

A Christian Vision

In the name of who intercedes for us before his Father in heaven, dear friends in Christ: According to experts in such things, a key quality of an effective leader is the ability to set before subordinates a *clear vision for the future* of what the organization or business they're a part of should be. That is, the leader is to paint a vivid portrait in the minds of the members of the organization that both inspires them and shows them what they're supposed to be striving for so that everyone, management and workers alike, will be working together to achieve the same goals. And of course what precisely the leader's vision *is* depends on the kind of organization you're dealing with. For example, if we're talking about a company that manufactures autos, the leader's vision might include things like launching several new lines of vehicles that will dominate the market in various categories like trucks, sports utility vehicles, family vans, luxury sedans, and fuel-efficient economy cars. And it would include specific numbers concerning market share, sales figures, gross and net profits, and so on. The idea is that once everyone has a mental picture of what the company is supposed to look like and how well it's supposed to be doing in say the next five or ten years, all effort can be directed toward making the leader's vision a reality with little or no effort being wasted in blind alleys.

I'm sure you see how this would work for most businesses and organizations, regardless of what they do. A leader who can clearly articulate and inspire others with a bold vision for the future is likely to be successful both personally and for the organization.

Unfortunately, more recently this sort of thinking has spilled over into the Church under the false assumption that it's just another human organization. The idea is being championed by self-described church growth experts who believe that what works in business ought to work just as well in the Church of Jesus Christ. When this model is imposed on a church, the pastor becomes less of a preacher whose job it is to proclaim the powerful Gospel and rightly divide the Word of truth, and more of a CEO whose job it is to inspire others with his vision of a growing, vibrant, *human* organization that manages to attract so many new members each month and that continues to increase the giving and participation of all its members. This is done by emphasizing stewardship, targeting specific demographic groups, and catering to unchurched people's felt needs instead of focusing on what Scripture says are their real needs. That is, there is less (if any) emphasis on the one thing needful, God's Word, and more of *whatever* will attract the attention of "religious" consumers – and *whatever* is the operative word. Anything goes if helps fill pews with warm bodies and gets them to open their wallets.

It's truly a tragedy when congregations allow themselves to fall under the spell of such a vision. Despite the temptation to do so, churches should never measure success in terms of numbers of members, their attendance records, their relative giving, or the number of converts they make. Instead, a church is successful if it is clearly and boldly proclaiming the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ, and its members are firmly trusting in the same. That's how Jesus measures success in his church. And it does, after all, belong to him. It is not the personal plaything of the pastor or the board of elders or the church council or all of them together who feel they need to impose their lofty vision for the future upon it. I mean, do I want this church to grow, and reach out to the community, and win converts for Christ, and always operate in the black, with plenty money left over to fund missions all over the world? Of course I do. I expect you do too. I pray that the Lord grants these things. But if they happen, it will be his doing, not ours. And if in his wisdom he decides that we limp along, losing members, constantly wondering how we're going to keep going – well, that's okay too as long as we are being faithful to his Word, and stepping through the doors of opportunity that he opens. What is this church going to look like in five or ten years? I don't

know. I only know that my silly vision of what I would like it to be won't make it happen. My job, your job, is to be *faithful* to the Word.

Now, with all that being said, there is a vision for the church I want to impress upon you today. With St. Paul, I want to inspire you with a vision that describes not what things *could be*, but rather the way that they *are right now* in the church. But to help you do this, I need to explain some of the imagery that Paul is using in today's Epistle that would have been taken for granted by his original audience. You see, the people Paul was writing to were all subjects of the Roman Empire. And the Romans were very big on impressing a vision on the people of the nations they conquered. They wanted their subjects to *see the way things are*. Specifically, they wanted them to know that *we've beaten you*. You are now under the thumb of the Empire. And you can accept that and submit to our authority, or you resist and suffer the consequences.

Understand that nations didn't volunteer to become subject to Rome. They were defeated in battle and made to submit by brute force, or they were intimidated into surrendering by witnessing the bloody pounding that neighboring nations suffered before they succumbed to Roman rule. Either way, when you gave in, the Romans would rub your nose in it by staging elaborate victory parades in all your major cities. They'd march their army through displaying their might, their banners, and their flawless discipline. Your soldiers would be part of the parade too. The difference is that they'd be disarmed and humiliated, heads hung low, driven along chains. Your leaders would also be part of the procession, stripped of their armor and the marks of their authority. If they were allowed to live (and that was doubtful) it would only be because they swore complete allegiance to Rome. But the point is that the Romans wanted you to see all of this so that you'd know exactly where you stood.

And there were other constant reminders they wanted you to see. Roman standards, the symbols of the Empire's power, would be displayed in all public places. Roman garrisons would build fortresses and keep themselves visible to remind you that you're living in an occupied land. Even on the coins they made you use – you couldn't get away from it – there was the emperor's face and imperial seal reminding you that you're not free. "You belong to me", those coins said. "I determine whether you live or die. That's the way things are."

And not only was it a case of determining *whether* you lived or died; but the Romans' particular specialty was impressing upon you a vision of *how* you might die. That's what crucifixion was all about. Every detail of it was designed to be a public spectacle: the flagellation that ripped all the skin from your back, the long procession through the middle of the city carrying a cross, the pounding of the nails, the lifting up and the crucifixion itself, always in a very public place right outside the city gate so that everyone coming in or going out would be forced to see. And then the slow agony of twisting and turning, struggling for breath for the two or three days it might take a victim to die. It was all to say to you: See? This is what happens to those who do not submit to our authority. This is the way things are. Capture the vision of yourself on a cross and you'll understand that you best do exactly what we say.

Okay, with this in mind, then, in today's Epistle Paul is drawing a parallel between this vision that all his hearers would have understood only too well and the vision of the way things are that Satan has impressed upon us. Follow me here, it gets a bit tricky: but in the same way that Rome wanted to force a vision on their subjects to intimidate them and keep them in subjection, so also Satan wants you to see things his way for exactly the same purposes. He wants to keep you in subjection. The difference is that he wants you to think of *spiritual* matters according to his vision. This vision is what Paul calls "human tradition and the elemental spirits of the world". It's our natural *fallen* understanding of the way things are when it comes to questions of God, religion, spirituality, and salvation.

I mean, there are a number of basic assumptions people live under when it comes to spiritual matters. We know things are not right here on this earth, and we know that the problems are caused, at least in part, by human sin. If we're honest about it, we'll admit that we're part of the problem. Everyone has some sense of their own sinfulness. We all feel guilty from time to time. And this gives us the sense that God (or the gods, or Allah, or whoever we imagine the deity is) is way up there in holiness and perfection and we are way down here where there is sin and suffering and death. The question is what to do about it. And this is where Satan's deceptive vision comes in.

Obviously, the logic goes, if sin is the problem then we must struggle to overcome it. We've got to climb out of this dark hole and the trouble that we're in and press onward and upward, ascending the steep steps that lead to God. And so being religious means working hard, doing things that will please God, and being very careful not to step out of line because if you do, he'll punish you something awful, and make you go back down several steps. You might even have to start your climb over again. What drives your forward progress, then, is fear of punishment and the constant worry that maybe you're not doing enough to get ahead. So the religious life means always working harder to try to please God and do what he says.

Admittedly, this vision of what religion is all about turns a lot of people off. Either by having tried and failed to make any significant progress or by having sized up the problem and decided it's just too high a mountain to climb, they give up. They accept the status quo. Yes, they have a vague sense that they should be trying harder; but being religious is just too much work. "I can't win so I might as well give in to my sinful impulses, live it up, and hope for the best in the end." Naturally Satan is delighted when someone captures this vision of the way things are, and a lot of people do. They've accepted defeat and are thoroughly subject to sin. What's less apparent is that he's just as happy when someone has the former vision I described: that "pursuing the path to God means lots of hard work to improve myself, so I best get on it." Such a person is just as defeated and subject to sin; the trouble is that he doesn't know it. He imagines that by all his work he's climbing out of the hole. In truth, he's only digging it deeper.

The Christian message, the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ, stands opposed to this way of thinking. It gives us a vision of the way things are that's radically different. According to the Gospel, we are *dead* in our sins and trespasses. *That's* the way things are. And dead people are not capable of doing anything to work toward saving themselves. They're dead. If they're going to be saved, someone else must do all the work. And according to the Gospel that someone else is Jesus Christ. He is God's Son who came down from heaven, took our fallen flesh upon himself, and redeemed us by dying as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Now, to those who repent of their sins and trust in him and his work for our salvation, he grants forgiveness of sin and life eternal. We know this.

But here's the problem: we don't see it yet. We still live in this world full of sin and suffering and death. We don't feel very victorious. It sure seems like things are the way they've always been. And Satan knows this. He knows too of our natural inclination to see things according the vision he's impressed upon us – the one that says we have to work our way up the ladder. And this is why the church is always being afflicted by false teachers who try to augment the simple saving Gospel with a program of added works. You see, just because someone comes to faith in Jesus doesn't mean Satan is done trying to deceive him. Quite the contrary, the believer is going to become even more the target of Satan's attack. And this is how he does it: he says through his false teachers, "Oh, you believe that Jesus is your Savior? Wonderful! That's great! But now that you're a Christian, surely you want to live like a Christian, don't you? Sure you do. So here's what you must do to be a real Christian ..." and then they go on to describe more ways for you to climb

the stairs that lead to God. And then you're right back where you were before: not trusting in Christ and his work; but rather trying to work your own way to up to God and salvation.

This is what happened to the church at Colossae – the one to which Paul wrote today's Epistle. They *had* trusted in Christ, but then false teachers came in and undermined the Gospel by adding to it their program of good works and ceremonial activities that they said were required of *real* Christians. Unfortunately, most of the congregation fell for it. They began to see Jesus less as their Savior, and more as the guy who got them started on the right path, and as their leader and guide along the way, perhaps—but now they had to finish the job he started. Climbing up to God was still on their shoulders.

They weren't seeing things right. Their vision of the way things are was faulty. And so it is that Paul presents them with an entirely different – the true – vision of their reality. They were seeing themselves apart from Christ: He's up in heaven. We're down here. He did his part. Now we must do ours. No, says Paul. Since you believe in Christ, you are *in* Christ. In this short section we heard he says it no less than seven times. *You are in Christ. That's* how you are to see yourself. That's the way things are. And what that means is that what happened to Jesus also happened to you. "In him you were circumcised with a circumcision not done by hands" he says, speaking of your Baptism. That's when, in Christ, you put off the body of sinful flesh. With him, he goes on, you were buried in your Baptism – your dead sinful self put in a watery grave. And then God made you alive again with him, "having forgiven you all your trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against you."

And what's interesting here is that Paul is using all the very graphic images that the Romans used to impress their frightful vision on their subjects – but Paul uses them not to intimidate you, but to free you with what they mean for you because you are in Christ. Your triumph is in Jesus who endured for you the very things that everyone subject to the Roman Empire was most afraid of: crucifixion. And what they used to do was to write the crimes the person had been found guilty of on a placard nailed above his head on the cross. So what Paul is saying is that since you were in Christ on the cross, the record of your sins was on the placard. See them there; all of them. Capture that vision. And also see that when Christ died, so did you – thus fulfilling the law that says the sinner must die. Since you are in Christ, divine justice has been satisfied. The record of your sins is cancelled. There are no debts for you to pay.

And that means there's nothing to separate you from God any longer. There's no ladder to climb. If you are in Christ, then you are already with God – for as Paul says, "in him the fullness of deity dwells bodily". *That's* the way things are. Be inspired by that vision, and you won't be taken captive by false teachers who try to impose on you a worldly way of looking at things. See yourself in Christ and walk in him by faith trusting in all that he has done and you will disarm the enemy who seeks to make you a captive again every time.

Christ our Lord has given us a vision for the future of his Church. It's described in the book of Revelation, when the holy city, the New Jerusalem descends from heaven as the glorious Bride of the Lamb. What a sight that will be. But until we see it, let's be inspired by the vision we've been given that describes the way things are right now as we continue here below *in Christ*. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!