

1 Corinthians 13:8–14

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

Three Different Durations

Verse 8 contains a very great deal. There are three things here, and they differ from one another in a precise and important way. First, charity never fails — it has no end. Second, prophecies shall be done away — a definite act will bring them to a close. Third, tongues shall cease — they will quietly peter out of their own accord. The King James also uses the word *vanish* for knowledge at the end of the verse, but that is the same Greek word as *fail* above; it too shall be done away.

These distinctions are deliberate. Something that is done away implies a definite terminal point brought about by the arrival of something that ends it. Something that ceases has fulfilled its function and simply runs its course. Tongues will cease of their own accord — they are in a different class from prophecy and

knowledge, which will continue until the perfection of glory arrives and then be done away. This bears directly on the question of the present state of these gifts, as we shall see.

Charity Never Fails — What It Does and Does Not Mean

The statement that charity never fails does not mean that love always works — that love is the solution to every problem and will cure every situation. That would be like the quack medicine that never fails and cures everything. When the disciples could not cast out a certain evil spirit, and asked the Lord why, He said: *this kind can come forth by nothing but by prayer and fasting*. That was not the occasion for the Lord to say, bring love to it, for love never fails. That particular case required prayer and fasting — nothing else. To read the verse as a claim that love solves every problem is a misuse of it.

What the verse actually means becomes clear in verse 13: *now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three*. These three all abide now. But the greatest is charity — why? Because love never fails, while faith and hope will eventually be swallowed up in sight and realisation. Charity continues on eternally. That is the plain and simple meaning.

The widow's oil in 2 Kings 4 is a beautiful illustration. She had one small vessel of oil, and she poured and poured into all the borrowed vessels — and the oil did not fail until there was not a vessel more to fill. Love is like that. Its source is in God, who is inexhaustible. It is enough to fill to the brim whatever capacity there is to contain it.

Verse 8 Must Be Read with Chapter 12

One of the most common mistakes made with verse 8 is to read it in isolation from chapter 12. The gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge in verse 8 are

precisely the gifts spoken of in chapter 12. The Spirit of God expects that chapter 12 has been read before coming to chapter 13.

Does *knowledge shall be done away* mean that in heaven no one will have any knowledge? Of course not — verse 12 itself says, *then shall I know even as also I am known*. So knowledge increases in glory; it is not abolished. What is done away is the gift of knowledge — the manifestation of the Spirit spoken of in chapter 12. The same principle applies to prophecy. The gift will be done away when the perfection of glory arrives. What will not be there is the gift — not knowledge itself, not the speaking of God's mind itself, but the particular manifestation of the Spirit appropriate to the present partial state.

Tongues Have Ceased — Prophecy Has Not

Since tongues are in a different class — they shall cease, not be done away — we surmise from this that tongues ran their course and ceased in the apostolic age, having fulfilled their role in connection with the planting of the church. Healings and miracles are in a similar category.

Prophecy and knowledge, however, are to be done away only when the perfection of glory comes — and that has not yet arrived. So there is scriptural grounds to say that the gift of prophecy continues. Not in its revelatory element — Agabus prophesying of a coming famine is that element, and it has passed with the establishment of Christianity. But prophesying in the fundamental sense — speaking the mind of God, being His mouthpiece — continues on. If verse 8 is speaking of the gifts of chapter 12, then the gift of prophecy shall not be done away until the perfection of glory comes. It has not yet come.

The Clerical Theory — and Its Real Purpose

There is a well-known clerical interpretation of verse 10: *when that which is perfect is come* is taken to mean the closing of the canon of the New Testament — specifically the writing of the book of Revelation. Once the canon was complete, the argument runs, the partial gifts were no longer needed, and what is called in chapter 14 the order of the assembly was therefore superseded. The clergy then steps in to fill the vacancy.

A candidate for a doctoral degree in theology once explained his thesis on exactly this theory, and when pressed, stated plainly that the conclusion was: after the canon was closed, you have the clergy. That is the scheme. The theory exists not because the text demands it, but because the clergy requires it. Without it, the free operation of the Spirit in the assembly, as set out in chapter 14, stands as a direct challenge to the clerical system.

But consider what the theory actually implies. Most of Paul's epistles — Galatians, the Corinthian letters, Romans, the Prison Epistles including Ephesians and Colossians — had already been written before the book of Revelation. On the clerical theory, with all these books in hand, the saints still saw *through a glass, darkly*. Then Revelation is written, and suddenly they see face to face. But in practice, the interpretation of the symbols in Revelation almost always depends on understanding the rest of the New Testament first. One who understands Ephesians goes a long way toward understanding the symbols in Revelation — not the other way around.

Moreover, the expression *face to face* was used by John at the close of his second and third letters: *I hope to come unto you and speak face to face*. He was looking forward to being present with the one he was writing to. There would be joy, peace, and full communion. How much more, when that which is perfect means the perfection of glory in the person of the Lord Jesus coming again — face to face with Him.

The Child and the Man — Two States

The illustration of verse 11 makes the contrast between two states clear. When one is a child, one speaks as a child, understands as a child, thinks as a child. When one becomes a man, one puts away what belongs to childhood. The apostle is making an analogy from human growth to contrast the present partial state with the state when the perfection of glory arrives. This is the mature state — not when the canon of Scripture was closed, but when the coming of the Lord introduces us into the perfection of glory.

Verse 12 returns to the contrast: *now we see through a glass, darkly — but then face to face*. In the ancient world, glass was not transparent as modern window glass is. The glass of that day was nearly opaque — murky, letting through a dim light but not a clear image. That is the present state. Then face to face — direct, full, unobstructed. Nothing about the closing of a canon produces that. And *then shall I know even as also I am known* — a considerable increase of knowledge, not the elimination of it.

A small illustration shows that even one verse of Scripture is not dark. A man in Brazil, a drunkard, took home a bottle of alcohol and used a scrap of torn paper to cork it. When he arrived home, he read the scrap: *Nor drunkards shall inherit the kingdom of God*. He threw the bottle out the window and went back to get the rest of the book. One fragment of a verse was the light of heaven into his soul. The present state is partial — but it is not dark in the sense of being without light.

Two Classes — Not Three

Verse 13 names three things: faith, hope, and love. But to say *the greatest of these is charity* — as the King James renders it — can mislead. Darby renders it more precisely: *the greater of these is charity*. Why the comparative rather than the superlative? Because there are not three things in one class — there are two classes.

Faith and hope belong together in the category of things that are partial, suited to the present state. Faith will be swallowed up in sight; hope will be swallowed up in realisation. They abide now, and they are precious now, but they belong to the partial. Love belongs to a different class — it never fails, it continues on eternally, it is not partial. Hence, the greater of the two classes is love. The greatest of three would make it merely the top item in a single list of three equals. The greater of two classes is what the Spirit of God is expressing. This is one of those grammatical perfections of Scripture — three things named, yet the comparative is used, because in God's mind they form two classes and love is the greater.

A similar grammatical perfection appears in John 1:17: *grace and truth came by Jesus Christ*. Grace and truth — two things — yet the verb is singular. Darby renders it: *grace and truth subsists through Jesus Christ*, with a marginal note that grace and truth go together in the person of Christ, so united as to form one subject.

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