1 Corinthians 13:8-13

Love Outlasts the Inauguration of the Church

This week we’re taking a side trip from Acts 2, where we find the Holy Spirit manifesting God’s work in the saints in a new way in the brand new church, into the topic of Cessationism – the idea that the miraculous spiritual gifts ceased to function normatively in the body after the inauguration of the church. This particular passage in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians is concerned with the timing of God’s plan referencing:

* The Past - the time of Paul’s writing
* The Present – the time in the church age after Paul’s writing
* The Future - the eternal state of the church dwelling with Christ in eternity

Paul is writing a corrective set of doctrines from chapters 12-14 where you can see the church in Corinth was misunderstanding, misusing, and probably not manifesting the work of the Holy Spirit. He wants the body to come together (chapter 12) to manifest the unity of the Holy Spirit, to love one another (chapter 13), and to be careful that they exercise those gifts properly and don’t misrepresent Christ and the church when they do so (chapter 14).

## Inaugurations in the Old Testament

When God Created Adam & creation, when He saved Noah, and when He sent Moses to free Israel He inaugurated periods of stewardship. He established things in miraculous ways to show His workmanship and intent, but He did not necessarily keep doing massive miraculous things in obvious moves to sustain them – that’s why they were stewardships. God setup humanity in Adam and established a stewardship (which Adam failed at maintaining); God setup a stewardship with Noah (which humanity has failed at maintaining); and God setup a stewardship of Israel through the Law and the Land (which Israel failed at maintaining). The idea that God was doing something was not foreign to those He communicated to and through, but there doesn’t appear to be an expectation of continued signs and wonders because He assigned a responsibility.

Moses was an agent for splitting the Red Sea, bringing the Law from God, providing water, quails and manna. However, God did not establish the Covenant (AKA stewardship) with Israel in Deuteronomy giving signs and wonders as warnings, but instead with being in and out of the land as part of the sign of God’s earthly blessing.

## Inaugurations in the New Testament: Acts 2 and Acts 10

In Acts 2, and in Acts 10 where Peter is sent to inaugurate the response to the gospel in the Gentiles, we see that the Holy Spirit is given to show God’s supernatural establishment and that the supernatural is happening to sustain His new work in the church. Peter, when accounting for the work with the new gentile part of body in Acts 11:15, says, “…the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning.” The establishment of the church came with God’s intentional stamp of authority so that the Jewish [circumcised] leaders of the church were unable to say that this inauguration was from anyone else but God (Acts 11:18).

So when would the miraculous spiritual gifts cease to operate on a daily basis? Paul is going to explain that to us here and now in 1 Corinthians 13.

### Why Apostolic or Miraculous Gifts Are Grouped

In 1 Corinthians 12:28 we see that apostleship was part of the gifts to the church. At no point in time does Paul advocate within chapter 12 for others to exercise their local-church-based apostleship. The apostleship appears to align with the principles given in Acts 1, which would require supernatural visions of Christ like Paul had on the road to Damascus to continue to establish new apostles. We don’t find this historically, and there are certainly not modern verifications of these sorts of events. However, if apostles are part of an establishing agency that would help get the church’s stewardship begun, then we have no problem expositing and concluding that the apostolic gift and related miraculous gifts were inaugural from this passage.

### The Miraculous Today

It is worth stating that cessationism does not mean that the miraculous doesn’t happen or that God has lessened His involvement in the church today, but that the specific giftedness for individual believers on a day-to-day basis to provide for the church’s needs has ceased. The miraculous can and do happen, just not through the known, specific agency of gifts to the church to establish doctrine or expose needed truth to the church’s leadership. We have the scriptures now and can devote ourselves to the study the apostle’s teaching just like the church did in Acts 2:42.

# Love in Whole, Gifts in Part

Paul is about to talk to us about math. He’s got the ingredients for a pie, but he knows that the whole pie is coming. It will be complete. The ingredients for a pie can (in part) be tasty individually, but the pie, when baked, is complete. So Paul is gluing together the doctrine of the body of Christ, which included at that time the miraculous gifts being manifested, with the doctrine of the body for the whole length of the stewardship of the church. He wants the church in Corinth and beyond to consider the time beyond the present and into the need for the body to consider a fellowship that exists after the excitement of the miraculous on into the excitement of the eternal.

## Love Never Fails

At first glance at this phrase it might appear that as this book was divided up we got a snippet of what might be considered part of the last set of Paul’s thoughts on body-love. Paul re-iterates the need for the body to abandon division for love. But really, given the context the idea that love never fails creates a beautiful connection between the body-life need for gifts to care for this infant church and the idea of miraculous giftedness not being the long term need for the mature body.

When we look at carnal examples of love we find that mankind comes up short. Love, when defined outside of God, becomes either an emotional instrument, a hormonal release, or a failing striving of the will. However, benevolent love that is empowered by the Holy Spirit cannot be measured in emotion or hormone or effortful ways – it is measured as abiding or non-abiding. Abiding love, through the energizing of the Holy Spirit, never fails. It appropriates the truth of what is presented in verses 4-7 supernaturally. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit that is for the believer every second we’re on this planet, and as we’ll see in verse 13 continues on into eternity. Love *never [in all of time]* fails*.*

## Prophecy

Prophecy is the speaking, or writing, out the truth of God by the inspiration of God. The reason we have the books of the Old Testament about what would be taking place – and as Peter attests to in 2 Peter 1:21 – is that we have the Spirit of God moving human agents to share His truth. Paul, used as a prophet himself, tells believers that prophecy will be done away with. It will cease to operate as a gift. The Greek mood and tense of the verb for ‘done away’ are indicative and passive leading us to understand that there will indeed come a time that the prophecies will come to an end. The result of this is that the believers in Corinth (and at that time) can know for certain that God will have spoken authoritatively through His apostles and then the need for the gift will cease.

## Languages (Tongues)

The ever-lauded spiritual gift of tongues is defined biblically (and contextually) as a known language being spoken by a person who has no previous training in or knowledge of that language, often to proclaim the gospel [c.f. Acts 2:4,11; Acts 10:46; Acts 19:6; 1 Corinthians 12:10]. The gift is not a prayer language or the tongues of angels but instead various known earthly languages.

Paul tells his readers that this gift will cease (or will be restrained). In this case the mood and voice of the verb for ceasing are indicative and middle: the ceasing will happen and the Spirit will bring it about himself (and the speaker will be silenced).

## Knowledge

The gift of Knowledge is a gift where the Holy Spirit reveals truth about people or circumstances. The outcome of this gift should be that believers come to understand spiritual truth in their lives through the conviction and direction of the Holy Spirit. Similar to Paul’s revelation that prophecy would cease he uses the same Greek word for ‘ending,’ but in the singular form.

## Miraculous Gifts Today Cannot Be Redefined

When people talk about these spiritual gifts operating today on a regular basis it is done commonly with redefinition of how the Holy Spirit is manifesting them. For example the gift of prophecy has been redefined to be ‘a forth teller of the word’ and so anyone who reads aloud the Bible is a prophet. The gift of tongues is often redefined to be a ‘prayer language’ or an outpouring of the Holy Spirit leading to a person speaking syllables that no one understands. The gifts as they’re understood should be in line with what was revealed and what the authors of the New Testament as its original authors would have intended them.

# In Part and the Whole

## Knowing and Prophesying in Part

Paul then tells the church in Corinth that their current spiritual gift manifestations of the miraculous sort were in light of the partially known revelation. The key part of the part is that it is not a whole and perfect place that their revelation is known from, but that revelation of the New Testament was in process. This is known as progressive revelation: God revealing truth over time for mankind to share and absorb.

One of the key things about the Old Testament Law is that it is not dynamic and able to respond to technological and cultural changes. In fact, it tends towards blocking changes to these things in certain ways so that even today practitioners of Judaism, who cannot work on the Sabbath, do some interesting things with their technology to attempt compliance. The idea that the New Testament doctrine would be completed and the Holy Spirit would enable us to engage with the changes around us through His direction must have been a relief to those who were dealing with the restrictions of legalism.

## When the Perfect Comes, the Partial Will Be Done Away With

Much has been made of this word translated ‘perfect’. In the Greek it is used to mean perfect, mature, or complete. If we look at Paul’s analogy of the maturing church in the next few verses it is hard to interpret this as Christ’s coming, which would be something Paul could have said more clearly as he did in 1 Corinthians 4:5 and 11:26. Instead when we look at what they have in part it isn’t Christ, but their understanding and maturity. Furthermore, we’ll look at the two other terms Paul uses to illustrate below to see that this is in line with his reasoning.

The other half of this verse is the idea that the partial will be done away with. When the spiritual gifts cease to be useful they will be done away with because our understanding of the canon of the scriptures will be possible through studying God’s word with the direction of the Holy Spirit.

## Maturing & the Mirror

Upon covering the idea of maturing unto perfection/completion in the previous verse Paul explains the idea through two other analogies: a child growing into adulthood, and the difference between looking in a mirror stone and seeing someone face to face.

### When I Was a Child

Paul articulates the inferiority of the partial versus the value of maturity for the believer. A child, in this case generally an infant or toddler, does not have a large understanding of the world compared to an adult. As Paul states the speaking, the thinking (understanding), and the reasoning of a young child are substantially different from that of an adult. Similarly, the church as it matures goes from not having very much doctrine to the point of having clear, articulated, well-reasoned doctrine – inspired by the Holy Spirit – that can be applied through the enabling of the Holy Spirit. The church is then able to think God’s thoughts after Him with the result of renewing our minds (Romans 12:2). Upon maturing Paul says he himself did away with the childish things. We expect this from maturing individuals and are often concerned if it is lacking.

### Seeing in a Mirror Dimly

Paul describes the church as knowing things, but with a lack of clarity – like a person looking into a stone mirror. The Greek word translated ‘dimly’ is the word which we get our English word enigma from: ainigma, meaning obscure. Again, the idea that the perfect or mature thing was the return of Christ would indicate that the revelation, once completed, would still be obscure in this case. Instead, if the completion is that of the scriptures, then we can see that an obscured reflection would be inferior to the face to face quality of sight.

## Knowing & Being Known

Paul’s third illustration of maturity unto the perfection that is coming is that of a person who has partial knowledge of truth (not to be confused with the gift of knowledge in verse 8) who will later mature to having full or over-arching knowledge in comparison. Furthermore, the difference of Paul’s third type of knowing in this verse is the fact that God presently knows him. This is a perfect knowledge that only God could have.

# Faith, Hope and Love

Even if the miraculous (aka apostolic) gifts have faded away the believer today still abides in faith, hope, and love. However, the faith and hope that we think of today will cease to operate in the sense that it does now once we’re joined to Christ at his glorious return. We will not need to hope in His return any longer [c.f. Romans 5:2, 8:24; 2 Corinthians 1:10; Galatians 5:5; Ephesians 1:12, 4:4; Colossians 1:5; Colossians 1:23, 27; 1 Thessalonians 1:3, 2:19; 2 Thessalonians 2:16; Hebrews 3:6; 1 Peter 1:3]. Our faith will have been borne into an abiding, unified position and condition.

Of these three things love is by comparison greater. Love is eternally manifested in the character of God and will remain on into eternity. As believers we find that this agape love that is described here is God’s benevolence manifested in our own walk, and its fruit will be born on into eternity in Him. God is love.

# Conclusion

As a body we should be focused on our Lord. Abiding and beholding Him as we are conformed into His image. Not that we don’t ever expect the miraculous, but instead waiting on Him, and understanding that He uses all things (Romans 8:28). We expect that He will empower us to love in a rich way that edifies the body. We see God’s use of our lives in light of His desire to set out good works for us (Ephesians 2:10), that He will then reward us for (1 Corinthians 3:14), and that we are ambassadors of His body. If we are abiding in Him, His love will be manifested in the body to the result that we would see the height, the breadth, the depth, and the width of God’s love in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 3:18).