

Vision – Top down or bottom up?

By Rev. Derek Li (translated by Deacon Robert Lam)

“Vision” is mentioned in the Bible in Proverbs 29:18. Different translations help us see the scope of the concept.

- “Where there is no vision, the people perish; but he that keepeth the law, happy is he.” (KJV).
- “Where there is no revelation, people cast off restraint; but blessed is the one who heeds wisdom’s instruction.” (NIV)
- “When there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint, but the one who keeps the law, blessed is he!” (NET)

Apparently, “vision” refers to what the people understand from the prophetic words of God. It means if no one shows us God’s word (the role played by prophets in the Old Testament times), the people of God will talk and live without restraint. People will act according to their own desires without making any reference to God’s will. In our present time, “vision” is what the Holy Spirit teaches us through the words of God (the Bible), and what we learn from expository preaching from pastors who excel in exegesis of biblical text.

In the Old Testament we read, “In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions.” (1 Sam 3:1) It refers to a common problem at the later period of the Judges. Both sons of the old High Priest Eli did not follow practices of the Law in their priestly service, violating the meaning and purpose of offering sacrifices (1 Sam 2:12-15). What’s even worse was that they slept with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting (1 Sam 2:22). During this period not only the serving priests behaved like this, so did the Judges who oversaw Israel, resulting in the whole nation losing all spiritual awareness. Likewise, after godly Samuel appointed his two sons as Israel’s leaders, they did not follow his ways to fight for God’s people. Instead they only focused on their own personal gains and benefits (1 Sam 8:1-3). Vision was lost.

Therefore, the church needs a “vision.” It must not be a dream of the church leaders themselves, but one that comes from the Bible, for the benefit of the spiritual growth of members so that the church would be able to experience God’s Kingdom on earth.

What we need to clarify is what should be SCBC’s “vision” and direction at this moment be? In 2015 our deacons and pastors began to work on this issue, starting from Dr. Chris Wright’s book/seminars and taking into consideration the state of the church. By 2017 “Be the blessing to all people” became our vision and the church’s direction. Now that we have entered into the third year, our focus remains “Be the blessing to all people,” even though there are some slight differences in the interpretation by the three language groups based on their own situation and needs.

Leaders are responsible for regular check-ups of the spiritual health of the church, setting direction and conveying a clear vision to the members. Hopefully the vision will be fully internalized and owned by everyone. Even though the church vision is clearly “Be a blessing to all people,” members keep on asking what exactly is the direction? They want to know the spiritual path they must travel and action to be taken. With the size of our membership and being made up of three language groups, how can we become united under one vision and synchronize our steps as we move forward?

Most “visions” derived from the Bible by leaders around the world could be viewed as “top down.” They might not be effective enough to mobilize the whole church and help members understand and accept them. Surely, leaders have prayed and gained a large scale perspective of the church’s needs and direction before they determine what the “vision” should be. Then they map out the path. However, there must be practical action steps for members of different spiritual maturities to follow in order to realize the “vision,” so that as Eph 4:13 says “the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” Many church leaders have found it difficult to communicate the vision and practical steps to church members, so that members could identify themselves with and own the vision. The extent of members’ participation is therefore an indication of how much they grasp the vision.

Often “top down” visions are not even close to members’ present needs and hence they do not consider themselves as stake holders. So, we must begin with understanding members’ situations, needs, challenges they face, and their spiritual strengths and weaknesses. Leaders must learn how much members value their faith, and church involvement. Taking time to grasp the reasons behind their values, what they have gone through in their spiritual growth, what preoccupies them at their present life stage, their relationship with family and people, and if there are any tensions and problems in their lives. These must form the basis of our vision casting. It requires long term pastoring of church members that begins with systematic contact and relationship building. An ideal, (even though it comes from the Bible) derived subjectively by leaders without due consideration and involvement of the members can hardly become a vision that could be realized or fulfilled. It will remain an empty idea that cannot be measured. On the other hand, a bottom up vision is one that results from close pastoral relationship building, listening to members patiently, learning about their thoughts and lives, as well as encouraging them with biblical principles and comforting them with God’s words. It helps leaders to not only better understand members but also to leads them towards the vision they accept and own personally.

Different reactions may be encountered during the process. Leaders feeling complacent because of good reactions, or giving up because they feel helpless as members’ reactions are beyond their control. Both responses are equally wrong. We must examine good and bad reactions, so that appropriate adjustment can be made to keep the church on track.