

10. LOVE'S CORRECTION

www.thebiblejesus.com

The “**Corinthian Catastrophe**” which Paul urgently wished to correct in chapters twelve through fourteen was their selfish abuse of “tongues”. We can estimate how critical the issue was by the fact that he spends **three whole chapters** dealing with this “charismatic question”. Chapters 12, 13, and 14 are **one complete unit**. And the heart of that unit is “The Love Chapter Thirteen”.

This is all the more remarkable when we consider that each of the issues the apostle has so far had to correct was already hugely critical. Paul has already rebuked sins such as frictional factionalism, gluttony and drunkenness around the Communion Table, and sexual immorality which made even the pagan society round them blush. But for each of these Paul does not take anywhere near the amount of ink he uses over “tongues”.

Not content with God’s Sovereign appointment of each believer’s position in the Body of Christ, nor satisfied with His all-wise determination of each believer’s giftedness, the Corinthians were **coveting** what they considered are the better, or the greater gifts --- the showier “tongues” and the “interpretation of tongues” --- which they imagined would impress others by their super-spirituality. The problem was pride. ^(**1**)

Therefore, as we leave chapter twelve, the apostle’s point has been that not everyone has the same gift. And certainly, **Not all speak with tongues**, do they? He is now going to show them **a more excellent way (12: 31)**. And in that context we enter chapter 13, the famous ‘Love Chapter’.

The ‘Love Chapter’ is one of the best known and most favourite of all in the entire New Testament. We hear it at weddings and funerals, whether for Christian or non-Christian audiences. We see it engraved on wall plaques, sitting on work desks, and on magnets on fridges. We even see it tattooed on various body parts! You know the words so well;

Love is patient, love is kind; love does not envy, love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, endures all things.

Love never fails ... the greatest is love (1 Corinthians 13: 4-8).

However, chapter 13 must not be read in isolation from its original setting and context. *It’s at the very heart of correcting the “charismatic” problem.* If we are ever going to correctly understand the “charismatic question” we must understand that each of Paul’s mighty descriptions of what love is, is in fact a *rebuke* of the misuse of the

¹ For my exegetical reasons for adopting the indicative (**You are coveting**) of **1 Cor. 12: 31(a)** rather than the imperative (**Covet earnestly**), see the previous article “**The Case Against Speaking in Unknown Tongues** on pp 7-8 under the heading ‘**An Odd Translation**’.

charismata. Only then can we put the reading glasses on to focus on every gem in each phrase embedded in the resplendent and sparkling diadem of love!

THE TONGUES OF MEN AND OF ANGELS

So, let's start at the beginning of chapter 13 --- **the more excellent way**;

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become as a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal (13: 1).

We'll stop here because it's highly relevant to our "Charismatic Question". As I mentioned in *The Case For Speaking in Unknown Tongues*, this is one of the key texts quoted in favour of the belief that "ecstatic tongues" are "heavenly tongues", indeed, are the "languages of angels".

My charismatic friends and Pentecostals say, "We're not doing the tongues of **Acts 2**, we're doing the **tongues of angels** in **I Corinthians 13!**" Their admission is tacit agreement that the tongues on the DoP were recognisable foreign languages miraculously given without the need for the speaker(s) to study and learn them beforehand. Their admission is strong testimony to the fact that they do not have the same gift of the miraculous languages given on the DoP!

All Pentecostal missionaries still have to painstakingly learn the various foreign language(s) of the ethnic-groups they minister to, which is unequivocal evidence they have not received the miracle languages of Pentecost! So, what about the "tongues of angels"?

First point. This is the only verse in the entire Bible that mentions the languages of angels. Of course, the Scriptures only have to say something once for us to believe it. But it's also a cardinal truth, that the more critical and necessary a doctrine is for God's people, the clearer and more often it is mentioned in Scripture.

If this sole verse wasn't in the Bible nobody would ever think to claim they can speak in heavenly tongues. For, in the Bible, when angels appear in heaven, or whenever they appear to men on earth, they always speak in the language the person(s) understood.

And when they worship the LORD God, and whenever they have something to say between themselves, they always speak in the language the person looking on and listening in understands. Furthermore, whenever the LORD Himself speaks to the angels, and whenever He instructs them, it's always in the language that men know. No wonder the rabbis held *Hebrew* to be that language of angels! (²)

So, before we proceed to claim a doctrine that men can speak with the tongues of angels, we probably need more back-up evidence than a single mention.

² E.G. **Dan. 8: 13f**; for two angels speaking between themselves and **Dan. 10: 11** for an angel telling the man to understand the words being spoken to him.

Second point. The apostle Paul is speaking hypothetically. (³) The apostle says, *If* I had this ability. Not only should we be very careful to build an important doctrine on just one mention in Scripture, but even more extreme caution should be exercised if that one mention is an hypothetical case. No doctrine inculcated upon the Christian should be built upon a speculative wish!

Third point. Elsewhere the apostle Paul states that he does **not** speak with the tongues of angels! In the **Second Book of Corinthians** Paul reluctantly shares what he is able to share about an incredible “heavenly” experience he had. He talks about the **visions and revelations** he had, **whether in the body ... or whether out of the body**, he did not know. Only God knew.

But he was **caught up into the third heaven** (which he also calls **Paradise**) and heard **inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter** (2 Cor. 12: 1f).

The **words** Paul heard spoken in heaven were both **inexpressible** [**unspeakable** per KJV] and **not lawful** [**not permitted** per KJV, or, **which no mortal is permitted to repeat** as per NRSV] for him to utter. He was allowed to eavesdrop into some awe-inspiring **words** being communicated between some unspecified persons. Did he hear the languages of **angels**?

We do not know. We cannot know. But we are given the reason for our ignorance: It was **not lawful**, i.e., **not permitted**, for Paul to divulge the words. If Paul did hear **the tongues of angels** he says *no man is allowed to speak those words! God has forbidden men to speak in the languages of heaven!* That’s just not a realm given to mankind.

But, even if we grant that Paul is claiming to have the ability to speak in “the tongues of angels” and that charismatics can do the same, the moment any attempt is made to interpret those words for the benefit of others, they are attempting to do what is **not lawful, not permitted**. And who wants to be involved in what God has forbidden?

Fourth Point. The hypothetical languages Paul suggests are of one grammatical class. He says **If I speak in the languages of men and of angels**. Paul muses that even if he could speak **both** earth’s and heaven’s languages, but used them without love’s control, he would be uttering empty sounds. Some feat he is contemplating here!

That possibility would have grabbed the attention of the Corinthians who were clamouring over each other in the pursuit of miraculous speech! Imagine how impressive it would be to be gifted *at the same time* with the ability to speak unlearned foreign languages of earth as well as heavenly tongues. That would take multilingual abilities to the highest level, to the max! Miraculous speech in spades this would be!

Now he’s got their attention, and Paul continues with his hypothetical case;

³ *Èà ν* (*ean*) is a conditional particle and the subjunctive mood conveys a thought or a wish rather than an actual fact.

And though I have *the gift of prophecy*, and understand all mysteries, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

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 (vs. 1-3).

This next part covers mighty wisdom (the gift of prophecy and the ability to understand all secrets) and mighty works (social charity and martyrdom in the cause) to accompany his mighty words. Here's proof Paul was a great preacher for notice his alliterated, three-point sermon outline ---the three "w's" --- **w**ords, **w**isdom, **w**orks! But --- and here's the fourth "w" --- **w**ithout love spiritual giftedness does not prove spiritual maturity, it adds up to a big fat zero for, **I am nothing** and **it profits me nothing**.

LOVE'S REBUKE

Love is patient ... In their church meetings the Corinthians were anything but patient! They were barging in at the communion table, reaching over each other to get to the food and wine! And in the matter of speech, they were butting in and interrupting while others were still speaking, producing a cacophony of competing chatter. In context then, these words, **Love is patient**, are *a rebuke*.

Love is kind ... which is to say, considerate and generous. Yet these believers weren't concerned to edify others. They weren't so much concerned to build up of their fellows. No. They were displaying their own importance by agitating for their own spectacular speaking. In contrast, love considers others. Again, these are words of *rebuke*.

Love does not envy ... but they were jealous of other's gifts. **The foot** was saying to **the hand**, you don't rate like me! **The ear** was craving to be **the eye**. **The Corinthian Catastrophe** was that they were "green with envy" over the gifts God had given to others. They were jealous and not content. But a truly mature believer filled with Christ's love wants what's best for the Body, not for himself or herself. Another *rebuke*.

Love does not parade itself ...and is not puffed up. But the Corinthians were being boastful and pushing themselves forward. To use a favourite word of Paul's in this whole three chapters, they were **edifying** themselves instead of thinking of the good of the whole church. That's why God gave them the gifts in the first place --- to edify the Body. (⁴)

Yes, Paul acknowledges that languages --- whether natural in that multilingual society or miraculously given like at Pentecost --- have their place in the assembly, but always and only if they are interpreted, so that all may benefit and all may say "Amen!" and "Thanks be to God!"

⁴ A suggestion. Take a coloured marker and read through chapters 12 to 14 and highlight in one colour the words "body", "church", "one another", etc. and then take another coloured marker and highlight the word "edify", "profit", "build you up". The theme of edifying others is all-pervasive.

Important observation here: Charismatics claim that when they pray in heavenly tongues they are being built up spiritually. That is, they take Paul's statement about edifying themselves in a positive light. "Private prayer tongues" they assure us, are able to make us strong in our own spirits (13:4).

Nothing is further from the context! That's *the reverse* of what he is really saying, for he is censuring them. The whole context is a *rebuke*: The one who is speaking in a language without interpretation is behaving selfishly. He or she is just puffing themselves up, just edifying themselves without benefit to others. A spiritual gift exercised and controlled by God's love **does not seek its own [edification]** (13: 5).

But, somebody may object, doesn't Paul go on to express his wish that **you all spoke in tongues** (14:5)? Yes. But did you notice that just a few chapters back Paul expressed another wish for them in the exact same words? That's right. He used the very same words to express his wish that they would *all be celebrate* as he himself was! Turn back to chapter 7 and check it out;

For I wish that all were as I myself am ... i.e., single, celebrate, unmarried! He goes on to acknowledge that **each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind** (I Cor. 7: 7-8). He means that some have the gift of celibacy and Paul wishes that all the singles in the church would **remain unmarried as I am**. That's his sincere desire for all.

So, does Paul's stated wish that they all spoke in "tongues" mean he suddenly wants them all to seek this gift, in spite of his already having said that not all will or can do this? Obviously not. In chapter 7 he qualifies his wish for everybody by saying he is speaking **by way of concession, not of command** (7:6). And where are the persons who wish to apply with equal and literal weight both wishes? Obviously when Paul expresses his wish that **you all spoke in tongues**, he is also speaking **by way of concession, not of command**.

PRAYING IN SECRET

Furthermore, where, pray tell, is there a single example of praying in "heavenly tongues" in private in Scripture? We do get an insight into a good number of men and women who prayed in private in desperate times of need. But in not a single case is there an example of them praying in a heavenly tongue. There is not even an example of Jesus himself having prayed in the tongues of angels.

On the contrary, our Lord gave us specific instructions on how we are to pray in **the secret place**. Jesus says when you pray, **go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly** (Matt. 6: 6).

And whilst there in private, how are we to pray? That's right. He says, **do not use vain repetitions as the pagans do** (Matt. 6: 7). We are to talk to our heavenly Father in a no-nonsense, straight-forward, and direct manner. We are to **ask**, to **seek** and to **knock**.

That's what praying in the spirit means. We don't give up. We are in deadly earnest. And the only way to **ask** is to pray (to use Paul's own advice) **with the understanding (14: 15)**. Our minds are to be fully engaged.

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, he never said a word about the need to pray in "private prayer languages". He gave them the simple and well-formulated words of the so-called 'Lord's Prayer'.

But aren't there times when our minds get in the way and we must let our spirits soar unhindered into heaven --- **If I pray in a language, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful (14:14)**? Again, we must be sure we have our multifocals on, for the Corinthian situation is a totally different setting and context to Jesus' advice about praying in secret.

The subject under consideration at Corinth is not private prayer time. The context concerns church meetings. Public praying is in view. And if Paul or anybody else stands up to pray in the assembly in a language which nobody present knows, and if he himself is not able to interpret that language given by the Spirit's inspiration, then the very best that can be said is that he is being inconsiderate.

In this particular case, where the speaker does not have the gift of interpreting his miraculously given language, his own **understanding is unfruitful**. He is just **speaking to God**, just **building himself up**, just **speaking into the air**, just **being a foreigner** to those listening, just **speaking mysteries that are unfruitful** both *to himself* and **to everybody else (14: 2,9,11,14,17)**.

However, if such a pray-er has both the gift of a language and its interpretation, then well and good. He must interpret for all. Or, if he cannot understand the Spirit-inspired language he is uttering, but if someone else understands his language and is able to interpret, also very good.

That would be just as if I went to a church service in Spain and wanted to say something in English, I would either have to be bi-lingual and able also to speak Spanish (in which case, why would I waste my time speaking in English unless there were other English speakers present?) or else get another bilingualist who knows both English and Spanish to translate my English. But, **if there be no interpreter, let him keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God (14:28)**.

Now ask yourself this: If this pray-er really was speaking in a "private prayer language" that he himself did not understand, how could he possibly **speak to himself**? **Speaking to yourself requires understanding what you are thinking and saying, surely?**

This simple fact alone should be enough to prove that the languages being spoken in the Corinthian assembly were not *unrecognizable* angelic languages which the speaker did not himself comprehend. Speaking to oneself requires the ability to understand one's own thoughts, surely? Speaking to one's self requires the mind to be engaged!

People in the world say that speaking to yourself is a sign of insanity. That's often said in a joking kind of way. Well, what would they say if they knew a Christian was speaking to himself but couldn't understand a word he was saying to himself? Double insanity.

Paul said, "When I pray to God I will speak **with my understanding also (14:15)**. Nobody needs "the tongues of angels" to pray! Only the carnal-minded Corinthians in the whole Bible are said to pray to themselves in tongues! And the "love Chapter" rebukes them for it.

When we take the position that the tongues spoken in Corinth were foreign languages --- whether naturally learned in that cosmopolitan society or whether they were supernaturally given as at Pentecost --- the meaning of the whole passage becomes immediately clear.

Love does not behave rudely ... or, does not behave itself unseemly, or, does not behave unbecomingly. The spiritual gift exercised by love is never indecent or out of control. It does not produce **unseemly** behaviour. We moderns would say, "Love does not behave like an idiot, like a nut case."

Paul began his correction and instruction on the "**spiritual gifts**" (12: 1) by reminding the Corinthians how they once had been **carried away** in their ecstatic worship of their idols. He reminds them that now they are to be self-controlled when they are praying and speaking in Christ's name. Again, observe how the "Love Chapter" is written as a *rebuke*.

I will not go into the indecent happenings in certain charismatic meetings where folks are "slain in the Spirit" and when the attendants have to cover the women on the floor with "altar blankets" or tug at their dresses so as not to have all eyes on certain exposures. The holy Spirit is not the author of such unseemly behaviour.

And just by the way, have you noticed when someone is 'slain in the Spirit' in a charismatic meeting that they invariably fall backwards? Yet in the Bible one of the indications of God's judgment is to fall backwards? (⁵) In contrast, whenever someone in the Bible is confronted by God's holy presence they fall forwards, frontwards onto their faces. (⁶)

Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Paul keeps coming back to his central theme: Spiritual gifts must never ultimately be for one's own benefit. Certainly, the user is greatly blessed, but only in their being able to bless others.

⁵ Many examples may be given. **Gen. 49: 17; Ps. 40:14; 70:2; Isaiah 1:4; 28: 13; 59:14; Jer. 7: 24; 15:6; I Sam. 4: 18** Remember the reaction of the crowd that came to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane? Yes. They fell backwards when he confronted them (**John 18: 6**).

⁶ E.G. **Dan. 10:9-10.**

He has already told them that **there should be no dissention within the Body, but the members should have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it (12: 25-26).**

Gifts controlled by such love demonstrate true maturity and genuine spirituality. We may be able --- hypothetically speaking! --- to speak with both the languages of earth and of heaven, but if we are not being controlled by God's character and love, then we are only being like **a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.**

And that's the heart of the matter! Yet, there's still more to utter on the matter ...!?