

**THE ENGAGING CHURCH:
ACTIVELY PURSUING GOD'S PURPOSES**

1 Cor. 9:19-23
Jeffrey S. Carlson
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PROLOGUE

A little girl had just finished her first week of school. "I'm just wasting my time," she complained to her mother. "I can't read, I can't write and they won't let me talk!"

Do you ever feel like you are just wasting your time? I think we have all felt like that from time-to-time. Let us remember that all our time is from God and we need to seek his vision for what we are to do with the time entrusted to us.

PREFACE TO READING

Our Scripture text is taken from 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. First I am going to read a paraphrase of this passage and then later a standard translation of this passage in order to help us better grasp the characteristics of ministry Paul is trying to teach us.

SCRIPTURE

Even though I am free of the demands and expectations of everyone, I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: religious, nonreligious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, the defeated, the demoralized—whoever. I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ—but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view. I've become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God-saved life. I did all this because of the Message. I didn't just want to talk about it; I wanted to be in on it! (1 Corinthians 9:19-23 THE MESSAGE).

INTRODUCTION

The Christian Church faces many challenges in today's world. But this is nothing new. The Church has always faced challenges, even going back to the First Century. We need to remember that the Church is to be about God's work and if we are doing God's work, there is no need for us to be discouraged. Paul tells us:

“Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart” (2 Cor 4:1 NRSV).

The term “engaged” here has nothing to do with marriage. John Fetterman, a pastor from Madison, Wisconsin, tells of an elderly woman who died. Having never married or even been engaged, she requested no male pallbearers. In her handwritten instructions for her memorial service, she wrote, "They wouldn't take me out while I was alive; I don't want them to take me out when I'm dead."

Anyway, the term that is translated in this passage as “we are engaged” has to do with taking ownership of something, either literally or metaphorically, in order to bring about a positive outcome. God is calling us to take ownership of his work in the world in order to bring about a positive outcome. A Christian who wants to be in on this would be called an “Engaging Christian.” A church that wants to be in on this would be called an “Engaging Church.”

Earlier this year, a few of us from First Church attended an informative and inspirational seminar entitled, “The Engaging Church.” There the term “Engaging Church” referred to a congregation who was committed to being faithful to God in making new disciples. My use of the term “Engaging Church” does not necessarily contradict this but is broader than this. Based on Paul’s remarks I would say that an Engaging Church is one that actively pursues the purposes of God, actively seeks to be in on what God is doing in the world, and greatly desires to take ownership of the ministry God wants us to fulfill.

Over the next few weeks we will be taking a closer look at how an Engaging Church would go about fulfilling the historic five-fold mission of the Church: Service, Outreach, Worship, Fellowship and Discipleship. More importantly, I hope that through this experience *we* will want to be an Engaging Church for God.

In his letter to the Christians at Corinth, Paul gives us the marks of an Engaging Ministry:

“For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. {20} To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. {21} To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. {22} To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. {23} I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings” (1 Cor 9:19-23 NRSV).

An Engaging Church is one that seeks to adopt the marks of an Engaging Ministry. The Engaging Church Follows a Principle, Makes a Plan and Delights in Participation. This means that as we work for God we need to engage our hearts, our minds, and our behavior.

1. THE ENGAGING CHURCH FOLLOWS A PRINCIPLE.

THE ENGAGING CHURCH FOLLOWS A PRINCIPLE. This is the principle of winsome love. When we work for God we need to engage the heart and practice winsome love.

The aristocracy of ancient Greece believed that if you talked to ordinary people as if they were important, that would make you no better than a slave. Paul risks offending the aristocrats who were part of the Corinthian Church when he says:

“I have made myself a slave to all” (19).

But he is not recommending that we become doormats for others. Rather, he uses this language in order to reject the aristocratic view. The truth is, all people matter to God and so they need to matter to us.

Paul wants to win people to Christ. The word for win (*kerdaino*, ker-dah'-ee-no) is interesting. When it applies to finances it means to obtain by investment. When it applies to people it means to develop a relationship, that is, make a friend. Paul uses it 5 times in 4 verses. (Even if he had only used it twice that would still be a win-win situation! But here it is a win-win-win-win-win situation!)

A winsome love is one that builds relationships and helps people find a deep personal connection with Christ. It does not manipulate people nor does it distort the message but it seeks an authentic and heartfelt connection.

The motivation for this is Jesus himself. Through Jesus we become friends of God and he gives us the wonderful privilege of helping others become his friends also (2 Cor 5:18). This requires a winsome love. We need to engage our hearts and win people to Christ..

2. THE ENGAGING CHURCH MAKES A PLAN.

THE ENGAGING CHURCH MAKES A PLAN. It thinks strategically as to how to effectively carry out the work. When we work for God we need to engage the mind and plan our strategy.

Paul's plan to help people connect with God is simple: become like them to reach them. He does not adopt their values or lifestyles but tries to find common ground. He enters their world and tries to see things from their perspective.

Paul was willing to reach out to anyone but he believed he was especially called to reach people who knew little or nothing about Judaism, commonly called Gentiles. He describes it this way:

“For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles” (Gal 2:8 NIV).

So how does a rabbi raised in a strict religious environment tell people that Jesus is the Messiah when these same people have no idea what a Messiah is? He had a two-stage strategy. First, he would go to the local synagogue and explain how Jesus of Nazareth had fulfilled the prophecies of the Messiah. Sometimes members of the synagogue would come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah and that was great. But that, in and of itself, did not help Paul reach the Gentiles.

At most synagogues, there were also people who remained just outside listening to the services. They were called “God-fearers.” These were Gentiles who embraced the teachings of Moses but never converted to Judaism. Some of these would respond favorably to Paul's preaching and come to faith in Jesus. Paul's second stage would then be to work with these “God-fearers” turned Christians to reach other Gentiles who knew little or nothing about Moses or the Scriptures. The God-fearers became the bridge between Paul's Jewish worldview and the completely different worldview of the Gentiles. This two stage strategy proved quite effective in Paul's ministry. The key thing to remember is: he made a plan.

Most American churches do not have any kind of plan. The prevailing philosophy is, “If it is important, it will happen all by itself.” One wonders what the reaction would be if people who hold to this philosophy discovered that their doctor had the same attitude: “If the surgery needs to be done, it will happen all by itself.”

This will not do. If God's work is important then it is worth thinking about how we can do the best possible job. We need to engage our minds and plan the work.

3. THE ENGAGING CHURCH DELIGHTS IN PARTICIPATION.

THE ENGAGING CHURCH DELIGHTS IN PARTICIPATION. It teaches the biblical truth

that every Christian is called by God to participate in ministry. We are to be deeply involved in what God is doing in the world. Patrick Mead from Rochester Hills, Michigan has a great, if somewhat blunt, line on his internet blog about how we are to live our lives in such a way as to make a difference. He says:

“When you die, as we all will, you can either fill a hole or leave [a hole]. Your choice. I have no interest in filling a hole. I have a great interest in leaving one.”

Christianity is not a spectator sport. If you are watching something happen, then you are not really part of it. You are not engaged in it. We need to engage our behavior and participate together in fulfilling God’s purposes for the Church.

Paul says:

“I do it all for the sake of the Gospel, so that I may share in its blessings” (23).

The word for share (*sugkoinonos*, soong-koy-no-nos) means “co-participant.” The Gospel ministry is not meant to be a one-person job. The followers of Jesus are to participate together in this work. And those who participate in the work share in the blessing of seeing others receive the benefits of Christ also.

CONCLUSION

The Engaging Church Follows a Principle, Makes a Plan and Delights in Participation. This means that as followers of Jesus we need to engage our hearts, our minds, and our behavior with integrity and effectiveness as we fulfill God’s purposes for our lives.

We need to be committed to God with our whole being. God needs to be our highest priority and when God is our highest priority all other priorities in life fall into the right perspective. Jesus said, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matt 6:33 NIV). Or to put it another way, “God will give you all you need from day to day if you live for God and earnestly desire to engage in what God is doing in the world.”