



Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship

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Window on the World

From Randal Dick
Superintendent of Missions

Scandinavia's challenge



By John Halford

TYREHEIM, Norway—This is a hard article to write. It's much easier to tug at your heartstrings writing about the poverty-stricken Third World hellholes where some of our brethren live.

But what do I say about Scandinavia? It's idyllic. Here at Tyreheim, 50 kilometres from Oslo, cosy log cabins fringe a mountain meadow dotted with wild flowers. Beyond is a forest of dark green fir trees, with just a trace of the winter snows. The peaks soaring above are still snow capped.

Far below, a lake sparkles as the melting ice gives way to crystal clear water. A boat makes its way slowly to the opposite shore. The sky is blue, with a few puffy white clouds on the horizon. Norway in spring is paradise—heaven on earth.

I am here to enjoy a spring festival with members from Scandinavia. They have come from Norway, Sweden and Denmark to spend a few days together. They need the contact, because there are not many of them, and they have an important job to do.

Scandinavians may live in paradise, but they have lost the knowledge of God. The Nordic region is one of the most spiritually deprived places on earth.

Our church's congregations have never been large here. We have 85 members, scattered throughout Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland. We have two elders. Carl Aas from Oslo is the regional pastor, and Don Boddie takes care of the church in Copenhagen, Denmark. (Scandinavia includes Iceland, but our church has never had members there.)

As good as it gets

Every now and then the United Nations ranks the countries of the world according to a quality of life index. The Scandinavian countries usually come out on top when such things as education, health care, income and life expectancy are compared. The average Norwegian can expect to live to 78, twice as long as in some Third World countries. In terms of physical wellbeing, the Nordic countries are the best places on the earth to live.

But without God in their lives they surely are not the happiest places, we are tempted to say. Scandinavian countries are relatively crime free, and although they

have pockets of misery, overall they are disciplined and tranquil. Their towns and cities are pin clean and the buses and trains run on time.

Scandinavians are to be found on the cutting edge of humanitarian and environmental projects around the world, and at home they are extremely generous, giving more to charity per capita than almost anyone else. And don't believe that stuff about the suicide rates being higher—the statistics don't bear it out. Norwegians, Swedes, Finns and Danes may not be an exuberant people, compared to, say Italians or Filipinos. But don't mistake seriousness for unhappiness. They are not unhappy. Why should they be?

So, what is this article about? Perhaps to help you understand the question our Scandinavian members have to ask themselves sometimes—what is the church's job here?

The problem of paradise

Although the Nordic peoples have a long Christian tradition, most now show little interest or involvement in religion. Nearly everyone is a de facto member of the state church, but most are content to leave it at that. They would say they are Christian if asked, but the knowledge of God does not intrude much into their lives. The cradle to grave welfare state has blunted the physical consequences of letting go of traditional morality.

So preaching the gospel to Scandinavians is like selling proverbial refrigerators to Eskimos. What do they need it for? They are already blessed.

The church members told me that when they try outreach projects they often find themselves getting in the way of state-run departments formed specifically to do the same thing.

No need for God

Something is frightening about this paradise. The people who have the highest standard of living on earth now see no need of God. Their "Christian" ethic has helped them become developed, civilized and democratic. But a "Christian" society without the real

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power of God coursing through it is ultimately a liability.

Prosperity without the knowledge of God can lead to self-satisfied delusion. "What does it profit a man that he gains the whole world and loses his life," argued Jesus. He meant life with God—real life—but what does that mean to someone who has no understanding or knowledge of God? The Scandinavians have not really rejected Christianity—it has simply become a non-issue.

Why does life need to be better? Why is Christ the answer if you aren't asking the questions? Why bother about the wages of sin when you have a welfare state? Why do you need a Saviour if you have no sense of guilt?

"Our challenge here is not to explain to people what the Bible means," Mr. Aas said. "People don't yet know what it says. They certainly don't look to it for the answers to the big questions in life. Like the church in Laodicea, they are rich in material goods, but do not see that they are poor in spiritual matters. This is a problem in most of the Western world, but especially in Scandinavia."

Uphill battle

Church members work together to write, edit and publish booklets on various topics in the main Scandinavian languages—Danish, Swedish and Norwegian. (Scandinavians understand each other to some extent, but obviously prefer to learn in their own language.) Today we have an active reading list of 1,400 people. The members also organize concerts and public lectures. But it is an uphill battle.

On a day-to-day basis, Scandinavia's physically blessed people have little need to stop and think about God.

But as French scientist and theologian Blaise Pascal observed, "There is a God-shaped hole in everyone." Even the most physically secure people cannot escape their humanity. However good life is, it does not last forever.

Reality check

In Oslo, a sculpture park is dedicated to the work of Gustav Vigeland (1869-1943). Dozens of bronze and granite human figures are on display, modelled with brutal realism.

Instead of idealized, perfect physiques, many of Vigeland's statues show us as we really are. It is a sharp reminder of reality in this humanistic paradise, and you can't walk through it without wincing. The central feature is a 50-foot statue, sculpted from a single piece of granite. More than 120 figures are sculpted, scrambling and clawing in a tangle of arms and legs, seeking to climb higher and higher. Vigeland was expressing our restless need to grow, to get somewhere, to be more than we are and to find something to fill the God-shaped hole. And when you've reached the top? Well, on the day I looked at it, a pigeon was casually relieving itself.

Eventually even the most physically blessed people on earth must confront their mortality and ask, "What is the purpose of it all?" At such times, God's voice can often be heard most clearly—but not by people who have long lost contact.

The words of Isaiah 40:3-5 have a special poignancy in this context: "In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed."

Please remember your Scandinavian brethren as they work together to do their part in clearing a way for the message of hope in their magnificent spiritual wilderness.

Our church in Estonia

The WCG has 15 members in Estonia. Carl Fredrik Aas, regional pastor, visits four times a year, while Leo Kaagjarv is our local leader. Mr. Aas gives a public lecture every time he visits on topics suggested by the invited audience. In the last seven years he has covered more than 20 basic but important biblical topics. The last one was about forgiveness. Attendance at the lectures is between 30 and 80, depending on the topic. After the lecture, while the audience is enjoying coffee and cakes, Mr. Aas and Mr. Kaagjarv have prayed for those with health or family problems.

Many people in this once communist satellite republic respond with tears of gratitude and relief when they are prayed for. They have never had someone pray for them just because they cared.

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Speaking in Tongues

(Part 2 of 3)

Tongue-Speaking In Corinth

On Paul's second major journey to preach the gospel to gentiles, he went into Europe, preaching briefly in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea and Athens (Acts 16:12-17:15).

In Corinth, however, Paul spent a year and a half (Acts 18:1, 9-11) — a long stay for an apostle who was "constantly on the move" (2 Corinthians 11:26). Corinth was a seaport city with a reputation for immorality. There Paul found Jews and gentiles who wanted to be taught the Word of God.

After the congregation had been established in Corinth, Paul eventually moved on — to Ephesus in Asia Minor, Caesarea in Judea, Antioch in Syria, and, after a few years, to Ephesus again (Acts 18:18-23; 19:1).

Bad News From Corinth

While Paul was back in Ephesus, he heard about the Corinthian church. The news was not good — the new Christians were arguing among themselves about several aspects of Christian behaviour. Their example made Christianity look bad, even to the immoral pagans!

The Corinthian Christians sent Paul a letter asking him for advice about a number of topics, including the topic of tongues. They had been speaking in tongues frequently, and they asked him about this spiritual gift. Their letter gave him an opportunity to give them the guidance they needed.

In his letter Paul criticized them because their arguments were ruining the unity that Christians ought to have. "Some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you" (1 Corinthians 1:11). "I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it" (1 Corinthians 11:18). "Your meetings do more harm than good" (verse 17).

In their disagreements, some of the people claimed to follow one Christian leader, and some claimed to follow another (1 Corinthians 1:12). The behaviour of the Corinthian Christians was wrong, and Paul had to correct them.

"I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought" (verse 10).

Paul Writes About Their Problems

In chapters 1-4, Paul tried to help the Corinthians see the problems of disunity. They were acting like unbelievers, not like Christians (1 Corinthians 3:3). He told them what to do about sexual immorality within the Church (1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 6:12-20) and lawsuits between Christians (verses 1-8). These subjects illustrate the problems the congregation was

having. Paul had to set them straight with strong words.

Then Paul began to answer their questions. "Now for the matters you wrote about..." (1 Corinthians 7:1). First, he dealt with the topic of marriage in chapter 7. Chapter 8 begins to address their next subject: "Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (verse 1).

From the way Paul writes his letter, we can tell that the Corinthian Christians were proud of their "knowledge." Paul points out that their knowledge, at least the way they were using it, was harmful to their spiritual growth. Their knowledge was causing arguments and divisions in the congregation. Love, he writes, is more valuable, and it is a better indicator of Christian living. Chapter 9 explains Paul's right as an apostle, and chapter 10 continues the subject of food sacrificed to idols. In chapter 11, Paul comments on some problems the Corinthians had in their worship meetings.

Various Spiritual Gifts

In chapter 12, Paul begins a new section, which contains comments on tongues. "Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant" (verse 1). They needed instruction to help them use their spiritual gifts in a helpful way.

There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, Paul tells us, even though they are all inspired by the same Spirit (verse 4). God gives these special abilities "for the common good" — so Christians can help one another (verse 7). Paul lists various gifts, including "speaking in different kinds of tongues, and... the interpretation of tongues" (verse 10).

What are these tongues? Are they foreign languages, like the miraculous tongues spoken on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-11)? Or does this gift of tongues produce other kinds of sounds? The fact that a supernatural gift was needed for interpreting the sounds (1 Corinthians 12:10; 14:13) indicates that the speaking may not have been a human language. But we cannot know whether modern tongue speaking is anything like the Corinthian practice.

Paul lists similar spiritual gifts in his letter to the Roman Christians (Romans 12:6-8), but that list doesn't mention tongues or interpretation. Corinth seems to have been the only church congregation where tongues were spoken regularly.

Not everyone has the same spiritual gift or ability, Paul notes. God distributes them: one power to one person, another gift to the next person, a third ability to another, just as God determines (1 Corinthians 12:8-11). By dividing the gifts in this way, God encourages members to work with and help one another.

The analogy of a human body illustrates this. Feet, hands, eyes and other parts serve different functions. By contributing to the body as a whole, the various

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parts serve one another. So it is in the Church, the Body of Christ (verses 12-27). God appoints people with various spiritual functions: apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle-workers, healers, helpers, administrators and speaking in different kinds of tongues (verse 28).

"Are all apostles?" asks Paul, of course not. Neither are all Christians prophets, teachers, miracle-workers, healers, tongue-speakers or interpreters (verses 29-30).

From the way Paul presents his argument, it seems that some Corinthians expected every Christian to have the same gift when it came to tongues. They doubted the spirituality of anyone who did not have that gift. That isn't a reasonable way to judge Christianity, Paul tells them. None of these spiritual gifts can be singled out as the one and only test of the Holy Spirit.

The Best Spiritual Quality

It is good to desire the greater spiritual gifts, says Paul, perhaps agreeing with something the Corinthians had written in their letter (verse 31). It seems that the Corinthian Christians eagerly desired to be spiritual and to appear spiritual.

In chapter 13, Paul describes the best evidence of spirituality — love. If love is not present, it does not matter what kind of miracle-working gifts a person might have (verses 1-3).

Paul mentioned, "tongues of men and of angels" (verse 1). "Tongues of men" means human languages, but what are the "tongues of... angels"? There is no indication in the Bible that angels speak to humans in mysterious languages. Every time they spoke to humans, they were understood.

So why did Paul mention angelic languages? It may be that some of the Corinthian tongue-speakers claimed that their sounds were angelic. Or perhaps Paul used the term as the most exalted tongue speaking he could imagine. And, of course, in the realm of spirits there certainly is a different vocabulary. In any case, Paul tells us that tongue speaking without love would be nothing; no matter how "spiritual" it might appear.

God's way of life is based on love. Love perseveres and endures forever; it will never fail or become unnecessary (verses 7-8). In contrast, spiritual gifts will eventually no longer be needed. Knowledge, at least the kind that the Corinthians were proud of, will pass away (verse 8). Even prophecy, a gift that Paul praises, will cease.

"For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes [at the return of Christ], the imperfect disappears.... Now I know in part; then I shall know fully" (verses 9-12).

When God's people are resurrected and become completely perfect, special spiritual knowledge will no longer be important, because everyone will know fully. Divine messages and predictions will no longer be important, for the same reason. Tongues will likewise cease. Certain spiritual gifts have value in this

temporal age, but they are not of eternal significance in the way that love is.

A Better Form of Speaking

Spiritual gifts do have value, so we should want to have them (1 Corinthians 12:31). But what kind of gifts should we desire? We follow the way of love. We should eagerly desire a gift that helps others. "Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church" (1 Corinthians 14:12).

Paul recommends "the gift of prophecy" (verse 1). He does not necessarily refer to predicting the future. The Greek word Paul used here means "an utterance inspired by God...the capacity or ability to utter inspired messages." The verb translated "prophecy" means "to speak under the influence of divine inspiration, with or without reference to future events" (Louw and Nida — refer to bibliography in part 3).

In other words, the gift of prophecy is, as Edgar Goodspeed translates it, "inspired preaching." Today's English Version calls it "the gift of proclaiming God's message." Speaking in prophecy, Paul says, is better than speaking in tongues. "He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues" (verse 5). Why? Because inspired preaching can be understood, and tongues cannot (without an interpreter).

"Anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men.... No one understands him.... But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort" (verses 2-3). Inspired preaching can be understood; its purpose is building or edifying the Church (verses 4, 31) -- helping Christians live better lives.

Paul says it is good to speak in tongues, but it is much better to prophesy (verse 5). "I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue" (verse 19). "Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying?" (verse 9).

"If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful" (verse 14). If the mind is unfruitful, it implies that even the tongue-speaker didn't understand the sounds. The speaker wouldn't be able to explain it without supernatural help (verse 13).

This is also shown in Paul's comments about musical instruments: The tune isn't identifiable "unless there is a distinction in the notes" (verse 7). Similarly, messages cannot be understood if there is no distinction in sounds. In the tongues spoken by the Corinthians, it seems, words couldn't be distinguished from one another. The message could not be understood.

Were the Corinthians speaking foreign languages that no one in Corinth understood? Or were the sounds simply not part of any human language?

Paul doesn't clearly tell us. His comments cover both possibilities -- sounds that had no meaning, or a foreign language that no one knew. In either case, the result was the same: In Corinth, the tongues could not be understood. They may have had some value to the

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speaker (verse 4), but they were of no value to the congregation.

What Is the Baptism of the Holy Spirit?

John the Baptist predicted that Jesus would baptize people with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:6-8). In Acts 1:5, Jesus told his disciples that they would receive this baptism in a few days. On the Festival of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit filled the disciples (Acts 2:4), fulfilling the predictions of John and Jesus. Peter said the Spirit had been poured out on them (verses 17, 33).

Years later, the Holy Spirit came on Cornelius and other gentiles (Acts 10:44-45). This was the same as the Holy Spirit being "poured out," or having "received" the Holy Spirit (verses 45, 47), or being "baptized" with the Holy Spirit (Acts 11:15-17).

All these terms refer to the same thing: The Holy Spirit is given to God's people. The promised baptism is available to all who believe (Acts 2:38-39). Paul indicated that people usually received the Holy Spirit when they believed (Acts 19:2). The book of Acts records several instances when people were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Paul and the other New Testament writers do not use the phrase "baptism of the Spirit," but they do write about the Holy Spirit being given to God's people. The Spirit is available to all believers as "a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance" (Ephesians 1:13-14). In 1 Corinthians 12:13, Paul writes that all believers are baptized by the Spirit into the Body of Christ, the Church. In Ephesians 5:18 he tells us to "be filled with the Spirit." In Greek, a writer could use a different form of a word to indicate whether a command was for a onetime event or for a continual activity. Paul used the continual form, indicating that Christians should always live according to the Spirit. He was not writing about an unusual experience that initiates people into a new status.

Nothing in Paul's epistles suggests that the gift of the Spirit comes in two steps or blessings. He does not suggest that the gift of tongues, for example, is evidence of having more spiritual power. Romans 12 doesn't even mention tongues as a gift of importance. Church leaders were not required to have the gift of tongues. Instead, they should be able to teach in language that could be understood (1 Timothy 3:1-2, Titus 1:5-9).

What is the evidence of God's Spirit? What can prove that God is in us? His love. If we love others, if we love even our enemies, it is evidence that God's Spirit is guiding us.

If we are inspired to live God's way, if our lives show the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), we are giving evidence that God's Spirit is filling our minds and hearts. A good Christian example is a powerful witness to faith in Jesus Christ.

Seeking After Signs

Jesus said in Mark 16:17-18: "These signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they

drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well."

Some people have taken these verses as a requirement, as if it were a commission that Christians ought to try to fulfil to prove their authenticity. Some groups attempt to pick up poisonous snakes without being harmed. The handlers usually avoid being bitten, but sometimes they are bitten and die. The success rate does not matter. What is important is whether God wants his people to be doing this. Should God's people do dangerous things so God will rescue them with a miracle for all to see that God approves of them? Are miracles necessary to prove that Christianity is right?

Faith does not come from seeing miracles. The Israelites who crossed the Red Sea saw numerous miracles, but they did not have the faith to obey God. And many Christians have believed without seeing anything dramatic. Faith comes when God allows someone to believe the gospel (Romans 10:13-14; John 6:44). The primary miracle is in the heart and mind, not necessarily anything that can be seen. Moreover, God does not want us to do dangerous things in order to prompt his intervention. Satan tempted Jesus with such a challenge, and Jesus answered, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (Matthew 4:5-7). We should not try to force God to do anything. Such conduct shows a lack of faith.

The scripture in Mark 16 is a prediction, not a command. It simply says that some Christians would experience these miracles; it is not a promise to protect all Christians, or to heal all, or that all would speak in tongues, or that all would cast out demons. It indicates that various miracles would happen; it does not say how often they would happen.

Miracles still occur today — healing, for example. Demons have been cast out. Christians have been miraculously spared from accidents. But others have died in faith.

The real proof of Christianity is not miracles. It is the love of God, the fruit of the Spirit of Christ in us, motivating us to love one another and to love and obey God (Romans 5:5; Galatians 5:22; John 13:34-35; Romans 8:14; Acts 5:32).

Interpretation and Order

Paul used part of his letter to tell the Corinthian Christians how to use the gift of tongues. It seems that it was their regular custom to speak in tongues. But tongues had become a problem — enough of a problem for the Corinthians to ask Paul's advice about the situation.

For the specific circumstances at Corinth, Paul advised tongue-speakers to pray for the gift of interpretation (verse 13); it is only through interpretation that others could learn something from the sounds (verse 5).

"If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church" (verse 28). This implies that the speakers were able to control themselves. They had to be silent unless someone known to have the gift of

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interpretation was also there. They should speak in an orderly way. They should not disrupt services but contribute to them. Paul explained, "For God is not a God of disorder but of peace" (verse 33). When spiritual gifts are being used, there is no excuse for confusion. If there is chaos, the people are not allowing God to work in them in the way he wants. Paul stressed that worship services "should be done in a fitting and orderly way" (verse 40). Apparently the Corinthian meetings had been disorderly, with many people speaking at the same time. "If the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?" (verse 23).

In contrast, Paul says, if some outsiders hear inspired speaking and teaching, they may worship God (verses 24-25).

So Paul gave the Corinthians some simple rules for improving the organization of their worship meetings.

People could come prepared to participate in various ways, according to their gifts or abilities. The primary rule, based on the way of love, was that "all of these must be done for the strengthening of the church" (verse 26).

Only one person should speak at a time, and there should be only two or three speaking in tongues in any one meeting (verse 27). (This rule applied to prophets, too.) If anyone speaks in a tongue, someone must interpret. If no one could explain the message, the tongue-speaker had to be quiet (verse 28).

Paul forcefully corrected the Corinthians on some of their problems, but on the topic of tongues he was gentle. He did not want the correction to cause more division than the problem had caused. "Do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" (verses 39-40).

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Speaking in Tongues (Part 3 of 3)

Evaluating Spiritual Gifts

"My friends, you asked me about spiritual gifts," Paul wrote the Corinthian Christians (1 Corinthians 12:1; quotes on pages 19-21 are from the Contemporary English Version, copyright 1991, American Bible Society). "I want you to desire the best gifts" (verse 31). The Corinthians desired spiritual gifts. Paul took this opportunity to emphasize the spiritual gifts that would best serve the entire community of believers. "If you really want spiritual gifts, choose the ones that will be most helpful to the church" (1 Corinthians 14:12). "Love should be your guide. Be eager to have the gifts that come from the Holy Spirit, especially the gift of prophecy.... When you prophesy [speak an inspired message — see *prophecy* in the glossary], you will be understood, and others will be helped" (verses 1, 3).

Purpose of Speaking: To Be Understood

Paul was giving the Christians in Corinth some guidance that they had asked for. He corrected a mistake they were making. They had been seeking the gift of tongues, but they were misusing the gift. These tongues weren't helping the congregation. "If you speak languages that others don't know, God will understand what you are saying, though no one else will know what you mean.... By speaking languages that others don't know, you help only yourself" (verses 2, 4).

Paul said they didn't have to stop speaking in tongues (verse 39), but he did want them to turn their enthusiasm into more helpful channels, either by interpreting the unknown sounds, or simply by speaking words that could be understood.

"I am glad for you to speak unknown languages, although I had rather for you to prophesy. In fact, prophesying does much more good than speaking unknown languages, unless someone can help the church by explaining what you mean" (verse 5). "When we speak languages that others don't know, we should pray for the power to explain what we mean" (verse 13).

The most helpful gift is the gift of inspired speaking (verse 1). It can encourage, comfort and teach (verses 3, 31).

Meetings Should Be Orderly

Paul also gave the Corinthians advice about a related concern: order in worship meetings. "My friends, when you meet to worship, you must do everything for the good of everyone there" (verse 26).

First, he gave instructions for people who spoke in tongues: "No more than two or three of you should speak.... You must take turns, and someone should always be there to explain what you mean. If no one can explain, you must keep silent in church" (verses 27-28).

Similar instructions were given for people who prophesied in language that could be understood: "Let only one person speak at a time, then all of you will learn something and be encouraged" (verse 31).

The Corinthians needed some advice about this; apparently their meetings had been full of confusion. "Suppose everyone in your worship service started speaking unknown languages, and some outsiders or some unbelievers come in. Won't they think you are crazy?" (verse 23).

Paul was disappointed with how the Corinthian church meetings had been conducted. Earlier, Paul had scolded them because they had been arguing: "Your

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worship services do you more harm than good. I am certainly not going to praise you for this. I am told that you can't get along with each other when you worship.... You are bound to argue with each other" (1 Corinthians 11:17-19).

So Paul stressed order. "God wants everything to be done peacefully and in order.... Do everything properly and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:33, 40).

Was It Really the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit can inspire tongue speaking, as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 12:7-11 and as we see in the book of Acts.

But tongue speaking can happen in other ways, too. Non-Christians, both ancient and modern, have spoken in tongues. Several ancient religions included tongue speaking, usually (as far as we can tell) not a real language, but simply strings of syllables, also called ecstatic speech:

There are records of ecstatic speech and the like in Egypt in the eleventh century B.C. In the Hellenistic [Greek] world the prophetess of Delphi and the Sibylline priestess spoke in unknown or unintelligible speech. Moreover, the Dionysian rites contained a trancelike state as well as glossolalia. Many of the magicians and sorcerers of the first century world exhibit similar phenomena. (G.R. Osborne, in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1984, page 1100.)

Descriptions of ecstatic speech are common in the study of comparative religions.... The Delphic and Pythian religions of Greece understood ecstatic behaviour and speech to be evidence of divine inspiration by Apollos. [C.M. Robeck, Jr., in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 4, 1988, page 872.)

How did these ancient pagans speak in tongues? Perhaps they were given supernatural abilities by demons, but perhaps they did it simply from human ability. Modern investigations have found that tongues — or at least something that sounds like tongues — can come from a natural source, the human brain:

The tongues phenomena can be explained on psychological, sociological, physiological and linguistic ground alone.... The consensus of most social scientists is that glossolalia (tongue-speaking) takes place when a person is functioning in some type of altered mental state... Psychologists consider them [tongues] to be explainable in terms not necessarily supernatural or spiritual.... The psychological state of the glossal list is altered in some way. (Klemet Preus, *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 46, 1982, pages 280-281.)

Glossolalia is not language in the ordinary sense.... It is, rather, a willed and welcomed vocal event in which, in a context of attention to religious realities, the tongue operates within one's mood but apart from one's mind in a way comparable to the fantasy-languages of children.... Glossolalia is regularly both taught...and learned, and is in fact easy to do if one wants to. (J.I. Packer, *Churchman*, Vol. 94, 1980, pages 108-109.)

Glossolalia is a learned skill, however unconscious its mechanism. The occasions on which it is manifest are to a high degree dependent upon expectations of a specific group, expressed in part through ritualized procedures. Even the characteristic bodily motions accompanying dissociation and some aspects of modulations in the utterances are specific to a particular group and even to the leader who has "taught" the glossolalist. And the interpretation given to glossolalia depends upon the belief system of the group. (Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 1983, page 120.)

Ecstatic speech, although unusual, is a natural ability that can be taught. Tongue speaking is not necessarily a miracle, so it cannot be proof of the Holy Spirit. The Corinthian Christians, however, had been assuming that tongue speaking was proof of supernatural inspiration. From the way that Paul writes, we conclude that some of the Corinthians had a real spiritual gift for speaking in tongues.

However, others -- the ones causing confusion — were imitating the gift. Perhaps influenced by the importance given to ecstatic sounds in pagan religions, some of the Corinthians emphasized tongue speaking as a visible evidence of being spiritual. In doing so, they were neglecting the more important parts of Christianity, such as love.

Paul redirected their thoughts to help them see a better way. He started by reminding the Corinthians of their pagan past (1 Corinthians 12:2), and he gave an extreme example to show that not every saying is inspired by God (verse 3). Messages need to be examined before they can be accepted (1 Corinthians 14:29, 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21). God will not inspire a message that contradicts the Bible or the way of love. Since the message needs to be evaluated, it has to be understood. That is why Paul says the gift of tongues, if there is no interpreter, is for private use (1 Corinthians 14:28), and that is why he emphasizes prophecy.

Understandable speaking is better than ecstatic sounds in several ways: It can be controlled and orderly, it can teach and edify both believers and unbelievers; and it is not noisy chaos. No one would confuse it with the ecstasy that occurred in groups who, for example, worshipped the wine god while drinking and making noise with musical instruments. "Brothers, stop thinking like children" (verse 20). Paul did not mean that tongue speaking was childish, but rather that the Corinthian overemphasis on tongues was childish. Paul quoted a passage from Isaiah 28:11-12 to point out that speaking in strange tongues is not always an effective way to bring people to God. Tongues are a sign "for unbelievers." People who don't yet believe in God look for miraculous proofs (1 Corinthians 14:22). But even if they see tongues, they may scoff, perhaps saying the people are drunk, crazy or even demon-inspired (verse 23, Acts 2:13).

Tongues, as a sign, do not lead people to the obedience and faith in Jesus our Lord. Christians, who already believe, need to look for the less spectacular

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but more important change in the human heart, a change Paul describes as the way of love.

Did Paul Speak in Tongues?

But didn't Paul himself speak in tongues? He says he did in 1 Corinthians 14:18, but we do not know what kind of tongues he spoke. He knew several languages, but this is probably not what he meant. He did not say he spoke in more languages; rather, he said he spoke in tongues more often than the Corinthians did. He could pray in a tongue, but he preferred to pray with understanding (verses 14-15). Paul described many of his supernatural and natural experiences (2 Corinthians 12:1-5, 11:21-30), but he doesn't say anything more about tongues. Apparently it wasn't important for Christians then or now. From the instructions he gave the Corinthians, it is clear that Paul would not have spoken in a church meeting in a language that others could not understand (1 Corinthians 14:19).

Paul said that tongues could edify the speaker (verse 4), but the importance of self-edification is limited. After all, the Corinthians had been overestimating themselves in wisdom and knowledge and spirituality; they were puffed up with self-importance. They did not need more attention on self — for spiritual maturity, they needed to exercise love for others, and build up the church, not themselves (verses 3-4).

What did Paul mean when he wrote, "I would like every one of you to speak in tongues" (verse 5)? Perhaps he wished that all the Corinthians were really speaking messages from God. Whatever he meant, he immediately clarified that his greater desire was that the Christians speak in a way that could be understood: "I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified."

The Corinthian experience with tongue speaking seems to have been an isolated case, and Paul dealt with it in a tactful, instructive way. He allowed a limited amount of tongue speaking, but he did not allow it in church meetings if there was no interpretation. He did not allow several people to speak at once (verses 27-28). He clearly said that orderly, understandable messages were better.

But if a person wanted to speak in an unknown tongue at home, in private, the Church should allow it (verse 39). The unusual speech might encourage people to continue building their relationship with God. At least it would be a reminder that we are not always able to clearly describe our needs (Romans 8:26).

Gifts of the Holy Spirit

The "gifts" of the Spirit are God-given abilities distributed as God knows is best for different aspects of Christian service. But not every Christian has the same gift, just as not every part of the human body performs the function of seeing, hearing or walking (1 Corinthians 12:14-26). Through a division of labor, God encourages us to work with one another to be

more efficient. As we work together, Christ gives his Church growth (Ephesians 4:15-16).

What are the various gifts? Paul lists some in 1 Corinthians 12:28-30: Church leadership positions such as apostle, prophet and teacher, or gifts of miracles and healings, or less spectacular but equally necessary abilities such as helping others and administration.

Another list is in verses 7-10: messages of wisdom or knowledge, faith and healing and miracles, inspired messages of prophecy, tongues or interpretations, or a special gift for distinguishing between spirits. (The Greek word for "distinguishing" is also used in 14:29. This gift was probably used to tell which prophecies or tongue-interpretations were genuine and which were false.)

The precise difference between wisdom and knowledge, or faith and healing and miracles may not be important in this list; Paul is simply making the point that spiritual gifts come in many varieties, although they are all "for the common good."

Romans 12:6-8 gives yet another list of gifts (none of the lists is exhaustive): prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving to others, leading others or showing mercy. Some of these service gifts should be found in all Christians, but some people are distinctly better at certain activities than other people are.

As God gives us these abilities, we should apply them as best we can for the common good of the Body of Christ.

The gifts in these lists come in three major categories: Church leadership, speaking, and serving others. Peter summarizes "gifts" under the categories of speaking and serving (1 Peter 4:11). "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms" (verse 10).

Paul said that God had given (the Greek verb is similar to the noun used for "gift") the Philippian Christians the ability to believe in Christ and also the opportunity to suffer for him (Philippians 1:29-30).

Suffering patiently and faithfully can also be a useful spiritual gift. Paul described a "thorn in my flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7), which served by emphasizing Paul's weaknesses, therefore showing that the power of his message came not from himself but from God (verses 8-10).

Paul referred to marital status, whether married or not, as a gift (1 Corinthians 7:7). Any of life's circumstances can be considered a gift of God if we are able to use it to glorify Christ and serve others. It does not matter how spectacular or seemingly ordinary the gift is -- what matters is how it is used (1 Corinthians 13:1-4). Love, a fruit of the Spirit that all Christians must have, is the test of whether an ability or gift is good.

All gifts should be used to glorify Christ and to benefit others.

Fruit of the Holy Spirit

"Live by the Spirit," Paul tells us in Galatians 5:16, not by the "desires of the sinful nature." These phrases

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represent opposite approaches to life (verse 17). In verses 19-21, Paul describes some of the acts of the sinful nature, and in verses 22-23 he describes some of the fruit or results of the Holy Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

In Ephesians 5:9, Paul describes more "fruit" of the Christian life: "goodness, righteousness and truth." The Holy Spirit also produces life and peace (Romans 8:6), hope (Romans 15:13) and spiritual wisdom (1 Corinthians 2:6-15). All Christians should have all these qualities.

As we yield to God's Spirit (Romans 8:13-14), and as we are led by the Spirit of Christ (verse 9), we will have Jesus Christ's mercy and compassion for others and his love for God's way of life.

"By their fruit you will recognize them," said Jesus (Matthew 7:20). Many people will call Jesus "Lord," and they will prophesy and perform miracles in his name (verses 21-22), but unless they do the will of the Father, they are false prophets (verses 21, 15). "By their fruit [by the way they live] you will recognize them" (verse 16). All Christians should have the fruit of God's Spirit.

Summary

Does speaking in tongues prove that the Holy Spirit has come to a person? No. Gifts or abilities, no matter how miraculous they appear, should not automatically be accepted as divine. They should be tested to see whether they are in harmony with God's Word and the Christian way of life.

Are those who speak in tongues more spiritual or closer to God than those who do not? Not necessarily. If those who speak in tongues don't have love, Paul says, they are useless noisemakers -- no matter what language they speak (1 Corinthians 13:1).

What role should tongue speaking have in the Church? Paul does not forbid tongue speaking, but he strictly limits its role in the meetings of the Church. He tells the Corinthians not to do it during their meetings unless someone could interpret. Even if interpreters are there, only one person should speak at a time. The gift of tongues, or any other gift, is not a special mark of spirituality. All the gifts of the Spirit are given as God decides (1 Corinthians 12:11). As we follow the example given in the book of Acts, we do not need to make special effort to experience this particular gift.) No one, no matter what gifts one has, has any reason to be proud or to look down on others (verses 21-25). And Christians with "small" gifts need not feel bad. Each should simply use his or her abilities to best serve others (Romans 12:6-13).

Glossary

Caesarea. A city about 80 miles northwest of Jerusalem, where the Holy Spirit came upon the gentile Cornelius and his household.

Charismatics. Those of various denominations who emphasize spiritual gifts such as tongue speaking, healing or prophecy. They usually do not teach that

everyone should have the same gift. The Greek word *charismata* means "gifts."

Ecstatic speech. Non-language syllables produced when the brain sends signals to the organs of speech (throat, tongue and lips) but the language centre of the brain does not organize the signals. The person can be conscious or in a trancelike state.

Ephesus. A city in western Asia Minor, near modern Izmir in western Turkey. The miraculous tongue speaking at Ephesus showed that disciples of John the Baptist were accepted into Christian churches after faith, baptism and the laying on of hands.

Glossolalia. Speaking in tongues. The Greek word *glossa* means "tongue," and *laleo* means "speak."

John the Baptist. A Jewish prophet who prepared the way for Jesus. He had many disciples even 20 years after his death.

Mark 16:15-18. Modern translations note that verses 9-20 are not in some of the oldest New Testament manuscripts and therefore may not be part of the original Gospel. We include these verses in our discussion, but they do not affect our conclusion.

Pentecost. One of the annual religious festivals God told the Israelites to observe. It comes about seven weeks after Passover. It was on Pentecost that the Holy Spirit filled the disciples, causing them to speak in tongues, and the New Testament Church was founded.

Pentecostalism. A movement that stresses the importance of tongue speaking as a "second blessing." People are taught that they receive the Holy Spirit upon conversion, but are not filled with or baptized with the Holy Spirit until they speak in tongues.

Prophecy. A God-inspired saying or a message from God. The verb translated "prophecy" means to speak under divine inspiration, with or without referring to future events.

Samaria. A region about 40 miles north of Jerusalem. The Samaritan people were of mixed ancestry, both Israelite and gentile. When the gospel was preached in Samaria, the Holy Spirit came upon converts in some noticeable way, but there is no mention of tongues (Acts 8:14-18).

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Bible Study of Romans Chapter 11

"All Israel will be saved"

In Romans 9 and 10, Paul describes a theological problem: Most Jews are rejecting the gospel. Not only are they missing out on salvation, it makes other people wonder whether God is faithful to his promises. In chapter 11, Paul affirms that God has a surprising plan for the people of Israel.

The remnant of Israel

At the end of chapter 10, Paul described Israel as a people who heard the message but refused to accept it even though God pleaded with them. So Paul asks, did God reject his people? (11:1). And he answers: By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. Paul is living proof that God has not abandoned his people. God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew (v. 2). Foreknow does not refer to advance knowledge, as if God knew more facts about the Jews. Rather, it refers to a relationship that God had with the Jews. His covenant with them is no longer valid as a source of laws, but the promises God made to them will still be kept. God has not given up on the Jews. Don't you know what Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he appealed to God against Israel: "Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me?" (vv. 2-3, quoting from 1 Kings 19:10, 14). Elijah thought that everyone else had gone astray. What was God's answer to him? Paul asks in verse 4. "I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal." [1 Kings 19:18] So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace (vv. 4-5). The situation wasn't as bad as Elijah thought it was. In Paul's day, too, thousands of Jews believe in Christ. There is a remnant, a small

percentage, of Jews who are following what God is doing.

They are chosen by grace, not by their zeal for the law. And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace (v. 6).

Some were hardened

What then? Paul asks in verse 7. What the people of Israel sought so earnestly they did not obtain. The Jews sincerely wanted to be righteous, but their works did not achieve what they wanted.

The elect among them did obtain righteousness, Paul says, but the others were hardened, as it is written: "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that could not see and ears that could not hear, to this very day" (vv. 7-8, adapting Deut. 29:4 and Isa. 29:9-10). The minority accepted the gospel; the others did not because God gave them over to their own inclinations. However, Paul said in chapter 10 that they heard and understood, and that God pleaded with them, but they refused. And Paul will soon say that he works hard so that some of them might be saved (v. 14). God has not decided that these people will be lost. But they rejected Christ, and God let them have their own way. But the blindness will eventually be removed.

In verses 9-10, Paul quotes a stronger passage in Psalm 69:22-23: And David says: "May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever." In this psalm, David asks God to punish his enemies—even to blot them out of the book of life! But Paul is not asking that, for the Jews have not stumbled beyond recovery, and Paul works hard so that some might be saved. Paul is not quoting the psalm for

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eternal punishment, but only for its comment about eyes that cannot see.

Arousing the Jews to envy

In verse 1, Paul asked a question as a springboard for his discussion, and in verse 11 he does it again: Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious.

The Jews who reject Christ are not hopelessly lost—they can still be saved. But in the meantime, salvation is being offered to Gentiles. Paul is alluding here to Deuteronomy 32:21: “I will make you envious by those who are not a nation; I will make you angry by a nation that has no understanding.” Contrary to what most Jews thought, God would bless the Gentiles so much that the Jews would be envious.

In verse 12, Paul reasons from a less-than-ideal situation to a better one: But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring! If Jewish failure has brought blessings to others, won't Jewish success bring even more? Paul is implying that there will come a day of success, when most Jews will accept Christ.

Paul believes the majority will be saved—first a remnant of Jews, then a good number of Gentiles, then the majority of Jews, and finally another blessing for the Gentiles—the salvation of the great majority. I am talking to you Gentiles, he says in verse 13. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. Even though Paul was writing to Gentiles, he was addressing a Jewish question. He seems to be rehearsing what he will say on his trip to Jerusalem. In verse 15, Paul again uses an argument from the lesser to the greater: For if their rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? If the failure of the Jews brought salvation to everyone else, won't it be even better when the Jews finally accept the gospel? They might be spiritually dead now, but God can raise the dead.

New branches attached to the tree

In verse 16, Paul switches to a different style of argument, using analogies. First, he uses an example from Israel's system of worship: If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy... No one could eat from the harvest until the firstfruits had been offered (Lev. 23:14). After they were offered to God, the entire harvest was sanctified. In context, the firstfruits are the remnant of Israel, the small percentage of Jews who accept Jesus. They are given to God, and this means that the whole Jewish nation is set apart for God.

Then Paul uses another analogy: If the root is holy, so are the branches. The root is probably the patriarchs, and if they are holy, their descendants are, too, and God won't give up on them.

Then Paul moves into the analogy of tree-branch-grafting: If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root... Paul isn't giving horticultural advice—he is tailoring his analogy to suit his purposes. The root is the promise of salvation given to Abraham, a promise now given nourishment by Jesus Christ. Many of the Jews are cut off from Christ, and Gentiles are being attached to the tree. The Jews are not superior—but neither are the Gentiles.

But Paul warns those Gentiles in verse 18: Do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. That was apparently a temptation for Gentile Christians in Rome. If you think this way, Paul says, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. Remember that your salvation depends on a promise given to the ancestor of the Jews, Abraham, and to the Messiah of the Jews, Jesus. You didn't earn the right to be grafted in; it was only a matter of God's grace.

You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in” (v. 19). Paul then responds: Even if that's true, I can still show that you shouldn't think of yourself as superior to the unbelieving Jews. Granted, he says in verse 20, but they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble, “for if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either” (vv. 20-21). You can be broken off just the same as they were. Paul considers it possible for someone to reject the faith. If salvation were predestined, then people would have no need to tremble, and Paul would not imply that God could break them off. Paul wants people to be confident, but not to assume that everything is guaranteed no matter what they do.

Paul combines God's grace and judgment in verse 22: Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. If we fall away from grace and go into self-reliance, then we will be cut off from the tree of salvation.

The salvation of Israel

And if [the Jews] do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again (v. 23). If Jews accept the Messiah, they will be re-attached to the Abrahamic tree—everything can change, according to whether people accept or reject Christ.

Paul then reasons as to how easy it will be for the Jews to be grafted back in: After all, if you [Gentiles] were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree... if that difficult thing has been done, how much more readily will these [Jews], the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree! (v. 24). God can easily put the Jews back in.

Paul then says: I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not

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think you are superior: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved (vv. 25-26).

Paul calls it a mystery, something previously hidden but now revealed—and it is revealed so Gentiles do not think themselves superior to Jews. Israel has been hardened in part—that is, most Jews do not currently believe. But this restriction is temporary—it lasts only until the full number of Gentiles come into faith.

Paul has already argued that the Jews have not stumbled beyond recovery, and Jewish branches can be grafted back in if they believe, so when he says they are hardened until the full number of Gentiles comes in, he implies a temporary hardening. And the following verses say that the Jewish people are still loved, that their calling cannot be revoked, and that God will have mercy on them. Paul believes that most of the Jews will be saved, because Deuteronomy 32 predicts a time when they will accept Jesus as their Saviour.

Paul supports his point by blending ideas found in Isaiah 59:20-21; 27:9; and Jer. 31:33-34: As it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins" (vv. 26-27). Isaiah says "the Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins," and Jeremiah promises a new covenant in which God will not remember their sins any more.

Paul knows that the Redeemer has come to Zion—Jesus has come, and Paul is confident that Jesus will accomplish the work he came to do. Even when the nation was a mess, God promised a day of salvation for them, and he promised a new covenant for them. The fact that Gentiles are entering the new covenant does not change the fact that it was promised to the Jews. The promise is not broken—rather, it is expanded to include the Gentiles.

When will this happen? Paul does not say. The Jews can turn to Christ at any time.

Paul gives us his summary and conclusion in verse 28: As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies for your sake; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs. The Jews are enemies of the gospel right now, but God still loves them, and they are still part of the chosen people. Why? For God's gifts and his call are irrevocable (v. 29). God will keep his promises.

In verses 30-31 Paul summarizes it: Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's

mercy to you. Mercy is now given to Gentiles; it will also be given to Jews, for salvation is by grace. Paul's concluding rationale is in verse 32: For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all. Everyone has sinned and deserves wrath on the day of judgment, but in Christ all can be made alive. The grace of God "offers salvation to all people" (Titus 2:11)—to all races and nations.

Doxology

What more can Paul say? There is no evidence that this will happen—there is only the promise of God, but he is more faithful than evidence is. So Paul launches into a section of praise. It is a call to theological and intellectual humility—and it is also a reminder that theology, if done correctly, should always lead us to praise and worship. Whenever we catch a glimpse of what God has done or is doing, we should respond with awe and thanksgiving.

Paul started this chapter by talking about human failure, but he ends by praising the God who can be counted on to succeed:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!

"Who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counsellor?" [Isaiah 40:13]

"Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?" [Job 41:11]

For from him and through him and to him are all things.

To him be the glory forever! Amen (vv. 33-36).

Praise God, who in his grace saves both Jews and Gentiles! He is faithful to his people, and his purpose will stand.

Questions for application

- Are there people today who claim to be part of God's people, and yet seem to ignore him? Would Paul hold out hope for them?
- Do people reject the gospel by their own choice (10:21) or because God has blinded them (11:8)?
- Can envy really cause people to turn to Christ (v. 13)?
- Have I ever felt superior to unbelievers (v. 18)?
- Does Paul want me to be confident (8:38-39) or to tremble (11:20)?
- When I think about what God has done in my life, do I respond with praise (vv. 33-36)? What would my poem say?

Michael Morrison

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Lessons from the Bible

The Gospel of Mark, LESSON 15: MARK 2:18-22

A Lesson About Old and New

Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?" Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.

"No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins" (Mark 2:18-22).

The primary fast of the Jews was the Day of Atonement, one of the seven annual solemn assemblies of the Law of Moses. The Pharisees also fasted on the second and fourth days of every week. Apparently, the disciples of John were doing something similar. (The Pharisees didn't have disciples in the same sense as John or Jesus. The term "disciples of the Pharisees" might refer to anyone who followed the example of the Pharisees.) Although such fasting was not part of the Law of Moses, by Jesus' day it had become an important expression of the Pharisees' meticulous devotion to the ceremonial law. To the Pharisees, if Jesus' disciples were not fasting, then it called into question their piety, sincerity and devotion toward the ceremonial law. Further, it called into question Jesus' attitude toward the ceremonial law. Jesus had already healed on the Sabbath, and his disciples had already been noticed picking grain on the Sabbath and eating without the prescribed ceremonial washing. Add to that the lack of fasting, and the Pharisees must have found this upstart rabbi increasingly troubling.

Incompatible

After Jesus was gone, fasting would have a place in the Christian community. It would remind believers of their dependence on God, of their need for God's mercy, and of the power of God for the salvation of those who believe the gospel. Until then, Jesus' disciples had no reason to fast. In the Bible, fasting is a sign of disaster, or a voluntary abasement during times of great stress or trial. But the presence of the Son of God on earth with his disciples was a time of joy, not of sorrow. The time for sorrow would come later, when Jesus was murdered and taken away. In any case, fasting in the manner of the Pharisees, as a sign of their devotion to the ceremonial law, was incompatible with the new covenant Jesus was inaugurating. For Jesus' disciples, fasting while Jesus was with them would have been like sewing a new piece of cloth on an old garment—it would have been incompatible. Jesus' point was that the old has gone, the new has come. The two are not compatible. To put

new wine in old skins ruins both the skins and the wine. New wine requires new skins.

Today, it's still easy to try to pour the new wine of the gospel into the old wineskins of the Law. Grace doesn't come easily to us. We like to have a way of measuring where we stand with God. The gospel tells us simply to trust God that he loves us and has forgiven all our sins for the sake of Christ. But we often want something more tangible than that. We want something we can sink our teeth into.

So we run back to the Law. The Law provides a way of measuring where we stand with God. If we avoid sexual sin, for example, and lying, and stealing, and murder, then we can have a firmer basis for feeling that God isn't mad at us. If we don't use crude language, if we don't watch entertainment that has sex and violence in it, if we help others, if we don't miss church, and so on, then we can rest easier about our relationship with God. Of course, these are good behaviour patterns, part of the way we naturally desire to live when we have fellowship with God.

But even when we're successful in behaving well on the outside, a deeper problem remains. Doing good things doesn't solve the problem of our alienation from God. Our pride, our selfishness, the sin in our heart of hearts, is still there. And every once in a while, when our guard is down, what we really are inside squirts out to remind us that we're still sinners. Then we can either pretend we're not really that bad, or we can admit to ourselves what we're really like.

Not based on the Law

Fellowship with God is not based on the Law. It is based on God's faithfulness to his word of grace. God told Israel: "I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed" (Malachi 3:6; compare Deuteronomy 4:31). God's free determination to do as he pleases is what gives us a positive relationship with him. He tells us through the words of Jesus in John 3:17: "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

John wrote, "God is love" (1 John 4:8). He did not write, "God is justice." If God were after justice, none

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of us would survive. But God has determined to dispense grace rather than condemnation. We are told, "Mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13). How grateful we can be that God is the way he has chosen to be! God's devotion to us is the basis of our fellowship with him, devotion that God has demonstrated through Jesus Christ.

Rest

When we're really honest with ourselves, we know that despite constant trying, we still sin. Where does that leave us? We can either work harder and harder to keep up the whitewashed façade of personal

righteousness, or we can turn it over to God and trust him to forgive us and make us righteous. If we take God at his word, then we can rely on him to do in us and for us what he says he has.

Faith gives us rest. It transforms godly living from a duty, from a way of proving ourselves, to a joy, to a way of taking part in the good life we can have with God in Christ (referring not to physical abundance, but to spiritual contentment, to the inner peace only God can provide, which is worth more than physical riches). Most of us can use a good rest.

J. Michael Fezell

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The Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship

Tel. (03) 9726 8898