

Focusing on God's Vision for the World Makes the Difference

By Bob Young

I began preaching without clearly seeing God's vision

I begin with a confession. Over 50 years ago, when I began preaching, I had a dream of reaching multitudes but I did not clearly see God's vision for the church. Because I did not see God's vision, I could not cast the vision nor explain the challenge – the challenge that God has placed before every Christian, every church leader, every church.

I began preaching in a rural church that had 150 on a good Sunday. We reached 200 a couple of times on holiday weekends. I served as both pulpit preacher and youth minister. We had gospel meetings (evangelistic series) but in reality, there was not much expectation on the part of the local church of significant numerical growth. We mostly held our own. My dream was put on hold -- my job was to provide spiritual leadership for the 150 members and the 20 young people in the youth group. Probably, the church did not think much about growth because the church was already big enough to satisfy most. As I look back over my ministry from that small beginning, I am amazed at the journey God had in store for me as little by little I saw and shared God's heart more clearly – the intense love he has had for the world since before the beginning of time!

From that small beginning, God was with me – together we went through valleys and together we ascended mountain tops. He gave me a clearer vision of what being a Christian is about. He gave me a clear vision for ministry, he revealed his vision for the world, he revealed his vision for the church. I was still dreaming of multitudes. My second church was about the same size as the first. Again, I served as pulpit preacher and youth minister combined. The church was in an older section of a city. The church was very active in foreign missions, fully supporting three missionaries. But looking back and thinking about ministry on the home front, I wonder if the hope of the elders was not to lose any more members and at least to maintain the status quo.

When I moved to Michigan (my third church), some church members had an interest in reaching out with buses. We became so successful that some other members did not like the noise, confusion, and excitement. Bus programs brought lots of children but not much sustainable numerical growth.

In my fourth ministry, God had prepared me to see and share his vision clearly. I began to think about and pray about God's desire that the church should grow. He showed me again and again his love for the lost. The church actively sought more members. The church as a body, using the giftedness of the members, became active in evangelism. We expected the church to grow; we wanted the church to grow. I could see God's vision for the world, I could see God's vision for the church, I sought to share that vision. God blessed those efforts and the church almost tripled in eleven years.

I might have considered the success God gave as abnormal or a fluke, but in my next ministry the church more than doubled in eight years. My spiritual thinking about the possibilities for evangelism and the possibility of church growth was growing – from little emphasis on evangelism, to thinking that maybe a few will come to Jesus, to thinking that perhaps we can reach dozens, to seeing that in one year 52 were baptized.... I became aware that hundreds and thousands are waiting to be brought to Jesus. The dream of multitudes is possible! The missing ingredient is that God's people must be helped to see God's vision for the world!

In my work in the university, in my continuing work with churches, in my work in missions, I had and have one goal – to be part of fulfilling God's vision for the world!

Two Bible passages have greatly influenced thinking. The first passage that challenged me was Matthew 9 where Jesus said that the fields were white and that his followers should pray for harvest workers who would enter the field and reap the harvest. A speaker at an annual lectureship spoke on this theme, using Matthew 9 as his primary text. As I looked around at the churches, I noticed that a lot of work was done but that much of it was not harvesting work. I began to pray regularly for the harvest and for harvest workers. I wanted to participate in the harvest. I worked with leaders in other churches to plant new churches. I prayed, taught, and preached until the local church was actively involved in harvesting.

The second Bible passage that has demanded my attention is Revelation 7 -- John's description of a great innumerable multitude from every tribe, nation, people, and language, before the throne of God. Still today, it seems to me that in the majority of our churches we are not thinking of multitudes. We do not have a vision for multitudes. We are not imagining and dreaming about numbers that cannot be counted.

Beginning about the seventh year of my full-time ministry, God focused my vision so that I could see his vision. It is a vision that I have shared again and again over the past 45+ years. John's view of the redeemed included multitudes. "Multitudes" reflects God's plan. He is not wanting anyone to perish. God has been at work throughout human history for the salvation of every soul. He has called the church to join him in the work of proclaiming the gospel so that the world will believe on Jesus and return to God.

In Revelation 7, God shows us how the future will be! He is revealing his will. The whole Bible comes together and makes sense. That is what he wanted from the beginning with Adam and Eve -- be fruitful and fill the earth! The same with Noah -- be fruitful and fill the earth! Later with Abraham -- Look up at the sky and count the stars; if you can count them...a great multitude that no one can count! That is what God wants. People. "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." (Rev. 21:3)

About 45 years ago, my ministry changed dramatically. Ministry was about more than the local church. It was about the multitudes. Making disciples that make disciples. It is not about how many people attend the local church; it is about how many people are yet to be reached. Since there are no limits, we can never stop reaching the lost. This vision of God's purpose, plan, and future has now guided me for almost 50 years.

I continue to pray for multitudes. I see hundreds and thousands accepting Jesus as Savior and Lord each year, but I continue to pray for multitudes.

Can you see the multitudes that Jesus described? Will you join me in praying for the multitudes? In praying for the harvest because the fields are white? In praying for harvest workers that will reap the harvest?