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A1302 – January 13, 2013 – 1 Corinthians 14:1-13
Prophecy Greater Than Tongues

Having concluded his parenthesis on the more excellent way of love in 1 Corinthians 13 Paul now returns to the subject of tongues speaking. The Corinthians had a fleshly love of the gift of tongues and considered it to be the gift that made one truly spiritual. Of course, Paul has corrected that notion by teaching that any gift exercised outside of love, far from making one spiritual, is nothing but a big annoyance. In chapter 14 he returns to the relative ranking of the gifts, in particular the superiority of prophecy to tongues. But he begins with the command of 1 Cor 14:1 that the ultimate pursuit is love. **Pursue love** Paul says. Above all the ultimate pursuit of the Christian should be to **pursue love** according to the parameters laid out by the apostle in 13:4-7, “Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; covers all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” If we pursue love in this manner then we will truly be spiritual indeed. But the mere reception of a grace gift of the Spirit does not make one spiritual. It must be exercised in love. So we should **pursue love**.

Then in 14:1 he follows up with a second command: **yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts**. Since Paul commands us to desire earnestly spiritual gifts then obviously Paul is not saying pursue love and forget about spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts are important. And yet while that is true, actually Paul has a particular gift in mind when he says **desire earnestly spiritual gifts because** “gifts” is in italics alerting you to the fact it is not in the original text. The original text merely commands, **yet desire earnestly the spiritual**. And since we discovered earlier in 1 Cor 12:1 that the Greek expression **the spiritual** was a code word in Corinth for “a tongues speaker,”

then Paul is commanding them to desire earnestly the speaking of tongues. Paul, as we will see clearly in 1 Cor 14:5 is not opposed to the gift of speaking in tongues. He, in fact, wished that all believers spoke in tongues. But that is not all of what Paul taught. And the rest of what Paul taught brings these teachings into a balance. Now the gift of speaking in tongues was simply the ability to speak in a foreign language one had never learned. So obviously it was one of the more electrifying gifts. It was an attention grabber and could easily put the speaker in the limelight, which is precisely where many of the Corinthians wanted to be. They loved the attention and this gift gave them the attention their flesh was yearning for. And yet Paul does command them to **desire earnestly** this spiritual gift. Now the reason he commands them to desire it earnestly is for two basic reasons.

First, the gift of tongues was a gift of verbal revelation by which God made known bits and pieces of the NT canon. And since the NT canon of Scripture was being written at the time then all the verbal revelation gifts were necessary to complete the NT canon. Therefore they should be desired earnestly. Second, the gift of tongues was a sign to unbelieving Jews that judgment was coming upon their nation. Therefore it was a gift to be desired earnestly so that unbelieving Jews might heed the warning by repenting and believing in Jesus as their Messiah. Repentance and belief are two sides of the same coin; repentance meaning “a change of mind” regarding the person and work of Jesus, faith meaning personal confidence in the person and work of Jesus. Repentance and faith understood in this way are not two separate acts but two inseparable acts, two sides of the same coin if you will. And certainly the gift of tongues was given to warn the unbelieving nation of Israel of the judgment coming upon their nation, a judgment that individual Jews could escape if they heeded the warning given by the gift of tongues, for verse 21, “By men of strange tongues and by the lips of strangers I will speak to this people, and even so they will not listen to Me,” says the Lord. So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers.”

Now when the NT canon was complete, as Paul predicted in 1 Cor 13:8-10, and the purpose of warning unbelieving Jews of coming judgment occurred, in AD70 when Jerusalem was defeated and the Temple upon the mount was destroyed, then the revelatory gifts ceased. So looked at from our perspective in the year AD2012, we live long after the completion of the NT canon and the judgment on Jerusalem and so in 14:1 we should continue to **pursue**

love because 1 Cor 13:8 said that **Love** never comes to an end, but we should not **desire earnestly** to speak in tongues because they have come to an end with the completion of the NT canon and the destruction of Jerusalem. So then today for a Christian to **desire earnestly** would be contrary to Scripture. The command to desire earnestly to speak in tongues was a command exclusively for the generation of believers that lived prior to the completion of the NT canon and the destruction of Jerusalem.

Finally 14:1 has a third command, to **desire earnestly** tongues, but **especially that you may prophesy**. Here is another gift that Paul **especially** wanted them to desire. It is another verbal revelation gift. Paul considered it to be greater in rank than speaking in tongues. Clearly in 12:28-30 Paul ranks “prophets” far above “tongues.” Prophets is second in the list only after “apostle,” and tongues is listed at the bottom of the list. So prophecy should be desired more than tongues in that day. Now prophecy was the ability to receive direct verbal revelation from God and pass this on to others in their language; the language the people already knew, their native tongue. The gift of tongues on the other hand was the ability to speak in a language others did not know, a foreign tongue. So it should be clear that prophecy was superior to tongues. Tongues however was attractive to the fleshly Corinthians because it was such a thrilling spectacle.

That is why they made such a big deal of it. But that betrayed their fleshly desires in contrast to truly spiritual ones. If they were truly spiritual then they would recognize that tongues were important but prophecy was more important. And yet again we must say that however applicable these commands were to the believers of that generation, they have no application to us. Since tongues and prophecy have been done away by the time of the completion of the NT canon, as Paul predicted in 13:8-10, then no believer today should desire earnestly to speak in tongues or prophecy. Rather what all believers should desire earnestly today is Bible teaching. If you look back at the ranking of gifts in 12:28 you see that apostle is first, prophet is second and teacher is third. Since apostle and prophet have been done away since the foundation period of the church then the first and greatest gift still being given today is teacher. Therefore, what every Christian should desire today is Bible teaching. That way we can know exactly who we are even as God knows who we are. And if Paul were writing to us after the completed canon of Scripture he would command us to desire earnestly to have the Bible taught.

Ultimately Paul hoped that the partial revelation he had at the time would give way to the complete revelation so he could know himself fully even as he is known. And now that it has, our desire should be to have it taught purely and unadulterated such that we can know who we are as God knows us. Bible teaching is the highest form of worship. Worship being appreciation for God and appreciation for God comes through being taught the Scriptures. So today every Christian should desire earnestly to have the Bible taught.

But if we were to cast ourselves into the shoes of the Corinthians before the NT canon was complete and we only had a partial NT revelation, then we should desire tongues but especially **prophecy** so that the NT revelation could be complete. And that is verse 1.

1 Cor 14:2-3 and here we have the explanation for why they should especially desire prophecy. **For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God; for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries. 3But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation.** The simple point Paul is making is that speaking in a tongue is inferior to prophesying because no one understands what is being spoken in a tongue and cannot therefore be edified, while one who prophesies can be understood by others and therefore be edified.

Now in verse 2 some take it that we have Paul condoning speaking in tongues in a private prayer language between the person and God. I don't take it that Paul is condoning it. I take it that he is simply saying that nobody can benefit by it other than yourself and therefore it is inferior to prophecy. And of course self-benefit is not the proper use of any spiritual gift. The proper use is described in 1 Cor 12:7 as being "for the common good," and at the end of 14:5, "so that the church may receive edifying," and at the end of 14:12," seek to abound for the edification of the church." Not yourself. Tongues was being used by the Corinthians to draw attention to themselves, a fleshly desire. And to claim that you use tongues as a private prayer language between you and God is nothing more than a bare pronouncement of your fleshly desire to draw attention to yourself. Paul's point is not to condone it in verse 2, but to say that it fails to meet the goal of the spiritual gifts which is to edify men.

And therefore, verse 3 prophecy is superior. **But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation.** And

the simple reason it edifies, exhorts and consoles other men is because other men understand what is being said.

In 1 Cor 14:4 states the point clearly, **One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church.** Clearly, prophesying is superior since that is the purpose the Holy Spirit gave the gifts for in the first place, for the edification of the church. And of course the individual does get some edification by using his gift. He may experience some euphoria, some emotional high, some attention, but is that really what they were given for? Paul says later in verse 23 that if unbelievers enter the assembly and everyone is flapping at the mouth, getting their little euphoria, then they will say you are mad. So there had to be strict regulations on tongues in the assembly and that's what this chapter is mainly about. There are somewhere around 30 rules and regulations put on speaking in tongues in this chapter and yet what do we have today in the neo-Pentecostal and Assembly of God churches today? This intense interest in speaking in tongues. Baloney, not only are they completely non-existent since the NT canon is complete and the judgment on Israel already occurred, but 99 times out of 100 the practitioners don't follow the rules and regulations laid out in this chapter. People say again, well I use it as a private prayer language between me and God and quote 14:2. And yet again, is that really the tenor of the passage? Is Paul condoning speaking in a private prayer language to God? Of course not. That was not the reason God gave the gift. God gave the gift to edify others, not yourself. Therefore, verse 4, they should earnestly desire to prophesy that they might edify **the church.**

1 Cor 14:5, **Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but more that you would prophesy;** again, you can see that Paul was not against **tongues** at all. He was against the selfish use of tongues. I'm not against tongues either. I'm all for them while their purpose was still active in the early church. I give praise to God and thanks that He gave this gift to the early church. It was instrumental in forming the NT canon and warning unbelieving Jews of judgment coming on their nation. It's just that now that their purpose has been met I don't desire to hear anyone speak in tongues. I don't desire to hear anyone prophesy. I desire to hear Bible teaching. But if I had lived in Paul's day then I would be like Paul and desire that all speak in tongues, but more that they would all **prophesy.**

Now it's not clear if the Corinthians spurned those who prophesied but it is clear that they admired tongues more than prophecy. Paul turns their admiration on its head. To be doctrinally correct in your admiration you should desire **prophecy more than tongues**. The reason is given in the rest of verse 5. **And greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edifying.** Unless there is an interpreter prophecy is greater. If there is an interpreter then tongues is equal because everyone clearly understands what is being said and can be edified. The only difference then was that when the gift of prophecy was used everyone was immediately able to be edified because they immediately understood what was being said. Whereas with tongues there had to be a mediator to translate what was being said. Clearly what Paul taught reveals that one who speaks in a tongue might also have the gift of interpretation. So a believer can have more than one spiritual gift, though he can't have all the spiritual gifts.

In any case, the important thing in the end is **that the church may be edified**. But again, now that we have the completed NT canon can we be edified by those who claim to speak in tongues or prophecy? No, the only way the church can be edified today is by the permanent gifts being exercised, chief of which is Bible teaching, then helps, then administration, etc... So now that we have the completed NT canon no one should desire tongues or to prophesy. The chief thing all believers should desire is what? Since 1 Cor 12:28 says apostles are first importance, prophets are second importance and both of them have ceased, then highest ranking gift still being given to the church today is what? Teacher. Teacher of what? The Bible, God's word, the Holy Scriptures. That's what God wants us to know and to be conversant with. That's what He wants us to hide in our hearts that we might not sin against Him. And yet there are thousands and thousands of churches this morning and what is coming across their pulpits? Drivel. Nothing but drivel. Nonsense. So much drivel that keeps the saints ignorant, that confirms their licentiousness or legalism, that adds or takes away from the gospel of Jesus Christ, that propagates erroneous doctrines, that openly propagates pagan themes under the guise of Christianity and the people are so ignorant of the word of God that they even proclaim amen. The Church of Jesus Christ in America is in dire straights folks. People come in here all the time and you know what they say to me? We've never heard this stuff before. We didn't know all this was in the Bible. And you know why they never knew this stuff

was in the Bible? Because there aren't many Bible teachers out there. Lots of churches but not many teachers. I had one guy here tell me that his neighbor in town said, "Oh, if you want Bible teaching you need to go listen to Jeremy Thomas at the Bible church." What that comment shows you is that people around here know what's going on in here, they just don't want it. They don't want the word of God. Or they've ranked something more important than it. But isn't it interesting that there are believers who don't want the word of God. The NT speaks to this. It says in the last days Christians will no longer endure sound doctrine but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths." The NT clearly predicts the times we are living in, where Bible teaching is rare and believers who endure sound doctrine are rare. You are rare, you are a rare gem in this generation if you are enduring what is being taught here. You really have to grasp how rare it is that you are listening to the word of God being taught, because people come in here and then flake out all the time. They can't handle the truth, they don't want the truth.

Now back to the text of 1 Cor 12:28, it logically follows that if apostle and prophesy have been done away with the completion of the NT canon, that what every Christian should earnestly desire is that God place teachers among them. Teachers that teach sound doctrine. That way they can know who they are exactly as God knows who they are and know what God expects of them and how they can enjoy the eternal life they possess so that they can receive a good standing in the kingdom. It's very simple. But people, even Christians, don't want sound doctrine. And do you think Jesus Christ is going to be happy with them at His judgment seat? When He says to them, I put that guy in your town and you knew he was teaching sound doctrine and you chose to go to a different church because of the music or the social element. You had precious jewels of Mine pouring forth from the pulpit and you chose drivel over My jewels. I don't think Jesus Christ is going to be very happy with those believers. I think Jesus Christ cares very much what church you decide to go to. And the bottom line is you go to the church that is teaching sound doctrine, over and out, teaching the word. There is no higher form of worship and there is no higher ranking spiritual gift Christ is giving His Church today than teacher. Now teaching must be done in love, don't forget that it must be done in love. Speaking the truth in love Paul says. And we

may be at fault for that at times or love may be misunderstood. But speaking the truth in love is of great importance.

But if we were to live in Paul's day when the whole NT canon was incomplete then the gifts that would give rise to it we would want to be exercised. 1 Cor 14:6. **But now** and this signals a logical conclusion just as 13:13. **But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what will I profit you unless I speak to you either by way of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching?** Now, to understand the verse you have to ask what those four gifts have in common. And the answer is they are all clear speech, speaking in a language that is understood by the hearers, which in Paul's day would have been in Greek. And when Paul came to Corinth on his 2nd missionary journey in Acts 18 he spoke to them in the Greek language. He didn't come in there speaking some foreign language, that would have been nonsense, that wouldn't have profited anyone, they would have all left. And it wouldn't profit you if I came in here speaking Greek to you. We all speak English and so I teach the Bible in English. It wouldn't make a dime's difference if I got up here and delivered the sermon in Greek and you'd probably leave and I wouldn't blame you. The only time we use Greek or Hebrew is to explain the meaning of a word or phrase because something's not so great about the English translation. Paul's point is that unless you speak clearly you don't profit anyone. And speaking in a tongue without an interpreter is nonsense to everyone.

Now in verse 7 he illustrates from music. **Yet even lifeless things, either flute or harp, in producing a sound, if they do not produce a distinction in the tones, how will it be known what is played on the flute or on the harp?** Obviously you won't know the song if there are no distinctions in the tones. It's very simple. And in the same way you won't know what someone is saying if you don't know the language.

Verse 8, another illustration, this one from music again but music in the military. **For if the bugle produces an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle?** See, it might not be the end of the world if you don't recognize a song, but it might be the end of your life if you don't recognize the sound of a war bugle. That's why the bugler has to be very clear and distinct in his sound. The sound he makes communicates something to the soldiers. And if it's unclear what sound he makes then no one **will**

prepare himself for battle and they'll get slaughtered. In the same way, what good does it do if someone speaks in a tongue and nobody knows what is being said. It does no good. And that's why so much of this flapping of the tongue today in charismatic circles does no good. It doesn't benefit anyone, we have the completed canon of Scripture, teach the Bible.

Verse 9, **So also you, unless you utter by the tongue speech that is clear**, and here he is speaking of the organ of the tongue, **unless you utter by the tongue speech that is clear, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air.** The point of this section over and over is that if you can speak in a known language to others it is far superior to speaking in a foreign language where they don't know what the hell you are talking about. You're just speaking flapping at the mouth.

Verse 10, **There are, perhaps, a great many kinds of languages in the world, and none is without meaning.** Now the many kinds of languages in the world all came out of the tower of Babel because there was only one language in the world before the tower of Babel. But at the tower of Babel God divided the language into many languages in order to stop a construction project, not because construction projects are bad but because autonomous building projects are bad. Man wanted to build himself a kingdom independent of and in opposition to the kingdom of God. And that kind of project God graciously stopped by dividing the language. It was gracious of God to stop that construction project because He essentially slowed down the autonomous kingdom building of man and thereby ultimately delayed divine judgment. Man is trying to overcome the language diversity barrier right now to unite and form a global kingdom of man and when it gets near completion God is going to destroy it. So the many languages came out of this judgment back at the tower of Babel. And every language has **meaning**. It's very simple to understand what Paul means here.

Verse 11, **If then I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be to the one who speaks a barbarian, and the one who speaks will be a barbarian to me.** Now the Greek word translated **barbarian** just means "one who speaks in a foreign tongue." And obviously if you are sitting there listening to a foreigner speak its all gibberish to you. You have no clue what they are saying. And so what benefit is that to you? It's no benefit; it's a waste of time, you might as well leave, unless there is an interpreter. And yet

if you go into some of these charismatic churches their eyes are rolled back and they're speaking gibberish into the air and their foaming at the mouth and nobody has a clue what anybody else is saying, it's chaos and it's all just a big waste of time. They're just getting an emotional high, they're just drawing attention to themselves, it's all fleshly excess, that's all it is, and today it has nothing at all to do with Christianity. Nothing. It's not even related to Christianity. It's a heathen practice.

Verse 12, **So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual**, the sense of being spiritual. Paul is saying if you really want to be spiritual then **seek to abound for the edification of the church** and not yourself. That's true spirituality, not speaking in tongues for self edification, nobody else benefits from that, you're just showing off, and showing off isn't being spiritual, it's being arrogant, contrary to 13:4, obviously it's not loving. Love in 13:5 does not seek its own, it's not out to get everyone to look at them, it's out for the good of others.

Therefore, verse 13, **let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret**. Otherwise its nonsense, that's a logical conclusion. Tongues do not reach their aim when there's no interpreter. But since tongues have ceased then interpreters have ceased to, because the gift of interpretation is the ability to interpret from one language into another language without having learned the language. So both of these have ceased. Now this is a logical conclusion and I know most of the discussions with Charismatics aren't too logical, they're more emotional. But you have to insist on staying with the logic of the text and so if they get emotional just get out of the conversation, insist on the logic of the text and stay with the word of God because you're not going to go anywhere when someone gets emotional.

I think the most important thing, in the end, is to emphasize Bible teaching. We have the complete NT canon. Do we realize what a treasure we have. It's the treasure Paul longed for. It's the treasure these revelatory gifts were given for. And now we have it. So why all this fuss about tongues and prophets and apostles when we have God's word. What could be more important than God's word? Now go and be a Berean and see whether or not these things are so. Study to show yourself approved unto God.

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