



Our One Acceptable Gift to God

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. 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, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1–3, KJV 1900)

We could select any number of passages to illustrate that the chapter breaks in our New Testament were not always inserted in the best textual location. In our present study the transition from the close of Chapter 12 to Chapter 13 might well agree with the beginning of a new paragraph, but the theme of Chapter 12, spiritual gifts, continues; a chapter sequence should continue. The three verses that we shall here examine affirm this point. In them Paul highlights the futility of any spiritual gift, even the most notable from our perspective, if we do not use the gift with the God-defined trait of love. "The God-defined" trait of love is different from our human sense of love. Our human perspective overloads the idea of love with emotions. God's definition of love, which we shall examine shortly, ignores emotions and focuses on specific conduct, actions that prove the true motive of what we say and do.

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. The question of speaking in tongues is a topic of intense controversy in our time. To say the least, the idea polarizes people. They are intensely for it or against it. I fear that both sides of the controversy often ignore the actual teachings of Scripture on the question. In Acts 2 we read a detailed description of exactly what speaking in tongues as a miraculous blessing or gift from God means. This passage says not a word about mystical sounds and syllables. (Acts 2:4-11) Every element of the miracle involved known human dialects or languages. Men were gathered on Pentecost from some seventeen dialects. When the Holy Spirit empowered the apostles, they spoke with this gift of tongues. How does the passage describe them? There was no need for a translator. In fact a major element of the miracle was the fact that those who heard recognized that the men speaking spoke in the Galilean dialect, but they heard or understood as if those men were speaking in their native language. The Holy Spirit directed the apostles to speak their native language, but He also gave each hearer understanding as if these men spoke in their native language. The Holy Spirit instantaneously translated Galilean words into seventeen different

languages. The very power that defines this event as a supernatural miracle is that the Holy Spirit provided immediate translation from one known human language into several other known human languages. I have never heard any advocate of modern tongues suggest that he or anyone he knows has such a gift. In fact in the context of spiritual gifts, 1 Corinthians 12-14, we have clear evidence that this gift was likely temporary and had, by the time Paul wrote to the Corinthians, already ceased. If not, why did Paul prohibit speaking in foreign languages in the Corinthian Church unless a translator was present? (1 Corinthians 14:27-28) If this gift of miraculous tongues still existed, why didn't Paul affirm it in Chapter 14 instead of prohibiting speaking in the church in a foreign language unless a translator was present? In these two verses the word "unknown" is italicized in the King James Bible; it was supplied by the translators to convey the sense of the Greek sentence. Further, the word "tongue" was translated from the Greek word "glossa," a word that we should recognize by its similarity with our English word "Glossary." What is a "Glossary"? It is a list of unfamiliar words to us, but words in our English language, accompanied by brief definitions, something of a mini-dictionary. Every point that Paul makes in Chapter 14 presumes that the miraculous gift of tongues, as it actually existed for a season, had ceased and was therefore no longer an option for the Corinthian Church. At the time Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians, they had one and only one option to understand what someone spoke in a foreign language. They needed a translator. The idea of a believer with a miraculous gift of tongues had already ceased. It was no longer an option.

Our words convey the ideas and thoughts of one person to another. They are our primary method of communicating to each other. How does this gift relate to the greater topic of spiritual gifts that Paul introduced in Chapter 12? Notice that Paul specifically refers to a spiritual gift in this verse. If Paul could at this moment speak in any language known to man—in fact even any language known to angels—his words would be of no value whatever unless they were seasoned with this God-kind of

love of which he writes in Chapter 13. Paul goes farther. Even if he had other miraculous gifts; prophecy, understanding mysteries, supernatural knowledge, and incredible faith, but if he lacked this special trait of the God-kind of love, all of his gifts combined would mean nothing at all.

In my ministerial youth, I recall overhearing two older preachers indulging a bit too much in self-promotion. Neither man directly praised himself. Elder A praised Elder B, and Elder B praised Elder A, but in the end they jointly thought themselves to be two of the most powerful preachers of their generation. The more they talked the more their bragging made me feel queasy. Eventually they mentioned a preacher about their age whom I happened to know quite well. They proceeded to slam this poor fellow right and left. As I pondered the self-promoting pair along with the absent elder, a powerful conviction came to mind. The absent preacher who was being criticized so severely by the two men had a lifelong reputation, one that he faithfully honored to the very end, for showing amazing and loving kindness to his brothers and sisters, even brothers or sisters who didn't fully agree with him. He truly modeled this God-kind of love. By the end of their lives, these two men had lost their influence as ministers of the gospel, but the fellow they enjoyed criticizing so fiercely left this world and entered glory with the love, respect, and admiration of his brothers and sisters. He stayed faithful and true to his gracious love to his last breath. This conversation between the two men has often reminded me of just how relevant First Corinthians 13 is to the greater subject that Paul is teaching in these three chapters, spiritual gifts. The Lord bestows and administers spiritual gifts, not for the recipient to promote self, but for the edification of His church body, and for His glory.

Often in the realm of human accomplishment that ignores God's superintendence and judgment, a believer is liable to become prideful and think himself more intelligent or more skilled at whatever spiritual gift he fancies himself to possess, missing few opportunities to remind those around him of his presumed superiority. Let's suppose for the moment that he is just as skilled as he thinks himself to be, which is quite unlikely. If he does not wholly use his gift with godly love, love in action, every action and every word that he speaks, his gift, according Paul in this inspired Scripture, is wholly worthless. It means nothing at all. Spiritual gifts are not about one believer promoting himself or seeking supremacy over another believer. It is not a "Spiritual gift contest." This context emphasizes that every spiritual gift is all about benefiting the whole body of the church, not about building the notoriety of the person who presumably possesses the gift. To the extent that a believer uses his presumed gift for himself, he destroys any potential benefit the gift might be for others in the church body. Often, therefore, the believer who becomes poisoned by personal pride actually harms the body

instead of blessing it, even as he thinks himself the one and only indispensable gift in the church. More than a few times I have witnessed the Lord quietly, but ever so effectively extract men with this attitude from a church and render them neutral. If you drive the highways in the State of Texas, you'll read road signs along the highway, "Don't mess with Texas." The cliché could not be more appropriate if changed to "Don't mess with God." And that point also means "Don't mess with God's body, His church." In the end, you'll lose.

"...it profiteth me nothing." The believer who loses his way in spiritual gifts forgets the Biblical truth that every spiritual gift belongs to the Lord, not to himself. Though he may ever so subtly confuse benefit to self with benefit to the church, the moment he turns the gift to attempt to benefit himself he shall lose all profit to himself. God will not allow him to gain personal benefit or profit from a gift intended and given only for the service and benefit of His church body.

One of the greatest hurdles a young preacher, a young man truly gifted of the Lord to preach the gospel, shall face is the requirement of the Lord that he wholly forget himself every time he stands up to speak to the church.

I protest by your rejoicing which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily. (1 Corinthians 15:31)

Perhaps this point is at least part of what Paul had in mind when he wrote these words. Before a believer can appreciate the reality of the resurrection of the dead, he must understand the futility of pride and of self-promotion. This state of mind is not a one-time event. It needs renewal in our minds every single day that we live. Every morning personal pride and self will wake up and push for preeminence. The young man who fails to face self down daily and die to self for the sake of his Lord and for the profitable use of his gift to serve, bless, and edify the church body will never develop his spiritual gift at all. No matter how long he exercises himself and tries, he shall remain a spiritual infant who has more needs than abilities to help others. Paul might have become self-centered by hearing the Corinthians rejoicing in him and in his spiritual gift, but such a reaction to their rejoicing would have wholly prevented his daily dying. If a man in the exercise of his gift provokes true spiritual rejoicing, he should know that the source and cause of their joy is not anything in him. All their rejoicing resides in the Lord, not in the man. And no man can practice this daily death in his spiritual life in conjunction with any degree of sinful pride or service to self. Young preacher, or wannabe preacher, this thing called preaching is not all about you. It is all about the Lord. The sooner you understand this simple truth the sooner you shall begin growing and edifying hungry saints. And if you can't get this point solidly affirmed in your mind, don't even try to advance in ministry.

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor