The Witness of the Prophets:
Visionary Experience Then and Now

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“In many and various ways God spoke to His people of old by His prophets. But now in these last days, He has spoken to us by His Son.” – Hebrews 1:2

We hear a lot today about having a vision. Every leadership manual or business seminar begins with a vision. Leadership guru, John Maxwell, highlights the four most important areas of effective leadership:

1. People skills
2. Planning
3. Vision
4. Results

1 I took this picture 7/30/2012 in Albuquerque, NM. Hoffmantown Church is not an LCMS congregation, but is a voluntary affiliate of the Southern Baptist Convention. http://hoffmantownchurch.org/.
2 John C. Maxwell, The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership: Follow Them and People Will Follow You (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 10. Incidentally, these four find similarities in the four “hinges” proposed by Transforming Churches Network (TCN) for the leadership of the pastor:
   “Personal Leadership: Leaders demonstrate a commitment to their own physical, mental, spiritual, and relational needs and development. Great leadership begins with leading yourself well first.
   Building Bridges to the Community: Leaders dedicate some of their time (several hours per week) toward connecting the church to the community by assessing needs, meeting leaders, and forming connections with unchurched and unreached people.
   Vision Casting: Leaders communicate the vision of a preferred future and a healthy sense of urgency about the direction and focus of the congregation.
   Empowerment of Leaders: The Pastor (and other leaders) spends significant time developing leaders through coaching, mentoring, and training.” http://transformingchurchesnetwork.org/resources/for-church-leaders/hinge-events/.
Even some within the Church today are after vision statements and vision casting, all part of an effective leadership model. As one LCMS affiliate website defines it:

“Leaders communicate the vision of a preferred future and a healthy sense of urgency about the direction and focus of the congregation.”

So why stress having these visions for the Church? Well, because that’s what works. The growing, effective, successful congregations are those with a clear vision; and more than that, the leadership to enact it. But what are these visions? Where do they come from? And, what this paper is really after: is this how the Church is given to speak?

The *Christian Post* a while back had an article entitled: “Bill Hybels Unveils Willow Creek's Future Vision for Multiplied Impact.” The article speaks of the “big idea” that Pastor Hybels and his staff “heard” while gathered for a strategic planning meeting. Many churches today now operate this way: with a vision, coming from strategic planning, enacted by a leader who is able to hear what others might not.

Now we must get our terms straight for there to be any sort of clear and helpful conversation. Our focus here is on “vision,” and with that, the person who sees visions, a “visionary.” A standard dictionary gives the following for “vision”:

1. a : something seen in a dream, trance, or ecstasy; especially : a supernatural appearance that conveys a revelation b : a thought, concept, or object formed by the imagination c : a manifestation to the senses of something immaterial
2. a : the act or power of imagination b (1) : mode of seeing or conceiving (2) : unusual discernment or foresight c : direct mystical awareness of the supernatural usually in visible form

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4 [http://transformingchurchesnetwork.org/resources/for-church-leaders/hinge-events](http://transformingchurchesnetwork.org/resources/for-church-leaders/hinge-events). Cf. Terry Tieman, *People of Passion: Activities for Opening Doors to Your Community* (Cordova: Transforming Churches Network, 2012), 28. Again, Maxwell says similarly: “Great leaders always seem to embody two seemingly disparate qualities. They are both highly visionary and highly practical. Their vision enables them to see beyond the immediate. They can envision what’s coming and what must be done” (Maxwell, 158).
3. a : the act or power of seeing : sight b : the special sense by which the qualities of an object constituting its appearance are perceived through a process in which light rays entering the eye are transformed by the retina into electrical signals that are transmitted to the brain via the optic nerve

4. a : something seen.

And “visionary” means:

1. “a : illusory b : incapable of being realized or achieved : utopian c : existing only in imagination : unreal.
2. a : able or likely to see visions b : disposed to reverie or imagining : dreamy
3. of, relating to, or characterized by visions or the power of vision : having or marked by foresight and imagination
4. n : one whose ideas or projects are impractical : dreamer.

Related synonyms include: idealist, quixotic, romantic, starry-eyed, utopian, idealistic.6

Now, considering the push within the Church to embrace visions, visionaries, and vision-casting, much of this is troubling. Notice just from the dictionary how much of the language is abstract, intangible, and ultimately Gnostic: “dream,” “trance,” “ecstasy,” “imagination,” “mystical awareness,” and so forth. It’s not until the last two definitions of vision that you even get the most concrete words of vision, summarized as “something seen.” This betrays, perhaps, our more common way of speaking about visions, and what is typically meant today in leadership circles: imaginative foresight.7 The vision language we hear today, by and large, is not related to a concrete reality, something seen outside of us, but rather, thoughts and feelings and desires that come from within—hence, the art (or skill?) of vision-casting.

The person responsible for vision-casting is the leader. (And while we don’t have time in this paper to address this notion head on, I propose we also put an end to speaking of leadership

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6 http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/.
7 George Barna offers a number of working definitions, the last being his own and most precise: Vision is…“foresight with insight based on hindsight;” “looking into the future;” “seeing the invisible and making it visible;” “the informed bridge from the present to the future;” “sanctified dreams;” “a clear mental image of a preferable future imparted by God to His chosen servants and based upon an accurate understanding of God, self and circumstances” (Barna, The Power of Vision [Ventura: Regal, 2003], 24). And Dan Southerland, of Flamingo Road Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, says: “Vision is a picture of what God wants to do.” Cf. Dan Southerland, Transitioning: Leading Your Church through Change (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 22.
and leaders within the Church. In the meantime, a more scriptural and Christological choice might be “servant.” But in today’s parlance, this leader, or quasi-CEO, is the one who manufactures the vision, or “captures” it. And the way this vision works is that it must be followed, by all. If you’re not on board then find another church, another way, another leader to follow—in a sense, another vision. Or to put it more bluntly (and terrifyingly) yet, Mark Driscoll speaks of “a pile of dead bodies behind the bus; and by God’s grace it’ll be a mountain.” Run over are those who haven’t gotten with the Mars Hill vision.

What’s more, many within the Church claim their vision is from God. They use words such as: “The Lord laid it on my heart.” Or, “I heard the Lord telling me.” And even sometimes, “I saw where God was leading us.” These visions can’t be tested or questioned, proved or falsified. And by claiming that these visions are from God, then no wonder those not in line with the vision are left on their own, cast out, exiled, “run over.” In a very certain sense, by opposing the vision or the visionary, one also opposes God—so much for sola scriptura!

But is this the way our Lord has given us to speak? What do the Scriptures say about visions, and visionary experience? And how would our conversation and therefore practice change if we adopted a more scriptural way of speaking?

**Vision, Visionaries, and the Office of the Prophet**

The Scriptures do, in fact, have much to say about visions: receiving them, seeing them, and speaking them forth to others. But again, let’s get our definitions straight. In a standard

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8 For a thorough critique of “leadership” language, see Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism.*
9 Cf. Barna, 67-84. He also says, “Make no mistake about it: visionary leaders receive their vision for ministry from God” (26). Notice the character of inspiration, revelation, and outright enthusiasm.
11 This violent enforcement of the vision is nothing new. And while Eric Voegelin argues for an ancient Gnostic origin to this sort of thinking, he at least shows quite clearly how Karl Marx exemplified this thinking and paved the way for Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler to enact the behavior. See Voegelin, especially pages 17-26, 34-37, and 69-74.
Hebrew dictionary, *chazon* [חָצְוָן], the common word for *vision*, is defined as: “revelatory word (in superscriptions, Isa 1:1), sought from a prophet (Ezek 7:26).”

In the Old Testament vision is associated with the prophets. The *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* notes that “By far the largest number of passages, at least 86 out of 115 [mentioning *chazon*], are associated with prophecy. Why this particular association?” the article asks—because *vision* and *prophet* are so frequently associated: “A *chazon* is thus an event in which words are received…*chazon* is the means through which God speaks to the *nabis*.”

And this is the point: the visionary experience of the prophets, rooted in the revelatory Word of Yahweh and a true conversation with Him, will inform the Church’s witness today and thereby firmly establish her mission in the concrete Word of God. That is to say, if you want a vision, you must seek the word of the Prophet [Ezek 7:26], delivered now to us in Jesus Christ. And it is His revelatory Word that comes to us in the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of this Word made flesh in the sacraments—if we’ve got a vision, it’s Christ.

But before jumping to the conclusion, we’ve got to do a bit of the groundwork and understand how it is that the prophets see these visions.

**The Biblical Visionary Experience: *Visio extra nos***

A quick survey of the prophetic books highlights their visionary experience. For example, Isaiah begins in typical prophetic fashion:

> The *vision* of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he *saw* concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziyah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. (Isa 1:1)

For Jeremiah, the superscription is tied to the *words*:

> The words of Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiah, one of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom the *word of the LORD* came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign” (Jer 1:1-2).

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13 TDOT, IV: 283.
But it doesn’t take long before the words take form and God asks: “Jeremiah, what do you see?” (1:11). And even clearer yet,

“The word of the LORD came to me a second time, saying, ‘What do you see?’” (1:13). Word and vision come together in the presence of the prophet. But how does it work—what does this receiving of visions look like?

In my estimate, much of scholarship misses the mark when it comes to the experience of the prophets. Most critical scholars speak in terms of ecstatic experience—a sort of out-of-body phenomenon. Though certainly transcendental, I reject this notion of prophetic ecstasy. Abraham Heschel supports this, saying,

Indeed, if ecstasy were essential to prophetic experience, Moses, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah would have to be disqualified as prophets, since no trace of ecstasy is found in their experiences.15

H. Wheeler Robinson is another one of the few scholars who recognizes this common error. He argues that the Old Testament knows of no separation between soul and spirit and body.16 With Heschel and Robinson, I believe the prophet is fully conscious, alert, and even, or better, especially interactive with what he sees. The vision, linked to words, might best be described in terms of a conversation.

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14 For this vision language in other superscriptions see Ezek 1:1, “I saw visions from God.” Cf. Amos, “The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah” (1:1; cf. Mic 1:1; Hab 1:1). Obad 1, “The vision of Obadiah.” Cf. Nah 1:1, “The book of the vision of Nahum of Elkosh.”


16 H. Wheeler Robinson, Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 180-81. For the full quotation:

‘Possession,’ or some equivalent term denoting invasion, is preferable to the commonly used ‘ecstasy,’ because the latter springs from a Greek conception of personality, which does not at all harmonize with Hebrew psychology. ‘Ecstasy’ (ἐκστάσις) implies that the psyche can leave its usual earthly dwelling, the human body, and travel into other regions…But the Hebrew nephesh is not conceived as such an entity, potentially independent of the body; it is no more than the animating principle of the body, and it is the body which constitutes the real personality for the Hebrew…The Old Testament offers no example of a disembodied ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’…thus the very word, ‘ecstatic,’ as applied to the psycho-physical phenomena of Hebrew prophecy, helps to perpetuate a misconception. The prophet’s self does not leave his body.
The Heavenly Council and Conversation

The visionary experience of the prophet as conversation is consistently located in what the Scriptures call the heavenly, or divine council [סֹד יְהוָה] (Ps 82:1; 89:7). A scene from 1 Kings illustrates the contours of this council well. The context is Ahab, king of Israel, and Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, forming an alliance against Syria. The split nations will join under a common endeavor to reclaim Ramoth-gilead for Israel. But before they march off, Jehoshaphat, in good conscience, asks that they “Inquire first for the word of the LORD” (1 Ki 22:5). So Ahab calls together some 400 of his ‘prophets’ who all say with greater fervor than the next, “Go up, for the Lord will give it into the hand of the king” (22:6). Jehoshaphat is rightly suspicious—this is the North, they do things a bit differently up here. Surely, he pleads, there must be another. Of course there is, Micaiah, but Ahab hates him because “he never prophesies good concerning me, but evil” (22:8). Now, Micaiah gives the same word as all the others; but when he’s pressed, Micaiah permits us to peer into the assembly of the heavenly council. First he tells Ahab what he saw: “Israel scattered on the mountains, as sheep without a shepherd,” and then comes the council description:

“I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left; and the LORD said, ‘Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?’ And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, saying, ‘I will entice him.’ And the LORD said to him, ‘By what means?’ And he said, ‘I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ And he said, ‘You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so.’ Now therefore behold, the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the LORD has declared disaster for you.” (1 Ki 22:19-23)

Set aside for a moment the difficulty that comes with our Lord sending forth a lying spirit. Focus on what Micaiah saw. There is the Lord Himself, sitting upon His throne, and surrounding Him—to the left and the right—are the “host of Heaven” [וְכָל־צְבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם]. With this sketch in mind, notice what Micaiah heard. There was a conversation. We seem to enter somewhere in the
midst of it all, entering an on-going conversation. Yahweh is in dialogue with all the hosts of heaven, and here is Micaiah, the prophet, witness to it all.

We’re given a similar description in the prologue of Job (Job 1-2). The book begins with the familiar description of Job’s situation, most notably that he was “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil…who would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of his children…Thus Job did continually” (Job 1:1, 5).

Then the scene immediately turns to the heavenly council—again, we jump in mid-conversation:

Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. The Lord said to Satan, “From where have you come?” Satan answered the Lord and said, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.” And the Lord said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job…So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord. (Job 1:6-12)

Again, as for what we see: there’s the Lord, and gathered in His presence, that is, before His face, are the “sons of God,” among whom Satan himself is included. Again there’s a sense of a regular gathering, a regular conversation, but this time the conversation addresses Satan. And if the Lord sending forth a lying spirit was difficult theologically, here our Lord sends forth Satan as his own hand (1:11-12). Nevermind that for now, simply notice the consistency of this heavenly council scene—and Job 2 is more of the same.

To add another dimension to our picture here, we turn now to Zechariah 3, with the ordination of Joshua the high priest and the rebuke of Satan.

Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the Lord said to Satan, “The Lord rebuke you, O Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this a brand plucked from the fire?” Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments. And the angel said to those who were standing before him, “Remove the filthy garments from him.” And to him he said, “Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments.” And I said, “Let them put a clean turban on his head.” So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments. And the angel of the Lord was standing by. (Zech 3:1-5)
In this vision within the council there are now two humans: Joshua, who is consecrated as high priest, and the prophet Zechariah, who witnesses the event. But before Joshua is ordained to his temple service, there is first the rebuke of Satan. The council scene takes on here a legal tone, justice is spoken and the judgment rendered: Satan is cast out of the council. (One may consider the Christological implications here of Jesus’ statement in Luke’s Gospel: “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” [Lk 10:18]).

Moving to Isaiah, we consider his famous call narrative:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:
   “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”
And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said:
   “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”
Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said:
   “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”
And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 
   “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”
Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.” And he said, “Go, and say to this people...” (6:1-9)

Similar to what Zechariah saw, here we have within the council a cleansing of impurity. Again, it all takes place with angels moving about within a heavenly conversation. Unique to Isaiah’s vision, however, is the imagery of the train of the Lord’s robe, which fills the temple. This clue, along with the coal taken from the altar of incense, reveals the down-to-earth character and locatedness of these visions. Not only that, but the seraphim, hovering above our Lord’s throne, calling back and forth to each other, are the heavenly reality of the carved cherubim, located

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17 Consider also Isaiah’s prophecy: “How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low!” (Isa 14:12).
above the ark of the covenant.\(^1^8\) Isaiah’s vision is also similar to that of Micaiah, where we began, but this time it is Isaiah who interjects and stands before Yahweh. Hearing the call, “Who will go for us?”\(^1^9\) Isaiah offers to go with what he sees and hears: “Here am I! Send me.”\(^2^0\)

Now that we have a working picture of this heavenly council we must examine the prophet’s task within the council. First and foremost, the council is the place where Yahweh delivers His word. This is truly revelation. As we’ve said above, it’s the location of the heavenly conversation. And to this conversation, along with angels, and archangels, and all the company of heaven, the Lord invites His prophet as an active participant. Fabry, in his article in the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* suggests:

Naturally, it is the basic requirement for every true prophet that he stand in the sód YHWH (cf. e.g, Isa. 6; Jer. 23:18), not only in the sense of the notion of a throne council but also abstractly as participation in Yahweh’s own immediate planning.\(^2^1\)

So the council is the location of the Lord and His Word and therefore the prophet—all in conversation together. The Lord speaks and His Word takes form and shape, hence: vision. The prophet’s interaction with this vision is both by hearing and seeing, but also by speaking and interceding.\(^2^2\)

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\(^1^8\) 1 Kings says it well: “Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the Lord to its place in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the Most Holy Place, underneath the wings of the cherubim. For the cherubim spread out their wings over the place of the ark, so that the cherubim overshadowed the ark and its poles” (1 Ki 8:6-7).

\(^1^9\) The plural “for us” here in Isaiah invites us to consider the creation of man as an instance of deliberation within the heavenly council: “Let us create man in our image” (Gen 1:26; cf. 3:22; 11:7).

\(^2^0\) See also Isa 40:1-8 for a similar conversation between the prophet and the Lord within this council.

\(^2^1\) H.-J. Fabry, “Sód,” TDOT X, 176.

\(^2^2\) An important aspect of this conversation, however, is the prophet’s “no.” One of the chief functions of a prophet is his appointment to speak back to the Lord, to argue his case—or perhaps the more comfortable language might be, “to intercede for the people.” When our Lord speaks His word and presents His vision of justice to the prophet, there are times the prophet simply says, “no.” Consider, for example, the experience of Amos (7:1-6). Twice our Lord shows Amos a vision of destruction and twice Amos cries out against the vision: “O Lord God, please forgive!...O Lord God, please cease! [חֲדַל−נָא]” And twice the Lord repents of the vision He showed to Amos. Yes, I said, repent (cf. KJV). Our English translations have piously scrubbed the strong Hebrew language which clearly presents our Lord repenting [חֲדַל], changing His mind, turning from the evil (cf. Isa 45:7) was to do (cf. Jer 18:7-8). This sort of intercession is precisely what Abraham, the first prophet (Gen 20:7), engaged in by “standing before the Lord,” pleading for Sodom (Gen 18:22-33). More famous yet is the intercession of Moses, who stands in the breach between Yahweh’s wrath and the people of Israel (Cf. Exod 8:8-14, 28-32; 9:27-29; 10:16-17; 32:11-14, 30-36; 33:12-17; 34:8-9; Num 11:2, 11-15; 12:13-14; 14:13-19; 21:7; Deut 5:5; 9:20, 25-26; 10:10). Walter
Most importantly, the word revealed is a real word, an external word, something that can be seen with the eye and heard with the ear. This Word, revealed in the heavenly council, is best known in the Old Testament as Torah: the teaching, the revelation, the word of truth from the council. Torah reveals Yahweh’s will for His people. Sometimes our English translations speak in terms of “plans,” “counsels,” or “advice.” All of these refer to that which proceeds from the council. By inviting His prophets to see and hear the vision of His will, He intends for them to go and speak forth this word. And so we rightly speak of prophets as forth-tellers. There is a strong misconception among us that understands the prophets and prophecy primarily in terms of foretelling, or predictors of the future. Prophets do no such thing. There is nothing within them that allows them to predict or foresee the future. Rather, by their location within the heavenly council, where they see the Lord’s word as it is in Heaven (outside of time), the vision they see may be in our understanding past, present, or future. They simply see the reality and speak it forth. Though originally called “seers” (1 Sam 9:9), prophets are properly witnesses.

**False Prophets: No Vision**

To be sure, the prophetic experience within this council cannot be over-estimated. Amos states,

“For the Lord Yahweh does nothing without revealing his council to his servants the prophets.”

כִי לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה דָבָר כִּי אִם־גָלָה סֹודֹו אֶל־עֲבָדָיו הַנְבִיאִִֽים

(Amos 3:7)

And Hosea confirms the visionary aspect of this council:

“I spoke to the prophets; it was I who multiplied visions.” (Hosea 12:10)
Everything our Lord does is first revealed to the prophet in a vision within the heavenly council. In fact, “According to this [theological] understanding, the sign of a true prophet is membership and participation in the *sod YHWH*.”24 But what happens when there’s no vision or no prophet? What do you do? How do you get a vision? Does this ever happen in the Scriptures?

1 Samuel gives us a starting point: “The word of the Lord was rare in those days—*there was no vision opened to them*” (1 Sam 3:1). This lack of vision is not a good thing. And as the narrative unfolds, Samuel is called to be Israel’s prophet, their witness to the heavenly council. Another example is found in Proverbs, “Where there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint” (Prov 29:18).25 Without a vision there is fear, lawlessness, and recklessness. In Lamentations Jeremiah cries out:

> Her gates have sunk into the ground; he has ruined and broken her bars; her king and princes are among the nations; the law is no more, and her prophets find no vision from the LORD. (Lam 2:9)

These prophetic visions are always from God, revealed in the heavenly council, and are never from man—no ecstatic experience, or imaginative foresight, or preferred future. You can’t *come up* with a vision. But Israel had a way of doing just that:

> Thus says the Lord of hosts: “Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord.” (Jer 23:16)

Jeremiah addresses the wicked shepherds who “scatter the sheep of my pasture” (23:1). Our Lord speaks of His own agony over their evil, and so issues His word of judgment on both priest and prophet alike. He warns the people to close their ears, not to trust these *false* prophets. For what

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25 Cf. Andrew Steinmann, *Proverbs*, Concordia Commentary Series (St. Louis: CPH, 2009), 575: “The Hebrew term is *never* used to mean ‘vision’ in the human sense of a person’s envisioned goals, aspirations, persuasive powers, or imaginative leadership, even though this proverb has often been misinterpreted along those lines.” Cf. Keil/Delitzsch, “HAZON is, according to the sense, equivalent to NEBU’AH, the prophetic revelation in itself, and as the contents of that which is proclaimed.” (432) Also notable is the second half of this verse which ties the prophetic vision to the *Torah*, mentioned above.
makes them false is that they have no vision—at least, no vision from Yahweh. Their visions come from their own minds. The Lord asks,

For who among them has stood in the council of the LORD to see and to hear his word, or who has paid attention to his word and listened? (23:18)

He goes on:

I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in my council, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people, and they would have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their deeds. (23:21-22)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer relates God’s sentiment well: “God hates visionary dreaming; it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious.”

Or as Jeremiah puts it:

Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, declares the LORD, who steal my words from one another. Behold, I am against the prophets, declares the LORD, who use their tongues and declare, ‘declares the LORD.’ Behold, I am against those who prophesy lying dreams, declares the LORD, and who tell them and lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness, when I did not send them or charge them. So they do not profit this people at all, declares the LORD. (23:30-32)

Vision does not come from within us—our minds, our thoughts, our plans, our hopes. Vision comes from the Word of God, which is a “lamp to our feet and a light to our path” (Ps 119:105).

Conclusion

We have argued that today’s notion of vision, vision-casting, and visionaries does not align itself with the Scriptures. While today’s best-selling methodologies root the vision within the creative mind of the leader, the Scriptures locate the vision within the heavenly council. So

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Indeed, Barna even admits, “the Bible never directly refers to this insight with the terminology we are using” (55).
what does this mean for us today? Where is vision today? Well, oddly enough, I think Bill Hybels may help us get back on track:

The coolest vision that ever happened on earth was when God announced that he wanted redemption to occur but that it was going to cost someone something. Sin was going to have to be paid for...The coolest vision that ever happened was when Jesus died to atone for human sin.  

Whether or not this is the coolest vision, it is for Scripture the central and consistent vision—it’s what takes place in the heavenly council. And the heavenly council is located wherever God is. Wherever the Lord sits on His throne and enters into a conversation with His heavenly hosts. As we come into the New Testament, the vision of the heavenly council is revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. He is the vision the prophets beheld. The council itself is revealed by the counsels that proceed from His mouth. Indeed, in Christ’s own speech the prophetic voice is fulfilled. And with Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension, the counsels of God, that which proceeds from the council, from Christ Himself, is delivered in the Church by the Spirit. Paul calls these counsels, mysteria: mysteries. As Raymond Brown demonstrates, the Semitic background to Paul’s mysterion is the Hebrew sod (council). So St. Paul says,

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. (1 Cor 4:1)

That is, one should regard us pastors as stewards of the counsels of God, stewards of His Word, stewards of the preaching task and the administration of His Sacraments. As another scholar notes, “the mystery of the vision is the mystery of the Word.” Luther gives us the same:

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“Solely through His Word, God would declare to us His will and His counsels, not through our notions and imaginations.”

If a church is looking for a new vision, maybe we should refrain from any sort of Gnostic mysticism, creative foresight, or preferred future, and stick with what St. Paul said, “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). The vision of the heavenly council is revealed to us \( \epsilon \nu \ X\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omega \), in Christ. The mystery is laid bare in the Word as it is preached and the giving out of the Holy Sacraments. As Church, we’re given to gather around these; for so we will on the last day. For a closing picture, let us peer into the heavenly council with St. John:

9 After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” 11 And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.” (Rev 7:9-12)

That’s our vision: Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Let’s take after the prophets and witness to this Christ. Let’s tell forth what we have seen and what we have heard! And thereby, let us draw others into the Church, where the Word of Christ is preached and received. There are the mysteries, there is the heavenly council, there is Christ for us.

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