

“The Pastor as Vision Caster”

Adapted from a lecture delivered at the
72nd Convention Baptist Ministers Association Annual Convention
January 15-17, 2013
Central Philippines University

In the hyper-digital technocracy in which we live, innovation – the birthing of new products of the imagination – is the currency, and pedigree, of success. To be successful, one has to consistently stay in the competitive race for the top, germinate ideas that supposedly dazzle, and demonstrate the ability to produce “cutting edge” products in order to satisfy consumers with very short appetite and attention spans. Such is the age of the Internet and quantum physics in which we live.

To be a “visionary” is the fashionable *nom de guerre* of the leader in the postmodern world, and being an “entrepreneur” usually accompanies and completes this new cachet. The tide of this new secular leadership paradigm is powerful, even irrepressible, and has also found its way into the realm of pastoral leadership. But, alas, the title – self-proclaimed or otherwise – takes an interesting turn when strained through the filter of a sober theology of pastoral ministry. The phraseology, “vision caster” is fairly new. I noticed it emerging into our daily ecclesiastical lexicon (at least in mine) only in the last 12-15 years. If it has been around longer than that, then I have not been paying proper attention. I also find an intriguing premise in the phrase. I love fishing, and “casting” a line or a net is necessary to fish. I am holding the tackle and the reel, which holds the line. I am the “source” of what is cast.

So a “vision caster” is logically the “source” of the vision. But is vision cast, or is it first received? If it is first “received” then one must admit that it comes from a source outside of one’s self. What does it mean for a pastor to be reminded of the words of Elihu to Job, when he told him that the God of the Bible whom we serve speaks “in a dream, in a vision of the night... (33:15)”; or reveals the divine self to Isaiah in unspeakable glory “high and lifted up”, whose voice “shakes the foundations of the thresholds? (Is. 6)” Is that vision ours? How do we know it’s ours – and when it’s not?

Gustavo Gutierrez, Peruvian Catholic priest, liberated theology when he demonstrated that theology is only the consequence of doing God’s will. In his work, *El Dios De La Vida*, He wrote that “talking about God, or theo-logy, is, for the Christian, only a second act. The Christian’s first act is contemplating God and doing God’s will. A theology that is not preceded by the doing of God’s will, according to him, does not meet the requirement of the God of the Bible.

Gutierrez’s wisdom, together with many choice others, has helped shape my own understanding of ministry. My own pastoral journey has taught me that ministry, to be biblical, must first be incarnational and, therefore, participatory – always connected to the pain and the longing of its particular location, wherever this may be. To be, in Paul’s words, “in Christ,” means, therefore, to be in resistance against the oppressions that continue to threaten the human individual and community that Jesus sought to build. One of the ways Jesus described his ministry was as a

shepherd – “I am the Good Shepherd”, he said. The shepherd model which Jesus employed is commonly dismissed as a sign of weakness in the patriarchal and utilitarian mythos of our culture. But it is the personification of risk-oriented agape in the Bible. By its very nature, the primary ethic of a shepherd is one of risk-taking - *for others*. In point of fact, the larger biblical picture portrays God’s call of mighty leaders as a call not for themselves or their self-edification; rather, God’s call is always a call *for others*. God called Abraham not to make him an extraordinary, self-contained individual; Abraham was called to be “a father of many nations.”

Ministry for the sake of Jesus means participating in his ethic of resistance and liberation in the flesh and blood community where God’s people dwell. The practical implications of our biblical faith are disturbing for they put into question and bring to judgment our easy preoccupation with the familiar, with institutional survival. They are disturbing because, like how the devil confronted Jesus in the wilderness, the demands of healthy and faithful pastoral leadership require us to resist and move away from the temptations that make us weak – fame, power, unfaithfulness.

The congregation, the local church or “gathered believers” becomes the church of Jesus in the practice of ministry. The church is in mission if it locates itself in the crucible of ministry *practice*. A fundamental assumption behind the Baptist principle of the “Priesthood of all Believers” is the belief that all members of the community of faith have spiritual gifts. One of the main tasks of the pastor, then, is in helping in the discovery, recognition and use of these gifts. In doing so, the pastor prevents the reduction of his task into simply being a fireman putting out fires, or a traffic cop preventing cars from shutting down an intersection and causing a traffic jam.

As discerner and facilitator of gifts, the pastor instead becomes the orchestra leader of a symphony who understands the unique sounds of each instrument, and knows how each of those sounds can come together to form harmony and melody. The pastor who encourages full participation of all members of the congregation by guiding their unique gifts to find expression in a suitable ministry, is the pastor who releases the creative spiritual energy of a community of faith.

A wise farmer understands that you cannot plant the same crop again and again, year after year. The reason is that the same crop species will ultimately deplete the nutrients of the soil. This is why agronomists have taught farmers the critical value of crop rotation in order to maintain the fertility of the soil. In fact, there comes a point when the land needs to be laid fallow and completely rested. The Bible as we know has introduced a spiritual meaning to this practice, of laying the land fallow, when it uses it as the theological basis for the prescription of the Sabbath and the Year of Jubilee.

In the same way, the church needs to have a healthy body, and in order for it to have a healthy body it needs good leaders. Its health is not going to be maintained if it is not constantly replenished by the spiritual gifts of its members. When the gifts of members are pushed to the sidelines, the entire body suffers. The pastor as visionary must integrate good leaders into the total ministry of the church. Cultivating and harvesting leaders is a necessary part of the church’s ministry.

And so in a very profound way, the work of the pastor grows out of the ministry of the people of God. As the people of God arise from the ministry of Christ himself, so the pastor in turn arises from the people of God. An effective pastor who has the skills to unleash the unique gifts of each member is a pastor who is a good listener. Like a shepherd who deeply understands his/her flock, a pastor cannot lead a people if that pastor does not invest time to understand the strengths of the members of the church, and a pastor cannot understand the gifts and strengths of each member if the pastor does not make himself/herself familiar with the story of each person. This can only come from humble listening, and from an abiding appreciation of the beautiful complexity of the human person.

It is not possible for us to fully understand the great mystery of the indwelling of both humanity and divinity in Jesus. But we can safely assume that growing up in the home of Mary and Joseph, and around the carpentry shop of Joseph must have helped shape Jesus' own understanding of the world, and of his ministry on earth. We know that Jesus' wisdom came from God, but he must have learned a great deal growing up in a carpenter's house and, through that, was able to see life through human eyes from that vantage point. The "visionary" pastor is the pastor who sees the world through the eyes of her/his people.

A recent study that the Pew Foundation conducted on the attrition rates of pastoral tenure in the United States revealed that one of the highest rates of vocational failures in pastoral ministry - when pastors leave and give up their careers in pastoral ministry - occur within the first five years after they graduate from seminary. Those of us in regional pastoral ministry who are the closest to the lives of pastors and congregations agree with this study. Once in a while in our regional work, we see a new seminary graduate - nay, even a veteran at times! - enter into their pastoral assignment with reckless eagerness (always with a hint of hubris) to apply what they have learned in their classroom in seminary, or exercise their deeply held understanding of leadership. They come into their new congregations armed with the wonderful theories about leadership in the church, and they right away embark on a scorched earth mission to change the way the congregation is organized - they change the by-laws, eliminate committees and create new ones, and produce a "strategic plan" devised in the isolation of their offices, convinced that they know "exactly what the church needs." I call that the "Slash and Burn" method of church leadership.

Then it is no surprise to us that the next thing we hear is that this pastor is suddenly caught in a congregational firestorm of conflict, when an internal rebellion explodes dividing the loyalties of the church members. The pastor comes to us saying the all that he/she was trying to do was for the good of the congregation. We call it a fundamental failure of Pastoring 101. It is a reality in ministry that good intentions are often times the source of much heartache. Another important study has looked at the tenure of effective pastors in stages of three years - and these effective pastors are the ones who devote the first three years of their ministry in building and forging of relationships of mutual trust and respect with members of the congregation.

We oftentimes overlook a deeply spiritual reality in ministry - and that is, that at the heart of the proclamation of the gospel is the great mystery of the incarnation, that God lovingly gave up divinity to take on our likeness and our full humanity, so that God can guide our journey with

ultimate credibility, "he is a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief" is the declaration of one of the messianic prophecies.

So now if God emptied himself of all divinity to be in relationship with us through an only son Jesus Christ, who are we to not take on the same incarnational responsibility with the people we are called to serve? A pastor must attend to the basic and fundamental requirement of pastoral ministry - of earning the respect of his/her church members by way of personal example. That pastor enters their lives in all of their joys and sorrows. That pastor is present with them as they go through the milestones and transitions of their lives, earning their confidence through the building of relationships of mutual respect, trust and love.

In the same way that God demonstrated his familiarity with our feelings and experience through the ministry and life of Jesus Christ, so must the pastor earn the confidence of her/his people. Only then can a pastor legitimately cast a vision for the church, because at that point the vision that he/she helps the congregation to see is a vision that has been birthed from Holy Spirit speaking through the very aspirations of the people that the pastor seeks to lead.

As pastors, it does not matter how far we see your vision for your church. It does not matter how convinced we are that our vision is the right one for our people. Because if it is a vision that we only came up with all by ourselves in the isolation of our own office, it will simply be just our own vision - and it is a vision that will remain compelling and impressive only to ourselves. Let us not forget that on the day of Pentecost the flame of the Holy Spirit rested not only on the head of the apostles. We know that the Holy Spirit's flame rested on each one who were present.

The effective visionary pastor understands that he/she needs followers to translate a vision into reality. That pastor understands that to effect change in the congregation that she/he leads, it is fundamentally important to find creative ways to put her/his people in the driver's seat.

Preparation, training and equipping are directly related to results. In the Parables we see how Jesus prepared his disciples. He made sure that his followers were first deeply rooted in God. And then he taught them how to weave the eternal words of life and the gospel into the context where they were to witness and do ministry.

Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him. In every instance that Peter answered "Yes", Jesus didn't stop at the love part. Jesus attached a non-negotiable rejoinder to each "Yes" response of Peter - "then tend my sheep!" The love part is inseparable to the work part. In a day and time suffused by the allure of many truth claims and self-claims, how do we know that what we do is of God? I asked a friend and colleague fairly recently whose insights I valued since our days in seminary, after not seeing each other for almost thirty years, and he answered me with astonishing simplicity: "Does it look like Jesus?"

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