

“The Doctrine in the Text”  
 Pastor Sam Richards  
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 Texts: 1 Cor. 13:8

I have been preached to twice in the past week. The last sermon I found to be insufferable and the first unsurvivable. Perhaps it was impact of the first that distempered me for the second—that can happen. The caliber of the preachers could not, quite possibly, been more disparate; but how was the contemporary preacher to know he was going up against one of the very best preachers ever. Separately by about two hundred and seventy five years, the two were not in competition. I am not going to name the contemporary preacher both charity and the unintended collision between the two demands I exercise some generosity of spirit. The first preacher, to whom I have access through my library is none other than Jonathan Edwards, and, strikingly, his address is title “Lecture XV;” it is not registered as a sermon at all. What the Reverend Edwards preached on was the doctrine in the text of 1 Cor. 13:8. What he did in that “lecture” had a leveling effect on me. It was stunning, devastating and explosive. If a person can be utterly humbled by a sermon, I would be a candidate for that person.

But it wasn’t just my approach to preaching; or to sermonizing in general, that lay in ruins, friends. It was me. Edwards schooled me. The doctrine in one verse was urgent, compellingly significant. I couldn’t escape the conviction that whereas Edwards’ preaching was incisive and terribly clear—some of my preaching would be so much blather in comparison. I was dumbfounded. King Lear, more dramatically, might cry, “I am undone;” but I am not certain that such a turn of phrase would be *hyperbolic* for the impact Edwards’ “lecture” had on me. I felt the need for recuperation if not resuscitation. The elegance and perspicuity of Edwards was, in several places, breathtaking.

Here’s some of what I took away: *love is the supreme grace of the Spirit*. Edwards contended this: “The Holy Spirit for ever(sic) to be communicated to the saints in the grace of charity, or divine love.” Note the text:

**Love never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge<sup>1</sup>, it shall vanish away.**

What is meant by “supreme grace of the Spirit?” is something we must obtain because the full meaning of the assertion is not immediately obvious. The excellence/superiority of love exists in its “essential” nature; in its “indispensability” to saint and church alike; and in its “durability”—for love not only endures unto the end, it persists in the state of perfection which is to come, *which will forever remain as the saints’ rest, and home*. In heaven, which is a perfect kingdom of love, love remains when and where prophecies and tongues have ceased—**vanished away**. (Other translators say, “pass away, “become useless,” even “be dismissed as useless.”) Oh, the observant amongst you might exclaim, you omitted “knowledge” from the threefold list of obsolete graces. Was that intentional? Absolutely, it was. Is Paul asserting that “all our present modes of apprehension and of utterance will be left behind?” Here is something we know about knowledge: “. . .(T)he knowledge, the mode of

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<sup>1</sup> The other triad in Ch. 13 is **faith, hope and love**—these, however, are said **to abide**. So what seems to be in view is the “permanent state of things” in the age to come, or heaven.

apprehension belonging to the present, will pass—because here it is indirect, and there it will be immediate. ‘We shall know face to face,’ which is what philosophers mean by intuition. Here our knowledge ‘creeps from point to point,’ painfully amassing facts, and thence, with many hesitations and errors, groping its way towards principles and laws. Here it is imperfect, with many a gap in the circumference; or like the thin red line on a map which shows the traveler’s route across a prairie, or like the spider’s thread in the telescope, stretched athwart the blazing disc of the sun—**but then face to face.** Incomplete knowledge shall be done away; and many of its objects will drop, and much of what makes the science of earth will be antiquated and effete. What would the hand-loom weaver’s knowledge of how to throw his shuttle be worth in a weaving-shed with a thousand looms? Just so much will the knowledges of earth be when we get yonder.” (Maclaren’s “Expositions”) I take Paul, and Edwards to mean this: knowledge as we commonly mean it will be supplanted by a qualitatively higher form of knowledge—something that agrees with familiarity, intimacy and personal relationship—**to be known as we know—or then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known** (v.12). Now I am content to say that one kind of knowledge is becoming obsolete; but a knowing reserved to heaven takes its place. Spiritual and divine knowledge we shall have in full—individually and corporately. Knowledge, gloriously increased and perfected for, *like everything else in heaven*, it must be perfect to be there.

I should like to point out the three properties of love once more: its essential nature, its indispensability and its durability. These all speak of the eternity of love, its heavenliness.

That said, we come to the doctrine of the text: “That the great fruit of the Spirit, in which the Holy Spirit shall, not only for a season, but everlastingly, be communicated to the church of Christ is Charity, or divine love. There follow four points—alas, not three (which would make of a tidier modern sermon outline)—and they are these: a. The Spirit of Christ will be everlastingly given to his Church and people to enliven or quicken, influence and empower them through his indwelling presence. b. There are other spiritual fruits besides divine love where in the Spirit of God is given to his church. c. These other gifts have various expiration dates and will eventually cease. (The cessation is, to my view, staggered and intermittent, depending on the conditions the church finds herself in. Edwards takes a more linear and historical view as if addressing the church universal as a single entity.) and d. That love is the great and unfailing fruit in which Christ’s everlasting influence is to be realized.

My first point. “The Holy Spirit is the great purchase, or purchased gift, of Christ. The chief and sum of all good things in this life and in the life to come, that are purchased for the church, is the Holy Spirit.” (Edwards, Charity, p. 307) That thought is worth the price of entry! Put together like that blew me away. Of course, Jesus paid with his own blood the purchase price of my forgiveness, my escape from bondage to sin, the cancellation of my debt but to those precious benefits I can now add the thought that Jesus, having purchased the Holy Spirit, ascended to heaven to pick up his purchase and send it on to us. Now we can read with new eyes, or in a fresh way:

**7 But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the [a]Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. 8 And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment; 9 concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; 10 and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you no longer see Me; 11 and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged.**

“As he is the great purchase, so he is the great promise, or the great thing promised by God and Christ to the Church” (p. 307) delivered on the day of Pentecost. (See Acts 2:2-3) After the giving off the law, comes this later, greater gift: the Paraclete, our Helper and Friend. Yes, our forever Friend! And that the church shall continue, and so that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it, we have been given, every single believer, the Holy Spirit everlastingly.

My second point: there was a flowering of many other gifts of grace: miracles of healing, deliverance, resurrections from the dead, prophecies dreams and visions—extraordinary gifts such as are recorded in the Old Testament, but newly distributed to apostles, teachers, prophets and evangelists, disciples and elders—all the early ministers of the New Testament. And there was an abundance of the more ordinary common gifts (convictions of sin, repentance, conversions and various religious affections *which reflect the influence of the Holy Spirit indirectly on human hearts*). Apart from divine love we cannot say these are any more than manifestations of common grace—they can be saving only if they consist of that love. *But these things have expiration dates and some claim they have decreased “because they are no longer needful.”* Here, I disagree with Edwards and would leave it up to God to determine whether or not such endowments are needful, under certain conditions, or not. What is not contestable is that these common and ordinary gifts will not be operative in heaven “because there the end of all means of grace is already fully obtained in the perfect sanctification and happiness of God’s people. (p. 310) Things given for the perfecting of the saints will have accomplished their purpose.

Thirdly, now Edwards places particular significance upon the completion of sacred canon meaning the writing of Job and the five books of Moses! Then people had the word of God by immediate revelation (to various eminent persons), and these words were written down and transmitted to others. In that day, dreams and visions were common as recorded in Job! Such seasons came intermittently up until the day of the gospel which was marked by a resumption of extraordinary gifts. These were preparation for Jesus who possessed the Spirit without measure, the Great Prophet of God—**no man spake as this man spoke** (John 7:46)!! In the days of his flesh, the disciples received power and authority to do miracles, heal and deliver but the great effusion followed the resurrection. Edwards writes, “when the apostle John had written the book of Revelation, these miraculous gifts were no longer needed, and therefore they ceased” (p. 312) . . . “no further occasion for them.” (p. 313) This side of the sufficiency of Scripture (which I ascribe to), I question the cessation of need and the absence of occasion because in the world as we know it there are both. And this side of heaven, that is what seems not to have changed.

That brings us to my fourth point: That love is the great and unending fruit in which Christ’s everlasting influence is to be realized. That which is forever given cannot be taken away. It is unending and eternal. The implanted love of Christ is present in every member of the church invisible. **Nothing shall separate us from it.** Every miracle worker that has ever lived has left for heaven has left their miraculous gifts behind. But they did not leave behind divine love; heaven is where it is perfected! This is true for the church collectively. Heaven is constant; there is no intermittency there as heaven is our last, complete and eternal state! Extraordinary gifts and common graces all terminate there. . . in glorious perfection.

Another bombshell was Edwards' explanation for why the other fruits of the Spirit fail, "and the great fruit of love remains, is, *love is the great end of all the other fruits and gifts of the Spirit.*" ***They were but means to this one end—love is the sum of all grace.*** "Revelation and miracles were never given for any other end than to promote holiness, and to build up the kingdom of Christ in men's hearts.

That miraculous gifts prove the imperfect state of the church is a curious line of argument. It seems to hang on the idea that the miraculous hinge on the infancy, or immaturity of the church rather than the power and gracious sovereignty of God. Does the God whose name is Wonderful just not do wonderful anymore now that the church is shorn of her dependency on the miraculous? One might think that the sufficiency of the word alone would have brought the church *farther along* than she appears to be now after all these centuries of enlightened practice. Is the church more "perfect" with the canon? Or is it the blatant disregard for the canon that actually troubles her? Sound doctrine is openly repudiated in some places!

Was there nothing praiseworthy in the early churches, wrapped up in its needy infancy? Were none excelling by way of love and holiness? I do not think that holds up to historical scrutiny. Paul mixes praise with his concerns in the canon itself. In its most perfect state is something as yet unattained by the church. That is not to question our future gloriousness but to dial back the presumption of arrival (as if we had already attained it!). Just how full grown is the church?

I am no fan of gullibility—or of spiritual naïveté. If someone claims to have direction directly from heaven I expect it to be consistent with the revealed word. . . a dream can simply be a dream; but it can still be a visitation from God. Where does it say dreams are obsolete? Was the announcement at Pentecost only for the next few years, decades, centuries?! Are visions in the same category? Who are we to limit God's means of communication? Does God only have access to the internet? Can God only reach you by your smart phone?

While some of these questions remain unanswerable, here's what is play: divine love is the originating, creating, sustaining impetus of church life. We can love God and each other increasingly and that is a very good thing. **Love never faileth**, bank on it.

**Amen**