



## 1 Corinthians - Chapter Thirteen

V. 1 Corinthians 11:2-14:40 - Divisions over Corporate Worship (continues)

V.c 1 Corinthians 12:1-14:40 - Elevating one spiritual gift above others (continues)

### Summary of Chapter Thirteen

Some people have referred to the following verses as Paul's love chapter and parts of it are frequently read out at weddings and funerals. However, Paul is still addressing the issues of the problems that had arisen during church meetings. Indeed, the chapter should be introduced by the concluding clause of Chapter Twelve: <<*And I will show you a still more excellent way*>> (1 Corinthians 12:31b).

Therefore, Paul brings together his argument on spiritual gifts to clearly show that, whichever gift an individual may have been given, if it is not used in love then it has no purpose; for love is God's greatest gift. After all, God gave his Son to the world in love.

Those who hold to the notion that Paul was an unpleasant, argumentative character should note that he could not have written in this way, especially not to a group of people who knew him so well, unless it reflected at least a part of his true self.

V.c.iii 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 - The Gift of Love

This passage is the centre piece of 12:1-14:40. Paul's whole argument is that the provision of spiritual gifts and their use has no basis unless there is a clear demonstration of genuine love for each other within the church. Spiritual gifts without love are worthless, and love is supreme because it lasts forever.

The first part (vv.1-3) insists on just how vital love is; without it, nothing else matters. The middle part (vv.4-7) describes love itself, in memorable though challenging language. The final part (vv.8-13) explains that love is one of the things which will last into God's new world, and which therefore matters far, far more than the things which will pass away, which include most of the things the Corinthians were most bothered about.

<sup>1</sup> If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

### 1 Corinthians 13:1

The tongues of mortals and of angels was discussed in the comments made on 1 Corinthians 12:10. It allows for both a foreign human language that the speaker has never learned but suddenly can communicate the Gospel to speakers of that language; and the heavenly language that is unintelligible to other listeners.

Tongues is probably the first gift mentioned because the Corinthians had used and emphasised it without love: <<*The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you'*>> (1 Corinthians 12:21).

Do not have love. Paul is saying that all the gifts are of no value unless they can be exercised and expressed with genuine love for others.

Love must be the distinguishing mark of Jesus' disciples. Jesus' new command: <<*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*>> (John 13:34-35), takes its point of departure from the Mosaic commands to love the Lord with all one's powers and to love one's neighbour as oneself. Refer to Leviticus 19:18, Deuteronomy 6:5, and Mark 12:28-33.

However, Jesus' own love and teaching deepen and transform these commands. Jesus even taught love for one's enemies, as recorded in Matthew 5:43-48. The command to love one's neighbour was not new; the newness was found in loving one another as Jesus had loved his disciples, as confirmed in John 13:1 and 15:13.

I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. Paul declares that, without love, speaking in tongues and languages of any and every kind is simply a way of making a loud but incomprehensible noise.

<sup>2</sup> And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

### 1 Corinthians 13:2

Paul then moves on to the gifts of prophecy (1 Corinthians 12:10), and faith (12:9). His reference to faith, so as to remove mountains alludes directly to the teaching of Jesus: <<*He said to them, 'Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, "Move from here to there", and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you'*>> (Matthew 17:20).

<sup>3</sup> If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

### 1 Corinthians 13:3

Give away all my possessions. Jesus, in a demonstration of his love for a rich young ruler's desire to acquire eternal life, stated he should give everything he had to the poor in order to become Jesus' disciple: <<*Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me'*>> (Mark 10:21).

If I hand over my body. This is an indication that Paul would have died, just as his Lord had, for those in the church: <<*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends*>> (John 15:13). However, love cannot be measured by actions alone; motives must be assessed to determine what is loving: <<*I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgement before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God*>> (1 Corinthians 4:4-5).

That I may boast. The Greek phrase allows for the translation 'deliver up my body to be burned', which has a similar implication as already described. Paul's actions would have been in line with some of his famous ancestors: <<*Nebuchadnezzar said, 'Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him. They disobeyed the king's command and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God'*>> (Daniel 3:28).

I gain nothing. Paul is stating that using spiritual gifts or serving in ministry for personal pride or ambition is to no avail in Kingdom terms.

<sup>4</sup> Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup> It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

### 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

The attributes of love, especially God's enduring love, show that all iniquities can be dealt with: <<*For then you would not number my steps, you would not keep watch over my sin, my transgression would be sealed up in a bag, and you would cover over my iniquity*>> (Job 14:16-17), <<*Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offences*>> (Proverbs 10:12), <<*One who forgives an affront fosters friendship, but one who dwells on disputes will alienate a friend*>> (Proverbs 17:9), and: <<*Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins*>> (1 Peter 4:8).

Rejoices in the truth. Jesus came proclaiming truth: <<*Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice'*>> (John 18:37). So too should all who profess his name: <<*I was overjoyed to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we have been commanded by the Father*>> (2 John 4), and:

*<<I was overjoyed when some of the friends arrived and testified to your faithfulness to the truth, namely, how you walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth>> (3 John 3-4).*

The terms believes and hopes are sandwiched between bears and endures and, like them, probably refer to relationships between people rather than to faith and hope in God. Love believes the best of others and hopes the best for them.

What this passage really describes is Jesus, or at least his actions and attributes. It also allows believers to contemplate what it would be like if they were a true reflection of him, how that would work out and what the world would be like if more people were truly like Jesus. This is not meant to be an opportunity for people to either build themselves up to think they are like him or to put themselves down because they are not. However, they should know that this life is within reach of each believer; because it is the life of Jesus, the life inspired by the Spirit, the life which is their birthright within Christ's body.

What is more, as Paul insists - and this is the point of him saying all this here in the letter - this is the life which will bring the right sort of order to the chaos of faction-fighting and spiritual jealousy within the church, in Corinth or anywhere else!

<sup>8</sup> Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end.

<sup>9</sup> For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup> but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

### 1 Corinthians 13:8-10

Love never ends. Paul brings to a climax this passage of great truth that alludes to the call of love and life itself continuing on into God's future; the destiny for all who have faith in him and what he has promised: *<<But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him'>> (1 Corinthians 2:9).*

Interpreters differ over the time when Paul expects prophecies will come to an end and tongues to cease, along with other gifts represented by these examples. The cessationist view is that miraculous gifts such as prophecy, healing, tongues, interpretation and miracles were given to authenticate the apostles and their writings in the early years of the church, but those gifts ceased once the entire NT was written and the apostles died (circa AD100).

Others hold that Paul expected these gifts to continue until Christ returns, which will be the time when the complete or perfect ways of speaking and knowing in the age to come replace the in part gifts of this age. Support for the second position is found in v.12, which indicates that 'then' is the time when these gifts will cease, for it is the time of Christ's return.

Paul wants the Corinthians, above all, to learn to think in terms of God's future and its relation to the present. This, in part, is a matter of getting them to think the way Jews do, instead of in the pagan thought-forms they tended so easily to lapse into. It is also a matter of getting them to place Jesus'

resurrection at the centre of their view of the world, time, history and themselves.

<sup>11</sup> When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

### 1 Corinthians 13:11

When I was a child, when I became an adult. Paul uses analogies from the natural order of things to indicate what should happen as believers mature in their faith.

This is the first of three analogies that Paul uses to help his readers make the transition from the present into God's future. Their current puffed up ways are mere child's play; they need real spiritual, emotional and personal maturity.

<sup>12</sup> For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

### 1 Corinthians 13:12

Mirror, dimly. Ancient mirrors were made from polished metal, such as bronze, and thus one's reflection was even dimmer than in modern mirrors. Paul may have used this example since Corinth was known for its manufacture of mirrors.

Face to face suggests a reference to Christ's Second Coming. Then, the spiritual gifts of this present age will no longer be needed. The OT uses this phrase to refer to seeing God personally: <<So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved'>> (Genesis 32:30), <<Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then he would return to the camp; but his young assistant, Joshua son of Nun, would not leave the tent>> (Exodus 33:11), <<The Lord spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the fire>> (Deuteronomy 5:4), <<Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face>> (Deuteronomy 34:10), <<Then Gideon perceived that it was the angel of the Lord; and Gideon said, 'Help me, Lord God! For I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face'>> (Judges 6:22), <<and I will bring you into the wilderness of the peoples, and there I will enter into judgement with you face to face>> (Ezekiel 20:35).

The second analogy of the mirror should lead his readers to realise that what they see is in fact a reversal of reality, a mere image of the truth. The time is coming when that reality will become clear to all: <<Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is>> (1 John 3:2).

Then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. This is the third point Paul wishes to make. It is not important what people know of God; it is more about what God knows of them!

<sup>13</sup> And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

### 1 Corinthians 13:13

Faith, hope, and love. The relationship of these three Christian qualities is a frequent theme in Paul's letters. Refer to Romans 5:1-5, Galatians 5:5-6, Ephesians 4:2-5, Colossians 1:4-5, 1 Thessalonians 1:3 and 5:8.

Paul sees all of life within the framework of God's future - God's future which has burst into the present in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and especially in his resurrection, which has marked him out as God's Messiah, the world's true Lord. In that future, Paul sees a world of joy, delight, and above all of love.

So in the present there are three things which point into the future:

1. Faith, which looks at the God made known in Jesus and trusts him for everything: <<*Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.'* *Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works*>> (John 14:8-10).
2. Hope, which looks ahead to God and what he will do in the future, which is already assured by Jesus' resurrection.
3. Love, which will finally know as it is known, and embrace as it is already embraced: <<*For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me*>> (Galatians 2:19-20).

Why is love the greatest of these? Because, as the hymn says,

Faith will vanish into sight,  
Hope be emptied in delight;  
Love in heaven will shine more bright.

Perhaps Paul would say along with Jesus, in the Kingdom of God love will come on earth as in heaven. But the point should be clear. Love is the way of life in the new world to which, by grace, believers are bound.

Think within God's time-plan, Paul is urging the Corinthians. If you do that, you will not only see how important love is, and will be able to resist the temptation to engage in factional fighting, to perpetuating social divisions at the Lord's supper, and to boasting over spiritual gifts. You will also see the spiritual gifts themselves in their proper light. They are a temporary means for building up the church in the present age, and as such it is important to learn to use them correctly.