

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Temporary Gifts: Permanent Charity

Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. (1 Corinthians 13:8-12, KJV)

Occasionally Bible students interpret these verses, especially the closing verses of the quote, as referring to the Second Coming. While the points made by this interpretation are all true, the interpretation ignores the context of the whole chapter. Chapters 12-14 deal with spiritual gifts in the here and now, not with the Lord's return. If we interpret these verses in harmony with the context, we should apply them to spiritual gifts, not to the Second Coming.

What is Paul's point in writing that prophecies shall fail, tongues shall cease, and knowledge shall vanish? Given the context of spiritual gifts, we should seek an interpretation that addresses this topic.

1. Prophecy. While we often think of prophecy as a divine gift or enlightenment by which someone predicts future events, Scripture often uses the word to teach a different spiritual gift. Yes, at times God has enlightened people to predict specific future events. However, if we study the Old Testament prophetic books, a far more common trait of all those prophets manifests a different characteristic. "*Thus saith the Lord...*" appears far more consistently through those prophetic writings than "*It shall come to pass that...*" A clear message from God to His people in the prophet's time, often an unpopular message that warned of judgment because the people had turned from God to their own ways, dominates the prophets' writings. If we examine Paul's words to the Corinthians in the very next chapter, we see a similar description of "Prophesying." It seems that many spiritual leaders in the Corinthian church had compromised their message to the church. Instead of speaking God's message clearly, uncompromisingly, to the church, they were likely trying to preach popular themes and ideas to the church. Paul rebukes such a compromised message and teaches the church that "Prophesying," speaking God's truth plainly without regard for popular opinion, is a more important fruit of a true and faithful spiritual gift than speaking in tongues or any other

manifestation.

Paul simply states a fact that many Bible students often ignore. Prophecy, likely in terms of the supernatural prediction of future events, was not a common manifestation even in the Old Testament. Occasionally such prophecies addressed future events related to either God's judgment or deliverance of His people in their time. But sprinkled throughout Old Testament prophecies we find clear and quite specific prophecies of Jesus' coming and work. We find these prophecies from Genesis to Malachi. God did not want His people in the Old Testament ever to forget what He had in store for them in His Son's coming into the world. We read a few such prophecies in the New Testament. However, if a key theme of God's prophetic revelations had to do with Jesus' coming and work, the need for such supernatural revelations of future events would cease after Jesus came and completed His work. "*...whether there be prophecies they shall fail.*" Apparently this idea of predicting future events appealed to people, so they might try to perpetuate it, but the true revelation and gift never relied on human appetite, but on God's ministry to His people at the time of the prophecy and thereafter as they read His Word. When we say that this supernatural gift of prophecy ended, we are not being insensitive to Scripture or unspiritual. We are following inspired Scripture's teachings in this passage.

2. *...whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.* Here too Paul is dealing with supernatural knowledge of spiritual things, not with the common knowledge of life. Consider one Biblical example. When Jesus sent the twelve, He told them not to consider what they would say when brought before the authorities and questioned. (Matthew 10:19). When they were so challenged, Jesus promised that He would give them the words to speak. Unless you or I are/were numbered among the twelve, these words do not apply to us. We cannot claim such supernatural knowledge as the Lord gave to those twelve men in that time. I have

known a few preachers who claimed to have this spiritual ability in their preaching. First, Jesus never told the twelve that they would be given such supernatural knowledge and speech in their preaching, but in their defense against persecution. A simple point will refute the idea of perpetual supernatural revelation in preaching. If this supernatural knowledge were a permanent spiritual gift, why did Paul teach Timothy to study to rightly divide the word of truth? (2 Timothy 2:15). Why did Paul teach the Thessalonians to study? (1 Thessalonians 4:11). Why didn't Paul in these two instances simply tell the Thessalonians and Timothy that the Spirit would supernaturally give them the knowledge they needed? Sadly, most examples of people who claim this gift today, including the preacher who says that he gives no thought to his sermon because he wants to solely trust the Lord to give him the words, clearly manifest that they gave no thought to their words. What they say is often rambling and disconnected, not edifying and instructive gospel preaching. They are trying to stand on a temporary past gift that ceased.

3. *...whether there be tongues, they shall cease.* Paul is not here suggesting that humans shall so evolve as to no longer need their tongues or verbal speech to communicate their thoughts to others. Without question, a unique spiritual gift related to human speech existed in the first century church. Rather than relying on modern explanations to understand precisely what that gift was, we need to rely on Scripture itself. Surely if the Holy Spirit gave such a gift, we can learn about it from Scripture. Acts 2 documents what may well be the most dramatic manifestation of this supernatural gift to be found in the New Testament. Spend some time carefully reading Acts 2:1-11. We cannot doubt that the Holy Spirit gave the eleven, perhaps the hundred twenty, a supernatural ability to communicate the gospel to those present. In fact, verses 6-11 describe the precise nature of this miracle of speech. There is not one word about a mystical language never heard or spoken before. There was clearly no need for an interpreter or translator. Luke, the inspired author of Acts, leaves no question or doubt regarding what occurred. The disciples were all Galileans and spoke in the native dialect of the Galilean region. However, because the Day of Pentecost was such an important Jewish holiday, Jews from many different regions, nations, and languages had traveled to Jerusalem to observe this religious holiday. Their description of this miracle is simply stated and explained. Each man recognized that the disciples were speaking in their native Galilean dialect, but each man, representing some seventeen different nations and dialects, immediately heard their words in their native

language or dialect. Imagine you or me speaking in our USA English language, but people in the audience from the Philippines, Africa, India, France, Germany, and other nations all immediately hearing our words in their native language. They understand that we speak in English, but they also consciously realize that they hear our words as if we spoke in their native language. The miracle was that the Holy Spirit provided immediate translation of Galilean speech into their various seventeen different known languages. Not a single person heard a mystical speech that required translation or interpretation. Not one. Every language spoken or heard in this miracle was a known existing dialect of human speech.

Given this very precise and clear example, I cannot explain it by any other means than that the Holy Spirit provided the miracle of immediate translation from one human language to another. Take note further that the word "tongues" in our English Bible was translated from the Greek root for our English word "glossary," a simple list of existing words in an existing human language with a simple definition of each word.

This New Testament example cannot be altered or compromised to support the common contemporary idea of "Speaking in tongues" that appears in undecipherable sounds. Further, Paul expands this lesson extensively in 1 Corinthians 14 to the actual public assembly of the Church in Corinth. Again, all the description provided deals with known human languages. In Acts 2, the Holy Spirit provided immediate translation from one known human language into seventeen different known human languages. However, when Paul described the problem in the Corinthian Church in 1 Corinthians 14, he forbade anyone speaking in an unknown language unless a translator was present to translate his message into the common language of the members in the Corinthian Church. If this miraculous gift were a perpetual gift, why didn't Paul remind the Corinthians of that point and teach them how to use that gift? Additionally, Paul makes yet another clear point in his 1 Corinthians 14 teaching on this subject. Since the Holy Spirit provided immediate translation during the time He administered this supernatural gift, His purpose in manifesting the gift was to convince unbelievers, not to boost believers. (1 Corinthians 14:21-25) Apparently, speaking in tongues in the miraculous sense of that action, was to convince unbelievers that God was present and manifesting His work by this supernatural translation of human speech from one known human language to another. However, if that supernatural gift had ceased at the time Paul wrote to the Corinthians, it was necessary that the church provide an orderly

setting for its public assembly, including speech in known familiar human language so that what their teachers taught would be heard and understood by all present. Otherwise Paul required the church to provide translators.

Charity never faileth. Unlike these temporary spiritual gifts, Paul emphasizes the timeless reality of godly charity. There was never—and shall never be—a time when this principle, this spiritual gift, shall cease or become obsolete. It shall always be in vogue with God and with His faithful people.

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. In the setting of the Corinthian Church, Paul doesn't paint tongues or any other spiritual gift, even the three specific spiritual gifts that he says shall end, as evil or bad. He does depict them as appropriate for the infancy of the faith, but that era of infancy was ending, and the church should understand that ending and grow into a more mature faith based on enduring charity, not based on a temporary gift. It is quite enjoyable and entertaining to watch children playing, growing, and learning, but we would never want to revert from adulthood to the limitations of childhood. Paul in principle applies the same thought to spiritual gifts versus charity. Charity is for the growing, maturing believer. If we think of love in terms of our culture's sentimental, emotional view of love, it would be appropriate for the youngest and most immature of believers. However, if we view love, Paul's "Charity," in terms of its actions that Paul has outlined in this chapter, it obviously belongs to the mature and growing believer. It would be impossible for the child-believer to master.

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. It is this sentence specifically that Christians often associate with the Second Coming. Every point they make regarding the Second Coming is certainly true, indisputably so. However, in this context, the application of the sentence is to present spiritual gifts, not to the Second Coming. Despite the temporary and powerful outpouring of the Spirit during the early years of Christianity after Jesus' ascension, the actual vision and knowledge of believers was far more limited than the present knowledge that is at least available to every believer. How may a present believer come to this greater knowledge? Why the limitation then? Where is it that we may access it and begin using it in our lives? If we think in terms of spiritual gifts and Paul's teaching in this context, the answer is quite direct. In terms of what we should teach or preach and how we should conduct our lives, where do we go for the right answers, for God's answers? To Scripture, right? And when Paul wrote First Corinthians, a few New Testament letters existed, but not all of them, and they had not yet been compiled into one volume.

More often than not, only a few copies of existing letters were available. Likely they were read to the public gathering of the church. (Colossians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27) Most believers did not have their personal copies of these letters for reading and study. In his description of inspired Scripture, Paul used the same adjective that he used in this lesson, "...when that which is **perfect** is come..." (1 Corinthians 13:10) "*That the man of God may be perfect...*" (2 Timothy 3:17) God's full resource to enlighten and to instruct His children for faith and for life, His "Perfect" resource, was not complete at that time, but it soon would be. God's full supply, His "Perfect" resource to guide His believing children into a "Perfect" knowledge for their faith and life, the New Testament, is key to the right use of every spiritual gift that the Lord supplies. Review the first three verses of 1 Corinthians 13. No spiritual gift imparts any value whatever if not used with the principle of "Charity." A man may create a self-satisfying illusion of perfect obedience to Scripture, convince himself that he possesses an indispensable spiritual gift, but if he does not apply Biblical charity to every word and to every action, all of his self-satisfying illusions are no more than that, a self-serving illusion. He cannot and will not do anything that ministers edifying care to a single wounded hungry sheep.

When you hear a sermon, you sense whether the man speaks out of love or some other motive. His words may not be overt, but you sense the spirit behind them. Preachers, when you preach a sermon, preach it with the understanding that the sheep to whom you speak get a clear sense of your motives in speaking. They know inherently whether you speak in 1 Corinthians "Charity" or some other motive. If your heart isn't right toward those people, you need to stay out of the pulpit till you get it right with them. The same principle should apply to every conversation that occurs between believers. Frame your words with godly love or remain very silent.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor