

The Last Word

Gerhard Forde

1 Corinthians 13:1–13

“Though I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol” (1 Cor. 13).

We have come to the end again. It’s time for another last word. It is the end of the school year, yes. It’s the end of seminary years for graduates; yes. But it’s also the end of the great festival cycle of the church year. The birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord have been proclaimed to us and now, at last, it has been said that the Spirit has been poured out upon us all. It is all accomplished. So now we ought to be able to speak it. What is the last word?

“Though I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol.”

How about that for a last word? Surely it’s a good word; one that can hardly be surpassed. So good, in fact, that I might just say it and sit down. That might even be the greater part of love! But the trouble is, I haven’t said anything yet. I have only said something about how to speak. And it’s possible that to say nothing more than that would not be particularly loving.

But what can I say? “Though I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol.” That word is a terrifyingly exacting task-master. However theologically correct, biblically sound, rhetorically eloquent, homiletically splendid, religiously grand, angelic or even Spirit-breathed my words, if I have not love – have not agape, self-giving spirit – it’s all just hollow noise, empty prattle.

But who then can presume to speak? Who can pass this test? This final exam? Are we not condemned to silence? These were Paul’s last words, so to speak, on that messy scene at Corinth – what we today politely call “diversity!” Paul’s yet “more excellent way.” The completion of the grand festival cycle, the outpouring of the Spirit had resulted in little else than that noisy argument, bitter and divisive, religious rank-pulling of the worst sort: “I’ve got the Spirit, and you haven’t.”

And I suppose now that Pentecost is come and gone we too have all been treated to the annual orgy of self-recrimination over the fact that “we don’t talk enough about the Spirit,” and how Lutherans are second article Unitarians and enlightening palaver of similar sort. Diversity? Oh yes! You name it, we’ve got it! But in a sense, that isn’t strange, Paul says. There are different gifts, the body has many members doing different things. You just have to get it all together. “Well, thanks a lot, Paul! Have you any more helpful advice for us?”

Yes, now that you mention it, there is one more thing – a yet more excellent way. “If I speak in tongues human or angelic but have not love I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol.” Yes, but how shall I so speak? How shall I avoid adding my voice one last time to the squabble? One last cut? Here’s my chance! One last bit of cynicism, one last impressive, weighty demonstration, one final bit of advice.

I do have more to say, you know! I’ve been talking all year, but I didn’t really finish! You probably couldn’t believe all the things I think you ought to know and do! Indeed, if only you could somehow be made over into something closer to my image, things would be a lot better, of course! After all, noisy gongs and clanging symbols can be impressive too, you know!

But Paul had to go and spoil it all. “If I speak in tongues human and angelic, but have not love...”. What then can I say? What is the last word? Perhaps I shall have to give up – and you shall, at last, speak for another, speak of another, speak in the Spirit. How else can I get by here? Could it be that that is what Paul was driving at? That it’s not a matter of talk about the Spirit, however grand; not about what we’ve got, but of speaking in the Spirit?

And what then shall I say? How about, “Your sins are forgiven for Jesus’ sake?” But that’s awfully simplistic, and maybe even kind of embarrassing, isn’t it? Come on, Forde, can’t you think of something more profound to say? Yes, I can, now that you mention it! After all, I am a professor! Besides, I don’t even think you deserve it – not after hearing what you have to say!

And I don’t know if I can really trust you with it. If it were up to me, I would find something else to say to you. But there is this stricture: “If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol.” I don’t know what else to say. And you see, I don’t know how to do that in any other way. And so it boils down to agape, to giving ourselves over to each other, to this moment, this ending. So I shall speak, at last, and you will listen, “Your sins are forgiven for Jesus’ sake.” And that’s the last word.

SOURCE

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