



The Priority of Inward Grace Over Outward Gifts In Religious Action

Perhaps you have most often heard 1 Corinthians 13 read at wedding ceremonies. In one sense this may be appropriate since the passage identifies and extols the elements of love, and love is intended by God as a necessary ingredient for proper conduct within a marriage. However, Paul is not addressing the obligations of marriage partners in this passage. He is speaking of the unrivalled value of love in the life of a congregation of Christians. He is especially insisting that one must possess love to exercise rightly any charismatic gift. 1 Corinthians 13 is an integral part of his argument as recorded in chapters 12-14 of this book.

In chapter 12 the apostle noted a number of principles to keep in mind when church members are exercising revelational and miraculous gifts received from the Holy Spirit. Near the end of that chapter Paul placed the charismatic gifts on a ladder of importance for the church. The gift of apostleship was at the top of the ladder. Speaking in tongues was on the bottom rung (1 Cor. 12:28).

If a Christian desires usefulness in Christ's church he is advised, '*... earnestly desire the higher gifts*' (1 Cor. 12:31a), recalling that tongues is the lowest of them. Not yet finished with giving guidance he immediately adds, as an introduction to 1 Corinthians 13, '*And I will show you a still more excellent way*' (1 Cor. 1:31b). No other gift of the Spirit is so excellent that it can equal the excellence of love.

The Preeminence of Love

Quite clearly Paul is urging that no one forget the very high significance of the fruits of the Spirit. '*Faith, hope and love*' (1 Cor. 13:13) are mentioned. He is also asserting the supremacy of love among these fruits: '*The greatest of these is love*' (1 Cor. 13:13). Beyond even that Paul is insisting upon the general tinsel-like quality of the Spirit's gifts being exercised outwardly by a person whose inner man is deficient in love.

Thus Paul begins the argument of chapter thirteen by again mentioning the gift of tongues. Clearly the apostle thinks that flamboyance and ostentation were in evidence by the overuse or over-prominence of speaking in tongues in Corinth. '*If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels...*' (verse 1). In this expression not only are languages of men included but also angelic speech is supposed. The latter would be the most extraordinary use of language imaginable to convey revelation. Yet, no matter how lofty the verbiage used by me, still, '*If I have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal*' (verse 1). Without the grace of love in the heart of the one who uses his gift of languages, tongues become clattering, discordant sounds. Worse still, the person speaking in tongues without love makes himself into merely a shrill noise.

And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing (verse 2).

Even gifts to search out the secret things of God and gifts to accomplish powerful goals leave the possessor of these gifts worthless if he does not have love. '*I am nothing.*'

If I give away all that I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing (verse 3).

Outward acts of generosity and self-sacrifice bring no profit to those who lack love.

All of God's commandments require love, love to God and love to neighbours. All acceptable service in the church must be attended by a heart of love. Christ has intensified the requirement of love for fellow-Christians by insisting that his own expression of love to the saints must be the model of our love to them. All specifics of the commandments only instruct us how to demonstrate outwardly the love for God and man that is within our hearts. *'Love is the fulfilling of the law'* (Rom. 13:10). Love is more excellent than are various forms of revelation, and it is superior to all acts of generosity and service. Love has a unique moral beauty and value above other qualities and skills which the Spirit gives to men.

Love alone amplifies the other gifts of the Spirit. Love is an inherent excellence which includes every form of kindness, every expression of humility and modesty. It always acts unselfishly and always sympathizes with all good (1 Cor. 13:4-7). When these superlative features of love are withdrawn from other powers and actions the latter become simply tawdry.

Actual Use of Gifts without the Attendance of Grace

Furthermore, we must insist that Paul is not merely suggesting the impossible when he speaks of revelation and miracle being performed by those who have no love. In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus pointed ahead to the day when he will conduct the final judgment.

'On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And then will I declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."'

Matthew 7:21-23

There is every reason to believe that Judas declared the gospel and found demons subject to him as did others of Jesus' disciples. Yet all he did was done without love to the Saviour or love to perishing sinners. His labours with gifts were dull clanging sounds. He and his service were nothing of value. He gained nothing by his labours. It is dreadful to think that at the last day we may discover that some even offered their bodies to be burned who gained nothing by it (verse 3).

When Jesus had sent seventy-two disciples into various villages to prepare them for his coming, *'The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!"'* (Luke 10:17). Jesus rejoiced with them in seeing his kingdom come with power. Yet he warned them that other matters are far more important than the exercise of powerful gifts. *'Do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven'* (Luke 10:20). Powers given by the Holy Spirit have a tendency within the unconverted to divert attention from the most vital things, such as regeneration, justification, sanctification, union with Christ, and conformity to Christ's image.

Where Is a Desire for More Love?

The way of highest excellence is to speak and to act with love. Thus if men really sought to bring glory to God, if they desired the most useful service in the church, they would pursue the nurture of love within their own hearts. Yet we wonder how many really believe what Paul said! Is this truly the most excellent way in our thinking? If in our city a series of studies upon the scriptural teaching of love were being conducted at the same hours as meetings purporting to evidence prophesying, healing and tongues, which would be most thronged? People will travel great distances for a glimpse of the gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12. Few would cross the street to learn of the biblical love extolled in 1 Corinthians 13.

Yet at moments we all admit that our society is broken because it lacks patience and kindness (verse 4). Everywhere we meet with envy, boasting, arrogance, rudeness, self-centredness, irritability, and resentment (verses 4-5). The grace of love, the fruit of the spirit, is, after all, the need of our day. Tongues and miracle working will not of themselves produce love. Without love they are inefficient, mere tools of those who desire promotion into the spotlight.

Paul's Persuasive Arguments

One line of reasoning given in 1 Corinthians 13 to convince us that love is more excellent than the charismatic gifts is that love is demonstrated to shine in all its glory, while at the same time the gifts without attending love are seen to recede into mere show.

Another argument to establish love as superior is that love is shown to be that grace which will endure forever, whereas the gifts of 1 Corinthians 12 which were causing such a stir were temporary and must pass away. Even love's fellow-graces, faith and hope, are limited as to the time of their usefulness. Hebrews 11:1 tells us, '*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*' But a day will come when all that is promised (the objects of faith) will be in the possession of all the saints. At that time there will be no need to hope for the unseen. As Paul stated elsewhere, '*Hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience*' (Rom. 8:24-25). In the same way prophecy, tongues, and the gift of knowledge will pass away, but they shall do so even before faith and hope are no longer needed to attend love.

Yesterday and Today

In New Testament times there was an emotional enthusiasm for the gifts of the Spirit (listed in 1 Cor. 12). When Christians and cults of today claim to be revisited by the same gifts a great excitement attends these assertions. The ferment is built upon a number of shallow and unwarranted paths of thought. It is believed that where such spiritual activity is found it evidences the purity and power of Apostolic Christianity. It is presumed that only those who are spiritually walking near to God could speak prophecies or perform wonders. It is assumed that what is called the Spirit's presence and action validates the beliefs and spiritual maturity and effectiveness of those who exhibit such gifts.

Last month, in the February issue of *The Banner of Truth*, we observed Paul turning some of these arguments upside down. He reminded the Corinthians that heathenism and the occult also produce similar impulses and appearances of wonders. Careful analysis of doctrine alone can validate unusual spiritual powers or gifts.

In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul shows the '*more excellent way*', the way which is more excellent than the charismatic revelations and miraculous actions being practised at Corinth. The more excellent way also arises from the Holy Spirit, but it is a grace (a fruit of the Spirit's indwelling), not an endowment of a gift. Love is of far higher honour and usefulness in the church. Love demonstrates the transformation of human character and produces the highest blessings within any church.

After all, Paul teaches, the gifts of 1 Corinthians 12, are only temporary. '*Prophecies will pass away*' and '*tongues ... will cease*' (1 Cor. 13:8). If we desire the higher and permanent gifts, none is higher or more permanent than love. At Corinth Christians were being carried away with zeal for the gifts. Paul argued at length for the great excellence of love, because it was being forgotten in the midst of the stir made by those exhibiting the miraculous gifts. This is far short of an unqualified endorsement of the state of affairs at Corinth. It was a situation which obviously needed serious correction then. Similar corrections are needed in men's thinking today.

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