

Branding has changed. A hundred years ago, a brand was an identifying mark burned on livestock. You could look at a cow and see that it came from, say, the Flying V Ranch. Nowadays a brand is a name, a term, a design or a symbol that separates one product or company from another.

We don't really see a Flying V as much as we see Apple and Starbucks. Today, brands are for consumers, not cowboys. Can you hazard a guess as to what the top brands are today? Google, Amazon, Apple, Netflix, Facebook and Starbucks. No surprises there. All are brands that have been burned into our brains over the last several years.

But these brands are more than simply well-known. McDonald's is not on the list, even though its golden arches are a universal symbol. No, the top brands today like Google and Amazon have "the power to connect deeply with people and bring about change," says one observer. "They can influence the direction of larger culture and make an impact on the way other businesses think and operate."

The brands that matter most connect deeply with people and bring about change. They actually influence the direction of our culture. Take Amazon, for example. It has fundamentally shifted the way we buy stuff, and it "consistently gets people excited about spending their money." How about Apple? It is the world's 2nd most valuable company and also one of the most beloved, "due to its gorgeous products, intuitive services, and its' enduring halo of cool."

Facebook knows that "humans crave connection." Facebook is where it happens, more and more -- for better or for worse. And Starbucks is more than a coffee shop. Beyond home and work, it is a "third place" where community is created in unexpected ways. All of these brands connect deeply with people and bring about change. They exert an influence on the entire world.

So how about the Christian brand? Our cross is recognizable on church buildings around the world, and many of us put symbols of our faith on our cars,

clothing, and jewelry. Some people even get cross tattoos -- the Christian symbol burned into their skin!

Sadly, though, our Christian brand is suffering. Sexual abuse scandals, financial scandals, and even political posturing have caused many people to turn away from the faith. Sadly, these days, for some... Christianity has become associated with "intolerance, bigotry, anti-intellectualism, exclusionism, stinginess..." Not the message we want to be sending as followers of Christ.

Perhaps we need to go back to our roots and reclaim our brand. And fortunately, the apostle Paul can help us with this. As much as anyone else, Paul helped to establish the Christian brand, way back in the first century. He didn't have a cross tattooed on his bicep, but he did present the message of the cross as "the power of God." He believed that Christ "died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures."

For Paul, the cross is not a sign of weakness. Instead, it shows the power of God. On the cross, Jesus died for our sins and then was raised to new life. What happened on Good Friday and Easter was more world-changing than anything developed by Amazon or Apple.

But that's not all. "The one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus," said Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians, one of our scripture lesson for today. Yes, that's right -- "raise us also." This means that we will experience a resurrection right along with Jesus and will enjoy eternal life with him. Through the power of God, we are part of what I like to call the Eternity Brand.

Just imagine, for a second, how excited an advertiser would be to develop a multimedia campaign around a brand like this. All the pieces are in place: Connects deeply! Brings positive change! Exerts an influence! "Beyond all measure!" Why, none of the products of the most innovative companies even

comes close. Paul knows that there is no competition, since all of the things of the world will eventually pass away, from Apple iPhones to StarBucks lattes. "Our outer nature is wasting away," he says, and everything around us will eventually crumble. But we do not have to lose heart. "For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." And that's a brand we can trust.

So what are the characteristics of God's Eternity Brand? Not high-tech phones, or video streaming services, but instead...invisible power and eternal life. These are qualities that people are craving, and they are traits that the Christian faith can provide. For starters, Christianity offers invisible power. Our faith knows the truth of what is said by a character in the novel *The Little Prince*, "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."

Think about this for a moment: What is essential is often invisible to the eye. Love for family members and friends. Justice and righteousness in our dealings with others. Belief in the power of forgiveness, both given and received. The fruits of the Holy Spirit, which Paul lists as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

None of these qualities can be perceived with our eyes. But we see them clearly with our hearts, and we know how essential they are. In fact, they are infinitely more important than anything we can purchase, and the quality of our lives would plummet if we were to lose them. Imagine living without love, in a world without justice, or righteousness, or the possibility of forgiveness. Imagine getting up in the morning without the possibility of joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, or self-control. We know we need them, every single one of them. Even though we cannot see them.

Fortunately, our Christian faith gives us access to these invisible powers. We are able to love each other because God "first loved us." We act with justice and

righteousness because our God is a just and righteous God. We believe in the power of forgiveness because Jesus died for our forgiveness to free us from sin. And we are able to show the fruits of the Spirit because the Spirit is always working through us.

"What is essential is invisible to the eye," says the character in *The Little Prince*. The apostle Paul would probably agree, which is why he says to the Corinthians, "We look not at what can be seen, but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal." In other words, our faith gives us assurance. The good news is that our Christian faith gives us invisible powers to face the many challenges of life. But it also assures us of a place in God's eternal kingdom. That's why it is not a temporary brand, like all of the top corporate brands today. It is an Eternity Brand.

Paul writes to the Corinthians, "We know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." This focus on eternal life, made possible by the resurrection of Jesus, is at the heart of our Christian faith. It assures us that nothing in all creation -- not even death itself -- can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We need this assurance, especially with the growing pace of change taking place in our world these days. Institutions and corporations no longer provide our communities with the stability they once did. Think of iconic companies such as Block Buster Video, Circuit City, Pan Am, Tower Records, and Toys R Us. They may have once been brands that mattered, but now they are gone, though apparently one of them might be coming back.

In the face of economic change, we need the Eternity Brand, which includes God's promise of "a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." This brand connects deeply with people who want to live with faith and love, knowing that the choices they make in this life are going to have eternal consequences. It

brings about change, inspiring people to work hard to transform the world as it is, into the world as it should be. And it shapes the history of the larger culture by giving people a vision of God's heavenly kingdom, in which injustice and war are replaced by righteousness and peace.

God provided for the apostle Paul as God does for us. At the heart of our brand is invisible power and eternal life -- "beyond all measure!" And because of this truth, which we are able to believe in because we have the gift of God's gracious and Holy Spirit, we have nothing to fear. And Thanks be to God. For that. Amen.