

1 CORINTHIANS 13:8-13

INTRODUCTION

Now the theme of this final section in this chapter is that love never fails, it lasts throughout eternity. Many of the Corinthians had their eyes on the wrong things. They were overly concerned about the temporary (the more public and miraculous gifts) and they were not concerned enough about the permanent gift of love.

Now the church had many failings, it was materialistic, selfish, it was full of compromises and it entertained hatred and jealousy and virtually every other sin imaginable including sexual immorality. The church was called to be light, but sadly it lived in sin. Instead of Corinth being Christianised as a result of the church's witness the church had become paganised.

However the greatest failing of the church at Corinth was its lack of love. Yet love is what they should have been seeking for Paul makes it clear in this passage that love endures whereas the gifts that they were seeking, prophecy, tongues and knowledge were temporary and would not last when perfection comes (v 10).

1. SOME GIFTS ARE TEMPORARY (vs. 8-12)

Love never fails and the word "fails" has the basic meaning of "falling" especially the idea of a final falling and it was used of a flower or leaf that falls to the ground withers and decays. Paul's point is that at no time will agape love ever fall, wither or decay by nature it is permanent it is never abolished. This is why the church should seek to demonstrate this gift more than the miraculous gifts.

Love never fails because God is love (1 John 4:8) and God never fails. God is love and is eternal therefore love is also eternal. In heaven this wonderful gift of love will continue but the gifts that the Corinthian's were seeking would be abolished long before then. Paul illustrates the permanence of love by contrasting it with three spiritual gifts that the Corinthians sought highly and loved to use within the church.

In using these gifts the Corinthians did so in a loveless way and so they caused havoc within the church.

Although we are told here that all three of these gifts will one-day cease to exist, Paul uses two different verbs to indicate their termination. Our NIV translation does not help here for it translates the same verb in different ways. But basically Paul says prophecy and knowledge will pass away which means to reduce in activity or to abolish. The form of the verb is passive which in Greek means that something will cause them to stop which we know from verse 10 is "when perfection comes." We will discuss what that phrase means in a minute.

However when it comes to tongues Paul uses a different verb, which means, "to cease" and it means to stop, to come to an end. But the verb is used in what is called the middle voice in Greek which when used of people means a voluntary action upon oneself but when used of things it means a self causing action. The cause comes from within it is built in.

In other words what Paul is saying is that something happens to bring prophecy and knowledge to an end but tongues are brought to an end by itself for God has given it a built in stopping place. The gift of tongues will stop by itself like a battery it had a limited life span when that life span is reached it comes to an end.

But the question remains as to when and how these gifts will end? It seems to me that the gift of tongues came to an end at an earlier period than the gifts of prophecy and knowledge, which is why Paul uses a different verb. But when did prophecy and knowledge come to an end? If we know that then we can work out when tongues came to an end. This brings me to the meaning of the phrase "when perfection comes." Now it is interesting to note that both prophesy and knowledge gifts have to do with revelation.

God revealed to the church certain things through prophecy and through knowledge, which we do not know exactly what the gift of knowledge, involved. It seems clear it was supernatural knowledge given for the benefit of the church. Perhaps in order to understand difficult parts of the Old Testament. In any case they were both imperfect revelation gifts but when perfection comes these gifts will no longer be needed.

What is this perfection that has to come? Now at once our minds think of heaven and the perfection of heaven or to Jesus who is the perfect Son of God. But actually the word perfection does not always mean absolutely perfect. Within the New Testament the word is often used of maturity. For example in 1 Corinthians 14:20 the word is translated as "adults" and the idea there is to be mature in contrast to childish.

That is the meaning of the word here in verse 10 and this is clear from the continuation in verse 11 of the contrast with childish and adulthood. What Paul is saying I believe is that when fully mature or adult revelation comes then the partial and childish revelations of prophecy and knowledge will be abolished?

We must consider this interpretation in the light of 2 Timothy 3:16-17 where the word perfect ("thoroughly equipped") is talking about maturity rather than perfection. So if my understanding is right Paul is saying that when Scripture is complete when God's mature revelation has come then the church will have no need for gifts like prophecy and knowledge.

Our Bible is perfect in the sense that it is utterly sufficient revelation for all our needs. Paul is saying that when sufficient comes the inadequate and partial will be done away with. For people today to want to go back to the gifts of tongues and prophecy is to go back to what is insufficient and what is not mature but childish. An adult does not speak like a child or play games that a child plays (v 11).

An adult thinks like an adult and reasons in a mature way and no adult would want to go back to their childish ways of thinking and talking etc. In the same way when we have churches who claim to still have in existence the gifts of prophecy and knowledge and tongues then that church is childish but it is more than that for it is being deceived for such gifts no longer exist today. So whatever the source of their claims for practising such gifts they do not come from God.

There are some people who refuse to accept the understanding of these verses that I have just given because they say that verse 12 must be referring to heaven and not the completed Scriptures. Even many commentators have said that Paul is contrasting the present knowledge with heavenly understanding.

However I would like to point out that there is no indication that Paul is talking about heaven for the subject he is dealing with is the time and reason when miraculous gifts will cease. Increasingly a number of commentators relate verse 12 to an Old Testament passage (Numbers 12:6-8). The language is similar in many parts especially in the Hebrew and Greek.

The situation is that God is rebuking Miriam and Aaron for speaking against his servant Moses. The contrast in the book of Numbers is the same contrast being made here in verse 12. It's a contrast between dim partial revelation and open full faced revelation. It is a contrast between the

lesser and the greater prophet. In the Old Testament Moses stood as the great prophet who spoke to the Lord face to face (Numbers 12:8) whereas God spoke to other lesser prophets in visions and dreams (Numbers 12:6).

In the New Testament Jesus Christ stands as the Great Prophet who has revealed God to us. The Apostles under the guidance and leading of the Holy Spirit recorded his full and complete revelation of His Father for us. This record is complete full and mature and we have it here, it is called the Bible.

The Corinthian's with their emphasis on miraculous gifts were the ones seeing a poor reflection in the mirror; it was like the Lord revealing himself through visions and dreams in the Old Testament. These gifts gave only a partial disclosure of God through Christ but by comparison the receiving of Scripture was like being face to face with God.

So verse 12 actually summarises for us why it was necessary for gifts to cease although for the Corinthians that was still in the future. Scripture gives us a full, more complete, more mature revelation; therefore we have no need for the childish gifts of prophecy and knowledge.

Now the temptation that the church faces to today is to look at the state of the church and to see its weakness and its failures because of sin and its coldness of heart and then conclude we need to return to the state of the church in apostolic times. Such thinking has led to many sincere Christians and churches seeking after miraculous gifts that ceased when the Scriptures were completed.

People argue that because these gifts existed in the early church, then surely if we had those gifts today our church would make a greater impact in our society. After all would people not listen if I had the gift of prophecy or could speak in unlearned languages or could speak some word of knowledge? But the answer to such thinking is No! The last thing the church needs today is to go back to its childish roots.

Until the Scriptures were complete the church was actually in an inferior position regarding truth. Believers must not seek to go back to those days for we now have the completed word of God we have God's mature revelation, we have the face to face revelation of God. Why would anyone want to go back to the inferior and the partial when we have the complete revelation from God?

So you see this chapter in this book is not asserting the norm for the church of all ages as some Christians would tell us. But this chapter prepares the church for the abolishing of these temporary gifts on the completion of the canon of Scripture. What adult would want to revert to a child's perception of truth after tasting the more mature and gracious revelation of truth in the Scriptures?

Yet my dear friend that is what charismatic churches is asking us to do. They want us to go back to childish revelation like dreams and visions instead of staying with the face to face revelation of the Scriptures. I hope I have convinced you of the termination of these temporary gifts and the vitality of the Scriptures for us today. But this still leaves me with tongues.

For if my understanding is right then tongues will come to an end on its own and was not dependant on the completion of the Scriptures. Is it not possible then that the gift of tongues is still in operation today? Is it possible that its batteries have not yet run out?

2. WHEN DID THE GIFTS OF TONGUES CEASE?

It is possible to argue that as tongues has an in built time scale that will bring it to an end then it is possible that this gift is still functioning today and that is what we see is Charismatic type

churches. The answer to that is clearly no. You see Paul is saying that these gifts that he has listed are childish gifts given until the completion of the Scriptures.

Within these three gifts that Paul mentions two of them will exist until the completion of Scripture and then they will not be needed. One will come to an end in its own time and that ending clearly cannot be after the completion of Scripture otherwise Paul's whole argument about mature and childish falls apart.

So tongues clearly came to an end before the other two gifts mentioned here were brought to an end by the completion of Scripture.

The New Testament itself indicates this. If you look at the New Testament you will notice that it's only in the books that were written early that we find any mention of tongue speaking. Paul mentions it only in this letter and James Peter, John and Jude make no mention of it at all. Even in the book of Acts, which is the history of the very early church, we do not have mention of tongue speaking after chapter 19. It seems from this evidence that tongue speaking not only ceased to be an issue but also ceased to be in existence at all after the 50's.

In the Pastoral Epistles, which is the books that give the clearest guidelines about a functioning church, no mention is made of these gifts at all. That would be odd if the gift of tongues were an essential part of a functioning New Testament church.

We know that tongues along with other miraculous gifts were sign gifts given to authenticate the gospel message. When the Scriptures were complete there was no need for this gift because the Scriptures are self-authenticating. They simply receive their authority from God because it is God's word and we look no further than the Scriptures themselves to see that they are authentic.

The final reason I want us to consider is church history. Tongue speaking does not seem to have been practised much after the apostolic age. If you study the history of the church you will discover that tongue speaking has only spasmodically and questionably reappeared throughout the twenty centuries of church history. The gift of tongues is no where alluded to or found in any writings of the church Fathers. Clement of Rome wrote a letter to the Corinthians in the year 95 AD about four decades after Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. In discussing various problems in the church Clement makes no mention of tongue speaking.

It seems that both the use and misuse of that gift had ceased. Justin Martyr the great church Father of the second century visited many churches in his day. Yet in his volumes there is not one mention of tongue speaking. It is not even mentioned among his numerous lists of gifts; a strange thing if this gift was still in existence and if it was central to the life of the church, as many Charismatics today would have us believe.

Origen who was a brilliant church scholar and lived in the third century makes no mention of tongue speaking. In fact he argues that the sign gifts of the apostolic age were temporary and not exercised by Christians in his day. In fact the historians and theologians of the early church all agreed that tongue speaking ceased to exist after the time of the apostles.

We know of no other time when tongue speaking appeared to take place in the church until 17th and 18th centuries when Roman Catholic groups in Europe practised it and one or two other heretical groups. In truth for over 18 centuries the gift of tongue speaking was unknown to the church and even then the gift is only practised by some heretical groups. It is only in the 20th Century that tongue speaking became a major emphasis again within what was known as Holiness movement, a large section of which developed into Pentecostalism. The Charismatic movement which began in 1960 carried the practise of tongue speaking beyond traditional

Pentecostalism into many other denominations, churches and groups both Roman Catholic and Protestant.

What the Charismatic movement has done is to try and fill the void of true spirituality, a void that was felt by many in the church with false experiences and practises.

So as I conclude let's get back to the point that Paul wants to make. It is so easy to become so taken up with the issue of tongue speaking that we miss Paul's point. His point is that love never fails but the gifts that the church at Corinth loved to show off with will cease much sooner than they thought or expected.

However there would be some gifts that would remain after the ceasing of these miraculous gifts faith hope and love will remain being active within the church of Jesus Christ (v 13). It seems that Paul is saying that these three are fundamentally important in the life of the church. It is faith that generates hope and it is faith and hope that are manifested by love.

Of these three Paul says that love is the greatest. By that he means that it is more important than faith and hope and the probable reason for this is that love will remain after Christ returns and takes us to heaven whereas faith and hope will be replaced by sight and reality. Faith and hope are Christian disciplines and gifts that we need for this world only.

Love is also greater than faith and hope, because love is the manifestation of the both faith and hope (Galatians 5:6 & Colossians 1:4-5). Love is faith and hope with its clothes on.

Therefore within the functioning of the church we must not seek after gifts that no longer exist but instead give ourselves wholeheartedly to using whatever gifts we have for the benefit of the church. The only way that we can really do this is to use our gifts lovingly, which means using them in ways that are patient with people and kind. In using our gifts in love we will never be envious of others or boastful or proud of the gifts given to us by God. We will never use our gifts rudely or in ways that elevate us. We will refuse to become angry or keep a record of wrong or delight in evil as we use our gifts in love throughout the church.

We will use our gifts in ways that show that we rejoice in the truth of God's word and we will seek to use our gifts in ways that will always protect others, will always trust others and will always hope for the best outcome with others. Finally we will use our gifts lovingly as we persevere with others refusing to give up and refusing to stop loving our brothers and sisters.

Therefore let's remember these three remain faith hope and love but the greatest of these is love (v 13).

Amen