

“God is really among you!” (1 Corinthians 14)

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Paul writes this about the Bible in 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

That’s easy to believe when we read Bible passages like 1 Corinthians chapter 13, one of the most familiar passages in the Bible. Troy taught from this passage a couple of weeks ago, and it’s a beautiful, inspiring passage. “Love is patient, love is kind.” We hear 1 Corinthians 13 over and over again, and we never really get tired of it. “Love does not envy, it does not boast.” 1 Corinthians 13 gets used in weddings, and spoken as encouragement about how to live. “Love is not proud. It does not dishonour others.” A couple of weeks ago when Jaime and Casper read 1 Corinthians 13 with worship music in the background, it made sense to have it read so artistically. “Love is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.” Passages like this can make a person say, “surely we are reading from the Word of God!”

Then we get to 1 Corinthians 14. The communication isn’t quite as pretty anymore. The words don’t inspire in the same way. There’s no sense of poetry to it. It’s clunky and awkward. You can’t really read it with the same sense of artistry - It would be like reading the minutes of a business meeting while a string quartet plays in the background. If you’re into theology this chapter might be very interesting to you. If you are into church history, this passage may be very interesting to you. But if you are looking for clarity and inspiration, you might just end up confused.

I want to say 1 Corinthians 14 is a more practical passage, but for many of us reading, we might not find this teaching very practical at all. It seems quite irrelevant to our style of church – for us and thousands of other churches, we don’t give much attention to speaking in tongues or delivering prophecy. We don’t even know how to begin to understand this information, let alone apply it. So it’s easiest to conclude, “I don’t get it” and skip chapter 14 altogether.

But in Paul’s mind, 1 Corinthians 14 is probably just as important as 1 Corinthians 13. Paul did all that excellent 1 Corinthians 13 teaching on love in order to apply it in 1 Corinthians 14. The 1 Corinthians 13 love passage is the teaching – 1 Corinthians 14 is the application. The words of 1 Corinthians 14 get to the heart of what Paul is saying to the church – it’s the “why” of 1 Corinthians 13.

But knowing this doesn’t make the chapter any less confusing. What do you do with a passage like this? It took me a few reads to make more sense of it. But I believe that all Scripture is God inspired, so I’m willing to dig deeper. To understand it better, I read the passage through and I look for words and phrases that are familiar. Familiar ideas help me make sense of the more confusing stuff. And from those familiar words and ideas I’m able to build a framework to understand what’s going on.

From reading 1 Corinthians 14 through a few times, important and familiar phrases I found were:

- Follow the way of love. (1 Corinthians 14:1)
- Strengthen, encourage and comfort each other. (1 Corinthians 14:3)
- Everything must be done so that the church may be built up. (1 Corinthians 14:26)

With these phrases in mind, I'm able to find a little more clarity in this passage.

Follow the way of love. Paul speaks of two spiritual gifts that were used in the early church: speaking in tongues (or speaking a spiritual language) and prophecy. Speaking in tongues was impressive. It was the gift lots of people desired. It was this other worldly language, giving you that buzz of being connected to something out-of-this-world.

Prophecy was functional. It communicated clearly. This was not so much prophecy that predicts the future, but prophecy as "God-given wisdom, understanding, insight and teaching."¹ It was speaking the right words into a given situation.

The problem Paul was talking about was private spirituality vs. what is best for the full body of believers. Paul was less concerned about the supernatural and dynamic display of Christ, and more concerned with ways that the church can **strengthen, encourage and comfort** one another.

People wanted the fancy gift, not the clearly communicating one. The fancy gift made for bombastic meetings, and everyone felt good about exercising their spiritual gifts. But it sure made it difficult to understand one another. It seemed to make the point about what the people's gifts, instead of what Jesus had done and was continuing to do. In my crude summary of what Paul is saying, "Look, if you want to speak this spiritual language in your personal spirituality, great. But if you want to do life together, how about we share with each other in a way we all can understand."

For Paul, **Everything must be done so the church may be built up.** "Public worship builds everybody up rather than everybody developing their own spiritual giftedness."² Paul says, "***in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.***"³ The most important thing for Paul was being focused on Christ and being built up in Christ together. It was amazing that God was doing supernatural things through church folk, but the greatest thing was to communicate and care for one another, to do everything in love.

The end result Paul predicted was how those who don't yet follow Jesus would respond. Would they hear lots of spiritual language they wouldn't understand and say, "Well that's weird!" Or would they plainly hear about Jesus, realize their need for Jesus and respond, "***Surely God is in this place!***" Imagine people, coming to worship with us, and concluding "surely God is in this place."

¹ NT Wright, *1 Corinthians: For Everyone Bible Study Guides*, p. 58

² NT Wright, *1 Corinthians: For Everyone Bible Study Guides*, p. 58

³ 1 Corinthians 14:19

Paul is keen to remove all barriers between believers, and eager to remove all barriers to people experiencing God through Jesus Christ. Jesus certainly did this, and Paul wants to continue on that ministry in the churches by simply loving each other, part of that love being clear communication of the words of God.

Removing barriers, speaking clearly, not considering one person's abilities as greater than another's – all of these are ways to practically love one another in the church. And when people see this clearly communicated, barrier breaking, elevating God behind it all they exclaim: "God is surely in this place."

We can learn something from this. The specifics of speaking in tongues and speaking prophecy might not make a lot of sense in our community. But prioritizing clear communication over spiritualized jargon makes sense in our context. Valuing love over own specific abilities makes a lot of sense in our church. Choosing to build up others instead of building up our pride makes sense in our church. We can learn all of this through the words that are familiar in this puzzling passage of the Bible.

AND THEN as we read further into 1 Corinthians 14 we read these words . . .

Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church. (1 Corinthians 14:34-35)

It should be pretty obvious by now that, as a church, we don't do this! Women preach, pray, lead worship, lead communion and share. We welcome that. How do we reconcile these words with our church, and with the reality in which we live? It doesn't make a whole lot of sense to "obey" these words in the time and place where we live.

We can read this by using the same teaching from 1 Corinthians 13, as well as this framework we found in 1 Corinthians 14:

- Follow the way of love. (1 Corinthians 14:1)
- Strengthen, encourage and comfort each other. (1 Corinthians 14:3)
- Everything must be done so that the church may be built up. (1 Corinthians 14:26)

Before I talk about this, I have a disclaimer: I am going to put my foot in my mouth. I want us all to be aware of this. As much as I have prepared for this sermon, I am going to say things that will come across the wrong way. I am going to be talking about issues surrounding gender and worship preferences and culture. Somewhere in here I am going to misrepresent something. I am probably going to say something that to you might sound dumb.

First of all, in regards to women staying silent in the churches, NOBODY does this. Sorry, to say "nobody does this" is an overstatement. There are churches that would strictly abide by this, but they are pretty rare. Often these churches that do this will have other cultural distinctions as well.

The church I grew up in took passages like this pretty seriously. Women didn't even pray publically in church or lead worship except to sing. But women still spoke – they shared testimonies, asked questions, contributed to the conversation if a conversation was going on in the church building and the church service. They weren't silent. They weren't waiting to ask their husbands at home. They weren't permitted to teach or lead from the stage, but these verses certainly weren't fully “obeyed”.

Also, our church sponsored a missionary to Japan, and she was a woman. What do you think she did as a missionary? Do you think she sat silent in church? Apparently it wasn't ok for her to speak and lead in church in Canada, but it was ok for her to do this in Japan. Churches that say they apply this passage apply it to church in Canada to Canadians, but I'm not sure they ever apply it to other countries. That's inconsistent . . . and more than just a little racist.

So most churches that say they take this seriously really don't. Not in a way that's consistent, and surely not by the letter of the teaching. But just because something in the Bible isn't followed by anyone doesn't mean it shouldn't be followed at all. Just because we don't obey something, doesn't mean we shouldn't obey something. So what do we do with these verses?

Here's the thing: the Bible doesn't even obey this!

- **The Gospel writers don't!**
 - The Gospel authors often give equal voice to men and women. There are frequent pairings of men and women in the gospels. If Jesus encounters a man that needs help, the next story is of a woman that needs help. And if the stories are contrasted as a good example and another a bad example, the good example is from the woman. The underdog from that culture is almost always the one elevated in these stories, which in Gospels often meant elevating the voice and actions of women.
 - The Gospel writers very clearly communicate the faithfulness of the women. At the crucifixion and burial of Jesus, they stick around when the men hide. They are the first messengers of the resurrection!
- **Jesus doesn't**
 - In his teaching, Jesus will often use contrasting characters. If there is a pairing of men and women in the gospels, and one is a good example and another a bad example, the good example is the woman. In that culture and society she is often the voiceless and the underdog, and Jesus elevates the underdog, and he certainly elevates and amplifies the voice and role of women.
- **The Old Testament doesn't**
 - Look at the women of the book of Genesis and Exodus. How “submissive” are they? They have strong voices, and more control over their circumstances than we frequently acknowledge. Much is taught and changed through their actions and words.
 - Ask me sometime about the book of Judges – how when the nation does well, women lead and have authority, and how when the nation does poorly, women have no authority and no personhood. The ideal in Judges seems to be women with autonomy, value, voice and power.

- **PAUL DOESN'T.**
 - Paul speaks highly of deacon named Phoebe.
 - Priscilla and Aquilla, husband and wife leaders in the early church, together teach church leader Apollos and disciple him.
 - Earlier in 1 Corinthians 11 – in this very same book -- we read that Paul encourages women to pray and prophecy, but must do so with their heads covered (another thing we don't do and won't do). But if women are supposed to be silent in the church, why does he talk to them about praying and prophesying?

The Bible doesn't even obey what is written about women being silent in the churches. There's obviously something very different going on here than the literal letter of the law. This is more likely speaking to a very specific situation in a very specific church.

We recognize that as we read the Bible, some things are exceptionally plainly spoken. Isn't that amazing that something written from a specific culture thousands of years ago still speaks clearly to us today? Isn't it amazing that we can read 1 Corinthians 13 and plainly live it today?

We also recognize that as we read the Bible some things are not so clear. Because, again, this is written to a specific culture thousands of years ago. This book of 1 Corinthians still speaks to us today, but parts of it take more work to understand. OR some of it we may never fully understand. And that's ok. There's more than enough of the plainly spoken teaching to go around!

So whether this is a result of time, or culture, or a specific church, we don't hold to these verses as we see them written in 1 Corinthians 14 about how Women should remain silent in the churches. But we do try to strictly hold to this:

- Follow the way of love. (1 Corinthians 14:1)
- Strengthen, encourage and comfort each other. (1 Corinthians 14:3)
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And because of these ideas of 1 Corinthians 14 women speak and teach and share and contribute and lead in our church. Paul wants clarity of the Gospel always. What's going to make the message of Jesus Christ clear in our church, city and culture: keeping women silent? Or elevating their voices, teaching and abilities just like Jesus, Paul and the Bible all seem to do? What is more likely to make people conclude, "Surely God is among them" about our church?

No matter what, we seek to know Jesus Christ and make him known, and that involves following the way of love; strengthening, encouraging and comforting each other, and doing everything so the church may be built up.

God give us wisdom as we read the Bible. May we always do the things that we know we are being asked to do. May we seek wisdom on the things that are more confusing. May we always follow the way of love given to us by Jesus Christ.