

THE VISION THING

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'Where there is no vision, the people perish.' So says Proverbs 29:18a (KJV). Or does it?

This verse is quoted by many of us in support of mission action plans, growth action plans and other such vision documents, and I need to say at the outset that I am a fan and proponent of such processes. I am happy to subscribe to the well-known quotes 'If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail,' and 'If you aim at nothing you will hit it every time.'

I have written more than my fair share of vision statements and vision documents, and I have been very positively influenced by the language of vision answering the question, 'where are we called to go?' (alongside identity being about who we are, mission being about why we exist, and values being about what guides how we do things).

All of these are very important. Many readers will probably have worked on some variation of a 2020 vision over recent months and years, and can quote many examples of the importance of organisations and individuals having clear vision in order to get things done, and of others which have perished through muddled thinking. Jesus himself made decisions which were informed more by his vision than by immediately presenting needs, such as when he moved on to pastures new in Mark 1:38 or set his face like flint to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51, quoting Isaiah 50:7).

But vision is a tricky word. At the risk of stating the obvious, its primary meaning is to do with seeing, or 'the faculty or state of being able to see', to quote the Oxford English Dictionary. We get the extended

meaning about future planning from the sense of forming a mental image of what the future could look like. This allows the play on words behind '2020 vision', as it brings together the phrase in common parlance about perfect eyesight with an image of what we are aiming at for the year 2020.

So what does Proverbs 29:18a actually say? The translation at the top of this article is taken from the King James Version, a version which I suspect is not commonly quoted by most readers of this article. A look at some more recent translations demonstrates that the KJV is a little out of line these days:

- Where there is no revelation (footnote 'prophetic vision'), the people cast off restraint (NKJV).



- Where there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint (ESV).
- Where there is no revelation, people cast off restraint (NIV).
- Where there is no prophecy, the people cast off restraint (NRSV).
- Where there is no vision [no revelation of God and His word], the people are unrestrained (Amplified Version).

And The Message paraphrase:

- If people can't see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves (MSG).

The key Hebrew word in the first part of the sentence is *chazon*. It appears 56 times in the Old Testament. Ten of these references are in Daniel and seven in Ezekiel. The primary focus is on the pictures which the prophets receive from God (e.g. Isaiah 1:1, Daniel 8:1, Obadiah 1:1, Nahum 1:1), and which they seek to share with the people. Thus the word speaks of revelation – bringing into the light something not perceived before – and it speaks of divine provenance. The translations above all seek to capture this idea of prophetic revelation in similar if slightly different forms. As is so often the case The Message paraphrase gives a helpful slant – ‘people can't see what God is doing’.

The second part of the sentence uses the word *para*, which speaks of running wild or loose. It appears 14 times in the Old Testament. In some cases, the word is used literally, such as Moses' instruction to Aaron and others not to let their hair hang loose (Leviticus 10:6), while elsewhere it has the metaphorical application of neglecting, ignoring or not being restrained (e.g. Proverbs 8:33). Nowhere is there any sense of perishing or dying.

As can be seen above, modern translations have largely reached agreement on the idea of casting off restraint. We might expand the phrase to say ‘they have taken their eye off the ball, forgotten what they are about, stopped making the main thing the main thing, and are all over the shop in what they are up to.’ (Perhaps that would be the EASCV – the Extremely Amplified Somewhat Colloquial Version).

So what am I saying?

1. SETTING CLEAR DIRECTION (VISION) IS OF COURSE VITAL FOR THE LIFE OF A CHURCH

Without it we will be open to being torn in all sorts of different directions, all competing for time, energy and resources.

2. THE KEY THING IS THAT THE DIRECTION COMES FROM GOD

So how much emphasis do we put on hearing from God, as opposed to simply working up seemingly sensible plans?

Paul states that we are to eagerly desire the spiritual gifts, especially prophecy (1 Corinthians 14:1), but how open are we to the inconvenient still small voice or the even more inconvenient prophetic word which seems to call for a change of direction?

When we are abounding with well-crafted statements and glossy literature, it takes a degree of courage and humility not to just sweep such calls under the carpet. But it is a salutary reminder that the primary role of the Old Testament prophet seemed to be to bring about a change of direction.

3. ARE WE UNDER-USING THE VERSE?

Rather than suggesting that we over-use Proverbs 29:18, I am actually suggesting that we are in danger of under-using it by squeezing it into an ill-fitting mould.

When we don't hear God's voice calling us, the people are in danger of casting off restraint in all sorts of ways: neglecting God's perspective on issues of morality, on character formation, on the importance of mission and discipleship, and not just direction-setting. When God's voice is not heard in the Church or in society, then anything goes. When that happens, the people are lost; I guess you could even say that they perish.



FOR REFLECTION

1. Do you have a clear vision of where your church is going?
2. How open are you (honestly) to God changing that direction?
3. How much emphasis do you put on seeking prophetic revelation?
4. In which areas of life might you (or your church) be in danger of casting off restraint and drifting away from God?