

The Charismatic Movement In Relation to I Corinthians 13:8-13

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I believe this passage to be significant in dealing with Charismatics and non-Charismatics alike. We should not study Scripture just from the perspective of refuting error, although that would be of some value. More importantly, we should study the Word of God with the motive of learning and applying God's truth in our own lives. With this goal in mind much error will fall by the wayside and we can more effectively grow in grace as we are exhorted to do.

Several ground rules must be established and adopted before one is able to effectively study a portion of the Bible. It is absolutely essential to use sound hermeneutical principles in our interpretation. One that first comes to mind is to interpret our experience by the Bible, not the Bible by our experience. God's Word must be the criterion for our doctrine, not our experience. Our experiences differ and are sometimes in conflict with clear Bible teaching. Extra-Biblical revelation can only lead to confusion and contradictions. I cannot deny that something happened to someone, but I can question the method or origin of this occurrence when compared to the Word of God.

Satan, the master of counterfeiters, is quite content to let us experience the feeling of worship just as long as we do not actually worship the true God. His ministers are ministers of righteousness (II Cor. 11:13-15) and therefore he is often able to deceive even well-meaning Christians.

A second ground rule is that we should not just speak the truth, but speak the truth in love. There are, no doubt, those from both camps who have violated this principle. The result is not edifying to believers or honoring to Christ.

It is also necessary to gain an accurate definition of key words or terms. The word "tongues" in verse 8 comes from the Greek word "glossa" (γλῶσσα). The meaning is quite similar to our English word "tongue." It means either "the organ of speech" or "a language." The context determines which of these two meanings is meant. The majority of times that it is used in the New Testament it is clearly referring to a known language.

It is unfortunate that the King James translators rendered "glossa" as tongues. The result has been that today when we hear the word "tongues" we react much as Pavlov's dogs and automatically "salivate" toward the definition of ecstatic speech. This often passes for Biblical tongues but it neither fits the definition of the word nor the Bible description. Even if we were to heed the exhortation of Paul and some Charismatics to "forbid not to speak with tongues," it would not relate to much of the Charismatic movement of today as the modern-day phenomena that we now see is *not* the tongues of the Bible.

The most complete Bible description of tongues is found in the second chapter of Acts. There we find the apostles waiting in Jerusalem for the Promise of the Father, His Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4,5). When they were filled with the Holy Spirit they began to speak with *other tongues* (ἑτεραις γλῶσσαις) as the Spirit gave them utterance (2:4). The Jews from other nations heard them speak in their own language (2:7). Several nations are mentioned by name and residents of these nations even heard them speak in their own dialects (dialektos, διαλεκτός). Nonsensical jibber-jabber does not have language subgroups or dialects. In all the places that tongues are mentioned in the New Testament, I can find no references that indicate that it is referring to anything different than a known language that may or may not have been miraculously acquired.

The thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians is often called the "Love Chapter" and treated parenthetically. It is frequently isolated from the context and therefore, spoken of as a separate entity from the previous chapters depicting the myriad of problems in the Church at Corinth. I do not believe that this chapter is a "petunia in an onion patch." The sharp contrast between chapter thirteen and the previous chapters exists for a purpose. I believe that, among other things, God is trying to tell us that the church had a big problem with divisions, immorality, carnality, litigation between believers, improper attitudes about marriage and

singleness, defilement of Christian liberty, improprieties at the Lord's table, and abuses of Spirit gifts, etc. These problems could be partially rectified by the application of divine love in our lives, or more accurately, the proper use of the gifts, in love, for the edification of the body.

It appears that, if the context is considered, that chapter fourteen should *not* primarily be called the "tongues" chapter. Chapter twelve describes the gifts; as various. Chapter thirteen dictates how to apply them; in love. Chapter fourteen gives us the purpose of the gifts; for edification of the Body of Christ. Note how many times variations of the words "know" or "understand" are used in the fourteenth chapter. Prophesying or teaching is emphasized because knowledge of God's word is essential for growth (I Pet. 2:2). Tongues are an exception as they are the least of the gifts and are for a sign. We shall also soon see that God's Word destines tongues to cease of themselves.

The first seven verses of chapter thirteen give us a divine perspective of real love (agape, ἀγάπη). This is the same love that was manifested toward us when God sent His Son that we might live (I John 4:9). It is also the same love that we are to display to others in fulfillment of the law (Romans 13:8,10), and of the husband to the wife (Eph. 5:25,28) This is an enduring and sacrificial love.

That is the emphasis of verse eight. The force of the verse is not about the gifts. The comparison is being made of the temporary quality of the gifts and the permanence of divine love. Divine love never fails.

However, it is significant that some of the gifts are temporary, especially in view of the Charismatic doctrines concerning the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Verse 8 reads: "Love never fails. But whether *there are* prophecies, they will fail; whether *there are* tongues, they will cease; whether *there is* knowledge, it will vanish away."

The words "they will fail" speaking of prophecies and "it will vanish away" speaking of knowledge, are identical in the Greek except that one refers to a plural noun and one to a singular noun. The word comes from "katargeo" (καταργεω). It means to abolish or to render ineffective. It is here in the future tense and in the passive voice which means that it will not perform the action of the verb itself but the noun will have the action of the verb done to or upon it by an external force.

There is a significant and distinct difference in how God's Holy Spirit describes the termination of tongues. The words "they will cease" speaking of tongues is a different word and in a different mood than the previous mentioned definition. The word is "pauo" (παυω). It means to stop or to cease. In this verse it is in the future tense and in the middle voice. The middle voice means that the noun is acting upon itself with the action of the verb. In other words, tongues will not be forced to stop because of an external force or event but it will cease of itself. In God's mind there apparently is a need for prophecy and knowledge until "that which is perfect" has come but, at some point prior to that time, there will no longer be a need for tongues.

Verses nine and ten mention that we know in part and prophecy in part until that which is perfect has come. At that time these two will be "done away." This is the same word that was used in verse eight in reference to knowledge and prophecy. Notice that tongues are not mentioned again. At this time they would have stopped of themselves.

Though we know that tongues will cease of themselves and that it will be accomplished before the time that that which is perfect has come and prophecy and knowledge will be abolished, we do not know from this verse alone when tongues will stop or maybe have already stopped.

Possibly discovering the identity of "that which is perfect" would assist us in the determination of the time of cessation of tongues. Various suggestions have been proposed. One is to interpret it as a general principle. When anything perfect is seen or enjoyed, then that which is imperfect is forgotten, laid aside, or vanishes. There may be some truth in that statement but I think that this interpretation is missing the point of the context and also reading a little into it.

Another more common suggestion is that it is referring to the complete written revelation from God. There is merit to this thought as we know that the signs, wonders, miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit was God bearing witness before the New Testament was completed. The miracles seemed to be substantive in nature. After the Bible was completed, both they and we no longer need wonders to authoritatively say, "Thus says the Lord." It is now in written form for people to see for themselves. If this interpretation is correct then the gifts of prophecy and knowledge have also been abolished.

It has been proposed that Jesus is that which is perfect. It could not refer to His first advent because we know from Acts that these gifts were alive and well for a while after Jesus' death and His ascension. Those that would adhere to the gifts for today would likely suggest that it refers to Jesus' return at the start of the kingdom. But it is not likely that it is referring to Jesus at all because of the neuter gender of "that." It could mean something about Jesus that is neuter except for the fact that it does not say so. It says "that".

Another suggestion is the rapture of the church. Revelation 11:3 speaks of God raising up two prophets during the tribulation. If the rapture is before the tribulation, and I believe the Bible is clear on that, prophecy would have had to be obliterated prior to that. It does not fit. He did not say in I Corinthians 13:8 that some things come and go and come again but love is forever. That would be a weak contrast. He said that some things go but love is forever.

John MacArthur and perhaps others have suggested that it is referring to our eternal state. This view fits the neuter gender in that it refers to a perfect thing, not a perfect person. It allows for prophecy and knowledge in the Tribulation and the Kingdom. It also seems to fit the context of I Corinthians 13. Paul was contrasting spiritual gifts with love by showing that the gifts exist only in time but love will go on throughout eternity. This gives some explanation to the phrase "face to face" in verse twelve. Finally, it explains how "then I shall know as I am known." There will be a time in the future when we will have perfect knowledge because we will be like Christ (I John 3:2). If this is the correct interpretation, it is probably true both historically and personally.

At the present time I lean toward that interpretation but it does not help us much either way in determining the time of the cessation of tongues. Let us look then into other parts of the Bible where it is present or even conspicuously absent.

We see a relative abundance of miracles starting at Pentecost and for a time afterwards. Just before His ascension Jesus told His apostles that they would receive power after the Holy Spirit came upon them and that they would be witnesses to Him (Acts 1:8). Not only was Jesus' early work confirmed by signs and wonders (Acts 2:22; John 20:30), but the apostles were also confirmed in this manner (Acts 2:43; 5:12; 8:13; 14:3; Romans 15:19; II Corinthians 12:12; Hebrews 2:4). The apostle's work was to be foundational in function. Ephesians 2:20 tells us that the mystery, the church which is His body (Ephesians 1:22, 23) was built on the foundation which was the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone. It goes on to say that in Christ we are being built together for a habitation of God. Peter, using the same allegory, tells us that we "as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house" (I Peter 2:5).

The point is that the foundation is laid only once, the process of construction then turns toward the superstructure. The foundation cannot be built again and again. The primary need for the apostles ended when the church started to be established. The church is now exhorted to be led by godly elders who, in turn, will exhort and edify the body from God's word (Titus 1:5-9). There is a glaring absence of apostolic succession and confirmation by signs and wonders.

This is also historically true even in the accounts of Acts. For example, early on in Paul's ministry we see signs, healings, etc. But later we see him not being healed of his own infirmity (II Corinthians 12:7-10), telling Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach's sake and his frequent illnesses, (I Timothy 5:23), and leaving Trophimus sick at Miletum (II Timothy 4:20). It appears that he could also do little for his beloved co-worker, Epaphroditus, who was sick almost to death (Philippians 2:25-27).

I believe that, if God wanted to, He could give the gift of languages today. Perhaps He has at times. But I also see no Biblical guarantee that He will. When He was giving those gifts He gave them to whom He willed, not to those who sought them. But to me the clincher in I Corinthians 13 is not the obvious, that tongues will cease. I think it more relevant in dealing with the Charismatic that their tongues are foreign to the Bible in *any* age. In practice I also think that there are frequently more important issues than tongues. I have spoken with some who state that they are to some degree trusting in their good works or their experience for their salvation. This issue is of much greater priority than error in doctrine concerning living the Christian life.

Although the tongues of the Corinthian church were clearly languages, I am not sure that they were the same as the tongues of Acts 2, 10, and 19. Some Charismatics, realizing sharp contrasts between the two, agree that Acts was referring to languages but that I Corinthians was referring to their angelic language or what we would call unintelligible or ecstatic tongues. John MacArthur also notes these differences and states that Acts presents the proper use of tongues and that Corinthians presents the improper use of tongues. There is obvious truth to that statement but I am not presently content that it answers all the differences. The following is a list of some of the significant similarities and differences between the tongues of Acts, chapter 2 and the tongues of I Corinthians, chapter 14:

Comparison and Contrast between the Tongues of Acts 2 and I Corinthians 14

Acts 2	I Corinthians 14
Spirit filled, 2:4.....	Carnal, 3:1
With one accord, 2:1.....	Divisions, 12:25
People heard them speak in their own language, 2:6,8.....	<u>He</u> that speaks is to interpret, 14:5,13,27,28
Result was understanding, 2:6-11 No need to interpret 2:8	Result was misunderstanding and confusion, 14:14,19,33 Not interpreted (A theme of chapter 14 is “edification and understanding”)
Result was honoring to God, salvation of 3,000 2:41..	Result was disorder, 14:23,40
Purpose of the Chapter: Historical account of the birth of the church – an event which cannot be repeated	Purpose of the Chapter: About 22 years later, to correct the misuse of the gifts in the church – to encourage edification and understanding
Source clearly from God, the Holy Spirit, 2:4	Their application of tongues not of God, 14:5, 9, 12, 22, 23, 27 ,28, 34 ,40
Apparently not related to the church public assembly as it occurred prior to the formation of the church.....	Apparently <i>is</i> primarily related to the church public assembly. 14:5,19,23-33,34,35
All the apostles spoke in languages but no reason to think that any of the 3,000 new believers did.....	Not all to speak with tongues, 12:28-31 Signs could even be duplicated by the unsaved Matt. 7
No regulations given, apparently proper as God gave it, 2:4	Largely discouraged, if used at all. There is great potential for misuse, little profit and is highly regulated, 14:1-40
Apparently not sought after.	Not to be sought after, prophecy more essential and edifying, 12:31, 14:39
Accompanied with related manifestations v.2, sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, appearance of cloven tongues of fire. (Though no record of these signs being repeated in Acts 10 or 19). Tongues can easily be counterfeited but these signs are not usually seen today with what is called “tongues”	No supernatural manifestations
Apparently they were just obedient to the Holy Spirit and spoke with other languages “as the Spirit gave them utterance.	Choice of the will as commands are given concerning the use of tongues.
Initial reaction to tongues: V7 amazed, marveled V8 wonder how everyone heard in their own language V12, amazed, in doubt, questioned its meaning V13 mocked them claiming that they were full of new wine.	Confusion when misused
The miracle part was apparently involuntary. Was not sought for. They were not “pre-trained” or coached as some are today.	Act of the will, to speak in tongues or not, to interpret or not, etc. Some modern churches give lessons on <i>how</i> to speak in “tongues”

Could it be that the gift of tongues mentioned in I Corinthians was simply a gift from the Holy Spirit to be able to learn a language, a gift that needed to be nurtured and stirred up? Late in Paul’s ministry he exhorts Timothy to not neglect (I Timothy 4:14) but to stir up the gift of God which is in him (II Timothy 1:6). This was probably referring to the gift of evangelism. Is there a parallel between this and the long-term baby believers mentioned in Hebrews 5:11-14, who should have been teachers (maybe they had that gift) but did not reach maturity because they did not “by reason of use have their senses exercised”? I would not be dogmatic on this point but do intend to study more.

I Corinthians 13:8-13 is a significant text to be used in dealing with a Charismatic if they are seeking truth, but it certainly is not the only text to study. I have spoken with some that after addressing some problem texts have said, "I don't care, I know it happened to me." I do not deny that "it" happened to them but I can accurately say that they have put themselves in a precarious position. This attitude is not peculiar just to Charismatics. This is a human phenomenon to which we all are prone; it just surfaces in different dress. We were not left here after our salvation to judge people but to glorify God by speaking the truth in love. This passage can be used in this manner.