

CHAPTER 6

THE PROBLEM OF TONGUES IN THE ASSEMBLY

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

In the first three verses of this “love” chapter, Paul sets forth a principle crucial to a correct understanding of the problem of tongues in Corinth. The principle is this: *It is possible to exercise a spiritual gift apart from love.* If it were possible, one could even speak in angelic tongues apart from love (verse 1). One may have the gifts of prophecy, knowledge, and faith, and yet not have love (verse 2). One could even suffer and die as a martyr apart from love (verse 3). In other words, a person may have a *genuine gift from God*, and yet fail to exercise that gift in love.

Such *love* can be produced in the believer only by God the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22) as he maintains a right relationship to the Lord (cf. Galatians 5:16; Ephesians 4:30; 1 Thessalonians 5:19). This was precisely the problem of the Corinthians. They were not walking according to love. They were walking according

to the flesh: "Are ye not *carnal* [fleshly], and walk as men?" (1 Corinthians 3:1-4)

The key question is this: Does a person need to be in right relationship to the Lord in order to exercise a *genuine* spiritual gift? Consider Judas Iscariot, the son of perdition. There is no doubt that Judas was genuinely gifted of God and enabled to perform miraculous sign-gifts. According to Matthew 10:1-8, Judas actually had a part in healing the sick, cleansing the lepers, raising the dead, and casting out demons (verse 8). He even went about preaching the gospel of the kingdom (verse 7). But Judas was an *unclean, unregenerate, unsaved man* (John 13:10-11). Certainly he was not in right relationship with the Lord. Judas exercised these gifts apart from love.

The gift of tongues at Corinth was obviously being abused and misused. It was being exercised apart from love. *Love edifies* (1 Corinthians 8:1), but the tongues-speaking at Corinth did not edify (1 Corinthians 14). The misuse of the gift was causing great disorder and confusion in the assembly. But *the problem was not with the gift itself*. The gift of tongues was a *genuine* charismatic gift. Paul never implied that the gift was spurious or illegitimate. Paul never questioned the fact that the Corinthian believers actually had the God-given, miraculous ability to speak in tongues. *The real problem was with the Corinthians!* They were *misusing* the gift that God had given them and they were not exercising it in love.

God cannot be blamed for the Corinthian problem.

Tongues was a miraculous gift and God must enable a person to speak in tongues (Acts 2:4). Does this mean that when the gift was misused, *God* was misusing *His* gift? God forbid! Perish the thought! "God is not the author of confusion" (1 Corinthians 14:33). On the contrary, the *Corinthians* were misusing *His* gift. They were to blame, not God.

To solve this apparent dilemma, consider another miraculous charismatic gift, the gift of prophecy. It was possible for the gift of prophecy to be abused, and therefore Paul had to set forth some regulations in 1 Corinthians 14:29-31. Was it God's fault that His gift of prophecy was being abused? The answer is found in 1 Corinthians 14:32: "The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets." Dr. James L. Boyer explains this verse as follows: "The one who exercised the gift of prophecy, and also by implication the gift of tongues, was not overwhelmed by a compulsive external power which moved him automatically without his control. Rather, he was able to speak, or to wait his turn, or to refrain from speaking. In accordance with the regulations here stated, he knew what he was doing and was responsible for his actions."⁶

The gifted man was *responsible* for how he used the gift! *The problem was not with God! The problem was not with the gift! The problem was with the Corinthians!*