BUILT DIFFERENT

LESSON FOURTEEN

COMMENTARY

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1 CORINTHIANS 13:1–3

Gordon Fee, in the *NICNT*, grounds the first three verses in Paul's overall argument:

1. This opening sentence is the reason for the entire argument: "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels." One may be quite sure that the Corinthians believed they did the latter; indeed, this best accounts for the sudden shift to the first person singular (cf. 14:14–15). On its own this could mean nothing more than "speak eloquently," as some have argued and as it is popularly understood. But since it is not on its own, but follows directly from the preceding rhetoric (12:28–30) and anticipates the argument for intelligibility to come (14:1–25), most likely this is either Paul's or their (or both) understanding of "speaking in tongues." "Tongues of men" would then refer to human speech, inspired by the Spirit but unknown to the speaker; "tongues of angels" would reflect an understanding that the tongues-speaker was communicating in the dialect(s) of heaven.

That the Corinthians at least, and probably Paul, thought of tongues as the language(s) of angels seems highly likely—for two reasons: (1) There is some evidence from Jewish sources that the angels were believed to have their own heavenly language (or dialects) and that by means of the "Spirit" one could speak these dialects. Thus in the *Testament of Job* 48–50 Job's three daughters are given "charismatic sashes"; when these were put on they allowed Hemera, for example, to speak "ecstatically in the angelic dialect, sending up a hymn to God with the hymnic style of the angels. And as she spoke ecstatically, she allowed 'The Spirit' to be inscribed on her garment."305 Such an understanding of heavenly speech may also lie behind the language Paul will use a bit later (1 Cor. 14:2; "speak mysteries by the Spirit"). (2) As has been argued elsewhere, one can make a good deal of sense of the Corinthian view of being people of the Spirit if they believed that they had already entered into some expression of angelic existence. This would explain the rejection by some of sexual life and sexual roles (cf. 7:1–7; 11:2–16) and would also partly explain their denial of a future bodily existence (15:12, 35). It might also lie behind their special interest in "wisdom" and "knowledge." For them the evidence of having "arrived" at such a state of "spirituality" would be in their speaking the "tongues of angels." Hence the high value placed on this gift.

But Paul's concern lay elsewhere. Their "spirituality" showed evidence of all kinds of behavioral flaws. Their "knowledge" led to pride and the "destruction of a brother or sister for whom Christ died" (8:2, 11). Their "wisdom" led to quarrels and rivalry (1:10; 3:4). Their "tongues" were neither edifying the community nor allowing outsiders to respond to the prophetic word (14:1–25). In short, theirs was a kind of "spirituality" that lacked the primary evidence of the Spirit: behavior that could be described as "having love."

In saying "but do have not love," Paul does not mean to suggest that love is a possession of some kind. The language has been formed by the elevated style of the prose. To "have love" means to "act in a way that is loving," just as to "have prophecy" (v. 2) means "to speak with the prophetic gift"; and to act in a loving way means, as in the case of Christ, actively to seek the benefit of someone else. For Paul it is a word whose primary definition is found in God's activity in behalf of God's enemies (Rom. 5:6–8), which was visibly manifested in the life and death of Christ himself. To "have love," therefore, means to be toward others the way God in Christ has been toward us. Thus, in the Pauline parenesis, for those who "walk in the Spirit" the primary ethical imperative is "love one another." This is found at the heart of every section of ethical instruction, and all other exhortations are but the explication of it.

The final coup in this sentence is the language "resounding gong" and "clanging cymbal." Although what the former designates is uncertain, at least it is a metaphor for an empty, hollow sound.311 The latter in fact was an "instrument" expressly associated with the pagan cults. Perhaps, then, this is an allusion to what he had said earlier (12:2) regarding their former associations with such cults. To speak in tongues as they were doing, thinking that they were "Spirit people" but with no concern for building up the community, is not merely to speak unintelligible words; it makes one sound like the empty, hollow noises of pagan worship.

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2 In this second sentence Paul widens the perspective to include three of the *charismata* from before (12:8–10), a list which in that argument came from Paul himself as his way of expanding their own horizons as to the work of the Spirit. Thus he includes *prophecy*, the gift he regularly considers to be of primary significance for the community (cf. 1 Thess. 5:19–20; 1 Cor. 14:1–25); *knowledge*, which was another of the Corinthian favorites (cf. 1:5; 8:1); and *faith*, which, together with its qualifier, "that can move mountains," means the gift of special faith for mighty works (see on 12:9). In order to make this point as emphatic as possible, Paul thrice emphasizes the totally inclusive "all": *all* mysteries, *all* knowledge, *all* faith. If one person could embrace the whole range of *charismata* and the full measure of any one of them but at the same time would fail to act in love toward someone else, such a person would amount to *nothing* in the sight of God.

But what did Paul intend by the second item, "fathom all mysteries and all knowledge"? These terms appear together as a regular feature of Jewish apocalyptic,317 especially with regard to the unfolding of God's final eschatological drama. Paul now uses this language to refer to God's present revelation of the divine ways, especially in the form of special revelations by means of the eschatological Spirit whom Christians have received (cf. 14:6). This is most likely how we are also to understand both the "message of knowledge" mentioned earlier (12:8) and the "knowledge" that accompanies tongues and prophecy in the redirecting words that follow (vv. 8–13).

Given the longer protasis, Paul concludes with a shorter apodosis, "I am nothing." That speaks eloquently for itself. As before, possession of *charismata* is not the sign of the Spirit; loving others as Christ loved us is.

3 Enlarging his perspective yet further, this time quite beyond *charismata*, Paul next offers examples of great personal sacrifice. The first item literally says, "If I parcel out321 all my property for food," to feed "the poor" being implied. In light of the preceding word about "faith" (v. 2), Paul is probably once again reflecting on the teaching of Jesus. How, then, can he say that such a "loving deed" gains nothing? Here in particular Paul's own point comes to the fore. As with the *charismata*, the deed in itself is a good thing, commanded by Jesus of his would-be followers, and surely of benefit for the recipients. Paul's point is that such an action by one who is not otherwise characterized by the love he will describe next (vv. 4–7) is of no benefit whatever to the giver.

The final item, which is undoubtedly intended to climax the series, also presents us with the greatest difficulties in understanding. Some form of self-sacrifice seems to be in view, but because of the difficult textual variation (see p. 697 n. 299), one cannot be sure which. The majority of interpreters prefer the reading "to burn," and view it either as martyrdom or an extreme example of giving oneself up to the most painful of deaths for some great cause. But there are several difficulties with this option: (1) Even though martyrdom by fire was not unknown among the Jews, this had not yet become a Christian phenomenon; the fiery persecutions of Nero are still at least a decade away. It seems unlikely, therefore, that Paul had martyrdom in mind—although it is equally easy to see how later scribes could have read it this way by hindsight. (2) This is made even less likely by the language itself. One does not "give over one's body" to martyrdom; rather, such is taken from one. Moreover, the language "if I give over my *body*, so that I might be burned" is highly unusual under any circumstances. One would expect rather "that it might be burned." (3) The basic reason for adopting this reading is *not its own intrinsic merit*; rather, it tends to win by default, in light of what is perceived to be the still greater difficulty of making good sense of "that I may boast." It is regularly assumed that this latter is pejorative language and, therefore, that such an action is already so unloving that Paul's apodosis becomes redundant. (4) Given the difficulty with this alternative and the frequency of Christian martyrdom in the early church after Paul, one can well understand why a scribe would have changed "boast" to "burn";328 whereas under the same circumstances it is nearly impossible to account for the opposite change.

What that means, therefore, is that Paul most likely wrote, "if I hand over my body that I might boast." The question for the later reader is, What could that mean? If we were limited only to a pejorative sense for "boast," then despite all the above arguments we would probably have to assume that Paul

wrote "burned" and try to find an adequate meaning for it. But in fact we are not so limited in Paul. As noted in the previous discussions of this word (1:29–31 and 9:15), for Paul this can be a positive idea, as long as it is brought under the gift of grace. That is, Paul will boast in the very things that are his own personal weaknesses so that the gospel might be the more glorified. For him this usage had eschatological overtones; he expected to have a legitimate "boast on the day of the Lord" (2 Cor. 1:14; cf. Rom. 5:2–3). If that is the meaning here, then this final item is most likely a genuine reflection on his own ministry, in which he is referring to the kinds of bodily sufferings of which he "boasts" in his next (preserved) letter to them (2 Cor. 11:23–30 and 12:10), which also help to bring about his greater "boast," their salvation. Hence the current NIV probably has it right in adding "to hardship" as a way of making some sense of the clause. But if he does not also have love, even these reasons for boasting, Paul says, "profit me nothing."331

The inclusion of the final examples (v. 3) makes it clear that love is not being set in contrast to Spirit giftings as such; rather, the apostle is presenting the absolute supremacy and necessity of love if one is to be a follower of Christ at all. Paul will continue to "give his body so that he might boast"; he will especially urge the Corinthians to desire prophetic utterances; and he will encourage tongues in their life of personal prayer. But these things must be brought forth in lives that above all "have [= express themselves in] love," for without love one quite misses the point of being one of Christ's people in the first place. The easiest way to move this paragraph from their situation to ours is simply to give it a new ad hoc expression, in terms of how one thinks of their own life to have "spiritual" significance. For example, "If I preach with the brilliance of Paul or Chrysostom, but have not love …"; or perhaps, "If I write a commentary on 1 Corinthians 13, but have not love …," etc.[1]

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4–7

Thomas Schreiner, In the *Tyndale Bible Commentary*, comments on Paul's definition of love:

4. Verses 4–7 describe love in action and attitude, helping readers to discern the nature of genuine love. Certainly we do not have an exhaustive list here but one that is representative. The centrality of love in the Pauline ethic is evident. Love is the goal of his teaching (1 Tim. 1:5), and all the instructions of the law can be summarized in the command to love one's neighbour (Rom. 13:8–10; Gal. 5:14). In fact, all the virtues are bound up with love (Col. 3:14). When Paul begins a list of virtues, we are not surprised to see that he begins with love (Rom. 12:9; Gal. 5:22). When it comes to which foods one may eat, love considers the good of fellow-believers (Rom. 14:15; 1 Cor. 8:1–3), which helps explain why Paul says, 'Do everything in love' (1 Cor. 16:14). Love, after all, expresses the love Christ demonstrated in giving his life for the sake of human beings; thus believers should also live in a loving way (Eph. 5:2; cf. 1 Thess. 4:10).

The list begins with the words *Love is patient* (cf. 2 Cor. 6:6; 12:12; Gal. 5:22; Eph. 4:2; Col. 1:11; 3:12; 1 Thess. 5:14; 2 Tim. 2:24). Impatience puts oneself first, thinking that one's own schedule and time should take priority over the needs of others. Love is also *kind* (cf. 2 Cor. 6:6; Gal. 5:22; Col. 3:12). Harshness, severity and meanness are contrary to love, especially given God's kindness in Christ Jesus to sinners (Rom. 2:4; Eph. 2:7; Titus 3:4). Love is not envious or jealous, but rejoices in the good that comes to others (Rom. 12:15). Joseph's brothers were jealous of him because Jacob favoured him over themselves (Gen. 37:11; Acts 7:9). Warnings against growing jealous of the wicked are given to the righteous (cf. Prov. 3:31; 4:14; 23:17; 24:1; see also Jas 3:14, 16; 4:2), and Paul particularly warns the Corinthians about envy in their divisions (1 Cor. 3:3; see also Gal. 5:20). Envy may smoulder within and then break forth with terrible consequences, as the great Shakespeare play *Othello* indicates.

Love *does not boast*. The word used here (*perpereuetai*) points to bragging, where people go on and on about their accomplishments and gifts. Perhaps Paul thinks here of those who boast about their knowledge (8:1–3) or those who are proud of their spiritual gifts. Proverbs 27:2 catches what Paul has

[1] Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., Revised Edition, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 698–704.

in mind:

> Let someone else praise you, and not your own mouth;
> an outsider, and not your own lips.

Paul warns against comparing ourselves with others and commending ourselves (2 Cor. 10:12). Finally, love *is not proud*. Here is a particularly favourite word of Paul for describing the arrogance of the Corinthians. He uses the word (*physioo*) five other times in the letter (4:6, 18, 19; 5:2; 8:1); the only other occurrence is in Colossians 2:18. The word may be aptly translated 'puffed up' (KJV, NET, NKJV) or 'inflated', and it denotes those who are full of themselves.

5. The description of love continues: it *does not dishonour others*, or it is not 'rude' (esv, net, csb, nrsv). Love does not shock others but acts in a fitting way (cf. 1 Cor. 7:36). The word-group is often used of appropriate behaviour in sexual matters (e.g. Lev. 18:6, 7, 8; Ezek. 23:29; Rom. 1:27; 1 Cor. 12:23; cf. Sir. 29:21), and this connects in 1 Corinthians to the case of incest (5:1–13) and sexual sin with prostitutes (6:12–20). The term also refers to what is dishonourable in a general sense (Deut. 25:3; Ezra 4:14). 'Love does not elbow its way into conversations, worship services, or public institutions in a disruptive, discourteous, attention-seeking way.' Paul goes on to say that love is not *self-seeking*, which fits with the admonition in 1 Corinthians 10:24: 'No one should seek their own good, but the good of others' (cf. 1 Cor. 10:33; Rom. 15:1); or, as Paul says in Philippians 2:4, believers should not look 'to [their] own interests but … to the interests of the others' (cf. Phil. 2:21). Love is not narcissistic, self-absorbed or self-obsessed.

Love is also *not easily angered* (so also net) or 'irritable' (ESV, NRSV, CSB). Love, in other words, is not easily annoyed or provoked to anger. It is 'quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry' (Jas 1:19). Love remembers its own offences and sins and the great forgiveness received, and therefore does not constantly pick at others (Matt. 18:21–35). Along the same lines, love *keeps no record of wrongs*. Lack of love manifests itself when a count is taken of wrongdoing (Matt. 18:21), when the instances when one is aggrieved are recorded and remembered. This admonition is especially apropos in cases where there are lawsuits (6:1–8). Those who love remember their own failings and reflect on the many occasions when they have let others down.

6. Love finds pleasure in virtue and what is good; thus it does not *delight in evil*. On the contrary, the wicked 'delight in doing wrong and rejoice in the perverseness of evil' (Prov. 2:14). Love does not bless incest (5:1–13), selfish lawsuits (6:1–11) or sex with prostitutes (6:12–20). Those who give themselves over to evil bestow their approval on those who do what is wrong (cf. Ps. 50:18; Rom. 1:32). The righteous one, however, 'rejoices in the truth' (NRSV). The prepositional prefix on the word 'rejoices' (*synchairei*, so BDAG) does not mean here 'rejoices with' (as per the NIV), for it is probably stylistic; thus the prefixed verb has the same meaning as the verb 'rejoice' (*chairei*, NRSV) earlier in the verse. Love takes delight when righteousness flourishes and advances (cf. 2 John 3–4). Barnabas illustrates what Paul refers to here. When he travelled to Syrian Antioch and saw that many were converted by God's grace, 'he was glad' (Acts 11:23). The righteous rejoice in the progress of the gospel whether it is furthered through Paul or Apollos, and they do not become partisans who quarrel over which minister is more effective.

7. The paragraph ends with a rhetorical flourish: four verbs are used with the same-sounding ending (*ei*) and each is preceded with the same adverb *always* (*panta*) or object 'all things' (*panta*, NRSV). Fortunately, the meaning does not change whether we have an adverb or a direct object. The first verb may mean *protects* (*stegei*, BDAG) so that love covers over and does not bring to the light the sins of others. On the other hand, everywhere else in Paul (1 Cor. 9:12; 1 Thess. 3:1, 5) the verb means 'bears' (so CSB, ESV, KJV, NASB, NET, NKJV, NRSV), so this reading should be slightly preferred. We see in 1 Corinthians 9:12 that Paul uses himself as an example of a person who bears everything for the gospel's sake. One argument against this interpretation could be that the last verb says the same thing about love: it 'endures all things' (NRSV). The objection is not compelling for the text is rhetorical, and the two middle verbs, 'believes' (CSB) and *hopes*, are not sharply distinguished from one another either. Love bears, endures and puts up with much; it does not forsake people when life

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is arduous and one's energy is taxed. Colossians 3:13 expresses Paul's intention: 'Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.'

The two middle verbs are similar: love 'believes' (CSB) and *hopes* all things. The verbs cannot be read to support naïveté, as if love believes the most improbable or ridiculous things. On the other hand, love does not give way to cynicism and despair, for it believes in the God who gives life to the dead (Rom. 4:17). Love believes and hopes for the best, since it looks to God who can forgive sins and grant a new beginning to those dead in trespasses and sins (cf. Eph. 2:1–7). Belief and hope do not exist in a vacuum; they are anchored to the God of the promise.[2]

1 CORINTHIANS 13:8–13

In the *Pillar Bible Commentary*, William Baker explains what Paul means by love being that which lasts:

Paul's third major division on love (13:8–13) advocates the universal persistence of love as the lone human quality of behavior that stretches beyond current human conditions. Everything else is transitory, including the spiritual gifts, the point he develops in 13:8–10. In 13:8, he specifically notes three gifts from his list in 13:1–3: prophecy, tongues (reversing their order from there), and knowledge as representative. Notably, he does not mention faith from earlier, since it will be listed with love as ever enduring in 13:13, nor giving to the poor nor bodily sacrifice, which are, in fact, acts of love.

After first stating with forceful simplicity in 13:8 that love does not and cannot be stopped (lit., "never fails"), he emphatically declares that prophecy, tongues, and special knowledge will not continue. Leaving off tongues, he stipulates in 13:9 that both prophecy and knowledge only provide partial and imprecise revelation. God's purposes and plans are simply too vast for any human to utter or comprehend, even by the Holy Spirit among believers. But on the very day when that limitation will end, the need for prophetic words and special knowledge will also cease. Then, the community of believers will enter into a state of perfection in the presence of God, and understanding that is screened through human instruments will no longer have any purpose. Though he does not say so explicitly (see note on 13:10), Paul must have been thinking of the day of the Lord's coming as the end point of God's plan, when earth will be destroyed (Garland 2003:623; Thiselton 2000:1065) and the disrupted universe reunited with God.

In 13:11–12, Paul introduces two analogies to help convey his point about partial knowledge being replaced by complete knowledge. In 13:11, he first compares what he is talking about to the vast change in knowledge that occurs between childhood and adulthood. The world of children is confined to what their parents and immediate surroundings convey to them, enough for them to get by but not at all adequate to function in the world of adults. Paul emphasized that childhood knowledge, like outgrown toys, must one day be permanently put away.

In 13:12, Paul's second analogy involves a mirror. No matter how finely polished, a mirror can never provide more than an indirect image of a person's face. It is not even a remotely adequate substitute for seeing someone close-up in real life, or being seen by someone else in real life, face-to-face (NLT, "with perfect clarity"). Each person's face is unique and is the physical representation of individual personality. Even so, a person's face is only a window into the soul, a caricature of true personhood. True personhood can never be fully fathomed by our friends or family, or even our spouse—and certainly not in a mirror! Only our Creator knows us to our depths, and on the day of perfection, God himself will gaze beyond our eyes to the boundaries of our personhood. We will be known like we longingly seek to be known now. The quest for self-understanding will be over.

[2] Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2018), 275–278.

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With 13:13, Paul reaches both the climax and the conclusion of his eloquent speech, extolling the eternal virtue of loving behavior over all other human actions. The artful construction of his monologue comes to a fitting end by placing the word "love" (*agape* [26, 27]) as the very last word in the declaration that love is the greatest. Yet he introduces possible confusion by both complementing and comparing love with two other virtues, faith and hope, which he links in a triad, as lasting forever with love. The triad also appears (when rendered literally) in 1 Thessalonians 1:3 and 5:8 in the order of faith, love, and hope, with hope being emphasized in an epistle that focuses on eschatology. The triad appears (in literal translations) in a variety of orders elsewhere in Paul's writing (Rom 5:1–5; Gal 5:5–6; Eph 4:2–5) and in the New Testament (Heb 6:10–12; 10:22–24; 1 Pet 1:3–8).

The question is whether Paul intended to link the other two virtues with love as eternal (so phrased by the NLT) or whether he viewed them as essential to Christian life now, like love, but nevertheless earthbound in terms of their value once we reach perfection. It makes sense for both faith and hope to be limited to the current state of human life, especially for Christians, since their faith in Jesus Christ and hope in eternal life both would seem to be vindicated at his return and not needed thereafter (Bruce 1971:179; Fee 1987:650; Hays 1997:231; Horsley 1998:179; Witherington 1995:271–272). In this sense, the literal rendering of the word "remains" (*meno* [3306, 3531]), which the NLT translates as "last forever," is taken very seriously. All three—faith, hope, and love—*remain* as vital to the current state, but only love endures as vital into the next.

However, this may be forcing a strict reading and dichotomy Paul did not wish to make between his big three virtues, which he never subdivides like this elsewhere. Perhaps, in fact, he saw the three as so intertwined that his point should be taken straightforwardly. In this sense, faith and hope are vital aspects of loving behavior even in the hereafter (Garland 2003:626; Thiselton 2000:1071–1074). Trust and confidence in God and in one another would not seem to be irrelevant to loving behavior even then, though admittedly they would be on a different plane than they are now in the struggles Christians presently face.[3]

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Mark A. Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, New American Commentary
Gordon Fee, *1 Corinthians*, New International Commentary of the New Testament (NICNT)
Anthony Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (NIGTC)
Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary
Alan F. Johnson, *1 Corinthians*, IVP New Testament Commentary
David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians*, The Bible Speaks Today
William Baker, *1 Corinthians*, Cornerstone Bible Commentary
Paul Ellingwroth and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on 1 Corinthians*, UBSH

[3] William Baker, "1 Corinthians," in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians*, vol. 15 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 192–193.