DISCERNING DIRECTION
Biblical Insights on Vision

Background to Vision

- Vision is a biblical concept that has been imported into the commercial world, and regurgitated back into the Church, so that most of its content is business not biblical.
- Definitions abound and differ. They are often used interchangeably, but nearly all are limited to or linked with a picture of the future.

The development of interest in vision as a widespread concept is relatively recent. Why?

RECENT HISTORY FUELLED BY…

- Increasing pace of change in western society: companies needing to ride 'white water' rather than drift sedately down stream.
- Rise of audit and inspection culture; everything continually reviewed to ensure appropriate performance, effectiveness, and value for money.
- Importing commercial values to what was once public, charity, church sector.
- Fashion and fad: it is an in thing! However, truth is rarely found in fashion and fad. It is more likely to be found in hard theological reflection.

Because 'vision' is primarily used in a commercial framework, it is normally closely connected to an imagined future, and linked to concepts of continuous growth and increased revenue. This is too limited a view for Christians.

BIBLICAL TIMES

In the Bible the word 'vision' is used in a number of different ways with a wider range of subtle meanings:

- A vision of who God is e.g. Isaiah 6:1 'saw the Lord', Genesis 15:1 'the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. Do not be afraid, I am your shield, your very great reward.'
- A vision of what God wants to do e.g. Abraham Genesis 12:2-3 God gives him a vision, Genesis 15:5.
- An apocalyptic vision of what is to come e.g. Daniel, Revelation.

The Bible recognises that vision is sometimes difficult to attain, and ultimately is a gift from God. See Jesus' parables e.g. Mark 4:9-12.

The Bible teaches that the essence of vision is seeing clearly, to see as God sees, past, present and future i.e. it is as much about the reality of the present as an idealised future.

Now when the word is used in Christian circles, it tends to be filled with business values and understanding, and not a biblical understanding. It is important to ask what makes vision 'Christian'?

Corporate Vision for the Future

Vital and visual – people need to see it.
Inspiring – contains the wow factor.
Simple – people need to understand it.
Involving – people need to be able to see their part in it.
Owned – they need to identify with it so that it belongs to them.
Now and needed – people need to see the necessity of it.

DISCERNING DIRECTION
Myths that Mar Vision

Adapted from The Power Of Vision by George Barna.

MYTH	REALITY
1. Vision should be as a result of consensus amongst the leaders of the organisation.	Vision is not the result of consensus; it should result in consensus.
2. Vision and mission are the same.	Vision: specific actions in a given season. Mission: general purposes for taking action.
3. Some leaders are visionaries, some are not.	All leaders are visionaries; by definition they are going somewhere.
4. The purpose of vision is to estimate future realities and then to operate effectively within those parameters.	The purpose of vision is to create the future, not to live with it. Leaders make it happen, not let it happen.
5. Vision is conceptual; strategy is practical and detailed.	Vision is conceptual but also practical; eventually it must enable us to prioritise.
6. Vision protects the organisation from risk.	Risk is unavoidable.
7. The goal of vision is numerical growth.	The absolute reason for vision is to glorify God.
8. Members will be swept along by the vision's force without understanding it.	Vision has no inherent force unless it spreads from the visionary to the visionless.
9. The best way to capture vision is to adopt the vision of other successful leaders.	It would remain the vision of another. There is no guarantee that visions are transferable.
10. Because of its size and scope, vision will make people fearful and anxious.	Vision, when shared properly, does not make people afraid or doubtful. It is motivational.
11. Most organisations in the same business will have the same vision.	There is no reason at all for the same vision in two different organisations.
12. If it is truly God's vision, capturing it will be a quick, simple process.	Catching the vision is not time constrained. It is defined by many internal variables.
13. Vision can be gleaned by watching and copying successful people in the world.	They are following a different set of values.
14. The leader is solely responsible for the vision and therefore should not consult with anybody else.	Gaining commitment means involving people from the beginning, but not being a people-pleaser.
15. A catchy memorable slogan is the best way of communicating the vision.	We need the vision before a slogan to represent it.
16. Sometimes the vision is just to maintain the current position, or decline less dramatically.	Vision always demands change. A pledge to survival is an admission of defeat.

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DISCERNING DIRECTION
Practical Tips on Discerning Vision

Looking for Vision

Look within you; what do you feel? There is a vast difference between a person with a vision and a visionary person.
- A person with a vision talks little but does much.
- A visionary person does little but talks much.
- A person with a vision finds strength from inner convictions.
- A visionary person finds strength from outward conditions.
- A person with vision continues when problems arise.
- A visionary person quits when the road becomes difficult.

Great visions begin as an inside job.

Look behind you: what have you learned? A person with experience learns that people buy into the leader before they buy into the vision.
- The credibility of a vision is determined by the leader.
- The acceptance of a vision is determined by the timing of its presentation.
- The value of a vision is determined by the energy and direction it gives.
- The evaluation of a vision is determined by the commitment level of people.
- The success of a vision is determined by its ownership by both the leader and the people.

Look around you: what is happening to others? A good idea becomes great when the people are ready. If we run too far ahead, we lose our power to influence.

Look ahead of you: what is the big picture?

Look above you: what does God expect of you? God's gift to me is my potential. My gift back to God is what I do with that potential.

Look beside you: what resources are available to you? Evaluate the progress of the project by the commitment of the people.

Three Level Vision

Successful leaders see on three levels:

- Level 1. Perception: seeing what is now with the eyes of reality.
- Level 2. Probability: seeing what will be with the eyes of discernment.
- Level 3. Possibility: seeing what can be with the eyes of vision.

A futurist lives only on Level 3. A forecaster lives only on Level 2. A follower lives only on Level 1. A leader lives on Level 3, leads on Level 2, and listens on Level 1.

For example, an organisation sets changing its name as a goal. The great leader, through eyes of vision, already sees a new name for the company (Level 3). That leader, through the eyes of discernment, sees the trend of the organisation (Level 2). The leader knows the direction of the company by looking through the eyes of reality (Level 1).

Surprisingly, vision-casting does not begin with Level 3 (the big picture). It begins with Level 1 (the small picture) and will only be successful if the leader can influence Level 2 (the next picture).

DISCERNING DIRECTION
Hindrances to Vision

Understanding What Hinders a Vision

When a vision is hindered, it is often a people problem.

Limited leaders There are some who are in leadership positions without the necessary gifts or talents to lead. They have a choice to make. Either gather around them those who have these gifts, or move on.

Concrete thinkers George Bernard Shaw said, 'Some men see things as they are and say 'Why?' (concrete thinker). I dream of things that never were and say 'Why not?' (creative thinker). Charlie Brown holds up his hands before his friend Lucy and says, 'These are hands which may some day accomplish great things. These are hands which may some day do marvellous works! They may build mighty bridges, or heal the sick, or hit home runs, or write soul-stirring novels! These are hands which may some day change the course of destiny!' Lucy, who always sees things as they are, replies, 'They've got jelly on them.'

Dogmatic talkers Some speak as though they have superior knowledge on every subject and can sway things beyond their actual knowledge or ability.

Continual losers Their motto is, 'If at first you don't succeed, destroy all the evidence that you've tried.'

Satisfied sitters People strive for comfort, predictability, and security in life. On the heels of comfort comes complacency; of predictability, boredom; and of security, no vision. In a leadership magazine article, Lynn Anderson described what happens when people lose their vision. A group of pilgrims landed on the shores of America about 370 years ago. With great vision and courage they had come to settle in the new land. In the first year, they established a town. In the second, they elected a town council. In the third, the government proposed building a road five miles westward into the wilderness. But in the fourth year, the people tried to impeach the town council because the people thought such a road into the forest was a waste of public funds. Somehow these forward-looking people had lost their vision. Once able to see across oceans, they now could not look five miles into the wilderness.

Tradition lovers The British have always been good with the patronage system. John F Parker in Roll Call tells the story that for more than 20 years, for no apparent reason, an attendant stood at the foot of the stairway leading to the House of Commons. At last someone checked and discovered that the job had been held in the attendant's family for three generations. It seems it originated when the stairs were painted and the current attendant's grandfather was assigned the task of warning people not to step on the wet paint. One British newsman, told of the situation, commented. 'The paint dried up but not the job.'

Census takers These people love to check out with others before doing anything. Obviously this can be a good thing to do, but not if it actually stops you doing a God thing.

Problem perceivers We need these people around, but only if their attitude is right.

Self-seekers They are in it for their own gain, and will twist things for their own end.

Failure forecasters Chinese proverb 'A person who says "it cannot be done" should not interrupt a person who is doing it.'

Taken from John Maxwell, Developing the Leader Within You

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DISCERNING DIRECTION
Threats to Discerning Corporate Vision

The Leadership Challenge

There are a variety of issues that leaders face when it comes to corporate vision. We've listed some below.

- **The skill shortage** Those who are intuitively 'visionary' can't understand why the rest of us don't get it. Those of us who don't get it tend to think we can't get it!

- **The excess of choice** Endless programmes and products competing for our attention leads to idea overload. We become bewildered by all the possibilities before us, and end up doing nothing.

- **The 'plug and play' mentality** Discerning corporate vision is hard work, and therefore we prefer to take 'plug and play' strategies. Yet most things don't plug and play well into our local contexts.

- **The new big idea cycle** A constant changing of direction to keep up with latest 'new thing' or because of a change of leadership. This means nothing is ever worked through and people become dissatisfied, eventually not wanting to give themselves to the new vision because they know it won't be around long and will never be realised.

- **The confidence threat** Some don't have a vision because they've lost confidence in God, the gospel, grace, or themselves.

- **The overload reality** Many in leadership are struggling with all the demands and expectations on their time. Just 'keeping up' is enough, let alone trying to make time to work out where we should be going.

- **The volunteer dilemma** The more church is seen as a leisure pursuit that people opt in and out of, the lower the level of commitment will be. Vision takes commitment. It is always costly.

For Reflection

Which of these is a challenge for you? Why?

What could you do about it?

What is your next step?

DISCERNING DIRECTION
Evolution Versus Revolution

Evolution – Let it Happen

'Evolution is not a force but a process, not a cause but a law.'

- Follows laws.
- Is slow.
- Results in casualties.
- Is environmentally constrained.

BENEFITS
- Consultation leading to understanding.
- Value placed on experience.
- Change is tailored to needs and capabilities.
- Time to learn.
- Time to build commitment.

RISKS
- Piecemeal change.
- Pockets of revolution.
- Varying levels of awareness.
- Varying levels of commitment.
- Failure due to slow response.

Revolution – Make it Happen

'Revolution is not a dinner party: it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence.'

- Breaks laws.
- Is rapid.
- Results in casualties.
- Breaks constraints.

BENEFITS
- Sense of urgency apparent.
- Shock could break traditional mould.
- Top management commitment demonstrated.
- Early success could increase confidence.

RISKS
- Breaking the organisational values.
- Top-down enforced change.
- Change seen as negative comment on middle management.
- Strategy not valid.
- Strategy not supported.
- Leaders exposed.

'Be not afraid of moving slowly, be only afraid of standing still.'

Bryn Hughes

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DISCERNING DIRECTION
Resources for Discerning Corporate Vision

Books

The Because Approach, Andrew Baughen, Paternoster
A complete guide to strategy from a vicar who was previously a management consultant.

Memories, Hopes and Conversations, Mark Lau Branson, The Alban Institute
The best introduction to Appreciative Inquiry on the market.

Advanced Strategic Planning, Aubrey Malphurs, Baker
A highly programmatised approach with great insights and useful questionnaires to use.

Missional Map Making, Alan Roxburgh, Jossey Bass
A brilliant critique of traditional strategic planning methods and a creative approach to discerning where God might be leading.

Courageous Leadership, Bill Hybels, Zondervan, chapters 2-3
Hybels on top form, passionate as ever about gaining and implementing vision. Helpful stuff on how to communicate a vision.

Relational Leadership, Walter Wright, Paternoster, chapter 3
Developed in an organisation, Wright gives a ten step approach, utilising key questions to help define vision.

Healthy Churches Handbook and Developing Healthy Churches, Robert Warren, CHP
Developed from the Natural Church Development material, this approach uses methods that engage both left and right brain and comes with everything you need to run it in a local church.

Creative Church Leadership, Elisabeth Welch, Canterbury Press, chapter 12
An excellent chapter on vision rooted in God.

Coming up Trumps, Peter Brierley, Authentic
Somewhat complex and technical approach which offers four primary methods for discerning vision (see below). Very helpful at showing other ways of doing it.

Leadership That Works, Leith Anderson, Bethany House, chapter 13
Very practical, down to earth approach.

Transforming Leadership, Leighton Ford, IVP, chapter 6
Some great reflections on Jesus and vision from Mark's gospel. Vintage!

Four Methods

In Coming Up Trumps, Peter Brierley outlines four different models for gaining vision:

- Vision building is a logical progressive method of moving towards the immediate future, which many leaders with the ability to work towards shorter-term or smaller (but nevertheless challenging) visions will see.
- Horizon mission methodology is an imaginative values-based process for thinking backwards from a distant future position, which those with creative ability will probably find easier to adopt than others.
- Relating and delegating works well for those exceptional people-people who not only see an opportunity but also have the ability to recognise its importance.
- The military model looks at strategic objective in great detail. This works well with those who like detail, but the crux of this method is for those who have an invisible overarching strategic objective to accomplish and the ability to fulfil it.

'All these methods are relevant in their different contexts, and according to the characteristics of individual leaders. They are based on different approaches to thinking future: vision building is a vision-centred approach, horizon mission is values-centred, relating is more people centred, and military excellence centred.'