

Vision Setting and the Will of God

Jeremy Peckham FRSA

In their book “Spiritual Leadership”¹, Henry and Richard Blackaby state that “The role of spiritual leaders is not to dream up dreams for God but to be the vanguard for their people in understanding God's revelation. The Christian leader is far better described as a servant of God.”

Is vision setting unbiblical?

Were this book aimed at church pastors one might not feel that there is much to quibble with. I well recall an elder I once knew saying to me “I don't get where this idea of having a vision for the church comes from, that just something for business”. The Blackaby's book however is aimed at all leaders who are Christians, whether leading a church or a business. Does that mean that Christians shouldn't have a vision or dream dreams?

I believe that there has arisen a degree of confusion around the idea of vision setting amongst christians due to the burgeoning of the idea in the late 20th century in the business world. Many took on board the idea that all organisations ought to have a vision and a mission statement, even the church. When we simply import the thinking about vision setting and the process of vision setting from the world in an uncritical manner, then one can perhaps understand the Blackabys point when they seek to realign the thinking of christian leaders.

Does vision setting have a place in Christian leadership and how does it fit with God's will and revelation? The answer to these question lies in having a clear understanding the role of dreams and visions in the bible and in the theology of the will of God. This will lead us to an examination of the process behind vision setting.

Determining God's will

One of the influential books early on in my Christian life was a book called “Decision making and the will of God”.² It helped me enormously as a young Christian in figuring out whether or not God had a specific and unique plan or blueprint for my life and if I needed to be constantly seeking to discover what that was.

One view suggests that God has an individual will for each persons life and our goal is to discover what that is in order that we may be at the centre of His will. The alternative view is that God has already revealed His will through the scriptures and that we are free to choose what we do as long as it aligns with God's revealed will. We might call this walking the way of heavenly wisdom.

Of biblical dreams and visions!

When we consider the role of dreams and visions in the bible we discover that they were used by God to communicate his will to his people or to individuals. Dreams were essentially God communicating when the individual was asleep³ whereas visions occurred when the person was awake and often “in the spirit”⁴. The story of Joseph's dream and it's eventual fulfilment many years later in Egypt is perhaps one of the best know dreams of the bible.

¹ Spiritual Leadership - moving people onto God's agenda, Henry and Richard Blackaby B&H Books 2001

² Decision Making and the Will of God, Gary Friesen, Multnomah Press, 1980.

³ Examples include Abimelech, Genesis 20:1-7, Pharaoh, Genesis 41, The Midianite and Amalekite armies, Judges 7:12-15, Solomon, 1Kings 3:5.

⁴ Examples of visions include Samuel, 1 Samuel 3, Zacharias Luke 1:5-23, Peter, Acts10:9-15.

⁵ Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. ⁶ He said to them, “Hear this dream that I have dreamed: ⁷ Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, ^kmy sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf.” ⁸ His brothers said to him, “Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?” So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words. Genesis 37:5-8

The apostle Paul had a number of visions during his ministry, one sending him to preach in Macedonia. Perhaps the most famous vision is that of John when he was “in the Spirit” on the island of Patmos, recorded for us in the book of Revelation.

So does God communicate with his people through dreams and visions today? The often misquoted verse from Proverbs is of no help to us in justifying the idea that vision setting is a good thing.

“Where there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint, but blessed is he who keeps the law.” Proverbs 29:18

The context here is clearly that the prophets need to communicate God’s truth and laws for without being reminded of them people will go astray.

Whilst it is true that many muslims have been known to come to faith through a dream and we would not want to contain God, it is perhaps fair to say that since we now have the scriptures, God’s word and revelation, He does not normally communicate with us through dreams and visions but rather through his word.

God’s self disclosure

This brings us back full circle to the issue of God’s will and how we discern it not only for our lives as individuals but also as leaders. If through God’s self disclosure we can now know God’s will then we can say that as leaders we are those who take people in the direction of His revealed will. We are to be participants, in many different areas and spheres, in what God is already doing in the world, so in that sense we are participants in His vision. In that sense His will is now revealed and is not something mystical that has to be discovered by each individual. Similarly a vision is also not some mystical view of the future that is handed down from God to visionaries!

In his book *The Mission of God*, Chris Wright states that “God has a church for His mission, not a mission for His church”.⁵ Whilst at first this might sound like an issue of semantics it is far from it because it is a reflection of the fact that the scriptures have already shown us what God desires, what His programme is. It helps us to realise that we need to understand this revealed mission and to align ourselves with it rather than simply asking God to bless what we want to do.

A vision is a desired future outcome

When we think about vision setting then, we need to think in terms of what God’s agenda for the world is and how we can fit into that. Putting it another way it is discovering God’s specific calling for our lives, again not something mystical but determined through us and others discovering our gifts, Godly passions and opportunities. For some it is to be leaders and for some leaders that might be to be visionary leaders. Before elaborating further it will be helpful to state what a vision is. There are many ways that we could describe a vision or vision statement but put simply it is “a desired future outcome”, often seeing how things might be compared to what they are now. What then is God’s desired outcome for the future? Clearly and ultimately this is His kingdom coming but when we read the bible we also find that in the meantime God also wants His people to do righteousness and justice.

⁵ *The Mission of God*, Christopher Wright, IVP, 2006.

“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Micah 6:8

When we as Christian leaders think about vision setting, it should be a specific envisioning of the future that fits within God’s revealed will, His desired outcomes. There is nothing mystical nor unbiblical about a Christian having a vision or imagining a desired outcome for the future, provided that it fits into what God has already disclosed that He is doing and that He desires. This requires a change in our thinking and an alignment with His revealed will.

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”
Romans 12:2

Following this scripture, take for example a possible vision for a pastor. A desired outcome for God’s people is that they should conform less and less to this world and more and more to His likeness. The final outcome that we all hope for of course is that day when we shall be completely changed. Non the less a pastor may feel that a God given vision for his ministry might be to work towards this transformation through preaching and teaching, discipling one on one or in small groups. He might examine whether this change in behaviour is being achieved, how that might be determined and if it isn’t, why not. Such an examination might lead to doing things differently and will certainly put him on his knees in prayer in the realisation that his work can only be accomplished by God and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Choosing the right outcomes

It is clear that one of the things God want’s is for us to show kindness and compassion, a vision might be to alleviate the suffering of refugees, slum dwellers or to rescue children from sex slavery. These are all specific visions of a future outcome, refugees living without fear, slum dwellers living in sanitary and healthy condition and girls allowed to enjoy a normal childhood without abuse. These and many, many more are all examples of the future outcomes that we know God desires for His world because He has already revealed that to us in His word.

For many in Christian leadership their vision may be to evangelise a specific people group, to envision a future outcome of an unreached tribe coming to Christ or university students come to saving faith. But where does this leave those leading in business, politics or another type of secular organisation? Is it possible to conceive a vision that aligns with God’s desired future outcomes? In answering this question we need to widen our thinking about what future outcomes God desires for His people and His world.

Two of the key concepts found hundreds of times in the Old Testament are “righteousness and justice”, technically a hendiadys - a single or complex idea expressed in two words, rather like the concepts of “law and order” or “health and safety” that we have in the English language.

The various Hebrew words used for righteousness and justice in express much more than a state of affairs but rather a concept that derives it’s meaning from the relationship in which it finds itself whether spouse, worker, friend, judge or neighbour. The Hebrew root for the word justice in it’s widest sense means “to put things right” so there is an activity associated with doing righteousness and justice rather than merely a a desired state of affairs. This means that we can properly have a vision for a community and a world where we seek to put things right and where righteousness and justice might eventually flourish.⁶ These ideas translated into visions for the future and much practical action in the late 18th and early 19th century in the U.K. Various wealthy and influential Christians including Wilberforce and the Clapham sect were able to campaign for changes to the law regarding a whole variety of what they saw as injustices from children sweeping chimneys to

⁶ For an extended discussion on this point see Old Testament Ethics for the People of God, Christopher Wright, IVP, 2004 Ch 8 Justice and Righteousness

better conditions for factory workers. Wilberforce had a vision of slavery being abolished, something that only happened at the end of his lifetime after forty years of campaigning. In the mid 18th Century many people drunk cheap gin because it was deemed safer than the polluted water that was commonplace over much of Europe. Arthur Guinness who came under the influence of John Wesley, was much concerned about this drunkenness and felt God calling him to “Make a drink that men will drink that will be good for them.”. He developed a stout beer and founded the Irish Brewery no doubt envisioning a better world where people were no longer permanently drunk on cheap gin but could drink his beer, a safer and healthier alternative! The alcohol levels were lower than gin and whisky and the brew contained so much iron that people soon felt full.

Broadening further the meta narrative of God’s desired outcomes for the future, we can go back to the creation ordinances and see that God commanded men to be stewards of His creation thus establishing that He desired a future where the resources that He gave us might be managed well and used for our benefit . Scripture tell us that finally there will be a new heaven and new earth, the old will pass away, but this doesn’t mean that we can’t legitimately vision what we can do with these resources for the betterment of people and the created world. Neither does it negate the mandate to seek transformation or to “fix things” so that we work together with God in moving our societies in directions that will show God for who He is by the witness and actions of His people.

This is the broader context in which Christian leaders in any sphere whether in overtly Christian mission or so called secular employment can dream dreams and vision the future, in line with the very desires of God made know through His word. At the same time we will always remember that ultimately humanity needs a Saviour.

Most Christians are called to serve in secular organisations and some in leadership. The bible gives us many examples of leaders who served pagan masters yet with integrity and purpose and it is clear that God’s purpose for many of us who are leaders is to be salt and light in secular places and to envision a world that Glorifies Him. So whether we are on the mission field, making hi-tech gadgets, serving constituents as a member of parliament or acting as a school head, we need to think through how our vision setting fits in to God’s wider desired outcomes for His world. That leads us to consider the process of vision setting and where it might diverge from a secular approach and values.

Following the right process

The reason that some might see vision setting as a worldly activity or one that should remain in the business world lies not just in a misunderstanding of what vision setting is about but also in a false conception of the process.

Once we accept that God is on a mission and that he has desired outcomes for the future we can better understand how we as leaders in all spheres of life fit into that vision. We also learn that we can make choices within God’s revealed will and that in some areas there are no right and wrong choices. This leaves us free to weigh up options seeking heavenly wisdom and to make decisions with courage and conviction knowing that we are not required to hit the bulls eye in determining God’s unique will for us or our organisation.

As we have already seen, God is concerned not only about bringing His kingdom but also about displaying His glory, having His people bear witness to Christ and to be a preservative as well as light in a corrupt world. When we grasp these realities we begin to see that it is our sovereign Lord who will accomplish that which He purposes. Do we doubt that His Kingdom will come? Then why do we doubt that He will bring about through his servant leaders and followers a better, but not perfect, world where righteousness and justice prevail. We cannot predict the near term outcomes of that envisioned future, nor do we always know how God will bring it about through his people but we can be faithful to His calling and have conviction and passion about the vision.

The process of vision setting for a Christian leader is one of imagining future outcomes that fit into God’s revealed will for His people rather than imagining a future that centres on financial gain, our

own achievements, desires and success. This leads us to consider our motives when visioning the future and to examine our hearts to see if they are aligned with God's revealed will.

A patient endeavour

For leaders in overtly Christian organisations or NGOs these questions might seem strange as much of our focus is on helping the disadvantaged and in reaching people for Christ. For a business person thinking about innovation, are we thinking about how the product or service might improve people lives, provide jobs and a fair and just place to work or are we just passionate about the invention and feeding people's desire for more?

Whatever the sphere of our calling as leaders, we must still examine our hearts and motives and remember that it is God who is at work through us not we ourselves.

“Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”— yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” James 4:13-15

One of the hardest things to do as a Christian leader when feeling passionately that we are doing “God's work”, is to learn patience and to wait on Him sometimes for the “how” this vision will be accomplished, even in overtly Christian ministry!

A true vision is something that is on the horizon and differs from goals that can be achieved in a short time. Some confuse goals with a vision but they are in fact steps along the way to that vision. When we think about God's desired future outcomes such as righteousness and justice, they are mostly long term, they are outcomes that are sometimes slow to realisation and ones that we will never fully realise this side of heaven because of sin and the broken nature of our world. Yet we can still set goals towards achieving the vision that help us focus on what to do next. Sometimes these goals have to be modified in the light of experience and reflection as God teaches us His way even if the vision remains.

I lead a work in Kenya, Africa Rural Trainers (ART), that teaches the bible to rural pastors over three years in their communities. These are poor people with often only primary school education and no bible knowledge yet across Africa there are upwards of 800,000 untrained pastors. The vision or desired outcome for the future is to see many pastors lives transformed by the word of God so that they in turn can teach their churches and see their lives also transformed. One of the things that we set out to do when we saw this need and envisioned the future was to also improve the pastors economic situation and to make the training project self sufficient.

By the end of this year ART will have trained 400 rural pastors and we have many stories of remarkable transformation, yet the task of reaching sustainability and improving the pastors economic situation has largely failed over the six years since we started the work. This has caused much heart searching as we have encountered crop disease, crops destroyed by hailstones a few weeks before harvest and insurance companies failing to pay up on policies that covered the crops. Does this mean that the vision is wrong, that it is the schemes of man rather than God?

Maintaining the vision

We have constantly had to examine our hearts and return to God's word for answers to these questions and every time we are confirmed in our view that God would have us do this. His word tells us that we should show kindness and compassion, even when it is easier to give up. We believe that we should seek to bless both spiritually and practically through helping pastors to farm better. Yet the lesson we have learnt is that we don't know the “how” yet nor God's timing for it's fulfilment but we need to wait patiently on the Lord, seek wisdom and not give up trying.

The steps of a man are established by the Lord, when he delights in his way;
though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong, for the Lord upholds his hand.
Psalm 37:23,24

Six years on and we are now seeking to pilot chicken farming projects with some of the pastors. We hope that such a project will have more success being low in investment and potentially profitable with home grown and home made feeds. God has led us to someone whom we believe can help in achieving these goals. Will this work? We don't know but as we pray and pray and examine God's word, His revealed will, we can see nothing that tells us to stop trying and everything that suggest that the desired outcomes are in line with what God desires for His people and these pastors. This is the comfort of vision setting that aligns with God's revealed will.

Many of us as leaders have to learn patience as we strive towards the goal that is the desired future outcome of our life's labours. There is no mystique about having a vision and determining whether it is from God but we do need to learn to rely on Him and His timing and not merely our own skills, experience and passion.

Even the apostle Paul experienced setbacks and disappointments but he had a clear vision of the future and what God had called him to.

"Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Philippians 3:13-14

The scripture that I most often turn to and remind myself of in times of difficulty when things don't seem to be going the way that I expect is that well know passage in Proverbs.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." Proverbs 3:5-6

A long road to the future

In his book "Visioneering", Andy Stanley states that there seems to be a correlation between the preparation time and the magnitude of the task to which we called. Citing Moses as an example he reminds us that he spent 40 years in preparation before leading the children of Israel out of Egypt.⁷ It's worth noting too that although God gave Moses a clear vision for the future he did not know exactly how he would lead the children of Israel to the promised land.

Sometimes God puts us in positions to prepare us for what he desires us to do in the future. As I look back over my life I can see that the experiences and that challenges I faced as a high-tech entrepreneur were a preparation for the work that I am now engaged upon in Africa, perhaps the biggest challenge that I have had to face.

Communicating the vision

Not all leaders are called to be visionaries, some carry the vision of another, often an entrepreneur, but all of us as leaders need to communicate what that vision or desired future outcome is, how it aligns with God's will and the dependence that we need to have on Him for it's realisation. Without a clear understanding of where a group of people, an organisation or a business is heading, those we lead will be directionless and uninspired. The age old story of the three bricklayers sums it up well!

"There were three bricklayers working beside each other on a wall. Someone came up to the first one and asked, "What are you doing", "What does it look like I am doing?" he replied sarcastically, "I am laying bricks!" The man asked the next guy on the wall what he was doing.

⁷ Visioneering, Andy Stanley, Multnomah Press, 1999

He said, "Can't you see what I am doing? I am building a wall." Then the last man was asked what he was doing. He exclaimed, "I am building a great cathedral for God!"

All of those that we lead should be able to catch the vision and be able to articulate it in simple terms and to be able to understand their part working according to God's will in the accomplishing of that desired future outcome.