

“Ministry Diversity and the Centrality of Christ in the Local Assembly”
Issues of Opportunity - Understanding Personal Adversity

Author: Patrick J. Griffiths ©
Date: September 16, 2007
Title: “The Biblical Principle of Ministry Opportunity and Adversity”
Text: 1 Corinthians 16:5-9
Theme: Local church ministry is often met with internal and external adversity.

Intellect - Making it Personal: There is a great opportunity for kingdom work in our community, but it will be met with resistance by adversaries from within and from without.

Volition - Action Step: You need to get involved in kingdom work and you need to help us overcome internal and external adversaries.

Emotion: You need to love the Lord and His church and you need to resist those who would oppose Him by opposing His church.

Introduction:

“Paul turns very naturally to his travel plans, since he has just given instructions concerning the gift the Corinthians were challenged to make to the poor in Jerusalem. He indicates in verses 2 and 3 that when he arrives in Corinth, he does not want to have a collection taken, but rather that their gift be set aside in advance of his arrival. On his arrival, he would compose letters to accompany the gift and the Corinthians who carried it to Jerusalem. And so, having given his instructions concerning this gift, Paul writes next of his travel plans.” (Paul’s Closing Words, [1 Cor. 16], Bob Deffinbaugh, Th.M. www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=811 Paul’s Personal Plans for the Future [16:5-9])

His plans involve three stages:

- Ephesus to Macedonia (v. 5)
- Macedonia to Corinth (vv. 6, 7)
- At Ephesus (vv. 8, 9)

Inside of this short paragraph the apostle gives three statements concerning ministry. First, he makes a statement regarding the relationship between himself and those he serves. Second, he makes a statement regarding his submission to the will of God in planning ministry. Finally, he states the opportunities and obstacles in ministry.

Paul loved those with whom and to whom he served. Notice how this affection is expressed in verses 5-7.

- I. His affection for the fellowship (vv. 5-7).

There was a deep and abiding affection between the apostle Paul and the church at Corinth. Paul notes how he will stay with them and presumes they will receive him.

- A. He expected the church to take care of Him

The church is to be a place where warmth and reception are common. We should be the “friendliest” church in the area, not to attract, but simply because it is right. We should all be willing to facilitate those who are in need to the degree that we can.

“Unable to foresee possible contingencies, he refrains from making promise absolute.”
(R.C.H. Lenski, 1 & 2 Corinthians, 764)

i. This care is for sustaining (“I will stay with you”)

The word “will stay” is a compound word for abiding. The prefix heightens the sense of remaining. Paul was determined to stay with the fellowship in Corinth. Paul believed he had an ongoing opportunity with the Corinthian fellowship.

ii. This care is for enablement (“So that you may send me on my way”)

Like the word “stay,” the word “send” is a compound word. Again, the prefix heightens the sense of sending. There is a partnership, a union between the sender and the sent. In today’s modern mission movement, I believe there is a significant disconnect between the sender (i.e. the local church) and the sent (i.e. church planters) and with facilitating ministries (i.e. agencies). This is correctable, but will take prayer and fasting to make the necessary steps.

“That visiting servants of God are speeded on their way worthily of Christ by bountiful practical help is the God given responsibility and privilege of an assembly.” (W.E. Vine, First Corinthians: Local Church Problems, Zondervan, 1951, 231).

The involvement Paul sought was greater than mere consent.

B. He wanted to spend time with them

The word used here is the same in verse 5 but with a different prefix. Both uses of the prefix are intended to heighten the word “remain.” Paul recognized that effective ministry happens in a context, not in a vacuum. The action of discipleship is inseparably linked to the context of relationships. You cannot have one without the other.

You might not be able to touch everyone, but there are those with whom you can have a significant impact and those are the people you need to invest in.

This leads us to the second idea as it relates to ministry.

II. His submission to the Lord (v. 7b)

He surrendered himself to the Lord’s will. The word “permit” means to allow, to suffer. Before I examine this area further, let us consider the following idea:

“Paul gave thought to the future. Paul made tentative plans for the future. Paul does think about the future because he is seeking to be a good steward of the time and opportunities God has given him. As he considers the future, he is not consumed with

anxiety because he knows that whatever happens, God's will shall be done, for His glory and his (Paul's) good (see Philippians 1:12-26)." (Paul's Closing Words, [1 Cor. 16], [Bob Deffinbaugh, Th.M. www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=811](http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=811) Paul's Personal Plans for the Future [16:5-9])

The idea of God's control and man's volition are not mutually exclusive ideas. God's control works in and through man's volition. The means to God's end often includes man's volition. Your planning and purposing is not to the exclusion of God's control. It is because God is in control that you and I can have rest and contentment in the midst of our planning and in the midst of their non-fulfillment.

We do not know what God's will is when the issue falls outside of God's written word. When we do not have a direct statement, then we live our lives believing that what unfolds is God's will. If it happens, He permitted it to happen. If it does not happen, He did not permit it to happen. Notice how the overarching will of God is presented in the Bible.

- The Disciple's Prayer – "Your will be done" (Matt. 6:10).
- The Lord's Prayer – "Your will be done" (Matt. 26:42).
- Paul's persistent submission to the Lord's will in circumstances – "If God wills" (Acts 18:21).
- Paul's adamant refusal to be moved from going to Jerusalem – "The will of the Lord be done" (Acts 21:14).
- Paul yielded to God's control in life's circumstances - "If the Lord wills" (1 Cor. 4:19).
- The author of Hebrews notes this same principle – "If God permits" (Heb. 6:3).
- Submission to God's overarching providence – "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that" (James 4:15).

It is interesting how we see life as dependent on our ability rather than God's. Your involvement is non-negotiable, but it is God's will that is performed and fulfilled.

This leads us to the third idea as it relates to ministry.

III. His fervor for the ministry (vv. 8, 9)

"Paul is writing a short time before the Jewish Passover festival and intends to leave after a period of about two months, after the Jewish Pentecost festival." (R.C.H. Lenski, [1 & 2 Corinthians](#), 766)

Verses 8 and 9 explain why Paul chose to tarry in Ephesus.

A. Paul was sensitive to ministry opportunity (v. 9a)

"The apostle labored for three years in that Asian city (Acts 20:31), but he here put a time limit upon his ministry ('until Pentecost'). His reason for staying was that God had 'opened to him a great and effectual door' for proclaiming the gospel. On the second missionary journey God had forbidden Paul to preach in Asia (Acts 16:6), but on the third journey God had opened the closed door (Rev. 3:7-8). **Paul knew that his responsibility was to go through opened doors, not to fret about closed doors.**

He also knew that it was God who did the opening and the closing (2 Cor. 2:12; Col. 4:3). However, **wherever God is working, Satan will be there to oppose.** (Robert G. Gromacki, Called to be Saints: An Exposition of 1 Corinthians, Baker, 1977, 202).

The ministry was large and he did not wish to pass up the opportunity presented to him. Paul describes the ministry opportunity before him as “great.” It is our word “mega.” It speaks of something that is enormous.

Think of the circumstances Paul found in the city of Ephesus.

“Paul’s idea is not merely that of a great door standing ajar but of a great door into which one enters in order to accomplish a task. ‘An effectual door’ is one that is not merely looked at but is made use of effectually. Acts 19:19, 20 describe the great opportunity to which Paul refers, and Acts 20:1 reports when he left Ephesus.” (R.C.H. Lenski, 1 & 2 Corinthians, 766)

He also uses the word “effective.” Here the word in English is “energy.” Paul saw, through the Holy Spirit, an enormous door for ministry opening before him and he saw that the ministry was going to be filled with energy, with power.

“The door was ‘great’ in the extent of the opportunities; it was ‘effectual’ in the results of entering.” (W.E. Vine, First Corinthians: Local Church Problems, Zondervan, 1951, 231).

It is true that some of you are overextended in ministry, but some of you are equally unengaged in any ministry. The work is too great not to call each of us to action. None of us can afford to simply attend church and not be engaged in the work of Christ.

B. Paul was sensitive to ministry obstacles (v. 9b)

“This vicious opposition was focused in three particular experiences.

- First, Paul’s confrontation of evil powers . . . culminating in a public bonfire when the books of magic arts so rife in Ephesus were consigned to the flames.
- Second, the opposition to Paul and to the gospel was the guild of silversmiths, led by Demetrius. Demetrius and his colleagues . . . raised a public outcry against the evangelists, and dragged Paul and his companions into the local amphitheatre, where they were all but lynched.
- Third, opposition was also present in the Jewish hierarchy, representing the religious establishment of the day.” (David Prior, The Message of 1 Corinthians, IVP, 1985, 282).

This idea of adversity is interesting. In our cultural context, we think of staffing and finances as primary and significant obstacles to the advancement of the gospel. In Paul’s day, adversity had a face and name. The issues of staffing and finances are an issue of wrong priorities and self-focused hearts, but the issue of adversity is that of people who would fight against God by fighting against His church.

“God’s guidance is not only evidenced by opportunity but also by opposition. Too many Christians seem to think God’s will is evident in that which is successful, fulfilling,

warm and fuzzy. There was a great opportunity at Ephesus and a great need for Paul's ministry. But that **opportunity included opposition**. Where God is at work, we can expect Satan to be as well." (Paul's Closing Words, [1 Cor. 16], Bob Deffinbaugh, Th.M. www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=811 Paul's Personal Plans for the Future [16:5-9])

There are many adversaries in Christian ministry. Although we might assume we understand the ideas being presented in this short thought, perhaps too much assumption is taking place and thus a host of misunderstanding exists. Let us begin by defining a couple of key thoughts.

First, "What is Christian ministry?" Christianity ministry is one that reflects kingdom values and advances its agenda. The kingdom of God has a real set of values, thoughts, ideas, and expressions that show it for what it is. It is different from the kingdom of this world, the devil, and fallen flesh. It is this agenda, this value that is to be presented and advanced in a fallen world.

Second, "What is the kingdom?" We speak of a "kingdom" as if everyone understands what was meant, but unfortunately, such is not the case. In our Lord's Prayer, He prayed, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Although there is a real kingdom of God on earth right now, there awaits us a fuller and final manifestation of this same kingdom down the road. In this kingdom, Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords. In this kingdom, the work of God is without resistance. There will no longer be any adversaries or obstacles to the work of God.

Yet currently kingdom work is met with persistent opposition. Every local church has within it those who would oppose the work from moving forward. There are local communities and entire nations that are in opposition to the kingdom's presence. They hate the king, thus they hate the kingdom and those who would advance the values and agenda of the king.

In our text (1 Cor. 16:9) Paul uses the word "adversaries." It means repugnant or to be in direct opposition. Every ministry begins with promise and hope. All ministries initially are a wide open door and are filled with real power to accomplish kingdom work. Yet all ministry has standing in its path those who are in direct opposition to what is ready to unfold. This adversarial element is found from within and from without all fellowships. Let us initially consider our internal adversaries.

Internal adversaries:

Notice Paul's language to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28-30.

²⁸ "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. ²⁹ I know that after my departure **savage wolves will come in among you**, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and **from among your own selves men will arise**, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts. 20:28-30).

This same warning is given by our Lord to the disciples in Matthew 7:15.

“Beware of the false prophets, **who come to you in sheep's clothing**, but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Matt. 7:15).

Peter likewise warns of those from within who stand in the way of kingdom work (2 Pet. 2:1).

“But **false prophets also arose among the people**, just as there will also be **false teachers among you**, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves” (2 Pet. 2:1).

Paul reiterates this thought in 2 Corinthians 11:13-15.

¹³ “For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, **disguising themselves as apostles of Christ**. ¹⁴ No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵ Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their deeds” (2 Cor. 11:13-15).

If such things were present in the days of the apostles, why should we not expect anything less? There are those within a local church whose sole desire is to destroy the church of Jesus Christ. **Knowing that such a threat is real should cause us to be ever vigilant against those who would divide any local family by their pernicious ways.**

May God cause us to see with divine eyes the threat against His church. May we awaken to the ever present danger that is unfolding around us regularly. May His wisdom make known to us His path as evil in confronted in the family of God.

The elders are placed in their position as shepherds to protect the flock of God.

“holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both **to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict**” (Titus 1:9).

¹ “I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: ² preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; **reprove, rebuke, exhort**, with great patience and instruction. ³ For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, ⁴ and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths” (2 Tim. 4:1-4).

What happens if the teaching elder goes astray and what is the role of the sitting elders? I submit myself to the elders of this fellowship and if they prove me wrong, then I will accept their correction or leave.

As elders we would be in great sin if we allowed those who would divide the fellowship to exist without being challenged to repent or leave. It is our task and it is our obligation.

Yet there is more. Not only are there internal adversaries, but there are adversaries outside the church. Let us now consider our external adversaries.

External adversaries:

Paul speaks of such adversaries when he references Alexander, the coppersmith, in 2 Timothy 4:14, 15.

¹⁴ “Alexander the coppersmith **did me much harm**; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. ¹⁵ Be on guard against him yourself, for he vigorously opposed our teaching” (2 Tim. 4:14, 15).

Even a casual reading of the gospels reveals the constant and persistent opposition to ministry our Lord faced with the religious establishment. Sometimes our great adversity will come from those who believe they are doing the “real” work of God. They speak with dripping piety and cloaked support. Their intentions are hidden from the viewer, but what they leave in their wake is division, hurt, and broken lives.

We also know that the devil stands in direct opposition to all kingdom work. Paul and Peter reference this in two of their letters.

“But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that through me the proclamation might be fully accomplished, and that all the Gentiles might hear; and **I was rescued out of the lion's mouth**” (2 Tim. 4:17).

“Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. **Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour**” (1 Pet. 5:8).

Add to all of this the emotional and spiritual hardships inherent in the ministry of shepherding His sheep. Paul spoke of this burden in his letters. He also addressed concerns focused on his speech and what the “ministry” looked like. It appears people wanted the wisdom of this world and something other than Christ crucified (1 Corinthians).

It is this “adversity” that provoked Paul to say, “who is adequate for these things?” (2 Cor. 2:16).

APPLICATION: (What’s the NEXT STEP?)

When Paul charged the Ephesian elders to be on guard he said first look to yourselves and then to the flock (Acts 20:28). For whatever reason, unlike any other vocation, it is possible while tending to the flock of God that one is lost in the ministry. While focused on the good, the best is missing. Let us consider five practical steps.

1. We must see ministry as an enormous opportunity for explosive kingdom work. We must reach people who do not know love without condition. We must reach people who do not know acceptance without requirement. We must reach people who do not know forgiveness without limit. And we must

reach people who do not know service without reward. All they know is that unless they measure up, they will only experience rejection. We must have an intentional approach to reaching sinners and not just making saints comfortable.

2. We are the body of Christ to this community, let us be that body to one another and to those outside this fellowship.
3. We must understand that the work has many adversaries. Friend, how tragic it would be if you and I were the obstacles to the great opportunity that sits before us to our local, national, and global community.
4. “There is one simply lesson, above all others, to be learned from Paul’s experience: the presence of opposition does not mean that we have moved out of the will of God.” (David Prior, The Message of 1 Corinthians, IVP, 1985, 282).
5. God is doing a great work. I want to be a part of this work, and I surrender myself to it.

Although the adversaries to kingdom work are numerous, formidable, and persistent, they are no match for the priceless and powerful nature of our Triune God. God the Father reigns with a powerful and compassionate hand. The Lord Jesus sits enthroned and proves enough in this life and the life to come each and every day. The Holy Spirit causes us to find rest in the storm. Together they show us time and again the great door of opportunity for effective ministry before His people.

It is His work and we are His workers. He does His work through us for His glory and our good. What is the next step? It is for us to wake up to the real dangers swirling all around us. It is for us to realize that He is enough both now and forever. We must truly repent of our lusting after lesser things in place of the greater glory of God. O what real joy is ours when we drink from His well and feast from His table. May each and every day find us fighting the fight of faith to find Him always and forever enough for each and every moment.