

A Couple of Loose Ends . . .
1 Corinthians 14

The last couple of weeks we've examined what Paul had to say in 1 Corinthians 14 about two specific spiritual gifts, speaking in tongues and prophecy. I've appreciated the feedback and the conversation that's taken place in the congregation in light of these two messages. We'd encourage you to continue the conversation and share your own experience and insights with others. Today we pick up two issues Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 14 that we haven't yet dealt with directly. These are a couple of "loose ends" that probably won't be "tied up" at the end of this message . . . but at least we'll have more to talk about.

***"The women are to keep silent in the churches. . ."* (14:34-35)**

After last week's sermon on prophecy one person came up and said, "I wish you'd covered one more verse . . . the one about how women are supposed to be silent in church. . ." When people come across this verse, it can be a bit "shocking to the system" since it seems to be an absolute prohibition on women speaking "in church." On the basis of verses like these people have accused Paul of being sexist and chauvinistic and all sorts of other terrible things. So, let's examine what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35.

34 The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. 35 If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.

There are many different interpretations of these verses. Each of those interpretations has to take into account that in chapter 11 (verses 2 through 16) Paul instructs women to have their heads covered *when* they pray and prophesy. There he is talking about not sending the wrong signals in worship; a woman not covering her head sent a variety of different signals (e.g., that she was available either sexually or relationally). But Paul is acknowledging that it is perfectly acceptable for women to pray and prophesy when the church gathers. That fact needs to be taken into account in interpreting his instruction in chapter 14.

First, some take this to be an absolute prohibition on women speaking "in the church" – whenever the church gathers for worship. Those who take this position are forced to argue that chapter 11 isn't talking about women praying or prophesying in the regular church service, but in a smaller home setting. The problem is that there's nothing in 1 Corinthians to indicate such distinctions since churches in the first century typically gathered in homes.

Second, another cluster of interpretations approach ch. 14 with the teaching of ch.11 as a given. The reasoning is that since Paul has already acknowledged that women pray and prophesy in church, whatever Paul means here it's not an absolute prohibition against women speaking in church (otherwise he'd be contradicting himself in the same letter). With this approach, Paul's instruction for women to "keep silent in the church" applies only to a limited set of circumstances. And so now we look at ch. 14 to see what those circumstances might be.

No interpretation is without its problems, but I am drawn toward the interpretation that keeps Paul's instruction rooted in the immediate context of prophecy being practiced in a peaceful manner (instead of in a way that produces confusion). Remember in verse 29 Paul wrote that

two or three prophets speak and the others should evaluate what was said (in light of Scripture and wisdom).

29 Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment.

Based on what Paul wrote in chapter 11, women would be among those bringing a word of prophecy. In 30 through 33 Paul emphasizes that prophets should speak one at a time and the others should listen and learn and be exhorted.

31 For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; 32 and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; 33 for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.

Use of the gift of prophecy should not produce confusion/chaos in the church. Paul advocates a disciplined and orderly way of prophesying in worship to reflect the fact that “God is not a God of confusion but of peace.” And so prophets are to speak one at a time with others learning; then the words of prophecy are evaluated against Scripture and wisdom.

With the orderly use of prophecy in mind Paul writes what he does in verses 34 and 35. If you’re reading from the NIV, you notice that it puts the last phrase in verse 33 with verse 34: “As in all the congregations of the saints. . .” (“congregations” in verse 33 is the same word as “churches” in verse 34).

34 The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says.

Allow me to give my understanding of this verse (and the next) and then I’ll discuss *why* Paul might have given this restriction on women. I am drawn toward the interpretation that Paul is saying that women should not participate in the evaluation of prophecies. Whereas both women and men can bring words of prophecy, Paul is saying that only men should be involved in evaluating and passing judgment on such prophecies. In this interpretation, Paul is saying that women in attendance should remain silent during the evaluation of the word of prophecy.

35 If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.

Paul limits his comments to married women (who in the first century had much more freedom and status than unmarried women). They should continue the conversation with their husbands at home instead of taking part in the evaluation of the prophecy when the church was gathered. This verse is not only a word to women. It is also a challenge to men to be theologically engaged and therefore able to have spiritual conversations in the home.

When we try to make sense of *why* Paul might place such a restriction on women, we each bring our other theological convictions about biblical roles of men and women to bear. Nobody looks at this passage in isolation from what Paul says elsewhere about the roles of men and women; our understanding of Paul’s teaching here needs to be consistent with our understanding of the rest of the Bible.

People bring different convictions to this passage and explain it differently. Some people think that Paul made this restriction because some of the women in the Corinthian church were especially contentious or especially prone to be deceived or uneducated theologically . . . therefore the only solution was to keep them from opening their mouths at all when prophecies were being evaluated. Personally, I don't see any evidence in 1 Corinthians that this restriction is related to any such dynamics within the Corinthian church.

In my understanding what Paul writes here is consistent with the roles for men and women that Paul advocates elsewhere. Whereas spiritual gifts are not gender-specific (God doesn't limit any spiritual gifts to either men or women), there are differences in roles. We saw back in chapter 11 that Paul said that the husband is the "head" of his wife: the husband has the role of servant leader, looking out for his wife's needs in a very intentional way. The wife, for her part, is to welcome this role and make it as easy as possible for him to lead (the concept of "submission"). Paul doesn't link these roles to competence or constitution, but simply on God's design (creation order – see 1 Timothy 2:13).

In my understanding Paul taught a consistency between roles of men and women in the home and in the church. Paul didn't want a situation in which the roles in the home were reversed when the family gathered with the church. That, in my understanding, is why Paul taught that those who shepherd the church as elders should be men. Among other things, elders look out for the well-being of the local church and guard its doctrinal integrity. It seems to me that evaluating a word of prophecy involves these same functions of guarding doctrine and of shepherding the church. That's not to say that only elders can evaluate prophetic words, but that Paul's instruction here seems consistent with men serving in the role of elders.

Again, to be clear, I don't think Paul is implying anything about the ability of women in general to evaluate a word of prophecy or of doctrine. I know lots of women who are more theologically astute than lots of men. That's not the point in Paul's reasoning. It's a matter of respecting God-given gender distinctions in the home and in the church. That's my best understanding of what's going on 1 Corinthians 14 with Paul's comments about "women keeping silent." (For a fuller explanation of this position, see D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, pp. 121-131; Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, pp. 215-225).

I realize that this interpretation may raise many questions for you than it answers. Even raising the topic of the role of women in the home and in the church might be a painful thing for you. You may have had hurtful experiences or interactions related to your role in the church. You may have a very different understanding of these texts than I do. Let me simply say that this is a very complex issue biblically and practically. Not having a position on these issues isn't really an option; each church has to have a position on the roles of men and women in the church. We each need to hold our convictions honestly and firmly, but we need to hold them with humility, giving others the prerogative to disagree without questioning motives or commitment to God.

The Sovereignty of God and Desiring Spiritual Gifts

The next issue I want to discuss is the interplay between God's sovereignty in giving spiritual gifts and Paul's urging the Corinthians to desire certain spiritual gifts. On the face of it, God's sovereignty and our desiring might seem to be incompatible.

In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul emphasizes that *every* believer has a role to play in the body of Christ. The Spirit sovereignly distributes gifts to every member of the body of Christ:

12:7 But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

This verse establishes that every believer is given a spiritual gift(s) for the common good.

12:11 But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.

This verse establishes that the same Spirit distributes different gifts to different people. Just like the human body, the body of Christ needs diversity to function as it should. The Spirit Himself sees to it that this diversity exists. It's in this context that we read verses like this:

12:31 But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way.

Paul has just asked a series of rhetorical questions which point out that all do *not* have the same spiritual gift – whether that of apostle, prophet, teacher, working of miracles, healing, tongues or interpretation. Paul then urges the Corinthians to “earnestly desire the greater gifts.” Paul is speaking in relative terms here: desire especially those gifts that have the most benefit in the body of Christ. Paul has listed several spiritual gifts, beginning with the gift of apostleship and ending with tongues. Given that tongues was being elevated above all other gifts, Paul is urging the Corinthians to value and desire other spiritual gifts.

In chapter 13 Paul describes this “still more excellent way” – a lifestyle of love which transcends all spiritual gifts. Without love, no spiritual gifts are profitable for the cause of Christ. He concludes his discussion of love and launches into his discussion of tongues and prophecy in 14:1.

14:1 Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy.

As we've seen the past two weeks, Paul is arguing that prophecy is more valuable than tongues in public worship because it involves intelligible speech – language that others can understand and benefit from. They were to desire especially that they might prophesy due to the benefit to others in the church. In verse 12 Paul gives the guiding principle behind desiring a gift such as prophecy:

12 So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church.

Their zeal for spiritual gifts should focus on “the edification of the church”; instead of a selfish orientation, they should be intent on building up and strengthening others with their gifts. Verse 13 gives an application for those who might speak in tongues around other believers:

13 Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.

Paul is advocating the person with the gift of tongues praying for the gift of interpretation. In this way a person with the gift of tongues might provide benefit to others in the church (through an understandable message). Otherwise, the person should speak in tongues in private. Paul wanted the Corinthians to use the gifts they'd been given and to seek additional gifts for the benefit of others in the body of Christ.

In Paul's mind there was nothing incompatible between the Spirit sovereignly giving spiritual gifts (chapter 12) and the believer earnestly desiring and praying for spiritual gifts based on his/her understanding of what is needed in that church. When you think about it, there is always this interplay between God's sovereignty and our desiring when we pray. We pray for the things we desire, the things we really want, but we acknowledge God's sovereignty all the while. After all, we are asking God, bringing our requests; we aren't telling God what to do. Whenever we pray we are mindful that God is sovereign and that He can answer yes or no. Our part is to want what God wants and ask accordingly. This – it seems to me – is what Paul is advocating in relation to spiritual gifts: desiring and asking for those gifts that are especially valuable in the body of Christ. We desire and ask, but God can either give or not give according to His sovereign wisdom.

1 Corinthians 14 suggests that we at Faith should ask questions like, "What gifts should we desire so that we might abound for the edification of the church? What gifts will help us pursue our mission of helping people come to faith in Christ and experience God in all of life?"

We might conclude that what's needed in this church (and in this community) is the gift of apostle – the ability to take the message of Christ to other cultures or sub-cultures. We might conclude that we need more with the gift of evangelism. All of us are responsible to bear witness for Christ, but some are gifted to be especially fruitful in leading others to Christ. Perhaps we need more people with the gift of mercy. I heard someone say recently that she can enter a room and sense people's pain (and joy). Maybe we need more people with that type of mercy who can enter into others lives on a deep level and meet them at their point of pain. Maybe that's what we need to teach us how to move beyond superficiality in many of our relationships. We ask for the gifts that we think will help us "abound for the edification of the church" and eagerly see how God answers our prayers.

I hope you see the mindset behind thinking about gifts that God might want to give us. As we talked about in chapter 12, Christianity is a "team sport": we need to think about our spiritual gifts in light of the common good. One of the most strategic things we can do is try to discern the gifts that will help us pursue our mission whole-heartedly. The closer we get to the heart of God, the more we'll want what He wants, and we'll ask for the same with great faith.

Note #1: Ultimately, it's not wrong to desire any spiritual gift. The past couple of weeks as we've studied the gifts of speaking in tongues and prophecy I've had a number of conversations with people about these gift and about their experience with these gifts. One person told me that she'd prayed for years for the gift of speaking in tongues and that God had not given her that gift. Others told me that they've asked for the gift of tongues and God *has* graciously given that gift.

Note #2: Paul urges the Corinthians to desire prophecy, but presumably this was because of the specific dynamics in the church at Corinth. The church at Thessalonica needed to be told not to despise prophetic utterance (1 Thessalonians 5:20). But apparently these gifts weren't a source of controversy in other churches since tongues isn't even mentioned in Paul's other letters; prophets are mentioned three times in Ephesians as foundational for the early church.

Note #3: Spiritual gifts are ALL temporary. In chapter 13 Paul wrote that all spiritual gifts will one day cease. In 13:8-10 we read:

8 Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part; 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.

When Christ returns the body of Christ won't need spiritual gifts anymore. We will see Him and will be like Him; we will be transformed in a moment into Jesus' likeness. The needs and deficiencies that spiritual gifts address will be gone. Yes, this means that when Christ returns I'll be out of a job; there won't be a need for pastor/teachers in heaven. There won't be a need for the gift of evangelism in heaven because everybody there will already know God. There won't be a need for the gift of encouragement because nobody will lack courage. When Christ returns spiritual gifts will cease.

But in the meantime, the Holy Spirit distributes gifts so that we can do the very things Jesus would do if He were here in bodily form. As members of the body of Christ, we do the works of Christ. Those with the gift of teaching are supposed to say the very things Jesus would say if He were here. Those with the gift of mercy show mercy just like Jesus would if He encountered a need. Etc.