

Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



1 Corinthians 9:19-23, 24-27 **“The Power Of Influence ”**

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(22nd Sunday After Pentecost)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

I CORINTHIANS 9:19-23, 24-27
 "THE POWER OF INFLUENCE"

High Status Training, Low Status Occupation
 Paul Foregoes His Rights And Serves, 9:1-14

IIIC: 9:19-23 FLEXIBILITY AND ACCOMMODATION IN EVANGELISM.

SENSITIVITY

6:2 Chiasm, Win//Save, Christ's Pattern: Mission Is Incarnational: Phil. 2:7-8

1) v.19 Free From All And Slave To All.

Accommodates Lifestyle (Food, Clothing, etc.), Not Ethics

19 For though I am free from **all men**,

9:1, 4-6, 12, \$ Support, Freed By Christ, Free To Love Others, Gal. 5:13

I have made myself a slave to all,

To Assume Lower Status Was *Servile*, Voluntary Servant, Mk. 10:45

that I might win (gain) the more.

Win The More Purpose-Driven, 7 Purpose Clauses: *That*

Gift Of Evangelism: Expects To *Win* People

2) v.20 Become As A Jew To Win Jews.

Human Identification, Which The Spirit Uses

20 To the Jews I became as a Jew,
 in order to **win** (gain) Jews;

Gospel Meets People *In Their Social Matrix*

Win

Save Them From Their Predicament

All Of Life = Material For Identification

3) v.21a Those Under The Law + Law Footnote: Jews & Proselytes.

to those under the law as one under the law-
 (though not being myself under the law-)

2 Cor 11:24 (5x beaten), Acts 16:1-3,18:18, 21:20-26

Gal. 3:19-4:7

that I might **win** (gain) those under the law.

Win

Law Not Determine His Relationship

Maintained Jewish Links, 9 Uses Of *Law*, v.21

3') v.21b Those Outside The Law + Law Footnote: Gentiles.

To those outside the law as one outside the law-
 (not being without law toward God but under(in) the law of Christ-)

Law Reread Thru Christ, Rom. 6:14-15

Love, Gal. 6:2, 5:18

that I might **win** (gain) those outside the law.

Win

Paul Is Not Antinomian, Not Surrender Center

Their Slogan Was 6:12

2') v.22a Became As The Weak To Win The Weak.

Honor/Shame Culture, 8:11

22 To the weak I became weak,
 that I might **win** (gain) the weak.

No As Here, Non-Christians, Rom. 5:6, 1 Thess. 5:14

Win

Slaves, Manual Laborers, No Status

Downwardly Mobile, Not Mention *The Strong*

1') vv.22b-23 All Things To All Men.

Would *The Strong* At Corinth Also Identify With *The Weak*?

I have become all things to **all men**,

Hyperbole, Free On Non-Essentials, Accused Of *Chameleon*?

that I might by all means save (gain) some

Save Some

(Realist) An Instrument For *God To Save*

23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel,
 that I may share in its blessings.

Share Blessings *Good News = Gospel*, Not Advice, 9:12, 14, 18

Present & Future

Many Areas Are Morally Neutral, We Identify In Order To Influence

Missions Requires Self-Discipline

Who Will Reach Unwed Mothers, Prisoners, AIDs Sufferers, Church Drop-Outs?

IIID: 9:24-27 SELF-DISCIPLINE AND REWARD: EXAMPLE TO IMITATE.

TRAINING

It Takes Spiritual Discipline To Adapt To Different Cultures

1) v.24 Q & A, Athlete: Runner.

Paul's Single-Minded Passion, Phil. 1:30, 1 Thess. 2:2

24 Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete,
 but only one receives the prize (crown)?
 So run that you may obtain it.

No Team Sports, Isthmian Games Every Other Year

Corinthians Need Self-Control Of Winning Athletes

Analogy Breaks Down: Non-Competitive, Many May Win

Skills To Learn, Point Is Self-Discipline

2) v.25 Q & A (Ellipsis) Athlete: Boxer.

Athlete Motif: Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.4.30

25 (Do you not know that) every athlete exercises self-control in all things?

Mastery, Fruit Of Spirit, Gal. 5:23

They do it to receive a perishable wreath,

Great Efforts, Withered Wild Celery, Pine Wreath

but we an imperishable.

7:29, 10:11, Christians Are *In Training*, Embrace Hardship

Our New Freedom Is For The Sake Of Discipline

1') v.26a Runner (Paul As Example: I).

Takes Effort To Respond To God's Grace

26 Well, I do not run aimlessly,

Corinthians Must Go Into Program Of Rigorous Training

Athletes Took Vows Before Games "not to sin against Olympics"

2') vv.26b-27 Boxer (Paul As Example: I).

2 Events Of Pentathlon, Every Victory Has Its Price

I do not box as one beating the air;

Model What You Teach! Philo Called Sophists *Shadow Boxers*

but I pommel my body and subdue it,
 lest after preaching to others

Lit. *Buffet my body and make it my slave*
 Attention To Self-Control As Well, Rigorous Lifestyle, 1 Tim. 4:16

I myself should be disqualified.

Sober Reflection, Inglorious Elimination, 1 Cor. 13:5-7, Rom. 1:28, 2 Tim. 2:5

THE POWER OF INFLUENCE

“I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”

When duty and joy coincide, something good is at work!

1 C O R I N T H I A N S 9 : 1 9 - 2 3 , 2 4 - 2 7

In the early days of this America, when the frontier was still east of the Mississippi, a lone pioneer was hacking his way through what is now the western slope of Virginia. It was dead winter and he was numbed to the core. To his surprise he saw vapors rising from a warm spring. Stripping off his dear skin jacket and homespun breeches, he sank his shivering frame into the hot, minerals waters. Life and feeling soon came back into his frozen bones. He told others of the spring. Later travelers reported the waters had medicinal powers, curing stomach ailments and skin rashes. Word spread, people came, some stayed. Houses sprang up. Shops and services were added. A booming little town arose.

But then came a day when cold, ill visitors would arrive and ask, “Where is the warm spring from which all this grew?”

Those who lived nearby shook their heads in embarrassment, “No one remembers. We’ve moved on to bigger and better things.”

On Christmas Eve 1784 Bishop Francis Asbury,¹ founding apostle of the American Methodists, gathered in Baltimore with sixty circuit-riding preachers to charter *The Methodist Episcopal Church*, a new church for a newly freed land. Written into the first edition of the *Discipline* are these marching orders:

“Gaining knowledge is a good thing; but saving souls is better.... You have nothing to do but save souls. Therefore... be spent in that work.”

Asbury echoes an earlier charge given by John Wesley:

¹ The standard biography is now John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (Oxford, England: OUP, 2009).

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“It is not your business to preach so many times, and to take care of this or that society, but to save as many souls as you can; to bring sinners to repentance, and with all your power to build them up into that holiness without which they cannot see the Lord.”²

To be in John Wesley’s and then later Francis Asbury’s band of lay preachers meant you had to get over any hesitancy about offering the Savior to people in all conditions of life. I remember the day– shortly after I arrived in Georgetown in June of 2008– that I walked to the back of the Duncan Methodist Cemetery to find the grave stones of three early circuit riders. The first read Isaac Hartley, born 1809, entered the itineracy 1825, died in the work 1827, 18 years old. The second Benjamin Rhodes, born 1779, entered the itineracy 1818, died in the work 1826, 47 years old. The third Anthony Senter, born 1785, entered the itineracy 1808, died in the work 1817, 32 years old. All were unmarried Methodist evangelists. The phrase that ought to grip us is the last one on each of the headstones, “died in the work.”

When did you last speak to someone about Jesus Christ? Not the church. Not a program. That’s too safe. When is the last time you spoke to a sinner or dropout about the Savior: *Can I tell you what Jesus Christ means to me?* Have we forgotten where the warm springs are? Have we moved on to bigger and better things? Have we forgotten what it means to be lost and why Jesus came among us? I fear we have.

I do lots of good things. Hours preparing services and studies and sermons. Read books, write prayers of confession in which sin is openly named. I work in the community, give counsel to the poor and addicted, tend the sick and dying, prepare people for marriage. I’ve been heavily involved in world missions and church renewal. I tithe and give offerings. I work cross-racially when I have the chance. My days and night are full of activities, all of which can be justified from Scripture and my job description. I’m diligent and duty bound, and in that sense faithful. But I do not see many people won to Christ and saved from sin and hell. A few, occasionally, but not many. I’m not hesitant to speak about Jesus or give my testimony. I just don’t see much results; I fear I’ve become more local shopkeeper than a skilled fisher of men and women, one able to train others to share their faith in winsome ways under the leading of the Spirit. Something’s missing. We’ve lost a holy passion for people and their spiritual welfare. We’ve become overly-cautious

² Both quotes from Robert E. Coleman, “Nothing to do but save souls,” www.goodnewsmag.org archives, Nov./Dec. 1998.

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in our witness.³ We are concerned less the church shrink institutionally, but we are not particularly concerned that people around us do not know God, are beat up by Satan and weighed down with their sins.

The front line of the Christian faith is not this room. This is the *holy huddle*, where we gather weekly to worship the Lord and receive instruction and encouragement. The front lines are where our people are bumping up against all sorts of people in all sorts of circumstances. Here the church is gathered; there it is deployed. It's just that too many of us have been intimidated into silence. You do not have to be a theologian or Bible scholar to be a witness; your own story— simply told— is enough. Most people are won to Christ, not by the careful arguments of a scholar or pastor, or because all their nagging questions are answered, but by the ordinary witness of someone they already know and trust, someone like you who took time to listen and build a relationship. And at some point you ask a question, “Can I tell you what Jesus Christ and his people mean to me?” They almost have to say Yes since you put it that way, and then you bumble your way through it. If you get emotional, it's OK. The Holy Spirit will use it. And remember, you don't always have to be the last link in the chain, just the next one. The Holy Spirit is building a case; you're just the next witness on the stand. You speak the truth in love; you give your testimony— whether simple or dramatic— and leave it to God to make the case. And if they ask hard questions, work on them together. When someone in anger asks me, “Why did God let this happen?” as if I'm God's press agent, my answer is, “I don't know. What don't you ask him and see what he says?”

“Who me?”

“Yes, you.”

“Well, God and I quit talking years ago.”

“Well, your Heavenly Father's waiting for you to pick up the phone again.”

Our loss of passion for sharing our faith as good news is rooted in a waning religious experience, and that is grounded in a loss of confidence that the gospel is indeed true. Many have ceased— at a practical level— to believe Jesus Christ is fully alive and vitally concerned with us and everyone around us. He's receded from the foreground of devotion into the background as teacher or model, one to be admired-

³ On the intellectual trends and social forces in our popular culture that work to erode a confident witness, see the insightful analysis of Carl R. Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Wheaton, ILL: Crossway, 2012), Chapter 1, “The Cultural Case Against Creeds and Confessions,” 21-50.

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even honored— but not one whose disturbing and wonderful presence might break in any moment. The resurrection of Jesus— if it means anything— means he is available and near. Heaven is not at a distance but just beyond sight, an overlapping world. When I sit with a person in crisis, a thought sometimes intrudes— I presume as a prompt from the Holy Spirit, “The Lord is near.” And all of a sudden I’m full of fresh hope and the deep belief the risen Jesus is able to touch the person in front of me. That is the practical meaning of his resurrection. Our great, good friend is near.

So if you ask what I most need, and if I was honest and did not give you what I thought you wanted to hear, I’d say that I most need is a fresh encounter with the risen Lord. The one I had over four decades ago as a nineteen year old has just about petered out. Yes, there have been interim fillings, but I can again see the bottom of the well. Not more Scripture or more opportunities or leadership. I have plenty of those. Not more sermons or tapes or books. I study every day. Not some new technique but a meeting that would put me on my face trembling and strip away all the crud I’ve accumulated as a career pastor. And if, being lifted to my feet, I was given permission to ask two questions, they would be these: First, “What do you want with me?” And secondly, “Why don’t you show up more often? It’s hard down here on battlefield earth. And why is the Holy Spirit treating us like step children? We need a flow, and all we have is a piedly trickle. What comes through is good stuff, but why so little of it? Are our pipes that clogged? I signed up to follow you and learn your kingdom stuff; how did I end up running a religious franchise and coddling Christians who beg to be entertained?” His piercing eyes and laser-like answers would no doubt put me back on my face in self-loathing, but at least I would know where I missed the deal. There, I said it, but I’ve been thinking it for years. I take great hope in what Pastor Walter Wangerin once said, “Faith is work. It is a struggle. You must struggle with all your heart.... And on the way, God will ambush you.”⁴ I want to be easy to ambush; I am praying to be ambushed.

What we need is a fresh soaking in the presence of holy love. Not a surface shower or light sprinkling but a deluge that fills the underground aquifers of the church and sends up multiple artesian wells for people to drink from. And if you take this sermon as a guilt trip that we all ought to be better people and witness more than we do, you’ve missed the point. What we need we cannot provide. It’s not found in a pastoral bag of tricks. Unless God visits us afresh and opens rivers of mercy, nothing changes, and my energy will just wear us both out! It’s not a matter of good

⁴ Quoted by Bruce Buursma, *The Chicago Tribune* (Aug. 8, 1986).

preaching or more lively music, as if the issue was a lack of biblical content or getting people emotionally revved up. It begins with a frank admission something’s wrong, or more precisely, that the someone we claim to worship and follow has grown distant and secondary. “We miss you, Lord Jesus; we are so sorry that we have ignored and moved on to bigger, better things.” Like a once passionate marriage grown dull and routine, the first thing to do is admit it, to look across the table after another silent supper and say, “I used to love you. What happened?” Then to listen to the answers the other gives. The one across from us is the risen Jesus.

We speak naturally about the things we love; no one has to compel us. Why do so few speak of Jesus Christ with devotion and fresh stories to highlight his nearness? Such a flame of love is not humanly generated, though it must be guarded and tended in the church’s fireplace. What is blocking the presence? What is preventing us from welcoming the love of Christ more deeply into our lives? Is it the residues of racism we’ve never turned away from? Is it the historic sins of the city of Greenwood that have never been confessed and forsaken? Is it pride in prosperity? Is it a lack of prayer or love for the poor? It is secret sin? Is it you? Is it me?

TURNING TO THE TEXT

Paul loved Jesus Christ because of what he’d done for him. Blinded him with light, put him on the ground, asked a probing question, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”⁵ It was history’s most famous turn-around. Paul was now enraptured, intellectually and otherwise, with Jesus, with what the Father had done through him in the Holy Spirit. A new center was discovered, one around which everything prior had to be reorganized. And when— after this event— Paul looked out at the people who populated his world, he saw them through the eyes of a love willing to crawl up upon a cross for each one.

What would it be like to see people, not through the eyes of our habits, but through the eyes of Jesus? Everything would change. Compassion and understanding abound; patience deepens. It would be much easier to speak the truth in love and avoid pretense. I remember forty years ago sitting in Groves Stadium at Wake Forest one Saturday. I gazed at the tens of thousands there for the game when a thought came unbidden, “I love them all, every one.” I filled with emotion, tears brimming up and dripping off my cheek. A friend sitting next to me asked, “Is

⁵ Acts 9:4.

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everything alright?” I brushed him off; I was too embarrassed to tell the truth the Lord just whispered to me. It ruined the whole game; I could not concentrate. For a sliver of a moment I’d seen through his eyes and melted. That is what makes evangelism a passion and not a program.

Paul didn’t want anything from the people he dealt with. He was free from them and so free to be for them, as he says in verse 19, “For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more.” He already had the best education Judaism had to offer. He was bi-cultural as a Roman Jew from Tarsus in Asia Minor. He spoke and read two languages– Greek and Hebrew, and likely more local dialects as well. He was a man of physical courage willing to walk or sail anywhere, and self-supporting as a leather worker. Paul was a free man.

Every person in Paul’s Mediterranean world had a specific social location, dress, food, customs, and religious beliefs. And as long as it did not violate his central ethical principles or his devotion to Christ, Paul was willing to do just about anything to identify with others. After all, God’s Son took on human flesh to identify with the whole human family– we call it *the incarnation*– and that was Paul’s model: get inside the world of others through humble identification and listening. He did this in order to gain influence, and he was explicit about his purpose. He uses the phrase *in order that* seven times in five verses. Paul was goal oriented; his aim was to build a bridge of trust for his message about what the one God had done through his official ambassador Jesus the Son, the Jewish Messiah and now Boss Of The Universe.

People needed to hear and respond to the news that changes everything, and to gain a hearing Paul built relationships, then waited on the Holy Spirit to indicate the next step. What facet of the multi-faceted gospel matches up with the need of the person before me? For Paul it was never a canned but always a customized presentation fitted to his audience. As he said, “For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more.” In a world built on the categories of honor and shame and keenly aware of every indicator of status, that was a remarkably downward mobile thing for Paul to say. Slaves were the bottom rung on the social ladder, right next to manual laborers, and Paul claimed to be both. He could debate with the philosophers and converse with the dock workers in the ports. Paul was a general practitioner who *knew how to read the human document*.

Missions teachers use the terms *incarnational ministry* and *contextualization* for this strategy. What it means at ground level is that Paul was adaptable, always

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looking for ways to build bridges and gain a hearing. Pastor Stuart Briscoe made it contemporary with his confession, “I’m prepared to be interested in what other people find interesting.”⁶

In Paul’s presence you felt like an audience of one. He listened; what you didn’t know was that while he listened to you he was also listening to the Lord for guidance and revelation through the Holy Spirit. He was equally comfortable in Jewish and Gentile settings, with rich and the poor; his combination of wide travels and deep learning made him a rich conversation partner. Any topic was a good starting point. But sooner or later every conversation turned to Jesus Christ. That’s how it is with those who see with the Lord’s eyes, especially those with a gift of evangelism. Think of them as the obstetrical department of the church that deals with the messiness and risk of brining new life to birth. Sooner or later they bring every discussion around to Jesus Christ, and the best do it with style and sensitivity. Listen to people; they talk about the things they love. So do Christians.

To see people come out of their inherited religious system and come under the benevolent lordship of Christ was the highest satisfaction for Paul. Five times in verse 19 through 22 he used the word *win* or *gain* to refer to the conversions he sought. William Temple got it right when he said that “The church is the only cooperative society in the world that exists for the benefit of its nonmembers”⁷

Back to this idea of seeing people through the eyes of Jesus. It means, at the simplest level, that everyone is of value and worthy of attention. No one can be dismissed or treated second class. To see people through the Lord’s eyes is extremely egalitarian. Whether high or low, all are loved of God; everyone matters absolutely.

When with Jews, Paul kept Sabbath and ate kosher. He returned to his roots to keep the door open for Jews to come to Christ. And it cost him dearly. In order to preach in the synagogue Paul had to submit to the discipline of the synagogue. Which means, as he informs us in 2 Corinthians, that five times he received the thirty-nine lashes given a false teacher.⁸ This is what is behind the brief phrase in verse 20,

⁶ PreachingToday.com search under 1 Cor. 9:19-27.

⁷ Idem.

⁸ 2 Cor. 11:24.

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“To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews.” His back was striped from the scars of the rods. But it was the ticket that gave him a voice in the synagogue and a price he was willing to pay.

And when with Gentiles and other pagan polytheists Paul adapted as far as conscience would allow. He ate their food without question, listened to their music, discussed their philosophy, quoted their poets and looked for God-sized openings. The gospel is not a message dropped on people from above but a gift shared in the context of a relationship of growing mutual trust. It’s one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread.⁹ It’s one, cold, weary, ill traveler leading another to the warm springs of God’s healing love. We are responsible to put our concerns aside and identify with others as best we can that God might have a witness to put in the path of every person. Are there people around us whom God is preparing to receive, but there is no one near enough who’s earned the right to be heard? Could it be the Holy Spirit has more trouble finding credible witnesses than receptive people?

This means you are important, as is your specific location and all the details of your life. Where you grew up, what your job is, who you know, what your hobbies are, where you’ve traveled, whether or not you served in the military: all these are possible contact points. Your social network and the lost people you know are not my responsibility; they’re yours! You lead them Christ; I will baptize them!

There is a test of character that goes along with this work, and if you offer yourself as a witness for Christ it will come your way. It is this: Am I willing– for the love of Christ– to identify with and love those who are at the bottom of the world’s ladders of status and success? Not just tolerate or patronize, not just give advice, but to learn to love them as Jesus loved me. Prisoners, the habitually immoral, addicts, the uneducated and unsophisticated, people of other races and religions, those I am repelled by for one reason or another, people who would see me as being of higher status than themselves. Paul did, and this last group was the climax of his list. First Jews, those whom he was most like. Then Gentiles who were outside his Jewish faith. And finally *the weak*. And in this case he did not use the qualifying word *as*. He did not say, “To the weak I became *as* one who is weak,” but, “To the weak *I became weak*.” Paul was deliberately downwardly mobile. At times he lived with those at the bottom of the scale of status, not in a patronizing way but in a way that made them trust him and open to his message. So if you are willing to be a witness,

⁹ An oft-used quote from D.T. Niles.

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but only to those who bring you some benefit by association or status, you are not yet ready to speak of Christ because you will misrepresent him. You have not yet understood how low he came to reach us. The Christian philosopher Cornelius Platinga has written:

“We do not want suffering; we want success. We identify not with those who are low and hurt but with those who are high and healthy. We don't like lepers or losers very well; we prefer climbers and comers. For Christians, the temptation to be conformed to this world is desperately sweet and strong.”¹⁰

You can't do this for long without a steady supply of the love of Christ flowing into your own heart. Will there be anyone in heaven, and after that blessed interim the fullness of God's new world, who is there because of your witness and example? Or, will you arrive empty-handed with no spiritual issue?

The last four verses are famous because in them Paul uses the language of ancient athletics from the Olympics and other contests to lay out an example for Christian self-discipline. His point is not that only one can win but that discipline and self-control are required to be an effective Christian witness. He even leaves open the door that the witness may be disqualified if he does not attend to his own training, “...lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” Charles Wesley turned this idea into a hymn stanza meant to send a shiver of holy fear down the spine of every Methodist. The hymn is *A Charge to Keep I Have*, and in our hymnal the last stanza reads, “Help me to watch and pray, and on thyself rely, assured if I my trust betray, I shall forever die.”¹¹ Whew!

Paul likened himself to a boxer whose body was bruised from the training and the blows. This violent image of the Christian as pugilist is a reminder that spiritual combat is real. The image of a runner straining towards the tape and a boxer with fists bared is a sobering alternative to the soft and safe images that characterize our United Methodist Church. Comparing the present church to Paul— or to the early circuit riders— is like comparing Joe Louis in his prime to the old, fat, dull-witted Lewis who served for years as a nostalgic ornament at Las Vegas casinos before he

¹⁰ PreachingToday.com search under 1 Cor. 9:19-27.

¹¹ *U.M. Hymnal* (1989), No. 413.

died. Our United Methodist Church, pastors and people alike, is— with a few exceptions— spiritually flabby, biblically ignorant, culturally compromised, and morally out of shape. If Satan is not a real foe, if people without Christ are not lost, if everyone is automatically saved no matter what they believe or how they behave, and if all God wants is for us to be nice and reasonable, then why bother? It’s a good question, and presently unanswered.

On the issue of discipline and training we could learn something from the Methodist Church of the Caribbean. Each member in good standing carries a card in their wallet, on one side their name, on the other the pastor’s signature. Membership must be renewed annually at the covenant service. On the card are seven duties:

1. To come to church every Sunday and receive Holy Communion regularly.
2. To join in fellowship with other Christians.
3. To keep a daily quiet time for prayer and Bible study.
4. To bear witness to Christ in daily life and to seek to win others.
5. To give personal service to neighbors and community, especially those in need.
6. To be active in at least one non-church organization for social or political action.
7. To give money for the work of the church and to alleviate human need.

CONCLUSION

I do not fear for the future of the church or its mission. God will find a people. I do fear, however, that our wing of the church has become so distracted and enamored of so many extraneous things that we have lost our first love, Jesus Christ, and our founding passion— to save souls and bodies and lives.

As the vow asks, “Will you support the ministries of this church by your personal witness to Jesus Christ?” And if you don’t have a story to tell or a witness it make, we can help you find one. I think we would be surprised if we knew how many of the folk in our midst have never surrendered their lives to Jesus Christ and found the full freedom of forgiveness and a new purpose in life. Conversion is not just something that happens out there; it also happens in here.
