

BIBLE LIFE MESSAGES

The Priority of the Love - Oriented Life

I Corinthians 13:8-13

¹ The priority of the love-oriented life is the theme of the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, verses 8 through 13. ² These verses say, **Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.**

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Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. ² ₄

¹ I Corinthians 13:8-11.

² I Corinthians 13:12-13.

But how do you interpret verses 8 and 10? ³

If you come from a traditional evangelical church, like I did, you will view this passage one way. If your background is from a Pentecostal Holiness persuasion you will see it entirely different.

My church background was a very legalistic one. My church taught, and I believed for a long time, that acceptance of a person as a Christian brother or sister depended upon how much they agreed with our church's theological teachings.

As a civilian pastor, and then as an army chaplain, I rubbed shoulders with Pentecostal Holiness pastors all the time. I became very close friends with some of them.

This relationship put me into a dilemma. There were only three possible decisions I could make regarding my acceptance of them.

³ I Corinthians 13:8 & 10 - But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away . . . but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears.

I could, simply, not accept them as Christian brothers and sisters. This position would put a strain on my friendships and make it more difficult to work together with them in ministry. Besides; what if they're right and I'm wrong!

I could treat them as Christians but not really believe it. For me, personally, that attitude would be deceitful and hypocritical.

I could, and I did, genuinely wrestle with my "Pentecostal Problem" and this is what I came up with.

My presentation today will examine the traditional Evangelical understanding of this passage of scripture, the generally accepted Pentecostal Holiness understanding and, then, my personal understanding.

5 First . . .

I. The Traditional Evangelical Christian Understanding

The traditional Evangelical Christian understanding of this issue. ⁶

Supernatural spiritual gifts passed away close to the end of the first century! ⁷

They were originally received by the church through the Baptism of the Holy Spirit.

They were demonstrated on the Day of Pentecost.

It was prophesied In Acts, chapter 1, verses 5 and 8, **For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit . . . But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.**

Then, on that day the Baptism of the Holy Spirit came upon those who were in the upper room. ⁴ **Suddenly a**

⁴ The apostles and, maybe, some others. (Acts 1:13-15 & Acts 2:1)

sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. ⁵

The upper room folks went to the Temple where they used their gift of tongues to communicate with the crowd in over a dozen different languages. ⁶ ⁸

The second time the Baptism of the Holy Spirit occurred was at the household of the Roman Centurion, Cornelius. ⁷ ⁹

These supernatural spiritual gifts that were received from the Baptism of the Holy Spirit were passed on to other disciples from the apostles by the process of

⁵ Acts 2:2-4.

⁶ Acts 2:5-11.

⁷ Acts 10:1-11:18.

the “laying on of hands”.⁸ 10 References to this phenomenon are throughout the New Testament!

When the apostles, and those to whom they laid their hands, died (around the end of the first century), the supernatural spiritual gifts ceased.¹¹

So, **perfection**, in verse 10, equals **the full establishment of the church** worldwide by, roughly, the end of the first century!

The reasoning behind this theological viewpoint is the lack of historical evidence found. The main non-Christian historical documents, referencing the church, as well as the Christian documents themselves of the next few centuries have the mention of these spiritual gifts noticeably absent!

⁸ Acts 8:14-17 - When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

My friend, Albert Young, wrote a very scholarly biblical exposition defending this position. My wife and I grew up with this position. ¹²

Now, let me explain . . .

II. The Generally Accepted Pentecostal Understanding

The generally accepted Pentecostal understanding of this issue. ¹³

Supernatural spiritual gifts are in existence today and will continue until the Lord comes again! Why do they say this? ¹⁴

A Pentecostal might say to you, “I know these gifts exist today because I have personally experienced one or more of them.” Another testimony might be, “I have been personally baptized in the Holy Spirit and experienced something similar to what was experienced during the first century.” ¹⁵

How might you respond to that? ¹⁶ My wife and I decided that we did not have the right to question another person's experience. They are the experts on what they experienced. God may provide personal miraculous acts whenever He chooses. After all, He's God! ¹⁷

I do believe that it is important for us to study God's Word with them. We have the responsibility to judge what they were taught about what they experienced! ¹⁸

So, **perfection**, in verse 10 equals **heaven**; what we will experience after this earthly life is over! ¹⁹

In verse 11, **When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me** is interpreted to mean that in this life we are immature like children, but in the next life we will be mature! ²⁰

In verse 12, this earthly life is but **a poor reflection as in a mirror**. In heaven we will understand everything clearly and not need these spiritual gifts!

I hope that I have been able to accurately present both of these positions. As you can see, they both make sense but are opposed to each other. ²¹ So I had to wrestle with God's Word to come to . . .

III. My Personal Understanding

My personal understanding of this issue. ²²

Supernatural spiritual gifts, if they exist at all today, should be the first of two or more steps involved in reaching maturity in Christ! The spiritual gift, in and of itself, is not God's goal for you. Spiritual maturity in Christ is! ²³

What role might supernatural spiritual gifts play in your own spiritual development? God loves you and wants a relationship with you so much. ²⁴ If you are so turned off to Him because of some negative experience you had in the past and want nothing to do with that "religious stuff", God might have to get you jump started into your spiritual life. He may decide to use a miracle to do that. ²⁵ But, the time must come

when your trust in God becomes so certain that you no longer need that gift. Your love-oriented life can take over and, for you, these gifts can pass away! ²⁶

What role might supernatural gifts play in your Christian witness? ²⁷ Prophecy, tongues or supernatural knowledge might demonstrate to a purely secular person the reality of God's existence.

I heard a story from a Pentecostal friend about a Chinese man, born and raised in Communist China. He was a house guest of an American Christian. His host invited him to worship that Sunday. When they arrived the Chinese man suddenly ran over to a group where a man was speaking in tongues. He was absolutely amazed. The message in tongues was in perfect Mandarin. The communicator didn't know the Chinese language at all. That experience convinced the Chinese guest to seek spiritual things! ²⁸

So, some might get enough of the supernatural to whet their appetite for spiritual things. But the most

successful witness is the testimony of a change from a secular life to the love-oriented life. 29

We had a friend and his family who were experiencing difficult circumstances. They, and some of their adult children and their families, were living together in the same house. Only the wife had study employment. Everyone else was unemployed. Then, she was falsely accused of a crime at work. In spite of the fact that all in the household were unemployed, unable to pay the rent plus legal fees, their trust in the Lord was absolutely incredible. Their trust in the Lord, in spite of the world caving in on them, was a more powerful testimony to us than listening to an unknown tongue or seeing some miraculous healing. 30 The testimony of a changed life must replace the witness of a life only consisting of the demonstration of a spiritual gift.

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I think my understanding of this issue fits the biblical context of First Corinthians better than the previous two understandings. 32

First Corinthians, chapter 12, explains that although the spiritual gifts differed from one another, none were more important than the others. Each gift demonstrated had the purpose of benefiting the Christian body as a whole. Each needed to fit in the community so that the whole body could be built up. ³³

First Corinthians, chapter 13, explains that there's a more excellent way than the simple use of these spiritual gifts. ^{9 34}

First Corinthians, chapter 14, states that if you're going to continue with spiritual gifts, at least exercise the ones which will build up the community of believers the most! ³⁵

So, to my understanding, **perfection** equals the spiritually mature life; **the love-oriented life!** ³⁶

So, notice again verse 11, **When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a**

⁹ I Corinthians 12:31 - But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way.

child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. This is not saying spiritual gifts are childish; only that they should be put away after their purpose has been fulfilled! ³⁷ When you grow physically, your body changes physically and mentally. You adjust to the stage of life you are in at the time. ³⁸ When you grow spiritually, your life of love should replace those gifts that become so insignificant in comparison. ³⁹

God's goal for you is for you to have a love-oriented life! It's to be vibrant and obvious to others. Your spiritual gift should push you in that direction. If it becomes an end in itself, discard it! ⁴⁰

The Apostle Paul said, **I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.** ¹⁰

Your goal is to have a love-oriented life!

<http://www.biblelifemessages.org>

¹⁰ Philippians 3:14.