

‘What is love?’

I want to begin by sharing a love letter that a wife sent to her husband who was in the army.

Dear Anton, ‘I know it was our joint decision for you to go off to the army for the year, but it’s so hard not having you here. We are married, doesn’t it make sense that we should be together? I’m so miserable without you, it’s almost like you’re still here.’ Love, Anne.

I feel it in my fingers, I feel it in my toes. Love is all around me, and so, the feeling grows. It’s written on the wind, it’s everywhere I go, oh yes, it is. So, if you really love me, come on and let it show.

When it comes to the subject of love most people think about those warm, fluffy feelings we get inside us towards someone else. But the reality is that real Biblical love has nothing to do with our feelings, it all has to do with our attitude and actions towards others. I’ve been asked to speak from **1 Corinthians 13** today on the subject of ‘What is love?’

1 Corinthians 12-14 deal with the issue of miraculous gifts which were causing a huge division within the church in Corinth during worship. **1 Corinthians 12** identifies the gifts and instructs the Corinthians to see that their objective isn’t to benefit individuals only but rather the whole church. **1 Corinthians 13** tells us that possessing those gifts without love is truly worthless. **1 Corinthians 14** tells us that some brethren were placing greater emphasis on the gift of speaking in tongues and many were elevating the tongue speaker above others.

And so, in many ways, these young Christians were getting carried away with their new God given gifts, but they didn’t know how to use them properly in worship. **1 Corinthians 13:1-3** “If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

Like many churches today, the Corinthians were obsessed with the gift of tongue speaking. The word tongue in Greek is the word, ‘*glossa*’ and it always means a language, a human language. It was miraculous in the sense that the person, had never learned or studied the language before.

When Funmi and I were in Liverpool city centre a few weeks ago we stopped to speak to these street preachers who tried to convince us that we weren’t Christians because we couldn’t speak in tongues. Now does the Bible teach that?

1 Corinthians 12:29-30 “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?” The answer to Paul’s rhetorical questions is no! Not all Christians possessed all the gifts. Now apart from the fact the Bible clearly teaches that not every Christian had the gift of tongues, I asked him ‘what language he spoke’, to which he replied, ‘the language of angels’.

Now we could spend a whole sermon on tongue speaking and the language of angels but let me ask you this. What language did the angel use when he spoke to Hagar when she was in the desert? **Genesis 16:7-8** “The angel of the LORD found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. And he said, “Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?”

What language did the angel use when he spoke to Joseph when he was about to divorce Mary? **Matthew 1:20** “But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

Loved ones, angels are always represented in Scripture as communicating in human language. And ask yourself, what logical reason exists for humans to speak in an alleged ‘angelic’ language that is different from human language? What’s the point, what would be the spiritual benefit? There is no point, there is no spiritual benefit. The Bible over and over again clearly tells us that tongues were a known human language.

Notice before referring to the ‘tongues of angels,’ Paul referred to ‘the tongues of men.’ Why would Paul say, ‘Though I speak with the tongues of men’? After all, isn’t that precisely what all adult humans do? We humans speak at least one human language!

Paul isn't speaking about the ability to speak a human language, but the ability to speak **all** human languages. No tongue-speaker in the first-century church had the ability to speak **all** human languages. Paul's point is simply this, even if a tongue-speaker could speak every human language known to man, without love, the ability would be wasted.

When I asked that street preacher to show me one example from Scripture of any human being speaking 'angel language', he replied, 'Paul.' Now loved ones for someone who claims to have the Holy Spirit, he's certainly ignorant of what the Holy Spirit wrote through Paul. Paul didn't say he spoke the language of angels, he says, 'if I speak in the language of angels'. In other words, these are hypothetical statements that Paul is making.

He says, "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains." Paul is saying, 'even if I were capable of speaking all human languages, which I'm not.' 'Even if I were capable of understanding all mysteries, which I'm not.' 'Even if I were capable of moving mountains, which I'm not.'

'If I were capable of doing all these things but don't have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.' Now when you think about an orchestra, a percussion instrument serves its purpose among the strings, woodwinds, and brass instruments. But if you take the percussion or brass, trombone or French horn out of the orchestra, the loud noise is useless. Paul's point is that the single instrument or gift, can only serve its designed purpose when acting together with the whole body. 1 Corinthians 12:14 "Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many."

Paul again says, 'If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.' Paul is obviously addressing some brethren who were showing a great deal of zeal, yet they lacked love and thereby their profit is 'nothing,' in relation to God's will to profit the whole church. 1 Corinthians 12:7 "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good." Paul is basically saying, if he had the ability to do all these things but didn't do them with the motivation of love, he would be wasting his time. Paul is emphasizing that if anyone had these miraculous gifts but didn't have love, the gifts were a waste of time.

So, what does Biblical love look like? 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

If you ever want to know what the love of God looks like, here's your answer. You see, loved ones, we could replace that word love, with the word God because John tells us in 1 John 4:8 that 'God is love.'

"God is patient, God is kind. God doesn't envy, God doesn't boast, God isn't proud. God doesn't dishonour others, God isn't self-seeking, God isn't easily angered, God keeps no record of wrongs. God doesn't delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. God always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

And notice that these sixteen descriptions of love have nothing to do with our feelings. They are all to do with our actions and attitudes towards others. And as Christians these characteristics of love should be clearly shown in our lives because the same passage of Scripture says, 1 John 4:8 "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love."

The question is, can people see these characteristics of love in our lives? When people examine our lives, and speak to us, would they be able to say. "Maria is patient, Vincent is kind. Sam doesn't envy, Thandiwe doesn't boast, Michelle isn't proud. Liam doesn't dishonour others, Dave isn't self-seeking, Peter isn't easily angered, Steve keeps no record of wrongs. Charles doesn't delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. Ann always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

Now I put different names in there, but the truth is, we should be able to put our own names in each of these characteristics. Notice what Paul says next in, 1 Corinthians 13:8 "Love never fails." The word, 'fail', means to depart from, digress, to fall off and it's a play on words. Notice that love is sandwiched in between the gifts. In other words, Paul is saying that those who don't do things within the church with the motivation of love for brethren are identified as those who are 'nothing', 1 Corinthians 13:3.

John said in 1 John 2:5 ‘But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them.’ The love of God is a care and concern for the spiritual wellbeing of His creation. And whenever we keep God’s commandments by loving our own soul and the soul of brethren, then ‘love for God is truly made complete in us’.

And so, Paul is saying when a Christian demonstrates the love of God in their lives, they will never fail. They will not ‘fail’, in terms of departing or digressing from truth and come to nothing. Let me tell you loved ones, moving away from the truth always end up bad. 2 John 9 “Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.”

So, love will never fail and to contrast love with the spiritual gifts, Paul continues and says in 1 Corinthians 13:8-12, “But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now, we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”

Now notice that the same three gifts mentioned here were mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. The obvious conclusion is that these three gifts stand as a representation of gifts as a whole. And as we will see in a moment, Paul is going to tell us that all the miraculous gifts, will one day ‘be done away’ with. And I say, ‘one day’ because the text implies its in the future because Paul uses the word, ‘will’. In other words, at some point in the future, gifts given by the Holy Spirit to man will be abolished or cease to happen.

Paul says, “For we know in part and we prophesy in part,” He’s talking about those miraculous gifts. If I only possess a part of something, I don’t possess the whole thing. He’s saying that the church only possessed bits and pieces of God’s will. You get a little bit of God’s will when someone prophesies, you get another little bit of God’s will when someone speaks in tongues and you get another little bit of God’s will when someone has supernatural knowledge revealed to them by God. Remember we’re dealing with the will of God being miraculously revealed here.

And so, the natural question would be, when will prophecies, tongues, and knowledge, i.e., when will all the miraculous gifts be abolished or cease to exist? Paul tells us doesn’t he, ‘when completeness comes’, or ‘perfect’ as most translations have it. In other words, the ‘in part’ would end, when the ‘perfect’ came. And so, the next natural question would be, what is the perfect?

Now let me tell you what it isn’t, it isn’t referring to Jesus. The KJV says, ‘When that which is perfect is come’. Jesus is never referred to as a ‘that’ in the Bible. It also isn’t referring to the return of Christ, or the perfection of Heaven. The word ‘perfect’ isn’t once used in the Bible, in reference to Heaven’s state of perfection. Listen, if the Holy Spirit had intended us to understand this as a reference to Christ, it would have been easy for Him to have said, ‘when He who is perfect’, or even, ‘when Christ comes again’.

So, what does the word, ‘perfect’ mean? The word ‘perfect’, in Greek is the word, ‘teleios’, and it means something which is complete. It has to do with ‘reaching maturity’, or ‘the attaining of a purpose or goal’. Remember Paul is making a contrast between something that is incomplete, and something that is complete. So, what is the perfect? Let’s allow the Bible to interpret itself.

James 1:23-25 “Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.”

James speaks about the ‘perfect law of freedom’, which everyone agrees is the Word of God. And so, the perfect is the complete revealed New Testament Scriptures. In other words, the complete Bible, which helps us to become Christ-like and mature. The Bible says in 1 Peter 2:2, “Like new born babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it, you may grow up in your salvation”. 2 Peter 3:18 says, “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ”.

You see when the church only possessed bits and pieces of God's will as revealed through scattered miraculous gifts, the church couldn't mature. It was still in its infancy, it was still a spiritual baby. Paul had already told them that back in 1 Corinthians 3:1+2, "Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly, mere infants in Christ, I gave you milk not solid food for you were not ready for it, indeed you are still not ready".

And so, because they weren't mature or couldn't mature as Christians, Paul says you guys are still like children. That's why he says 1 Corinthians 13:11 "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child." When God's will for the New Testament era had been revealed, the church then had the means available to be a man and grow up. That's why Paul goes on to say in 1 Corinthians 13:11 "When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me." Do you see how he contrasts being a 'child' with being a fully matured 'man'?

You know when I go for a shower the bathroom usually gets all steamed up and sometimes I go to have a shave, but I can't see all of my face, I can only see parts of my face and it's really difficult to go ahead and have a shave. But for me to see my face clearly, I need to clear away the steam off the mirror, so that I can see my face clearly.

And that's what Paul uses as an illustration in 1 Corinthians 13:12 where he says, "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."

Now remember they didn't have mirrors like we have today, they would use highly polished brass to see their reflection. But even at that, they couldn't see themselves clearly like we can today using the mirrors we have. The point is this, the existence of the miraculous gifts to acquire God's Word is compared to looking through a clouded mirror. Once the complete New Testament was available in written form, the miraculous gifts were no longer necessary. Paul says, it's like standing face to face with someone, rather than looking through a clouded mirror.

Do you see how Paul uses the same language as James did earlier? James 1:23-25 "Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do."

Paul says God's will isn't clear right 'now' but 'then' we will be able to see clearly, 'then' everyone will be able to know the full will of God. Paul says the same thing over in Ephesians 4. Ephesians 4:8 "This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people."

Paul speaks about the gifts that were given, now look at Ephesians 4:11-15 where he says, "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ."

The gifts were given 'until' we all reached unity in 'THE faith' and have 'the knowledge'? Remember the word 'faith' here doesn't mean belief, it means the entire teaching and words we find within the Scriptures. Notice also how he contrasts and uses the same words as the Corinthian passage, words like 'mature', 'infants' and 'grow up'.

In other words, Paul knew that when we finally get the Bible, God's completed revelation to man, we won't fall for every kind of doctrinal teaching that comes along, why? Because we can check it out for ourselves, we can measure what's been taught with the Bible itself. Paul's speaking about the complete revelation of God, which we call the Bible, so, now we can all grow and mature as we read and study the Bible.

Now did that time come when God's word was complete? Jude 3 "Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people." Loved ones, 'the faith', the complete Bible, was entrusted or delivered once for all. 'Once for all' means, it's done, there will be no more revelations from God.

Someone once explained these miraculous gifts to me like this, and I hope this helps your understanding of the subject. **The next time you are walking somewhere, and you see a new superstructure being built, and you see that new building starting off with its foundation and as it starts to grow, the builders usually erect temporary scaffolding around it, to keep it steady and so that they can do more work on it.**

You see, these miraculous gifts in the first century church were like scaffolding, that was temporally erected while the superstructure was being built. **But what do you do with the scaffolding when the building work is finished?**

You remove it and take it away because its job is done, it's served its purpose. Once the structure is complete the scaffolding is removed and discarded. The miraculous gifts were only temporary, they were to help build up the church, until the Bible was readily available. The miraculous gifts have ceased, all of them, we don't need them anymore because we have everything we need to know about God in His word.

The question Christians need to ask themselves is simply this, **is the Bible enough?** And if you answer yes but you still believe we need miraculous gifts of some kind, then you've just contradicted yourself with the Scriptures. **2 Timothy 3:16+17 "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."** The Bible either thoroughly equips us or it doesn't!

2 Peter 1:3 "His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness." The Bible either gives us everything we need to live our lives right for God and gives us all the knowledge of God we will ever need, or it doesn't!

Loved ones, the question the Christian world needs to ask themselves is this, **how long will they continue to be deceived or deceive themselves?** Now I know the word deceive sounds a bit harsh but it's not my word, it's the word Paul uses. **2 Timothy 3:12-13 "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived."**

The gifts have ceased, and Paul says in **1 Corinthians 13:13 "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."** Now the very fact that Paul uses the word 'remain' here, implies that the miraculous gifts were never to stay. And though spiritual gifts will pass away, 'faith, hope and love' will remain.

Faith is produced by the word of God, as **Romans 10:17** tell us. As divine revelation is revealed, through His word, faith continues to be produced. And a consequence of this faith is 'hope.' Christians are confident, through divine revelation, that a heavenly home awaits the faithful as **1 John 2:25** and **1 John 4:13** tell us.

But why is love greater than faith and hope? The word 'greatest', indicates the level of importance in relation to faith and hope. The reason that love is greater than faith and hope is that love is an act of the reality of our faith and hope. Love acts for the benefit of others, love looks at both the physical and spiritual needs of others and acts upon those needs.

And remember this, loved ones, unlike what that street preacher said to Funmi and I, in terms of 'proof' of being a Christian. Jesus didn't say, 'they will know you are His disciples because you speak in tongues or have some other miraculous gift'.

He said in **John 13:34+35 "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."** Love is to be the motivating factor in every Christian's life. And so, to answer the question, **what is love?** The answer is God.