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"For other FOUNDATION can no man lay that is laid, which is JESUS CHRIST"

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Tongues in the Corinthian Church

by Dennis W. Costella, Editor

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P**PROMOTERS OF THE** Charismatic Movement often claim to receive messages from God. They say, "God told me..." or "God's message for the church is...." But are their statements true? Does the Lord have more to say to the church than what He has already

given in the written Word of God?

Zealous tongues-speakers often ask non-Charismatics why they do not seek the "baptism of the Spirit" which, they claim, is evidenced by "speaking in tongues." If someone were to ask the Charismatic who spoke in tongues, "What did you say when you were speaking in tongues?" he would usually say, "Oh, I have a prayer language. I don't know what I was praying, but it sure was wonderful, and you can't imagine the power it has!" Is this what the gift of tongues entails? Is this gibberish that is spoken and even promoted today the same "gift of tongues" given to the early church in the days of the apostles?

We firmly believe that the Bible reveals otherwise. When studying I Corinthians 12-14, one must not assume that the tongues spoken in the early church and the tongues movement of today are identical. A truly Biblical understanding of the nature and purpose of tongues in the early church can only be obtained when this false presupposition is set aside.

The primary purpose of the special, revelatory gifts of the Spirit was to provide the early church with Divine direction and instruction in New Testament church doctrine. These gifts also provided assurance that what was being spoken through these supernatural communications, in fact, was of God and not of a false spirit. Spiritual gifts of this sort were also essential in determining whether or not the knowledge received conformed to apostolic doctrine. The gifts of discernment, word of knowledge, tongues, interpretation of tongues, visions and prophecies were all intended to supply the whole church with this essential ministry. Gifts of healings and miracles served to authenticate the church's message. Until the completed New Testament Scriptures were canonized, these God-given gifts were essential to the stability and edification of the early church.

Now here was the problem many who were blessed with these gifts edified themselves, but they failed to share the blessing of the communication they received with others so that the latter would also be built up in the Faith, or "edified." God intended for spiritual gifts to "profit withal" (12:7;14:5)-the entire fellowship of believers, not just those with certain gifts. Jealousy and misuse resulted from this incomplete form of Divine revelation, which was only "in part" (13:10), that is, God's Word was revealed in portions as the gifts were exercised. But what follows in the text is "a more excellent way" (12:31) - a perfect way.

Love Was Lacking in the Exercise of Spiritual Gifts

What was missing in the practice of these special, spiritual gifts? Godly love was terribly lacking. Anyone with a revelatory gift should have been concerned with sharing his message from God with others for their edification. These gifts were of no real value unless they were used for the betterment of others. Love provides the proper, godly motivation that makes spiritual ministry just that-a ministry.

Tongues, prophecy, the gift of knowledge, miracles of faith-all of these amounted to nothing unless they were exercised in love, that is, they were used to benefit others (13:1, 2). Some among the Corinthians were selfishly trying to bring glory to themselves by boasting and reveling in their gifts, caring little about God's reason for giving them the gift in the first place-for the profit of all in the church (12:7; 14:12). True spirituality will always manifest itself in a genuine selflessness and a heartfelt desire to be of help and blessing to others.

The Holy Spirit ministers gifts to believers for the benefit of others in the body of Christ. This is an important truth. God rejects a showy, self-aggrandizing form of "spirituality"-it is "nothing" (13:2). All outward acts of charity or religious piety are likewise of no consequence apart from the proper motivation of love for God and for those to whom He has called us to minister (v. 3). How easy it is to fall into the trap of assuming God is more concerned *with what* we do instead of *why* we do it. But motives and methods are important, for God weighs the spirit of every supposedly "good" work (Prov. 16:2).

The blessed truth found in I Corinthians 13 (the "love chapter") regarding godly love is actually a rebuke leveled at the carnal Corinthian believers who failed to understand that the spiritual gifts were to be used for the edification of others. In these verses we have not so much a definition of love's qualities as a listing of what love is *not* (its antonyms) that

characterized those in Corinth who ungraciously gloried in their unique "gifts."

True, Spirit-wrought love is manifested in kindness, patience, selflessness and godliness. These traits were lacking in Corinth because the sensational nature of these gifts resulted in personal attention for the one with the gift (13:4, 5). Pride ruled many of these "gifted" saint and whenever pride rules, then tempers flare and contentions abound (Prov. 13:10). Watch out for self-proclaimed spiritual giants.

When selfish interests persist, there will always be a "short fuse" (no "bearing all things" or "enduring all things") when it comes to believers' treatment of one another (vv. 6, 7). This pride results in a strange form of joy when others fall ("rejoicing in iniquity") or do not measure up to one's self-defined standard of spirituality. Instead of believing the best concerning others, the worst is assumed. Instead of rejoicing in, and hoping for, what is true error and falsehood are perpetuated. Yet God's love changes all this "Self" is dethroned, and the edification of others becomes one's top priority.

"In Part" Revelation Was put Away

The reason why love excelled even above the unique gifts of the Spirit (13:8) was because of the temporal nature of the latter. Revelatory gifts would cease, but the Divine graces of faith, hope and charity would continue throughout the Church Age as signs of the Holy Spirit's vital ministry. False teachers commonly promote the erroneous belief that the sign of the Spirit's power is speaking in tongues. Not so! The sign of the Spirit's presence and power is genuine, Biblical love at work (1 Jn. 3:14). Love continues; tongues have ceased.

Herein lies the Corinthians' shortcomings: Temporal spiritual gifts were not only used in an unloving way, but they were even exalted above the more excellent gifts of the Spirit that would grace the saint and glorify Christ long after the prophecies, tongues and word of knowledge gifts had ceased to exist. Revelatory gifts provided only partial revelation with respect to God's truth concerning the mystery of the Church and the dispensation of grace; through tongues, prophecies, etc., the Corinthians only knew "in part" (v. 9). Their understanding of what God would have the Church to know was partial, sporadic and even sometimes withheld by those self-serving believers who limited their revelatory gift to their own edification. But what was to follow these spiritual gifts was the final work of Inspiration: God's written Word, which would render unnecessary the temporal gifts that the Corinthians foolishly exalted (v. 11).

When God's final revelation was given, providing the Church with a full understanding of His will, then that which only provided understanding "in part" would be "put away." Paul illustrates this vital principle using the example of a child's developmental growth in understanding the world around him (vv. 9-11). Paul is prophesying here about the soon-to-be discontinued revelatory gifts and the coming "perfect" Revelation that would give the Church full understanding (vv. 10, 11).

What is "that which is perfect" (v. 10)? It is certainly not the Second Advent of Christ, for the word "that" is an impersonal pronoun and Christ's Second Advent does not fit the context of these verses—the subject being the revelation of New Testament truth to the early church. "That which is perfect" is the *Word*, the completed canon of Scripture.

Partial understanding, seeing "through a glass darkly," vanishes in the light of God's Word. It is a mirror wherein, even now, we behold the glory of the Lord and know ourselves: even as we are known of Him (2 Cor. 3:18; Jas. 1:23-25). Paul says, "Now I know in part..." (v. 12), but when the canon of God's Word is finished, It will contain His completed storehouse of knowledge (2 Tim. 3:16,17). The time was at hand for the Corinthians to put away the special revelatory gifts they so enjoyed and to submit to the final, written authority of the Scriptures, which even then were being circulated among the churches (1 Thess. 5:27 Col. 4:16).

We have the Bible; we need nothing else. There is no revelation forthcoming that will serve as an addendum to what God the Father has "spoken unto us by His Son" (Heb. 1:1, 2). How was this final conveyance of the Word of God to man, through Jesus Christ, to come

about? Read carefully the prophecy Jesus gave to His disciples (who would later become some of the human writers of the New Testament Scripture) in John 16:1-15. It was needful for Christ to ascend to the Father, for in so doing, the Holy Spirit would descend and guide the disciples "into all truth" and reveal to them "things to come" (v. 13). Notice *all* truth. Whose truth? God's truth - all of it! New Testament prophecy would be revealed to them (Matthew-Revelation is the fulfillment of this promise). Christ would be glorified and magnified in this Holy Spirit-inspired Revelation of God to man (v. 14). Jesus said, the Spirit "shall take of mine [divine truth of the things pertaining to Jesus Christ] and shall shew it unto you" (v. 15).

Although the apostle Paul was not present when Christ conferred this prophetic promise to His disciples, the events in Paul's life, calling and ministry reveal that he, too, was inspired by God's Spirit as he penned Holy Scripture. The inspiration of the Gospels (Jn. 14:26 cf. Lk 1:1-4), the epistles (2 Pet. 3:1, 2, 15, 16; 1 Thess. 2:13; 1 Jn. 4:6) and the totality of the "faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3 cf. vv. 17-20; Eph. 2:18-3:5; 1 Cor. 14:37) was forever finished when the apostles and prophets (such as Mark, Luke, and Jude) had finished their prophesied ministry of penning, by the miracle of inspiration, the New Testament canon of Scripture. With the passing of the apostolic age, so also passed the need for and the purpose of the revelatory gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Tongues Were Understood by the One Exercising the Gift

Millions are deceived by assuming that the tongues practiced in Charismatic circles (and pagan religions also boast in their "tongues speaking") are identical to the tongues in the early church. This is a false assumption. The tongues of the Bible were legitimate languages (Acts 2:4-8). They were also understood by the one exercising the gift. A careful exegesis of the rebuke to the Corinthians regarding the misuse of the gift of tongues reveals this fact. It is significant to note that prior to the Azusa Street revival at the turn of the 20th century, this was the common interpretation. Matthew Henry says, "All Protestant commentators, with only one exception, interpret this chapter [12] to show that those who spoke in a tongue, understood themselves what they spake" (*Commentary on the Holy Bible*, by Matthew Henry and Thomas Scott, 1710).

The problem today with the interpretation of this text by so many is that they automatically assume that the nonsensical gibberish being passed off as "tongues" by the 20th century Pentecostals/Charismatics is the same "tongues" that were operative by the Holy Spirit in the Corinthian assembly. Not so! The present-day tongues speaker is not even a close counterfeit.

Some modern translations even provide an incorrect interpretation of this text that the underlying Greek text does not warrant. For versions to substitute "mind" for "understanding" in verse 14, or to presumptuously write that the tongues speaker "does not understand what he is praying" is to translate the text with a preconceived, faulty assumption. This is dishonest scholarship and is a prime example of how the new versions actually alter a vital doctrine. Undoubtedly, one of the reasons the Charismatic heresies so often go unchecked is because the new Bible version used by the one who is trying to refute the error is itself a tarnished and deficient "Sword of the Spirit."

The one who spoke in a tongue understood what he was saying or praying as he uttered the language previously unknown to him. Confusion occurred, however, when the tongues speaker himself did not make the communicated message known afterwards (14:13b) or when he failed to have an interpreter (vv. 27, 28). As a result, those who heard the utterance were not edified; he was the same as a barbarian (or foreigner) as far as their understanding was concerned (vv. 7-11). The one speaking was edified by what he spoke in the same way as those in the church were edified and built up when they heard God's truth spoken through a prophecy proclaimed in their native language (v. 4). Edification required understanding in both cases.

The same was true for one praying in a tongue (vv. 15-17). He did not utter senseless,


unintelligible, ecstatic gibberish; the vocalization of lucid words comprised the prayer. We know this because the Bible says that if those listening had been able to understand the language of the one praying, then they would have been able to say "Amen!" to *what* he was praying. However, they could not join in because of the language barrier, not because the prayer was composed of ecstatic utterances devoid of comprehension. The speaker was "giving thanks" (v. 17). Can a person express such specific praise without articulating words? Impossible!

The misuse of genuine, Spirit enabled tongues in the early church resulted from selfish edification that did not desire to seek the edification of others as well (v. 6). God gave revelatory gifts to instruct *all* in the church, not just the one with the spiritual gift (12:7). If the assembly did not comprehend the message, then the *understanding* of the speaker was "unfruitful" because only he was edified. The tongues speaker was to provide for the interpretation (14:13, 27-28) so others would profit from his *understanding*.

God desired for all in the early church to understand His messages given through tongue and prophecies (14:12, 19, 26-31). Gifts were not to be used selfishly. Unless someone were present to interpret the message, the speaker himself should pray "that he may interpret" (v. 13), that is, "pray with the *purpose* of interpreting what he said" (Charles Hodge, *First Corinthians*). Otherwise, the speaker's understanding would be "unfruitful" as far as others were concerned, for they were not edified (vv. 13,14). Proper use of tongues would benefit the whole assembly with God's instruction.

What about an "angelic tongue" claimed by Charismatics? The "tongues of angels" in 13:1 speaks of the heavenly nature of the subject matter conveyed, not the incoherent, nonsensical mechanics of the communication itself. Where in the Bible is an angel's message anything other than something easily understood by the hearer? Nowhere in God's Word do an angel communicate in a language not understood. Nonsensical "worship" of God and edification apart from understood truth are totally foreign to Scripture.

So what is happening in today's "tongues movement"? Is it orchestrated, psychological manipulation; or pretended, willful self-deception; or even demonic manifestation? It is difficult to say. But is it the Spirit-wrought tongues that were practiced in the early church? Definitely not.

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