

Title: What if, we really got it?

Text: 1 Corinthians 12.27-31

Theme: The church

Series: 1 Corinthians # 63

Prop Stmt. The church is where each believer really belongs.

Read Text:

We live in a fast moving river. This strong current is called our culture, and it seeks to take us along with everyone else in the same direction. We are pressured to believe the same, talk the same, value the same and react the same. As creatures, born with a sinful nature, the pressure to conform and to go with the flow is more than an external one, it is internal as well. You live in a world that tells you that beautiful people have more value than unattractive ones. Talented people are intrinsically better than the rest. The strong take advantage of the weak and the weak don't survive, so don't waste your time on them. Youth is desired. Money is power. Popularity is influence. Being laughed at and rejected is to be avoided at all costs. The list goes on. Recently, a boy was being picked on at a local high school. A kid from our church saw it and had a choice to make. He could just flow with the current, or stand up in the river. If I stand up for the kid, I will then become the target of their taunts. If I join in or ignore it – y'know, just go with the flow, then I won't be mocked.

A young married girl I know got a job as a receptionist and was grateful for it. She and her husband really needed the second income. A couple of days into the job, she was instructed by her boss to tell a caller that the boss was not in, call back later. She had a choice to make. Either she goes with the current, or she stands up in the river.

What is the current at your school? What are the rules? Who sets the trends?

What is the current at your work? What are the rules? Who sets the trends?

What is the current in your life? What do you really think is the

2000 years ago, a man appeared on the stage of this earth and stood up in defiance of the current. His life and message was radically different. He said things like: Happy are the humble. Happy are the meek. Happy are those who mourn over their sin. Happy are those who are pure in heart. To those who had spent their lives believing that happiness consisted of being influential and being noticed and having power, and being respected and revered, and exploiting others to get what you want, this man's life threatened more than their external positions of power, this man's message threatened their very existence. If he was right, they were all living for the wrong reasons.

There were admittedly some rich and powerful people who followed him, but not because he catered to the rich and powerful, but because he understood what true riches and what real power was. He treated all people as equals. He loved each one and lovingly spoke the truth without fear. He had the power to stand up to the powerful and say, you have no power over me. He had the resources to say to the rich, I don't need your money and will not change my message to get you to like me.

Some shook their heads in amazement...can you really live like that? Others shook their fists in seething anger, seeing that their wickedness was being exposed – they crucified him. Still, others surrendered their lives to follow him.

That boy from our church stood up for that kid, and he predictably became the target of abuse. But later on a girl came up to him and said, “I saw what you did back there and wanted you to know that I respect you for that.” But, even if that girl never said anything, even if no one else noticed, even if the boy he stood up for was too embarrassed to even say thanks, that boy was living it – for real.

The young married receptionist said to her boss, “I can’t say that you are not in, when you are in. I can’t lie.” She was told, if you don’t do what I tell you, I’ll fire you! What had more value, her paycheck, or truth? She said, “Fire me, if you have to fire me, but remember this. If I don’t lie to him about you, I won’t lie to you about him or anything else.” She didn’t get fired. But, even if she did, that girl was living it – for real.

What do those stories have to do with this text? Absolutely everything! Church is not defined just by a weekly worship service. Our worship together is a necessary and significant time for us. But genuine Christianity is set on display on the stage of life when we stand up and then go against the current of our culture because we are going after Christ. The people in the church at Corinth had imported into the church many of the values of the world. People had formed cliques and looked down on each other, and treated some of the members with contempt. These people in the church were in many ways no different than the people in their world.

That is my point. Who in this world gets all of the attention? It is the powerful, the prestigious, the famous, and the influential. Typically, in school, and in many other places, beautiful people or the bullies, the intimidators or the pretty get what they want. The people in the “inside” are it, and everyone else is a wannabe. That is what the church was looking like in Corinth. Without vigorous oversight and intentional shepherding, church can become another social environment where the values of a godless, materialistic, and self-centered world are lived out, even though we claim to believe the gospel. If you want to treat people with contempt, if you want to treat people as if they don’t belong here, as if they can’t be forgiven, or they can’t make it to your level, then your attitude is denying the very gospel that you claim to believe.

### 1. **What if you really understood your identity?** – v.27

I am speaking to those of you who claim to be followers of Christ. If you really understood who you were, you would never think of yourself as someone who does not belong, nor as someone who is more important. Do you see how radical this is? Our world basically offers us two alternatives: 1) Totalitarianism – which as two expressions - Either be used by others who live at the top, or use others who are below you. Or 2) there is the empty promise of personal fulfillment through individualism. If you want to have relationships – get used to being used. If you don’t want to have relationships – get used

to being lonely. But, coming to faith in Christ fundamentally reconciles you to God and it frees you to be able to live relationally as your Creator designed you to live. The church is the greenhouse where those relationships are to flourish. If you really understood your identity...

**A. You would realize that you really are part of the church –**

You Belong Here! But the “here” is so much more than the building, it is the people who love you. You are a person. You have been made in the image of God. Your core identity is a person who is dearly and deeply loved by God not because of what you can do for God, but because God chose to set His love upon you. God made you to belong. That need for identity is met as you find out that you have specific contribution to make to the body. God made you to work and care for others, and that need for responsibility, that desire to know that I am being counted on, that others are depending on me, is met as you take on your shoulders concern for others.

Do you see how that the church celebrates your individuality, but rejects individualism? You are not here to use others. You are not here to sit on the sidelines like a consumer and just use what you feel like at the moment. Neither are you to be used.

I was given an article this week that illustrates this:

Julie and Bob Clark were stunned to receive a letter from their church in July asking them to “participate in the life of the church” – or worship elsewhere. “They basically called us freeloaders,” says Julie. “We were freeloaders,” says Bob.

In a trend that may signal rough times for wallflower Christians, bellwether mega-church Faith Community of Winston-Salem has asked “non-participating members” to stop attending. “No more Mr. Nice Church,” says the executive pastor, newly hired from Cingular Wireless. “Bigger is not always better. Providing free services indefinitely to complacent Christians is not our mission.”

“Freeloading” Christians were straining the church’s nursery and facility resources, and harming the church’s ability to reach the lost, says the pastor. “When your bottom line is saving souls, you get impatient with people who interfere with that goal.”

Faith Community sent polite but firm letters to families who attend church service and “freebie events,” but never volunteer, never tithe, and do not belong to a ... ministry. The church estimates that, of its 8,000 regular attendees, only half have ever volunteered in the past 3 years, and a third have never given to the church.

“Before now, we made people feel comfortable and welcome, and tried to coax them to give a little something in return,” says a staff member. “That’s changed. We’re done being the community nanny.”

Surprisingly, the move to dis-invite people has drawn a positive response from men in the community who like the idea of an in-your-face church. “I thought, *A church that doesn’t allow wussies – that rocks*,” says Bob Clark, who admires the church more since they told him to get lost.<sup>1</sup> By the way, that was a fictional piece of satire from Larknews.com. But why is that so radical? That is all that this text is saying? If you belong to Christ, you belong to the church (v.12-13). If you belong to the church – live like it! If you belong to Christ, live like you belong to the church. You matter and so do others. This is where your unique gifts are embraced, but no one person or group is exalted over the others. If you really understood your identity...

**B. You would realize that all of the other members really belong here. –  
You Belong Here too! (said to others)**

Just as much as you belong here, others belong here.

A number of years ago I was at a fitness club. A man who appeared to me to be of middle-eastern descent was on a treadmill. Another man decided that he wanted to use the machine therefore, the first man should get off. The verbal exchange resulted in man #2, unplugging the machine, so the first guy had to get off. That was when I heard it. The second guy said, “Why don’t you go back to where you came from?” It happens all the time like that doesn’t it? Their taking our jobs – go back to where you came from. Their taking our schools – go back to where you came from. Their taking our clubs, our neighborhoods...whatever – go back to where you came from. It doesn’t make it right, but I expect that in the world. But, the church is different if we really are the church.

“Now you are the body of Christ, and each of you is a part of it.” What if someone who just became a follower of Christ is sitting in the pew you normally sit in, or starts doing a job that you normally do, or if someone a little younger than you sings a little differently than you do, do you think, do you say – “Hey, why don’t you go back to what you used to be?” Not if we understand the church – we don’t. “You Belong Here” is more than a slogan, it is our theology.

2. **What if we really understood that everyone belonged?** – v.28-31a

**A. We would value what each one brings to the table.**

This is the point of these verses (28-31a). And yet, this time, when Paul writes out some of the gifts (and notice all of the gifts that are listed and note that not all of the gifts are listed) he does something different. He actually places a numerical value next to the first three. Of course, this raises all sorts of questions. Is this an order of priority? Is this an order of function? Is this an order of history in the NT church? Is this simply a checklist without implying importance or indispensability? How could Paul say that apostles are more important than prophets who are more important than teachers, when all along he is arguing for the fact that every single person has something of value to bring to the table?

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<sup>1</sup> Joel Kilpatrick, “Mega-Church Downsizes, Cuts Non-Essential Members,” Larknews.com (September, 2006)

I don't think that Paul is arguing here for the gift of being an Apostle as being first in greatness, because he is about to define greatness in terms of love, not an office. I think that he is saying that historically, the NT apostles came first, then the NT prophets (which according to Eph 2.20 were the ministry foundation of the church), there was obvious overlap between these two groups, and then came the teachers. God used all three groups, but chronologically, the order was apostles, prophets then teachers, then the rest of these.

Gifts (plural) of healing, gift of helps, gifts (plural) of administration, and the gift of tongues comprise a partial list of the gifts that different people have in the church. Any differences at all become an opportunity for division and pride. But, if we really understood that everyone belonged, then God-given differences would be embraced and celebrated, not fought over. In fact, notice that Paul then asks what ought to be a very obvious question. Are all apostles? The answer is NO! He asks this same question of every gift that he has just mentioned.

I am going to be dealing with the gifts of tongues and prophecy in more detail in chapter 14, but this text is so clear, that if we are going to be faithful to Scripture, and to the Holy Spirit who directed Paul to write these words, we must conclude at this point that it is very, very obvious, that the gift of tongues was never, ever intended to be experienced by every believer. Therefore, to make this gift the standard of evidence for full salvation is not only wrong, but it ends up dividing the church into the groups who have had the experience, and are therefore spiritual, vs. the ones who have not and are therefore not at the level of the others. How dare anyone make the gift of tongues the test of authentic Christianity?

Whether it is division over which gifts are more important, or which people have more value, or which color of carpet is the best for the building, when we fail to remember the true nature of our identity in Christ, we will stoop to dividing ourselves up over things that don't matter and that harm the gospel.

#### **B. We would value what would benefit each one.**

We now come to v.31 (at least the first part of it). I think the NIV translators rightly put a paragraph or thought division here in this verse, because the last part of this verse really sets the stage for what is coming in chapter 13. More on that in the last point. If you have an NIV translation, notice that there is another way this phrase could be translated.

But eagerly desire the greater gifts – command

But you are eagerly desiring the greater gifts. – description

Both of these translations are grammatical acceptable. The question is, is Paul saying that this is what they are supposed to do, or is he saying, "But you guys are eagerly desiring the greater gifts" implying that they are missing the whole point. That may be

what Paul is saying, but I personally don't think so. I think the command translation is best because of the context. I say that for a couple of reasons.

- 1) The Corinthian believers were not desiring the greater gifts, they were all wiggled out over the gift of tongues, which Paul mentions as last.
- 2) I think the entire argument that he is making demands the command interpretation.

Look at 14.1 – “Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.

14.39 – “Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues.”

He wants them to be eager to prophesy. He sees that the gift of prophecy had more of a benefit to the rest of the church than the gift of tongues. So, interestingly enough he encourages them to pursue that gift. But, in 12.31, he does not yet say what the greater gifts are. Why not? Because he does not want them to focus on that yet. There is something else that is more important for them to understand. That is what the next phrase and the next chapter is all about!

### 3. What if we really sought the good of others? – v.31b

Love is not a gift that some people in the church have and others have the gift of surliness. Genuine, Christ-focused, Spirit-driven, God-honoring, theologically-consistent, self-sacrificing, heart-level love is the over-arching, all-embracing substance of true church life that completely transcends in importance any gift!

Paul does not speak about the practical benefit of the gift of prophecy because even that gift, as helpful as it is, is not as important than they understand this. Love, as an entire way of life has to characterize every single person who has been born into the family of God, or you don't have the right to claim membership.

If we don't love, it does not matter if we all speak in tongues, or have the gift of prophecy, or the gift of knowledge, or the gift of faith, or whatever. Without love, almost everything that we elevate as being so great in the church is nothing more than just a bunch of hollow noise.

#### A. **We would love as Christ loved!** (chapter 13)

Love is the context of the church. Love is the greenhouse, the environment where spiritual gifts thrive and people grow. Love provides the validation for our claims of the gospel. We will start January 07 with chapter 13. Love like this can only come from Christ.