

# THE VISION HAND-OFF

*by Douglas Wilson, New Saint Andrews College*

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*Note: This article has been prepared from an audio recording.*

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One of the central problems we see throughout the Old Testament and through Old Testament history is the problem of generational faithfulness. The people get into a bad jam, they are pressed, they cry out to the Lord, the Lord delivers them remarkably and you turn the page and they are right back to worshipping idols. Then they get in a bad jam and they cry out to the Lord and God delivers them and so forth and it recurs. This problem of generational faithfulness is a problem that they did not seem to be able to solve in the Old Testament. But Jesus came in such a way as to enable us to address this problem rightly. Jesus came in order that we might be delivered from our sins and this sin is one of the big ones, a root sin. Failing to pass on the vision is a bad deal and refusing to pick up the vision that your believing ancestors bequeathed you is even worse. Jesus came to address all that.

In Judges 2:7–10 it says,

And the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great works of the Lord, that He did for Israel. And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died, being a

hundred and ten years old. And they buried him in the border of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the mount of Ephraim, on the north side of the hill Gaash. And also all that generation were gathered unto their fathers: and there arose another generation after them, which knew not the Lord, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel.

All of Joshua's generation died, and were gathered to their fathers. They went to be with the Lord, and there arose another generation in their place after them which knew not the Lord, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel. What didn't they know? They didn't know the deliverances. They didn't know their *history curriculum*. They didn't know their history lessons. They didn't successfully ponder and meditate on what God had done for their grandparents and their parents. They were not owning these deliverances as their *own* deliverances. We see this problem happen over and over again in the Old Testament.

Now what I want to do is apply this to your school, to your institution, to your work. We might put this whole thing under the heading of mission drift. I want to list seven ways for you to accomplish this mission drift. These seven could actually be collapsed into one

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which is do nothing.

What do you have to do to get weeds to grow in your garden? Simply nothing. What do you have to do to let things get off course? Nothing. So these seven all amount to apathy or complacency or presumption. When you itemize what you need to do in order to accomplish mission drift, it will be helpful for you to do the difficult thing which is to go the opposite way, to stay mission true, to avoid vision slide, or vision veer. So, here are seven tips on how to screw it up. Don't do them.

1. Keep a death grip on your opinions. This is quite distinct from keeping a life grip on your vision. The only reason necessary for clutching at your opinions in that way is that you have gotten to the position where you *can*. What does it take for a sinner to hold to his opinions stanchly? Well, all he has to do is get into a position where he can. All you have to do is get into a position where you are a permanent board member and they can't get you out of there.

The reason faithful men hold to the vision is because they must. They hold to the vision when they are reviled, and they hold to it when they are applauded. They hold to the vision when the sun is shining and they hold to the vision when it only looks like a crazy man would hold to this in the midst of the tempest and turmoil. So, faithful men hold to the vision and everybody calls them stubborn. Others, clutching to their own opinions, stubborn as the pope's mule, hold to whatever it is because it is *theirs*.

Why do you cling to this so tenaciously? Because it is mine. It is "my precious." Opinions grow stale and wearisome. Vision is constantly fresh. Vision refreshes. Vision encourages the faithful. Vision is something that puts backbone back into the people who are discouraged. You can tell by the fruit. Jesus says you are going to be able to identify this sort of thing by the fruit.

If every time anybody says to you, "Could we reconsider this?" If you automatically think mission drift, then you are in a bad way. In order to keep from

changing, institutions must change. The trick is *what* to change and *what not* to change. You don't avoid mission drift by never changing. You avoid mission drift by changing where you must change and refusing to change where you must not change and getting it right. Mission drift institutions are the ones who change. They give away the store over here and then they are tenacious about this particular teeny thing and that particular tiny thing. If you want to save your school, your school must change and your school must change in the right ways overseen by reasonable people. In order to keep your vision your school must not change. And that means that you have to know the difference between those things that are principles and those things that are methods, those things that are of first important and those things that are not.

2. Assume that you personally are ten feet tall and bulletproof; you are the thing holding everything together. But if you are the thing holding everything together, that is bad news for everybody. Charles de Gaulle put it well when he said that graveyards are full of indispensable men. We are all on this conveyer belt called time and the emergency stop button doesn't work and everybody in this room is going to be dead in a century from now. So graveyards are full of indispensable men and we all know that truth. But there is a difference between knowing it and knowing in a way that matters in your day-to-day decision making.

Here is a spiritual exercise: Not only will the day come when the school is getting along without you, it may well be that it gets along very *well* without you. Make your peace with God on this. We all know that there will come a day when they will get along without us technically but we still insist that they must stagger along. We insist that there has to be an appropriate period of crippling after we are gone.

Contrary to this, cultivate the demeanor that John the Baptist had: "He must increase, and I must decrease." Surrender this point in your soul. Assume

in the presence of God that future board members will associate the year of your demise with the time “we really took off.” And before you say “that’s sad,” keep in mind that those who cultivate this demeanor are not the ones it happens to. When John the Baptist said, “He must increase, I must decrease” we all know John the Baptist’s name. Jesus is the one who said there has not been anybody born of women greater than this man. So the people who cultivate this demeanor—“I am not indispensable, I want to prepare for the future, I want the school to be prepared for the future, I am not going to be here and this may be the time of the grand improvement,”—that is the kind of demeanor where the people are not crippled by your demise. They are saddened by it but you have been careful to equip them beforehand. They know what to do. They have been well taught and they have been instructed.

3. Allow the modern “professionalism” code to dictate to you a pretense of impersonal objectivity in board selection and in hiring. Let the word *nepotism* panic you. A pretense of objectivity doesn’t make anything objective but it does ensure a weird kind of hypocrisy. You do a national search for a headmaster when everybody in the room knows who it is going to be. Ever seen that happen? We have got to touch this base—we have got to do this—and some of you are thinking we all know it is going to be Schwartz here. Why don’t we just save ourselves the big expense and go talk to Schwartz? No, no, no, we have to do a national search. “But, Schwartz has taught for us for fifteen years; he is the best we have ever had—he is just fantastic! It is going to be Schwartz.” “But listen, we have to do a national search.” This is hypocrisy, or superstition, or *something*.

Now, there are times when we have to play cards with the hand that we are dealt. We have to function in the world that we are in, and there are times when you have additional pressures on you. There is an accrediting agency or some other people breathing over

your shoulder. They say, “Look, in order to keep your accreditation you have to pretend for three months it is not going to be Schwartz.” OK, suit yourself. But we close the door and say we all know it is going to be Schwartz. That is not hypocrisy; that is simply Gideon threshing in the wine vat. That is you making do with what you’ve got.

At the same time, the word *nepotism* was coined for a reason. It really is a problem. So what if the founder’s son really is a blockhead and everybody knows it except for the two of them?

Do not pretend that we somehow get the most qualified candidates by pretending we do not know anybody. In the Bible, knowledge is of a person’s character and abilities. It is not X-number of credit hours. In the modern pretense, we have this system built up where we have all of these state land grant universities, which are knowledge factories, and people come out of them with X amount of credits in sociology. What on earth is that supposed to mean?

When I look at a widget factory, I can count the widgets. But can I count the knowledge units of sociology? The point I want to make is that we want to believe that numbers are king when Jesus is king. And Jesus is a person. Our evaluation of our students, our evaluation of our teachers, our evaluation of who to hire to be the next headmaster, who to elect as the next board chair, those are *personal* decisions and you should, hell or high water, choose the best person for the job. If the best person for the job is this unknown, as opposed to the founder’s son, you go with the unknown. If the best person for the job is the founder’s son you go with him and you don’t care what people say. But this looks bad because this is the founder’s son and you know, what is this going to look like? Well, it is going to look like the founder who built a great school also raised a great kid. Nepotism can refer to a real problem, but don’t be spooked or superstitious in how you react to the word.

4. Forget how young you were when you started and

take an exceedingly dim view of any potential leadership for your school that is ten years older than *that*. Imagine that you are considering new board members and you are thinking, “I don’t know. He is kind of a young pup. He is almost 40.” The problem is not that he is a young pup. The problem is that you are an old geezer. This new board member has his kids in the *high school*. He is just five years away from being a grandparent.

Scripture says, the glory of young men is their strength, but if you want to wreck your school, ignore that resource—the strength of young men. Wait until the entire board is approaching 70 and then try to recruit some young blood by which you mean men in their fifties.

Recruit and train and do so with an eye on the future. Cultivate rolling recruitment. Keep a close eye on the average age of your board. If you have five men in their upper fifties and two men in their upper twenties, what are you doing? You are training two men, that is what you are doing. The glory of young men is their strength. They have that and you are giving them what you did not have back in the day which was wise counsel, a sounding board, someone who is able to be cautious when caution is needed, but who is able to be pressed when young men need to press.

If we have board members in their sixties, and we are training and developing board members in their thirties—which means that when they are in their forties they are recruiting and training people in their twenties—they have done it with ten years of mentoring from us. They have been mentored and now they start mentoring. What have you just done? This is one of the key elements in what I am talking about here. You have extended your stretch to perhaps four generations.

You can remember what your parents said to you. You can pass on to the people who are coming behind and they can pass it on—you can reach multiple generations. You can go well beyond one generation if you overlap it, if you treat it like a relay race. Don’t act

like this generation does it, and then everybody stops and you start over with the next generation. Hand the baton off and expect them to hand the baton off and make that part of the culture of your school. If don’t do this then you are setting your school up for mission drift.

5. Invest your ego into the school instead of investing yourself. There is a difference between giving yourself away and putting yourself into the school and putting your ego into the school. When you give yourself away, it goes away. It is a gift. You are not tracking it. When you invest your ego, it is tied up with thousands of little invisible tracer threads and you can yank on any one of them. You say, “After all I’ve done for this school, after all these years . . .” Every gift you ever gave the school has got a little bronze plaque with your name on it.

If you are doing it before the Lord it really is potent. You may be aware of the plaque on Harry Truman’s desk that said, “The buck stops here.” One of my favorite things about Ronald Reagan is the plaque he had that said, “There is no limit to what a man can do if he doesn’t care who gets the credit.” Pour yourself into the school without caring who is going to get the credit. And if you need to be acknowledged, keep in mind that the Bible says we ought not to be fishing for the credit. We ought not to be fishing for the honor, we ought not to be doing what we do with one eye on the honor. It should embarrass us even to think about.

The Bible says to honor those who lead you and the Bible gives instructions to the school constituency. If you have given yourself away, and you have given yourself away for a generation, for a career, or a lifetime vocation, and you built the school, should they recognize it? Absolutely. *They* should recognize it. Should you be keeping track of how well they are doing in recognizing it? Absolutely not. It’s none of your business. Don’t have those little invisible threads tied to anything. Let it go. Invest yourself in the school—which is not the same thing as investing your ego.

6. Assume that mastering the cant and the buzzwords

is the same thing as perpetuating the vision. Think that attending conferences is the same thing as paying attention during them. I think that this is something that the classical Christian school movement, like every human movement, is in danger of. Eric Hoffer once said, "First a movement, then a business, then a racket." Education in North America is deep into the racket phase. Higher education is a joke; it is a racket. The government education system is a joke; it is a racket. When we get something successful going, the pressure is going to be movement, then business. The first half of the business is going upslope. Business means you learn how to pay the bills. You learn how to pay salaries. You learn how to get your act together. There is nothing wrong with it. But there is a pressure here. Movement, business, and then there is a business orientation that takes over and you are no longer serving people. You are serving the bottom line. You are no longer serving people.

You are worshipping at the altar of reputation. You become a tony prep school and that is the business that you have turned into; then it becomes a racket where you are taking people's money for nothing. Don't assume that this temptation is removed from us. Rather it is very much with us because we are *people* and you have got schools that struggle to make it. Cotton Mather once said, "Faithfulness begat prosperity and the daughter devours the mother." All you have to do to keep the ball rolling is to master the buzzwords in the classical and Christian and Socratic method and integrated classrooms. Buzzwords are one thing, actually doing it is another. Keep the vision. Keep your first love.

7. Come to believe that it is your school instead of Christ's. When you come to believe that it is your school, you begin to view everybody else who is contributing to the school as a potential threat to it being your school. Let's say someone comes alongside and they are really trying to pitch in, and they really begin to help the school, and then they begin to help the school almost as

much as you are helping the school. Then they begin to help the school as much as you are helping the school. Then they begin to help the school more than you are helping the school. You say, "*Mine*. I would rather the school fail as mine then succeed as his."

That is the spirit of envy. The spirit in us, it says in James 4, tends towards envy. It veers towards envy. You do not want to be throwing elbows. You do not want your position to be that of positioning. You are not positioning yourself. What you are doing is working with the team. This goes back to the earlier point of investing yourself and not your ego and wanting to be open to him increasing and you decreasing. All of these tie together. You are not competing.

The way to do it is to make sure that you are free of envy. Envy is one of those sins that hardly gets preached on anymore at all. We preach against all kinds of sins but churches are riddled with envy. Conservative Christian communities are riddled with envy. Any school or institution where some people get promoted and other people don't is full of envy. There are many faculty teacher lounges that crackle with envy. Just be done with it. Crucify it. Take it to the cross and be done with it, because that will destroy your school quicker than anything.

So the problem is that Israel had neglected the future by neglecting the past. They didn't know the Lord and His many works. What has God done for you as a school and who knows about that? Do you remind yourself? Do you remind your spouse? Do you remind your kids? Do you tell a story? And do you tell the story free of envy? Do you tell the story in such a way that Jesus is the hero and not you? Jesus is the hero and you are the recipient. You are the recipient of His grace and His mercy and His kindness and His provision and His deliverance.