

1 Corinthians - Commentaries by Frank Binford Hole

Resurrection, No. 3 - God's Victory (15:20-28)

1 Corinthians 15:20-28.

20. But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept.

21. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead.

22. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

23. But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming.

24. Then cometh the end, when He shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when He shall have put down all rule and all authority and power.

25. For He must reign, till He hath put all enemies under His feet,

26. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.

27. For He hath put all things under His feet. But when He saith all things are put under Him, it is manifest that He is excepted, which did put all things under Him.

28. And when all things shall be subdued unto Him, then shall the Son also Himself be subject unto Him that put all things under Him, that God may be all in all.

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We are apt to forget that a fact may have more than one signification, and that its bearing may be felt in many directions.

The resurrection of Christ is a great and glorious fact which cannot be overthrown. Men have flung against it their wit and strength, but like waves dashing against a cliff, only to recoil shattered upon themselves. It has stood through the years and will stand. Its bearing on the question of our justification and peace with God we have seen. We should be great losers, however, if while rejoicing in that, we overlooked its value and bearing God-ward.

Romans 4:23 — v. 2, sets before us the former, and 1 Corinthians 15. Treats of the latter aspect of this great subject.

Some amongst the professed disciples at Corinth had intellectual doubts and difficulties as to the resurrection of the body, and reasoned, "How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come?" (ver. 35). They considered it apparently too gross and materialistic a conception; and posed as pioneers of a more spiritual idea of the subject. They were, in reality, fools (ver. 36).

But the apostle Paul, did not content himself with merely answering their foolish questions. He disproved their whole position by establishing, beyond doubt, the great fact of Christ's resurrection (see vers. 3-11), and then from verses 12-28 he shows how this great truth bears upon everything: not only upon our safety and happiness, but upon God's purposes and glory.

We have our souls, infinitely precious to us; if we lose them we lose our all. Their safety then, their happiness now, is rightly therefore a matter of absorbing interest to us. Until everything is settled, and the last flicker of doubt has died away, we have neither ears nor mind for anything else. But when once we grasp, by faith, the bearing of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus upon ourselves, and see that we are as clear of judgment as He is, then we do well to remember that God's rights were outraged by sin. He has His own sovereign will and purposes concerning the putting away of sin, and the bringing in of peace, blessing, and glory upon this sin-cursed earth. He has counseled a heavenly region of bliss, and to reveal Himself in such a way that men may be recovered to Himself, and brought in the place of sons to know Him and enjoy Him, and to give Him His right place of supremacy in love forever and ever.

All the power of darkness was arrayed against the accomplishment of these things. In the death of Jesus we see divine love grappling with the power of evil. In His resurrection we see its victory declared.

It may help us to perceive the greatness of this victory if we get some idea of the divine stake in the death and resurrection of Christ, by seeing what God's thoughts and purposes were. We need not go outside 1 Corinthians 15. for this, though other scriptures unfold these purposes more fully.

The resurrection of the saint was one great thought which God had before Him (vers. 20-23). His character and glory were intimately bound up with it. All through the ages, here and there — often enough in the humblest individuals — the light of faith had shone. Before Christ came, when as yet there was only the starlight of type and promise to cheer the watcher, saints, of whom the world was not worthy, lived, and suffered, and died. Out of the scene of their sorrows, they gazed into the realms of God's purpose.

“These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Heb. 11:13).

And what then? They went down, like to the wicked to all appearance, into the silence of the grave.

Further there were the early disciples. They, even while Paul was writing, were the objects of fierce persecution from a hostile world. Gaps appeared in their ranks as one after another was smitten. And yet for every man that fell two stepped into the ranks eager to be baptized for the dead, and themselves become a target for the foe (ver. 29). Why was this? They looked on to a glorious recompense in the coming day.

And they were right, for resurrection was God’s thought for them. Yet if ever it was to be, the power of death must be broken and the bars of the grave, gates and all, must Samson-like be carried away.

The establishment of a kingdom in this world was another purpose of God (vers. 24, 25, 50). It might be thought that this would be a very simple matter, an end which could be easily reached by the simple exercise of divine power. It was not so. Man was in rebellion, and in league with the power of Satan. There was opposing rule and authority and power, there were enemies to be subdued (vers. 24, 25). True it is that if God makes bare His arm, every enemy is swept before Him like chaff before a tempest, but what about the enmity and the sin which had ruined everything? This must be met. It was met when once at the end of the age Christ appeared “to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself” (Heb. 9:26). His death and resurrection therefore was the shattering of the very foundations of Satan’s empire, and in the risen Christ we have not only the firstfruits of the great resurrection harvest of the saints (ver. 23), but the pledge of the establishment of God’s will and authority here upon earth “He will judge [or administer] the world in righteousness by that Man whom He hath ordained; whereof He hath given assurance unto all men in that He hath raised Him from the dead” (Acts 17:31).

Then again at the close of the mediatorial kingdom of Christ, it is God’s purpose to receive everything into His own hands and to be all in all (ver. 28). He will be “in all” for He will pervade the whole of the realms of light, and each and all who dwell therein, whether in heaven or on earth. He will be “all” for He will be the supreme and exclusive object of every soul that He fills. All this too hinges on the resurrection of Christ. Established in the power of that, all is permanent; without it all would be passing away.

If we turn to the Epistle to the Ephesians, we find the fullest unfolding of the thoughts and purposes of God, especially in connection with believers of this dispensation: unto Him there is to be glory in the Assembly in Christ Jesus unto all generations of the age of ages (Eph. 3:21). Here too the resurrection of Christ is the great essential (Eph. 1:19-23). But we may not, at present, pursue the theme further than its unfolding in 1 Corinthians 15.

We must carefully note, however, the way in which the Lord Jesus is presented to us in connection with all this.

“For since by man came death, by Man came also the resurrection of the dead” (ver. 21).

The victory has been achieved by Man in the person of Jesus, just as the ruin came in by man in the person of Adam. Instead of shifting the contest on to an entirely fresh plane, and settling everything by one stroke of deity pure and simple, God has — if one may so put it — met the foe on the old battle ground originally chosen by Him in the garden of Eden, and there reversed everything. Man comes out of the contest in resurrection, covered with glory, and not the shame of defeat.

But this Man is of an entirely new kind or order. “The first man, Adam, was made a living soul;” the last Adam “a quickening spirit”... “The first man is of the earth, earthy: the second Man is the Lord from Heaven” (vers. 45, 47).

One thing more. Though the victory is God’s victory, He gives it to us who believe, as it is written: “Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (verses 57, 58).

Let us only go through this valley of the shadow of death with the light of Christ Risen in our souls, and we shall possess the deep and sweet consciousness that the resurrection world established in Him abides forever, and that no labor in view of that world is lost, it too abides and will all be manifested in the resurrection day. This will give stability to our souls, and our Christian character, and prove an abiding incentive to spend ourselves in the service of the Lord. The shadow of defeat no longer rests upon us, for Christ is risen and the victory is God’s.

Foundations of the Faith: Key Teachings, Last Adam - The Second Man, The (15:45)

At first sight the subject now before us may seem to belong rather to the superstructure of the faith than the foundations, but it is not so. It is truly fundamental, and this we shall see as we proceed.

Both the expressions which head this chapter are found in the course of the great argument on the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. If their force is to be grasped, verses 35-49 should be read.

The point raised in these verses is as to the body in which the risen saints will appear, and the Apostle shows that though there is identity preserved between the body which is buried and the body which is raised, yet in condition and character the risen body will be altogether new. As to condition, the former is marked by corruption, dishonor, and weakness; the latter by incorruption, glory, and power. As to character, the former is a natural body, the latter a spiritual body.

The next fact that confronts us is that just as there is a natural and a spiritual body so there is a natural and a spiritual race. "The first man Adam was made a living soul, the last Adam... a quickening spirit" (v. 45).

Adam is presented to us in Scripture as the original progenitor of the human race. He came fresh from God's hand as recorded in Genesis 2:7, as to his body formed out of the dust, but receiving the spiritual part of his constitution by God's in-breathing, and in this way becoming a living soul. This tripartite nature of man is clearly stated in 1 Thessalonians 5:23. What characterized Adam's position in creation was, however, that he was a living soul a living soul, we may say, possessing spirit as well as body. The last Adam, who is none other than our Lord Jesus Christ, bears an infinitely higher character. He is "spirit" rather than "soul"; and not merely "living" but "quickenings" or "life-giving."

Here there breaks out upon us the true divine glory of the Lord Jesus. He is a Spirit so is God. He is life-giving because the Life-Giver. "Am I God to kill, and to make alive?" asked the distracted King of Israel (see 2 Kings 5:7). No, he was not; but Jesus was and is. But then He who is the life-giving Spirit is the last Adam, i.e., really and truly Man; the Head and Source of a new race of mankind, having stamped upon it the character of spiritual as definitely as the character natural is stamped upon the first Adam and his race.

Notice, too, that He is "the last Adam." The contrast here is between the first and the last, not the first and the second. Why last? Evidently because that word excludes the idea that any third or subsequent race can ever be needed, or enter upon the scene. "He taketh away the first that He may establish the second," is what Hebrews 10:9 says. He never takes away the second in favor of a third! The second is established. The last Adam abides without rival or successor, for perfection divine perfection and not merely human is reached in Him.

The forty-sixth verse of our chapter points out the historic order of the two Adams. First the natural, then the spiritual; though, of course, in importance and in the thoughts and purposes of God, the last was always first.

Verse 47 again speaks of the two heads, emphasizing the condition that marked them rather than their respective characters, as in verse 45. The one is "of the earth, earthy," or as it may be translated, "out of the earth, made of dust." The Other is "out of heaven." In this verse they are termed "the first man" and "the second Man"; not this time "the first" and "the last." Now why is it second? Because here, where Christ's manhood rather than His headship is before us, the object of the Spirit of God is to exclude every other man. After the first Adam and until the last Adam historically appeared no man counted at all. The last Adam was the second man, and not Cain, as we might have supposed.

Who and what, then, was Cain? Simply Adam reproduced. Adam "begat... in his own likeness, after his image" (Gen. 5:3); "In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made He him" (Gen. 5:1). This likeness, alas, was marred by the Fall, and it was not until he was a fallen creature that Adam begat "in his own likeness." He reproduced his fallen self both morally and physically. Hence from the point of view of this passage in 1 Corinthians 15 there was nothing but "the first man" until the appearance of Christ, who is the second. Adam was a marvelous and complex being, and every one of his millions of descendants during that time was an individual with characteristics, that showed on the surface, if we may so put it, some fresh permutation or combination of the many features which make up the Adamic nature; yet fundamentally all were one in both nature and character.

At this point we may perhaps appreciate more fully the immense importance of the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ was born of a virgin. There was a hint of this great fact in the first prediction concerning Him ever given. It was the Lord God Himself who spoke of "the woman" and "her seed" (Gen. 3:15). Hence, "when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman" (Gal. 4:4), yet conceived under the direct action of the Holy Ghost (Luke 1:35). Therefore it is that while the Deliverer was by the woman He was not an ordinary son of Adam at all. The virgin birth means that the Lord Jesus while truly Man was yet a Man of a new order.

Verse 48 turns to the two races, ranged respectively under the two heads; stating that the earthy race of the first man partakes of the character and position of Adam; the heavenly race of that of Christ. To understand rightly the race we must therefore rightly understand the head.

Verse 49 links on the truth of the preceding verses with the great theme of the chapter, i.e., resurrection, by showing that the identity between the last Adam and His race is to be complete even as to the physical body. We certainly have borne the image of Adam in our physical bodies. So certainly shall we bear the image of the last Adam, the heavenly Man. Our resurrection bodies will be fashioned in conformity with His body of glory.

The latter part of Romans 5, beginning at verse 12, should also be read. Here we find the spiritual results flowing from the characteristic actions of the two heads. Adam's characteristic action was disobedience, whilst obedience even to the death of the cross characterized Christ. From Adam's sin there flowed death and condemnation. From Christ's obedience unto death flows life and justification. The main line of the Apostle's argument runs straight from verse 12 to verse 18. Verses 13-17 are parenthetical, running like a loop line between the same two points and giving details which show that what is offered in Jesus Christ the risen Head of the new order cannot be confined to any section of humanity, such as Israel. It must be as universal as the calamity it is designed to overcome. Moreover, the blessings thus introduced are of a nature to meet, and more than meet, the penalties incurred by Adam's fall.

Verses 18 and 19 are important as summing up the whole matter. One distinction which is not quite clear in our excellent Authorized Translation should be noted. We quote therefore from the New Translation of the late J. N. Darby. Verse 18 deals with "one offense towards all men to condemnation" and "one righteousness towards all men for justification of life." Verse 19 states that "the many have been constituted sinners" and "the many will be constituted righteous."

In these words we observe the same distinction as we have before seen when sins were in question in Romans 3:22. It is a question of sin—the nature— here, but again the bearing of Christ's one righteousness, consummated in His death, is distinguished from its actual effect. Its bearing is towards all with justification as the objective, only here the justification is not contemplated as being from offenses, but rather as being "justification of life." The former is, of course, perfect and absolute, but somewhat negative in its bearing, i.e., by it we lose both guilt and condemnation. The latter is more positive and indicates that full and perfect clearance which is the portion of every believer by virtue of his standing in the life and consequently nature of the risen Christ as Man. It might have pleased God to clear us from the guilt of our sins without cutting the old links with the fallen Adam and implanting us in the risen Christ. This further great favor is, however, ours as believers

and consequently we are now “constituted righteous.” While we are in this world the old nature with its unchanged tendencies is still in us, as other scriptures show; but in this verse the Spirit of God is contemplating what we are in Christ as God sees us.

Romans 8:1 sums up this section of the epistle and reverts to the truth we have just considered. “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.” If it stated that in the Day of Judgment we believers should escape condemnation, that would be wonderful. What it does state, however, is that there is now no condemnation. The condemnation has been borne and exhausted as far as we are concerned, and we are now in the life of the risen Christ and as clear of condemnation therefore as He is.

A great many Christians, we fear, have never seriously considered this important side of truth. It deals with life and nature rather than with the overt acts in which life and nature express themselves, or, as we commonly say, with what we are rather than with what we have done, and hence it is not quite so easy of apprehension. Still, it really conducts us to that which is the secret of the profound blessedness which characterizes Christianity, and we are great losers if we ignore it.

What is the difference between “the first man” and “the old man?”

The first man, as the context in 1 Corinthians 15 shows, is Adam personally, if the expression be taken in its primary sense. There is, however, a secondary sense, as is clear from the fact that we do not meet with the second man until Christ appears. How then shall we designate the millions of humanity that came between? They were all “first man” in character; so that in a secondary sense “the first man” covers Adam and his race.

The “old man,” on the other hand, is a purely abstract conception. It does not indicate any particular human being or group of human beings, but rather is the personification of all those moral features which characterize fallen Adam and his race. It is the fallen Adamic character personified.

“In Christ” is a phrase often met with in Paul’s Epistles. What, in a few words, is its significance?

As 1 Corinthians 15:22 shows, it is an expression in contrast with “in Adam.” We are all “in Adam” by nature, i.e., we originate from him and stand before God in exactly his nature, position, and status. The believer is “in Christ” by grace, inasmuch as we owe our real and spiritual existence to His quickening action as the last Adam. We therefore stand before God in exactly the nature, position, and status of the risen Christ, as Man.

We might use the process of grafting as an illustration, if at liberty to exactly reverse what is actually carried out by the gardener. He grafts the good into the worthless, whereby the worthless is condemned, and the good dominates and characterizes the tree. In Romans 11 grafting is used as an illustration of God’s dispensational dealings with Jews and Gentiles, and the Apostle points out in verse 24 that he uses the figure in a way “contrary to nature” by supposing the wild olive branch grafted into the good olive tree and thereby partaking of the virtues of the good. This is the adaptation of the process we want for our illustration. The Christian is one disconnected from the “Adam” stock by God’s work and grafted into Christ, partaking of His fullness. He is “in Christ,” though the flesh is still in him.

Does “in Christ” then only refer to the believer’s new position or status before God?

If the early part of Romans 8 be read we find that verse 1 gives us “in Christ,” but this is followed in verses 8 and 9 by: “So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God. But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you.”

Now “in the Spirit” is as clearly contrasted with “in the flesh” as “in Christ” is with “in Adam,” and it indicates the new condition or state which corresponds to the position in Christ.

Now these two things, though distinct and distinguished thus in Scripture, are not to be disconnected. There is no such thought as a person being in Christ and not “in Spirit,” nor vice versa. They are two parts of one whole. Speaking generally, we may say, then, that the expression “in Christ” often covers the fact of our new state as “in Spirit”; yet if we come to a closer analysis, as in Romans 8:1-9, it does mainly refer to the believer’s new position rather than his new condition.

Has all this anything to do with that “new creation” of which Scripture speaks?

It certainly has. It says, “if any man be in Christ he is a new creature” or “there is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17).

New creation clearly does not mean the destruction of personality or identity. If that reversed form of grafting— “contrary to nature” — of which Romans 11 speaks could be carried out in nature we should see the once wild olive bearing good fruit, and generally behaving as the cultivated stock. It would indeed be new created, yet the identity of the engrafted twig would remain.

Still, it is creation: as positive a work of God as the creation of Genesis 1. As Ephesians 2:10 says, “We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus, unto good works...” To be God’s workmanship is a wonderful thing.

The first man is evidently superseded by the second Man. When did this take place?

If we consider things from the standpoint of God’s purpose, He never had any but the Second before Him. We never were chosen in Adam in any sense whatever. God has “chosen us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4).

If, however, we consider things from our standpoint, we may say that the true character of the first man was fully revealed at the cross. There he was judged, and at the same moment the perfection of the second Man also came fully to light and He was glorified (see John 13:31). Historically, therefore, the cross was the supreme moment. The first was judged and superseded by the Second, who was tested to the uttermost and raised from the dead.

In the new heaven and new earth of Revelation 21:1-7 new creation will characterize the whole scene. "Behold I make all things new" is the word. The supersession of the first by the second will then be absolute and complete.

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1 Corinthians: Briefly Expounded, 1 Corinthians 14 (14:1-40)

Chapter 13 BEING a parenthesis, showing the surpassing excellence of divine love, the first verse of chapter 14 is connected with the last verse of chapter xii. Love is to be pursued as the thing of all importance, for where it is, spiritual gifts may safely be desired. Where love reigns, they will be desired not for personal advancement or distinction, but for the profit and blessing of all. Hence the gift of prophecy is given the first place. It is amongst the best gifts which may be coveted earnestly.

The Apostle at once proceeds to contrast the gift of prophecy with the gift of tongues, which evidently had great attractions in the estimation of the Corinthian believers, being so obviously supernatural in its origin. He does not cast any doubt upon this particular spiritual manifestation. The "tongues" to which he alluded, were the genuine manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit, and under the control of the speaker. The Apostle spoke with tongues himself in larger measure than any of the Corinthians, but he did so in a controlled and restrained way. Verses 6, 15, 18, and 19 show this. The point is, that even when the gift of tongues is at its best, it is of less profit than the gift of prophecy.

When the Corinthian saints came together in assembly before the Lord, He was to be their Director in all things, and all their activities were to be in the energy of the Spirit of God. This chapter furnishes us with many directions from the Lord—directions of a general character, which are binding at all times. Whether on a given occasion this or that brother should take any audible part, and if they should, what part, is a matter which must be settled in reference to the Lord's will when the occasion comes. But when they do take part, they must do so in subjection to the general instructions given by the Lord in this chapter, acting as men of a sound mind enlightened by the word of the Lord. It may be remembered how Paul speaks to Timothy of God having given us the spirit "of power, and of love, and of a sound mind" (2 Tim. 1:7). This is exemplified in the chapter before us. Chapter 12 shows us the Spirit of power in the assembly; chapter 13, the spirit of love; chapter 14, the spirit of a sound mind.

Spiritual activities in the assembly may be Godward or manward. Activities Godward are mentioned in verses 14 to 17—praying, singing, giving of thanks. But in the main the chapter is concerned with what is manward—prophecy, tongues, doctrine, interpretation. These gifts are to be exercised for the benefit of others, and the test the Apostle applies is that of general edification. If the exercise of the gift edifies it is of profit. If it does not edify it is to no profit.

According to verse 3 the end to be attained is threefold. The simple meaning of edification is building up. The foundation is laid when the Gospel is received; but upon the foundation an immense deal has to be built up, so that edification may rightly continue throughout a long Christian life. Exhortation, or encouragement, follows. We pass through a hostile world, subject to all kinds of adverse influences. Hence we continually need what will stir us up to spiritual vigor. Then thirdly, comfort, or consolation is a continuous need in the assembly; for there are always those present who are face to face with sorrow and trouble and disappointment, and who need that which will lift them above their sorrows. We might summarize this threefold end as, building up, stirring up, and lifting up. Prophecy leads to the attainment of these three things.

Prophecy is not only the foretelling of future events. It includes the forth-telling of God's mind and message. In the apostolic days, before the written New Testament Scriptures were in circulation, there was prophecy of an inspired sort, such as is claimed by the Apostle Paul for himself and others in chapter 2 of our epistle, verse 13. We have not that today, nor do we need it, having the inspired Scriptures in our hands. Prophecy of an uninspired sort we may still have, for we may still find men gifted of God to open up to us, from the inspired Scriptures, the mind of God and His message for any given moment; and when we find it we do well to be very thankful for it. Such ministry of the Word of God does indeed build up, and stir up, and lift up.

As to the gift of tongues; its exercise is not forbidden, but it is definitely and strictly regulated in this chapter. The regulations laid down are of much importance. They make it certain that this gift if present, and exercised, shall be used for profit. Further, we have no hesitation in saying that when and where the gift is claimed, and yet those exercising it systematically ignore these divinely given regulations, a doubt is at once raised in any sound mind as to the genuineness of the alleged gift.

Even apart from this, however, these regulations are full of profit for us, for what is laid down must obviously apply in other directions also. For an instance of what we mean take verses 6 to 9. The immediate point of these verses is that mere vocal sounds are of no value. What is uttered by the voice must have some meaning to those who listen. It must be intelligible. Is that only of importance in connection with the gift of tongues? By no means. It applies universally. In our meetings it will not be enough that the speaker talks in English, for he may be enticed into a display of his learning by using hosts of long words of uncommon use, which leave the minds of his learners a complete blank as to his meaning. Or he may speak with such rapidity, or with such mystic obscurity, as to be unintelligible. In all such cases people merely "speak into the air," (ch. 14:9) and there is no profit.

We might wonder at Paul writing as he does in verses 14 and 15, did we not know what sometimes takes place even in our day. It is not God's way that even the speaker himself should be ignorant of the meaning of the words he has just uttered. He is to utter words, whether in speaking to others, or in prayer, or in song, which he himself understands and which are understandable to others.

If anyone address himself to God in the assembly, whether in prayer or thanksgiving he must remember that he does so as giving expression to the desires or the praises of the assembly. He is not speaking merely on his own behalf. Consequently he must carry the assembly with him; and they, understanding and following his utterances, ratify them before God and make them their own by saying "Amen" (signifying

“So be it”) at the end. They cannot intelligibly and honestly say “Amen” at the end if they are quite unaware of what it is all about. Far better is it to speak but five words profitable for instruction, than ten thousand words that mean nothing to the hearers.

Take note that verse 16 supposes that each in the assembly, even the unlearned and insignificant, do say “Amen.” They say it, and not merely think it. If our experience be any guide, a very small percentage in the assembly say “Amen” today. Test what we say in an average prayer meeting. If a brother in prayer really voices our desires let us ratify what he has uttered with a good distinct “Amen.” If he has not, honesty compels us to refrain from saying it. If the earnest, fervent outpouring of our desires were ratified by all of us in the utterance of a hearty “Amen” at the close, and the wearisome parade of information, and discussion of doctrines with God, which sometimes is inflicted on us at great length as a substitute for prayer, were ended in a rather chilling silence, the offender might possibly be awakened to what he is doing. When however every prayer finishes in silence save for a few feeble “Amens,” no such discrimination can be felt, and one begins to fear that all may be formalism and with little or no meaning or depth. Let us think on these things and cultivate reality.

Also we are to cultivate understanding in the things of God, while retaining a child-like spirit in other regards, as verse 20 tells us. When tongues are misused, as indicated in verse 23, it only shows a complete lack of mature sense. Children might act in that foolish way, just as they love to show off their new clothes. But the believer is to act as having the understanding of a man, not a child. The prophetic ministry of the Word of God brings the soul into the very presence of God. And the power of such ministry may be felt even by an unbeliever who happens to be present.

It is not enough that there should be prophecy. The gift must be exercised according to God’s order, which is laid down in verses 29 to 33. The Corinthians were highly gifted, and the tendency in their assemblies was evidently to have a great excess of talking. Verse 26 shows this. Each was eager to exercise his gift and get it in evidence. Confusion, disorder, tumult, was the result. God was not the Author of this.

So definite instructions were laid down. Speaking in tongues was not forbidden, but it is strictly regulated in verses 27 and 28; and if no interpreter is present it is forbidden. Prophecy too is regulated. Two or three speakers in any given meeting are enough. How wise is this regulation! The Lord knows the receptive capacity of the average believer. If two speak at considerable length it is enough. If more brevity marks the speakers, three may find an opportunity. Then it is enough. Someone may ignore this ruling and insist on giving us his word, but we are wearied and end by retaining less than if we had heard only three.

Note that the others who listen are to “judge.” That is, even in days when inspired utterances by direct revelation (see verse 30) were given in the assembly, those who listened were to do so with discernment. They were not to receive without testing what they heard. They were never to adopt the attitude of: — “Oh, everything that dear brother A—says must be right!” Such an attitude is a direct incitement to the devil to pervert the ideas of brother A—and so encompass the fall of many. It is a disaster for brother A—as well as his admirers. There is liberty for all the prophets to prophecy, though not of course on any one occasion. If on any given occasion a prophet may have something to say and yet no opportunity occurs, he must restrain himself and wait on God till the opportunity comes. He himself is to be master of his own spirit and not mastered by it.

Verses 34 and 35 deal with the silence of women in the assembly. The instruction is very plain and the word used for “speak” is the ordinary word and does not mean “chatter” as some have made out. This regulation cuts across the spirit of the age, without a doubt. But if that be a reason for ignoring Scripture, there will not be much Scripture left that is not ignored.

The Spirit of God foreknew how these regulations would be ignored or challenged. Some at Corinth evidently were inclined in that direction. Hence verses 36 and 37. The Word of God came out through the Lord Himself and His apostles and not through the Corinthians. It came to them. They might fancy themselves as spiritual people. If they really were spiritual they would prove it by discerning that these rules laid down by Paul were not just his notions, but the commandments of the Lord through him. The test of our spirituality today is just the same.

Take note that the Word of God does not come out through the church. It comes to the church. The crowning pretension of the great Romish system is that “the church”—and by that they mean the Romish authorities—is the teaching body. We need not here concern ourselves with their claim to be “the church,” for it is evident from this passage that the Apostles are the fountains, whence have flowed the pure waters of the Word, and we have them today in their inspired writings—the New Testament Scriptures. The church is not “the teaching body” it is “the taught body.” The Word of God comes to it, and its duty is to bow to the Word of God.

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