

THE POWER OF VISION

*Discover and Apply God's Plan
for Your Life and Ministry*

GEORGE BARNA



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George Barna, *The Power of Vision*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

IN 1983, MY WIFE AND I began attending an unusual church near our home that, at that time, was in the western suburbs of Chicago. The church was Willow Creek Community Church, pastored by Bill Hybels. Many elements made that church so unique for Nancy and me. Perhaps the most gripping of those, however, was the unflinching devotion of the church's leaders to their vision for ministry. It was my first introduction to a church that was serving God on the basis of His vision for the congregation.

Willow Creek transformed my life in many ways, not the least of which was calling my attention to the role and importance of vision. Since then I have had the privilege of working with thousands of churches, parachurch ministries, and for-profit corporations, evaluating how vision impacts their work.

This book is the result of those years of study. It has become a passion of mine to see the Church led by true leaders—people who are called to lead, have grasped God's vision for their life's ministry, and pour themselves into living the vision.

I wish to thank two groups of people who supported me along the way. The first group are the visionaries who have modeled the process for me or who have exhorted me to investigate it more closely. Although many leaders have been part of that learning curve, special thanks must go to Bill Hybels, Don Seltzer, Luder Whitlock,

Chuck Colson, Jim Garlow, David Barton, and Ron Sider for demonstrating vision in ministry. On occasion their actions or words have confounded me. But upon deeper reflection on the circumstances, I always have arrived at an understanding of their motivation by recalling their vision for ministry.

Enablers make up the second group. These were my partners in ministry at the Barna Group. These colleagues' stellar efforts enable me to study the culture, probe organizations, interact with leaders, challenge and consult with ministries, and describe some of what I have learned in book form, such as this one. My core team while I wrote this book was Irene Castillo, Lynn Gravel, Cameron Hubiak, Pam Jacob, David Kinnaman, Dan Parcon, Celeste Rivera, and Kim Wilson. I am grateful for their professionalism, dedication, and camaraderie.

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George Barna
1992/2017

INTRODUCTION

God's Vision for Your Ministry

IT'S AMAZING HOW significantly things change in a decade—and how much they stay the same.

Prior to the early '90s, relatively few people had written about the importance of vision. Then, without warning, vision became the hottest topic around. Major corporations started searching for leaders who could inspire personnel and investors with a compelling vision of the future. Bestselling business books addressed the topic. Presidential races began to hinge on the articulation of a grand vision for the nation, culminating in Bill Clinton defeating the incumbent George Bush in November 1992. Political analysts noted that Mr. Bush had derisively—and, in retrospect, unfortunately—dismissed “the vision thing,” virtually assuring his defeat by voters who perceived the Republican to be visionless.

“Vision” had entered the lexicon of the average person.

But things change slowly in the Church—sometimes for good reason, other times perhaps not so. Thousands of church leaders, aware of the vision revolution occurring in society at large, began to read books on the topic, talked about the matter at conferences,

and suggested to their congregants that a vision statement was needed.

Despite those good intentions, few churches immersed themselves in a true vision-development process that produced a genuine sense of God's vision and a related vision statement. What emerged, for the most part, were committee meetings resulting in refried mission statements or updated strategy statements designed to justify what the church was already doing. God was not at the center of the process, as He must be if we are seeking His vision.

In fact, the source was often a serious problem: in case after case, the outcome of vision-development efforts was the explication of human vision rather than God's vision. This is no minor flaw. As we have often seen, pouring resources into *our* best ideas can leave a church and its people flat. The decision to ignore God's best ideas is both an act of disobedience (by rejecting His will) and an act of strategic ineptitude (by leaving a myriad of opportunities untapped).

During the new millennium, we have witnessed a significant changing of the guard in local church leadership. As Baby Boomers have been replaced by "Gen X" and, more recently, by Millennial pastors, there seems to have been a decreased emphasis on discerning and pursuing God's vision for a church's ministry. Perhaps as our society has climbed higher on the narcissism scale, our leaders have been more inclined to "follow their gut" than to follow God's Spirit in this dimension of leadership.

What We Have Learned

Since writing the original manuscript of *The Power of Vision*, I have had the privilege of conducting more than five hundred thousand interviews with adults, teenagers, pastors, church staff, leaders in business and government, and executives of nonprofit and parachurch organizations. That wealth of information has enabled us to draw

many conclusions about the local church, people's faith, and contemporary culture. Not surprisingly, some of those conclusions relate to the continuing significance of vision for the life of the Church. Among those conclusions are:

1. Although they are good people and have been called to ministry, most senior pastors do not have an understanding of God's vision for the ministries they are trying to lead—and, consequently, most churches have little impact in their communities or in the lives of their congregants. Not even one out of every ten pastors of Protestant churches can articulate God's vision for their church. Clearly, this is one of the most important areas for growth during the present decade.
2. Most believers know about the concept of vision, but few have God's vision in place in their lives and ministries. The observable consequences include people experiencing feelings of frustration and self-doubt, a slide into spiritual complacency, the degeneration of Christian service ministries, heightened selfishness, and the acceptance of mediocrity within the Church. As Americans struggle with issues related to purpose, meaning, and significance, the heart of the solution will be the discernment of God's vision for our lives; anything else limits our potential to be the people God created us to be.
3. Institutions that serve as gatekeepers for the local church, such as seminaries, have moved slowly in response to recent discoveries and insights about vision. For instance, no seminary in the country uses the explication of one's vision as a filter for acceptance into the school, a guide to the coursework and program appropriate for a given student, a criterion for the selection of a student mentor, or an indication of a student's leadership potential. The role that seminaries play in their service to the Church would be much more valuable if God's vision were integrated at the center of the process.

4. Within the local church, few elder boards and search committees rely on the church's vision as the core filter through which pastoral candidates are screened. Similarly, fewer than one out of every twenty Protestant churches use their vision statement as the key to their ministry and staff evaluation process. If God's vision were known and emphasized in such settings, imagine the difference it would make in the focus and influence of these well-intentioned ministries.

In summary, then, although pastors and laity are more aware of the importance of vision for ministry, we are also in more desperate need than ever for a clear understanding of God's purpose for each individual church. Posting a two-line mission statement in the weekly program is not good enough, as the evidence clearly shows. After all, every church has basically the same mission (i.e., to help people fulfill the Great Commission and the Great Commandment through effective worship, evangelism, discipleship, stewardship, community service, and relationships).

If every church also has the same vision, then God must intend for His churches to compete with one another for resources, such as people, money, personnel, property, etc. But that creates an unhealthy in-house desire to "show up" or "defeat" brothers and sisters in Christ and takes our eyes off both the ultimate prize and the ultimate enemy. In fact, Scripture is quite clear that we are not to compete, but we are to love, assist, and serve one another because we are all part of the same body working toward the same goals. Success in the kingdom is not about our personal or group accomplishments; it's about how we work together for the greater good and the ends of the kingdom. Because a God of love and order—not of disharmony and confusion—created us, it is imperative that we grasp His unique vision for every church He has called into existence and fervently pursue those visions as necessary additions to the building of God's eternal kingdom according to His perfect purposes.

May God's Vision Reign

There are, of course, thousands and thousands of Christians who are tremendous examples of God's vision focusing and energizing their lives and whose ministries reflect their commitment to God's purposes. As we have interviewed those individuals, I have seen three common elements. First, they enter the vision-development process uncertain of what they are seeking to do but persuaded they must do something to provide greater clarity for their future. In my experience, it seems as if a "holy frustration" has led them to seek something more profound in their efforts to serve God—and He has undoubtedly been waiting and hoping for the opportunity to shape their minds and hearts through vision.

Second, the process extracts a significant cost from vision seekers. They admit that while they were involved in the process, they often questioned whether they should continue. But those who endure invariably submit that the result was worth the cost, many times over.

As described in this book, devotion to the process of discovering the vision is perhaps the most important component in all the activities associated with God's vision. For He takes greater joy in our getting to know Him and deciding that He is worthy of such devotion than in all of our efforts to facilitate great outcomes for His purposes. As an omnipotent being, He really doesn't *need* our efforts as much as He desires to know us and desires for us to know Him deeply, sincerely, and joyfully. The vision journey is a major step in that process.

Third, those who persevere and arrive at an understanding of God's vision, and then devote themselves to implementing it, experience outcomes they never could have foreseen without God's vision as the heartbeat of their ministry. The impact of God's vision is beyond our comprehension and certainly beyond our grasp; it is only through His empowerment that we see and accomplish the vision.

Many people have thanked me for writing this book. Often they recount stories of how the vision has changed their lives and those of

many other people. What a joy it is to hear such stories! But here's my confession: I don't feel that I wrote this book.

Now don't go jumping to conclusions before I finish: I pounded out every word that wound up in the final manuscript. But writing this book was such a different and memorable experience for me because never before—or since—have I had a book that seemed to be written *through* me rather than *by* me. During that week of writing, it often seemed as if I were having something akin to an out-of-body experience, watching my fingers type word after word and reading the text with admiration. Without wanting to overstate the case, let me simply say that this book is one of my proudest offerings to the Lord—largely because I know how deeply integrated He was in the writing process. When people compliment the book, it is simply confirmation that the Lord wanted to get these thoughts into the minds and hearts of some of His people—and I was the available scribe of the moment. What a privilege that was and continues to be.

I pray that you will be challenged by the simple truths and principles contained within these pages. It contains no deep philosophical statements or complex strategic theories. It is a simple idea: God created you, He has called you to a specific ministry, and He wants to impart to you His idea of what that ministry is and how best to accomplish His perfect outcomes through you. That's what His vision is about: maximizing your God-given potential to bless God and others through your commitment to doing His work, His way. We all need His vision. Imagine what the world and the Church would be like if we all took our direction from Him for the sole purpose of serving Him! What a different—and wonderful—world it would be.

1

Masters of Vision

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

- » Vision transcends time. True visionaries have much in common regardless of when they live.
- » As people of God seek to lead their churches, grasping God's vision for their ministry requires an investment in the vision.
- » Those whom God chooses to use as leaders can be effective regardless of their lack of worldly qualifications.

IS VISION A NEW CONCEPT? Take a look at one first-century visionary.

Five times the Jews gave me thirty-nine lashes with a whip. Three times the Romans beat me with a big stick, and once my enemies stoned me. I have been shipwrecked three times, and I even had to spend a night and a day in the sea. During my many travels, I have been in danger from rivers, robbers, my own people, and foreigners. My life has been in danger in cities, in deserts, at sea, and with people who only pretended to be the Lord's followers. I have worked and struggled

and spent many sleepless nights. I have gone hungry and thirsty and often had nothing to eat. I have been cold from not having enough clothes to keep me warm. (2 Cor. 11:24–27 CEV)

This is the story of the apostle Paul. This is not the tale of a man who had nothing better to do with his life or no other options. Paul was well educated, articulate, and a leader. By virtue of his background, he was a man with options. Yet after his conversion experience he was determined to serve Jesus Christ, a spiritual leader he had sought to persecute, and to endure outrageous suffering and personal sacrifice as a result of this turnabout. It was a conscious, startling, incredible decision. For what reason?

Paul was driven to fulfill a vision for ministry that God had entrusted to him.

Paul gives us glimpses of his comprehension of the vision for ministry that God had prepared for him. In 2 Timothy 1:11, he indicates the nature of his calling: his work is to be “a preacher, an apostle, and a teacher” (NKJV). In other letters, Paul outlines aspects of his vision for ministry. It is in Acts, though, where we gain the clearest insight into God’s vision for Paul’s ministry.

Throughout the latter half of the book, we see Paul preaching, teaching, admonishing, and planting churches with the kind of fervor not found in a person who is simply earning a wage. Paul, convinced of God’s design for his life, worked tirelessly to do God’s calling. Paul was compelled to commit his life to working out God’s vision in his daily life.

A Precedent for Passion

Paul’s passion was not without precedent, however. Hundreds of years earlier, another young man had a similar vision of how his life could count for the glory of his God. David, described as a man after God’s own heart, became the second king of Israel. Or, put

another way, David was a man who had grasped God's vision for his life, a man whose service and worship exemplified the spirit and commitment of a person in deep relationship with God and who was devoted to carrying out the special tasks God had ordained for him.

In time, David replaced Saul as king, albeit reluctantly. It became necessary to remove Saul from his exalted post of leadership because he lacked God's vision for ministry. Instead, he viewed his position in human terms and attempted to serve in his own strength. His conduct so disgusted God that the prophet Samuel, who had anointed Saul to be king, eventually had to break the news to Saul that his self-reliance and consequent lack of obedience had caused him to fall out of God's favor and be replaced as king (see 1 Sam. 13:14).

David, in contrast, reflected the humility, obedience, compassion, and dedication to God that mark a true visionary leader in the Church. We cannot read the psalms attributed to David without being struck by his passion to know and serve God. We cannot overlook the clear sense of the future that God had instilled within him. Like all visionary leaders, David was human and, as such, made mistakes. But one of his redeeming qualities was his burning desire to remain true to the vision for the future that God had placed in his heart, which God allowed him to work toward despite the frailties of his human nature.

Other biblical figures emerge as people moved by God's vision for their lives and ministries. Nehemiah was responsible for the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, risking death at the hands of King Artaxerxes and various enemy tribes. His bold speech, courageous confrontations with opponents, and insightful instructions to the Jews who struggled with him to rebuild the holy city were a testimony to the vision for ministry he had received from God. After an intense period of mourning, weeping, fasting, and prayer, Nehemiah received from God a clear vision of how he was to direct his life in the service of God. Far from succumbing to the fear of abdicating his comfortable life in the king's court and reconstructing

the centerpiece of the Jewish community, Nehemiah stood firm on the basis of the vision—the very work that “my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem” (Neh. 2:12).

Moses, a most unlikely candidate for greatness, received a clear call from God to serve Him in a special way. Like all true visions im-

The vision entrusted to Moses did not focus on satisfying people’s selfish desires but on a selfless quest to reconcile the world to its Creator.

parted by God, the vision entrusted to Moses did not focus on satisfying people’s selfish desires but on a selfless quest to reconcile the world to its Creator. Even though Moses had been abandoned by his parents and was guilty of murder and living in exile, God designated him to lead Israel to the promised land to spare His people from oppression at the hands of the Egyptians. In that process, Moses lived a nomadic, uncomfortable life for four decades, leading an unruly, disrespectful, unhappy, whining band of people through times of sacrifice, doubt, pain, and discom-

fort. But driven by God’s vision for leading those people, Moses remained a faithful servant of God.

Modern Visionaries

Vision has flourished even beyond the lives of biblical characters. In our own century, there are numerous examples of people who, by human standards, showed little promise for greatness and little hope of being able to change the lives of people around the world. But these people, having captured God’s vision for ministry, have lived with power and energy that undeniably transcend their natural capacities and with an intensity of commitment that far exceeds anything they had previously demonstrated in their lives. The results of their efforts further expose the power of God at work within them.

An Undeniable Transformation

The diminutive Albanian woman we remember today as Mother Teresa was nothing more than average early in her life. Her colleagues in the convent remarked that she was nothing special as a student, a leader, or a woman seeking to please God. However, after years of prayer and a spirit broken by Him, she emerged as a figure to be reckoned with; she moved beyond complacency to a deep compassion for the poorest of the poor. Summoning courage unfamiliar to her, she requested that her religious order permit her to initiate a ministry in India to care for those who were so sick that no other people or organizations bothered to care for them.

Why risk her life and the few human comforts she knew to begin a life of even greater sacrifice and ignominy? Because she felt a special calling from God to reach out to love the unlovable. She could very easily have continued her ministry as a nun, teaching in schools, leading young women to consider a relationship with Christ, even directing some special students toward a vocational ministry. Nobody would have questioned her love for God, her commitment to His kingdom, or her selflessness as a nun.

Yet she knew God had reached out to her with a special vision for what she could do to impact people's lives for His glory. And what an impact she had—one that exceeded her innate intellect, courage, and physical strength. She felt compelled to change the lives of people because God gave her a special vision for outreach.

God had reached out to her with a special vision for what she could do to impact people's lives for His glory.

A Dream, a Vision

Martin Luther King Jr. was a Baptist preacher in the South. While he was regarded as a powerful orator, nothing in his background—

academic prowess, family connections, political skills, church growth statistics—indicated that he was an emerging global leader, a crusader to be reckoned with. However, God worked through King to convert him into a servant with a larger calling: to address the injuries and injustice of race-based hatred and prejudice.

Much like the apostle Paul, King endured beatings, time in jail, slander, hunger, financial loss, and other inequities solely because of his quest to serve God. Driven by God's vision for his ministry, King encountered unbelievable hardships but stayed true to his calling until he was killed by an assassin's bullet. Sociologists and historians concur that of the many changes that redefined America during the turbulent 1960s, one of the most significant and far-reaching was the civil rights movement that King headed.

Vision for Growth

Donald McGavran was a missionary to India. In the early 1950s, he returned to the United States to further study missions, with a keen interest in discovering what types of outreach did and did not work effectively. He began to see ways in which the insights he had gained on the mission field could be applied to the American Church. He detailed his ideas in a series of writings that eventually became the basis for what became known as the church growth movement. Many church leaders today accept these principles as a matter of course.

During the 1950s, however, McGavran was ridiculed for his ideas and was occasionally asked to leave the fraternity of career ministers. Undaunted, he continued to teach and write about his ideas, convinced that God had placed him in these circumstances to enhance the spiritual life of the American Church. What was the strength that supported him during these years of travail? God's vision for ministry was his motivation and source of strength in the face of controversy and rejection by colleagues.

Vision for Reaching Harry and Mary

One of the best-known church leaders in America of the past half century is Bill Hybels. Thousands of pastors and lay leaders have traveled to Willow Creek Community Church over the years to witness how God has used Hybels and the church he leads in South Barrington, Illinois, to reignite the interest and creativity of American churches in reaching unchurched, non-Christian people. With a church body that exceeds twenty thousand people, Willow Creek has been a diligent and inspiring example of a church that can be relevant without compromising the gospel.

In its early days, what is commonly referred to today as the Willow Creek model represented a radically different vision for the development of a church-based ministry. Despite the acclaim the church received, don't assume fellow ministers and observers of the church scene stood by passively and applauded what Hybels and his team of young leaders were seeking to do when they launched the church. Through his innovative and bold efforts to reach Unchurched Harry and Unchurched Mary, the fictional characters described as the target audience, Hybels has been one of God's chosen instruments to instill a passion in the hearts of thousands of believers to reach out to the unchurched and unsaved. Without grasping God's vision for the unique ministry reflected in Willow Creek's services and structure, however, that model for contemporary ministry might never have seen the light of day. And thousands of people may never have come to know Christ as a result of that ministry.

Changing America through the Court

Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia used his thirty years on the nation's highest court wisely. On the strength of his vision for how a justice should perceive the law, he changed not only the US Supreme Court but also the legal community itself. That influence was a result of his vision for his role: to return the courts to constitutional

originalism and textual interpretation. That vision was directly related to his deep Christian faith and sense of serving God through his vocation.

When Scalia began his tenure on the court in 1986, most judges and legal scholars tended to ignore the original meaning of the Constitution and actual wording of the law itself. Countering that trend, Scalia became a forceful advocate for interpreting the relevant legal texts—the text of statutes, agency regulations, and especially the Constitution—according to their intended and common meaning, seen within the context of the document in question along with precedent and tradition.

Scalia not only affected decisions and procedures in the courts but also impacted law schools and conservative politics. His efforts redirected much of our legal thinking regarding separation of powers, freedom of speech, the rule of law, and how to read the Constitution while defending gun rights and capital punishment and resisting gay rights, abortion, and affirmative action. A brilliant legal mind and persuasive and colorful writer, Scalia served as the Supreme Court's Rule of Law Conscience.

His eventual colleague on the high court, Justice Elena Kagan, had lofty praise for him while she was still dean of Harvard Law School. “His views on textualism and originalism, his views on the role of judges in our society, on the practice of judging, have really transformed the terms of legal debate in this country. He is the justice who has had the most important impact over the years on how we think and talk about law.”¹

We could, of course, examine countless examples of leaders driven by God's vision for life, ministry, and vocation. In each case, we would discover that for those with the ears to hear God supplies the vision.

The Underlying Basics

In every case I have studied, the vision entrusted to the leader was not a simple matter of God paving the way to do what came naturally or

easily to the leader. Invariably, as true people of God seek to minister effectively, grasping God's vision for their ministry requires them to both attain the vision and then faithfully implement it.

Finally, it seems apparent to me that not every person is called to be a habitual leader. However, those whom God chooses to use as leaders can be effective, regardless of their lack of worldly qualifications. If you are like most ministers of the gospel, you occasionally have doubts as to whether God made a mistake allowing you to be in a position of leadership or influence. Those doubts are valuable, for they keep you asking the types of questions that sharpen your skills, soften your heart, and remain humble. It is that kind of self-examination that prevents us from becoming megalomaniacs, convinced of our own self-sufficiency and always ready to take credit for ministry progress. As long as the doubt does not become paralyzing, it performs a useful function in the development process.

But the best response to any self-doubt is to determine the source of the vision for your ministry. Was it a vision you developed with the gifts and talents God gave you, or was it a vision that you sought, prayed, and waited for and then received from Him? Chances are that if you do not yet have His vision for your ministry, either you have not made the investment required to capture that vision or you are not gifted as a leader. Either case mandates immediate and decisive action on your part. Without vision, the last place you ought to be is in a leadership post, regardless of the underlying reason. Only you can deal with that condition.