

Whose Vision Is it Anyway?

You hear ministry leaders talk all the time about what a church needs to grow. Some say it's preaching. Some say you need a great location. Others suggest you need a vibrant ministry to children or youth.

All of those aspects are important for a healthy, growing church. But I don't think they are what's most important.

You start with leadership. Everything rises and falls on leadership. I see churches in great locations that struggle because of bad leadership. I see churches with great preaching struggle because of poor leadership. Leadership matters.

And leadership rests on vision.

Charisma doesn't make a great leader. Vision does. In fact, communicating vision is your number one job as a leader. As a pastor, you need to continually clarify the vision of your church. It gets harder and harder (but more and more important) as you grow.

But where do you get vision that will propel your church forward?

You have to get vision from the Holy Spirit. God's vision never wears out. His vision will never fail. His vision is better and grander than anything we can think up. And his vision is exactly what our churches need.

How does God communicate his vision to us? I've discovered through the years that God tends to share his vision with me in three stages.

1. God tells me what he's going to do.

God starts by telling me what he wants to do through our ministry. The "what" always comes before the "how" and the "when."

To figure out what God wants you to do, start with what God says in the Bible about what the church is supposed to do. Your church *isn't your church*. It's Jesus' church. He founded the church, died for the church, sent his Spirit to guide the church, and someday will return for his church. He has already declared what the church is supposed to do. The purposes of the church are non-negotiable.

So start with the purposes of the church that God defines in the Bible. And then ask God to tell you how he wants to apply those purposes to your church.

2. God tells me how he's going to do it.

Too often leaders skip this step. When God gives them a vision, they move on quickly to how

they're going to do it. They come up with their own strategy and their own plans. Then they fall on their face and come crawling back to him.

3. God tells me when he'll complete it.

The longer I'm a Christian, the more I'm convinced that God's timing is absolutely perfect. The week before Easter of 1980, during our final preview service at Saddleback before launching the next week, I shared what God had showed me about the church's future.

In that message, I shared a dream of "at least 50 acres of land, on which will be built a regional church for Southern Orange County—with beautiful, yet simple, facilities . . . including a worship center seating thousands, a counseling and prayer center, classrooms for Bible studies and training lay ministers, and a recreation area. All of this will be designed to minister to the total person—spiritually, emotionally, physically, and socially—and set in a peaceful, inspiring garden landscape."

But when I shared that vision, I had no idea how or when it would happen. I certainly had no idea it would take nearly 13 years before Saddleback had land of its own. In fact, we were the first church in America to grow to more than 10,000 in weekly attendance without a building of its own. That wasn't my timing, but it was God's.

Nearly all of the pastors I've known who lead healthy churches have gone through seasons of burnout when they've had to learn that their vision for the church was from the Holy Spirit, not their own ego. I came to that point at the end of my first year at Saddleback. My vision for the second year of this church was simple: *Hang on*. I was out of big dreams. I just wanted to keep going.

I had two particularly haunting doubts during that time. Saddleback was growing fast, and I didn't believe I deserved it—and I didn't think I could handle it.

The truth is, God had a few important lessons for me to learn. Out of that period, God told me, "You're right. You don't deserve it. But I use you by grace." Grace is the fact that God knows everything I'm going to do in the ministry, every mistake I'm going to make, but he still uses me anyway. That's good news.

Out of that experience came confidence rooted in the realization that everything God does at Saddleback is an act of grace. It's not my responsibility to build the church. It's my responsibility to be faithful. While I was out there in the desert, God said, "You build the people, and I'll build the church."

So whatever vision God gives you for your ministry, hold it loosely. For nearly 40 years, I've prayed over and over again, "God, if I'm getting in the way of this church, I'm willing to move." The vision for Saddleback has never been mine. In the same way, the vision for your church belongs to God.

> Read more from Rick.

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