

## Introduction: “I Dream of Jeannie

Who remembers the 1960s TV sit-rom-com “I Dream of Jeannie?” The series was about the astronaut Tony Nelson, (Larry Hagman), who, after his space rocket malfunctions, is forced to make an emergency landing on a deserted island somewhere in the South Pacific. As he is making an S.O.S. in the sand, he notices a bottle that mysteriously moves, and keeps moving, on its own. Puzzled, he cautiously opens it, and as he does, smoke billows out along with a Persian-clad, Farsi-speaking, 2000-year-old Jeannie (Barbara Eden). And for the next five years, America was treated to the witty banter, uproarious circumstances, and unexpected hijinks, that occur when one finds, and eventually marries a Jeannie.

### Revitalization Team

A few years ago I served on a church “Revitalization Team.” It should have been called the “Resuscitation Team” because we were sent to churches that were on ecclesiastical life support. Our purpose was to help them revive and grow again. During my time on this team, I got to visit and analyze many such churches, but my favorite was the one where Larry Hagman and Barbara Eden’s mythical characters went to church during the “I Dream of Jeannie” series.

Other than this interesting piece of pop culture trivia, the church was near death and a few months from closing. This harsh reality was surprising for a few reasons. It had good pastoral and lay leadership. It was in a growing area. It had a large and beautiful campus. Other churches around it were growing. Plus, it had a well-crafted vision statement. So, what was missing? Before I answer, I can tell you that prayer wasn’t missing. Faith, hope, and love weren’t missing. Awareness of their “brutal reality” wasn’t missing and neither was their passion to grow. Before I tell you, what the miss was, and this miss is common in struggling churches, let’s remind ourselves of the power of vision.

### Power of Vision

Vision is powerful because it “sees” the future and sets the direction for the church. Therefore, it takes priority over all and any conveniences, preferences, or agendas. If we had a little fun, and unabashedly stole from Gordon Gekko’s “Greed is Good” monologue in the 1987 movie “Wall Street” we might say:

*The point is, that vision, for lack of a better word, is good. Vision is right, vision works. Vision clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the Kingdom of God. Vision, in all forms; vision for God, for ministry, for serving, has marked the upward surge of church. And vision, you mark my words, will not only save Bay Point church, but also the USA.*

### Visionocracy

[SLIDE 6] No doubt vision is good, and “inspiring a shared vision,” is priority #1 for good leadership. Why? Because as we are seeing in our vision series, we live in a “Visionocracy.” Therefore, we exist to implement God’s vision of “Getting heaven to earth” as creatively and as effectively as we can. In over 30 years of ministry, I have yet to hear anyone, not even those ranked as among the most cantankerous and curmudgeonly, openly disagree with a biblical vision. However, and as strange as this might sound, agreement with the vision is not the missing piece of why some churches live into the joy of their vision while others don’t.

## The Problem

If a compelling vision is in place, what then is this mysterious missing piece? Simply put, the shift, i.e., a failure to shift from belief to behavior or from a belief system to behavioral change.

Back in High School I was very keen on a girl and after many moons summoned enough courage to ask her out. A few days before the big date, I bought a manual 5 speed Ford Mustang II from a friend. Although I never drove a “stick” before I thought, “No problem.” As those who have driven a stick shift know, the hardest part is starting on an incline.

A few days later I go to pick up my date. While driving to her house, I pass one place in particular that could present a shifting challenge: an intersection near her home that set atop a steep incline. After collecting her, we roll up towards that intersection. As we are, I am praying under my breath, “Lord, please allow that the light to stay green.” He didn’t. It turns red precisely when we arrive. As we are waiting for the light to change, my heart palpitates, and my palms get sweatier and sweatier. Maybe it was the general nervousness of trying to impress my date. Maybe it was the fact that it was a hot, muggy summer night, and my new purchase had no A/C. Or maybe it was the ominous intuition of knowing that I’m no matter how hard I try I am not getting that car off that incline, at least not on the first try. Or maybe all three. The light finally turns green. I then proceed to let out the clutch way too soon and the car lurches and stalls. I restart it and try again, and it lurches and stalls, again and again, and again. Now there’s a million cars behind us blasting their horns in impatient unison. I’m turning deep shades of embarrassment (my date was very sweet and encouraging however). After what seemed like an eternity, I realized the car was in 3<sup>rd</sup> gear the entire time. I then hastily jammed it into 1<sup>st</sup> gear and shoot through that intersection like a bat out of you know where.

## Shift: I-GPS

Not shifting from belief to behavior will stall out a church quicker than a rookie stick shifter on a steep incline. So, what are the “shifts” we need to make to get our vision moving forward? The four core ones that I see in every thriving church are what I call “I-GPS.”

**The “I” stands for Invite.** The church is the quintessential “word of mouth” organization. Far more effective than external marketing and social media, is personal invitation. Therefore, we all need to be more like Andrew: the first person to invite someone to Jesus (his brother Peter in John 1:42-44). The biggest difference between growing churches and stagnate churches: a higher rate of personal invitations. So, let’s make it a goal for each one to invite one each week.

**The “G” stands for Give.** The Christian faith is born out of a God who “So loved the world he gave” (John 3:16). God is generous and giving and, as his kids, we are to emulate our heavenly Daddy. I’m not going to regale you with the dismal stats on how Covid has reduced giving by a whopping 44% in American churches and I certainly won’t tell you that our top giver has never set foot in our church. It may sound confusing, but although God’s grace is free, his vision is not. So, if we’re going to get heaven to earth, in terms of reaching the 450,000 unchurched Sarasotians, we need to shift from casual tipping to consistent tithing.

**The “P” stands for Pray.** Prayer is how we communicate with God, enjoy his presence, and receive his direction. Why do we need to shift from ceremonial praying to constant petitions? Because the original vision terminator himself, the devil, wants to defeat our vision and destroy our church. Our best offensive/defensive weapon against him is prayer, so let’s commit to praying 15 minutes a day for our vision.

**The “S” stands for Serve.** Jesus, the Divine Servant, made it clear that serving, instead of being served, was the greatest joy and fulfillment in life. The old church days of “show up, pay up, and shut up” are over. To pull off our vision, we need everyone serving wherever they can, especially according to their gifts and passions. Because so much is at stake let’s activate our servant DNA now (more on this point next week)!

### **Conclusion I-GPS Cards**

Before we come and dedicate our I-GPS cards to the Lord, I want to update you on the “Jeannie” church I told you about earlier. I checked up on it this week and guess what? They successfully shifted from belief to behavior and, against all odds, have turned the corner. If they can, we can! Can anyone say, “Amen?” Let’s pray.