

8,21,25 1 Cor. 13:8b-14:40, The Gifts of Knowledge, Prophecy and Tongues

Let's begin by reading from where we left off last time (vs's 8-13)

Whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. 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. 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. For now, we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Paul begins this section by describing two gifts that were intended to be partial and that were to be replaced by something else. Those gifts were "knowledge" and "prophecy". He also mentions tongues, but I plan to do an extended study on that gift because of how divisive and pervasive it has become in the Church; so, that will come later.

The first thing we need to do with "knowledge" and "prophecy" is define their function in the Church as spiritual gifts.

The use of "prophesy" in this context is not related to foretelling the future (we'll see more about that in 14:14), but here's a brief summary of its use in the church setting;

"Propheteia" has the literal meaning of speaking forth, with no connotation to prediction or other mystical significance. The gift of prophecy is simply the gift of proclaiming the Word of God in the assembly. Paul gives the best definition of the prophetic gift in (1Cor 14:3); "He who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men."

"Knowledge" (gnosis in the original) means exactly what we would think it means. Those with this gift received knowledge of the Christian life that was unknown to those without that knowledge. As related to application, one author said,

The difference between knowledge and wisdom is said to be that knowledge is the understanding of truth, whereas wisdom is the ability to apply the truth which has been learned.

In vs 8 we're told that prophecy will "fail" and that knowledge will "vanish away". In the original, both "fail" and "vanish away" are the same exact word (katargeo), which means, "to be unemployed or inoperative". And in vs. 10 we see that each of these was eventually going to be replaced by something else, which most translations call "perfect". But the word "perfect" (telios in the Greek) should be translated "complete" or "brought to its end, as in finished".

The temporary use of the gifts of knowledge and prophecy communicated information that was not "complete", because the "finished" Word of God was not yet completed. All of the instructions, teachings and doctrines that would govern the Church Age were in the process of being written as the letters of the apostles were sent out and were eventually gathered together into what became the New Testament.

So, until that happened, the only way that members of the early church could know what this new dispensation was all about was for the Lord to move through the apostles and spiritually gifted individuals in the local assemblies to bring the knowledge and prophetic instructions they would need to have to be able to understand the Life they had been brought into.

Once the scriptures were completed (which happened between 90-95 A.D. with the book of Revelation) the temporary gifts of knowledge and prophecy became "inoperative" and were replaced by the direct teaching of the full counsel of God through the pastors and teachers in the churches.

That which was "in part" was replaced by that which was finally "completed".

Some commentators say that in vs. 8 when Paul says, "when that which is perfect is come" he's referring to the second coming of Christ. But if that were the case, he would have used personal pronouns, not impersonal pronouns to describe this; he would have said, "when *He Who* is perfect comes", not "when *that which* is perfect comes."

And others argue, based on vs. 12, that there is no way in this life that we can have the kind of relationship with God that would be considered "face-to-face", let alone "know as we are now known".

Only those who don't know the Bible as well as they could believe that there is not enough contained in God's Word for us to know God and ourselves in that way.

They just haven't "put away childish things" and stopped understanding "*only* as a child". If all you know of the scriptures is the milk of God's Word, then you *wouldn't* understand that the Bible is a much greater treasure than most people seem to realize. Under the illumination of God's Spirit, we can genuinely be led into *all* Truth if we are willing to go there.

And you probably noticed in our passage that "tongues" was *not* described as being "partial", needing to be replaced by something else. Vs 8 told us that "tongues will cease." "Cease" is a completely different word than "katargeo". "Cease" means to simply stop or "desist"; with no replacement.

So, I'll re-read our passage, but I'll paraphrase and, where needed, I'll replace the English translation with the original language of scripture so we can see what was initially intended;

But whether there are prophecies, they will fade out and be replaced; whether there are tongues, they will cease completely; whether there is knowledge, like prophecies, it will fade away and be replaced. Because for now, we know only partially and we prophesy in part. But when that which is finished and completed has come, then that which is partial will be done away. When I was a child, everything I spoke and understood represented that which a child would know, but as my knowledge increased, and I grew up, I no longer saw life only through a child's eyes, so I set aside childish things. For now, we see as in a mirror dimly, but when we are fully grown, we will be able to stand and see face to face. For now, my knowledge is developing but remains incomplete, but then my full knowledge will allow me to know myself as I really am. And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

One other thing I should mention, in vs. 12 Paul uses the word "mirror" to refer to what he was "looking into" at that time, which he said was "dim" and "partial". It was like looking at a poor reflection in a mirror. This is an historical explanation of why Paul used this;

Corinth was famous as the producer of some of the finest bronze mirrors in antiquity but mirrors in Paul's day were not like modern mirrors, but were made of polished bronze (or some other metal). They were inferior to our modern mirrors and gave only a dim reflection of the person's image.

The early church had letters and gospel accounts that would eventually make up the completed canon, but until 90 A.D. the “mirror” was not crystal clear; it wasn’t complete. It would have been like it is now in some countries where believers only have access to various books of the Bible that have been smuggled in. God can use even “that which is in part” to advance us in spiritual growth, but we who are fortunate enough to have the full Bible in our hands should never take that for granted. Through men like Wycliff and different Bible smuggling missions, the Holy Spirit has gone to great lengths to make sure that as many believers as possible have the completed canon of scripture.

This descriptive adjective is used again in 2 Cor. 3:18; “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a *mirror* the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, by the Spirit of the Lord.”

In that section of 2 Cor. Paul is explaining to them that the Holy Spirit will take what we learn from our study of the scriptures and He will use that knowledge to conform us to the likeness of the One the Bible reveals to us.

We also see this metaphor used to identify the scriptures in Jas. 1:23;

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.

In principle, this is paralleled in John 5:39; “You search the scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which *testify of Me.*”

This puts us into chapter 14, and as I mentioned earlier, I want to spend some time on the two specific gifts that Paul talked about that were being both misunderstood and mishandled in the Corinthian church. And I’ll need to go into some detail on each of them so we don’t make the same mistakes they did.

Because of the controversy around these gifts, we’ll need to take a fairly deep dive doctrinally in our approach to this. So, if you fall asleep, you can review the notes later.

We’ll begin with tongues (“Glossolalia” in the original).

First, belief in the present-day use of tongues is not something that we should break fellowship over. However, if I was in a church and someone stood up and spoke in what they called tongues, and they weren't speaking in an actual human language, I would definitely have a problem with that.

The gift of tongues has caused a lot of problems in our generation, but from what we'll see in Corinthians, and what we know of Church history, it looks like it's been a controversial issue in nearly every generation of the Church age, including Paul's.

My goal in this study is this: We need to know what tongues were, *why* they were given; *when* they stopped and *why* they stopped.

Some believe they haven't ceased; some believe they have. In reading a large number of materials on both sides of this controversy, I must acknowledge that I don't exactly line up with either side concerning the arguments they use to defend their positions.

For example, those who believe tongues are still with us today draw heavily from personal experience, historical examples, or people they admire, as evidence for their position. I believe that no matter how 'real' an experience may seem to be; no matter how many historical precedents have been set; and no matter how wonderful the people are who have claimed this experience, the Bible alone must be the final determining factor in any doctrinal decision.

At the same time, those who claim that tongues ceased in the first century tend to use the transitional nature of the book of Acts and the coming of "... that which is perfect" in 1 Cor. 13:10 as proof texts to defend the cessation of tongues. I agree that Acts is a transitional book; I do not, however, see that fact as having *any* bearing on the timing of tongues' cessation.

Let's begin with the obvious. There are three places in Scripture where tongues are spoken of as historical events (Acts 2, 10, & 19). There is also one place where tongues were predicted (Mk. 16:17); "These signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues."

In none of these passages is there any explanation given of this gift other than in Acts 2:8-11 where the languages spoken are specifically listed, which shows that "tongues" are actual, human languages unknown by the speaker, but known by members of the listening audience.

(Acts 2:1-8) When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language. Then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, "Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born?"

From my reading, it appears that with the exception of some extremists on both sides, no one from either camp would deny that tongues-speaking was a genuine historical occurrence recorded in Acts.

So, as far as I can tell, there's no debate over whether tongues were a reality in the early church, and there is very little debate over whether tongues were human languages. For example, both Chuck Smith and Chuck Swindoll (who are polar opposites doctrinally) agree on these points. In Chuck Smith's book, "Charismatic vs. Charismania" he specifically states that "... the legitimate, Biblical gift of tongues were human languages, not, as some suppose, languages of angels or ecstatic speech."

We know from 1 Corinthians 12:1 that the author's intent in that section was to deal directly and thoroughly with the whole issue of spiritual gifts: "Now concerning spiritual gifts (lit. pneumatika), brethren, I would not have you ignorant." The Corinthians tended toward "ignorance" in this area- a fact that will become both obvious and crucial in our interpretation of several key passages later on. A couple of other relevant observations in chapter 12 are that the gifts (including tongues) were given for the mutual benefit (edification) of the Body of Christ (vs. 18-25). And the distribution of the gifts was the work of the Holy Spirit, Who alone knew which individual should have which gift; no single gift was given to everyone and no one was given all the gifts so that the Body would be inter-dependent (vs's 7, 18, 29-30).

This, of course, shoots down the hyper-Pentecostal theory that all believers should speak in tongues; but it also raises the question of why Paul would make the statement he made in 14:5a, “I would that you all spoke with tongues . . . “

Since I am convinced that Paul can’t contradict himself, here’s what I believe is happening in chapter 14. First, notice the rest of the verse 5, “. . . but *rather* that you prophesied . . .”

If I were to tell you, “I wish that we could all eat at McDonald’s, but I wish more that we could go to Texas Roadhouse”, which place do you think I would actually be trying to get us to go to? Paul is simply comparing the value of tongues with that of prophecy in an assembly setting, keeping in mind that the purpose of all spiritual gifts is the building up of the Body, and that prophecy is much more valuable in this regard than tongues (cp. 1 Cor. 14:5b. “. . . for greater is he that prophesies than he that speaks with tongues, unless he interprets, that the church may receive edifying . . .”).

Even though it seems clear that ‘not all speak with tongues’ (1 Cor. 12:3), or are expected to do so, the belief in some circles is that if tongues are used as a personal prayer language, they should be pursued by everyone.

This bothers me for several reasons: first, the Bible does not say, anywhere, that we are all supposed to seek the gift of tongues; if anything, prophecy, and some of the other gifts, are much more ‘profitable’ (1 Cor. 14:1, 5, 19, 39). Second, Paul specifically states that although the Body may be one, the members (the diversity) will be many (1 Cor. 12:20). It’s obvious why. Coaches don’t place the whole football team in the same position, and the team members don’t decide what position they will play; the coach makes that decision (1 Cor. 12:11 “. . . the Spirit distributes as *He* wills . . .”). In spite of that, listen to the following from the “Word For Today Bible Study Guide” that was published by Calvary Chapel of Costa Mesa;

“If a person does not want to use the gift of tongues in his prayer life, he has probably magnified his intellect to the point that he will not say anything that his intellect cannot grasp. Therefore, his prayer life is limited to English . . . and he misses a rich dimension in his prayer life.”

It sounds like the writer is implying that the “have-nots” in this area of tongues-speaking are arrogant intellectuals who are unwilling to pray in the best way

possible. Even operating on the assumption that the gift of tongues *is* in current use and that it's intended to enhance one's prayer experience, to say that those who don't use it that way are somehow rejecting God's plan for a prayer life with a "rich dimension" is completely false.

Paul made it very clear in 1 Cor. 14:14-15 that he wanted his prayers, his communication with God, to be in a language he could understand ;

For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful (lit. "useless"). What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit; I will also pray with the understanding.

The "Word for Today" publication I quoted is one example of how someone can use the grid of personal experience to see something in a passage that is not there, and apparently, at the same time, relegate all who have *not* had that experience to the category of second-class Christians.

There are other evidences in chapter 14 of Paul's intent to correct the misuse of tongues as a "prayer language". This is a comment by a leading Charismatic theologian;

From the instructions Paul gave in chapters 12-14 concerning (spiritual gifts), the conclusion can hardly be contradicted that 'speaking in tongues' was a major problem in the Corinthian practice . . . Evidently the glossolalist faction - perhaps identified as those who claimed to follow Christ in an elitist fashion, regarded 'tongues' as the communication with God par excellence, perhaps precisely because no one understood what they spoke. Glossolalia became conspicuous because of the glaring absence of love and because it was practiced with proud self-glorification while depreciating others. Thus, the unity of the body was woefully ignored; internal confusion among the members and external ridicule by outsiders were the inevitable results. Glossolalia was elevated as the supreme manifestation of the Spirit, at the expense of charismatic diversity. Such abuse of God's endowment of grace, Paul seemed to say in 12:3, is no longer demonstrative of the acknowledgment that "Jesus is Lord."

As I mentioned earlier, any objective interpreter, whether charismatic or not, will admit there were major problems in the Corinthian church. He will also notice the

corrective and even critical nature of Paul's letter, especially when addressing the subject of tongues.

It's also important to point out that although Paul allowed speaking in tongues to occur (14:39b) "do not forbid to speak with tongues"; he discouraged it;

(1 Cor. 14:23,27-28) If the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind? . . . If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be two or at the most three, each in turn, and let one interpret. But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in church.

Verses 6-11 discuss the fruitless nature of speaking in a language no one can understand;

If I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you unless I speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying, or by teaching? Even things without life, whether flute or harp, when they make a sound, unless they make a distinction in the sounds, how will it be known what is piped or played? For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare for battle? So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air. There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none of them is without significance. 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.

And verse 12 re-affirms Paul's intent to have the Corinthians focus on what is genuinely helpful to the church as over against those things that have no real edifying value; "Since you are so zealous for spiritual gifts, let it be for the edification of the church."

(1 Cor. 14:4) states; "He that speaks in an unknown tongue edifies himself, but he that prophesies edifies the church." Quoting from Ralph Martin's chapter in the book Charismatic Experiences in History;

Speaking, praying, and praising 'with my spirit' is good . . . hence I have the responsibility, Paul insists, both to employ the gift yet not to abuse its privilege by allowing it to get out of hand and lead into me

into a trance-like state where I cease to be held accountable for what takes place. The interpretation is supported by the way Paul writes somewhat disdainfully of 'my mind' as being 'unfruitful' (ie. inactive and not producing any good) when the speaker is exercising a glossolalic gift . . . He or she is responsible to seek the health-producing gifts, and thereby to turn from what is only self-gratifying and maybe destructive of the koinonia of the church; " . . . there is a type of praying which is *both* 'in the spirit' and 'with the mind'- a description that exactly fits the prophetic ministry which 'speaks . . . intelligible (lit. 'with my mind') words' (v. 19).

So, Paul proceeds to qualify the use of glossolalia: 'I will pray with the spirit, *but* I will pray with the mind also. These two qualifications, at first sight insignificant, are important: one sets up a contrast and the other adds in another component which Paul deemed to be vital to a proper understanding of prayer. Rational prayer takes precedence over irrational utterances . . .

In every use I could find in scriptures of the word "unfruitful" it conveyed a strongly negative connotation. "Unfruitful" is simply identifying something we are *not* supposed to do or be, ever. In chapter 14 Paul says that if he prays in a language he can't understand, his spirit may be engaged but his mind is not- and that this practice leaves his "understanding . . . unfruitful." This is *not* considered a good thing. So, Paul's solution is, "I will pray with the spirit, *and* with the understanding . . ."

When Paul prayed he made sure both his spirit and his mind were fully operational.

At this point, I've had people who *pray* in tongues tell me, "I don't care what the Bible seems to say to you, I know what I feel when I pray like this." The problem is, the Bible *does* 'seem to say' this; as a matter of fact, it *directly, specifically* says this; (vs. 14) "If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful."

Even though the Corinthians were determined to pray with their minds off-line; (and many Christians today are doing the same thing), Paul was determined to correct this error and to use himself as an example of the way it ought to be- both

spirit and understanding are to be involved in prayer, with neither excluding the other.

If this interpretation is valid, then why would Paul tell the Corinthians in vs. 28 that speaking in tongues was “speaking to God. . .”? It was because Paul was using a very common linguistic tool, one that was characteristic of his writing style – it’s called sarcasm. In Dr. Constable’s commentary, he puts it this way;

For those who believe Paul is saying that one should 'speak to himself and to God' means that Paul is advocating some sort of private activity is not plausible in a context wholly devoted to explaining the use of spiritual gifts in public worship, which is the general theme of 1 Cor. 11:2—14:40. That phrase, 'Speaking to oneself and to God' was a proverbial expression of exhortation. . .

Let’s look at some other examples of this Pauline style in action (I’ll paraphrase so you can get the feel of his sarcasm):

(1 Cor. 11:22) What?! Don’t you have houses to eat and drink in? Do you despise the church of God? What am I supposed to do- praise you?!

(1 Cor. 4:10) We are fools, but you are so wise; we are weak, but you are strong; you are honored, but we are despised . . .

(1 Cor. 1:14-15) Now, this I say, that every one of you saith, ‘I am of Paul; or I, of Apollos; . . . Is Christ divided?! Was Paul crucified for you? . . . I thank God I didn’t baptize any of you! . . . lest any should say that I had baptized in my own name.

And Paul wasn’t the only sarcastic man of God in the Bible. When Elijah was confronting the prophets of Baal, he said this;

(1 Kings 18:27) And it came to pass at noon, that Elijah mocked them, and said, “Cry aloud; for he is a god. Either he is talking, or he is meditating, or he is in a journey, or, perhaps, he sleeps and must be awakened. . .”

Here’s the verse we’re talking about; it’s in 1 Cor. 14:28;

If there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in church, and let him speak to himself and to God.

After all, God is the only One who will understand him; *he* won't know what he's saying and if there's not an interpreter, no one else will either.

I'm sorry if 'mocking' and 'sarcasm' are not what you would expect a godly man to engage in; but not only did many in the Bible do so, the Holy Spirit decided to record it for posterity. When the Lord uses someone to do something, or to write scripture, He doesn't take away their personality.

Finally (and this is extremely important), 1 Cor. 14:20-22 is the *only* explanation of the purpose of tongues given *anywhere* in the Bible; and there is nothing complex about it;

Do not be children in your understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature. In the law it is written:

"With men of other tongues and other lips I will speak to this people; and yet, for all that, they will not hear Me," says the Lord.

Therefore, *tongues are for a sign*, not to believers but to unbelievers.

Tongues were a sign - it's that simple. Tongues as a sign have nothing to do with Christians ("... *not* to believers"); it's a sign to unbelievers, specifically to Israel. In their understanding of this subject the Corinthians were "children" and needed to 'grow up' - so Paul helps them by explaining the purpose of tongues by pointing them to Isaiah 28:11-13;

For with stammering lips and another tongue
He will speak to this people,
To whom He said, "This is the rest with which
You may cause the weary to rest,"
And, "This is the refreshing";
Yet they would not hear.
But the word of the Lord was to them,
"Precept upon precept, precept upon precept,
Line upon line, line upon line,

Here a little, there a little,”
That they might go and fall backward, and be broken
And snared and caught.

Without going into all the details of Isaiah 28, the context of the passage is one of judgement and the foreign tongues (in Isaiah’s case, it was Assyrian) would be a ‘sign’ to unbelieving Israel of God’s pending judgement on them for their rebellion against Him.

Paul quotes *directly* from this passage in Isaiah as *his* explanation of the gift of tongues and he specifically mentions the phrase “this people” (referring to Israel) in his quotation.

On the day of Pentecost, Jewish travelers from all over the world, heard these Galilean disciples of Christ speaking in foreign languages.

(Acts 2:4-8) They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. There were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language. Then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, “Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born?”

They should have immediately thought of Isa. 28 (maybe some did, there were 3000 Jews converted that day).

Since the tongues was given as a sign-gift to warn of God’s judgement on apostate Israel, the instances of tongues speaking in Acts makes perfect sense.

God was using this “sign” as His last warning to a covenant people who had rejected His Son- their Messiah. Once Israel made her final decision (which some historians say happened at the stoning of Stephen), God’s judgement was guaranteed. In 70 A.D. Titus, governor of Rome, destroyed Jerusalem (as Christ predicted he would in Luke 21:20-24) and scattered the Jews throughout the world.

If tongues were a sign warning the Jews of judgement if they didn't repent, and if Israel ignored that sign (which they did) and as a result, reaped the consequences of their rebellion by being destroyed and scattered, what would be the purpose of continuing the sign? Tongues, at that point, would "cease"; this is (1 Cor. 13:8) from the original Greek;

"Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail (and be replaced by something better); whether there are tongues, they will cease (lit. "cut off at a specified point in time"); and whether there is knowledge, it will fail (and be replaced by something better).

Isa. 7:14 says, "The Lord Himself will give you a *sign*: behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel. . . ." That's another example of God giving Israel a "sign"; so, how many virgin births do there have to be for that sign to be fulfilled?

These two signs, the virgin birth of Immanuel and tongues, weren't the only signs and warnings given to Israel, but once they happened, Israel was accountable to respond to them.

Paul knew tongues were going to "cease" when their purpose had been fulfilled; so, he told the Corinthian church that tongues would be cut off at some point, and he explained to them the reason for this by quoting Isa. 28 and applying that passage to his explanation of tongues in 1 Cor. 14.

Because of what we know of Paul's heart for his people the Jews, it comes as no surprise that Paul would say, ". . . I speak in tongues more than all of you" (1 Cor. 14:18). I'm certain there were many believers who loved Israel, so speaking in tongues frequently in the presence of Jewish unbelievers would have been common place. Paul wouldn't have been the only one providing his people with the Isa. 28 warning.

Tongues were a warning of judgment; the judgement itself was clearly predicted by our Lord; and this judgement, warned of and predicted, historically occurred in 70 A.D. That's when the need for this sign ended and tongues "ceased".

So, now we know *what* tongues were, *why* they were given; *when* they stopped and *why* they stopped. We also know what the gifts of knowledge and prophecy were and why they would be replaced by something better.

If we look at 1 Corinthians chapters 12 through 14 without a prior, interpretive bias and focus exclusively on what Paul wrote in his attempt to explain these gifts, they aren't difficult to understand. But 2000 years of emotional experiences, and misinterpretations of the scriptures to justify those experiences, have led to a time in history when much of contemporary Christianity mirrors the Corinthians of the first century.