

## GOSPEL HIGHWAY

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### 3. THE MORE EXCELLENT WAY (1 Corinthians 13:1-13)

by B. S. Poh

We know that many people today are caught up in the charismatic movement. It is important for us to be able to show them from the Bible where they have gone wrong. The Bible is alone the authority in all matters of faith and practice. We know that God's word cannot be wrong, but men can be wrong. The Bible is alone sufficient to show us the correct way. We must turn to the Bible to find out God's will for us.

In the time of the apostle Paul, the church at Corinth was faced with the problem of having people who were too keen about prophecy and tongues. This is exactly the problem faced by many churches today. We have seen that Paul deals with the problem by laying down some important principles first. He will discuss how spiritual gifts are to be used in public worship later. His chief concern at the moment is to lay down some foundational truths that are relevant to the subject. In chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians, he has laid down the truth that the church is one body. Nothing sinful or selfish should be done to divide the one body of Christ. Paul ended that chapter by saying, "And yet I show you more excellent way."

What is that more excellent way? Here, in chapter 13, Paul wishes to show us that that way is the way of love. He is actually making a slight digression from the main theme, which is the use of spiritual gifts in public worship. It is as though he is leading us on a slight detour from the main road so that we may see the beauty of the trees and the flowers along the road. He will take us back to the main road again soon enough, but it is important for us to appreciate the beauty of the flowers and trees along the main road. By making such a detour, he is in fact laying down another foundational truth relevant to the whole subject of spiritual gifts. He is going to show to us that all our spiritual gifts amount to nothing if there is no love seen in us. In fact, he discusses love together with other Christian graces and contrasts them with spiritual gifts. Put another way, he wishes to show the importance of *graces*, which have to do with our character, as contrasted with *gifts*, which have to do with our abilities. So then, Christian graces are contrasted with *spiritual gifts*; our *character* is contrasted with our *abilities*.

#### Love Is Indispensable (13:1-3)

This chapter divides naturally into three sections. The first three verses teach us the main truth that *love is indispensable*. We cannot do without love. If there is no love in us, everything else is worthless. Throughout this section, Paul uses *hyperbole*, which is a rhetorical exaggeration. In other words, he is using superlative, exaggerated language to bring home a point.

#### Angelic languages?

He says in verse 1, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal." Paul is here not saying that he, or any other men, can speak in the language of angels. He is only saying that all our abilities at speaking the different languages, whether of men or of angels, amount to nothing if we have not love. All our speaking will be as useless as the sounds of metal instruments. That is plainly what Paul is saying. Plain as that is, there are those who would wrest this verse out of context and claim that their "tongue speaking" is in fact the uttering of angelic languages! What are the languages of angels? How do they sound like? Have you heard them before? None of us know what angelic languages are like. Anyone can therefore come to us and utter some gibberish which they claim to be angelic languages. But why in the first place should men be uttering angelic speech? What purpose does it serve? Do they become angelic by

so doing? Or are they becoming more "chimpanzeeic"?

In 2 Corinthians 12:2, Paul says this, "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago - whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows - such a one was caught up to the third heaven." He goes on to say in verse 4, "...he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which is not lawful for a man to utter." Paul was here countering his opponents who boasted of their spiritual experiences. He was relating his own experiences, but refused to say so directly. He knew that there is a limit to boasting, even of the right kind. He could have said, "I have greater experiences than you," but he chose not to do so. Instead, he put it in the third person, saying, "I know a man in Christ who had these experiences..."

Take note that Paul heard "inexpressible words". The question that may be raised is this - Was it the words themselves that were inexpressible, or was it the content of the words that was inexpressible? Let us take the first possibility. If Paul heard words that were inexpressible, if he heard angels speaking angelic languages, then he clearly tells us that it is not lawful for man to utter such angelic languages on earth. The charismatics would be wrong in claiming that man can speak angelic languages on earth!

Consider the next possibility. If it is the content of what he heard that was inexpressible then it still follows that Paul understood what the angels were saying, between themselves or to him. In the Bible, we find that every time God or an angel speak to men, they do so in languages that could be understood. The same happened to Paul when he was taken in the spirit to heaven. He heard words that he could understand. If this is the case, then Paul is saying that the content of what he heard was too lofty to be uttered on earth.

You see then that, either way, the charismatics are in trouble. If the "inexpressible words" refers to the *languages* of angels, then it is not lawful for charismatics to be uttering them on earth. If it refers to the *content* of the words, then Paul understood what he heard, in a language. The words he heard were not mere sounds. Instead, they had meanings, and were arranged together in such a way that they constituted a language which conveyed intelligible ideas. This is so different from the claims of the charismatics who utter nothing but mere gibberish. There is no syntax, there is no grammar, there is no sentence structure in the sounds that they utter. Language experts have analyzed their so-called tongues but found that they are not languages at all! The charismatics themselves do not understand what they are uttering. That is for the simple reason that the sounds that come out of their mouths do not constitute a language!

Paul is using exaggerated, high-flown words, to bring home the point that love is indispensable. It is not wrong for him to do so. In life, we express ourselves in different ways. We sometimes use a proverb. We sometimes use a comparison. We sometimes use a question, even though we already know the answer. Paul is not saying that men can speak angelic languages, nor that men can know everything, nor that men can remove mountains. Verses 2 and 3 make sense only when we understand them in the same way that we have understood verse 1: "And though I have *the gift* of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed *the poor*, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing."

### ***Gifts without grace***

You may have the most gifts, or you may have the best gifts, or you may have certain gifts to the highest degree, but if you have not love, you are nothing! Why is love so important? The reason is that this love comes only to those who are converted, who are in Christ. The original Greek word is "agape", which is the special love that only true believers have. An unconverted man may have a lot of compassion, a lot of kindness and so many other things, which together make it appear that they too have this "agape", but that is never the case. It is simply impossible for an unconverted man to have Christian love. Christian love arises only from faith in Jesus Christ. It is found only in converted people, whether in a small measure or in great. The apostle Paul is emphasizing the importance of this love in order to stir up the Christians to show more of it.

We must note that it is possible for some people who are not converted to have great gifts. They may profess to be Christians, but they do not truly belong to Christ. That is why the Lord says in Matthew 7:21-23, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practise lawlessness!’” Now clearly these are unconverted people. We know from the Bible that whoever comes to Jesus Christ in true faith will not be cast away (John 6:37). It follows that those who have performed so many wondrous things in the name of Christ and yet are cast away, cannot have been truly converted.

You see now why Christian love, “agape”, is so important. Without this love, all the gifts you have will amount to nothing!

### **Love Behaves In A Certain Way (13:4-7)**

Paul moves on to show that this love behaves in a certain way. He says, in verses 4-7, “Love suffers long *and* is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” There is no need for us to analyze every word that is used here to describe love. It is clear that the love that we are talking about is totally selfless; it is totally self-denying; and it is totally self-sacrificing. It is always outward-looking, seeking the good of others. This was what Paul had been advocating earlier in chapter 12, when he described the church as a body with many parts. He urged that there should be love and unity between the members of the church. Instead of thinking of their own good, instead of competing with one another, instead of engaging in proud and envious rivalry, they should be thinking of the good of others in the church. This was something not seen in the Corinthian church.

### ***Christ our example***

We note that the words of verses 4 to 7 are actually the description of Christ Himself. The Lord Jesus Christ is, ultimately speaking, our greatest model of love. You remember how, in John chapter 13, He washed the disciples’ feet and then told them that He had set an example for them to follow. Then, in John 15:12-13, He says, “This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends.” In 1 Corinthians 11:1 Paul says that we are to imitate him just as he imitated Christ. Christ is therefore our ultimate model. And love is the chief characteristic of Christ.

This love is not to be confused with sentimentality. A lot of people today have a wrong idea of what love is all about. They think that to have this love is to go around with a “holy-dreamy-look”, to talk softly, and to tread on tip-toe. But true Christian love is manly, mature, bold, and courageous. Remember how the Lord Jesus Christ overturned the tables of the money-changers in the temple, how He made a cord of whip and drove the animals out of the temple area. Remember how He rebuked the Pharisees and called them “vipers” and “hypocrites”. To many Christians today, such behaviour would be regarded as lacking love. But we know better! Christ has shown that true love will speak out against falsehood and errors. True love will expose hypocrisy and heresy in the church.

Similarly, true love will act in a very definite way towards those who are weak, who are seeking to know the Lord and who are lost. Remember how the small-sized Zacchaeus was singled out from the crowd by the Lord, and how he was blessed with the privilege of having the Lord as guest. And we are told that Zacchaeus was saved that day. That was love in action! Clearly, love is not sentimentality. The sentimental emotionalism that passes for love in many churches today is not the type of love that the Lord showed. It is not the love that our present passage is talking about. Paul wants us to know that true Christian love behaves in a certain way. It is selfless, self-denying and self-sacrificing. It is always outward-looking and thinking of the good of other people.

### **Love Is Permanent (13:8-13)**

We come now to the crucial part of the present chapter. Remember that Paul is teaching us the truth that love is the more excellent way. He argues out his case by first showing to us that love is

indispensable. Next, he shows us that love is unique - it behaves in a certain way. He now wants to show us that love is permanent. He says, in verse 8, "Love never fails. But whether *there are* prophecies, they will fail; whether *there are* tongues, they will cease; whether *there is* knowledge, it will vanish away."

Love is a Christian grace. It is something that should characterize a true disciple of Christ. This grace is compared to three gifts which, we are told, will disappear. The three gifts are all revelatory ones. In other words, they are gifts that conveyed the revelation of God to men. A person who spoke in an unknown tongue, that is in a language not previously learned, did so with the idea of revealing God's truth to those who were listening. A person who prophesied uttered words that conveyed God's will to men. A person who had special knowledge was able to inform others of what were normally hidden from the mind of men. Agabus, for example, was able to know that Paul would be arrested in Jerusalem. Peter, for example, was able to know that Ananias and Sapphira were telling a lie. This knowledge is a special gift and not a reference to what we commonly know. Common knowledge will still be in us even when we are in heaven. In heaven, we will know God, we will know one another, we will know truths still.

### ***Love will continue on***

Verse 8 tells us that love will continue on while the revelatory gifts will pass away. The contrast stands out more clearly in the original Greek than in the English translation. In the various English translations of the Bible, an attempt has been made to maintain a certain elegance in the prose. This is of course perfectly legitimate, but it loses some of the force of the contrast. We are told that "love never fails". The word "to fail" literally means "to fall". Unlike a fruit that falls from the branch, love never falls. It remains.

A different word is used to describe what would happen to prophecies and knowledge - they "will be abolished", or "will be done away". The word is in the future middle tense, which is very much like the future passive tense. There is here the idea that prophecies and knowledge had only a temporary use, a fact somewhat obscured in the English translation. Prophecies and knowledge were to be rendered of no effect once that temporary use was fulfilled. As for tongues, we are told that they "will cease", or "will come to an end". The word is in the simple future tense. The ability to speak languages that have not been previously learned will naturally cease, or disappear on its own.

We must note that there is no indication that these gifts will be revived once they have ceased. An illustration will be helpful here. Suppose that we visit a man in hospital. We are told by the doctor, "He will die." This is in the simple future tense, in the same way that we are told that tongues "will cease". When the man dies, we would not expect him to be revived. The words used, and the tense employed, do not give any indication at all that he will live again once he had died. Instead of saying, "He will die," the doctor may say, "He will be dead." This is in the passive tense. When the person is actually dead, we do not expect him to become alive again. So also with prophecies and knowledge - when they have been abolished, we do not expect them to be revived. The words and the tense employed do not give any indication that they will be revived. The charismatics are wrong to claim that tongues, prophecies and knowledge are being revived today. They cannot base their claim on this passage of Scripture. They will have to find some other parts of the Bible to support their claim. They can try, but they will not be able to find any passage that supports that claim!

Which will disappear first? Will it be prophecies? Will it be tongues? Will it be knowledge? This we are not told. The way they are mentioned together, and placed in contrast to love, show that they will disappear at roughly the same time. If they do not all disappear together at exactly the same time, they will disappear close to one another. The basic point made by the apostle is that love will continue on while the revelatory gifts will cease at some time in the future. Love is the more excellent way because it is permanent, while the revelatory gifts are not.

### ***When will the gifts disappear?***

Of interest to us is when the revelatory gifts will disappear. We know that it will be at some time after the apostle Paul wrote these words. But when exactly will that time be? Can we know more precisely when that will take place? The subsequent verses show when.

Remember that in this chapter, Paul is trying to show us the more excellent way, which is the way of love. Since he has begun comparing love with the revelatory gifts in verse 8, he continues to talk about them before coming back to talk about love. In the original Greek, verses 9 and 10 actually constitute one sentence, separated only by a semi-colon. Our English Bible translates it into two sentences, which is unfortunate. However, even in the English Bible, we can see quite clearly that the thoughts expressed in the two verses are actually related.

It says in verses 9 and 10, "For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away." Many charismatics would claim, in a rather simplistic way, that the "perfect" in verse 10 refers to heaven or to Christ. The more careful charismatics would say that the "perfect" refers to the *state* or *condition* in heaven, where we will see Christ "face to face" (verse 12). The "perfect" of verse 10 is thus linked to the "face to face" in verse 12. The comparison made in verses 9 and 10 is therefore the imperfect state on earth and the perfect state in heaven. All this sounds so plausible, but we will show that this cannot be right by a careful examination of verses 9 and 10, by a consideration of the context, and from what is said in verse 13. For the moment, we wish to show that the simplistic claim of the vast majority of charismatics, that the "perfect" of verse 10 refers to heaven or Christ, cannot be right. Their basic argument is that prophecy will continue until Christ comes again to earth, or until we arrive in heaven. This is a piecemeal way of interpretation that fails to consider the two verses together as one sentence.

When the two verses are taken together as one sentence, we notice that a comparison is being made between that which is partial and that which is perfect. A comparison is possible only within the same basic realm. For example, I may say to you, "A cow is big, and a cat is small." That sentence will make perfect sense to you because we are comparing one animal with another, and we are talking about their sizes. However, if I were to say to you, "A cow is big, and water is wet," you will think that I am mad! That is because a cow is basically different from water, and size and wetness are totally different qualities. Similarly, in verses 9 and 10, a comparison is being made within the same realm. It is impossible to say that "the perfect" is a reference to Christ or to heaven. If we take "the perfect" to mean Christ or heaven, then "the partial" will have to be a partial Christ or a partial heaven!

In fact, we can see that, in verse 9 and 10, the comparison is between two stages of the same matter. It is like saying, "The cow is small now, but it will be big in a year's time." Paul is saying that what is partial at the time of writing will one day become complete. That is precisely how the word "perfect" is to be understood. In Greek, the word "to teleion" is a neuter word which carries the meaning "the completed thing". It is derived from the word "teleios" which signifies having reached its end, finished, complete. The word is used a total of eighteen times in the New Testament, including this occasion in 1 Corinthians 13:10. Never once is the word used to refer to heaven. And never is it ever used to refer to Christ. Grammatically speaking, it is not possible for masculine words like "heaven" and "Christ" to be qualified by a neuter adjective such as "the perfect".<sup>1</sup>

We have still not stated exactly what "the partial" and "the perfect" mean. We have only noted that it is impossible to equate the "perfect" with Christ or heaven. Since verses 9 and 10 together form one sentence, and a comparison is obviously being made between them, we should put them side by side:

Verse 9 says, "For we know in part and we prophesy in part."

Verse 10 says, "But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away."

We have noted that when a person prophesies, he is actually revealing God's will to men. Verse 9 is saying that our prophecy is partial, or incomplete, because our knowledge of God's will is partial or incomplete. Since what "we know in part" in verse 9 is the revelation of God, "that which is perfect" in verse 10 must be the complete revelation of God. It is significant that while the word "perfect" is never used of Christ or heaven, it is used of Scriptures in James 1:25, which says, "But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues *in it*, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work,

this one will be blessed in what he does.”

Next, we compare the second part of verse 10 with the second part of verse 9. The “that which is in part” of verse 10 must be a reference to the prophesying of verse 9. Prophecy was only a temporary vehicle for transmitting God’s will to men at the time when the revelation of God was not yet completely given. When the revelation of God is completely given, then prophecy “will be done away”. The word translated “will be done away” in verse 10 is exactly the same word used in verse 8 about prophecies and knowledge, which “will be done away”, or “abolished”.

One dictionary of New Testament words (Vine’s) actually says that in 1 Corinthians 13:10, the word “perfect” refers to “the complete revelation of God’s will and ways, whether in the completed Scriptures or in the hereafter.” Here, we have at least a confirmation that the “perfect” of verse 10 cannot be a reference to Christ or heaven but rather, it is “the complete revelation of God’s will and ways”. We have still to determine when that will happen. Will it happen with the completion of Scriptures or will it happen in heaven? The context will give us the answer.

### ***When God's revelation is complete***

If Paul is referring to heaven, when the revelation of God will be complete, the contrast between love and the revelatory gifts in verse 8 will not stand out too clearly. Love is supposed to be the more excellent way because it lasts longer than the gifts. Also, it would fail to take into consideration the unique phenomenon of Scriptures. Put another way, it would mean that the Bible is not the unique revelation of God since there are these other means of revelation, namely prophecies, tongues and knowledge. The sole authority of the Bible, in all matters of doctrine and practice, would then be undermined. A third difficulty will arise from that. If the written word of God is not unique, and the revelatory gifts continue today, then we may add new prophecies to the Bible. Furthermore, the comparison made between love and the two other graces, namely faith and hope, in verse 13, will not be possible. These are formidable problems, which will not be encountered if we adopt a different view.

At the time when Paul was writing 1 Corinthians, the revelation of God was still not completely written down. All the apostles of Christ knew that they were actually writing the revelation of God. We read in 2 Peter 3:15-16 these words, “...as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable *people* twist to their own destruction, as *they do* also the rest of the Scriptures.” Peter said that untaught and unstable people were twisting the words of Paul just as they were twisting *the rest of the Scriptures*. Clearly, Peter recognized that what the apostle Paul had written down were Scriptures. We can be sure that the other apostles were aware of the fact that they were writing Scriptures as well.

The Scriptures were completed once the last surviving apostle, John, wrote the book of Revelation. It is significant that he ended that book by warning us not to add to, or subtract from, the prophecy of the book (Revelation 22:18-19). Since that is the last book of Scripture, we expect no more revelation to be given after that. There were no more prophets and apostles after the time of John. The church on earth is being “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief *cornerstone*” (Ephesians 2:20). The phrase “the apostles and prophets” means, of course, their writings, which point us to Christ.

We read in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 these words, “All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” This was written by the apostle Paul, who knew that the Scriptures would be all that a man needs to guide him into a knowledge of God’s will. When we consider what he wrote in 1 Corinthians 13 in the light of this passage, we become aware that Paul was looking forward to the time when the Scriptures would be completely written.

We conclude, therefore, that “the perfect” of 1 Corinthians 13:10 is a reference to the complete revelation of God as contained in the Bible, and “that which is in part” which will be done away is prophesying, and the associated gifts of tongues and knowledge. The prophecies, tongues and

knowledge mentioned in verse 8, which were expected to vanish away with the completion of the revelation of God, are therefore not found anymore today.

### ***A child growing up***

In verse 11 to 12, two illustrations are used by the apostle to emphasize the temporary nature of prophecies, tongues and knowledge. The first illustration is that of a child growing to maturity. The speech of a child is “childish” since his understanding has not developed. A baby would learn to utter sounds such as “Ma ma”, or “Pa pa”, without knowing what those sounds mean. As he grows, he begins to associate those sounds with summoning people and getting their attention. When he sees a man visiting the home, he might call the person “Papa” without realizing that he is not his father! Soon, he learns to call only his mother and father “Mama” and “Papa”, and there would be no more embarrassment caused!

As the child grows, he begins to repeat words after the mother to form complete sentences. When he is older, he forms his own sentences without the aid of the mother. When he matures further, he begins to express his thoughts with words of his own. By this stage, the child has already grown up! He would no longer be uttering unintelligible sounds. He would no longer be uttering sentences after others which make no sense to him. He would be thinking and behaving as an adult. It says, in verse 11, “When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.”

Note that, in this verse, what is spoken, understood, and thought of, all have to do with what we know. This verse is, in fact, an illustration of our understanding of God’s revelation. It is incomplete at first, and becomes more and more complete with time, so that a stage comes when childish ways are put aside. The church had to rely on the childish methods of prophecies, tongues and knowledge to know the will of God before the Scriptures were completely given. Once the revelation of God was completely given, these childish ways were stopped.

### ***Looking into a mirror***

The next illustration is that of a person looking into the mirror. It says in verse 12, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face.” The charismatics often appeal to this verse to support their claim that the revelatory gifts continue today and will only cease in heaven. They say that the “face to face” means seeing Jesus Christ in person, linking this with verse 10 in which it is claimed that the “perfect” is a reference to Christ or heaven. We have already seen that the “perfect” of verse 10 cannot be a reference to Christ or heaven. But what does “face to face” in verse 12 mean? Literally, it means to see a person directly. This phrase, however, is not always used literally in the Bible.

In Exodus 33:11, for example, we are told that “the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.” It is obvious that the phrase “face to face” cannot be taken literally here because God is a spirit and has no form. Furthermore, if a man were to see God, he would be struck dead by His glory. We are told in verse 20 of that chapter that God said to Moses, “You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live.” We are told further that God would put Moses in the cleft of a rock while His glory passed by, and, verse 23, “Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen.”

If the phrase, “face to face” cannot be taken literally, what does it actually mean? The answer may be found in Numbers 12:5-9. We are told in verse 5, “Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud and stood *in* the door of the tabernacle, and called Aaron and Miriam.” Verse 9 says, “So the anger of the LORD was aroused against them, and He departed.” This was a *theophany* - a manifestation of God in the form of a man.

We look next at verses 6 to 8, which say, “Then He said, ‘Hear now My words: if there is a prophet among you, *I*, the LORD, make Myself known to him in a vision; I speak to him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moses; he *is* faithful in all My house. I speak with him face to face, even plainly, and not in dark sayings; and he sees the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against My servant Moses?’” Here, the emphasis is on God revealing Himself to Moses in a special way. The emphasis is not with the mere encounter with the person of God. Aaron and Miriam

literally saw the form of God, just as Moses did. Moses was singled out as different from Aaron and Miriam, and from other prophets. He was specially treated with being given a fuller and clearer revelation of God.

The meaning of “face to face” is obvious from the passage. It means “plainly, clearly, or fully”. The revelation which Moses received from God was given directly, and was more complete, as compared with the other prophets. Note two things about this passage: firstly, the comparison is between two types of revelation, both of which were infallible, but one of which was more complete and clearer; and, secondly, the “face to face” experience took place on earth, and not in heaven.<sup>2</sup>

It is wrong of the charismatics to claim a “secondary prophecy” which is a mixture of truth and error. All prophecies that came from God were always true. A person whose prophecy contained any element of falsehood would have been treated as a false prophet, and he would have been stoned to death. This is according to the teaching of Deuteronomy 18:20-22, “But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die. And if you say in your heart, ‘How shall we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?’ - when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.” Today, we find many charismatics uttering prophecies that prove to be false. What they claim is not in accordance with Scripture, and what they predict does not come true. Yet nothing is done about them! In the Old Testament time, they would have been stoned to death! Today, church discipline should at least be exercised upon them. But that has not been done, and these people are allowed to continue uttering their so-called “prophecies”!

We come back to 1 Corinthians 13:12, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face.” We must understand that at the time when Paul wrote these words, the mirrors were made of polished metals. They were not made of mercury-coated glass like we have today. When a person looked into the mirror of those days, he could only see his own image dimly. This is to illustrate the truth that the believers during Paul’s time could know the will of God only incompletely because the revelation of God had not been completely given. We must also remember that Paul was trained as a rabbi, and he knew the Old Testament Scriptures very well. He often used Old Testament expressions and imagery in his writings. Here, Paul was expecting the revelation of God to be completed some time in the future, when a believer would know God “face to face”, just as Moses knew God face to face.

1 Corinthians 13:12 goes on to say, “Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.” Instead of treating this as a new illustration, it seems best to take it as an elaboration of the earlier part, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face.” This is for the reason that, in the original Greek, the two parts constitute one sentence, separated by a semi-colon. As in verses 9 and 10, we must compare the second part of the sentence with the first part. The phrase “now I know in part” must correspond with “now we see in a mirror, dimly”. It must mean that our knowledge of God’s will is partial or incomplete.

The phrase, “but then I shall know as I also am known” must correspond with “but then face to face”. This means that our knowledge of God will become complete, instead of remaining partial. It is as though we meet with someone face to face literally, and that person sees us clearly in the street light while we see him only dimly. As the mist clears, we see him clearly, just as we are seen by him. Here, the “face to face” experience is with God, and in a figurative sense, with reference to His revelation. Earlier, we have referred to Exodus 33:11, which says, “So the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.” In the next two verses, Moses said to the Lord, “See, You say to me, ‘Bring up this people.’ But You have not let me know whom You will send with me. Yet You have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found grace in My sight.’ Now therefore, I pray, if I have found grace in Your sight, show me now Your way, that I may know You and that I may find grace in Your sight, and consider that this nation *is* Your people.” Here, we are told that Moses desired to know the Lord by knowing His way. To know God’s way is to know Him. Moses desired to know God as he also was known.

We are known by God fully and clearly, whereas our knowledge of God is partial. In a sense, it

will always be partial, even when we arrive in heaven. Being creatures, we will never be able to know the infinite God completely. In 1 Corinthians 13:12, however, Paul has the specific purpose of comparing the situation at the time of writing with the situation at a time in the future. His purpose was to show that the revelatory gifts would pass away when the revelation of God became complete.

We have earlier noted that the word “perfect” is used to describe the law of God in James 1:25, “But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues *in it*, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.” It is of interest to note that, on this occasion, James is actually referring to the law of God as a mirror. He says, in verses 22 to 23, “For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was.” The early Christians looked upon the law of God as a mirror that showed them what they were like. While their literal mirror could only show their images dimly, the perfect law of God could show them their true selves, just as God saw them. The law of God reveals to us the ugliness of our sins. It shows us that our righteousness is nothing but filthy rags before God. It reveals to us the Lord Jesus Christ, and how redemption is to be found in Him alone.

### ***Love is the greatest***

Let us stand back and consider the whole passage again. In verse 8, we are told that the revelatory gifts will pass away. We wish to determine when that would happen. Verses 9 and 10 show us that it will happen when the revelation of God has been completely given. Two illustrations follow, both of which clearly speak of the revelation of God, which will become complete. There is the illustration of the child growing to maturity, in verse 11. Then there is the illustration of seeing into the mirror dimly, which would give way to seeing “face to face”. We may now draw the clear conclusion that the revelatory gifts would pass away when the Bible was completely written. Once that happened, there would have been no purpose left for the revelatory gifts.

Confirmation of this conclusion is found in verse 13, “And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these *is* love.” The definition of faith is given in Hebrews 11:1, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Romans 8:24-25 explains to us what is hope, “For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.” This is how “faith” and “hope” are to be understood. When we arrive in heaven, there would be no more need for faith and hope. Only love remains. For that reason, love is the greatest of the three graces.

We have noted earlier the difficulties that would be faced if we say that the revelatory gifts will cease only at the second coming of Christ. If that is the case, we would have to take it that faith, hope and love will continue in heaven. We would then need to redefine faith and hope. We would also have to find a reason why it is that love is the greatest of the three. By holding to the interpretation that we have given, all these difficulties will not arise. Instead, there will be consistency in the arguments of the chapter. Love is the more excellent way because: (i) it is indispensable, (ii) it is unique, and (iii) it is permanent. Concerning the permanency of love, it never fails while the revelatory gifts will cease with the completion of Scriptures. Graces are greater than the revelatory gifts because they will remain when the latter have passed away. Of the three graces, love is greatest because it lasts to eternity, while faith and hope ends with the second coming of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

### ***The authority of Scripture***

We know from the history of the church that prophecies and knowledge stopped, and tongues gradually faded away, at the completion of the Bible.<sup>4</sup> That was why the early ecumenical councils were held whenever the church was threatened by heresies. These councils must not be confused with the ecumenical movement of today. In those days, the church leaders would meet to discuss any heresy that had arisen. They would then issue a decree to condemn the heresy and declare what they believed to be the teaching of the Bible. The early Christians did not resort to prophecies, tongues or knowledge to determine the will of God. Instead, they treated the word of God as complete and sufficient. They used it as the authoritative rule to determine what were true and what were false.

The early Christians knew very well that the words of Revelation 22:18-21 closed the revelation of God. The completed Scriptures will be all that is needed until Christ comes again. Verses 18 and 19 say, "For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and *from* the things which are written in this book." The "adding to" and "taking away from" must not be restricted to the written words of the Bible only, but to its teaching as well. The charismatics today claim that they utter "secondary prophecies" which, although not *on par* with Scriptures, are prophecies from God. They claim that these "secondary prophecies", which may be mixed with error, are not added to the Bible as Scriptures. We have seen that it is not possible to have true prophecies that are mixed with error. We must point out now that to claim prophecies today is to "add to" the teaching of the Bible, and to fail to uphold the completion and sufficiency of Scriptures is to "take away from" from the teaching God's word. It is to break the command given in Revelation 22:18-19. We should be expounding the word of God today, and not be engaging in tongue-speaking and prophecy. Expounding the word of God is different from claiming fresh revelation from God.

### Conclusion

We have shown where the charismatics are wrong in their interpretation of certain verses in 1 Corinthians 13. They have the tendency to adopt a piecemeal approach in the interpretation of Scriptures, and fail to look at the verses in their proper contexts. This has resulted in fantastic claims being made by them. One such claim is that there is a necessary connection between the spirituality of a Christian and the gifts he possesses. If the claim is not made explicitly, it is assumed. Go to any charismatic circle, and you will soon get the idea that one has to speak in tongues to be a better Christian! Stay with them for a while, and you will find that prophecies and special knowledge are claimed freely! The chief characteristic of the charismatic movement is the free exercise of the tongues, prophecies, and healing, with claims of knowledge and visions. Our study of 1 Corinthians 13 has shown that: (i) there is no necessary connection between spirituality and gifts; and (ii) the revelatory gifts of prophecies, tongues and knowledge have ceased. A person can have the greatest, and most gifts, but he may be devoid of Christian love. The revelation of God is complete, and the Bible alone is the only authority in all matters of faith and practice.

We close with one more point: the completion of Scriptures is taught in the context of the indispensability of love, together with a description of how that love behaves. Christian love and Bible knowledge are married together. To love Christ is to obey His commandments (John 14:15). Without knowing the teaching of the Bible, it is impossible to love God truly. Equally, all our knowledge of the Bible's teaching amounts to nothing if we do not show love to others. After all, loving God involves also loving our neighbours as ourselves! Love and truth are inseparable. If you claim to have truth, do you show forth love?

### Footnotes:

1. Adjectives, like the article, must agree with the nouns which they qualify in number, gender and case.

In 1 Corinthians 13:10, *to teleion* ("the perfect") is actually what is known as a pronominal adjective, i.e. an adjective used in the place of a noun. An example of such an adjective is found in 1 Corinthians 6:9, "Do you not know that *the unrighteous* will not inherit the kingdom of God?" The word "unrighteous" is an adjective, leading us to ask, "Unrighteous what?" The answer is, of course, unrighteous people! The word "people" is masculine in gender, and so is the pronominal adjective "the unrighteous". In 1 Corinthians 13:10, "the perfect" is a *neuter* pronominal adjective. How can a *neuter* adjective be used to qualify *masculine* nouns like "Christ" or "heaven"?

Of course, it is possible for a neuter adjective to describe a neuter quality *of Christ* or *of heaven*. In Romans 1:19, "*what may be known* of God" is neuter, and so is "*the invisible things (attributes)* of Him" in Romans 1:20. These examples are fairly straightforward since the "of God" and "of Him" are given. If this is intended in 1 Corinthians 13:10, why didn't the apostle just add "of Christ" or "of heaven"?

Furthermore, the argument from the gender of the word should not obscure the fact that verse 10 should be interpreted in conjunction with verse 9, and also in the light of the context of the passage.

2. It is to be noted that the expression “face to face” in Numbers 12:8 is literally “mouth to mouth” in the original language, emphasizing that revelation is referred to throughout, not the visual perception of God. The Bible translators have been right in recognizing that the expression “mouth to mouth” is equivalent to “face to face”, both in the Old and New Testaments (2 John 12; 3 John 14). Moses is singled out as specially favoured by God in Exodus 33:11 and Deuteronomy 34:10 just as in Numbers 12:8, except that in, these other passages, the expression used in the original language is “face to face” and not “mouth to mouth”. Clearly, the two expressions are equivalent, and clearly they are a reference to the revelation of God and not to a literal visual, perception of God.

3. The question is often raised, Is it not possible that this passage is referring to heaven as well as to the completion of Scripture? We would not exclude the thought of heaven, for all the teachings of Scripture are intended to prepare us for heaven. After all, we have seen that love will continue on in heaven (1 Corinthians 13:13). However, we should not hesitate to say that the *immediate* reference of the passage is to the completion of Scripture.

4. No significant group is known to have claimed the gifts in the first fifty years after the completion of the Bible. Various extreme groups arose later which claimed the restoration of the gifts but there was no continuity between them. These sporadic groups were never significant, whether compared to “mainline Christianity” or “dissenting Christianity”.

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