

Paul is in the midst of talking about spiritual gifts (chs 12-14) but in this chapter “will show ... the most excellent way.” In vv 1-3 he teaches that even when one could excel in spiritual gifts, they were of no benefit to the one exercising them, if the person was not striving to love God and love their neighbor. Without love the tongues speaker is a noise maker, the prophet is a big nothing, and the benevolent gift-giver profits nothing. Love is the most excellent way because without it, nothing else gives value to the person.

In verses 8-12 love is the most excellent way, because love will not cease when others things come to an end. By way of application this raises the question if we will value something temporal or will we value most highly that which is eternal. To place excessive value in temporal things is like investing in a market that will eventually collapse.

I. ***The spiritual gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge will come to an end*** (13:8).

1. *The character of these gifts:* These were the gifts were highly valued by the Corinthians; here they probably also represent all the spiritual gifts..
2. *The character of their cessation:* Prophecy and knowledge will be stopped. The same word is used in vv 8, 10 & 11 and has a causative sense, i.e., to cause to stop, or to render inactive. Prophecies and knowledge will be stopped (v 8), the imperfect will be stopped (v 10), and Paul stopped the things of childhood (v 11). But a different word is used for the gift of tongues and means simply to cease or to cease of itself.
3. *Their relative value to love:* Their relative value was low. They will stop. Love will not stop, fail, or be rendered ineffective. Love is eternal.

It was senseless for the Corinthians to boast in things (gifts) that were less enduring than love. It was not reasonable to invest primarily in the temporal to the exclusion of the eternal. We also are challenged to more greatly value eternal virtues rather than temporal things.

Two reason why prophecy and knowledge will be caused to stop:

II. ***The spiritual gifts of prophecy & knowledge will not be needed in the future*** (13:9-11).

1. *The particular character of these gifts: they function “piecemeal”.* The phrase “in part” (cf. 12:27, “individually”) contrasts smaller pieces to a whole. Here is the idea that prophecy and knowledge come only bit by bit. In v 10 “the imperfect”, literally, “the in part”, refers to prophecy and knowledge, not with imperfections, but rather incompleteness. What was revealed by prophecy and understood by way of the gift of knowledge was really only scattered stones in a larger mosaic or individual pieces in a larger puzzle.
2. *The place for these gifts: they belong to childhood and not to mature adulthood.* Paul pictures various activities of early childhood or infancy which are appropriate and healthy for that stage, but childish or “infantile” for an adult. A small child does not connect well cause and effect and sees events as isolated from one another, i.e., in bits and pieces. It is part of maturity to put away childish things: to “grow up”, “act one’s age” and see the consequences of one’s action. Prophecy and knowledge present only a piecemeal picture. Not all the dots are connected. They belong to a period likened to small childhood.
3. *The time for this cessation of prophecy and knowledge is when “perfection” (NIV) or “the perfect” is come.*
 - a. A popular explanation for “the perfect” is the completed NT canon. Although counter-arguments exist, certain factors argue against this interpretation: (1) the indefinite nature of the conjunction “whenever” in light of a clear understanding of apostolic authorship of the canon, (2) knowing as we are fully known (v 12) hardly describes our current state, (3) the analogy of maturity, if parallel to Eph 4:13-16, is the yet future attainment to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ, and (4) prophecy will yet occur at and before the return of Christ (Rev 11:3; Joel 2:28-31). The intent is to contrast the eternal endurance of love versus the ultimate cessation of these gifts.
 - b. It is preferable to see “perfection” as our entrance into the eternal state, either at death or at the return of Christ, when we shall be like Him. (1 John 3:2). At that time the believer will be glorified and prophecy and a special gift of knowledge will not be needed.

III. ***The spiritual gift of knowledge will be replaced with complete clarity*** (13:12).

1. Polished metal mirrors of the day distorted the image. So is our knowledge today. To see “darkly” or “poorly” is actually “in an enigma” or “dark saying”. God used visions and dreams to reveal things to prophets which were then often difficult to understand, like a mirror that wraps reality in a distortion.
2. In the future, when perfection or full maturity comes, we will see clearly, face to face. Our limited attempts to put the pieces together and construct a correct picture will no longer be necessary.

These words assure us that we can know today, but not exhaustively. God has revealed truth, directs our thinking, and we can know correctly. But we will continue to struggle with an incomplete and hard to understand picture and therefore need humility.

The gifts through which God revealed truth and gave understanding are temporal. Love, however, is eternal. When we see Jesus, the prophet will not be needed. The one with the gift of knowledge will not be needed. We will see Jesus face to face and we will be like Him. But love will continue and that makes it the more excellent way. It is a challenge then to us to put the appropriate emphasis on loving God and loving our neighbor.