

THE RELEVANCE OF VISION TO CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

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ABSTRACT

"Several business executives share the importance of vision in competing successfully in the market place;"¹ it is however disheartening that some ministers struggle to understand the impact of grasping a vision for the ministry. This research work appraises the relevance of vision to Christian Ministry. In doing this, the researcher uses a missiological approach for the study.

The purpose of the research is to show that vision is relevant, very relevant to the work of the ministry. The research is aimed at strengthening those ministers who are operating their ministries with vision, stimulate those who may want to go into the work of ministry to get a vision before venturing into it, and warn those who are already in the ministry without a vision to have a rethink on why they are in the ministry. The research discovered that while many operate ministry without vision, some have a wrong notion of what vision is. If understood, vision can be received through various means such as knowledge of

God, prayer, intuition, audible voice, etc. Vision is therefore a necessity for success in Christian ministry.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays Christian ministries are springing up in an alarming rate; some operate in "big mansions" and cathedrals; others operate in rented buildings, classrooms and even one-room apartments. They carry bogus names written on large signboards and placed at strategic places. These ministries include denominational Churches, prayer ministries, drama ministries, Bible schools and colleges, and several other independent ministries focusing on women, youths, children, etc.

Do all these ministries have vision? Are the visions from God? The King James Version of Proverbs 29:18 reads: "Where there is no vision, the people perish." The New International Version puts it this way: "Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint." This shows that there are restraints for ministries that are without vision or revelation; it is only that those who operate such ministries cast off such restraints or ignore them even when it is evident that they have no clear vision.

Unless the ministers of God have a clear understanding of what He wants them to do, the probability of a successful ministry is severely limited. In spite of this, how many ministries operate from day to day with clear sense of God's vision for the ministry? Today one sees several ministers doing similar things; considering this, one may be tempted to conclude that the work of the ministry has become "do it as you like," or "do it as the other person is doing it." Has the work of ministry become what everybody will do the way he or she likes? Are all having the same ministry? If the answer is yes, one would wonder what is responsible for the confusion, competition and even fight that one sees among ministers nowadays.

The rivalry and duplication of vision in ministry borders the researcher and he believes every sincere child of God should also be bordered. Understanding the relevance of vision therefore, and receiving one for the work of the ministry will invariably provide answer to the numerous questions and problems that one sees in the work of the ministry nowadays.

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT VISION

Defining some terms as they relate to this research cannot be over-looked; this will enhance the understanding of the words especially as they relate to the work and give a general overview of the research topic. Some of the terms include "vision" and "ministry." For clarification and better understanding of the term vision, we will first consider some misconceptions about vision. Several people, ministers inclusive, confuse vision with some other things such as mission, ambition and so on. Some instead of getting a vision for ministry establish ministries in reaction to an action of some one. Vision, if properly understood, is different from mission, it is not an ambition neither is it a reaction against an action.

(a) Vision is Not a Mission

Vision and mission are related but distinct. It is sad however that some people have confused vision with mission. For some reasons many ministers equate the two, they believe that the two words are interchangeable. They are definitely not. "Mission is a general statement of ministry objectives; it is philosophic. Vision is a specific, detailed statement of direction and uniqueness; it is strategic."² A mission statement is a broad, general statement about who a minister wishes to reach and what the church or ministry hopes to accomplish. A mission can be described in a sentence or two; sometimes one can formulate it and use a slogan to capture its essence. In some ministries, vision statements are really mission statements. Barna listed some of such mission statements as

follows: "To know Him and make Him known," "To reach the lost at all cost," etc. These are broad statements; they are mission statements. While mission statement is general and broad, vision statement is specific, detailed, distinct and unique to a given ministry.³

(b) Vision is Not an Ambition

Yet some people mistake ambition for vision. Ambition, according to *Webster's Dictionary*, is "an eager and sometimes inordinate desire for something, a preferment, honor, superiority, power, fame, wealth, etc., or desire to distinguish oneself in some way."⁴ Barnhart defines ambition as, "Strong desire for fame or honor; things strongly desired."⁵ An ambitious Sinclair pictures an ambitious person as one who wants to be successful, rich or powerful. He therefore concludes that if you have an ambition to achieve something, you want very much to achieve it. If someone has ambition or ambitions, they want to be successful, rich or powerful.⁶

The above definitions indicate self-efforts of man in attempt to achieve something. Inside it, one could see self-motivation and inordinate affection towards something. Moreover, an ambitious person needs extra efforts, self-efforts, which may not be justifiable to achieving his aim. "The leader who takes a "me-too" approach in defining vision is neither operating on the power of God's leading nor demonstrating a capacity for authentic leadership."⁷ Oyedepo differentiating between vision and ambition says: "No man gives himself vision..., vision is God-given while ambition is man-made. Vision is from above while ambition has its origin on earth. Ambition is borne out of an earthly drive to do it better than others are. It springs mostly out of envy and desire for power and self-recognition."⁸

(c) Vision is Not a Reaction

There are several offences in the ministry. A minister may be

offended by a colleague in the ministry; due to erroneous teachings in a Church or a particular ministry; financial lack; by a senior minister, supervisor, or general overseer. Ministers have reacted differently to such offences in ministry, one of which is a return or opposing action known as reaction. Such reactions that are sometimes mistaken for vision have often led to opening of a Church or setting up a kind of ministry. A vision that is from God will not encourage divisions and breakaways. When a vision is from God, He will create a peaceful atmosphere and way out for the minister in His own time.⁹ The scripture admonishes, "If your boss is angry with you, don't quit! A quiet spirit can overcome even great mistakes" (Ecc. 10: 4 NLT).

(d) A Vision is Not a Dream

Another word often mistaken for vision by so many ministers is dream. Before establishing the fact that dream is not a vision, the word dream has to be defined. Sinclair defines dream as "an imaginary series of events that you experience in your mind while you are asleep; A dream is something you often think about because you would like it to happen; if you dream, you think about a situation or event that you would very much like."¹⁰ Similarly, Webster sees dream as a sequence of sensation, images, thoughts, etc, passing through a sleeping person's mind.¹¹

It is clear at this point, following the definitions as given by Sinclair and Webster, that dream is not a vision. Dream in this regard is more or less a product of imagination transformed into images on one's mind during sleep. It could be mere wishful thoughts. Dream is not a vision, but a vision can be communicated through dream.¹² In this case, dream is given by God and vision is communicated through it. "The dream then is the mode or the expression of the experience, while the vision is the content, the substance of what is seen or visualized or experienced."¹³

THE MEANING OF VISION

The term "vision" has different meanings to different people in different fields of endeavour. In this research, the word is defined in relation to the Christian ministry. The word "vision" is not strange in the scripture and so should not be strange to any Christian, especially those involved in the work of the ministry. The word, according to Lower, is frequently used in the scriptures, occurring about eighty-six times in the Old Testament and fifteen times in the New Testament,¹⁴ totaling one hundred and one in the entire Bible.

Richards and Martin simplify the meaning of vision referring to the Old and New Testaments as "a word from God and its interpretation."¹⁵ The absence of this will only leave a minister confused about what God is doing in relation to the work of the ministry. However, a word from God, interpreting the time and giving direction to God's people is very essential. Thus, they submit, "To each generation, to each congregation, God gives words of vision to provide a fresh, personal sense of purpose and a direction for ministry."¹⁶ Barna defines vision for ministry as a clear mental image of a preferable future imparted by God to His chosen servants which is based upon an accurate understanding of self, God and circumstances.¹⁷

Understanding vision without doubt, is a necessity for the work of the ministry. Oyedepo in this regard simply defines vision as "to see ahead," adding that "vision is a divine insight into God's plan for you."¹⁸ Paul speaking about the ministry of the church says: "But as it is written, eye have not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for those that love Him. But God hath revealed them unto us by His spirit. For the spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God" (I Corinthians 2:9-10). From the above scripture, one can say that vision is God's agenda for man that is hidden from other men but

revealed or given insight to by God to the man for which it is meant. Vision is about insight, revelation and understanding the mind of God concerning the ministry.

THE WORD MINISTRY

Etymologically John Neibuhr and Williams take the word "ministry" from the Greek word *διακονια* (*diakonia*) considering it as the most favoured way of referring exclusively to the church workers and their work. According to him, "The word, whether in Greek or English, simply means, "service... it soon came to stand for a particular ecclesiastical office, the office of the deacon, its original more inclusive sense was never completely lost."¹⁸

Sometimes a distinction is drawn between the "charismatic" ministry in the early church and the "institutional" ministry. Knox considers the reference of Paul to bishops and deacons at Philippi as suggesting the institutional ministry while the gifted ones like apostles, prophets, teachers, etc, as charismatic. In addition, a distinction is often proposed between the "general" and the "local" ministry in the early church, but where exactly the line should be drawn is not so clear. Some scholars have regarded the apostle, prophets and teachers as belonging to the "general" ministry, and the rest, including the bishops and deacons as local.²⁰

All these words have extensive application within the New Testament and are by no means restricted to denote service within the Christian church. Even when so restricted the words are used in great variety of meaning such as discipleship in general, service rendered to the church because of the gift bestowed and hence all kinds of service, especially the ministry of the word and most frequently the apostleship.²¹ In this regard, Awojobi defines it as "a divine approved assignment for a child of God to do on earth. It is the mandate heaven has given to him."²² The main emphasis on the

definitions above is on ministry as a divine assignment. If so, ministry should be carried out based on vision from God.

It is necessary therefore at this juncture to talk briefly on who a minister is. In view of the fore-going definitions of ministry, a minister is the person upon whom the divine assignment is placed; the person who has the heavenly mandate. A minister is a steward, one who carries out ministerial functions. Specifically, it is a usual title of the pastor of a congregation in most protestant churches. He conducts worship, administers the sacraments, preaches and assumes responsibilities for the pastoral care of the people.²³

In this research, the term ministry is any divine assignment that has to do with the body of Christ either in a local congregation or out of it. A minister is therefore one that carries out the divine assignment.

BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF VISION

Here the Biblical stand on the subject of vision is carefully examined; the concept in both Old and New Testaments are examined and examples are given of men who received vision from God and the relevance this had in their ministries.

I. Vision in the Old Testament

Visions are scattered throughout the Old Testament. Indeed the Old Testament presents a clear and consistent theory about the value of vision as a medium of revelation. However, some modern day preachers have neglected the visions of Old Testament. The idea that anything important in the bible and the scope of one's ministry could be revealed in vision is gradually lost.²⁴ Since vision is relevant to the work of the ministry, it is therefore advisable to look at the tradition in the Old Testament and see how this was practiced. Thus the

Hebrew words denoting vision and, or dream are herewith considered with biblical examples of men with vision.

Looking through the Old Testament on the theory of vision, one finds the belief that Yahweh is concerned with human beings and makes direct contact with them in order to give direction and guidance. In Hebrew, a vision is simply a visual image. The word *chazon* and *Marah*, and their several variations all came from two common Hebrew verbs meaning, "to see". But closely associated with vision is the auditory experience that is described as listening to God or speaking with him, it's something beyond one's ordinary self that appears to speak to the individual in his own language. The two Hebrew words translated by the word "seer" show clearly how highly Hebrew valued those who could see visions. The words are; *chozeh* and *roeh*, which are derived from the Hebrew words for seeing and perceiving, the same root from which the Hebrew words for vision are derived. Seer is another word for prophet; Samuel was called a seer (I Chronicles 29:29). The primary duty of a prophet was to receive a word from the Lord. One of the specific references is in II Samuel 24:11 in which "the word of the Lord came to the prophet Gad, David's seer."²⁵

Relating this concept of vision in the Old Testament to the ministries as received by individuals, one could see the reality of the relevance of vision to ministry: God gave Abraham a vision of leaving Ur and going to the land He would show him and of becoming a father of many nations (Genesis 12:1-5). God gave Moses the vision of leading the Israelites out of Egypt and taking them to the Promised Land (Exodus 3). God gave Nehemiah a vision of rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:1-2:20). All the experiences; talking with God, dreaming, seeing a vision, prophecy and angelic visitation or appearance, express the same basic encounter with the same reality that is not ordinary

ii. Vision in the New Testament

The New Testament in common with the Old Testament regards visions as one of the significant ways in which God chooses to reveal himself and his will to his people. The central message of the New Testament however, is that "God has uniquely revealed himself in Christ."²⁶ Therefore visions are always seen as secondary to this central revelation and are significant only in relationship to God's revelation in Christ.

A few of the New Testament books are considered here as examples of visions in the New Testament: The gospel of Matthew sees vision as one of the ways God communicates with humans and reveals his ways to them. Example can be seen where God used night visions to direct and warn both Joseph and the wise men (Matthew 2:12-14). Also in Matthew 17: 9, reference is made to vision during the public ministry of Jesus. Here Jesus refers to the transfiguration as a vision. The gospel of Luke opens with Zechariah's vision of an angel who prophesied concerning the birth of John (Luke 1:5-20). Also in chapter 24:23, vision is mentioned of angels who told the women who came to Jesus' tomb that he is alive. In both cases, vision was used to announce the plan and action of God.

In Acts of the Apostles, visions are a sign of God's continuing presence in the Church through the Holy Spirit. Acts 2:17 declares that the coming of the Holy Spirit is marked by dreams, visions and prophecy. God reveals his will to the Church through the Spirit, and one of the means he uses is visionary experience. Vision marked the advance of the gospel into the Gentile world. For instance, Paul's vision on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-9; 26:9-10) and his vision of the man of Macedonia (Acts 16:9-10) both initiate crucial events in the missionary activity of the Church. Peter's vision in Acts 10 is especially important in this regard. Reporting the vision in Acts 11: 1-18, Peter interprets the vision as an indication that the Gentiles are

to be included in the Church as Gentiles. God's revelation through vision directs the discussion of the early Church, especially on the crucial decision to accept Gentiles as members of the community of Christ (Acts 15:1-29).

In the revelation of John, one sees visionary experience in its most powerful expression. The content of the work is explicitly ascribed to ecstasy. John was "in the spirit" (Rev. 1:10; cf. 1 Cor. 14:2-14-16), commissioned by the glorified Christ to write down what he saw and send this message to the seven Churches within which he exercised his prophetic ministry. Geertz speaks concerning the revelation of John; "As a vision, a revelation of the ways things really are, revelation accomplishes the basic goals of religion."²⁷

In the New Testament, vision is understood as one of the ways that God communicates his will to human beings. When a vision is mentioned, the emphasis is always on the message that is revealed and the revelatory character of the experience.²⁸ The relevance of vision to ministry was never negated in the New Testament, as such should be taken seriously in the Christian ministry today. This is because God still gives ministry through vision to his ministers today. The subject of vision therefore is not strange in the New Testament, as one can see; it runs through from Matthew to Revelation. If the New Testament believers and preachers saw the importance of vision and through vision carried out their divine assignments, definitely vision will have much bearing with the work of the ministry in our contemporary time.

Suffice to say at this point that the researcher is not advocating spiritism or animism, but rather emphasizing the need for vision in ministry. One serious question that is before us is, "how should Christians respond to the problem of the unknown?" Should they go the way of the traditionalists? Definitely if no proper answers are provided, or they are allowed to take their chances, they will go the way

of the traditionalists who cast bones, and tell them what to do. To avoid this, Christians must provide better answers to the questions people ask about life, and one way to do this is through vision in ministry.

Such Christians that ask real life questions are under the leadership of God's servants and ministers who must tell them the mind of God. To do this, first, Christian leaders must model for the people concrete ways of seeking to know the will of God. This is biblical; the Old Testament used vision in diverse ways in their relationship with God and in carrying out divine assignments. The New Testament also did the same thing; today's Church will need it if the ministry will run in God's own pattern. In this regard, Hieber calls for "a theology of guidance that informs human actions... it must be made real in everyday life. Like other spiritual disciplines, learning to know God's guidance is as much a matter of mentoring as instruction."²⁹

HOW TO SECURE A VISION

It is good for one to get a vision for whatsoever he or she is doing. Thus, Oyedepo calls; "...get your vision, locate your place in God and let the light of God shine on your path."³⁰ The question that remains is, how can one secure a vision? Vision does not fall down like fruits from tree, it is not a game of luck; genuine visions come from God but man has a part to play. Just like the man who desires the gift of salvation has to step out and confess the Lordship of Jesus. The one who desires a vision has to step out and call on the name of the Lord. There is an asking involved, be it revelation or salvation. Oyedepo mentions some things one will do as stepping out: "Realizing or seeing the need for it is the first step to securing a vision. Until one sees the need for insight into God's ways, receiving a vision may not be realistic."³¹

Fomum uses Nehemiah as a case study of a man who saw the need for insight into God's ways and received a vision as a result. Nehemiah had his heart set on the right place – on the Lord, about Jerusalem. He was open to information. He sought information about the people who were on his heart. He heard the facts, God touched his heart, and gave it light, and the facts he heard became alive to him. From that moment the trouble and shame of the exiles and the broken wall and destroyed gates of Jerusalem were welded to his heart and being and he could not shake them off. Something was on his heart; nothing else could please him except doing something about that which was put on his heart. That was a vision received.³² In another way, Barna emphasizes knowing God as a step for securing a vision, arguing that, "you cannot know his vision for your ministry unless you first know God."³³

"There are times when God will speak directly to someone and impart to him what he wants him to do."³⁴ This can happen anytime anywhere, but most of the time, in the place of prayer. To know the will of God in any situation, especially as it concerns the work of the ministry, one needs to pray and ask God. In the place of prayer, God can speak and give a vision. The man Daniel was a man of great visions and revelations. However, he was first a man of fervent prayer. He received his visions through the instrumentality of prayer.

On this Oyedepo pointedly says; "Every showing, every vision from God must be preceded by a calling (prayer), no calling no showing."³⁵ God has promised a showing if there is a calling from his servants, "Call unto me and I will answer thee, and show thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not" (Jeremiah 33:3 KJV). This call is resounded all over the scripture. A time of prayer is a time of letting God know our availability to serve him. As we make bold requests, the thing that should motivate our requests is an understanding of how he can use us in specific areas to accomplish specific outcomes.

Another way of knowing God's vision is to be watchful. This is a moment of quietness in his presence, a time to be still and hear God speak, a time of meditation. Again Barna speaks; "A vital part of knowing His vision is to be still and attentive long enough to hear Him."³⁶ This requires one to spend much time before God allowing Him to direct his thoughts. Visions are received during watchful moments; "You make yourself available to receive God's plan through watching."³⁷ The prophet Habakkuk says, "I will stand upon my watch and set me upon the tower, and will watch to see what he will say unto me" (Habakkuk 2:1). Seeing this as very important Oyedepo insists: "Being watchful is very important if you want to receive from God: you may pray all you want, but if you are not watchful, you will miss your vision. Very often spiritual truths are sent forth as tiny seeds that can be ignored if one is not careful. So watch and lay hold on God's plan for your life."³⁸

Very often vision is also received from the word of God; as one reads the word of God, some portions of it will stand out and lay hold of him, and refuse to leave him. It will often be a demand to do something or a revelation of something about which something must be done.³⁹ In this case the person has received a vision. Vision generally should not go against the word of God; nothing that is contrary to the bible should be taken as a vision from God. Therefore, the general principle of the word of God should be applied to ascertain the genuineness of every vision." Barna suggests that one should "treat the bible as a sacred text that it is, one that unlocks the mysteries of His nature, the fullness of His dreams, and the wisdom of His methods."⁴⁰ The Bible should therefore serve as a means of fortifying the relationship one wishes to build with God. In addition to the possibility of receiving a vision while studying the word of God, a person can sit under the ministry of the word; as it is expounded, as the Lord is exalted, as the needs of the world and the Church are presented, the person is touched by something – he is gripped. It may be an idea, it may be a command from the Lord, whatever it is, the

person is "corrected". He can never be the same again; he has received a vision.⁴¹

However, a call is made to prove which or whose vision one is following. Not all voices or images are God's or from God, it is therefore important that one identify the voice behind his or her vision. A heed to Oyedepo's advice to children of God in ascertaining one's vision for ministry is necessary: "A vision that is not proved is not a vision to be pursued. A word not tested is not a word to rest upon. There is a path that God has prepared for every one born of him; He forbids any one turning from this path either to the right or to the left."⁴²

Though one does not necessarily see a direct connection between vision and leadership or ministry explicitly taught in the scripture, one does see a general correlation – most of the leaders in the biblical times were recipients of vision.⁴³ The concept of vision therefore is biblical and is relevant to the Christian ministry.

CONCLUSION

The research examines the relevance of vision to Christian ministry. It discovered that there have been many misconceptions about the term "vision". The understanding of vision however is getting one before embarking on the work of the ministry is obviously and indisputably relevant to the work of the ministry. The principle of vision is therefore the key to understanding ministry. The person has taken the first step towards ministry if he has a clear vision to which he is wholeheartedly committed. Without such a commitment to vision, a person cannot be an effective minister of God but will be an imitation, playing at what he wishes he could be.

Agreeably, one can say that the Old and New Testament ministers who succeeded in the work of the ministry did so because

they followed God's vision. One can appreciate the efforts of some ministers today trying to work for God for whatsoever reason; however, their self-efforts without a vision from God can do more harm than good. The truth of the matter therefore, is that vision is indispensable in the work of the ministry. Without it, the ministry is at risk, with it, success is sure.

ENDNOTES

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