

“A MORE EXCELLENT WAY” (A Study of 1 Corinthians 13)



By James E. Gibbons

THE CHURCH at Corinth was a church grievously beset by sin and many problems. The apostle Paul in the epistles of 1 and 2 Corinthians (as well as in another epistle the Holy Spirit has not chosen to preserve for us, 1 Corinthians 5:9) confronts the problems. The problems are more particularly highlighted in 1 Corinthians. In writing to churches, it was Paul's custom usually to start by saying something personal and complimentary about the intended recipients. In writing to the Corinthians, he was hard pressed in doing this. There were too many bad things that glaringly obstructed his view. However, he was able to go behind the unlovely picture and come up with something good to say. “I thank my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ; That in every thing ye are enriched by him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge; Even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you: So that you come behind in no gift; waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:4-7).

“Puffed Up” About Spiritual Gifts (and Other Things)

He compliments them in reference to the things of God, grace—grace in reference to salvation and grace in reference to spiritual gifts (not for anything personally emanating from them). Instead of being humble and thankful, the Corinthians were “puffed up” about many things; yes, even “puffed up” about spiritual gifts (thinking that having certain spiritual gifts made them superior to others, among them being the ability to speak in “tongues”—other languages). In chapter 4, verse 7, Paul “proddingly” asked, “For who maketh thee to differ from another? And what hast thou that thou didst not receive? Now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?”

Love (1 Corinthians 13), The “More Excellent Way”

After dealing with some problems the house of Chloe had told him about as they visited him in Ephesus (1 Corinthians 1:11ff; 16:8), Paul responds to some matters the church had written him about (1 Corinthians 7:1; 8:1; 12:1; etc.). First Corinthians 13, the chapter that is the focus of our study in this article, is sandwiched in between chapters dealing with questions involving spiritual gifts. In fact, 1 Corinthians 13 is itself about spiritual gifts and more in particular about the gift of the Spirit Himself and the predominate fruit He produces in the surrendered life (Acts 2:38; 1 Corinthians 6:19; Galatians 5:22, 23), love (1 John 4:12,13). After listing nine different spiritual gifts in chapter 12 and giving a wide overview of the spectrum of gifts, Paul says, “But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way.” There was something more wonderful than their inordinate preoccupation with spiritual gifts, even being “puffed up” about them, and that was love. It is the “more excellent way.”

Agapao (agape), the love of devotion, and *phileo*, the love of emotion, are the words for love found in the New Testament. *Agape* (noun) is the word used in this 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians. We don't fully understand why the King James scholars translated *agape* with the word “charity” here (and 28 times altogether in the New Testament). However, they seem to always use it in speaking about human beings and never translate it “charity” when referring to God.

Now let us take a look at this great and wonderful chapter on love.

I. THE FUTILITY OF RELIGION WITHOUT LOVE (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

- A. “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity [love], I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal” (verse 1)**

Tongues Means Languages

Paul deals with tongues to start with. It seems the Corinthians were putting a lot of emphasis on the gift of speaking in tongues. They could ostentatiously make a display of such a gift, speaking in a language they had never learned before. By saying, “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels,” Paul is showing that indeed an intelligent spoken lan-

guage is in mind, and not some jargon or emotional jibber-jabber. The phenomenon on the Day of Pentecost very clearly shows that “tongues” has reference to human languages (Acts 2:4-12). In 1 Corinthians 14:21, Paul likewise makes clear that he is talking about a human language when he quotes from Isaiah 28:11 and 12, “In the law [O. T., Isaiah] it is written, With men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people; and yet for all that will they not hear me, saith the Lord.” Here Isaiah has the Chaldean language (the language of Babylon) in mind, as the Jews would hear this language as the judgment of God was coming down upon them.

The Futility of Tongues without Love

Though a person spoke in all of the languages of the world and heaven, even eloquently, and had not love, it would amount to nothing more than “sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.” The “sounding brass” refers to two pieces of unwrought metal being hit together. “Tinkling cymbal” refers to two pieces of hollowed out metal being banged together. In other words, speaking in tongues would be no more meaningful and pleasant to hear, than the clanging and banging of rough and untempered metal together. Without love, speaking in another language would be just so much noise. Love is the important thing.

B. “And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity [love], I am nothing” (verse 2).

Even with More Valuable Spiritual Gifts, Without Love We Are Nothing

Having hit head-on their frivolous preoccupation with tongues, Paul now includes other spiritual gifts to get his point across. He expands his illustration to include gifts that would benefit the church more than tongues. The gift of “prophecy” is highlighted. Tongues and prophesying are put in contrast one with the other in chapter 14, with prophesying presented as being the more desirable gift (the word “unknown” is not in the Greek New Testament). “Prophecy” means to foretell and forthtell. And for the purposes of his argument here, his reference to “prophecy” becomes even more impressive when he lists “understand all mysteries, and all knowledge.” Corresponding with the twofold meaning of prophecy, this could

point to (1) foretell (“understand all mysteries”) and (2) forthtell (“understand...all knowledge”), or this could mean two more distinct gifts of the Spirit. Either way, his conclusion is the same about love. Then he tops it all off with “faith.” This can refer to spiritual gifts (Romans 12:3, 6), or to faith in the regular sense of the word (Hebrews 11:6). Regardless, even if we had all of these gifts that exceed tongues in value (and had them combined), topped by faith, and didn’t have love, he emphatically says we “are nothing.” Our religion is futile.

C. “And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity [love], it profiteth me nothing” (verse 3).

Bestowing All of Ones Possessions Of No Value Without Love

According to 1 John 3:17, if we don’t respond to a glaring need there is a question mark about our love. Thus John admonishes, “My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth” (3:18). Giving is normally an act of love. But Christianity demands that our motives be right (Matthew 6:1,2), and consequently John adds “in truth.” The gift without the giver is bare. Even “though I bestow [distribute, dole out bit by bit until all is gone] all my goods to feed the poor,” and it is not done in love, religiously “it profiteth me nothing” as far as God is concerned.

The Ultimate Gift of Self in Martyrdom

The “goods” have all been given, all that a person has, and now Paul takes his illustration a step further, the ultimate giving of self, and the giving of self in martyrdom; not just any martyrdom, but “though I give my body to be burned.” Certainly the giving of Christ to be crucified was the ultimate expression of love, whether from the viewpoint of God (John 3:16) or the Son of God. Jesus said to His disciples, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). This is beyond question in what the Lord Jesus Christ did for us. But conceivably and hypothetically, a person could go through all of this to die and it not be motivated by love. In that case, it would be of no profit to him in the sight of God. Love is what really matters.

II. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF LOVE (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

Love Personified

Having established the absolute necessity of love, Paul now lays out the characteristics of love before us. Here love is personified (spoken of as if it were a person). This shouldn't be hard for us to grasp for John said, "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16). Likewise we could fittingly replace the word "love" with "Christ" and it would beautifully impact us and get Paul's point across. Or even better, fitting in with the apostle's purpose in writing, how nice it would be to be able to put the name of the Corinthians (or our name) every where the word "love" is found; that they (we) would be an embodiment or reflection of each and every one of these characteristics in their (our) lives.

A. Positive Characteristics: "Charity [love] suffereth long, and is kind..." (verse 4a)

"Suffereth Long"

This word translated "suffereth long" is elsewhere rendered "be patient," "is longsuffering," and "patiently endured" (KJV). Where there is no love, it is easy to become impatient. The Corinthians surely needed a little more of this characteristic in their personal relationships, considering the problems disrupting the church.

"Is Kind"

Our English word "kind" in its origin seems to be related to our word "kin." Perhaps we could say that in being kind, we treat others like they are our kin (kindred). We are cordial and friendly disposed toward one another. This would harmonize with the meaning here, being considerate with a benevolent attitude toward others. Ephesians 4:32 reads, "And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you." Yes, Romans 12:10 says "Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another." Someone has said that if you are not kind, you are the wrong kind.

B. Negative Characteristics: "Charity [love] envieth not; charity [love] 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..." (verses 4b-6a)

"Envieth Not"

Now beginning a series of what love is not, or does not do, Paul states, "Love envieth not." In other words, love is not jeal-

ous. It is not jealous of other's spiritual gifts (as was the case at Corinth) or other's good fortune, well-being or blessings. As Paul said in the chapter right before, "...that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it" (12:25, 26). There is no room for jealousy here.

"Vaunteth Not Itself"

Then from the position of those who might have a "coveted" spiritual gift, viewed by some as being superior and making them superior, they are reminded that love "vaunteth not itself." It is not arrogant, vainglorious or boastful. As Paul said earlier in 1 Corinthians 4:7, "For who maketh thee to differ from another? And what hast thou that thou didst not receive? Now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?" They should have remembered and we should always remember that God is the author of "every good and perfect gift" (James 1:17). Humility and thanksgiving are always in order.

"Is Not Puffed Up"

Overlapping and further extending the thought of vaunting itself, Paul says that love "is not puffed up." Four times the expression "puffed up" is found in 1 Corinthians (4:18, 19; 5:2; 13:4). Among other things, they were "puffed up" in connection with religious factions surrounding the personalities of men and supposed superior spiritual gifts. But what we read in Philippians 2:3 should eliminate once and for all attitudes like those besetting the church at Corinth. "Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves." And as Paul says later in 1 Corinthians 16:14, "Let all your things be done with charity [love]." In following these noble admonitions, problems like those at Corinth become non-existent.

"Doth Not Behave Itself Unseemly"

Love "doth not behave itself unseemly." Here he seems to be saying that love is not rude or impolite. This is not the way love acts, responds or reacts. It ever wants to be, and seeks to be, respectful and courteous to all men (1 Timothy 5:1, 2; Titus

3:2). It stays within the bounds of propriety. There is the display of good manners. It is civil.

“Seeketh Not Her Own”

Here the direct opposite of love is dealt with, selfishness. Love does not insist on having its own way about everything. It neutralizes selfishness, and self interests, turning such inordinate feelings away from self to the well-being of others. This fits right in with what Paul earlier admonished in this epistle, “Let no man seek his own, but every man another’s wealth” (10:24). This Old English rendering, “wealth,” highlights *weal* as opposed to *woe*, i.e. *weal*-th. We seek another’s well-being before our own. This truth is emphasized again in Philippians 2:4, “Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.” This has to do with the attitude of unselfishness. We cease to be all wrapped up in self. Someone has said that a person all wrapped up in himself makes a mighty small package.

“Is Not Easily Provoked”

The word “easily” is not in the original language and was supplied by the translators. Simply stated, he is saying that love is not irritable, does not yield to provocation, and does not fly into a rage. We would say in a colloquial expression, “Love does not wear its feelings on its sleeves.” This would correspond well with what is said about the fruit of the Holy Spirit in Galatians 5:22 and 23, which includes “temperance” or in more of a modern vernacular, “self-control.” Certainly the Lord Jesus Christ has set us an example here.

“Thinketh No Evil”

Several thoughts could be involved in this statement. Love should not be judgmental, questioning the motives and actions of others. It should not be hasty to condemn. Love does not keep an account book and take inventory, perhaps with the idea of eventually getting even (or at least bringing the matter up at a future date). Love does not hold a grudge. All of these thoughts could be involved in what Paul is saying here.

“Rejoiceth Not in Iniquity”

In Romans 1:18-32, after dealing with Gentile sins and perversions, Paul concludes the chapter by saying, “Who knowing

the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them” (verse 32). In Ephesians 5:3 and 4 he likewise exhorts, “But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient [not fitting, proper]: but rather giving of thanks.” The “foolish talking” and “jesting,” among other things, would include off-color jokes a person would laugh at. Love would have no pleasure in the off-color humor, accompanied by the canned laughter, on television. It does not laugh at that which is vulgar. The scope of this injunction could include many things. A Christian can never be happy about that which is wrong.

C. Positive Characteristics: “But rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things” (verses 6b-7).

“But Rejoiceth in the Truth”

Love does not rejoice in vice, but in that which is virtuous. It does not rejoice in irreligion or that which is false in any sense of the word, but that which is true. Love is not a wishy-washy, doting sentimentality that overlooks flagrant error, even false teaching and religious error; it rejoices in the truth. The conversion of the Gentiles from idolatry was an occasion of “great joy” in the early church (Acts 11:18, 22, 23; 15:3). The apostle John wrote, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth” (3 John, verse 4). Let us love, appreciate and rejoice in the truth. Love rejoices in (and with) the truth. It does make a difference what we believe.

“Beareth All Things”

Most modern translations render this as bearing all things, although the idea of covering is in the word. Love will “put up” with a lot of things. It will hold fast. It will endure. There is no limit to its endurance. In one sense, what is said here seems to be parallel with verse 4 where he said that love “suffereth long.” It is patient.

“Believeth...Hopeth All Things”

Believe and hope are so closely related in what Paul is talking about here, we have grouped these two words together. Hebrews 11:1 tells us that “faith is the substance of things hoped for...”

The apostle is not saying that love is gullible and will believe any and everything that comes along (Ephesians 4:14, 15). Contrariwise, Proverbs 14:15 says, "The simple believeth every word: but the prudent man looketh well to his going." In believing all things, evidently he means that love puts the best construction on the conduct of others. It wants to believe the best about them and what they say. And, coupled with hope, it means that love is optimistic in doing this. It doesn't want to give up. With a positive outlook, it wants to keep on thinking and looking forward in optimism. It hopes for the best.

"Endureth All Things"

So many of these noble characteristics of love overlap (yet are different). Paul started with love "suffereth long." He said that love "beareth all things." Now he says that love "endureth all things." The end results are the same. Love perseveres. It is persistent. Hatred and ill-will will burn themselves out, eventually bringing destruction to those who harbor such feelings, but love continues on. It endures. It outlasts all things. How fitting to bring the description of the characteristics of love to a close with these words.

III. THE ENDURANCE OF LOVE AND THE PASSING OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS (1 Corinthians 13:8-13)

- A. "Charity [love] never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away" (verses 8-10).**

Spiritual Gifts to "Fail," "Cease," and "Vanish Away"

Having highlighted love and its qualities as the "more excellent way," Paul now gets back to the matter of spiritual gifts and the permanency of love. Love will continue. It is here to stay. It is what Christianity is all about, whether from the viewpoint of God or man. It will never fail, but the gifts will come to an end. They are looked upon as a passing phenomenon in the church. Paul has already talked about them, as here represented by "prophecies," "tongues," and supernatural "knowledge," compared to love. He now tells us that the time is coming when they will "fail," "cease," and "vanish away." The carnal Corinthians

who were “puffed up” had fastened their fleshly fancies to a “fading star.” But the “more excellent way” is here to stay. Its endurance in God’s plan is established and for certain.

Knowing “in Part” And Prophesying “in Part”

Paul speaks of knowing in part and prophesying in part until that which was “perfect” came, and then the “in part” situation would be done away. What is he talking about? What does this mean?

The gift of prophecy involved the revelation of God’s truth by the Holy Spirit directly to the person possessing the gift. Then he would teach and preach it. According to Ephesians 3:2-5, this is how the New Testament was given. The knowing in part and prophesying in part was controlled and regulated by when God chose to reveal His truth. Jesus promised that when the Holy Spirit came, He would “guide” the disciples into all truth (John 16:13) and bring all things to their remembrance (John 14:26). Following Pentecost, this was not done all at once. Their break with the law and carrying out the Great Commission didn’t happen all at once, but was carried out step by step. Although Peter had heard the Great Commission and said what he did on the Day of Pentecost (Matthew 28:16-20; Acts 2:39), they were a few years getting around to preaching to the Gentiles (Acts 10 and 11). They still had close associations with the temple (Acts 3:1) and things Jewish (Acts 18:18; 21:23-27). Jewish holy days were still respected (Acts 20:16; 1 Corinthians 16:8). They had to work through many Jewish hang-ups. So they literally knew in part (parts) and prophesied in part (parts) as the Holy Spirit led them by stages into all of the truth.

The Coming of “That Which Is Perfect Is Come”

However, they are informed and reassured by Paul that “when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.” According to Greek lexicons, the word that is translated “perfect” is defined as “complete, entire, as opposed to what is partial and limited.” It stands over against knowing in part (or parts) and prophesying in part. That which was “perfect,” or complete, represents the entire revelation of God. When God’s revelation finally was completed, and it was with the giving of all the truths contained in the New Testa-

ment, the spiritual gifts would be done away. This was the “in part” situation that would no longer be needed. We no longer have the supernatural spiritual gifts in the church today.

B. The Situation Illustrated: “When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know as also I am known” (verses 11-12).

“When I Was a Child”

Different people upon pondering this Scripture have come to different conclusions as to its possible meaning. However, in the immediate context, and in the understanding we have derived from this study, it could well have reference to the church and spiritual gifts. The church in its childhood stage very much needed the gifts. They did not have the completed revelation of God to guide them. Truth needed to be confirmed by the miraculous. But with the coming of “that which is perfect [complete],” the purpose of the supernatural would no longer be necessary. Truth would be revealed and confirmed. The adult stage would be reached, and they would “put away childish things.” Also, undertones referring to their childish ways in being “puffed up” about spiritual gifts could be hinted at. These are reasonable possibilities as to the meaning.

Seeing into a Glass Darkly

And the illustration of seeing “through a glass darkly” fits in with the same line of thought. James writes of a person “beholding his natural face in a glass,” when he hears God’s Word, then going his way and forgetting what he looked like (James 1:22-25). Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:18, “But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.” Yes, with “that which is perfect,” the completed revelation of God, this is accomplished in its fullest. The Word is “a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do” (Hebrews 4:12b, 13). We no longer see “through a glass darkly” with the completed revelation of God. We can know as we are known (13:12).

C. The Concluding Statement: “And now abideth faith, hope, charity [love], these three; but the greatest of these is charity [love]” (verses 13).

These Three Abide

As Paul has used triplets of words to represent the spiritual gifts, he now makes use of the word “now” to throw them over against what he is about to say. In what he has told us, the spiritual gifts have failed, have ceased, and have vanished away. But “now abideth faith, hope, charity [love], these three...” These three are the great and cardinal truths of Christianity. As that, they “abide” after the spiritual gifts have faded into history.

Love, the Greatest of These

Now that which seems to have eluded many of the Corinthians is presented as the greatest of the great. Faith is of the utmost importance. We cannot please God, be justified or saved without it (Hebrews 11:6; Romans 5:1; Acts 16:31). Likewise, hope is important, “for we are saved by hope” (Romans 8:24). But love is presented as being even greater than faith and hope. “Faith is the substance of things hoped for” (Hebrews 11:1). When we get to heaven, faith and hope will be no more. Faith will be replaced by knowledge. That which we have hoped for will then be ours. Hope will no longer be a factor. What remains is love. It will go on throughout eternity. “God is love.” □



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