

The Greatest Gift, I Corinthians 12:27 – 13:13

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Introduction

On Pentecost Sunday, Jesus Christ, seated in heaven, sent his Holy Spirit into the apostles, to give them the power they needed for mission. Before, they had stayed behind locked doors. After, they preached boldly in the streets, even when they began to be persecuted, to be arrested, and to die. Before, they were a monolingual group of Holy Land Jews. After, they were equipped in the languages of the Earth and went out as far as Spain, India, and Ethiopia, sharing their gospel that the Messiah of Israel was the savior of the entire world.

Yet there has been confusion ever since. Some have been confused about the miracle of Pentecost itself. Some have been confused over what it means to have gifts from the Spirit, and wonder why there is diversity rather than conformity. In First Corinthians Paul instructs believers how best to respect each other's diversity of spiritual gifts. Apart from the agape love of God filling our hearts, any other powers or gifts from the Holy Spirit amount to nothing.

Let us pray: Lord, in your mercy teach us your Word, and inspire us with your Holy Spirit to understand your Word and to live in it. In Jesus' name, amen.

1. Confusion Over Languages

In the account of Acts 2 we see that the Church received the power and tools that it needed for mission. Those in the crowds that morning heard the apostles in their own native languages, or tongues. These tongues were a sign that it is God's desire for the gospel to be clear and understood, in the language of the day.

Yet two confusions have beset the church ever since. The first confusion concerns the

tongues of angels. Some read First Corinthians 13 verse 1 and assume this means that the gift of tongues described in Acts 2 is the ability to babble gibberish. This forgets the main point of Acts 2, that the apostles were given the gifts of human languages for their mission to preach the gospel. That the point of spiritual gifts is mission is emphasized by Paul in First Corinthians 14, for as he states, he would rather speak five sensible words than 10,000 words that no one understands. Those who think that spiritual baptism is all about ecstasy and feeling need to remember that the Holy Spirit is calling them down from the mountain-top of God's glory and into the valley of mission. The second confusion concerns human languages. When all of the references to tongues in the New Testament are seen in terms of public worship according to the church's mission, it is really quite straight-forward. When Pastor Henoah preaches among us, he does us the courtesy of preaching in English. He does this because he is a missionary to us, and he does this because he knows his Bible.

Human languages are fluid, they change, yet God's desire remains to be understood. In the fourth century a scholar named Jerome translated the Bible into Latin because that was the common language of Western Europe. Centuries went by and Latin was no longer universal, yet the church kept insisting that only the Latin Bible could be used. The desire to put the Bible in the languages of the people was one of the sparks of the Reformation. So how is it that today some want to restrict the Bible to the English spoken four hundred years ago? That is the same mistake that the medieval Roman Catholic Church made about Latin, and such an attitude is not in keeping with the heart of God as shown to the Church at Pentecost.

2. What God Has Appointed

Pentecost teaches us that God wants the gospel to be understood by the people who hear it, so that they can answer the call to repent. When the apostles went out in power, the early

church grew rapidly. Soon the Holy Spirit was equipping people for many roles. In Acts 6 the apostles appointed a new kind of leadership, deacons, to meet the needs of people. They received and counted the offerings and distributed them to make sure everyone in the church had enough to eat. That meant they were acting as Trustees, and they were doing ministries of visitation, helping, and healing, all so that the apostles could focus on preaching.

By the time Paul writes First Corinthians, the followers of Christ have discerned a wide range of spiritual gifts: Paul lists apostles, then preachers and teachers, then miracle workers, healers, helpers, administrators, those with language skills and interpreters. In human frailty, some people became arrogant about their own gifts and roles. Paul devoted chapters 12 through 14 to set them straight. It still happens today: Some say: *If I have tongues of ecstasy, EVERYBODY should speak in tongues. Otherwise how can I be sure that YOU are saved???* Or, **“If I can share the gospel with strangers, anyone can share the gospel with strangers. You just don’t have faith, or your priorities are all wrong.”**

This happens when people use themselves and their own experience to discern the work of God in others, forgetting that we are each unique in what God gives and appoints us to do. Paul uses the image of the body, in First Corinthians 12, to make clear that my gifts from God are NOT the standard to measure the faithfulness of anyone else. In the body I might be a hand or an ear, and I need to function as I can, and allow the eyes and nose and knees to function as they are supposed to. The image I used with the kids today was of puzzle pieces. Imagine if each of us held a puzzle piece that was exactly the same shape and color as all the pieces held by everyone else. It would not make a complete picture of anything. We need one another in the diversity of what God has made us to be in order for the pieces to fit, and in order for the Body of Christ to function by God’s design.

3. The Greatest of These

So Paul writes First Corinthians chapter 13 as a way of teaching the people of the church the best way to honor and respect each other. The Holy Spirit seals us with the mind, character, and priorities of God, and that means that God's love fills us too. The best way to honor and respect each other across our gifts, our diversities, our differences of preference and opinion, is to love each other. Short of that, the gifts of the Holy Spirit are empty. In love, the gifts of the Holy Spirit are used how God intends, for the mission of the church and its building up.

For example: Some have the gift of prophecy and vision, those who dream big, and some have the gift of administration, that is, of detail management. The reason I connect prophecy, vision and dreaming big is that the prophet Joel and the Apostle Peter make that connection in Acts 2. Sometimes the dreamers and the detailers have a hard time understanding each other, and so they have a hard time getting along, and that makes loving each other a real challenge.

The big-picture dreamers can sometimes think that detail people are annoying control-freaks who ask too many questions, and who don't allow the Spirit to work things out and make things happen. Some of us dreamers need to be a lot more discerning. This Holy Spirit on whom we rely uses detail-oriented people to make our dreams and programs happen. That's the truth.

Some of you administrators and detail-types need a reminder too: No true God-sized vision, can fit into our neat, tidy boxes, paradigms, systems and routines. Administration as a gift channels God's power for mission, but bureaucracy chokes God's Spirit and kills the mission. There is no such thing as a spiritual gift that snuffs out the Spirit; if routines and systems are your excuse for killing a vision that would stretch your comfort zones, then your routines, systems and comfort zones have become your idols.

The church needs its prophets who dream the visions of God to lead us forward, and the church needs its administrators to give those visions form, structure, and context. Together you prophets and administrators are parts of one body of Christ, together you are pieces in a puzzle, each with your unique fit. But the body can only function if its parts hold each other in honor, and the puzzle can only be assembled if we honor the unique fit that each of us brings. That honor for each other, is the agape love of God described in First Corinthians 13. This is the best way to work together. So Paul writes, in Pastor Jonathan's paraphrase:

Love is patient, love is kind, love keeps no record of wrongs, love takes no delight in evil, but rejoices in the truth. When I was a child I thought like a child and I fought to keep my toys and to protect my turf; now that I'm all grown-up, I have learned a much deeper joy that comes from sharing. No one of us has all the answers, and none of us will have them until we enter glory and see how the puzzle fits together in the mind of God.

Conclusion

So what might a God-sized, Spirit-Powered vision for Elgin Covenant look like? The lesson of Pentecost is that God desires for the gospel to be understood in every generation. Another way to say it is that God desires the church to be reaching the world of its time, not the world of fifty years earlier. If we want our church to thrive, we need to minister to what Elgin is today and what it will likely be tomorrow, and not what Elgin was fifty years ago. In Elgin today thousands of young adults are bi-cultural: Mothers who bring their kids to Holly's dance class begin their sentences in English and end them in Spanish. In light of Pentecost, what does that mean for us?

Receive this as a discernment for your reflection. Despite a lot of hard, faithful work, maybe the reason we do not find a harvest of church growth is that we are aiming our efforts at

the Elgin of the 1980's. And now the clock is ticking. It is time for the faithful core at Elgin Covenant to consider your legacy. Revival in our context is not going to mean that Elgin Covenant will once again look like it did in 1982. Our Holy Spirit encounter is going to equip us for ministries we can hardly fathom, ministries that cross cultures, ministries that will change who we are and how we do things. Our Holy Spirit encounter will equip Elgin Covenant to share the unchanging gospel of our unchanging God in the language of today's residents of Elgin.

Do you want the power of the living presence of God? When our hearts are surrendered to the mission of God and to the love of God for one another and for our world, then, and only then, will God's Holy Spirit come in power. Amen.