

# **The Lens of Image Influences Impact – 1Corinthians 9:19-23**

## **Scripture Reading: Romans 15:1-7**

### **Introduction**

This is our third message in the series that I'm calling "Corrective Lenses" in which we are seeking to gain a biblical understanding on different issues that face the church today

In the first two messages we have seen how the way we see our purpose as a church defines our practices and how the way we see ourselves determines our level of sacrifice

This week we are going to be looking at how the way we see our image as a church influences the impact we will have

Most of you know how before God called me to vocational ministry I worked in the Tool and Die trade

As a journeyman toolmaker I worked for a number of different companies that made number of different products

One company I where I worked was a manufacturer of electrical components and I was employed at the division that made mechanical electrical switches

Unfortunately, this was during the time when solid state switches were taking over the marketplace making mechanical switches somewhat obsolete and so the division I worked for was floundering

So, after assessing the situation, the parent company decided it was best to get rid of the division to relieve themselves of the drain on finances it was causing

The managers had to maintain a proper image of the company which meant recognizing that being a manufacturer of switches didn't necessarily mean mechanical switches

And in doing so they were able to strategically refocus their efforts and remain profitable

There was nothing at all wrong with the switches the plant made – time had simply marched on and rendered them obsolete

Things change for churches just as they do in manufacturing and practices that were once very successful must sometimes be modified or even abandoned as new methods are introduced to maintain the effectiveness of the church

We know we've been given a mission to carry out for as long as we sojourn on this earth

And that the mission is to be witnesses for Jesus Christ, to spread the message of the gospel so that people might be reconciled to God through accepting the sacrifice made by the Son on their behalf, and to help them mature spiritually through discipleship

The mission hasn't changed one iota in the past 2,000 years and the message remains the same as it's always been

Frankly, we don't have the authority to change either the mission or the message even if we wanted to because both were given to us by God

Our image of the church and her members as faithful witnesses and faithful bearers of the gospel must forever remain

But if we want to remain successful in carrying out our mission, we must always be willing to reassess and retool our methods

Times change, people change, and the way we approach our mission must also change if we want to continue to reach them

Otherwise we will become like a manufacturer of mechanical switches providing our product to an ever dwindling market as we fade into obsolescence

Our image of how church should be done will definitely influence the impact we have and if we allow our image of church to become too rigid we will also soon recognize that our impact has atrophied right along with it

Now, I'm not advocating change simply for the sake of change but we need to be certain that we are looking at our image through a biblical lens and make changes where necessary if we want to maximize our impact

So let's turn in our Bibles to 1 Corinthians 9 and follow along as I read verses 19-23 ([1 Corinthians 9:19-23](#))

*For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, 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 not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. [21](#)To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. [22](#)To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. [23](#)I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.*

The focus of this passage that serves as the catalyst for my message today is found in [verses 22b-23](#)

Let's look at those words again and then consider what they mean for us today in the context of our image and impact

*I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.*

Paul's interest wasn't fame or fortune but to share the gospel with as many people as he possibly could and that should also be our only motivation as we consider what his example means for us today

## **I. Our church as a [mecca](#) or a [mission center](#)**

The first thing we need to consider is whether we view the church as a [mecca](#) or a [mission center](#)

What I mean when I refer to the church as a "mecca" is found in the definition provided by Miriam Webster as "a place regarded as a center for a specified group, activity, or interest"

So when I ask whether we see the church as a mecca it's in the sense of the church facility being the place for an activity or interest—in other words the place where we carry out our mission

It used to be when a person wanted to make a purchase of a particular item they got in their car and they travelled to the store that carried that item in order to make a purchase

That's why we used to hear shopping centers and shopping malls referred to as being "a mecca for shoppers"

And just as downtown retailers discovered they had become obsolete when the shopping centers and malls came along those brick and mortar retailers in the shopping centers and malls today are finding that many people are opting to do their shopping online and ever dwindling numbers of people actually venture out to a store to make purchases

Times change and websites like Amazon have become the new mecca for shoppers and as delivery times continue to shrink that trend will likely accelerate in the future

Even dining on food from a restaurant doesn't necessarily mean a person has to leave their house as home delivery is starting to be offered by more than the pizza place in many localities

Likewise, an ever increasing number of people are opting to do at least part of their "church" outside the walls of any church

In fact, it's so prevalent that what defines regular church attendance is beginning to change

Whereas, we used to say a faithful attender would be in the church building for one activity or another multiple times each week, being present in the church building on 3 out of 4 Sunday mornings is now more often the norm – even among church leadership

We've been experiencing this trend here at Brick Church and in my reading and in conversations I've had with other area pastors I've discovered that this seems to be a universal pattern

Being present at the church building itself is becoming less important even to those who would consider themselves to be faithful disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ

And this is in spite of most church members being familiar with passages such as [Hebrews 10:24-25](#)

*And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*

So we have to know that getting the un-churched into a church building early on a Sunday morning may well be difficult  
**“Church” doesn’t equal “building”**

But we need to remember that when Hebrews was written church buildings as we know them didn’t exist

From our study of the book of Acts we know that the early Christians met in the outer court of the temple as we see in [Acts 2:46](#); they met regularly in the Jewish synagogue; they met in lecture halls as they did with Paul in the hall of Tyrannus in [Acts 19:9](#); and they met in private homes as we see them doing in Mary’s home in [Acts 12:12](#)

According to current archeological evidence the earliest dedicated church building we know of dates to sometime in the mid to late second century AD

Without a doubt we have come to think of meeting together in our own building as normal and perhaps even proper  
We’re used to church plants beginning in homes or rental spaces but we feel a bit sorry for them if they continue to do so after some time has passed and we wonder what’s wrong that they can’t build a building

Now, don’t get me wrong

I love having this wonderful building to meet in – I believe God has richly blessed us

But if we think that Brick Church is dependent on this facility – if we fear, or perhaps know, that our ministry would cease if a tornado or a fire or some other disaster was to take this building from us

If we see this building as **the** place where Brick Church ministry happens we need to adjust how we see ourselves and our mission

**We have to take to heart that “church” doesn’t equal “building” and our mission is mainly “out there”**

When we consider the Great Commission from Matthew 28 we see that the command to make disciples is to be carried out as we are going – in fact the first word of the command is “Go”

And in Acts 1:8 when Jesus gave his very last instructions to his apostles he said

*“...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth”*

With the clear understanding being that they would need to go everywhere outside of Jerusalem to do so

And when Jesus was preparing his disciples for their ministry to come we see in Luke 9 that he sent the twelve out to minister

And in Luke 10 he sent out 72 in pairs of two with the words we see in [Luke 10:2-3](#) –

*“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go your way; behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves.”*

**Jesus didn’t instruct his disciples to build a clubhouse and minister to all who came through its doors**

He told them to pray for God to **send** laborers **into** his harvest and to **go** because I am **sending** you **out**

And that was the pattern that Jesus had demonstrated to them as they watched him minister

He didn’t hang around the temple or the synagogue waiting for people to come to him

Jesus went to the people – he was in the marketplace among them where they were

The Pharisees were the ones hanging out at the synagogue waiting to minister to the “right kind of people”

Jesus was in the homes of tax collectors and sinners – he met them *where* they were; *as* they were

**We must have a correct image of this facility as a mission center and not a mecca if we want to have true impact**

Because getting people into the church building is getting tougher every day

## II. Our culture as fixed or fluid

Most of us have been coming to this church or been involved with “church-world” elsewhere for so long that we have forgotten what it’s like to step into a church, or even a new church, for the first time

It can be quite intimidating and those of us who have visited a new church recently can remember that pang of anxiety in wondering if we’ve dressed correctly; if we’re carrying a version of the Bible that is going to cause them to look at us funny; if we’ve chosen to sit in someone’s personal seat; or even where the bathroom might be...

Every church has a culture that is largely invisible to those who attend there on a regular basis but it’s there nonetheless

As I look over your faces I see a fairly homogenized group that is very comfortable together

Oh, we have our differences to be sure but we are mostly very much alike

Part of that is the whole “birds of a feather flock together” thing and it’s only natural that people of similar backgrounds, outlooks, and tastes choose to congregate together because it’s comfortable

The danger comes in when we our culture becomes **fixed** and a barrier to anyone who isn’t like us

In some churches how far an outsider has to travel before they can come into, or be accepted as a part of, the church is more than a matter of the physical distance between their home and the church building

For example, I know of two churches in a community that are divided not by some matter of doctrine or even denomination but simply by economics

The “haves” go to one church and the “have nots” go to the other and never the twain shall meet – the one is where all the business owners and other power players worship and the other is for the working class and everybody knows it

In order to be accepted at either church a newcomer would need to fit in **economically**

And the same can be said for many churches where everyone is expected to fit into a certain mold whether it is a physical, intellectual, emotional, cultural, social, behavioral, sartorial, or some other mold or some combination of molds

Church snobbery comes in many flavors and it can appear in all areas of church culture

I suppose there are certain expectations that are intentional and stated openly at times but more often than not I think they begin innocently enough and those cultural distinctions become entrenched and institutionalized over time

And churches can erect a sort of “stained glass barrier” without being fully aware of it that keeps people who don’t fit in from meeting Jesus

Look at the example of how the disciples tried to prevent the people from bringing their children to meet Jesus simply because they didn’t see them as fitting the right “mold” for taking any of Jesus’ time

Or better yet, consider the account of Zacchaeus in Luke 19

We are familiar with the story of Zacchaeus – he was a tax collector who was shall we say, “Vertically challenged” and he heard Jesus was coming to town and he wanted to see him

But the crowd got in the way and he was forced to climb a sycamore tree just to get a glimpse of Jesus

And as the account continues we know that Jesus calls him down, goes to his home, and Zacchaeus was saved

But I want us to consider the people in the crowd who were blocking Zacchaeus

They weren’t doing anything “wrong” were they? They simply wanted to see Jesus too but in their desire to see him they blocked Zacchaeus from also seeing him

They likely did so without being aware of it but I think that even if they had known it’s likely they wouldn’t have cared because Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector which meant he was at the top of a despised group of people

But the point is that the people simply by doing what they did without taking time to consider it were blocking Jesus from the view of someone who was different from them

And that can happen in any church where culture is viewed as **fixed** and not **fluid**

Any time you hear the words, “We’ve always...” or “We’ve never...” really any time you hear the words “always” or “never” and they concern anything but some clear teaching of doctrine take heed because you may be witnessing a case of “hardening of the culture”

We all have preferences and those can be good or bad depending on how far we take them

But it is always bad when we mistakenly begin to believe our preferences are in fact precepts or principles

You may prefer to wear a coat and tie to church but recognize that as a preference and don’t burden others by telling them they must do the same

You might well prefer praise songs to hymns or vice versa and you might feel very strongly about your preference but that’s all it is – a preference

And the same is true when we consider our Sunday morning order of service, the time we gather, whether we sit in pews, whether we have flags on the podium, whether the preacher speaks from behind a pulpit, or any of a number of things that we do simply because they are so ingrained in our culture that we think they must have been carved on Moses’ tablets along with the Ten Commandments – perhaps they were on the back but I don’t think so

And as we saw in last week’s sermon all of our preferences are also opportunities for us to show sacrificial love to each other as we allow for them to be violated by others who hold different opinions

We also must be able to change with the times concerning non-essential matters because we will otherwise find ourselves stuck in a past that is no longer relevant or attractive to those we are trying to reach

I shared with you last week how a church member at another church told me how she and her family would leave the church if a bass guitar was ever allowed to be a part of the worship team

We’ve all been a part of the worship wars that keep smoldering in the church at large long after I thought they would die out but would it surprise you that worship wars have existed for centuries?

There was a time when all worship songs were sung without any instrumental accompaniment at all – and there are churches today that still insist that is the only proper way to worship

Perhaps everyone sang acapella because there was a time when the psalms were considered the only songs worthy of singing in worship to God and no one knew precisely what the tunes should be

It’s true and when the hymns many of us revere as the heritage of the church were being written they were a scandal of the highest order and considered sacrilegious by many – just like in the early days of the praise choruses that we lived through and the over-amplified, lightshow accompanied worship band performance oriented pattern that has been adopted by many churches today

There are certainly exceptions among but by and large people are easily offended these days and it seems some are actively looking for offense at every turn – perhaps to justify some sinful behavior, I don’t know

And no matter what we do we are bound to offend someone in some way at some time

But we need to endeavor to do our best to make sure that when we offend it is because of the unchanging truth we unyieldingly proclaim and not over some matter of preference on which we can yield

**In our passage we see clearly that Paul refused to stand firm on his preferences but yielded on non-essentials whenever he could all so that he could share the gospel and see others saved**

We have often said we don’t want to be merely a good church but a godly church and that will require us to follow the example set by our Lord and then by Paul as we go to people where they are and accept them into our midst without expecting them to fit into some particular mold based on our preferences

That may well mean some uncomfortable shifts in our culture as newcomers violate our preferences at times but wouldn’t it be worth that small sacrifice to have a greater impact that allows us to better fulfill our mission?

### **III. Our ministries as permanent or productive**

That brings us to our last point which concerns our ministries and how we view them

Whether we see our ministries as **permanent** or **productive**

There are certain things that we seem to expect from church because they have always been a part of our church experience – even if we don't participate in them ourselves we want to know that they are being offered to others

And so ministries have a way of attaining permanence as we continue to perpetuate them even if they stop being effective

I want to hasten to say that I am not advocating getting rid of any ministries at this time – okay?

I'm simply talking about how we view the things we do as a church in order to open our eyes so that we can begin to evaluate how we can have the most impact on our community – how we can best use our resources to carry out our mission

So, when I mention certain ministries please don't go around saying Pastor Bill says we should get rid of whatever  
Is that a deal?

When we look at Scripture we see that there are specific things that the church is instructed to do and there are other things that we are told the early church did

And then we are left to figure out which of those in the second group are simply *descriptive* – telling us what was done – and which we should view as *prescriptive* – telling us what the church should always do

It should be obvious that we can barely scratch the surface of such a discussion in a single sermon and I don't mean the examples I'm about to give to be an exhaustive list by any means – they are really only the most obvious

#### ***Great Commission***

When we looked at the Great Commission in **Matthew 28:18-20** we have seen that the first and most important ministry of the church is to **make disciples** – and we have talked at length about how that begins with evangelism

Then we see in **verse 20** that disciple-making includes “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you”

So clearly **teaching** should be an ongoing function of the church – we can agree on that, right?

But notice that we aren't told of **any specific form** that such biblical teaching should take

Which tells me that each local church is free to pick whatever form of teaching is effective for their time and place

#### ***Sunday school***

Here at Brick Church we have what we refer to these days as either “Christian Ed” or “Sunday school” that takes place for an hour each Sunday morning right before the morning worship service

And Sunday school is one of those things that all of us simply expect to be a part of our church culture and even if we don't personally attend it we would be bothered if it were eliminated

Largely that's because we have come to think that the command “Thou shalt have Sunday school” must have been one of the commandments etched on the back of Moses' tablets

But the whole Sunday school phenomenon first showed up in the 1780s in England and was a way to provide an education to working children who otherwise couldn't go to school

The Sunday school concept “jumped the pond” and came to the United States in 1790 and over time morphed from providing general education to providing instruction in Christian doctrine that we still practice today

My point is that even though Sunday school has always been a part of our personal experience leading to us having an expectation that it will always be present in the church it didn't exist until relatively recently

We're 20 centuries removed from the early church and Sunday school is barely 200 years old!

So, unless we're prepared to say that the church failed in their duty to teach as Jesus commanded we must admit that Sunday school is hardly the *only* way to carry out that command

It may well be the best way for us or it may not and I'm not trying to make that determination here this morning

I am simply using it as an example of something that is so deeply ingrained in church culture that we tend to view it as a **permanent** part of the ministry of the church without stopping to even consider its effectiveness

### ***Care of the needy***

The church is also commanded to care for the needy in our midst and we see the early church engaging in that endeavor

As we went through the book of Acts we saw offerings being made for the benefit of the poor

We saw the widows receiving a daily allotment of food and the need becoming so great that a group of seven men were appointed to facilitate the distribution

We saw offerings being collected and carried to Jerusalem when that entire community of believers was in need

Today we collect what we refer to as our Benevolent Offering and church leadership distributes it to assist those who are in need both within the church family and in the community at large

We also donate to the local food pantry, participate in Meals on Wheels, and so forth

But we don't have a daily distribution of food any longer and that's okay because in today's society that would likely be an inefficient and ineffective means of obeying the mandate to help the less fortunate

### ***Constant assessment***

We must always be assessing everything we do to determine if we are achieving our maximum potential impact as we seek to be faithful in obeying the clear commands given to the church in Scripture

No ministry should become so permanent that we believe it simply can't be modified or even dispensed with altogether in favor of something else that would better achieve the same end

We must always insist that our ministries be **productive**

The church that fails to assess and adapt will be the church that sees its effectiveness in fulfilling the mission of making disciples of all people both near and far dwindle

## Conclusion

I have to be honest and tell you that I don't have all the answers regarding how to address all that is going on today

I don't

But I do know that we can't sit back and expect people to find their own way to the doors of the church

It's getting harder every day to get church members into church as consistently as they used to be – times have changed

There once was a time when most people went to church culturally and they instinctively turned to the church in times of crisis but that isn't necessarily true right now

And if we just sit back and wait to minister to those who cross our threshold we are going to fail to maximize our impact and fail to do as well in fulfilling our mission as we could and should

From the examples we just looked at we see that we should be busy out there ministering beyond these walls

I know that we need to accept people as they are even if it stretches us a bit culturally because that's how God accepts us

We all know all too well that none of us would be acceptable to God if we had to meet some perfect standard first

Breaking out of our "holy huddle" and getting out into the world is going to put us on the home ground of the world and that might at times put us in uncomfortable situations

**But getting ourselves into the lives of our neighbors is God's plan for getting them into the life of the church**

And we need to have programs and ministries that make the most of what we have available

Church isn't simply for those of us who attend regularly but also for those others out there who need to hear the gospel

When Jesus was questioned by the religious authorities of his day why he would go into the homes of tax collectors and sinners to eat and drink with them he answered in [Mark 2:17](#) –

*"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."*

Like I said, I don't have all the answers but I don't need to because I have you all to help me brainstorm and together we can and must find ways to get out there physically to minister

And we also have opportunities that were unheard of just a few short years ago in the sense that technology now enables us to reach all around the globe from right here at the crossroads in rural Walworth, WI

I always try to meet every visitor to the church and in the last year or year and a half I have not met one person who has visited on a Sunday morning who had not first checked us out online

Every one of them had listened to one or more sermons either on our church website or our Facebook page before they came – in a sense they all *visited* us online before the visited us physically

And we really have a minimal online presence that could use a great deal of help to be the tool it should be for us

But with God's help and inspiration and some effort on our part we can do more and may well minister to untold numbers that we may never meet in person this side of heaven

Then when they decide to cross our threshold we need to make certain that we make them feel welcome and help them to assimilate while providing for their spiritual and physical needs in the most effective way possible

And it all begins with how we see ourselves and our mission because our image of ourselves influences our impact

Let's pray