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DCLXVI

I stand behind a woman in a checkout line at a convenience store. When the clerk rings up her purchases the total is \$6.66. The woman reaches for a pack of chewing gum that she clearly did not want just to bring the total to a different amount. Another person refuses to call a phone number like 555-6665, because it has three sixes in a row. Later this year, on the anniversary of the D-Day invasion of France, many people will have fearful reactions, and some may stay home from work, because the date could be written as 6/6/6 (June 6, 2006). Bizarre reactions to a number? Indeed. Justifiable? Not at all.

The fear of the number 13 is called triskaidekaphobia. Who knows what to call the fear of the number sequence 666? One thing you can call it is “uninformed.”

Revelation 13:18, in English, is the basis for this phobia. “If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man’s number. His number is 666.” (New International Version) A more proper reading would be the King James Version: “Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is Six hundred threescore and six.” That would show the error in the examples above. People fear the number sequence 666 in all its forms, even though the form may not be the number mentioned in Revelation 13. For instance, the woman who did not want a particular purchase total should only fear \$666.00. That would equal the number in the Revelation, whereas \$6.66 is six hundred fifty-three dollars and thirty-four cents short of the number. It is 6 and a fraction, not 666. Phone numbers and dates are not really numbers in the sense John used the word. Therefore they could never represent “the number of the beast.”

The problem is that most people who fear that number think in English and base 10 (a positional number system based on ten items per position). Instead of 666, the original would have said, as the King James Version translated it, 600 + 60 + 6 (either spelling it out or using different letters for each digit). If you read the Bible in Latin, instead of 666 the number of the beast would be DCLXVI (hence the title of this article). A computer programmer might recognize the number as 1010011010. In base six it would be written 3030. (Does that mean that anyone who goes hunting with a 30/30 rifle is the beast

instead of what he is hunting being a beast?) Anyone who fears that number should rightly fear all forms of the number, including 3030, 10201₅, and 666.

On the other side of the coin, some people have equated “the beast” to the head of the Roman Catholic Church because the Pope supposedly wears a crown bearing the words “Vicarius Filii Domine” (Vicar of the Son of God). If the letters not used in Roman numerals (counting u as v) are eliminated, the remaining letters add up to 666 if taken individually. The problem with this argument is that using the rules of Roman numerals (combining two or more letters to equal one number) you can get a number from 660 to 666. Since the first word contains VIC and IV, that could equal 112 (V + I + C + I + V) or 110 (VI + C + IV), or even 108 (V=5 + IC=99 + IV=4). While this theory at least recognizes that the number is not a numeral sequence, it ignores the rules of the number system it claims to use.

That just points up the lengths to which people go to try to identify who the beast is. More importantly, it shows the contortions people have to go through to fit their pet theory to the facts. Even the most reasonable theory—that the beast was Nero Caesar, whose name in Hebrew letters adds up to 666—is just a guess. Because we weren’t the original readers of the book we just don’t know.

Some would say this fear is ridiculous. In fact, it is pitiable. It is pitiable that men who author books based on the number of the beast think it is a number sequence. It is pitiable that people care more about what the preacher says the Bible says than what the Bible really says. Pity such people. But challenge them as well. That is our job as Christians.

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A MORE EXCELLENT WAY

One of the best known chapters in the Bible is the “love” chapter, 1 Corinthians 13. I remember when I was a youth that one of my Bible class teachers had a running contest between the boys and girls to see who could memorize the most scriptures. One week I memorized the thirteen verses of this chapter. It upset me when the teacher only gave me credit for one scripture since I did not specify where the verse divisions were. Still, it was a familiar chapter even to a third or fourth grade student.

Most people, though, don’t really understand the meaning of this chapter. It is unfortunate that the people who divided the Bible into chapters and verses made it so easy to separate this chapter from those surrounding it, and thus damage the argument Paul is presenting here. Since chapters 12 and 14 are about the spiritual gifts possessed by some in Corinth, the 13th chapter must be understood in that context.

Better than what?

Paul introduces this section by saying “Covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet show I unto you a more excellent way.” Than what is love more excellent? Some would point out that it is more excellent than hate. Others

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would say it is more excellent than almost anything. After all, “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him might not perish, but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16) If God’s love is so superior, then the love Paul is talking about is superior to even other loves.

All of this is true. The love Paul describes here is an unselfish love that concerns itself with others, even at the risk of oneself. It is not constrained by our emotional ties, positive or negative, to the person to whom it is directed. The love of which Paul speaks transcends feeling, emotion, bias, and even training. And yet Paul is being more specific in his use of love as a “more excellent way.” He brings it down to a single concept in relation to miraculous spiritual gifts, as opposed to the broad-brush view with which we normally infuse parts of this chapter.

In short, Paul is saying that miraculous gifts are good, but non-miraculous love is better. The miracles, without the love, are worthless; the love, with or without the miracles, is transcendent.

The first part of his argument shows this in detail. He shows that “speaking in tongues” (in either the biblical or the modern sense), prophecy, and miraculous faith are, in the words of Will Shakspear, “full of sound and fury; Signifying nothing.” Further, even altruism motivated by self-aggrandizement or even “because it is the right thing to do,” if not further motivated by a genuine concern for others, is worthless. “And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.” (Verse 3)

Whatever we do, miraculous or not, must be accompanied by love. There may have been those in Corinth who were boasting of their gifts. Some may have said that they knew they were saved because they had the gifts, but couldn’t be sure of those who did not. Others may have admitted the salvation of those who did not possess any of the gifts, but questioned their spirituality. On the other hand, Paul is arguing that the gifts show neither. It is conceivable that one could even lose their salvation and yet continue to possess the gifts. (I know I will get complaints about that statement from some who claim to have the gifts today.) In fact, those that practiced the gifts without practicing love, Paul indicates, are as those who practiced such things without having been saved.

Excellence of character

Paul next describes the attributes of love. This part of the chapter is read at many weddings. While that may be a valid use of those verses, it may be taking them slightly out of context. These attributes are, truly, independent of the use to which Paul lists them. There could easily be more attributes listed, however. It seems that Paul chooses his words to show the superiority of love over mere performance of miracles.

Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. (Verses 4-7)

Keeping in mind that both love and the performance of miracles are actions, not emotions, we can compare the attributes of both without “comparing apples

to oranges.” Based on the premise that Paul is indeed contrasting the two we could look at each characteristic listed above and state categorically that using miraculous gifts did not, in itself, meet any of these.

Whereas love is longsuffering, kind, and unenvious, the use of spiritual gifts led some to be impatient with those who did not have them. They could be used unkindly. Even those who possessed spiritual gifts envied those who had what they considered a more important or more public gift. The following chapter shows that many were envious of those who spoke in tongues, even though Paul considered that among the least important of the gifts.

In addition to being envious because of others’ gifts, people at Corinth may have been “puffed up” and proud, leading them to lord it over others who had “lesser” or no gifts. There is some indication in these chapters that some who were gifted used those gifts for their own glory. Others, it seems, tried to out-shout others, and rejoiced when they were heard instead of the other person. It did not matter that the other had just as important a truth to impart. Conversely, when they got out-shouted themselves, they bore a grudge against the one who overrode them.

Each of these characteristics finds an opposite in the actions of those at Corinth who possessed miraculous gifts. Paul is saying that love, when combined with the gifts would result in mutual encouragement. Without love, the gifts were tearing apart the congregation. This was not a fault of the gifts. It was a fault of those who had received them. Rather than proving that they were more spiritual, the way they used the gifts just proved their need for growth.

Excellence of duration

Most of chapter 13, the part that few people actually read, is devoted to proving that love is more excellent because it is more enduring. Most people know the conclusion: “Now abideth faith, hope, love, these three: but the greatest of these is love.” Few pay attention to the argument leading to that conclusion. Many choose to ignore the argument. They want the gifts, so they ignore the giver.

The final characteristic of love is that it is endless. The miraculous gifts were coming to an end. Love is complete; the gifts were partial. The average person possessed at most one spiritual gift. Even miraculous knowledge and prophecy were limited. Love, on the other hand, is complete and enduring.

The question often comes up: “When were these gifts to end, then?” Some say they are still available today. Others say they ended as much as 1,900 years ago. What does this chapter, and other passages, say?

For most people, the question hinges on the meaning of “that which is perfect.” Part of the problem is

the use of the word “perfect.” Some people say that nothing is perfect outside of heaven, so tongues will last until everyone gets to heaven. That argument misunderstands the meaning of perfect. As opposed to flawlessness, Paul is meaning completeness. Note the comparison in verse 10. “That which is perfect” is contrasted to “that which is in part.” Whatever he is talking about just needs to be complete.

This is not the forum for complex arguments. Suffice it to say that grammatically and logically “that which is perfect” cannot be heaven, judgement, or “the rapture.” It is not even when the last person enters the church. It cannot be God, Jesus, or any man, because then it would say “he who is perfect.” Perhaps the best answer is that it is the “perfect law of liberty” (Jas 1:17), the Bible.

The gifts of the Spirit could not last more than a century. The only way they could be conferred was the laying on of the apostles hands (Acts 8:18). Once the apostles and Cornelius died, the gifts would necessarily end, since nobody could give them to others. They would no longer be needed because the gospel would be written.

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Even though, or because, the miraculous gifts would no longer be available, love continued in importance. The act of giving oneself continues to be characteristic of the church of Christ, long after miracles passed away.

Truly faith, hope, and love were to outlast the miraculous. One of the great reasons for that is that these three are available to everyone. They are not “in part” in the sense that they are partitioned out to a select group of people. They are fundamental. They are foundational in supporting the structure of the church. Faith endures beyond the gifts, but only until it is swallowed up in knowledge. Hope endures beyond the miraculous, but only until we see God in his glory. Churches may exist without the gifts of the Spirit. They cannot exist without love. “A house divided against itself shall not stand.” And love is the greatest of the more excellent, because it continues even into eternity.

WHAT A SACRIFICE

We often hear people talk about sacrifice. "You have to sacrifice for your art." (Which, for me, currently means driving an extra 26 miles a day for rehearsals.) "How I sacrifice for my wife/kids!" "Practice sacrificial giving. Give until it hurts." The common thread through all of these is the idea of giving up something, often of value, and often painfully. In the Bible the idea of giving up something of value may be included, but it is not the primary meaning. Sacrifice may be anything that makes one holy.

In some cases that may be something one gives up. Certainly under the Law of Moses a sacrifice was not acceptable unless it cost one something. "And the king said unto Araunah, Nay; but I will surely buy it of thee at a price: neither will I offer burnt offerings unto the LORD my God of that which doth cost me nothing. So David bought the threshingfloor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver." (2 Sam 24:24) However, it was not the giving up that made the person holy. It was the offering itself. It did not matter how much or how little it cost. In some cases the sacrifice was the same for all, regardless of ability to pay it. "The firstborn of man shalt thou surely redeem, and the firstling of unclean beasts shalt thou redeem. And those that are to be redeemed from a month old shalt thou redeem, according to thine estimation, for the money of five shekels, after the shekel of the sanctuary." (Numbers 18:15-16) It did not matter so much the value of what you brought, but that you brought it.

What makes a person holy is not what he brings but that it is a part of him. Just the act of bringing a sacrifice reveals and enhances one's holiness. In a sense this is where the value comes in. If

you perform the minimum it is no more than what is expected of you. If you give more because you want to, it not only shows the desire for holiness; it also reinforces the holiness you already have. "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, your reasonable service." (Rom 12:1) Just as a person usually does not fall away with one sin but repetition, so holiness grows with repetition of that which makes for holiness.

In seeming contradiction to all that I have said up to this point, the most important sacrifice of all was not something that we gave at all. It cost us nothing. It was not ours to offer. It was of extreme value, but people accounted it as of no value. We sacrificed nothing, and yet this sacrifice makes us more holy than even we can imagine. That sacrifice is the son of God.

For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us: Nor yet that he should offer himself often, as the high priest entereth into the holy place every year with blood of others; For then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. (Heb 9:24-26)

This is the sacrifice that truly makes us holy. Anything else we could offer is only a picture of this sacrifice. Even if we offered all that we have, and that is no more than he asks of us, it would not make us truly holy. Only by the grace of God, and the sacrifice of his son to fulfill his justice, are we made holy, as God is holy. Now *that* is a sacrifice!

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