

PROPHETIC, MISSIONAL, AND STRATEGIC VISION

Romans 12:1-2; Luke 24:46-49; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 (NASB)

David Bruce Linn, Pastor-Teacher

15 January 2006

All Rights Reserved

The pastor ascended the steps to the pulpit at Thirteenth Street Presbyterian Church with a heavy heart. The year was 1881, and the place was New York City. The sanctuary was jammed with people. His text was Luke 4:18: "**The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor.**" The pastor, with his dark clothes and splendid beard, finished his message with an appeal for the members of that church not to follow him, closed the Bible, and stepped down for the last time at that church.

As he finished the service and left the sanctuary, he reviewed what he was losing. He was leaving a prominent pulpit with great influence in the city, a bright future, and a salary of what would today be about \$75,000. He had a wife and family to take care of, and now he was heading out into an uncharted ministry to start from scratch with no income whatsoever. But God had given him a vision of ministry which he could not ignore.

That man's name was Dr. Albert Benjamin Simpson who founded what is now called The Christian and Missionary Alliance. There are now some three thousand Alliance churches in America conducting services in many languages. There are seven times more Alliance people abroad than in America, worshiping in more than seventy-five countries. There are Alliance missionaries in some fifty countries, a fair number of which must remain secret for the sake of safety.

Simpson had no vision for starting a denomination. He went to his reward trying to prevent it. His vision was of the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ, and the heart of God to see people enter the kingdom of heaven through faith in Christ. He did the work of several men: publishing a missionary magazine, writing many hymns, conducting crusades, writing books and commentaries, founding Bible training schools, and starting churches all over America.

As the church enters the postmodern period--whether we like it or not--it is well for us to take a look back at church history to learn about the Biblical vision of Dr. Simpson which brought us to where we are today. That will, of course, take us directly back into the word of God to look at some familiar verses which, I hope, will rise in their significance for us as they are seen in context.

I have found it extremely helpful to break the concept of Biblical vision down into three categories, namely: prophetic vision, missional vision, and strategic vision.

1. PROPHETIC VISION

I had a pastor friend years ago who took a church in Haverstraw, New York. He was a wonderful encouraging fellow who had previously served in the British Merchant Marine, and he had the accent to go with it. He discovered that the people in his church were like whipped puppies. They loved the Lord, but were wary of commitments and new ventures. He came to find out that the previous pastor had said: "I have a vision of what God wants us to do." That vision entailed building a new church building which could only be financed if the leaders all signed their houses away to the mortgage company.

That vision failed, leaving an empty church foundation in the ground. The church leaders lost their homes. The pastor then left in disgrace, leaving behind a small devastated congregation which was frightened to death of any further damage which might be done to them. And my friend, Trevor, was left to pick up the pieces and try to help people get over the spiritual trauma.

I tell this story because we tend to fall into two errors regarding vision, either to call every human idea a vision or to deny that God gives any vision to anyone. Often Proverbs 29:18 has been quoted to validate one vision or another: "**Where there is no vision, the people perish**" (KJV). Frequently some human being concludes that he needs to think of a vision and then he tells people that unless they follow him they will be lost. But a better translation of that verse for current English actually reads: "**Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint**" (NKJV). Suddenly we get a very different picture of what is being said. This is not about church building, organizational expansion, or fund raising. In fact, the verse has nothing to do with the word "vision" as it is used in business circles and church growth books. It is a statement that without a riveting picture of God's holiness and judgment based upon the law, people will fall into lives of terrible sin.

This is a description of what I call prophetic vision because it is the way the prophets saw God and our proper response to him. The three key focus questions for prophetic vision are: *Who is God? Who are we in relationship to him? and What life should we live?* If we fail to answer these questions properly nothing else we do in our lives will be right because we will be out of sync with the God who is in charge of everything.

Isaiah prophesied: "**Declare and set forth your case; /Indeed, let [the idolators] consult together. /Who has announced this from of old? /Who has long since declared it? /Is it not I, the LORD? /And there is no other God besides Me, /A righteous God and a Savior; /There is none except Me. /Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; /For I am God, and there is no other. /I have sworn by Myself, /The word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness /And will not turn back, /That to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear allegiance. /They will say of Me, 'Only in the LORD are righteousness and strength.' /Men will come to Him, /And all who were angry at Him will be put to shame**" (Isaiah 45:21-24).

The only sensible response to this prophetic vision of God's identity is to fall down in humiliation at all of our sins, to worship him with our whole beings, and submit our lives to him with no reservation, as Paul wrote to the Romans: "**Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be**

transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:1-2). The prophetic vision is the foundation of all else in the church.

Dr. Simpson had a major collision with the prophetic vision of God and the life of total commitment. Two examples reveal what happened to him. Simpson was in a church tradition which had a very low appraisal of God's willingness to heal believers of their physical ailments. From their point of view it simply was not happening. Simpson listened to some teachers on the subject, and then, as he writes, that he went "...to the Bible to settle the matter. If it was true, it was the most stupendous thing in life. And so I went to my room and took my Bible thinking, 'If that is here, I will stand on it; if not, I will let it go. If it is true, I will accept it, cost what it will'" (p. 40, *All for Jesus*, Christian Publications, 1986). He came out with the conclusion that God is a healing God, that Christ is the Great Physician, and that he is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

This was a scandalous thought for a church which had relegated all healing work to the dusty pages of Bible history. Simpson was ridiculed as if he was a fakir or snake oil salesman when all he had done was read the Bible, improve his prophetic vision, and adjust his life accordingly. Simpson taught for the rest of his life that God might heal anyone, especially his children. If he did not, he would supply the grace to bear the ailment through faith in Christ. This is the process and working of prophetic vision: See God as he really is by studying the word of God, then shape our lives to conform.

Secondly, when Simpson preached his final sermon at Thirteenth Street Presbyterian, he made a point to explain that he had come to understand that it is believers who are to be baptized, not babies who are unable to believe. He had, in fact, gone to an Italian Baptist church and been baptized by the evangelist there because he saw the truth in the Bible. Presbyterians and others today still teach that a person enters the covenant when baptized as an infant, and Simpson was convinced that no one enters the covenant until he or she believes in Christ. Nothing else can be right in our lives and ministries until we submit to the prophetic vision: "**The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom**" (Psalm 111:10).

2. MISSIONAL VISION

So prophetic vision answers the questions: *Who is God?* and *How should we then live?* Missional vision answers the questions: *What is God doing in the world?* and *What is our part in what God is doing?* The first question finds its answer in the many Biblical statements that God is a missionary God. Christ explained it for those of us who live in this time period: "**For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost**" (Luke 19:10).

Christ answered the question about our part by commanding every believer to be on mission with him, as he spoke to his disciples in one of his post-resurrection appearances: "**He said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am**

sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high'" (Luke 24:46-49).

The issue of missional vision was crucial to the decision of Albert Simpson to resign from the pastorate at Thirteenth Street Presbyterian. He had discussed the entire matter with the leaders of the church before he took the pulpit there. In his own words, Simpson wrote that he "had accepted a call to New York with the explicit understanding on the part of his new church officers that they should unite with him in a popular religious movement to reach the unchurched masses" (*All for Jesus*, p. 36).

One would think that understanding the command of Christ and discussing it with the leaders of your church would be enough to permit obedience to that command, but Simpson soon found out that it was otherwise. As the Alliance history book *All for Jesus* explains: "Not everyone was happy with the sudden surge of requests for membership. Some looked askance at the variety of newcomers--poor, shabbily dressed individuals as well as the affluent and educated. To these uneasy guardians of Thirteenth Street Presbyterian's prestigious image, the church's growth was a mixed blessing. How were they to attract their social peers if the church gained the reputation of a city mission? The showdown came when the pastor asked permission of the church session [board] to bring into the church 100 converts from the Italian quarter. They had been won through his street preaching in the poor neighborhoods. The committee kindly but firmly refused" (p. 36).

It would be very easy to condemn Simpson's church officers for having lost their missional vision, or at least allowed it to become diluted with comfortable human preferences. But it is not our job to critique other churches. Our big question is how much we have permitted the dilution of the missional vision in our own church. Listen to how Simpson organized the first Alliance churches: "Every program, every activity, every organization in the church had a primary purpose. Whatever additional value, it had first to serve the function of evangelism" (*All for Jesus*, pp. 51-52).

This is the biggest challenge for our church, and for every church of which I am familiar: to sit down with the leaders, look at every group in the whole church, and determine how that group can serve to send forth the promise of the Father and make disciples of Christ.

3. STRATEGIC VISION

One way to look at prophetic vision is that it defines the "who" of Biblical vision while missional vision determines the "what." The third part of Biblical vision is strategic vision which defines the "how." I often urge pastors to answer these three questions about their church's strategic vision: *Who lives in your community? What are you doing to reach them? and If they visit your church will they find anything that makes sense to them?*

This last section of Biblical vision is the most controversial by far. I have found many people who simply do not believe that the church has any responsibility to adapt the application of Biblical vision to the community--including some pastors! So when the subject of strategic vision is raised the response is often that such focusing work is sinful and by definition

unbiblical. But should not the Bible itself be our standard for such questions? What about this comment about the leaders of one of the tribes of Israel: **"Of the sons of Issachar, men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do, their chiefs were two hundred; and all their kinsmen were at their command"** (1 Chronicles 12:32). The men in charge of that tribe had wisdom about what was going on the world and what to do about it. Don't we all want this in our churches?

Listen to Paul the Apostle explain how he thought about the earthly matters of culture and social convention which bear upon strategic vision: **"For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some"** (1 Corinthians 9:19-22). Paul was willing to adapt to social and cultural conventions, where not sinful, for the fulfillment of the missional vision.

In his final sermon to Thirteenth Street Presbyterian Simpson expressed his concern that "the church was not doing enough to reach nonchurchgoers of the city" (*All for Jesus*, p.44). Upon resigning he immediately began to work on a new strategic vision with services every day and three on Sunday. He filled the services with good music, both for group singing and special numbers. He kept his sermons short and did not ask for money. He preached Bible and "mere Christianity," refusing either to honor or denigrate sectarian Christians. The searing question for every church is whether we have become the kind of church Simpson would have had to leave in order to reach the lost--because reach them he did.

4. THE DYNAMICS OF THE THREE PARTS OF BIBLICAL VISION

To keep from falling into error or ineffectiveness we must understand the dynamics of these aspects of Biblical vision. Sanctification is the linchpin of the whole thing. That is, every one of us must encounter God through his word and move into a life set apart for him. The prophetic vision must be confronted first, then the missional, then the strategic. This order is often reversed in today's churches, resulting in patterns of ministry which conceal parts of the truth of God. There can be no sound discipleship in this way, though organizational growth may be achieved.

By contrast, a church which stops with prophetic vision becomes ingrown and legalistic. A church which overemphasizes missional vision becomes afflicted with zeal without knowledge.

There are also grave dangers of underemphasizing these three things. The underemphasis of prophetic vision leads to unholy living and lack of worship. A church whose missional vision is lacking ends up with no practical outreach to the lost, often asking why lost people don't just show up for church. Finally, the underemphasis of strategic vision results in good Bible studies and a heart concern for the lost, but no traction in the lives of people in the community. The church cannot afford to neglect any one of these parts of Biblical vision.

CONCLUSION

Have you looked God in the eye through the lens of his word and permitted his holiness to demolish you? It is like military boot camp. First God needs to tear you down, and then he builds you up as a member of his kingdom. Think about it. Why would God want to send forth disciples on the mission of Christ who do not fully embrace his true identity and their own? It would only do damage.

Secondly, have you faced Christ's call as a kingdom builder? He has sent the promise of the Father into the world upon us. There is no plan "B". Every part of the church needs to be scrutinized to see how it can be part of reaching lost people and making disciples.

Finally, have you accepted the fact that there are "men of Issachar" whose job it is to guide the strategic vision of the church? They will only be successful if we all support them as those who will give an account. The alternative is to have a church which holds great Bible studies and fellowships, and gradually passes away for lack of effectiveness. Make no mistake, it is God himself who discards useless wineskins.

A. B. Simpson was a man who said "yes" to God on all three of these aspects of Biblical vision, and became an example for many others to do the same. But we cannot live off of his faith and obedience. We must present our Lord Jesus Christ with our own. And as we do, we will discover that God has great things in store for us as well.