



Bible Student's Notebook™

The Herald of His Grace

Presenting every man perfect in Christ Jesus. Colossians 1:28

Volume 24
Issue 584

The More Excellent Way

by — A.E. Knoch (1874-1965)

Who, in reading of the marvelous gifts in the twelfth of first Corinthians, has not been struck with the last verse of the chapter, "Covet earnestly the best gifts"? That is what we would like to do, but what do the closing words mean? "And yet show I unto you a more excellent way." Can it be that there is something even better than the best gifts? If so, what is it and how may we enjoy it?



We may arrange the three periods thus, according to what remains:

- (1) The gifts, faith, expectation, love.
- (2) Faith, expectation, love.
- (3) Love.

The vital question with us is, "Where are we now?" It is best answered by asking, "Where was Paul when he wrote?" Was he looking forward to the resurrection glory of the saints or to another glorious change in his ministry?

In the original the question is settled for us. In our English version it is hidden by translating two different words "now."

For now [arti, at present, not in the past or future] we see through a glass darkly (:12).

And now [nun, from now on, not, in the past] abideth faith, hope, love (:13).

FAITH, EXPECTATION, LOVE REMAIN IN THE MORE EXCELLENT WAY

Paul was at the crisis *between* partial and full knowledge, *between* minority and maturity. To make this clear we would urge all to write the words "at present" for the "now" of :12, and put "from" before the "now" in :13. At that time they saw darkly. We do not. From that time to this "faith, expectation and love remain," though the gifts have vanished. ►

The thirteenth chapter is occupied with the answer to this question. This chapter is usually understood as an exhortation to love, especially in the exercise of the gifts, but it is far more than that. Love is the sum and substance of *the more excellent way*. Love will never lapse, but the gifts will go (I Corinthians 13:8).

THREE DISTINCT PERIODS

There are three distinct periods brought before us in this chapter. In the first one are all the gifts besides faith, expectation and love. Knowledge and prophecy are "in part" (:9), it is the time of childhood (:11), vision is through a glass darkly (:12).

In the second one the gifts "fail," "cease" or "vanish" (:8), perfection comes and partial knowledge and prophecy are "done away" (:9-10), childish things are "put away" (:11), knowledge is "face to face" (:12) and only faith, hope, love abide (:13).

The third period is only hinted at. Love never lapses, but we know that faith will be lost in sight and expectation will vanish in the glory.

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Strange as it may seem, the principal excellence of the path of perfection lies in the lack of the special gifts or graces of which Paul has just been speaking! *The more excellent way* knows no gift of prophecy, or of languages, or of knowledge. These are to cease to function. Only three things are left on the perfect path – *faith, expectancy and love*. These are not special graces for a few, but freely enjoyed by all.

MINORITY IS PAST; MATURITY HAS ARRIVED

A striking contrast between *the way more excellent* and that which preceded it is brought before us under the figure of a child, growing up into maturity. The gifts were for the support and schooling of infancy and adolescence, the playthings of immaturity, unneeded and unheeded by the maturity of manhood.

Again, *the less excellent way* was only partial in its perfection. Knowledge was fragmentary, and needed continual additions. The perfect path brings us face to face with the *full-orbed* revelation of God, face to face with His primeval purpose and its accomplishment and to a full recognition of our own part in His plan.

We all desire to walk in *the way more excellent*. No one cares to linger in the lesser glory, but many of us have been taught that this perfect path is not for us now, but is reserved for the saints in resurrection. For such we have the most marvelous of all messages. *The more excellent way is our present privilege and portion*.

Paul was not speaking of our resurrection state, but of the final phase of his ministry, which went from glory to glory. He was contrasting one of these glories with another. He was speaking of his final revelations as unfolded in Ephesians.

How can we be assured of this? The trinity of graces that remain are ample proof. *Now* faith and hope remain. They will have no place in the glory. Faith will be replaced by sight and expectation by fulfillment. Then we will not patiently wait for some future blessing, but rather enjoy the present. Hope will vanish for lack of those adverse conditions on which it depends. So with faith; in His presence it disappears in perception.

These are the abiding graces *for the present*. In contrast with the lesser gifts, such as prophecy, languages and knowledge, these remain *until the glory*. Only love remains forever. Only love never lapses. It is the supreme, the essential, the eternal grace, *the way most excellent*.

“Surely knowledge is not absent now!” Some may question whether prophecy is still operative, while others defend it and point to revelations outside the Word of God. Some claim that the gift of “tongues” is still for us. These three go together. If one is present, the rest must also be.

Besides, that “*knowledge*” was not to be *absent* on the way more excellent is most evident from the apostle’s development of the thought. The “*knowledge*” which shall be done away is *fragmentary*, a matter of installments. *It was not to be displaced by ignorance but by another and fuller knowledge*. That “*knowledge*” was a reflected perception, partial, distorted, and gives place to unhindered apprehension.

Moreover, is “*knowledge*” to be abrogated in the glory? Is ignorance an ingredient of celestial bliss? Surely such a thought is enough to send us back to seek some other solution to this assertion.

The matter is most simple. “*Languages*” are not to be discarded either now or in the glory. Undoubtedly then we shall speak by means of language, and assuredly we do so now. It is not “*language*” which is in question, but the *gift of language*.

Prophecy is ours, as recorded in the Scriptures, but the *gift of prophecy* has ceased. Knowledge is fuller than ever since the Word of God has been completed, but the *gift of knowledge* is no more.

No one now gains a knowledge of the truth by supernatural, divine endowment. We must all patiently plod along and carefully scan the Sacred Page even though we have the spirit’s illumination. All claims to inspiration, whether prophecy or knowledge, will be found to be another spirit, and in conflict with the written revelation we already have.

THE “GIFT OF TONGUES” IS SAID TO “CEASE”

Knowledge, *as a gift*, has ceased. Prophecy, *as a gift*, has been abrogated. But what of “*tongues*,” or languages? The conclusion is irresistible that, if the *gift of knowledge and prophecy* have no longer place for exercise, then *the gift of language* has also vanished. It was to cease somewhere between the infancy and the maturity of the saints as a body, not at the resurrection of the individual.

Maturity or “*perfection*” is not applied to the glory but to the present status of all who are in Christ. “*That which is perfect*” HAS come. Even at the time this epistle to the Corinthians was written some were “*perfect*,” and Paul spoke of the hidden wisdom to them (I Corinthians 2:6). Some in Philippians attained to this experience. It was the apostle’s mission to present every man “*perfect*” or “*mature*” in Christ Jesus (Colossians 1:28; cf. Ephesians 4:13; Colossians 4:12).

While all *are* mature because of the place into which the grace of God has put them, few of us know of our maturity or enter into the experience which accords with it. Like Israel, our hearts turn back into Egypt. Like children, we revert to the playthings of youth. We are much more fascinated by the gifts than by the faith, expectation and love which pave the path of perfection. We crave the spectacular and the exciting. We ignore the exhortation “*in understanding be mature*” (A.V., “*men*,” I Corinthians 14:20). With the vivid imagination of childhood, so seriously do we take these things that the gifts (rather than their absence) are loudly proclaimed as *the more excellent way!*

The Scriptures stand and are true. Our experience is fluctuating and deceptive. It is the height of folly to interpret the Scriptures by our feelings, and the most exalted wisdom to judge our experience by the Sacred Oracles. Yet all *true* spiritual experience is in fullest accord with divine revelation and, while it cannot *support* that which needs no prop, adds its testimony to the truth. Hence we add a few lines of our experience.

While we have examined very few of the professed prophecies of later centuries, we have seen enough of them to convince us fully that the gift of prophecy is obsolete. While practically all seek to supplement the Scriptures and to keep in accord with the revelation contained in them, in every case the deviation is sufficient to show that the revelation is not from God. If it is supernatural or superhuman, as seems to be the case in some instances, the spirit that inspired it was not the holy spirit of God, but another spirit, for such are expressly promised in the latter eras (I Timothy 4:1).

Moreover, now that Paul has *completed* the Word of God (Colossians 1:25), there is no necessity for any added revelation. The whole orb of divine truth has been rounded out. There are no missing segments. Every attempt to add to it is an excrescence, not only needless, but destructive of the truth.

The gift of knowledge was necessary while the most important segment of truth was still unrevealed. It needed a special endowment on the part of some to know God’s mind on matters concerning which there was no written revelation. Now no such equipment is necessary.

I have never known of any one who specifically claimed the gift of knowledge. I have observed that all who really have knowledge arrive at it by the patient and painful process of study. Those who imagine themselves especially endowed without previous preparation soon manifest the fruits of fanaticism.

Some have charged me with the possession of this gift, but I have the sober consciousness that many a thought which has come to me, when tested by God’s Word written, has proved that I have the gift of ignorance. I do not desire to give out a single idea which has not been received from and subordinated to the Scriptures.

For many years I have lived in close proximity to one of the most remarkable “movements” in which the “gifts of tongues” is a prominent factor. I have heard the “tongues” and have had those who were afflicted with them come to me and tell me the whole of their startling experiences. While there may have ►

been some deception, most were earnest, devoted saints who wanted God's best for themselves. Most of the tongues were "unknown," and, to a linguist, unknowable, for the succession of sounds was such as could by no manner of means represent rational ideas. Yet some were supposed to be actual living languages, and some of these, were put to the test of practical use. They failed utterly. Missionaries who had the gift of Chinese went to China, but found that the gift failed them altogether.

Seldom was it kept in restraint, as the Scriptures direct. There has been a tendency to parade it as the highest expression of spiritual attainment, and some have even demanded it as a necessary sign of salvation.

The most serious aspect of the matter is its close relationship with spiritism. Rather than receiving a gift, the gift gets its victim. It controls, not only the utterances, but to a large extent the time and occasion of its exercise. The symptoms are precisely the same as in demon possession. The speaker in tongues becomes a medium controlled by a spirit which is not of God, though it imitates the spirit of God. To get rid of this spirit, once it has a firm hold on its victim, is almost impossible. Having been trained to "yield," the will is weak, and the medium is in a deplorable condition from which nothing but God's power and grace can rescue him.

The gift of "tongues" has become an avenue for the entrance of seducing spirits (I Timothy 4:1) into the household of faith. That these spirits mimic the holy spirit and teach much truth shows only the subtlety of their seduction. Even if the Scriptures had not spoken specifically of tongues that "*they shall cease,*" the history of the "tongues movement" is itself sufficient for the spiritual mind to prove that the imitation offered is spurious. It has led to more division and dissension than any other movement in the brief period it has prevailed.

THE GIFT OF HEALING

The question remains, "What of the other gifts mentioned in Corinthians, especially healing, which is not specifically said to have ceased?" The answer is

not far to seek. Physical healing is clearly promised in many a passage, but it has no place in *the more excellent way* we are considering. Ephesians promises all *spiritual* blessings among the celestials (Ephesians 1:3), but there is not a single word as to physical health on the earth.

Philippians brings before us three of the most spiritual of God's slaves in this era of transcendent grace. Paul himself had a thorn in the flesh, and could not get rid of this physical infirmity, because *it was necessary for the perfection of grace*. God's power can be perfected only in infirmity (II Corinthians 12:9), and Paul, who healed others, learns the deeper lesson of abiding under the power of Christ. This was *after* he began to walk *the more excellent way*.

Timothy, next to Paul, is the greatest of all of the apostles for this era of grace. He, too, treads the path of perfection and suffers "*often infirmities,*" for which Paul prescribes a little wine instead of exercising his gift of healing (I Timothy 5:23).

Then we are told of Epaphroditus, who risked his soul for the saints and nearly died while he was staying with Paul, to his great sorrow. He was on *the more excellent way*. No one on this path ever used the gift of miraculous healing, even though he may have had it (Philippians 2:25-30).

NO LONGER KNOWING CHRIST AFTER THE FLESH

Before Paul received this ministry he was the greatest healer of all of the apostles. He more than duplicated all that Peter did; but when the great change came, as Israel's rejection of Messiah became more apparent, he decided no longer to know Christ after the flesh. He gave notice that the signs which accompanied the proclamation of the kingdom would cease, and intimated that God had something much better in store for the saints – not on earth but in heaven, not in the physical realm but in the spiritual.

Knowing Christ after the flesh (II Corinthians 5:16) refers to Christ's flesh, not Paul's. Paul certainly would not claim a fleshly knowledge of Him as the basis of his ministry hitherto, but he had

been proclaiming Him as the Messiah of Israel as to His *physical* relationship to the Circumcision. Christ was a Jew, and lived and died in their land and will restore the kingdom to them on the basis of their *physical* relationship to Him. Gentile blessing on earth must flow through this channel. Paul had been proclaiming Him as Israel's Messiah. This is "*knowing Christ according to flesh.*" Healing and all of the other gifts were associated with knowing Christ after the flesh. They continued in connection with that ministry.

At that point in Paul's career when he wrote the second epistle to the Corinthians he decided no longer to know Christ after the flesh (II Corinthians 5:16). He was entering *the more excellent way*. Christ according to the flesh corresponds to the regeneration, as the kingdom is called. Its proclamation leads to the kingdom and the millennium. That will be very good, it will be excellent; but Paul, in spirit, has come to the end of the millennium and enters the new creation (II Corinthians 5:17). The result of no longer knowing Christ according to the flesh is that "*if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.*" This is *the more excellent way*. The new birth leads to millennial blessing of which the gifts were the sign. The new creation introduces us to an unutterably higher sphere of blessing, based on faith, which asks for no signs.

As Paul gradually entered this path his own health became impaired, he could not cure his dearest friends, he even left one of them, Trophimus, at Miletum, sick. Ask him, in his Roman prison, whether the gift of healing has become inoperative. His answer might well be, "If it has not, why am I afflicted, and why is Timothy often ill, and what of Trophimus and Epaphroditus?"

There is not a single instance where healing did occur after the kingdom narrative in Acts had closed. Physical healing is a sign and pledge of the material marvels of the kingdom on earth. While that is no longer proclaimed, such attestations to its power are out of place.

The experience of Paul and his friends clearly accords with the absence of the gift of healing in *the*

more excellent way. My own experience for over a quarter of a century in one of the centers of the healing movement confirms this interpretation.

Death denies "divine healing." Healers and healed die of disease. Had the kingdom come none of those healed would have died except by violence, sin or design. The gift would have preserved them in health and defied death.

Paul's Preparatory Epistles give us the great divide between the teaching of the Pentecostal and the present dispensations. The thirteenth chapter of first Corinthians is especially devoted to showing the relation between his earlier course and his latest ministry, which is recorded in the *Perfection Epistles*: Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians.

Paul's ministry, unlike that of the twelve, went from *glory to glory* (II Corinthians 3:18). He did not receive all at first, but by gradual revelations, he ascended into the celestial heights of *present truth*. We should follow to the end, but, alas, we linger and lag behind. We imagine we have attained the summit of truth when we read of the marvelous endowments in the Corinthian ecclesia, but the apostle assures us that he knows of "*a more excellent way,*" or a path suited to transcendence (I Corinthians 12:31).

We earnestly urge our beloved brethren to search the thirteenth of Corinthians for themselves. *The more excellent way* certainly does not include the gifts, for it is in direct contrast with them and could not come until they had been discarded. That is the way of childhood, of fragmentary knowledge, of blurred vision. We cannot dissociate the gifts from all of these imperfections and disabilities.

Now that *the more excellent way* has been revealed in Paul's later epistles, why cling to that which God has made obsolete? Let us pursue the path suited to transcendence, the way more excellent!

— *Unsearchable Riches*, Volume 15
(*edited & abridged*)



Editor's Desk

My Apologies

All my affairs shall be made known to you (Colossians 4:7, Concordant Version).

I owe our readers a long-standing apology. Years ago the *Bible Student's Notebook* had a personal note from me that was a regular feature. I was often told by readers that this was one of the first things they read. Before diving into study, they enjoyed doing a little personal catching up with me.

Over time, with more and more Scripture studies pressing to be released, it seemed to me less than ideal to take up such valuable space with personal comments.

Early on I learned that another valued feature of our periodical was letters from our readers. A measure of comfort was found in knowing that there were others across this wide globe that God had on very similar journeys. Though over the years, we have still occasionally run letters, it hasn't been a regular feature; rather, it has always been as space has permitted.

I apologize for these two features not being regular. Now, however, with the inauguration of our semi-weekly release, I am once again motivated to share more from myself and from our readers. Not only will this space provide a way for me to stay in touch with you on a more personal level, but to keep you updated on our many ministry projects as well.

The More Excellent Way

In 1985 God graciously granted me insight into *the more excellent way*. That year I began to teach the threefold timeline (past-present-future) wonderfully revealed by Paul in I Corinthians 13. What great clarity this understanding would provide me over the years in my walk and ministry.

To my pleasant surprise, while recently reading through the September 1924 issue of the *Unsearchable Riches* magazine, I found an outstanding presentation of this timeline by A.E. Knoch. In this issue we are pleased to share this invaluable study with you. *Please* do yourself a great service by carefully reading this important work.

Your servant,

Clyde L. Pilkington, Jr.

Bible Student's Notebook™

Paul Our Guide – Christ Our Goal

ISSN: 1936-9360

Volume 24, No. 584 – January 30, 2017

Issued semi-weekly

This free electronic publication is dedicated to:

- the proclamation of the riches of God's abundant, exceeding grace (Romans 5:20; 11:6; Ephesians 1:7);
- the affirmation that God will save all mankind through the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (I Timothy 2:3, 4; 4:10; Titus 2:11);
- the "preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret in ages past" (Romans 16:25);
- true freedom and liberty apart from law (Galatians 5:1);
- the organic nature of the Body of Christ (I Corinthians 12);
- the distinct message and ministry of Paul, the apostle to the nations (Ephesians 1:1-3);
- the importance of receiving all whom Christ has received (Romans 14-15);
- the recovery of rich Biblical truth that has too long remained hidden under the veils of traditionalism, prejudice, misunderstanding, and fear (Mark 7:7, 13);
- the completeness of the believer in Christ (Colossians 2:10), with:

- total freedom from sins (Colossians 1:14);
- union in His death, burial and resurrection (Romans 6);
- adult sonship position (Galatians 4).

We do not claim infallibility for the contents of this publication. Our readers are asked to be as the Bereans and search the Scriptures (Acts 17:10-11; I Thessalonians 5:21).

This publication is not connected with any "church," "denomination," "movement," "organization," "mission," "creed," "meeting," "school," "conference" or "fellowship."

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PO Box 265, Windber, PA 15963

Office: (800) 784-6010

Local: (814) 701-0063

bsn@studyshef.com

Clyde L. Pilkington, Jr. – Editor
André Sneider – Managing Editor

Managers and Assistants

Clyde L. Pilkington, III, Keith Martin, Nathan H. Pilkington, Janet L. Maher, Stephen Hill, Aaron Locker, Mark Peters, Cindy Pilkington, Nadine Sneider

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