Transformation U:
The Digital Mission Field

1Cor. 9:19 Though I am free and belong to no one, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. **20** To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so a to win those under the law. **21** To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. **22** To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. **23** I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

1Cor. 9:24 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. **25** Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. **26** Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. **27** No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

The story is told that one day, Jesus and Satan were having an argument about who was better on the computer. They had been going at it for days and God was tired of hearing all of the bickering. Finally God said, "That's enough! I am going to set up a test that will run two hours and I will judge who does the better job." So Satan and Jesus sat down at their keyboards and typed away. They moused. They downloaded and uploaded. They did spreadsheets. They wrote reports. They sent faxes and emails. They edited photos and videos. They created genealogy reports. They made birthday cards. It was amazing! But ten minutes before their time was up, lightning suddenly flashed across the sky, thunder rolled, the rain poured and—of course—the electricity went off. Satan stared at his blank screen and screamed every curse word known in the underworld. Jesus just sighed. The electricity finally flickered back on, and each of them restarted their computers. Satan started searching frantically, screaming "It's gone! It's all gone! I lost everything when the power went out!" Meanwhile, Jesus quietly started printing out all of his files from the past two hours. Satan saw this and he was ticked! "Wait! He cheated, how did he do it?" God shrugged and said, "Jesus saves." Some of us think that's funny, and then some of us are like, "Jesus might save, but my computer doesn't!" Isn't it interesting how we have this love/hate relationship with technology? It's in our cars and refrigerators, thermostats and sports. **How do we live faithfully with all this technology around us?** Paul has some really interesting insights.

Before we get to Paul, I wanted recognize how much things have changed. In Thom Rainer's sweet, little book, *The Post-Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges + Opportunities That Will Determine the Future of Your Congregation,* he argues that post-COVID, online technologies are clearly more than just tools—they are a digital mission field. Going forward, he says, churches will work with four different kinds of groups:

1. **Digital only people.** These folks are unable to attend for any number of reasons—unable to attend because of body limitations, health concerns or distance, or because being with people is too hard. Maybe they will come someday, but maybe not. How do we care for these folks?
2. **Digitally transitioning people.** These folks may spend time with the church online—livestreaming or Bible study—but might be open to sometimes coming in-person. How do we encourage these folks to give in-person events a try?
3. **Dual citizens.** Depending on the Sunday, they may be live and in-person in worship and Coffee Hour, or live and online. Maybe some weeks, they take in our worship on YouTube. How do we help these folks stay connected and feeling they belong?
4. **People cut off from the online/digital world.** There aren't as many of these any more, but the person who can't manage a phone connection, or think their way through the signing on process on their computer—these people still need to experience the love of God too. How do we meet their needs too?

This is where Paul can offer us three key approaches for our new digital mission.

First, strategic use of our resources for God's purposes. So let's think for a moment about our resources. In our community, what are some resources people might have:

[Take responses from the congregation.]

A question we might ask ourselves is, "How could Jesus use that resource to bring more grace to my life and the lives of others?" Paul writes in vs. 24, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize." In particular, let's think about cellphones and computers for just a moment. How many apps do you have on your phone? How many of those apps help you or others know or show God's love better? If you have a desktop computer, does your background help your faith? Does your online presence make a difference? Paul adds, "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever." How do we make strategic use of our resources for God's purposes?

Second, embrace both/and thinking. In a way, our church has already embraced some of this reality too. We meet in a physical space, but the place where most people find us is our web address. We used to think of connecting with church as a take it or leave it, either/or proposition—either you come to church or you're out of luck. In his letter to the Christians in Corinth, Paul doesn't say, "either do it my way or get the heck out." Quite the opposite, right? He says, "I become all things to all people so that I might by all means save some." Both/And thinking opens new doors, and makes new connections possible.

Third, communicate in a way that people can receive. When my wife, Cynthia, and I were first married, I loved saying "I love you!" all the time. I would say it. I wrote songs and sang them to her—I think they were pretty bad, but she smiled and nodded appreciatively. But I didn't *really* know how to say "I love you" until on one of my days off, while she was at work, I cleaned the house spic and span! I scrubbed the counters and bathrooms. I scoured the stove. I even…vacuumed! When Cynthia got home that day, her whole face lit up! She got a little misty eyed…and she kissed me. She heard me say "I love you" loud and clear that day!

I realized that if I really wanted my wife to know that I cared, I would have to say it in the way she could really hear it. I think that's what Paul has in mind when he talks about becoming like different groups of people, to speak their language and culture in a way that allows them to hear about the grace of Jesus. In the same way, we may feel God's Presence on Sunday morning, and may enjoy the grace of *each other's* presence, but how do we help others online experience that? *In-person*, we create community and show each other kindness, but how do we build communities of blessing *online* in a way that people can receive?

I said earlier that Jesus saves, but sometimes my computer doesn't. Which really just proves that technology, like us, sometimes works the way the Creator intended, but often doesn't. And still, God has chosen flawed human beings to show other people how much God loves each of us. Technology has given us tools to extend our reach, new ways in which we get the chance to show grace to family and friends, but technology has also created *spaces* in which we find people we might never have met. In a curious way, we discover people in Bangladesh and Mexico, Iceland and Iran are our neighbors too. Isn't it awesome!? All these new people and new ways of being together, and God is giving us this opportunity to learn how to care for each other in these new spaces. We are called to reach out to people in new ways—digitally for those who need that. We will also keep many of our old ways of loving each other and God. New ways or old, though, we want to make sure people can truly hear God say, "I love you" in a way they can receive it. After all, that's why God came down to us in Jesus. God decided to not just *say*, "I love you!" but in Jesus, God *came* to us in *our* space, to talk and *be* with us, and to *show* us what love really is. **Our calling is to carry that love into every space we go, so that by all means, some will know the grace of Jesus that can change everything**.