

Vision Discernment

The Difference between Corporate Vision and Biblical Vision

Other public sectors doing visioning processes, including businesses, non-profit organizations, social services, educational institutions, municipal governments, and industry. They may even use spiritual terminology. These groups know about discerning core ideologies and building corporate cultures. In many congregations you will find leaders from the world “out there” with expertise in visioning processes. They have turned around many a company, hospital, social service agency, and school system.

However, Biblical visions are the same as corporate visions. These contrasts have surprised many church leaders with strong backgrounds in business or social service.

1. *Biblical visions are revealed, not created.* The visioning processes from the public sector are skillfully designed, but in the end they all assume that vision will arise from the creativity or imagination of the corporate employees. At worst, these visions are mere daydreams and brainstorming. At best, these visions are exciting and motivating goals that energize the corporation for creativity and focus the corporate purpose. Always they emerge from the creative energies of the constituency.

Biblical visions, however, do not emerge from the creativity or imagination of the organization. They are revealed by God, in God's own time. The corporation designs a period of activity to create a vision. The church must design a period of *disciplined inactivity* to listen for God. I call this a “spirituality of waiting”. It is not a series of meetings, but a series of pregnant moments.

2. *Biblical visions are linked to spiritual formation, not strategic planning.* The visioning processes of the public sector are part of a larger planning process to increase productivity, open new markets, multiply more effective services, or improve performance. Vision helps focus a corporation's long range plan.

Biblical visions, however, are part of a larger spiritual life. It shapes lifestyle, not just programming. The result will certainly include new, effective missions, but these missions are only the fruits of deeper spiritual growth which individuals and the congregation as a whole experience.

3. *Biblical visions are a joyful song, not a burdensome obligation.* Often the visioning processes from the public sector result in an even greater duty toward the corporate institution. Fitting into the corporate culture can become even more demanding, and the workload required to implement all that increased productivity or more effective service can be heavy indeed.

Biblical visions, however, result in greater freedom to find ones place in Gods universe of possibilities. They are not tied to institutional structures and goals. Instead, they release creative energy that may even shatter institutional structures and goals. The fruit of the vision is a freshly shared Gospel, not just a revitalized corporation.

Congregational leaders who have experience visioning processes through their involvement in the rest of the world are sometimes troubled by these significant differences in Biblical visioning. They grow anxious that Biblical visioning requires more personal investment and more private time, or less coordinated activity and fewer meetings. They also can be surprised that the fruits of their labors do not merely renew the organization, but transform the organization.

The Birth of the Church at Philippi

Acts 16 and Philippians 1 - 4

Philippi was originally founded by discharged Roman soldiers after the battle of Actium (AD 31) when the young Octavius Caesar defeated Antony and Cleopatra. This unlikely pagan environment saw the founding of the first European church. The grandparents of the founders might well have listened intently to the military news from Jerusalem about social unrest about the purported “King of the Jews”.

We read about the emerging Philippians Church from two sources. Acts 16 is the story of how it came to be, and Paul’s letter back to the Philippians represents the “email” of the day through which Paul encouraged the church. Out of all the churches founded by Paul, this church seems to have been the healthiest.

Prepare for discussion, and read Acts 16 and Paul’s letter to the Philippians privately. The story in Acts 16 pointedly reveals key steps in church development that were experienced in every church planted.

Vision

Read aloud Acts 16:6-10.

Paul’s vision is of a Macedonian begging him to “come over and help us”. Note that Biblical visions are not visions about property, preservation of a heritage, or any institutional program. The Macedonian vision does not appeal to Paul to build a building, install a pipe organ, maintain an organization, or initiate a program. The Macedonian is a definable, describable demographic. Macedonians appreciate different foods, enjoy different music, wear different clothes, and behave in different ways. God’s vision to Paul pictures “someone different than us”, with a clear spiritual yearning for God.

The decision to leave Asia and go to Europe was a momentous decision. This was decidedly Greek or “gentile” territory. Paul must have wondered if he would be accepted; whether he could accept them; and whether the words and stories he had to share, shaped by a Jewish culture very different from that the multi-cultural mix of newly founded Philippi would have any relevance. He knew that he would have to adapt the Gospel with new tactics.

Discussion

Who is your “Macedonian”?

What definable demographic keeps you awake at night asking you to “come over and help us”?

Team

Read aloud Acts 15:36 – 16:5 and Philippians 3:7-11.

If you read closely, Biblical visions are never revealed to loners. Even Moses, alone in the desert, already felt a spiritual companionship with his father-in-law Jethro, Aaron, and family. Visions are revealed in the context of spiritually profound relationships. Here we read how intentional Paul was to select his pilgrim companions.

Notice that immediately after seeing the vision, the narration of the story changes from the individual to the collective. Paul shares the vision with his companions, and “being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them”, they crossed over the straits of the Aegean Sea in response.

The unity of the team is their common experience of the real presence of Jesus Christ. Paul repeats this in his “email” back to Philippi, and reminds them that the real core of any Biblical vision is the desire to walk with Jesus in mission. The only thing that is really worth “dying for” is the hope of being close to Jesus. Paul is not prepared to die for a property, tradition, or musical style. He might be willing to die for his friends Silas and Timothy, but would avoid it if at all possible. The one and only thing he is really ready to die for is to be close to Jesus Christ.

Discussion

Who is your “Pilgrim Band”?

Who do you regard as your spiritual companions that hold you accountable to faithful living?

Risk

Read Acts 16:11-12 and Philippians 2:19-30.

Traveling even a short distance across the Aegean Sea was dangerous business. Even Roman couriers customarily stuck to the road. Partly, this was because the northern Aegean Sea is notoriously treacherous where the Hellespont (today's Dardanelle's) links eventually with the Black Sea. Mostly, this was because at that time that area swarmed with landless soldiers and piracy was common.

Paul and his team literally staked their lives on the authenticity of God's vision. They had a personal "stake" in it. They took enormous risks to get there, trusting God with their personal belongings, life savings, safety and security, and their very lives. Biblical visions always demand *everything you are and everything you have*.

Discussion

On what have you "staked your life"?

What would it mean for you to "stake your life" on Christ, rather than retirement plans, government, or even family?

Mentoring

Read Acts 16:13-15 and Philippians 2:1-18; 4:2-3.

One of the differences between corporate visioning and Biblical visioning is that the former is advanced by marketing while the latter is advanced through mentoring. Paul does not advertise. Instead, lingers in places where spiritual conversations are taking place (in Philippi by the river), and finds a seeker ready to hear God's word. The story in Acts mentions the business woman Lydia, but there are other women in the group. Paul later mentions Euodia and Syntyche, as well as Clement and "the rest of my co-workers whose names are in the book of life".

The story says that the Lord "opened her heart to listen eagerly" to what Paul was saying. But what exactly was he saying? The clue is probably found in the ancient hymn that Paul quotes in Phil. 2:6-11 regarding the humble death and exalted victory of Christ. Vision is always tied to Christ. He goes on to exhort them to "shine like stars" in the darkness of the world.

Discussion

Who has been your mentor?

Are you also sensitive to seekers and ready to share the core message of hope?

Cell Group

Read aloud Acts 16:15-16 and Philippians 4:8-20

Just as Paul shared the vision with his team, and together they staked their lives to pursue it; so also mentoring one person immediately leads to growing a small group. The Bible story mentions the "place of prayer" in Lydia's home, and we can readily guess what they did. They prayed, studied scripture, shared stories of struggle and victory, and went deeper and deeper into the mystery of Christ.

Paul emerges as both mentor and model. "Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me," he says, "and the God of peace will be with you" (Phil. 4:9). The cell group supports one another, but also holds one another accountable to Christian behavior and belief.

Discussion

Who holds you accountable to the Christian life?

How do we know what it means to be a Christian in pagan times yesterday and today?

Personal Transformation

Read aloud Acts 16:16-18 and Philippians 1:3-11.

Authentic visions always overflow their containers. The individual cannot help talking about it. The small group cannot keep it inside. Paul's prayer for the cell group in Lydia's home is that "your love may overflow more and more" (Phil. 1:9), and indeed it does. The deeper one goes into the mystery of Christ, the more lives are changed and transformed.

The love overflows the cell group in the case of the slave woman possessed by a demon. We might rather say today that this is "a woman possessed by a self-destructive behavior pattern that she chronically denies." This is otherwise known as an "addiction", and such demons are the greatest health hazard in the modern world. Paul heals her. It is only when lives are changed that the public takes notice.

Discussion

**Is your church motivated by an authentic Biblical vision?
Does your love for one another to overflow into a blessing to a stranger?
How many people are being transformed this month because your church exists?**

Stress

Read aloud Acts 16:19-24 and Philippians 1:12-30.

Whenever lives are changed (transformed, healed, reconciled, or born again), it is the people who make an evil living from the entrapment of others that get angry. Big surprise! Many are rich and well connected! So Paul and his team are arrested and thrown into prison. They are tortured by having the arms and legs immobilized in the stocks.

God's visions always create stress. Change the world, and the world will always strike back. If the world isn't striking back, and things are too pleasant, perhaps your church isn't doing enough to change the world. Yet even stress brings opportunities to witness to Christ.

Paul was all too familiar with the inside of jails. He was writing from jail in Rome to the Philippians. His attitude in the Roman jail was the same as in the Philippian jail. He and Silas ignore the pain, and sing hymns of praise.

Discussion

**What is the worst thing that can happen to you if you really, truly, follow Christ?
Is your vision strong enough to let you sing praises even when you are beaten and helpless?**

Godquake

Read aloud Acts 16:25-28 and Philippians 4:4-7.

Whenever you follow God's vision, stress will occur. What will rescue you from the stress? It will not be a vacation, continuing education, or even strategic planning. You must return to the vision. You must return to the original experience of Christ that started it all.

"The Lord is near," Paul says. That's the secret of victory. When you rejoice in even the most stressful circumstance, suddenly the earthquake turns into a Godquake. The foundations of your prison are shaken. You, and others, are liberated from your prison cells.

Discussion

**Have you ever felt the peace of God that surpasses all understanding?
What is the vision of your church that can cause you to rejoice in the face of any disaster?**

Unexpected Inclusiveness

Read aloud Acts 16:29-34.

God's vision always breaks down barriers and reconciles enemies. Vision builds unity, even when it is unexpected and perhaps even unwanted. The jailer mistakenly thinks the Godquake is a real earthquake, so he expects the prisoners will have all run away and decides to take his own life. Paul stops him in time to realize that everybody is there. The prisoners are singing, the jailer is saved, and all his household is baptized without delay.

Who would have predicted such an outcome? God converts the very people you dislike and fear the most into your brothers and sisters in Christ. The very people you want to avoid, are suddenly equal in to you in God's grace. If Christ can accept them, can't you?

Discussion

**Is our vision big enough to embrace the demographic diversity of our zip code?
Can our vision bless the people we dislike the most?**

City Reaching

Read aloud Acts 16:35-39 and Philippians 3:12-21.

Authentic visions grow, overflow, and infinitely expand. What began with Lydia, multiplied into a small group, and overcame obstacles to include unlikely people, now stretches out to embrace the whole city. Even the government is changed!

The story in Acts describes events from the perspective of the magistrates, as if the Godquake in Philippi had something to do with violating Roman citizenship. Paul sets the record straight in his email back to the church. "Our citizenship is in heaven," he says, and it is from there, not Rome, that we are expecting salvation (Phil. 3:20). It wasn't because they were citizens of Rome that they were freed. They were freed because people glimpsed a citizenship of another kind. Biblical visions elevate belonging to a new plane.

Discussion

**Does your vision elevate you beyond institutional membership to heavenly citizenship?
What are the privileges of heavenly citizenship? What are the obligations of heavenly citizenship?**

Letting God

Read aloud Acts 16:40.

This simple verse reveals one of the greatest miracles. Biblical visions do not require professionals, experts, or even ordained leaders to overflow into the world. Paul and Silas "departed". They left town. They sailed away. They let go control of the church.

The delegated authority and responsibility to Lydia, and to the brothers and sisters that made up the small group in Lydia's home. These amateurs, lay leaders, and ordinary faithful Christians are the ones who grow the church of Philippi to be one of the great ministries in the ancient world.

Discussion

**Are we ready to take authority and responsibility for mission?
Do we have the courage to surrender to vision of another Macedonian, saying
"Come over and help us!"**

Church Planting

"Seeding New Faith Communities"

The story of Acts 16 is particularly helpful considering the strategic steps for church planting or church transformation. The chart below reads from bottom to top ... as if you imagined scaling a mountain. Each step up requires risk, careful leveraging of limited resources, and spiritual discipline. Notice that the basic flow of movement is to begin with vision, then concentrate on leadership development, then program development, and then stress management (the same as in Acts 16).

Sequence of Development:

