



**FINDING a VISION
for YOUR CHURCH:
ASSEMBLY
REQUIRED**

Includes Study Questions

MICHAEL A. MILTON

“Skip the outside consultants and instead have your entire congregation work through this book together and watch God work.”

—Anthony Bradley

The worship of almighty God is our supreme calling in this life and our eternal destiny in the next. This book by Mike Milton will help all who earnestly desire to glorify and enjoy God in corporate worship and to encourage church leaders to go forward in faith through his miraculous means to achieve his glorious vision.

—**James Bachmann**, senior pastor, Covenant Presbyterian Church, Nashville, TN

As a seasoned pastor, Dr. Milton provides a great model for how local congregations can practice what it means to be “Reformed and always reforming.” The topics and questions raised in this book are of the sort that will extend the book’s usefulness decades after purchase. It is a strong model of the type of spiritual discernment that will not only revitalize congregations but also ignite new fires for churches to pursue their calling in mission of God. Dr. Milton delivers a book that will be useful for not only staff and church officers, but also Sunday school and small group settings.

—**Anthony B. Bradley**, associate professor of theology and ethics, The King’s College; editor of *Aliens in the Promised Land*

This challenging book must be read by all Christians. Subjects include God’s glory, God’s Word, the gospel, church growth, biblical preaching, and prayer—and there is much more to help and encourage churches. Read and pray over its contents!

—**Eryl Davies**, author/research supervisor, Wales Evangelical School of Theology

Mike Milton’s book is a gift to the church. Proved in the laboratory of Mike’s own pastoral ministry, it exhibits that marvelous mixture of Scripture and story, theology and wise

application, objective truth and personal insight, that we have come to expect from one of the foremost leaders and theological educators of our day.

—**R. J. Gore**, professor of systematic theology, Erskine Theological Seminary

Michael Milton is a pastor, a pedagogue, a preacher, a presbyter, a president, and a picker (of guitars, that is). He weaves all these roles into this fine, small work that will be used and used again because of its simplicity, clarity, harmony, and beauty. Don't let its brevity fool you: in a day of Styrofoam castoffs, this is one that you'll read and reread. Its most important value is how it embraces and follows God's revealed mind on ministry, outreach, worship, and preaching.

—**David W. Hall**, senior pastor, Midway Presbyterian Church, Powder Springs, Georgia

Michael Milton is a born leader with a keen mind that cuts to the chase and a heart that burns with passion for the gospel. He comes at this subject as one who has walked the walk. If you are a pastor or worship leader you need to read this book. If you are not a pastor or worship leader, you need to buy two copies, one for yourself and one to give to your pastor. I do not doubt that you and your church will be far better off for reading what Mike Milton has to say in these pages. As a teacher of worship and preaching, I intend to make it required reading for all my students.

—**Robert Leslie Holmes**, Adjunct Professor of Practical Theology, Erskine Theological Seminary

This series of sermons by Mike Milton serves as a helpful and practical guide for churches seeking to minister according

to the teaching of the Scriptures. Dr. Milton's focus on the ordinary means of grace is a refreshing alternative to the various "market-driven" methods and trends that continue to influence the church, particularly in North America.

—**Jeffrey K. Jue**, vice president for academic affairs, academic dean, Westminster Theological Seminary

In *Finding a Vision for Your Church*, Mike Milton has provided an excellent resource for those who would lead Christ's church to the glory of God. While intended for pastors and teaching elders, the book provides outstanding guidelines for all those in local church leadership. Beginning his study with "A Burden for God's Glory" and ending with "The Ministry of Prayer," Dr. Milton keeps the focus just where it should be—on him whose church it is. The frequency with which Dr. Milton uses phrases like "hunger for God to be glorified" and "longing for revival and reformation" reminds me of Jonathan Edwards. And the inclusion of questions for reflection at the end of each chapter makes this an excellent resource for practical implementation of the vision presented. I heartily commend this book to all who desire to see Christ's church be all that she can and should be.

—**Samuel Logan**, international director, The World Reformed Fellowship

Assembly Required is a great subtitle at a time when some believers are so turned off by showtime mega-churches that they fall into lone-wolf legalism. Mike Milton eloquently shows us the importance of assembling for worship, prayer, and teaching about grace and compassion.

—**Marvin Olasky**, editor-in-chief, *WORLD* magazine

The resurrection of Christ was such a great experience for the apostle Thomas that when he encountered the risen Lord, all he could say was “My Lord and my God” to Jesus. He worshipped him. When Christ appeared to the disciples in Galilee, Matthew says, “They worshipped him and some doubted.” The early church had this fresh experience of resurrection and they “broke bread together and worshipped him.” This is what Mike will bring to you and your congregation through his book: the fresh experience of Jesus the Lord. Jesus is exalted through our worship.

—**Henry Luke Orombi**, archbishop, Church of the Province of Uganda

I personally enjoy the privilege of ministry in partnership with RTS and Mike Milton for the cause of biblically healthy and effective churches, and . . . we are once again indebted to God’s grace overflowing to us through Mike’s endeavor.

—**Harry L. Reeder III**, senior pastor, Briarwood Presbyterian Church

Mike Milton’s *Finding a Vision for Your Church* could be yet another “This is how to bring revival to your church” book. Thankfully it is not. Instead, reflecting on Scripture and using his own experience, he introduces us to questions that every church should ask and reflect upon. As a Scotsman, I particularly warmed to the fact that this book is, in my view, applicable outside the North American context as well as within. The vision is God’s; by his grace I pray that Mike’s book would help us find and implement that wonderful plan the Lord has for his church.

—**David Robertson**, minister, St. Peter’s Free Church, Dundee, Scotland

**FINDING a VISION
for YOUR CHURCH:
ASSEMBLY
REQUIRED**

**FINDING a VISION
for YOUR CHURCH:
ASSEMBLY
REQUIRED**

MICHAEL A. MILTON



P U B L I S H I N G

P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

© 2012 Michael A. Milton

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, P&R Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865–0817.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, New King James Version. Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982, Thomas Nelson, Inc.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are from *ESV Bible*® (*The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®). Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NRSV) are from New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

ISBN: 978-1-59638-438-5 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-59638-575-7 (ePub)

ISBN: 978-1-59638-576-4 (Mobi)

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Milton, Michael A. (Michael Anthony), 1958-

Finding a vision for your church : assembly required / Michael A. Milton.
-- 1st edition.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-59638-438-5 (pbk.)

1. Church renewal. 2. Christian life. I. Title.

BV600.3.M565 2012

262.0017--dc23

2012035152

This book is dedicated with deep appreciation
and admiration
to the tireless and dedicated gospel service of
my colleagues in ministry:

Scott Brown, the Reverend Ron Brown, the Reverend
Steve Wallace, and the Reverend Rankin Wilbourne;

And to the session and deacons and members of First
Presbyterian Church, Chattanooga, Tennessee;

And to my wife, Mae, who has shown me the reality
of God's love;

And to all our children and grandchildren, with deep,
fatherly love from Dad and Poppy

Contents

Firsthand Testimonials	9
Acknowledgments	13
Introduction	15
1. Let God Come Down! <i>A Burden for God's Glory</i>	19
2. Value the Bible <i>A Passion for God's Word</i>	31
3. Value the Great Commission <i>A Heart for God's World</i>	43
4. Value the Heart of the Gospel <i>A Commitment to God's Grace</i>	55
5. Seeing Souls Safe in the Arms of Jesus <i>A Vision That Is out of This World</i>	69
6. Seeing Christ Triumphant in Our Generation <i>A Confident Vision for a Great Harvest</i>	79
7. Transforming Vision <i>An Optimistic Ministry</i>	91
8. Gathering <i>His Last Words, Our First Work</i>	103
9. Growing <i>What Is a Strong Disciple of Jesus Christ?</i>	115

Contents

10. Sending	127
<i>Called to Be Taught—Taught to Be Sent</i>	
11. Expository Preaching	143
<i>The Marks of Biblical Preaching</i>	
12. Living Worship	157
<i>Longing for the Courts of the Lord</i>	
13. Loving Fellowship	171
<i>The Church Must Be a Place to Belong</i>	
14. Compassionate Outreach	181
<i>Becoming the Hands and the Heart of God for a World in Need</i>	
15. The Ministry of Prayer	193
<i>It's All We Have, But It's All We Need</i>	
Appendix A: The Implementation of a Vision and Ministry Plan for a Local Church	209
Appendix B: The Vision and Ministry Statement	215
Notes	231
Resources for Further Study	241

Firsthand Testimonials

Insight from the Pastoral Team Who First Helped Bring the Author's Vision to Pass

VISION DOES NOT happen in a vacuum.

This book, which contains messages that were preached in the early years of our transition into the ministry at First Presbyterian Church of Chattanooga, causes my heart to be deeply moved by my remembrance of colleagues in the gospel ministry, both pastoral and lay. This “band of brothers” went through the process with me. In fact, I hired all of the pastors to help with this vision plan (one minister, the Reverend Ken Camp, who is now with the Lord, was already there as a part-time pastoral care minister). The messages that formed the vision for the ministry of the church have been updated and, hopefully, shaped into such a way that they may be of help to other church planters, church revitalizers, pastors, boards, congregations, and ministry leaders of all sorts. Yet I would be remiss if I did not underscore that ministry cannot happen by merely laying out sermons or vision plans or charts or goals. Vision needs flesh. It must happen cooperatively and collegially with others, who must come alongside and help to shape the vision, inform the vision, challenge the vision, and ultimately “land the vision,” as my friend Harry Reeder puts it.

As we complete the manuscript, I cannot help but think about the now seemingly momentous days surrounding the writing of the sermons. We lived them together. It would be the highest form of personal neglect if I failed to mention my esteemed pastoral colleagues in this book.

I am currently reading Winston Churchill's *Great Contemporaries*, and as I write this little endorsement of the pastors and elders and other church leaders who helped me, I am reflecting on the particular passage in the great prime minister's remembrances of Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig, in which the old Lion said, "But he endured it all; and with such impassivity and matter-of-fact day-to-day routine that I who saw him on [many] occasions—some of them potentially fatal—doubted whether he was not insensitive and indurated to the torment and drama in the shadow of which he dwelt."¹

Below are some comments from the pastors and church leaders who walked with me through those early days of pastoral transition into years that would bring about realization of much of that vision (though I believe the full fruit will be realized in future days when the potential of ungodly pride will be passed). Indeed, one could very easily make the case that the easiest job was his who preached the principles of our mission, and the truly harder job was the day-to-day landing of that vision which fell upon their shoulders. They performed their duties to Christ so well. It is for that reason that I have dedicated this book, in part, to them.



“These aren’t just chapters in a book or words from a distant teacher. Having the privilege of working under and being mentored by Mike Milton, I saw these values lived out, fleshed out, in the local church context. Mike Milton is a pastoral theologian, a pastor’s theologian, and these chapters are sure to aid renewal in the local church. Practical. Clear. Biblical.”

—**Rankin Wilbourne**, Minister of Outreach and Missions at First Presbyterian Church during Dr. Milton’s pastorate; now Senior Minister of Pacific Crossroads Church in Los Angeles

“When reading books of a practical nature, especially concerning the pastoral ministry, one intuitively knows if the work is born out of experience and will be worthwhile. I can assure you that you will sense immediately that this book is born out of practical experience because I was there, watching, learning, and participating as one of the pastoral staff alongside Mike Milton while he was the senior pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee. I don’t believe I am exaggerating to say that if you pricked Mike anywhere, he would bleed pastoral wisdom. As you read, I believe your heart will be moved and motivated by the biblical instruction and love for Christ’s flock exhibited in this book.”

—**M. Steve Wallace**, Chief of Staff and Executive Minister at First Presbyterian Church during Dr. Milton’s pastorate; now Chief of Staff and Chief Operating Officer at Reformed Theological Seminary

“Dr. Milton first wrote these messages to cast a vision for his own assembly, and this collection, along with the accompanying practical appendices, is founded on the Word of God and

rich with Scripture. He has thoroughly punctuated his own insight with historical illustrations, everyday examples, and the words of other scholar-preachers. From his own scholarship and experiences he answers the question, ‘What does a true biblical church look like?’, presenting with clarity the elements of a truly sacred assembly of believers in a Spirit-filled church. A great blessing for pastors and laity alike.”

—**Scott N. Brown Jr.**, Clerk of Session at First Presbyterian Church, both now and during Dr. Milton’s pastorate

“The heartbeat of this book is Mike Milton’s love for those foundational, ordinary means that lead to extraordinary works of God in ministry. My recommendation: read *Finding a Vision for Your Church: Assembly Required* once and then pick it up annually as a helpful yardstick and corrective to gauge where your ministry is on track and where you’ve veered off course. As I read it I am reminded of Mike’s patient mentorship of me and am thankful for the opportunity to experience it afresh in print.”

—**Ron Brown**, Minister of Discipleship at First Presbyterian Church during Dr. Milton’s pastorate; now Reformed University Fellowship campus minister at Covenant College in Lookout Mountain, Georgia

Acknowledgments

THE LORD HAS BROUGHT so many blessings to me. As I write these acknowledgments, I'm coming out of a season of sickness. During that time, I "enjoyed" a refreshing time of reacquaintance with my God. It was as if, as I've said in a recent sermon, I was allowed "to rest in God before running in ministry." There was another reacquaintance, however, and that was with my wife, Mae. I will never forget her faithfulness as she sought to nurse me back to health in the presence of a most mysterious illness (which the Almighty mercifully healed). I came to understand the meaning of the vow, "in sickness and in health," in a more meaningful way. Thus, in the summer of 2011, as I prepare this manuscript, I acknowledge the merciful hand of almighty God and the extension of his hand in the hand of my wife, Mae. I have been greatly blessed by God. I have been greatly encouraged and supported by my wife.

I also want to express my gratitude to the Rev. Marvin Padgett of P&R Publishing Company. Stitching together sermons into meaningful chapters that have direction, a singular focus, and intentionality concerning a particular readership, is no small assignment. Marvin helped me grasp that reality. Writing this book was, therefore, more than submitting previously written sermons for publication. I spent many hours back in the Word of God, writing and rewriting, clarifying and sharpening, in response to Marvin's challenge. In the end, I leave the results to the reader. I take full responsibility for

anything lacking herein, but give thanks to Marvin for helping me to strengthen this work. However it may be received, I assure you that it is better than the first manuscript he received! Thank you, Marvin.

I am indebted to Amanda Martin at P&R for her insightful reading of the work and application of her solid Grove City College training to the study section. It is my prayer that the fruit of her work will be seen in believers and entire congregations who settle for nothing less than a biblical vision and the blessings that follow. I also want to thank Ian Thompson for his wise counsel in helping to discover the best title and subtitle to describe the book. And I am always appreciative of the excellent editing by Aaron Gottier. P&R remains a favorite publisher of mine because of one reason: outstanding people.

I also want to thank the executive committee of Reformed Theological Seminary, as well as my colleagues at the seminary, especially Dr. Ric Cannada, Rev. Lyn Perez, Ms. Wendy Simmons, and Rev. Steve Wallace. Quite simply, this work could not have been completed without their support. Thank you.

And now I pray that the Spirit of the living God, who breathed forth the words that I have sought to exposit in these pages, will perfect my praise and gratitude to the triune God, to whom this and all of my life is dedicated.

Introduction

FINDING A VISION for Your Church: Assembly Required began as a series of messages that I preached at First Presbyterian Church of Chattanooga, Tennessee. I was called to that historic congregation as their senior pastor in December 2000. My first sermon there delivered on the first Sunday in February 2001. After giving my testimony from Philippians 1:1–6, I began to preach a series of messages from selected portions of God’s Word that would help our congregation focus on our common life together as the church. I desired something more than just an opening series that might get us all acquainted. I was praying for a filling of the Holy Spirit for me and for the congregation. I was asking God that he might reveal himself to us in a fresh way. I was praying for revival. Many others were praying to that supernatural end as well.

We did in fact see the hand of the Lord move at that time. Let there be no overstatement of the facts. There was no visible, demonstrable, citywide movement from on high, as far as I could perceive it (and I have been blessed to see such genuine revival—in Albania, days after “the wall” fell in that Balkan country, releasing the poor people from the tyranny of Communism and ushering in a movement of God that created a hunger for him; once seeing it, one can never forget it, and once experiencing it, one can never get over it). There was, however, a new spark of life in my own heart in those days. As pastor, I was also allowed to observe

the movement of the Holy Spirit in individual lives in our congregation and also in our community.

One of the greatest challenges I felt that I had then, and continue to have now, as one who has been elected to serve one of the great theological seminaries in our nation, is to believe and preach with conviction that the church is more than we see here today. The church is a sacred assembly, called out by almighty God, saved from the auction block of sin and shame and hell, and redeemed to fulfill God's purposes in the world today. She is also called by God to become his everlasting people in a new heaven and a new earth. How we get from where we are today to that place in eternity future is a story of its own. And that is what this book is about.

This book, then, is not just a definition *of* the church; it is a declaration *about* the church. The church is, in fact, the very body of the Lord Jesus Christ, existing by the power of his Word, his life, his atoning death, his resurrection, his ascension, and his reign, and living in anticipation of his glorious return. It is my conviction that this declaration, using the very means of grace that God has left his church—Word, sacrament, and prayer—has an evangelistic power embedded within it. Therefore, to proclaim the reality of the church, whether from the pulpit as a preacher, or in the seminary classroom as a professor, or on the assembly line as a worker, or in the Army motor pool as a private, is to engage the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As I write this introduction, I pray to the Lord Jesus Christ that these messages will be of blessing to you. I pray that since I delivered them in those first days of transition at a new charge and again in seminary settings, and now as I have edited this book to reach a broader readership, the Holy Spirit will convey the enduring truths of his Word to

each and every reader. I pray that pastors, elders, deacons, and church leaders of all sorts, with all of the people who worship with them, week in and week out, will come to see the glory and power that is resident in the church—a power that, when unleashed, can transform lives and bring healing to our wounded world. Thus, I would lay a cornerstone for this book with the words of the apostle Paul when he wrote about the church in his epistle to the Ephesians. In their world of confusion and bewilderment, the people of God did not fully comprehend the power of Christ at work within them. They, like we today, needed a fresh vision of the church—of the truth of Christ in his church—that would bring about a God-wrought vision for what he would do through them—a vision for personal, corporate, and global transformation. By God’s grace, the early church received that blessing. May we receive it now. It is simply this ascription of praise:

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.
(Eph. 3:20–21 *ESV*)

1

Let God Come Down!

A Burden for God's Glory

ISAIAH 64

This is revival, dear people! This is a sovereign act of God! This is the moving of God's Spirit, I believe in answer to the prevailing prayer of men and women who believed that God was a Covenant-keeping God, and must be true to His Covenant engagement. —*Duncan Campbell*¹

We say our prayers, but have we ever prayed? Do we know anything about this encounter, this meeting? Have we the assurance of sins forgiven? Are we free from ourselves and self-concern, that we may intercede? Have we a real burden for the glory of God, and the name of the Church? Have we this concern for those who are outside? And are we pleading with God for his own name's sake, because of his own promises, to hear us and to answer us? Oh, my God, make of us intercessors. —*David Martyn Lloyd-Jones*²

IN ISAIAH 64, Isaiah had seen the very courts of heaven. But his job was to preach to a very earth-bound people. Isaiah

had a burden. His burden wasn't just for Israel. His burden was for the glory of God:

Oh, that You would rend the heavens!
That You would come down!
That the mountains might shake at Your presence—
As fire burns brushwood,
As fire causes water to boil—
To make Your name known to Your adversaries,
That the nations may tremble at Your presence! (Isa. 64:1–2)

Casting a Vision

When a new minister takes up his sacred post, many in the congregation may wonder about his vision for the church. Will he build upon the past or move in new directions?

Vision is a word that is not only overused but also misunderstood. In today's culture, *vision* implies carefully crafted statements, ranging from the simple to the sophisticated, for just about any corporation or organization. Everything from a Fortune 500 company to a small, family-run business has its own vision statement. And there is much to be commended in having one. However, a vision statement alone doesn't ensure success. In recent American corporate history, Enron Corporation had a laudable vision statement—before it became the biggest bankruptcy in U.S. history.

Of course, a vision statement for a church is vastly different from a vision statement for a corporation. The church's vision statement, its very identity and purpose, must be thoroughly grounded in the Word of God. Nothing else will do.

A church can have a finely crafted vision, but be completely out of the will of the Lord, unbiblical, and lacking in the power of the Holy Spirit who attends his Word. A church can be an

ecclesiastical Enron, all puffed up with religious smoke and mirrors, but having nothing of eternal value—or, as Paul put it, “having a form of godliness but denying its power” (2 Tim. 3:5).

The overriding purpose of this book is to cast a vision for the church, for God’s holy bride. That vision must be weighed on the scales of Scripture. Or, to put it another way, the church’s vision must stand with the Bible: “To the law and to the testimony!” (Isa. 8:20).

Before going one step further, there are three caveats. First, when casting a new vision for a church, you must recognize that there are powerful forces of good already in place in the church where you are placed. Dreams dreamed long ago and visions cast before you were born are still at work today. Second, recognize that it takes time to formulate a vision. Be patient. Ministers and lay leaders should spend the early months of their ministry listening to what God has been doing and is doing in their midst. Third, this book is not just for ministers and lay leaders. This book about the church is for all of us who are believers in Christ, who are members of that holy bride that Christ is perfecting. Now, more than ever, we need to think biblically about the church. She is under attack from without, and often, unwittingly, from within.

I have found that, as a minister serving as a seminary leader, I am often called upon to enter into discussions with believers about various challenges facing congregations. In most cases, the problem has something to do with the nature of the church in our day. It may involve a lack of understanding of role relationships in the church, or the express signs of a true church, or the scripturally revealed purpose of the church, or the biblically disclosed methods for the church to realize her glorious goals in the world. It may just be that we fail to understand the eschatological vision of the

church—that we are not where we are going, but we are on our way by God’s grace.

The Burden: A Holy Dissatisfaction

When the Word of God is read in its entirety, you come to understand that it begins with a burden. That burden, simply stated, is God’s burden for his own creation. Man was unable to keep God’s law and fell away from his Creator. This grieved God. According to Ephesians 1, God saw this before the foundation of the world and took steps to remedy the problem. After the fall, the rest of Scripture is a record of God working out his covenant of grace; that is, God, by grace, has been doing for man what man could not do for himself. It is a record of God ordaining that he would come down to fulfill the requirements of his law and to pour out his wrath for sin upon himself as a propitiation for the sins of man. God was burdened for his own creation.

So the vision of the Bible begins with a burden. Therefore, any outline for a church’s vision must begin with a burden. When believers come to understand that burden, when they develop a heart and a passion for something that grieves them, that pains them, that creates desire, then vision emerges. A biblical vision is a divine solution that lifts the burden.

Turning to Isaiah 64, you see that Isaiah was a man with a burden for God’s glory in his own generation. You begin to understand what that burden entailed when you read the prophet’s plaintive words, “Oh, that.”

Job uses this phrase more than anyone in Scripture. He cries out from the depth of his soul, “Oh, that my words were written! Oh, that they were inscribed in a book!” (Job 19:23).

David uses the same opening in his exasperation over the sin of the wicked: “Oh, that men would give thanks to the LORD for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!” (Ps. 107:21). And Isaiah the prophet cries out, “Oh, that You would . . . come down!” (Isa. 64:1).

“Oh, that” expresses a holy dissatisfaction with the way things are in comparison with who God is. The prophet has seen God, experienced his glory, known his salvation, desired that Israel would know him, and so was dissatisfied.

There is evidence throughout the Bible that Christians are to be dissatisfied. Christians are enjoined to be content—but that refers to our circumstances, not to God’s glory!

Moses had a burden. When he first had a burden for his Hebrew brethren, he took matters into his own hands and ended up herding goats in the back forty of Midian. But then God manifested himself in a burning bush, and when Moses took his rod and marched into Pharaoh’s court, that man had a burden for God’s glory.

Paul knew God’s glory in grace and could never be content with ordinary religion. He would sacrifice all, count every gain as rubbish, put himself at risk, and take on any earthly power. For what? That he might know Christ and the power of his resurrection. Paul was a burdened man. He was burdened for God’s glory. He had experienced Christ and thought that the world would be unworthy until every knee would bow and every tongue would confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of the Father.

Thus, every vision begins with a burden, a holy dissatisfaction. “Oh, that” is the cry of a person or a church that has known the grace of God, has come to know the joy of a life surrendered to the compassionate Christ, and is discontent until God is glorified and worshipped and enjoyed.

The church today must have a burden. We must stand like Isaiah and say, “Oh, that God would come down in our community. There are people who need Christ. Oh, that God would come down to our nation. Oh, that God would come down to the Muslim people, to the African people, to Hispanics in Los Angeles, to smug, comfortable, pretend Christians who are not living to give God the glory.”

The church must be burdened—burdened for the glory of God.

Isaiah’s “oh, that” reveals his holy discontent, but the unfolding passage reveals more.

The Relief: Genuine Revival

The person who has experienced the living God is burdened for his glory in revival. Isaiah writes, “Oh, that You would rend the heavens! That You would come down!” (Isa. 64:1). Isaiah is dissatisfied. He is burdened, and the relief that he seeks is genuine revival.

When Isaiah writes, “Oh, that You would . . . come down,” do you think he is just interested in springtime revival meetings by a visiting clergyman? Nothing could be further from his mind! The prophet is burdened by a lackadaisical religion. Isaiah doesn’t want religion. He wants God! In this passage, we see mountains trembling, fires setting the forest ablaze, water boiling. It is a veritable eruption of divine presence on earth that this man of God yearns for.

This, beloved, is what you must pray for. Pray for revival in this generation—a genuine movement of God in which he is honored and glorified in this hour of world history.

Paul Johnson, in his book *History of the American People*, notes that American history is a history of revival. As you look upon our nation—our desperate need, and our evangelical

churches going from one faddish program to another, just to grow membership roles—we must cry out, “Oh, that God would come down!” We need genuine revival, a moment of God that transcends our natural abilities and makes everyone know that he has come down.

The church today must have a burden for revival in our time.

The Result: Reformation

Note further that Isaiah longs for even more. He reveals the focus of his burden for revival: “Make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you!” (Isa. 64:2 NIV). Isaiah is burdened for reformation as well as revival. The person who has experienced the living God is also burdened for reformation.

Reformation, in the biblical sense, is the transformation of society as the result of the transformation of the human soul because of God’s own work. It is the burden of a child of God who has come to know the glory of God’s holiness. The child of God, like the prophet, is offended that men continue to sin in the face of this holy God. Christians are people, like the prophets of old, who are filled with righteous indignation because God is not worshipped and honored properly. First you have a burden for the glory of God, then for revival, and then for reformation in our day.

As a child, you must have encountered bullies. Sandy was such a bully. He was known principally for his almost uncanny command of an ever-growing volume of curse words. No child ever had a more filthy mouth. But other kids began to pray for Sandy, and one child invited him to church. There was a new preacher at the church, and that was an excuse for Sandy to go. Over time, Sandy was saved, and he

changed—radically. He eventually led his entire family to Christ, felt the call to ministry, and today is a widely known Baptist preacher. The point is, reformation came to Sandy's house, and as his heart was changed, his speech and behavior were changed.

You must have a burden for God's glory in our world today. Are you tired of vulgarity on the airwaves of our nation, horrified by abortions being given legal protection, struck with righteous indignation over our great Christian churches ordaining unrepentant sinners to the pulpit, and offended by the sexualizing of everything and the open attack by Madison Avenue on our children's innocence? If so, you have a burden for God's glory in the land.

The church must be burdened by the ugliness of sin in our generation and by the bondage, pain, and brokenness that accompany it. The church must long for the reformation of our land and pray that God would come down and do something in the hearts of our countrymen, that God would supernaturally renew the minds of the people in our family and our community.

The Method: Salvation

But the question comes then, How can we be saved? Indeed, this is Isaiah's question in Isaiah 64:5:

How then can we be saved? (NIV)

And we need to be saved. (NKJV)

The answer is found in Isaiah 64:8:

But now, O LORD,
You are our Father.

Why can you expect an answer to the prayer, "God, come down"? There are two reasons.

Because of the fatherhood of God. "Oh, God, come down!" That statement is our hope. You must fix your eyes on the very nature of God as he reveals himself to us. He is our Father. The fatherhood of God assures us that he will answer our prayers.

God as Father desires the salvation of his children, our healing, and the transformation of this world more than any pastor could. This is the testimony of Scripture:

While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom. 5:8)

God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them. (2 Cor. 5:19)

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son. (John 3:16)

Benjamin B. Warfield of old Princeton Seminary taught that the emphasis of John 3:16 is on the love of God in comparison to the wickedness of the world. He "so loved the world." God's love is greater than our sin. His grace and mercy are greater than our little rebellion.

When a pastor is burdened for God's glory in revival and reformation, he wants what God wants. And those prayers are bound to be answered, for God's own nature, his fatherhood, assures us that he will come down.

Jesus assures us of this truth when he says, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out" (John 6:37).

Because of the work of the Son. The other answer is in Isaiah 64:9: “Do not remember our sins forever” (NIV).

He didn't. God, before the foundation of the world, made a sacred pledge to himself, a covenant of grace, that he would assume the sins of his people himself. Thus, on Calvary's cross, the central act of cosmic history took place. Paul wrote, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21 NIV).

Your burdens were lifted at Calvary. And therein lies your hope, your answer, and the vision of your life, your church, and your family. The love of God in Jesus Christ gives you optimism in your day. God will be successful. You may begin the work of prayer, of preaching, and of witness in our day. You may not see the salvation en masse that you long to see, but God's kingdom will be successful. He will bring all of his people in. This gives you unbounded confidence in your work in the church. Believers stand on the winning side.

Conclusion

Isaiah 64 draws a surprising beginning. It teaches that developing a vision begins by confessing a holy dissatisfaction with the way things are and hungering for God to be glorified. You must admit your longing for revival and reformation, and recognize that the answer to that longing is found at the foot of the cross.

A story will illustrate this point. A minister once preached a message on the soul's desire for God. After the service, an elder came to the minister and said, “I go to church. I pray. I do everything a good Christian is supposed to do. But when you talk about desiring God, I'm lost. When you talk about panting for the presence of God, I have no idea what you are talking about. I know the catechism, but I don't know

about this passion for Christ or this love for him. Can you tell me what's missing?" What that man was missing was a true awareness of God's glory, of his own sinfulness, and of God's love and grace in Jesus Christ at Calvary's cross. Over time, he came to know God's love and grace. For to know him is to love him and desire him. To desire him is to long for him, to be burdened for his crown rights as King of kings and Lord of lords in our generation.

Isaiah was burdened for the glory of God because he had experienced God's glory in his own life. Similarly, if the church doesn't know God's grace, if its leaders don't experience the glory of God in prayer, if families don't know his mercy and his peace through seeking him in prayer and worship in their own homes, then the church will have no burden.

Before you can cast a vision for your church, you must come to know your sin, your need, and his holiness. You must also know his love in sending his own Son to die for your sinful condition. When you know him in that way and you look out on a world of brokenness and sin and shame—across the ocean, across the nation, across the city, and, yes, across your own living room—then your soul will be burdened to cry with Isaiah, "Oh, that God would come down!"



Questions for Reflection

1. Reflect on your church's vision, even if you have no official statement of it. What do the leaders and congregation expect from the church? Are their expectations grounded in the Word of God? Are their expectations in alignment?

How can the church encourage unity and holiness of vision?

2. Do the visions of past leaders play a role in your church's decision making? If they do, evaluate them. Are they hindering the church's true mission, or do they help to focus and unite the church? How might those in leadership communicate their vision and their predecessors' vision to the congregation?
3. Consider how you can pray for vision and revival. What burdens might your church be called to lift? What are the concerns and passions of the congregation? How could your church's location come into play?
4. Write the rough outline of a vision statement for your church or revise the current one. How can you personally contribute to this vision?
5. Examine your heart. What motivates your desire for revival? How must the gospel change you?

Prayer

Oh, that my heart would be burdened for your glory in this generation; *oh, that* you would send your Spirit to renew and revive me and your church to take the gospel of the cross to this generation!

The church is more than a building—it is an assembly of people joined together across distances and even through time to fulfill God’s purposes in the world. Each local gathering of that assembly needs a vision to help its members accomplish the work God has called them to do.

But how do you inspire your church to create and follow through on a vision?

Mike Milton provides tested, biblical ideas to get everyone in the church involved in a plan to help the congregation grow. Each chapter develops an awareness of what needs to be done, provides questions for review, and includes prayers by elders and ministers of churches that have put these ideas to use.

“Mike Milton has brought to the table not only his extensive experience in leadership and lessons learned in pastoral ministry, but more importantly faithful, biblical insights for the spiritual vitality of the church. . . . I’m extremely excited about this resource, which I highly commend to you.”

—**Harry L. Reeder III**, *Senior Pastor, Briarwood Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama*

“Instead of doing ministry as everyone else does or as some other stale pattern suggests, why not let the Master of Ministry instruct us? Dr. Milton knows that Master well, and it shows.”

—**David W. Hall**, *Senior Pastor, Midway Presbyterian Church, Powder Springs, Georgia*

MICHAEL A. MILTON is Chancellor and CEO of Reformed Theological Seminary, where he is also the James M. Baird Jr. Professor of Pastoral Theology. He is the host of the national Bible teaching television program *Faith for Living*, a songwriter and recording artist, and the author of numerous books. Previously he was the senior minister of the historic First Presbyterian Church of Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Cover image © istockphoto.com / DNY59

PR
P U B L I S H I N G
WWW.PRPBOOKS.COM

CHURCH RESOURCES / CHURCH LIFE

ISBN: 978-1-59638-438-5

EAN



5 1 4 9 9



9 781596 384385