

## **Consumer Christianity**

### **1 Corinthians 14:1-25**

We are jumping back into 1 Corinthians this morning and to begin I want us to start thinking about what kind of mentality we have about our experience at church, especially on Sunday mornings. What are we looking for? What are we thinking about? What's our purpose for being here? We think a certain way about these things and there are some common trends that pastors and church leaders see among American Christians because of the culture we live in.

After the industrialization of the late 19th century, America has become what's known as a "consumer culture." A consumer culture happens in a capitalist country where people have money to spend, and businesses are competing with other businesses to sell products and services that people want. In order to sell, they have to make their products more appealing than their competitors', and they have to convince people that's the case. So there's all kinds of marketing and advertising that focuses on why their products and services are better for you than the others. Businesses cater to the individual buyers to try to meet their wants and needs better than anyone else. It's all about providing exactly what the consumer wants.

When you live in that kind of culture you learn to think a certain way. You're constantly being told that it's all about you – what you want, what you need, what you prefer. Your desires, experiences, and enjoyment are what matter most. Everything revolves around catering to you. That's the mentality that's engrained in people's minds in a consumer culture.

Now, let's think about what that looks like when it comes to the church. The reality that almost every pastor has to deal with is that most Christians operate with a consumer mindset. They are looking for a church that appeals to them – their needs, their wants, their preferences. They're expecting to have a powerful spiritual experience when they go to church and if they don't, they complain or they start to look for a different church. It's called Consumer Christianity.

In an article by Ray Burns from High Pointe Church in Altoona, IA, I read this statement: "Consumer Christianity is just what it sounds like – we treat Christ and His bride like commodities that exist to serve our wants. We treat believers and

the church as things that need to impress us.” Churches have to appeal to the people they are hoping to bring through their doors and hang onto, because if they don’t, the next church down the road will. So most people, when they go to church, are thinking about how good of an experience they’re having.

Do you think that way? How about when it comes to the songs we sing in church? How about the temperature in the room? How about the length or style of sermons? How about little kids running around and making noise? How about the way we handle masks? How much importance do you put on your own personal experience when you come to church?

This morning we are going to look at a passage where Paul points out a problem with the church at Corinth and it’s the same problem that happens in consumer Christianity. As we see what that problem is, my hope is that we will go a different direction and begin to train ourselves to think differently about our experience at church on Sundays.

You may remember that Paul just finished writing about love and how important it is. The people in Corinth were placing too much importance on spiritual gifts, especially speaking in tongues, and not enough on love, so Paul was trying to get them to flip that around. Love is far more important than spiritual gifts and if they would put love first it would change the way they thought about spiritual gifts. Paul writes about what that would look like for them in chapter 14.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:1-5.

*Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. <sup>2</sup> For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. <sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. <sup>4</sup> The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. <sup>5</sup> Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.*

So, speaking in tongues was at the top of the list when it came to the way the Corinthian believers were thinking, but Paul says, if you’re thinking rightly and love is most important to you, there are other gifts that will rise to the top,

especially the gift of prophecy. I read a description of the gift of prophecy in the ESV Study Bible that I really like: *“The gift of prophecy is speech that reports something that God spontaneously brings to mind or “reveals” to the speaker, but which is spoken in merely human words, not words of God. Therefore, it can have mistakes and must be tested or evaluated.”*

That’s the gift that Paul said they should earnestly desire instead of tongues. Why would he say that? He begins to explain in these verses. He points out that when a person speaks in a tongue, they’re not speaking to people, but to God, for no one understands them – they are uttering mysteries in the Spirit. In other words, it isn’t helping other people. Prophecy, on the other hand, is tremendously helpful for others. The things they share build people up, encourage them, and console them. So there’s a major difference between the two. Paul points out in verse 4: *“The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church.”* Speaking in tongues is about a powerful personal experience; prophecy is about building others up, and Paul is saying that is more important in the church.

He isn’t against speaking in tongues, he wants them to be able to speak in tongues, but even more than that, he wants them to prophesy, because when someone prophesies the church is built up and that doesn’t happen with tongues unless there’s an interpreter. Prophecy is for building up the church, tongues is for personal experience. Therefore, according to Paul, prophecy is greater in the church.

I want you to see a theme here. We don’t have the same issue with tongues as the church of Corinth did, but we do have a consumer mentality that tends to place too much importance on our own personal experience when we come to church, and not on building others up, and it seems that Paul is pointing out here that there’s something wrong with that. A wonderful personal experience is important, but not as important as building others up. That should be our priority when we come to church. And that is not the way we think in a consumer culture.

Paul goes on in the next several passages to emphasize the inability of tongues to benefit others in the church. So I’m going to go through these quickly and not hit every detail, but I want us to see the main point. It’s going to sound like he’s

overly negative about tongues – you just have to remember he’s writing to correct the error he saw in that church.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:6-12.

*<sup>6</sup>Now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching? <sup>7</sup>If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? <sup>8</sup>And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? <sup>9</sup>So with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air. <sup>10</sup>There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, <sup>11</sup>but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me. <sup>12</sup>So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.*

Paul gives several illustrations and the point of all of them is the same – speaking in tongues, without an interpreter, doesn’t benefit anyone other than the person speaking.

A couple years ago we were doing a canned food drive with the youth group and we stopped at a farmhouse where migrant workers from Mexico were living. It quickly became apparent that they didn’t know any English and they were confused about what we were doing. We were trying to ask them if they had any non-perishable food items that they wanted to donate, but they thought we were hungry and asking for food. So instead of donating some cans of food, they invited us in for supper!

When you’re speaking in tongues without an interpreter, you’re speaking in a language that no one understands. And even though it may be a great personal spiritual experience for the person speaking, it isn’t helpful for anyone else. So Paul tells them “In your eagerness for manifestations of the Spirit, seek manifestations that build up the church, and don’t put so much attention on pursuing your own personal experience of speaking in tongues.”

He continues...

Read 1 Corinthians 14:13-19.

*<sup>13</sup> Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret. <sup>14</sup> For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. <sup>15</sup> What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also. <sup>16</sup> Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say “Amen” to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? <sup>17</sup> For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. <sup>18</sup> I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. <sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.*

Again he makes the point – speaking words that you and others can understand and be built up by is far more important in the church than speaking unintelligible words with your spirit that no one understands. Therefore, speaking in tongues should not be your highest goal. Far better to speak words that people can understand.

He finishes with this...

Read 1 Corinthians 14:20-25.

*<sup>20</sup> Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature. <sup>21</sup> In the Law it is written, “By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.” <sup>22</sup> Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers. <sup>23</sup> If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? <sup>24</sup> But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, <sup>25</sup> the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.*

Even when it comes to winning people to Christ, prophecy is far more beneficial than tongues. If an unbeliever comes to church and everyone is speaking in tongues and it just sounds like a bunch of gibberish, they’re going to high tail it out of there and think everybody’s crazy. But if they come in and hear and

understand a prophetic word from the Lord directly for them, they will fall on their face in worship and faith. It isn't just about having a great personal experience, it's about building others up so they are encouraged and may even come to know Jesus.

The point Paul is making in all these passages is very clear and as I think about how it relates to us today, I wonder what Paul would think about modern day consumer Christianity and the attitudes many people have about church? I don't think he'd like it. I think he'd say we've got our priorities messed up. We're way too focused on our own personal experience. It's not like personal experience doesn't matter at all, but it certainly pales in comparison to our calling and responsibility to build others up in the church. That's what's most important and what we should focus on.

So I think we need to ask ourselves: What's my attitude about church on Sunday mornings? Hopefully the music and preaching and temperature and little kids don't prevent or distract you from being able to experience God's presence, but if they do, that's not the end of the world. God has brought you here to use your gifts to build others up, not just have a powerful experience. Let's be a people who have a different focus and different priorities. Let's break away from the mindset of consumer Christianity and focus more on how we can use our gifts to serve others.