

STRATEGIC VISION

Acts 15:1-31 (NASB)
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Peter the Apostle was traveling in the ministry during the early days of the church. He had healed people, cast out demons, and led thousands to the Lord. He stopped in someone's house to rest, and went up on the roof to pray. He was hungry, so he asked for food, and while his hosts were preparing it Peter fell into a trance. He saw a vision of a huge sheet floating down out of heaven on which was virtually every kind of animal and bird. In the vision the Lord instructed him to slaughter and eat. Three times Peter was commanded to eat, and three times he refused God himself because of Jewish dietary laws and ceremonial uncleanness. Three times the Lord said: **"What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy"** (Acts 10:15b).

When did God release believers from the Jewish dietary laws? Near the beginning of Jesus ministry: **"And He said to them, 'Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?' (Thus He declared all foods clean.)"** (Mark 7:18-19). That was at least ten years before Peter's vision! Peter had been resisting that change for all that time.

But the vision was not primarily about food. The whole point was that it was time for Peter to start preaching the good news of Jesus to non-Jews--Gentiles. It was the sternest form of rebuke: "Peter! How dare you call Gentiles defiled? They, like you, are only cleansed by the blood of Christ. You must take the gospel to them as well." Do you understand what this means? Although the timeline is difficult, by even the shortest estimation Peter had been functioning in violation of the Great Commission for at least seven and possibly twelve years! Jesus commanded: **"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you..."** (Matthew 28:19-20a). And for about a decade Peter ignored him.

How could this have happened? Why didn't anyone challenge him? Peter was actually following a defunct strategic vision of ministry which Jesus gave the disciples before the resurrection: **"These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them: 'Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand'"** (Matthew 10:5-7). Christ knew that the gospel was intended to go to the whole world, but for the sake of training and to fulfill prophecy he sent the message to Israel first. But just a few years later he changed the strategic vision to accord with the full mission: "Go to the whole world now, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, Greek and barbarian." And Peter, along with the whole rest of the church, refused for about a decade, choosing instead to follow a defunct strategic vision which was much more comfortable for them as Gentiles went to hell every day.

I think Peter did this almost unconsciously. It was unthinkable for Jews to mix with Gentiles. They would travel far out of their way to avoid ceremonial defilement by stepping on Gentile soil. So the first strategic vision of taking the gospel only to Jews made tremendous sense to them. The real strategic vision of taking the gospel to those previously considered defiled was unthinkable. I do not think Peter woke up every day for ten years and confessed the sin of following the old, defunct strategic vision. I think it hardly crossed his mind.

Before we proceed some definitions are necessary. First, the prophetic vision is seeing God as almighty and holy and totally submitting our lives to him according to his word: "**Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained [or perish]**" (Proverbs 29:18). Second, our mission is to reach the lost throughout the world. Third, the strategic vision is how to go about fulfilling the mission in different times and places, and among different people without compromising the prophetic vision. The prophetic vision and mission can be read straight out of the Bible and never change, but the strategic vision is an application of Scripture and must change according to need.

I am aware that most Christians, like Peter, are not even aware that they are following a strategic vision. They are comfortable in the way that they do church and they often perceive the idea of pastor and elders changing the way they do church as unfaithfulness. In addition, everyone around them agrees--just like first-century Christians did with Peter! There is no evidence of Christians rebuking Peter and the Apostles for leading the whole church in rancid rebellion against the explicit command of Jesus for a decade. There was, in fact, a conspiracy of silence. Did they really all forget the Great Commission? It's not possible.

When I teach about strategic vision--the need to shape the church to minister effectively in every time and place, and among every people, I am often met with a list of objections, such as: that it does not exist, that it is an excuse to indulge sinful preferences, that it is not based on theology but human factors, and that there are obvious examples of it being done wrong. All of those questions were answered by the (real) emergent church at the Council of Jerusalem, the account of which is found in Acts 15. It was the place where the awareness of strategic vision for the early church was born. As we study this passage, I urge you to ask God if you have been blind to the matter of strategic vision for your own church, and perhaps sinfully resisting necessary changes just as the first-century Jewish believers did.

1. A CRISIS OF GOSPEL VISION

If you have ever looked at the church and wondered: "What in the world are we doing?" know that the early church faced the same question: "**Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue"** (Acts 15:1-2). Within just a few years of Jesus' death and resurrection the early church had to hold a council of leaders to clarify the question: What is the good news of Jesus Christ?

Most people don't notice that this was not the only question answered by the Council. Most people read the chapter, understand the question about the content of the gospel, read the answer given by the Council and wonder: "Huh! Why did they say that?" In fact, the question of the content of the gospel revealed a second question, as shown in the next few verses:

"Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, [Paul and Barnabas] were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, 'It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses'" (Acts 15:3-5). If the passage stopped here we might be justified in thinking that the issue of the message was the only question. The hidden second question was about practices as will become clear. There is little doubt that the Pharisees thought there was only one question. They saw Christianity as a "sect of the Jews," and so they assumed that all of the ceremonial regulations in the Old Testament were necessary.

This reveals a profound mental confusion. Jesus never instructed the fledgling church to follow Jewish laws. Here is the message the Jewish people heard during Jesus earthly ministry: **"For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son, so that all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him. Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life"** (John 5:22-24). It was always this simple, and if the Jewish believers imported their concepts of fidelity to ceremonial laws they did so against the teaching of Jesus Christ. As we shall see by the end of the chapter, the Pharisees had been attempting to fold their idiosyncratic strategic vision of Jewish-style church into the prophetic vision of the church universal which transcends every time, place, and culture. Thank God someone stopped them! To put a fine point on it, the second question was: How will the true church be expressed in practice in different places and among different peoples? The reason that the question is not clear by this point in the chapter is that it was not clear to them. But the moment Jesus declared all foods clean more than a decade before the dietary laws of Israel became personal preferences.

2. THE EVIDENCE FOR A DIVINE CLARIFICATION OF THE GOOD NEWS

But the main doctrinal question had to be answered first. **"The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are'"** (Acts 15:6-11).

Years had gone by since Peter had learned the lesson of the flying carpet full of animals. Notice that he presents historical facts as his main argument. Everyone already knew that God

had worked the same among Gentiles as Jews. Then others gave evidence: **"All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles"** (Acts 15:12). No Jew could refute historical facts attested by three witnesses, not to mention their own eyes.

James, the brother of Jesus, then took up the evidentiary proceeding: **"After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, 'Brethren, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, 'AFTER THESE THINGS I will return, AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN, AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT, SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,' SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO'"** (Acts 15:13-18). James anchored his argument in Scriptures which had been in the possession of the people of Israel for centuries. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had stated his purpose to include the Gentiles as full members of the people of God. I do not know why they did not quote Jesus Christ to prove that this was Messiah's purpose.

The bottom line is that the principle of grace is the crowning jewel of salvation. Tamper with it in the slightest by insisting upon personal preferences as necessary for believers and grace is destroyed. Paul wrote with great emotion to the Galatians: **"It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love"** (Galatians 5:1-6). Salvation by grace alone through faith alone is our only hope.

3. THE BIRTH OF STRATEGIC VISION

After deliberating, James wrote a letter to the Gentile churches to respond to the issue: **"The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings. Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls, it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell"** (Acts 15:23-29). In short they said: "You know those guys who have made you miserable? We didn't send them. And here's a short list of things to do."

When we look at the list we see two matters which have been binding upon all believers for all ages, namely, to avoid all forms of idolatry and sexual immorality. Then they tell the Gentiles to follow two aspects of the dietary regulations of Israel. If you are like me, you are wondering how this answers the doctrinal question about salvation. Basically, they said: "Nothing has changed. It's still grace through faith." But with the specific advice about behavior the second, hidden question comes fully into the open: "Not only is following Jewish laws not necessary for salvation, it's not necessary at all. We're going to be doing Jewish-style church because we're Jewish. You are free to do Gentile-style church, and we suggest these guidelines to keep from offending each other."

This is cataclysmic! Suddenly the manner of doing church was cut free from any one particular culture or set of human preferences. Beyond doctrinal purity and the careful maintaining of good relationships no one gets to impose his human vision of what the church should be on anyone. The Jewish believers would naturally continue to follow the dietary regulations, but those regulations had moved from the necessary prophetic vision to the changeable strategic vision. There is nothing wrong with their following those laws so long as they did not insist on them for others. You can now see clearly that the Pharisees were trying to make their vision of Jewish-style church necessary for everyone by folding their strategic vision into the prophetic vision.

What cuts the church loose from all such human requirements is the theological principle of grace itself. Strategic vision is a necessary consequence of grace. Suddenly the church was free to run like lightning from one culture to the next, and that is precisely what happened. How many different styles of Gentile church have there been since then? An uncountable number.

And look at the response from the people who received the letter: "**When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement**" (Acts 15:31). You can almost hear their relief shouting out of the pages of Scripture: "Thank God! It really is all about grace after all!"

So the biggest piece of strategic vision is therefore what missionaries call contextualization. People must have the freedom to worship and serve God in ways that make sense to them so long as no doctrine is compromised. A second major part of strategic vision is targeting. The church has limited human and financial resources which must be directed to particular people and goals by the leading of God's spirit. This is elementary missiology which we do in every country to which we send missionaries. Now we need to do it here.

CONCLUSION

Every believer and every church has a strategic vision which can be objectively described by an outside observer simply by noticing who lives nearby and how outreach to them is being done. The question is not whether we have one but what it is and how it is working. We must stop screaming "unfaithful" whenever God's appointed leaders modify the strategic vision in order to pursue the mission of Christ. It is their bound duty before God to pursue the lost and to disciple them, and it is their responsibility to lead the church. You will note that the Jerusalem Council consisted of leaders who came to an agreement. They did not ask the church to vote. If

they had asked Jewish believers whether Gentiles should be required to follow Jewish practices the outcome would have been meaningless.

Whenever we exalt purely human preferences in the pursuit of our strategic vision we sin just as badly as the Pharisees. I've been to churches where they rock out simply because they like rocking out. I've been to churches where they rumble the pipe organ simply because that's what they like. I like both styles of music but I hated those services. The church does not gather to pander to my preferences or yours. It gathers to exalt the Lord Jesus Christ, and the principle of grace means that his exaltation will take place through a myriad of cultural patterns.

The times of our culture keep changing. People keep changing, both inside and outside the church. It is absurd to think that we can just keep doing what we've been doing and reach our community for Christ. We must hold the prophetic vision without compromise. We must remain relentless in our pursuit of the mission of Christ. There is no hope for reaching people unless we are willing to follow Christ as he leads our leaders into the strategic vision he has for us in this time and place.

Paul the Apostle wrote: "**I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some**" (1 Corinthians 9:22b, ESV). One message; all means. The train is leaving the station. I urge you to get on board.