

To Be Continued...

The Holy Spirit & His Gifts

First Corinthians 13:1-7

Capital One has made the slogan, “What’s in your wallet?”, iconic.

The ads I’m thinking of feature a group of somewhat friendly Vikings (or Visigoths) as they interact with modern society. They always end up smashing or breaking something on account of their horrible manners.

If the apostle Paul had been tech-savvy he might have produced a series of short parody videos showing the horrible manners of the believers at Corinth. Sure, they were exercising spectacular gifts of the Holy Spirit. But they were simultaneously tolerating all manner of sexual sin, they were promoting divisions, they were suing one another, they were divorcing one another, and they were given over to idolatry.

Paul might have adopted the slogan, “What’s in your *worship*?”

What *wasn’t* in their worship was love. Before he tells them what they ought to do to bring order to their worship services, he establishes the **way** they ought to do it (and everything else).

In Corinth the believers were exercising their gifts selfishly in ways that called attention to themselves. Paul illustrated this by comparing individual believers to the instruments of a symphony orchestra being conducted by a great master conductor.

1 Corinthians 13:1 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.

Although this is arguably the most famous 'stand alone' chapter in all the Bible, we want to keep its context in mind. Paul was correcting the Corinthians for their abuse of the gift of speaking in tongues. So he starts right there - with that gift.

To "have love" means to be toward others the way God in Christ has been toward us. To "have not love" is to act in a way that only seems spiritual by your own standards.

He mentions "tongues of men and of angels." We probably need to pause to ask and attempt to answer the question, Is tongues a language - a known human or angelic language?

It's not an easy question to answer, but I say the gift of tongues is *not* a known human or angelic language. Let me give you one reason why I think it isn't.

In chapter fourteen Paul uses known foreign languages as an illustration.

1Corinthians 14:10 There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none of them is without significance.

1Corinthians 14:11 Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to him who speaks, and he who speaks will be a foreigner to me.

The phenomenon of different, known foreign languages, would have been commonplace in a cosmopolitan center such as Corinth. Because of this verse, some argue that speaking in tongues was nothing more than people speaking in their native language, which others could not understand.

Those who use that argument overlook a most important point: Paul was using the confusion caused by foreign languages as an **analogy** of what uninterpreted speaking in tongues was like. It was **like** the phenomena of hearing a person speak French when you only know English. It was **like** that, but *not* that.

This, then, is powerful evidence that whatever the gift of tongues is, it **isn't** a known foreign language.

What about the corresponding phrase in First Corinthians 13:1, "the tongues of angels"?

While it seems likely to me that angels must have a common language, this phrase most likely describes the superior attitude of the Corinthians. They thought of their speaking in tongues as having achieved some level of spirituality akin to the angels.

It sounds weird, but Gordon Fee puts it into perspective:

... they believed that they had already entered into some expression of angelic existence. This would explain their rejection of sexual life and sexual roles (cf. 7:1–7; 11:2–16) and would also partly explain their denial of a future bodily existence (15:12, 35)... For them the evidence of having “arrived” at such a “spiritual” state would be their speaking the “tongues of angels.” Hence the high value placed on this gift.

"What just a minute," you say; "On the Day of Pentecost, didn't everyone hear the disciples speaking to them in their own, known native languages?"

Yessirree, they did. But that was **not** the gift of tongues; that was a miracle of languages. I know that because Paul is going to say,

1Corinthians 14:2 For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, **for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries.**

It seems clear that Paul thought of the gift of tongues as an utterance that "no one" could understand (without the corresponding supernatural gift of interpretation), because "in the spirit he speaks mysteries."

He didn't say, "only others who speak his native language can understand him, so go find a translator."

Further, the word "mysteries" indicates neither the speaker nor the hearer can understand **without supernatural assistance**. A mystery, in the Bible, is something that must be supernaturally revealed.

To refer to a foreign language that can be translated by a native speaker with these words makes no sense. Known foreign languages are not mysteries that no one understands.

Let's get back to love. The problem at Corinth was the uncontrolled exercise of uninterpreted tongues. It was evidence of a lack of love.

The "sounding brass" is really a brass vase that was used to amplify sound in the outdoor theaters.

The "cymbal" has its proper and necessary place in the symphony orchestra. Think of it, though, when played out of place and amplified: It distracts from the conductor's presentation of the musical score and inevitably calls attention to the one clanging it through the amplifying brass.

The exercise of spiritual gifts in public like the playing of a symphony orchestra being conducted by a great master conductor. You each have your necessary and proper place in the symphony. But you can exercise your gift or gifts in such a way as to call attention to yourself and away from your conductor.

You can be like a gong or a cymbal being played out of place.

1 Corinthians 13:2 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.

1 Corinthians 13:3 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.

Paul described various gifts in their most spectacular operation. But he quickly added that they must flow from love. Otherwise there is no spiritual impact on others, and there is no spiritual inheritance for yourself.

There were two competing notions of what it meant to be spiritual in Corinth. Or, I should say, the Corinthians had defined what it meant to be spiritual as exercising the gift of tongues, period.

The mere manifestation of speaking in tongues could never be a sign of spirituality. God's standard is love that is self-sacrificing and that puts the needs of others ahead of your own.

“What’s in your worship?” In Corinth it was self and selfishness. The “more excellent way,” the way of love, is active and practical.

In the Greek language these next words describing love are all present tense, continuous action verbs. Love is something you do or don't do.

These next few verses cannot be improved upon by commentary. G. Campbell Morgan said that talking about them is like dissecting a flower. You know something about the parts, but you've ruined the beauty of the flower.

Perhaps the best way to have these verses impact our lives is to simply define what the words mean then substitute your name for the word “love” as a means of self-examination.

1 Corinthians 13:4 Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up;

"Love suffers long and is kind" - You are patient in enduring injury from others and active in conferring good toward them. You do not give place to bitterness or wrath; you harbor no resentment.

"Love does not envy" - You don't begrudge others their success. You don't enter into rivalries.

"Love does not parade itself" - You are never anxious to be on display. You are not upset when you do not receive recognition.

"[Love] is not puffed up" - You aren't smug in your superior knowledge or position.

1 Corinthians 13:5 does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil;

"[Love] does not behave rudely" - You are genuinely sympathetic towards the feelings of others and, so, will not wound, distress or embarrass others.

"[Love] does not seek its own" - You don't feel the need to insist on your rights.

People can "provoke" us. They can arouse us to anger; we get in the flesh because of what they say and do. We then blame them for our reaction. Love guards against being irritated, upset, or angered by the things done and said against us.

"Think[ing] evil" is a bookkeeping term that means to keep a record. Love is ready to forgive so we can keep no such records.

1 Corinthians 13:6 does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth;

When others sin we have a tendency to "rejoice" that they have fallen; it makes us seem better somehow. This is what fuels the gossip columns and magazines. Love "rejoices in the truth," rejecting gossip and slander.

1 Corinthians 13:7 [Love] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

This does not mean we blindly overlook everything people say or do. Paul didn't; he was writing these very words as a correction to the Corinthians, and throughout the letter he has strong words to say to them.

The phrase "all things" is reminiscent of Romans 8:28 where Paul says, "all things work together for good to those that love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."

We are able to practice the way of love because we have absolute confidence in God to bring us through to our certain future with its reward.

"What's in your worship?" Each of us can only, ultimately, answer for ourselves.

But when we see someone hogging the spotlight, stealing the show, putting on a display of their gift or gifts, interrupting others... Then we can be certain they are not following the direction of our Conductor.