

**THE VISION SUMMIT –
STAGE 4. STAGING THE CLIMB**

1 Corinthians 4:1-5

Jeffrey S. Carlson

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PREFACE

Today marks the fourth week of the six week Vision Summit Series. We are using the story of Moses, when he stopped to climb Mount Nebo while leading the people of God on the journey to the Promised Land, as a background for the series. We are also using modern mountain climbing as a metaphor for the mission of the church. This Vision Summit series is an opportunity to find encouragement in our life together, see where God is leading us, and consider how we can pass the torch of faith to the next generation.

SCRIPTURE

So look at Apollos and me as mere servants of Christ who have been put in charge of explaining God’s mysteries. ²Now, a person who is put in charge as a manager must be faithful. ³As for me, it matters very little how I might be evaluated by you or by any human authority. I don’t even trust my own judgment on this point. ⁴My conscience is clear, but that doesn’t prove I’m right. It is the Lord himself who will examine me and decide. ⁵So don’t make judgments about anyone ahead of time—before the Lord returns. For he will bring our darkest secrets to light and will reveal our private motives. Then God will give to each one whatever praise is due (1 Corinthians 4:1-5 NLT).

INTRODUCTION

Mountain climbing is carried out in stages. The first stage is the choosing of the peak. We need to know where we are going. We examined that stage the first week. The second stage involves surveying the mountain. We need to know the challenges we face. We examined that stage the second week. The third stage is preparing for the climb. We need to know what are the resources and capabilities that are needed. We examined that stage last week.

The fourth stage is staging the climb. This may sound a bit like doublespeak – a stage of staging. But staging the climb refers to planning the climb according to the progress you need to make. Many climbs require an expedition of multiple days.¹ You need to be clear ahead of time what goals you need to reach for each day. Staging the climb enables you to

¹ The average time for climbing Mount Everest is forty days.

measure your progress.

The spiritual expedition we call the mission of the church also requires staging.

1. MEASURING PROGRESS

But unlike staging a climb, staging a church is not so clear cut. How do we measure progress? Do we use the same criteria to measure a church that we would a business or a sports team? In sports it's, "How many victories?" In Business it's, "How much profit?" For a church *is* the real question, "How many members do you have?" Is a church with 1,000 members a winner and a church of 100 members a failure? Is success determined by the numbers?

It seems to me there are at least three problems with this approach. First of all, the size of a congregation and the health of a congregation are not the same thing and are not always related. A lemming may boast of many followers but the destination is decidedly unhealthy.² The influential Jim Jones of the Peoples Temple had many members but the end result was a mass, coerced suicide and nearly a thousand dead.

It is possible for a large church to be healthy and a small church to be unhealthy. But it is also possible for a large church to be unhealthy and a small church robust. There has to be something more than just a focus on numbers that yields vitality. Nor is it just a matter of preference. According to Barna Group research, 83% of American Christians prefer to attend a church of less than 500 members. Only 8% prefer to attend a church of more than 1,000 members.³

The second problem is the widely held assumption that every congregation is in competition with every other congregation. But if one church gains at the expense of another who wins? Aren't we on the same team?

People can sometimes have funny ideas about what it means to be on a successful team:

Lou Holtz, former head coach at Notre dame, said, "On this team, we're all united in a common goal: to keep my job."

² The lemming effect is a widely used cliché though it is based on a misconception. Lemmings do not commit mass suicide. However, under certain conditions they develop a herd mentality when in search of new habitat and this may lead to unhealthy situations such as trying to swim across the ocean, resulting in mass death.

³ <https://www.barna.com/research/state-church-2016/>

Jason Kidd, former NBA star and current NBA coach said, “We're going to turn this team around 360 degrees.”

Or my favorite from Yogi Berra, “Baseball is 90 per cent mental. The other half is physical.”

The Apostle Paul has a more poignant understanding of the team we call church. He describes the body of Christ this way:

If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad (1 Cor 12:26 NLT).

An injury to one part of the Church of Jesus Christ will sooner or later bring injury to the rest. And blessings to one part of the Church of Jesus Christ will sooner or later benefit the rest. We're all part of the same family of God.

B. Edelstein has said:

A group is a bunch of people in an elevator. A team is also a bunch of people in an elevator, but the elevator is broken!

The sooner we realize that all Christians are in the same elevator and the elevator is broken, the sooner we can work as a team to address our brokenness and the brokenness of the world.

The third problem with using numbers as a measure of success is that the New Testament uses different standards. Do not misunderstand me, I am not saying that numbers are unimportant. For example, Luke gives us a vivid picture of the growth of the early church by describing what took place after Peter's Pentecost sermon:

Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church that day—about 3,000 in all (Acts 2:41 NLT).

The church went from 120 to 3,000 in one day. But considering the special circumstances of the inaugural outpouring of the Holy Spirit we can hardly be surprised this happened. Later during the missionary journeys of Paul and Barnabas the numbers were more modest. Yet they rejoiced. This is in keeping with what Jesus had taught that, “God's angels are happy when even one person turns to him” (Lk 15:10 CEV).

2. FAITHFULNESS

In general, the New Testament uses something other than numbers to evaluate success.

For instance, Paul speaks to this in his letter to the Corinthians. In regards to the ministry for the church in which he and Apollos are engaged he makes two points. The first has to do with faithfulness:

Now, a person who is put in charge as a manager must be faithful (1 Cor 4:2).

Managers or stewards were servants who were responsible for a household but were not the owners of the house. Their job was to transfer the resources of the owner to the members of the household according to their needs. They were not accountable to the occupants of the manor but to the lord of the manor. They were evaluated according to their faithfulness in carrying out their responsibilities.

Paul argues that we are stewards of the church. We are not the owners of the church. The Lord owns the church. Our job is to faithfully carry out the Lord's instructions and provide the Lord's resources to those in need.

This then is the number one criteria for evaluating the success of a church: faithfulness. We are called to be faithful according to God's standards and not successful according to the world's standards. The question then becomes, "Have we been faithful?"

In order to answer that question we have to know what it is we are supposed to do. We need to understand our purpose. Fortunately, this is not as difficult as you may think. When it comes to knowing God's purpose for his people today we do not have to feel around in the dark. We have the witness of the Scriptures and the illumination of God's Spirit. We know we are to love God and neighbor. We know we are to make new disciples, baptize and teach them.

The work that God wants us to do was practiced by the first Christians as recorded in Acts 2, explained by Paul in Ephesians 4, and modeled by Jesus in John 17. They are summarized in the Great Commandments and the Great Commission of Jesus. These statements outline what living out God's purpose for his church is all about.

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:28-31 NRSV).

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20 NRSV).

From the Great Commandments and the Great Commission we derive five functional purposes: love God, love your neighbor, make disciples, baptize and teach them. The practical expression of the love of God is through Worship; the love of neighbor through Service; the making of disciples through Outreach (evangelism); baptism by participating in the Fellowship of the Church; and teaching by learning how to mature in Discipleship. Worship. Service. Evangelism. Fellowship. Discipleship.

Every congregation is called upon to be faithful to the Great Commandments and the Great Commission. How the purposes of God apply to a particular time and place requires guidance, which is precisely what we seek through the Vision Summit Series.

3. GRACIOUSNESS – AVOIDING JUDGMENTALISM

Paul's first point is that we are called to be faithful. The second point that Paul makes has to do with letting God be the final judge of success:

It is the Lord himself who will examine me and decide. So don't make judgments about anyone ahead of time—before the Lord returns. For he will bring our darkest secrets to light and will reveal our private motives. Then God will give to each one whatever praise is due (4:4b-5).

We judge by outward appearance and usually get it wrong. I remember when I was under the care of John Knox Presbytery seeking ordination as a Minister of Word and Sacrament. Several candidates were at a required retreat at a hotel in LaCrosse, Wisconsin where, among other things, we were to be evaluated by a clinical psychologist to see if we were fit for ministry. Those of us who already knew each other sat in the lobby. A rumor spread that an older candidate was going to join us. The rumor also said he was an alcoholic, a mama's boy, and out of touch with contemporary life. A few minutes later an older guy walks in, wearing a light blue leisure suit, and takes a seat at the bar. We looked at him and looked at each other and whispered, "That's him!" For the next several minutes we made unkind remarks to each other about the guy. We even named him – Marvin. "How in the world can someone like Marvin expect to become a pastor?" we asked ourselves.

Time came for the evaluations and we moved to the second floor. I had the first

appointment. I walked to the door with confidence. After all, compared to Marvin I was a real catch. I knocked and heard a voice say, "Enter." There was a man behind a table with several notebooks and files. He looked up at me and told me to have a seat. I nearly collapsed. It was Marvin!

We judge by appearances but God sees the heart. God not only sees our actions but also knows our true motivations and never gets it wrong. This is why Paul discourage us from being judgmental.

Individuals can be judgmental but so can churches. During an impassioned sermon about death and final judgment, a pastor said forcefully, "Each member of this church is going to die and face judgement." Glancing down at the front pew, the pastor noticed a man with a big smile on his face. The preacher then said in a little louder voice, "Each member of this church is going to die and face judgement!" The man in front nodded and continued to smile. Annoyed, the preacher pounded the pulpit emphatically and repeated the ultimatum, "Each member of this church is going to die and face judgement!" Though everyone else in the congregation was looking somber, the man in front was still smiling. Finally the preacher stepped off the chancel, stood in front of the man and said, "I told you that each member of this church is going to die and face judgment. Why are you still smiling?" "Well, replied the man, "I'm not a member of this church." (Probably a good thing, too!)

Being judgmental is not helpful. It does not build up the church. It does not advance the cause of Christ. And it says a great deal more about us than about the people we are judging.

CONCLUSION

When mountain climbers stage a climb they are making practical plans by which they can measure their daily progress. Churches also need to evaluate their progress but we need to follow the Lord's criteria in doing so. The world looks at size and wealth. The Bible teaches faithfulness and graciousness. We need to be people of grace who out of gratitude try to faithfully carry out the Lord's instructions for his church. Each of us is a work in progress. Our church, also, is a work in progress. That is why we can say with confidence, God is not done with us yet!