

Problem Passages in 1 Corinthians

Introduction

First Corinthians is filled with what are called “problem passages.” What are problem passages? While perhaps it’s simplistic, passages can be problematic for at least three reasons:

1. The passage is difficult to interpret linguistically.
Simply put, the biblical language is unclear and can be interpreted several different ways.
2. The passage seems, on the surface, inconsistent with what the Bible teaches elsewhere on the subject.
This is when a passage seems to read clearly enough, but upon its most obvious reading, it does not seem to agree with the rest of the Bible on a certain subject.
3. The passage is hard to apply.
In this case, a passage is clear but hard to do. As someone has said, sometimes the problem with the Bible is that it is *too* clear. It is just difficult to obey.

The passages are indeed challenging to interpret, and due to their difficulty in interpretation, we interpret them with humility, meaning we interpret them with clarity and confidence, yet we do not hold that confidence with the same confidence that we would the deity of Christ or the bodily resurrection of Christ. As well, the opinions expressed here are not the official statement for this church or for any institution.

Of course, these passages are not a problem to God. The biggest problem with problem passages is that we do not have the mind to see from God’s vantage point. Because of this, we try to use a false interpretive strategy that goes something like this: “Sure this is what Paul said, but Paul was blinded by the limitations of his own culture and could not have anticipated how this should be applied today.”

The problem with this thinking, as we will reiterate below, is that it leaves us standing above the Scripture in judgment. According to this logic, we trust God to do small things: create the world, part the Red Sea, and raise His Son from the dead. However, we really doubt He can write a word that is timeless. This subtle belief can bolster the fact that some customs really have changed. Yet, when it comes to Scripture, especially order in the home and church, God’s Word transcends all of this. And this really is what all of these problem passages have in common; they are about God’s order for the home and church.

God’s desire is that the home be representative of Himself and that in the marriage union, we understand the character and plan of God (Ephesians 5:22–33). Similarly, one of the

functions of the church is to help us understand the home. So, from the family of church, we understand marriage and the home, and in understanding the home, we understand God. It would make sense, then, that God is concerned that these institutions genuinely represent the character and order that is in God.

Problem Passage: 1 Corinthians 7

⁷ Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” ² But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. ³ The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴ For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. ⁵ Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

⁶ Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. ⁷ I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.

⁸ To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. ⁹ But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

¹⁰ To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹ (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.

¹² To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. ¹³ If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. ¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. ¹⁵ But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. ¹⁶ For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

Live as You Are Called

¹⁷ Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. ¹⁸ Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. ¹⁹ For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. ²⁰ Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. ²¹ Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) ²² For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. ²³ You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men. ²⁴ So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with

God.

The Unmarried and the Widowed

²⁵ Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. ²⁶ I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. ²⁷ Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. ²⁸ But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. ²⁹ This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, ³⁰ and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, ³¹ and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

³² I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. ³³ But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, ³⁴ and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. ³⁵ I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.

³⁶ If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin. ³⁷ But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. ³⁸ So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.

³⁹ A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. ⁴⁰ Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God. ¹

Thinking Clearly

This indeed is a controversial passage. So let's return to the reminder that Paul is not bound to his time in writing Scripture. If we suggest that Paul was limited to his context when he wrote this, we suggest that it is God who is limited. Also, we take pause if our interpretation stands in judgment of the interpretation of all great thinkers in the history of the church.

The other problem with this line of reasoning is that if Paul was wrong on the issue of divorce and remarriage, then how can we trust him on the issue of justification in Romans 5, or eternal security in Romans 8? This is what someone has called a "Dalmatian" approach to the Bible: The Bible is just inspired in spots, and we stand above it to spot which spots are inspired.

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (1 Co 7:1–40). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

Again, Paul is not writing limited to his time, Paul is writing in a way that is above his time. He is being used of God to transcend time. Even still, this does not make it easier. Let's talk about what it means.

So What Does It Mean?

There is a dense passage, so let's summarize. Paul is advocating speaking to several practical issues in this passage:

- 1. Principles that govern marriage. v. 1–5,8,10,11**
 - a. Be faithful in marriage. vv. 1–5
 - b. Do not separate. vv. 10, 11
 - i. Divorce is not an option. v. 10
 - ii. Reconciliation is the goal. v. 11
“If a Christian does divorce another Christian, except for adultery, neither partner is free to marry another. They must stay single or rejoin their former mate. In God's eyes that union has never been broken.”²
 - c. Be faithful to an unbelieving spouse. vv. 12–16
 - i. A wife abandoned by an unbelieving spouse is “not bound.” v. 15
 - ii. You may win the unbelieving spouse. v. 16
- 2. Paul is an advocate for singleness. v. 6–9**
 - a. Not everyone has this gift. v. 7
 - b. Therefore singleness is not commanded. v. 6,7
- 3. Lead the life you were called to live. vv. 17–24**
- 4. Consider the time. vv. 25–40**
 - a. We are free to marry, but Paul's opinion is to remain as you are. v. 25³
 - b. The reason is that the world is passing away, therefore do not get so invested in this life that you do not see the big picture. v. 29–31
 - c. The married has to be consumed with present things. v. 32–35
 - d. We are free to marry or remain single. v. 36

Problem Passage: 1 Corinthians 14

Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. ²For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one

² John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series, Chicago: Moody, 1984. 165.

³ Paul says he does not have a “command” yet he is speaking as an apostle. Perhaps the best way to understand this is that while it is not a dictate from God, one should think twice before dismissing the opinion/insight of an apostle.

understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. ³ On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their building up and encouragement and consolation. ⁴ The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. ⁵ 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.

⁶ 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? ⁷ If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? ⁸ And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, ¹¹ 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. ¹² So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.

¹³ Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret. ¹⁴ For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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? ¹⁷ For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. ¹⁸ I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. ¹⁹ Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

²⁰ Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature. ²¹ 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.” ²² Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers. ²³ 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? ²⁴ But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, ²⁵ 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.

Orderly Worship

²⁶ What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. ²⁷ If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. ²⁸ But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God. ²⁹ Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. ³⁰ If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. ³¹ For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, 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, ³⁴ the women should keep silent in the churches.

For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says.³⁵ If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

³⁶ Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached? ³⁷ If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. ³⁸ If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. ³⁹ So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. ⁴⁰ But all things should be done decently and in order.⁴

Thinking Clearly

This text will raise a question in the mind of the listener: Is the ministry of speaking in tongues still operative today?

A few important things to remember. First, the ministry of tongues has a limited discussion in the New Testament. It is mentioned once in Mark, three times in the book of Acts, and here in 1 Corinthians. That's it. It is only mentioned in two of the 26 books of the New Testament.

Second, tongues were a sign gift. In other words, before the canon of Scripture was written down, the gift of tongues gave witness to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Now that we have a completed Word, the need for sign gifts to accompany the Word is no longer essential. In other words, everything God wants to reveal to me about Himself He does so in the Word.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the primary ministry of the Holy Spirit was, according to Jesus, to help us understand all the things that He would teach us if He were here. This is now the Ministry of the Word since we have a completed canon of Scripture (John 16:4–15).

There are three common views on speaking in tongues:

1. Operative: Some people still believe the ministry of a private prayer language, and tongues used to prophesy is operative today; some even believe it is the most important of all spiritual gifts.
2. Inoperative: Some, on the other hand, are “cessationist,” meaning they believe that 1 Corinthians 13: 8 is predicting a time when tongues will cease. The presence of the completed Word of God is enough.⁵
3. Open but Cautious: The phrasing here is unfortunate. We do not need to be cautious about the Holy Spirit! However, the idea is that while someone may have a private prayer language, the person taking this position believes we should be discerning about this and all exercise of spiritual gifts.

⁴ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (1 Co 14:1–40). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

⁵ See Phillip Johnson here: <https://www.gty.org/blog/B131111/four-points-about-tongues-from-1-corinthians-14>

It is important to note that this question is not answered by the text. The text is not a defense of tongues; it is a defense of order in corporate worship. So what exactly does it mean?

So What Does It Mean?

Paul intends to correct disorder in public worship. Since order in corporate worship is his goal, not a defense of the use of tongues *per se*, he makes several observations about tongues in public worship.

1. The use of tongues is not as edifying as prophecy. vv. 1–5
2. We should strive to build up the Church. vv. 6–12
3. Tongues can be confusing to outsiders. vv. 23–25
4. There must not be any confusion. vv. 33, 40
This is the main idea he wants to press. There must be order in public worship, and not confusion for the reason that confusion is not of God. From these general principles, he provides guidelines for the use of tongues in public worship.
5. Guidelines
 - a. Must be an interpretation. vv. 13, 27
 - b. Must build up the body. v. 26
 - c. Not more than two or three in one setting. v. 27
 - d. Only one at a time. v. 27

This passage could be controversial, however it is actually very straightforward. If tongues are present in worship, they must fulfill the guidelines laid out by the apostle Paul. The reason is that the misuse of this gift would cause confusion in the Church. Again, this is Paul's chief concern, namely order in corporate worship.

Problem Passage: 1 Corinthians 14:34

As in all the churches of the saints,³⁴ the women should be silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak, but should be submissive, as the law also says.³⁵ And if they want to learn something, they should ask their own husbands at home, for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church meeting.³⁶ Did the word of God originate from you, or did it come to you only?

³⁷ If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, he should recognize that what I write to you is the Lord's command.³⁸ But if anyone ignores this, he will be ignored.³⁹ Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in other languages.⁴⁰ But everything must be done decently and in order.⁶

Thinking Clearly

⁶ *The Holy Bible: Holman Christian standard version.* (2009). (1 Co 14:33–40). Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers.

First, it cannot mean utter silence. This would be inconsistent with what he has said elsewhere. So let's make a few observations.

Second, clearly the act of women teaching other women is not limited in Scripture. In fact, it is commanded (See Titus 2:3, 4).

Thirdly, we cannot make the mistake of thinking that this passage was relevant then and is not relevant now. As noted above, this is a common critique of the apostle Paul: Sure it's clear what he says, but isn't he just bound by his time, a time when women did not have the social justice that they have today?

However, that's not a thoughtful approach. Think about it. When it comes to women and gender roles, Paul is not working within his culture, but he is reacting *against* his culture. For example, when Paul instructed that men should love their wives as their own bodies (Ephesians 5:2–31) there was no one, absolutely no one in first-century Palestine who had such a high view of women. Despite what some will want us to believe, Jesus was a great liberator of women, and Paul continued in that tradition. Paul is not reflecting his culture; he is reacting against it!

This passage clarifies the normative nature of the command when he says, “As in all the churches of the saints...” So, whatever this means, it means something that was normative for the churches and for us today.

So What Does It Mean?

Remember the context is order in public worship. Paul is correcting those who were disrupting church order. There were some who were disrupting the corporate worship of the church.

This passage raises practical questions about teaching and gender in the Church. Paul does not address these here because that is not his primary issue at hand, and because perhaps he assumed that they already understood what he meant. He addresses this later in 1 Timothy 2:12 when he wrote: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet.³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve.”⁷

Here it is clear that the teaching function was tied to authority. Paul is saying that because of the creation order, God does not allow a woman to have teaching authority over a man. Again, the idea is *order*.

This helps us understand what is going on in 1 Corinthians 14:34. Paul is not calling for mute females. Rather, he is affirming implicitly what he expresses explicitly elsewhere: the need for order in the church that is consistent with and affirming of the order in the home.

⁷ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (1 Ti 2:12). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.