

*love builds up*

At 1:30pm on January 3rd, 2020, a metal box arrived at the Shanghai Public Health Clinical Centre. In that box was a test tube packed with dry ice containing swabs taken from a patient suffering with the new kind of pneumonia that was sweeping through Wuhan, China.

By 2am on January 5th, Professor Zhang Yongzhen and his team had mapped the complete genome of this virus. "It took us less than 40 hours, so very, very fast," he said. "Then I realized that this virus is closely related to SARS ... so ... it was very dangerous."

The professor went to Wuhan, did some more investigating, then boarded a plane on January 11th to meetings in Beijing. Just before boarding that flight he was asked on the phone, by a fellow researcher in Australia, whether he would allow the genome to be released publicly and online. After a minute of thought, he said yes. And while Professor Zhang was in the air for those two hours, the discovery became headline news around the world: there was a new, contagious coronavirus centred in Wuhan, and it posed a threat to us all.

But Professor Zhang's action did more than simply bring the news of the virus out into the open. Because he had released the genome map publicly, and making it immediately available to other researchers, vaccines were able to be created more quickly. What many of us don't know is that we've been waiting on the testing and production of vaccines, not the creation of vaccines. With the genome sequencing in hand, researchers took barely more than a weekend to create viable vaccine possibilities that were near-ready for the testing procedures that have kept us waiting.

While Zhang will downplay the bravery of what he did, the truth is, the stakes were high for him. China's National Health Commission had forbidden the publishing of information about the disease in Wuhan. So other Chinese labs that had processed that genome sequence already, hadn't released their results. Labs were told to destroy viral samples. And other whistleblower doctors in Wuhan had already been detained.

So the world sat on the brink of pandemic, with yet no vaccine possibilities, because no genome sequences had been shared. Not until Zhang took that risk, and gave that go-ahead as he boarded that flight to Beijing that day.

Knowledge, it seems to me, is extraordinarily important to us at this time. I am all for knowledge! (This might be obvious to many of you—if I wasn't all for knowledge I wouldn't take the time to remind you all as often as I do, that indeed, I do have an advanced degree from a relatively well-known British university.)

But especially now, knowledge seems ever so important. It's scientific knowledge, after all, that helps us fight the virus that has sent us into this pandemic. Understanding how the virus is transmitted, understanding whether masks work, and what kind of masks work—all this knowledge helps us survive and gives us hope that sometime soon we will thrive again.

But the knowledge on its own is nearly useless—it's knowledge about how masks work, *and then wearing those masks*, that makes the real difference. And it would be knowing that masks work, *but not wearing masks* that would be truly cruel and destructive to others.

So what is going on, exactly, with Paul in first Corinthians? Because he appears, perhaps, to be anti-knowledge. Paul blames the knowledge of some for the downfall of others in the Corinthian community: "By your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed," he writes. Knowledge here doesn't help people thrive—it leads to the destruction of others!

Paul goes on to say that when one Christians's knowledge causes the downfall of another it's a sin not only against another person. "But when you thus sin against members of your family," he writes, by "family" he means the church, "and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ."

What's happening in this passage from 1st Corinthians is a bit complex,

and full of a lot of arcane details about the religious world the Corinthians lived in. The Corinthian world included the worship of many different gods. And while some thought that the meat from sacrifices to those gods held special power, others knew more. Others were firm in their knowledge that those gods didn't have any real power. Because there is but one God, and one Lord Jesus Christ. And some used that knowledge, the knowledge that there is but one God, and one Lord Jesus, to eat the meat offered to those gods.

But what if a fellow Christian, who doesn't have the fullness of understanding about the Lordship of Christ, saw you eating the meat offered to idols? It would become a stumbling block, and a moment of crisis for those who were less firm in their understanding that God in Christ is Lord over any, and all, other spiritual powers. So don't do something out of knowledge that would make your fellow Christian stumble in the faith.

And so if all that was hard to follow, let me sum it up: Paul isn't saying that knowledge is bad. Paul is saying (in part) that knowledge *without love* is bad. Knowledge, without love, is either nothing, or harmful to others.

Paul will say even more later on in this letter. Acting with knowledge but without love is not only destructive to *others*. He will say that love is the only thing that really lasts, and "if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, *I am nothing.*"

Let's think back now to Professor Zhang, having sequenced the coronavirus genome. What did that knowledge amount to, before it was shared? Nothing. In fact, to keep that knowledge to himself would have meant a prolonged pandemic, and days or weeks of withholding that knowledge would have led to real deaths and the real suffering of real people. In some similar circumstances a researcher like Zhang might've withheld that kind of knowledge in order to make a good buck or two off of it.

But what did that knowledge mean when Prof. Zhang performed his act of love for others, releasing the genome sequence at real risk to himself? It

meant the lessening of suffering, and fewer deaths. Knowledge and love together lessened the suffering of others. Knowledge plus love equalled mercy.

But I'm not saying all this about Professor Zhang to tell a story about some distant hero. I'm telling this story for you. For me, for us. For the sake of Christian community. For the sake of loving service to others. To bring good news!

The good news is that we know what love looks like. Love builds up. It doesn't tear down; it doesn't say, in all perfect knowledge, "you did that wrong, don't you know ..." It doesn't say in all perfect knowledge, "you really need to do that better." (And I do see that sometimes here.)

Knowledge *plus love* says: "how can I help?" Knowledge plus love equals mercy. And when I see *that* here, it makes my heart glad. Because to see that, to see people using what they know for the sake of the good, I see that love builds up. It builds you up, me up, it builds up Christian community.

And it brings us closer to God. The God that builds us up, the God that builds us up in love. It builds us up by the love of a Christ Jesus who, though being in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. But rather emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

Living a love such that he would be obedient even to the point of death—a death that means new life for you, for me, for the the community of love that lives by his name, and for the world we serve.

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