

U Before I
2/14/2016
1 Corinthians 13:1-13

“I before e except after c.” Remember chanting that in grade school? For generations, it’s been one of the commonly used mnemonics to help children learn how to spell certain words in the English language. It worked to help us spell ie words such as friend, thief and yield and ei words such as ceiling, receive and deceit. But you may also remember that you soon had to learn several exceptions to that rule; for example, neither and weird.

As far as we know, the “i before e except after c” ditty first appeared in an 1866 spelling manual. But before long, it became known as the “short form” of the rule. That’s because the many exceptions to it caused some teachers to add qualifiers. Thus, an 1888 book altered it to “i before e except after c or when sounded like a as in neighbor and weigh.”

But that long form didn’t cover all the exceptions either, offering no help for height, leisure, ancient, efficient, protein and species.

And then consider seize and siege. Neither the short nor the long form helps you there. For those two, this memory gimmick is better: You lay siege to a city (i is the second letter in both siege and city), and you seize someone by the neck (e is the second letter in both seize and neck).

If you eventually became a good speller of ie and ei words, it was probably because you ignored the rule and just learned to spell the specific words. (Failing that, you may have been saved by your computer's spell checker!)

Finally, our tongue's motherland has said, "Enough!" A few months ago, the British government issued a document for primary schools titled Support for Spelling. It contains 124 pages of ideas for teachers on how to make spelling lessons interesting and engaging. One piece of advice is to stop teaching the "i before e except after c" convention because it's confusing. In short, there are so many exceptions that it isn't really a rule. Some other spelling conventions are useful, the document says, but not that one.

Not everyone agrees with the advice. Some people point out that the phrase does enable teachers to start a discussion about the peculiarities of the English language. But many others think the rule needs to be ditched.

Spelling conventions are a useful way to approach 1 Corinthians 13. In fact, that chapter could be thought of as the answer to the question "How do you spell love?" The apostle Paul gives several rules for spelling it:

- Love is patient.
- Love is kind.
- Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
- Love does not insist on its own way.
- Love is not irritable or resentful.
- Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth.
- Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Paul's rules are far more poetic than the sing-songy chant of "i before e except after c," but clearly, in spelling love, I doesn't come before anything. When you love someone, U always comes before I. Most people wouldn't disagree with that, but saying that U should come before I and living that way are often two different things.

One reason is that putting U before I doesn't come naturally. Several years ago, the Nova TV series advertised that it was going to air an intimate portrait of two groups whose members labor exclusively for the good of the community. In other words, no individual in either group put himself or herself first. And who were these remarkable groups marked by such selflessness? Some previously undiscovered tribe in the African jungle? Some isolated clan living in the interior of South America? Some unique cohort in the far, frozen North? No. It was ants and cockroaches. To find individuals that are by nature selfless, Nova had to look outside our own species.

More than one commentator on the current culture has noticed an interesting expression of our nature to put I before U. It has to do with Mother's Day gifts, some of which are redefining what it means to honor Mom.

For example, for Mother's Day a couple of years ago, one 26-year-old man spent \$6,000 to have a giant spider tattoo lasered off of his back at a dermatology clinic, and that was his gift to his mother. He said that his mother never liked the tattoo, and now that he's older, neither did he. So he planned to tell his mom, "Happy Mother's Day. I just went through two and a half hours of torture for you."

Some other adults have signed up for a dating service or a health-club membership, or they've found a job and moved out of their parents' home as a gift to their mothers. Still others have bought themselves cell phones for Mother's Day, saying it makes it easier for their mothers to get in touch with them.

In some cases, the mothers involved are glad to see these things happen, but at least one observer mentioned that such things are just adult versions of the macaroni-framed pictures of ourselves we gave our parents when we were young.

These sorts of gifts don't suggest that the individuals don't love their mothers or that they are necessarily selfish. It's just that self-interest is a naturally occurring phenomenon in every human being, to some degree. Most of us, in fact, have to struggle against it. We see it as a value to have a sense of compassion and empathy for others. Indeed, it's central to our Christian faith that we love our neighbor as ourselves, but most of us find that that doesn't come easily; we have to work at it. And we have to work at it not just until we finally get it right but over and over again. For the tendency to put I before U is deeply ingrained in us and doesn't go away just because we want it to — or even because we start following Jesus.

Even so-called unselfishness can be based in self-interest. More than one philosopher has pointed out that when we make a sacrifice for someone, it's possible that our motive isn't so much that we care about the person who benefits from our sacrifice as that we don't wish to be thought of as selfish, which is, of course, a self-interest viewpoint.

If such is who we are, what are we to make of Paul's "U before I" spelling of love?

In years gone by, most commentators on 1 Corinthians 13 took pains to point out that the Greek word Paul used for love in this passage is *agape*, which was not the common Greek word for love. In fact, the KJV translators of 1611 rendered it as "charity," which, in that day, had a somewhat different meaning than it does today. But the reason for noting that Paul used *agape* instead of a more common Greek word for love is to point out that it refers more to an act of the will than a feeling of the heart. In other words, whether or not it's possible to put U before I in the deepest places in our hearts or to feel lovingly in our emotions, it's possible to behave so that in practice we put U before I.

That means that even if our inward response is “What’s in it for me?” our outward response needs to be “What’s best for you?” And we can ask that question and act on its answer regardless of what our self-interest is saying to us. That’s all fine, and it does credit us with acting lovingly, but it can also be kind of grim: “Let’s do what is best for you. I don’t really want to, and I won’t enjoy it. But at least I will be loving my neighbor.”

Instead of seeing loving others as acting against what we naturally want to do, however, it may be better to realize that acting lovingly is a learning opportunity and that learning can be enjoyable and a source of personal satisfaction. To say that a different way, accepting Christ brings instant forgiveness of sin and immediately makes us righteous before God, but it also signs us up for a lifelong character-formation course. Paul gave his “rules” for how to spell love not because he was looking for a subject for a poetic essay; he gave them because people who had accepted Jesus still needed some help spelling love in their daily actions and attitudes.

Paul’s spelling out of love gives us a description of what it looks like from the outside, and as we make our behavior match that description, we learn patterns and responses that can override our tendency to put I before U. And many of us experience pleasure from learning new things.

But can we really learn to behave differently, in a way that goes against our nature? The example of many Christians tells us that we can. And so, perhaps, does a recent experiment. Richard Davidson, neuroscience professor at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, has been wiring up Buddhist monks to a brain scanner (EEG). He selected the monks because they routinely practice meditation. In one experiment, he asked them to meditate on “unconditional loving kindness and compassion.” When they did, Davidson’s machine immediately registered powerful gamma activity, which is evidence of intensely focused thought. It was 30 times stronger than the gamma waves from a control group of students. Plus, brain wave oscillations from various parts of the cortex were synchronized, something normally seen only when patients are under anesthesia.

While this experiment proves nothing, Davidson speculates that the monks had attained an intensely compassionate state of mind. If that was the case, then maybe compassion is something like a muscle, something that could be bulked up by exercising it.

Perhaps. But Paul's rules for spelling love tell us that love isn't spelled primarily through meditation; it is spelled through actions and attitudes. Nonetheless, the experiments suggest that exercising our loving actions and attitudes can make them stronger.

For example, take Paul's rule that love is not irritable or resentful. Irritation and resentment may spring up on their own, but when we notice those feelings, we can make a conscious effort not to display them and not to let them drive our behavior. And as we do, we're exercising compassion, beefing up our compassion muscle.

Or, to return to our original metaphor, we're learning to spell love for others. And we need to learn to spell it because Jesus taught us that putting U before I is a significant part of what it means to be faithful to God. It is, he said, second in importance only to our loving God.

1 Corinthians 13

Common English Bible

If I speak in tongues of human beings and of angels but I don't have love, I'm a clanging gong or a clashing cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and I know all the mysteries and everything else, and if I have such complete faith that I can move mountains but I don't have love, I'm nothing. If I give away everything that I have and hand over my own body to feel good about what I've done but I don't have love, I receive no benefit whatsoever.

Love is patient, love is kind, it isn't jealous, it doesn't brag, it isn't arrogant, it isn't rude, it doesn't seek its own advantage, it isn't irritable, it doesn't keep a record of complaints, it isn't happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth. Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things.

Love never fails. As for prophecies, they will be brought to an end. As for tongues, they will stop. As for knowledge, it will be brought to an end. We know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, what is partial will be brought to an end. When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, reason like a child, think like a child. But now that I have become a man, I've put an end to childish things. Now we see a reflection in a mirror; then we will see face-to-face. Now I know partially, but then I will know completely in the same way that I have been completely known. Now faith, hope, and love remain—these three things—and the greatest of these is love.