

Visions: to be or not to be

Introduction

Most sound believers would agree that the reliance upon visions in Charismatic and Pentecostal sources is an aberration not supported by New Covenant, apostolic teaching. Indeed, many would point to the appalling excesses in history that flowed from some claimed prophet's visions; the Munster tragedy would be a prime example.

But what about Reformed evangelical believers who claim to have visions and claim that these involve prescience? Are these any different? Is there any NT support for such practice?

This paper will examine this issue.

Visions in the OT

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds. Heb 1:1-2

God spoke in various ways under the Old Covenant

These methods include:

- Prophecy. This includes all forms of communication from God towards his people: foretelling, teaching with divine power, direction, judgments, warnings, denunciations and also exuberant worship of God.
- Visions. Prophets were formerly called 'seers' (1 Sam 9:9-11). This was because the word of God formerly often came through a waking vision experienced in an ecstasy or through a dream, which was a vision during sleep (Gen 15:1; Num 12:6; Job 4:13; Dan 7:1-2, 15, 8:2; Ezek 11:24). Often 'visions' and 'dreams' are used interchangeably (Num 12:6; Dan 7:1).
- To a lesser degree God spoke through lots, Urim and Thummim or the teaching of a priest.
- Sometimes God revealed himself through a symbol, which was a proof of the Divine presence. Fire was a common symbol. For example to Moses on Mount Horeb, and at Sinai; to Abraham (Gen 15:1-21); to Elijah (1 Kg 19:11-12).
- At other times he revealed himself by angelic ministry: this was frequent, especially in the days of the patriarchs. This continued until the period of Acts (plus the exceptional revelation to John in the late 1st century with visions and angelic appearances, Rev 1:1, 5:2, 7:2, 11:1).

Usually God spoke to the people of God

- He spoke to Jacob in a dream (Gen 28:1, 31:11).
- To Joseph (Gen 37:5, 9).
- To Solomon (1Kg 3:5).
- To Daniel (Dan 2:3).
- Joseph (Mary's husband) was warned in a dream (Matt 1:20, 2:12-13, 19, 22).

Sometimes God gave visions to Gentiles

- God informed Abimelech in a dream that Sarah was the wife of Abraham (Gen 20:3).
- To Laban (Gen 31:24).
- To the butler and baker (Gen 40:5).
- To Pharaoh (Gen 41:1-7).
- Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 4:10-17).
- Pilate's wife was worried about harming Christ (Matt 27:19).

In these last days God has spoken to us by His Son

God does not speak generally to his people in Old Covenant forms any more. He speaks to us by His Son through the indwelling Holy Spirit of Christ.

In his sovereignty God may grant someone a vision for some special reason, just as he occasionally grants a prescient prophecy for urgent reasons (see later). Nevertheless, visions, dreams, and foretelling prophecy are not the norms under the New Covenant. The focus is upon Christ not some subjective supernatural experience.

Since the Bible is the word of Christ, the Holy Spirit chiefly uses Scripture to direct believers or by giving direction during devotions.

The sources of direction for the believer

The only purpose in sharing a prescient vision is to give direction in some manner to the church; otherwise there is no point in them. People share a vision as a source of knowledge, such as regarding a future event, or a direction to follow.¹

First we have to establish what the normal sources of knowing God's will are.

The Bible

As God's word, Scripture is the primary source of gaining knowledge about everything. God teaches us that everything we will ever need to lead a holy, true life is taught us in Scriptural texts:

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2 Tim 3:16-17

Every work that we will ever undertake is equipped by God's written word. We need nothing else.

One of the problems with visions are that they form extra-Biblical sources of knowledge and by definition this is anathema; in fact it is blasphemy.

Doctrine

True doctrine arises from the systematic collation of Biblical teaching. As we gather these teachings together and form dogma, these doctrines also give us direction in our lives. This is not new revelation but simply understanding the wisdom contained in Scripture presented in a rational collection.

¹ I will investigate a private vision for encouragement later.

Thus, for example, we have Biblical teaching about sanctification. Any sources which teach people to do something odd in order to be more holy² must be resisted because it contradicts Biblical doctrine.

The Holy Spirit

The indwelling Spirit is also a prime source of direction. As the inspiration for Scripture he also will not add to God's word but will bring light and illumination on aspects of Scripture presented in a form particular to us.

Thus we should learn to be sensitive to the inner witness of the Spirit and follow his direction.

The counsel of mature believers

This would especially involve church elders. The counsel of people steeped in the Word for many years is worth listening to. Again this is not new revelation but the application of Scripture to a certain situation to help an individual focus on the right truth to aid choices in life.

The experience of the historic church

This is invaluable. Studying church history repays dividends.

History shows us the successes and the failures of men claiming to follow God. Periods where the church followed God's word differ hugely from other periods where churches followed some man or aberrant teaching. We learn about the application of the Bible in history and this informs our present circumstances which often follow patterns established long ago.

By considering all these things a believer is able to consistently form an opinion about the direction of his life; which way to choose.

Summary

All these things are aspects of our being in Christ. He is our revelation from God but he works through these means: speaking through the Bible by the Holy Spirit, speaking through the teachings of the Bible to establish principles, and speaking through other believers in Christ, both present and their wisdom recorded from the past.

Apparent NT support for visions for direction

I will avoid examining OT visions in detail because by definition these are Old Covenant. I will be making the point later that modern visions are also Old Covenant and are now not to be relied upon for the importation of spiritual knowledge. Just as no one would aver that casting lots was a viable means today of discerning God's will, so trusting in visions has past away.

Despite this, there are some examples of visions in the NT. These are only found in the Gospels (three cases), Acts and one case in Revelation. There is also a report of a previous historic case in 1 Cor 12.

² Charismatic examples would include: wearing a previously blessed wooden crucifix; burning a paper stating your worries on a fire kindled on a fake altar of incense; standing up, after a speech to a congregation, to identify as a sinner and thus receive forgiveness; and so on.

The Gospels

Now as they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, 'Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead'. Matt 17:9

This is simply a command regarding a prior event – the Transfiguration. It has no bearing for us.

And the people waited for Zacharias, and marvelled that he lingered so long in the temple. But when he came out, he could not speak to them; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he beckoned to them and remained speechless. Lk 1:21-22

Again, a report about a previous event.

Yes, and certain women of our company, who arrived at the tomb early, astonished us. When they did not find His body, they came saying that they had also seen a vision of angels who said He was alive. Lk 24:22-23

Again, simply a report about a previous event. Note that the statement is not actually true. The women had not seen a vision of angels they actually saw angels. In the excitement and confusion facts were mixed up.

Acts

Paul's Damascene vision

Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, 'Ananias'. And he said, 'Here I am, Lord'. Acts 9:10

And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting *his* hand on him, so that he might receive his sight. Acts 9:12

This is another signally special example of a vision that is extraordinary. Saul was to become Paul, the most important apostle of the Lamb after Peter, one born out of time, and one who wrote a third of the NT. As a former persecutor of the church and ardent Pharisee trained by Gamaliel, a special event was necessary to bring Saul to conversion and commission his ministry. Paul needed to see the risen Lord.

This is not something common to ordinary believers.

The outreach to the Gentiles

About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, 'Cornelius!' Acts 10:3

Now while Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant, behold, the men who had been sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate. Acts 10:17

While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, 'Behold, three men are seeking you.' Acts 10:19

I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object descending like a great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners; and it came to me. Acts 11:5

In the early days of the church when the apostles were learning what the repercussions of the New Covenant meant, special means (here, a vision) were needed to convince the apostles to take a new direction. In this case, to open the Gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 11:18).

So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. Acts 12:9

This was not a vision but an appearance of an angel.

And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us'. Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them.
Acts 16:9-10

Paul's planned journey is impeded by the Spirit and then changed in order to go to Macedonia. This is a special event in the ministry of an apostle of the Lamb in times of signs to authenticate the Gospel (Heb 2:4).

Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, 'Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city.'
Acts 18:9-10

A vision sent from God to encourage Paul in difficult times. A special event to an apostle.

Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, Acts 26:19

A report of a previous experience of a vision.

The transient nature of Acts

It is vitally important to note that Acts was a period of the church in infancy, a changeover from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. A transitional time. Mistakes were made and it took time to understand how the New Covenant would function. For example, elders do not appear in Acts until chapter 11 even though they are vital for the organisation of the local church. Also casting lots was utilised, an Old Covenant practice, to choose Matthias, who is never heard of again (a mistake, it should have been Paul).³ Worshipping in the temple occurred initially until God removed it.

It is incredibly unwise to use Acts to establish doctrines and practices without prior categorical teaching in the letters. For example, to cast lots to identify God's will or to allow the separation of parties and factions in the church (e.g. Hellenists and Jews; Acts 6:1). Every church leader that established communes based upon the example of communism in the early church in Acts led to complete disaster and damaged lives.

This understanding alone obviates any examples of visions being used in the church. There is no apostolic instruction on visions in the letters.

Revelation

And thus I saw the horses in the vision: those who sat on them had breastplates of fiery red, hyacinth blue, and sulphur yellow; and the heads of the horses were like the heads of lions; and out of their mouths came fire, smoke, and brimstone. Rev. 9:17

Revelation is a series of parallel visions given especially to John at the end of his life to prepare the church for what was to come.⁴ Oddly, the word 'vision' only appears once here.

This is undoubtedly a serious prescient vision of a superlative nature, only comparable with those given to Daniel, Ezekiel and Isaiah.

³ 1 Cor 15:8-9, 'Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles'.

⁴ Rev 1:1, 'The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants -- things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John'.

This was a vision given to an apostle of the Lamb, not an ordinary member of the church, who was also a prophet. This is not something that believers can aspire to; it is entirely 'other' and separate. This is a 'one-off'.

The special circumstances of the early church

I have stated that the beginning of the Gospel proclamation to the Jews and then the Gentiles was historically special. This was the breakout of God's revelation and special means were given to authenticate the Gospel proclamation.

Charismatics and Pentecostals (plus some others) maintain that this was not a special period but is the norm for the church for all time. Cessationists state that all the gifts of the Spirit ceased completely sometime in the first century. My position is that certain gifts ceased because they were no longer needed and could become a distraction (as they are in Charismatic circles). However, the gifts continue as the Holy Spirit chooses in the form that he chooses. For example:

- Tongues ceased. They were a sign to outsiders being words spoken in their language by people that did not know that language. Once the Gospel became established, such things were unnecessary. Special signs were vital to distinguish the Gospel from the many religious sects at that time claiming people's attention. The Gospel had power.
- Interpretation of tongues ceased because tongues ceased.
- Working of miracles. Again, necessary to authenticate the Gospel at first.
- Healings still occur in God's will. However, the frequency and intensity of healings as a sign to outsiders is very rare.
- The word of knowledge is, and always was, teaching.
- The word of wisdom is, and always was, counselling. Together, teaching and counselling are the ministries of an elder.
- Prophecy. Before the availability of the Bible to explain apostolic ministry and the teachings of Jesus, prophecy was vital to edify the churches and was very common. Over time this became unnecessary. Prophecy (a word from God) continues as teaching ministry enhanced by a powerful gifting of the Spirit (prophetic ministry). The formal office of a powerful prophet as a seer and foreteller with power for miracles has ceased after John the Baptist. This was an Old Covenant ministry now gone (Matt 11:13; Lk 16:16).
- Discernment of Spirits. Still a vital gift.
- Faith. Still a vital gift. This is faith above and beyond the faith that most people have.

The church always needs diversity of gifts, and the Spirit gives those gifts that are needed at that time.

The early period was special and unique

This was because God had to empower the breakout of the Gospel to a market filled with religious cults and sects, like the Greek mystery religions and holy clubs. These had no power, but the Gospel did.

Now all accept that this time was special, but Charismatics claim it never stopped. However, nobody claims that modern church leaders can do the things which the apostles, and sometimes their delegates, did routinely or once only. For example:

- Walking on water (Peter).
- Being bitten by a venomous snake and surviving (Paul).
- Teleportation (Philip).
- Instant intense healing of serious conditions. Healing of the blind, the crippled etc.

- Raising the dead.
- Clearly seeing the future with no uncertainty.
- Instantaneous dispelling of demons from demonised unbelievers.

Claims by Charismatics of healings never stand the test of inspection. They are usually only parlour tricks of the sort performed by hypnotist entertainers. They tend to be making someone fall over backwards (done better by stage hypnotists), appearing to make legs grow (again also done by stage performers) or pain relief (caused by endorphin release that quickly passes away). Investigations by Christian doctors of many ministries (such as John Wimber) revealed no significant healing at all after a crusade. This has been the case for decades. In fact there are many cases of a claimed healing miracle of someone on the night of the crusade only for that person to die a few days later.

Occasionally, God in his grace does make a significant healing. This is not due to the gift of some man but the grace of God. For example, I have seen a lady get up and walk freely from a wheelchair after prayer and not use the chair again. This was God, not some gifted person. In exposing the lies of men, we must not limit God.

In addition, all sound historians, including Charismatics and Pentecostals, agree that tongues ceased. However, they claim that they started up again, occasionally in history and then finally in the late 19th century. This is sophistry.

First, it makes no sense. The tongue as an act to help the Gospel break through by speaking in a certain language is no longer necessary. The Gospel is understood worldwide. Secondly, modern tongues are not actual languages (Acts 2:6) but gibberish. [Claims that some tongues sound like a language are specious. Biblical tongues were actual languages.] These are not Biblical tongues. Third, many Pentecostal tongues are interpreted as prophecy but tongues are prayer (1 Cor 14:14). Fourth, many tongues are directions or encouragement to saints, but Biblical tongues are testimony or praise to God (Acts 2:11). Thus modern tongues are gibberish and not Biblical and the interpretations are the excitable delusions of people.

Conclusion: modern tongues are not Biblical but are of the same sort as those experienced in the occult.

So the claim by Charismatics that their experiences are the same as those of the early church are utterly fallacious. The modern experience of the supernatural is a universe away from what the early church saw. That age has gone.

Joel's prophecy

This is probably the biggest problem to overcome.

And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy. I will show wonders in heaven above and signs in the earth beneath: blood and fire and vapour of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD. And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. Acts 2:17-21

This text is used by Pentecostals, Charismatics, enthusiasts, millenarians and others as an apologetic for universal supernatural gifts, visions, dreams and miracles. Often the result of such an apologetic has been chaos, apostasy, cultism, schism, exuberance, licentiousness and authoritarianism. It was such an apologetic that led to the Munster tragedy for example.

What is Joel's prophecy actually saying?

In the last days God will pour out the Spirit on all flesh

The 'last day's sometimes means the time before the very end but mostly means the Gospel Age after Christ's atonement. This is what it means here, confirmed by the fact that in this period the Holy Spirit is poured out on the elect from all nations and whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.

Widespread prophecy and revelation

In this post-resurrection age there will be widespread revelation by prophecy, visions and dreams through men and women who serve God.

This occurred in the early apostolic age. Acts reveals many examples of prophecy by men and women, visions and dreams. A period of supernatural gifting to authenticate the Gospel message in the world occurred in the early years of the church.

These supernatural gifts gradually faded away. This is a historical fact. Later letters do not mention them often if at all. Tongues are not mentioned after 1 Corinthians, regarding the period in the 50s AD. Prophecy is mentioned but not often and usually by an apostle or his delegate. Examples of visions are not mentioned at all after Acts; except 2 Cor 12:1 regarding an earlier historic experience and Rev 9:17.

Occasional mentions of tongues and healing occur in some Patristic letters but very few and usually regarding an aberrant cult, such as the mid-2nd century Montanists. They are rarely spoken of with enthusiasm and are often lumped with the Gnostics.

Occasional examples appeared in church history, again usually in some cult or another and often with very bad effects (e.g. the scandalous Catholic Apostolic Church in 19th century London or the Cevenols, 1688+).

It took time for the church to fully understand the benefits of the New Covenant mediated by the Spirit of God. Therefore God tolerated some mistakes (casting lots) and over-emphasis (communism), stressed preaching to Gentiles (originally avoided), and allowed a hangover of Old Covenant forms for a time (visions, dreams, formal prophecies, temple attendance, celebrating feasts) until the ministry of the Spirit in a believer became better understood.

What Joel is really saying is that in the New Covenant there will be open communication with God. He saw this in terms of his Old Covenant experience (visions, dreams, prophecy). He could not understand the implications of the indwelling Spirit in regenerated believers.

We have the Spirit within us, which is far better.

Signs in heaven

Supporters of Charismatic supernatural gifts based on this text tend to shy away from this because we do not see it happening.

- Wonders in heaven above: the sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood.
- Signs in the earth beneath: blood and fire and vapour of smoke.

These signs are reserved for the very end, as Jesus explains in Matt 24:29, after the final tribulation.

Do these verses support the idea that prophecies, visions, and dreams of revelation are commonplace in the church throughout all history? Not at all!

Visions used in the conversion of a person

From time to time God brings an elect sinner to himself by means of a vision. This is not isolated from the Word of God proclaiming the Gospel but is an adjunct to the way that God draws them. A vision of Jesus was part of my own conversion but I rarely speak about this.

The classic case of this is the conversion of Saul and the vision that God gave him of Jesus on the Damascus Road. Saul knew the Gospel and had heard the testimony of Stephen. He was also steeped in the Old Testament from his training as a Pharisee. Saul knew God's word but needed a confrontation with the risen Jesus to bring about his conversion. [To a certain degree, everyone needs such a confrontation in conversion.] God needed to stop Saul in his tracks and initiate conviction of sin against the Lord.

As a means of grace helping to bring about conversion, such visions are from God and should be received with thankfulness. We could debate whether the vision was a part of regeneration or a preparation for it in God's sovereign grace. I believe that it is an aspect of regeneration (along with conviction of sin) that results in faith and repentance.

Visions for personal encouragement

Paul's vision of heaven

I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago -- whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows -- such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man -- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows -- how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. Of such a one I will boast; ... And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. 2 Cor 12:1-5, 7

This is Paul possibly talking about his conversion experience, though he had other visions of the Lord Jesus (Acts 9:3, 16:9, 18:9, 22:17).

Firstly, this is the experience of an apostle of the Lord in the breakout of the Gospel when signs were prominent to authenticate the message. Secondly, this is not a normal period but the transitional time of Acts. Thus we cannot insist that these set a precedent for all

believers for all time. There is no apostolic teaching to expect visions just as there is no principle to expect teleportation.⁵

However, during history there have been times when a man was commissioned by the Lord for a ministry by the use of a vision. Hudson Taylor on Brighton beach is a good example. A vision of lost people calling out for help initiated the China Inland Mission. This is similar to Acts 16:9.

Paul's vision was a vision of heaven to encourage and stimulate him for ministry, It was a divine commissioning. Taylor's was similar, but less intense. Many people have known such types of visions as personal encouragement to change their lives in some manner.

Revelations

In times of great crisis God has sometimes granted his saints revelation to warn them of impending danger. The great example of this is Alexander Peden ('Peden the Prophet') who was given multiple prescient warnings in the Scottish Killing Times to avoid danger. By this he saved many lives. However, this was more prescient prophecy than visions. He even knew of the death of the English king before any news arrived much later.

Deliverance

John Paton was once under attack from tribesmen in the New Hebrides intent on killing him. He prayed and the men ran away fearful. Later some were converted and he asked them why they ran. They replied that a company of angels in bright armour surrounded him and terrified them. This is a rare example of God's deliverance by granting a vision to sinners.

The point

God clearly, on occasion, gives a person a vision for personal encouragement in some way. This is usually something that is not for public consumption but personal edification ('which it is not lawful for a man to utter'). They are not revelatory, not new revelation, but are means of encouragement, confirmation of God's prior will or a warning. Such genuine visions are extremely rare and usually given in emergencies of some kind.

The problem with visions is when a person uses them as prescience to preach to people about certain matters, such as church direction, private direction ('God has shown me that you must do this or that'), establishing a doctrine, establishing a church practice, indulging in occult practices, or to establish personal authority, and so on.

What about visions granted to unregenerate people?

Many times God gave a vision to a sinner who was not of God's family at that time. What can we make of this.

Usually the vision was a warning of some kind, usually of judgment to come, such as the vision to Nebuchadnezzar. In some cases the vision and subsequent judgment led to the conversion of the visionary, as in the case of Nebuchadnezzar who later humbled himself

⁵ Acts 8:39-40, 'Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing. But Philip was found at Azotus'. Azotus (Ashdod) is midway between Gaza and Joppa, 3 miles from the sea. Before that Philip had been in the desert on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza.

and worshipped God. In most cases the result was judgment and an ignominious end, such as Belshazzar (Dan 5).⁶

In some rare instances an unbeliever was granted a vision / prophecy where a curse was turned into blessing, such as Balaam. The visionary was still condemned (Jos 13:22; 2 Pt 2:15ff; Jude 1:11ff).

These OT examples do not form precedents for making a doctrine that God continues to give visions to the unregenerate. We have seen that God does not even usually give visions to his own people.

Sometimes sinners saw angels, or had visions, or had prescient dreams but never were converted. The gifts were added to their judgment. The visions were usually a divine warning of God's impending wrath.

It is astonishing that some people use these examples as an argument to support Charismatic visions and suchlike as universally applicable today. Pharaoh saw multiple miracles in his land of the sort never seen by man since; but there was no benefit to him; they resulted in judgment. Sennacherib saw an angel kill 185,000 of his soldiers in one night. Shortly afterwards his sons killed him in God's judgment. King Saul prophesied with the sons of the prophets twice but died unregenerate by suicide, rejected by God. The gift means nothing in terms of salvation and is often a warning.

God can do as he pleases. In the OT there were times of instantaneous judgment that is suspended in the current time. As well as final judgment, there were many temporal judgments on sinners. Many sinners saw miracles, healings, prophecies, visions and suchlike but were never saved. One saw a donkey speak. Other sinners saw the sun stand still. None of these things did them any good; they died in their sins. The homosexuals of Sodom saw angels but shortly afterwards were destroyed by them.⁷ These were different times because the Spirit had not yet been given because Jesus was not yet glorified. Thus there were many angelic appearances, miracles and suchlike. We cannot determine precedents for today from these.

Moses was a man like us but that does not mean that we can expect to part the waves of the sea. Jonah survived being devoured by a great fish; we cannot expect to survive such an experience. Elijah went to heaven in a fiery chariot in a whirlwind. No one has done that since. These were particular signs for those times and not for now. In the same way the formal prophetic office has ceased with the end of the Old Covenant, with John the Baptist.

For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. Matt 11:13

The law and the prophets *were* until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached.

Lk 16:16

Just as all the trappings of the Old Covenant have ceased: high priests, priestly mediators, instrumental music in worship, temples made of stone, Urim and Thummim, lots, feasts, fasts, and so on, so also visions are not the norm for revelation. They are mere shadows but the substance is Christ.

So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ. Col 2:16-17

⁶ We cannot say if the words written were a waking vision or a material fact. It seems likely to be a combination of both.

⁷ Gen 19:1, 4-5, 13.

Therefore, if perfection were through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need was there that another priest should rise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be called according to the order of Aaron? For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law. Heb 7:11-12

For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law. Heb 7:12

For on the one hand there is an annulling of the former commandment because of its weakness and unprofitableness, for the law made nothing perfect. Heb 7:18-19

For if He were on earth, He would not be a priest, since there are priests who offer the gifts according to the law; who serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things. Heb 8:4-5

In that He says, 'A new covenant', He has made the first obsolete. Heb 8:13

It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience -- concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation. Heb 9:9-10

For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered? Heb 10:1-2

By a new and living way which He consecrated for us. Heb 10:20

Visions are Old Covenant, which is why Joel focused upon them as a normal means of communication with God. He could not understand what the indwelling Spirit would do for the elect. With the direct revelation of the Spirit of Christ in our lives we do not need visions, dreams, angels or any other Old Covenant ministry. God speaks to us through Christ.

What about visions by claimed Christians that began when unregenerate?

It happens on occasion that a Charismatic church leader will claim some sort of authority based upon his ability to see visions, which he treats as prescience. He also claims that he is special because these visions began in childhood before he was a believer and this therefore boosts his authority. We will see later that William Branham (Latter Rain) and Lonnie Frisbee (Calvary / Vineyard) were of this sort; William Seymour (Azusa Street) was another.

This is a flat denial of Total Depravity. Before we come to the Lord and are regenerated we are capable of no good thing. Nothing we do pleases God; everything is cursed and sinful. Even our very best works (applauded in the world) are sin. Therefore these unregenerate visions are sin.

For there is not a just man on earth who does good. Eccles 7:20

There is none who does good, no, not one. Ps 53:3

We are all like an unclean *thing*, and all our righteousnesses *are* like filthy rags. Isa 64:5

There is none who does good, no, not one. Rm 3:12

Anything that arises from the old nature prior to regeneration is sin and the old nature is incapable of producing any spiritual good. God is not pleased with any work that results from our cursed unregenerate nature.

Therefore visions experienced before conversion emanating from the human soul have no lasting value, no spiritual value. God may use a vision, on occasion in his sovereignty, to warn an unsaved person and help bring them to Christ – but even this is rare and the vision is not from the soul but externally applied to shake the elect sinner, as in the case of Saul on the Damascus road. [One could argue that such a vision leading to conversion is part of regeneration.]

50% of conversion is repentance (the other 50% is faith). In conversion all our previous life is repented and the convert follows Christ instead. Thus all unregenerate visions emanating from the soul need to be renounced during conversion as acts of the flesh that are sinful.

Any church leader boasting of visions that were experienced from childhood are not to be trusted. Such a person has no understanding of God's word.

Why we cannot trust visions

Bad sources of visions

The occult connection

Visions are commonplace within occult circles. In the disciplines of occultism, visions occur in witchcraft, magic and spiritualism at all levels. Sometimes visions are sought by utilising certain methods: drugs, psychotic-inducing plants, asceticism, passivity, pain, sweat lodges, whirling, dancing into a frenzy etc.

The visions received are always considered to be divine and often viewed as an aid against a demon or localised evil spirit in a tree or river. Sometimes the vision supposedly spells out the future. On occasions visions were hoped to convey some sort of spiritual power.

In Western pagan occultism people that could tap into visions on demand were called shamans (multiple groups), sorcerers (multiple groups), medicine-men (American Indian) or witch-doctors (Voodoo). Trances would often be induced from dancing to a rigorous drumbeat. Empowered by an altered state, the shaman was able to ward off evil spirits or pronounce curses.

The Gnostic connection

In Gnosticism the focus was upon knowledge and not necessarily power (though Gnostic sects varied significantly). Visions of the divine (illumination) were sought to gain more knowledge about God and the realm of the spirit. Supernatural visions were necessary for this since matter was evil, obviating human methods of knowledge (Dualism).

The mystical connection

Mystics were similar to Gnostics in some ways. Their visions were claimed sources of divine knowledge usually to help gain union with the divine by suppressing the self. Some mystics became famous for their visions and some were written down for posterity. Thus mystical illumination became a focus for many that followed this or that mystical disciple. Examples: Teresa of Avila [1515-1582], Brother Lawrence [c.1605-1691], John Tauler [c.1300-1361].

In some cases the mystical illumination of a Catholic mystic developed into a whole order of mysticism with numerous disciples and factional groups, or even a monastic order. Examples: Hildegard of Bingen [1098–1179], Francis Xavier [1506–52], Ignatius Loyola [1491–1556], Miguel de Molinos [1640–1697].

Many heretical schisms in church history were initiated by a mystical leader having visions. Example: the Zwickau Prophets [early 1500s], William Seymour, Maria Woodworth-Etter, Ann Lee, Ellen G White.

The Charismatic connection

Oddly, visions are not that common in modern Charismaticism in formal terms. It is more common to find members talk about this or that vision in subdued terms with few people taking any notice. Powerful visions affecting multiple people are more rare but are seen from time to time. Such things were more common in Pentecostalism. Many times some vision led to a movement or a commune that resulted in disaster over the years (e.g. Frank W. Sandford or John A Dowie). In some cases, such as Joseph Smith [1805–44], Mormonism, visions initiated a whole new religion and a new sacred text.

You cannot certainly identify the source of a vision

Visions are subjective events. No matter how much visionaries clamour that a vision is of God, they have no way of proving this.

This is similar to following angels. How can you be sure that the angel you saw is an elect angel and not Satan (2 Cor 11:14). Similarly, Satan also gives visions to people. How can you be sure that your vision is not demonic?

Often it is claimed that if the vision comes to pass that is enough to prove the vision is godly; this is a lie. As in prophecy, false visions often come true but lead people astray because they are demonic in origin.

If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, 'Let us go after other gods' -- which you have not known -- 'and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the LORD your God is testing you to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Deut 13:1-3

Since visions are commonplace in paganism, occultism and Pentecostalism, how can you be sure that your vision is not one of this sort? Branham's visions of his personal angel that prompted his healings was claimed by many contemporaries (including some previous colleagues, such as Mr Pohl) to be a demon. Certainly the fruit was heresy.

In the end the only valid test is what fruit does the vision(s) bear? This may take years to discover, by which time much damage has been done.

You cannot be certain of the interpretation

Visions are famously obscure. Even clear visions can be interpreted in multiple ways. How can you be certain that your interpretation is correct?

The warning of history

The warning of history regarding dreams and visions brought into the church is absolutely catastrophic. Century after century visionaries brought terrible damage to the churches and sometimes destroyed entire regions and countries.

A personal modern example

I once interviewed a church leader who had recently (early 1990s) established a powerful ministry in Brighton. He had taken the town by storm completely eclipsing famous Charismatic churches in the town. His meeting grew to 400 in weeks assembling in a hotel and soon planted other meetings.

The reason for this expansion was what most considered to be his powerful acts from God. He was the man of power than many leaders sought to be.

In fact his power was merely getting everyone to fall over backwards from a distance; a common feature in occult sects but also entertainment hypnotists. It was usual for all 400 members to be on the floor. When I attended one of these meetings with a friend, we were the only two still standing.

What mostly disturbed me was to see a teenager fall down time after time. After recovering from one trance, he ran to the stage to get knocked down again and again like some drug. No one counselled this person.

As a result I wanted to meet this leader to find out his history and intentions. He told me that he had a powerful vision in (I think) New Zealand on a beach. This vision was so powerful that he was out cold for three days. After this experience he could make people fall over and 'God' told him to go and plant churches in Britain. Another odd thing was that he followed the counsel of his wife on all matters rather than deciding for himself.

The problem is that none of this is Biblical. It is not a ministry to make people fall over; in fact it is an occult practice. There was no proper teaching in his church, just organisation of people. Of course the church was not Biblical at all: no elders, a dominant single leader, no koinonia, no breaking bread etc. etc. It was noteworthy that many who flocked to him were not mature believers. Young inexperienced men were promoted to become church planters.

Despite massive initial growth this church later imploded with various damaged people and scandals. I have no idea if it even exists in Brighton anymore. I believe the leader went abroad and the churches, led by others, gradually diminished because they were focused on a personality no longer present.

So a massive vision led to the establishment of a rogue cultic church and many damaged people.

William Branham

Branham was one of those examples of a leader with certain occult gifts that had experienced those gifts as a child before he claimed to be a Christian. Lonnie Frisbee would be another example of this.⁸

This is a serious problem. How can the visions of a claimed Christian leader be considered to be a gift of grace from God if they were being experienced in childhood before they were regenerate? The answer is that they can't. They are a carryover of occult experiences into a claimed Christian life.

⁸ Who helped to create the Vineyard movement with his ability to make people fall over. Eventually he was expelled and later returned to practising witchcraft. Yet he was the personality behind the initial power phenomena in Vineyard churches and Calvary chapels.

In Branham's case (as in many others) his visions and 'angelic' visitations (read demon) that cemented his reputation as a powerful man of God in Pentecostal circles in the late 40s and 50s led to rampant heresies and aberrations. I have detailed this many times so I won't list them here, but Branham was the chief of heresy and was no Christian. His fame rested on certain occult gifts (plus fraud) which he had possessed since his disturbed childhood.

Note how many times visions given to people led to a ministry of making people fall over backwards in an occult fashion.

Munster

Munster was a town in Westphalia. In 1534 extremists, under visionary Jan Matthijs, preached millennialism and prophetic change, similar doctrines to those propounded by Thomas Müntzer earlier. Anabaptists poured into the city and forcibly gained control in elections, making all those unwilling to be baptised to leave. The city was then declared the 'New Jerusalem' and the church became identified with society (a deviation from normal Anabaptist principles). The surrounding Catholic rulers did not accept this subversion and besieged the city. Matthijs was killed in battle and Jan van Leyden took over, another visionary man who considered himself to be the third 'David' and ruler of the world. His emblem was inscribed 'king of righteousness'. Polygamy and forced communism was introduced in the midst of social chaos. The end came in 1534 when the besieging forces took the city and restored the legitimate authorities.

This is what happens when men full of visions and 'enthusiasm'⁹ are enabled to gain power in society.

The New Light Prophets (1742+)¹⁰

This group operated in New England at the time of Jonathan Edwards under the leadership of James Davenport (1716-1757). Originally a Congregationalist minister, he had gathered a big following in the revival and preached to large crowds in the open air like Whitefield. However, Davenport also led the crowds in singing praise, sometimes for hours. Edwards considered that Davenport was an 'enthusiast' who had opened the door to Satan to obstruct true revival. This was because in 1742 Davenport began to hear inner voices and visions becoming a leader in what became familiar as the New Light Prophets.

This group believed that a 'second Reformation' had begun which included the restoration of the supernatural gifts. In time other manifestations occurred as members began to fall to the ground, shake and see visions. These actions were seen as evidence of the Spirit's power, especially in conversion and Edwards had to write against this notion. Davenport himself went to extremes when he claimed the gift of discernment as the ability to see who was truly elect. Churches were split as he pronounced leaders were not really believers.¹¹

A seminary was started which did not use the Bible, in favour of subjective 'spiritual' revelation to train prophets. Music was used to enhance the atmosphere of meetings and preaching became theatrical and dramatic as fresh revelations interrupted meetings. Some of his hymns celebrated the lack of self-control in God's service, much like modern Charismatic choruses of the Toronto school. In 1743 a bonfire was organised to burn Puritan books. At a second bonfire, led by the 'spirit', Davenport began removing his

⁹ An old word for Charismaticism.

¹⁰ Adapted from my book 'The Origins of Pentecostalism'.

¹¹ See G W McHale & Michael Haykin, *The Toronto Blessing, A Renewal from God? Vol 1*, Canadian Christian Publications, (1995), p82+.

clothes and burning them. When an observer condemned Davenport of having the Devil in him, Davenport came to his senses and accepted the charge. Gradually the movement dissipated as Davenport now declared the work to be evil and sought forgiveness for corrupt actions.

Davenport was a pattern for so many who followed. His problem began when he implicitly followed subjective impressions rather than the Word of God. He led great worship times, preached powerfully, gathered a large following, worked in the midst of great revival, enchanted great crowds, wrote hymns, started a Bible School, disciplined prophets - and yet he later claimed that it was all Satanic, 'misguided zeal' provoked by 'the false spirit'.

I have been much led astray by following impulses or impressions ... without a text of scripture; and my neglecting also duly to observe the analogy of scripture [the general, unified, doctrinal content of the Bible] ... this ... corrupted my experiences.¹²

The French Prophets (Camisards, Cevenols, 1688+)¹³

After the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 by Louis XIV, Protestantism was outlawed in France. As many as half a million Huguenots (French Protestants) emigrated, but great numbers were caught escaping and enslaved. Nearly half of the Huguenot population lived in southern France and thousands continued to worship in rural woods and fields; this time being known as The Church in the Desert. With many of the pastors martyred or escaped, the French prophets emerged - individuals (mostly young illiterate women) began to prophesy as a spiritual power came upon them, giving messages to the people. Most had no knowledge of the Bible at all. These prophecies would follow trembling, crying, visions or falling over in ecstasy. One woman, Marie Boîteuse, was supposed to have wept tears of blood. They also claimed to speak in tongues during trances. By 1700 the numbers of these prophets had swelled into thousands.

When the messages encouraged violence, war developed in 1702 after the 'spirit' told Abraham Mazel to free imprisoned Protestants by killing the Roman Catholic abbot who had jailed them. Unsurprisingly, after two years, the Protestants were defeated. The Protestant cause was only rescued by the raising up in 1713, of a young Biblical preacher, Antoine Court, who, despite his youth, called for repentance and reformation. A synod in 1715 re-established the foundation of the authority of the Bible, condemned the prophets, formalised church reforms (including forbidding women preachers) and condemned violence. The prophets, as usual, declared all sorts of judgments would fall on their opposers. In fact, Court ministered in southern France until leaving for Lausanne in order to train French ministers to carry on the cause.

The source of the spiritual power inspiring this rise of prophetic ministry shows itself in familiar historical forms:

- It was focused upon women leaders.
- It did not rely upon the Bible and in fact replaced it with words from the 'spirit'.
- It caused a subjective approach to the Christian life.
- It resulted in several forms of charismatic experiences - visions, crying, falling over etc.
- It led to violence in speech, attitudes and actions.
- It caused breakdown in the church.
- It required the preaching of a true Biblical message to effect repair to God's work.

¹² James Davenport's Retractions from John Gillies, *Historical Collections of Accounts of Revival*, Banner of Truth, (1981), p357-358.

¹³ Adapted from my paper 'The Origins of Pentecostalism'.

These features are also found in several later Charismatic movements. Despite the clear occult source of this aberration, the French prophets were to have a significant influence upon later Charismatic sects like: the radical Quakers and the Shakers. By the end of 1707 there were about 400 French Prophets in London but the movement dissipated after the failed prophecy of the bodily resurrection of one of their members, Thomas Emes in 1708. Those that fled to England had a particularly notable effect upon Jane and James Wardley who had a powerful experience from the hands of the French Prophets in 1747, resulting in their separation from the Quakers.

The Shakers

Mother Ann Lee was the prophetess of the Shakers (which grew out of the Quakers). Her clearly occult visions led her to proclaim herself as the Messiah, the female counterpart of Christ. Her teachings led to multiple Charismatic-like aberrations, odd rituals (such as dancing in circles to shake off the Devil), adoption of pagan visions and even spiritualism.

Latter Rain

This was a rogue Pentecostal revivalist movement in the late 1940s that gave rise to the Healing Revivals of the 1950s. It featured visions and prophetic revelation that resulted in some of the most serious and nonsensical church aberrations ever seen (which were later adopted into the Charismatic Movement through people like Paul Cain and others). I have analysed this many times. Just one teaching was that Spirit-filled super-apostles would be able to fly, walk through walls, be invulnerable to bullets, didn't ever need to wash and would rule the world.

Summary

We could continue in this vein *ad infinitum*. Church history is filled with examples of groups that were inspired by visions and visionaries that all fell into apostasy and serious aberrations. I cannot think of a single group that was prompted by visions that did not apostatise. Before you claim that the Wesleyans were sound,¹⁴ Wesleyan Methodism is fully Arminian and riddled with heretical ideas and practices, such as women leaders. John Wesley himself was not Christian.¹⁵

Texts emphasising using your rational mind

Visions bypass the rational mind and have to be accepted by faith that they are correct. This is why apostolic teaching never affirms the utilisation of them, rather it affirms rationality within New Covenant thinking. That is, rational thinking based upon sound doctrine.

He stores up sound wisdom for the upright. Prov 2:7

Counsel is mine, and sound wisdom. Prov 6:14

I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason. Acts 26:25

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. Rm 12:2

Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Eph 5:17

¹⁴ You can argue that the origin of Wesleyanism was the vision that John Wesley had in a Pietist (Moravian) meeting whereby his 'heart was strangely warmed'.

¹⁵ For proof see my papers, 'Was John Wesley a True Believer?' and 'The problem of John Wesley'.

And have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him. Col 3:10

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind. 2 Tim 1:7

Conclusion

Visions are Old Covenant, just as much as formal prophecy and a Levitical priesthood. They are not necessary for gaining knowledge from God because we are united with Christ and have the indwelling Holy Spirit. God no longer speaks to us in a variety of ways because he speaks to us through his Son (Heb 1:1-2). Trusting in visions (especially when you can have no knowledge from where they came) is idolatry.

It may be that God, in his sovereign will, has granted a vision to a person very occasionally for a good reason; but that is not the norm. The normal Christian life is communicating with God through the Lord Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit in us. It is also the Spirit's job to bring the things of Christ to us (Jn 16:13-15), including knowledge, warnings about the future and encouragements.

No believer should seek visions; that is a denial of Christ and it is sin.

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