stranglehold of fleshly passions and self-centered desires. Break my heart with the things that break your heart."

Godly Vision Requires Perseverance

"*… with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews … the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me.*" (Acts 20:19, 23). This requires "staying power," the ability to keep going in the face of roadblocks. Vision doesn't come easy, for it is rooted in that which is eternal, not temporal.

There is a false notion that when you discover a vision from God, things will just fall into place. Yet, Jesus implied that the gates of Hell will make valiant attempts at breaking down the kingdom of God (Matt 16:8). This means war! The apostle Paul understood this when he wrote: "*… for a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many adversaries*" (1 Cor. 16:9). Visionary plans will sometimes be frustrated; discouragement knocks continually at the door. Many things will work against us and the vision God gives. One missionary who worked among unreached people was asked why he continued on when so few people responded to the Gospel. His answer was simply, "God sent me here, and He has not directed me otherwise." God has called us to be faithful. He is responsible for the results.

> *"Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Cor. 4:16-18).*

Godly Vision Requires Conviction

"... I did not shrink from declaring ..." (Acts 20:20). People of conviction are not hesitant people. They are ready at the drop of the puck to work toward for the kingdom's sake. They *really* do believe, and it is normative for their entire life. They are ready in season and out—not careless, but sensing the urgency.

I know a believer who has a black belt in karate. One Sunday, a friend playfully came up behind and poked him on the sides of his waist. Surprised, the black-belt believer, like lightning, brought his elbows in tight, trapping the prankster's hands while reflexively snapping his head back in a reverse "headbutt." Our spiritual reflexes reveal our convictions. There is an urgency in the kingdom of God, and vision is not wasted on the double-minded or the spiritual sluggards.

Godly Vision Requires Relevancy and Adaptability

"... *publicly and from house to house.*" (Acts 20:20). Paul was not hung up on the form of his ministry—he was willing to sacrifice personal preferences. Is there not some application for us from the apostle's example: "*I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some*" (I Cor. 9:22). Sometimes, vision is hindered by our "comfort zone" or "used-to zones." We have all heard someone say, "That is not what we are used to doing here." To be sure, some forms are more comfortable to us than others. But that is not the issue. Vision can die for lack of innovation when a person is unwilling to let go of preferences. We should be ready to use whatever means are most effective (assuming these means do not violate the clear teaching of Scripture).

In wanting to effectively reach young adults, one church started a "Saturday Night Live" outreach in the church basement, complete with drama, up-beat music, and a gospel presentation. Others have effectively used a home bible study. One set up an outdoor "theater" on Sunday nights to show gospel films, complete with popcorn. For a time, they attracted large crowds from their rural community. A small church plant was temporarily displaced from their rental facility, so they held a month of Sundays at a local bar. The owners were happy to take their rent money on their slowest day of the week. It attracted a good number of college students from the local college. They advertised on campus, "Church in a bar, come and check it out."

Some methods are time-tested and very effective; others are innovative and can be equally effective. Some use summer camps to attract children to the Gospel; others use sports clinics. Like Paul, who adapted his methods to gain a hearing, we must be flexible, too. Whether donning a coat and tie to meet a business person for lunch or putting on an old pair of jeans to talk to a street kid, we must adapt to the moment's needs.

Godly Vision Requires the Message of Repentance and Faith

"... *solemnly testifying ... of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.*" (Acts 20:21). The primary message of any godly vision must include the Good News of restoration to God. This was front and center in Paul's ministry, for it is the whole point of the kingdom program. But this means repentance and faith must be the heart of our daily walk with God. We constantly fail as Christians, and we must turn to God relentlessly. To do otherwise earns us the title "hypocrite."

The late, infamous communist leader of China, Mao Tse-Tung, spoke of "continual revolution" as the key to his political philosophy. As members of God's kingdom, we must continually revolt against the natural

bent of our hearts. This is revitalizing in the Christian life: daily confessing our sins to the Vision-Giver, offering our bodies as living sacrifices (Rom, 12:1), and reckoning ourselves to be dead to sin (Rom. 6:11).

Why do we need this continuous revolution in our lives? Because our presentation of the message can stagnate and become old. Our testimonies easily degenerate into historical background rather than a living, dynamic story that attracts people to the Savior.

These reflections are certainly not the definitive list of required characters for a person of vision. But, equally certainly, the man or woman who wants to be gripped by a vision from God must cultivate these Christ-like characteristics. The Apostle Paul left his stamp of character with the Ephesian elders. If they aspire to do the same, God will provide them with the vision for His particular work among them. We need men and women, young adults and young people, who are becoming people of godly character. It is to these kinds of people that God gives a vision. And it just might come through the “least” of the believers in our midst.

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