

*When Dreams become Nightmares*

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*Abstract:* Almost everything done in the church is done in the name of someone's vision. But how are we to tell whether a dream about the future is credible and wise? This article describes several criteria that can be applied to a vision to aid in discerning whether it represents God's mind, and whether leaders are being good stewards of it.

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They were crushed. The young couple had dropped everything to work in the ministry of a well-known Christian musician. They committed their lives to his dream of reaching young people through contemporary Christian music. It was exciting--until he announced he was moving to pursue other opportunities without them.

Everything that happens in the church, good or bad, seems to be done in the name of someone's *vision*, a motivating idea around which people rally. It may involve a ministry project, church growth, or a building program, but the concept is the same: move people to act by giving them a dream.

When the Holy Spirit authors this dream, the results can be amazing. When a dream is incited by the human spirit, the results are also amazing, but in a different way. The tragedy in Waco, Texas among others illustrates how easily a dream can become a nightmare.

How does the average Christian tell the difference between God-given motivation and mere human ambition? The Scriptures provide several diagnostic tests to discern whether it is safe to buy into someone else's program. While the doctrinal differences between genuine Christianity and its imitators are the most critical, some practical issues can serve as an early warning system for those ready to make a commitment to a group.

A dream is in danger of becoming a nightmare when one or more of the following features appear:

*1. When things become more important than people*

Many goals have to do with things, especially building an organization or a facility. In the rush to construct a physical plant, for example, the human dimension of ministry can be lost in the shuffle. Dealing with things seems concrete and tidy, when compared to the uncertainties and frustrations of working with people. It is easy to see how hardware can take precedence over humans in a leader's mind.

When things are top priority, a dream is on its way to becoming a nightmare. The strain of a building program has often resulted in congregations experiencing splits or other traumas soon after completion. Pastors frequently resign.

Church leaders are not the only culprits. I once admired a certain church facility; it was immaculate. One day the pastor took me inside. The interior was as attractive as the exterior. When I praised the care lavished on the structure, he lamented that it seemed to be the only thing his people cared about. The edifice was little more than a trophy case for the appearance-conscious.

If we magnify this concern to the scale of nationwide ministry or high-profile megachurch, the potential for disaster is obvious. Much of the scandal-ridden 1980s can be attributed to dreams that were darkened by a fixation on high-tech promotion to the exclusion of virtues like compassion and humility.

A healthy motivational idea makes things serve human needs. Jesus came to save people, not to be an organizational consultant or general contractor. When considering some person or group's dream these two practical questions should be asked.

\*Does the ministry place people first in its spending? Our heart is where our treasure is. (See Matthew 6:21.)

\*Does the ministry place people first in its results or is it inflicting casualties? We know them by their fruit. (See Matthew 7:16.) Our dreams will be no better than our priorities.

*2. When power becomes more important than service.*

Any ministry that tries to accomplish something beyond the ordinary risks drifting toward extremes. One of these is dictatorial leadership. Every cultic group, it has been said, is organized around some person's interpretation of the Bible. That individual, if he is a Jim Jones or a David Koresh, may exercise authority so followers will drink poison or shoot themselves simply to please him.

On a much less violent level, the abandonment of servanthood by any group's leaders will poison even the most wonderful, heaven-sent inspiration.

A believer needs to ask questions on the issue of power versus servanthood:

\*Is the organization incorporated so there is no individual ownership of assets? Leaders are not to serve "for dishonest gain but eagerly." (See 1 Peter 5:2, NKJV.)

\*Is there anyone from whom the leaders can hear the word no? God exalts the humble but resists the proud. (See James 4:6.)

\*How do the leaders react to criticism and negative information? Acts 6:1-6 offers a fine example of handling a complaint with honesty and humility. Dreams seldom rise above the character of those who implement them.

### *3. When presumption becomes more important than wisdom*

God is in the impossibility business. Any dream He places in our heart will require us to walk "by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). Willingness to trust the Lord as true when everyone else is a liar launches great undertakings.

The problem with bold initiatives is that they must be executed in the real world. Many have leaped out in faith, with a large following in tow, only to find themselves hurtling downward into financial ruin. Their dreams simply cost too much. The resultant failures have dotted the countryside with presumption's fruit: closed ministries and repossessed sanctuaries. Of course, these outcomes mean little compared to the wounded hearts of God's people.

To avoid such presumptuousness, healthy visions require a steady balance of faith and wisdom, danger and safety. Faith leads us to trust God for the impossible, while wisdom instructs us how to move toward that goal in practical terms. Jesus described this process when He said that a person trying to build a tower must sit down and count the cost before beginning. Otherwise, "after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all who see it begin to mock him" (Luke 14:29, NKJV).

Those contemplating involvement in some visionary undertaking should watch how the group's goals are put into practice and ask:

\*Has group decision-making characterized the planning for this endeavor? There is safety in many counselors. (See Proverbs 11:14.)

\*Is the plan unfolding in a series of subsidiary steps, none of which risks the- survival of the whole enterprise? "A house is built by wisdom." (See Proverbs 24:3.).

\*If the current leaders leave, who would take over and how would that change the fulfillment of the dream? Jesus said His church could survive transition and challenge. (See Matthew 16:18.)

Whether we are crossing the Red Sea, surrounding Jericho, or constructing a satellite TV network, God's people need a dream sent from heaven to move them to action. We are meant to be a people with hearts aflame. Like fire, however, dreams have the potential to consume and destroy if mishandled. When a dream becomes a nightmare, God is not in it. But as the Spirit gives us eyes to see, we can discern those visions that really reflect the heart of God and the integrity of His faithful servants.

In an age of nightmares we have never needed such dreams more.