

The Superlative Way

a study of I Corinthians 13

by John Hoad

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The study should be read in conjunction with the translation on the opposite page.

The word "love" is like the plain metal of a coin. Its value is determined by the image we stamp upon it: sentimental or sacrificial, cheap or costly, according to the life in which it is minted. "Words," says Eric Partridge, "are very much tougher than warriors; tougher even than women." But words, like women, may lose their honour and grace, and, like warriors, their strength and piety. The coinage of human love

becomes debased, and the coins have to be reminted.

For this we need the Cross, for the master-die of love was cast at Calvary. Only when the image and inscription of Jesus the Saviour is imprinted upon our human currency does "love" get at last its true, best worth.

The Thirteenth of Corinthians is such a royal mint. It speaks of a love which has the *imprimatur* of Christ upon it, and says of love so described that it alone counts; it alone conquers; it alone continues.

LOVE ALONE COUNTS

This apostolic lyric of love – the song of songs, which is Paul's – was rooted in a local situation. The church in Corinth was a pentecostal church, flamboyant with the gifts of the Spirit. Unlike so many modern churches, its danger lay in excess! Paul will not curb its enthusiasm, but he would direct it to its true controlling centre: *Be jealous for the more important spiritual gifts. And further, I will show you the superlative way.* Love is the Greatest Thing in the World. But it is more than that, for it is not just one thing among many; not just one more gift among the other gifts. Love is a way. It must constitute the whole life of the Christian, whether he has a particular gift or not, whether he is exercising the gifts he has or not. *If I speak in ecstatic languages, human or heavenly, but am lacking in love, I become a noisy steel-drum or clashing cymbal.* This speaking in tongues seems to be a different phenomenon from that of Acts 2. There each man in the crowd heard the apostles speaking his own language. Here the ecstatic language needs interpreting – I Cor.

14 : 27–28. The Corinthian phenomenon indicates a state of raptured wonder at the glory of God, in which the tongue cannot keep pace with the flow of thought and feeling. Grammar fails, coherence fails, ordinary language fails, and the utterances need at once to be explained by someone in rapport with the speaker. The phenomenon recurs, and may be the Spirit's means of breaking through an over-intellectualized and too formal faith. In this and the next chapter, Paul says how it should be judged: if it is not building up the congregation, or if it is hindering the conversion of outsiders, it must be checked. Many Christians who would not claim to speak in tongues have experienced in prayer or in deep realization of some truth a state of which they have to say, "I can't really put it into words." But eloquence, rapture, Paul declares, are nothing more than the noise of a pagan rite, unless there be love.

And if I have the gift of prophetic preaching, and am initiated into all divine mysteries and all saving knowledge, and if I have the absolute faith that moves mountains, but do not have love, I am a nonentity. Paul moves on to gifts that he considers more important for the life of the Church. In I Cor. 12: 29 he ranks the prophet after the apostle, and in I Cor. 14 he urges his readers to seek and value the gift of prophecy over and above that of tongues. Five intelligible words, spoken to the benefit of the congregation, are more valuable than several thousand in a "tongue". Prophecy springs from insight into God's will for history, in its contemporary applications and also as it opens up vistas into the

future. "Mysteries" and "knowledge" have here a religious connotation, and "all faith" refers not just to trust in Jesus as Saviour but to a miracle-working faith that marches with seven-league boots and takes mountains of difficulty in its stride.

How rich is the congregation that has men with such abilities in its midst! Men who can speak the word for the hour; men who can explain the faith, and answer doubts, and open up the riches of the Scriptures; men who can venture greatly in planning large crusades, executing building schemes, carrying through stewardship campaigns. These are grand things, but the men who plan and implement them, declares Paul, count for precisely nothing, if they are loveless.

How rich too is that congregation that boasts not only speakers and planners but also givers! Men of generosity, who take to themselves the command to sell all and give to the poor, emulating Barnabas or C. T. Studd in parting with their possessions, or finding inspiration in the land-gift movement of Vinoba Bhave in India. Men sacrificial to the point of taking up the cross and handing over their lives – in martyrdom, or in the living martyrdom of slavery – as their claim to glory. Many may benefit from these sacrifices, but the persons who make them, if without love, gain nothing at all in God's sight! *And if I distribute all I possess, and if I give up my own body, as my claim to glory,¹ but have no love, it brings me no credit.* Does this principle perhaps explain the harshness of Jesus' word, in Matthew 7: 22–23, where He says

that many who have prophesied, cast out devils, and done miracles in His name will at the last be rejected as unknown to Him? Without love, nothing is really done in Jesus' name! His name is Love!

LOVE ALONE CONQUERS

To love is to be free to be "there" for another person. We are made free for love as we contemplate and accept God's love in Christ for us. But this freedom is under constant threat, from outside and from within. Yet it conquers, and it is love alone that conquers the opposition of the world and the contradictions of human nature.

Love is slow to lose patience. The Greek word, like the Hebrew phrase before it, is compounded of "long" and "anger": literally, "slow to anger". This is an attribute of God Himself, in Old and New Testament thought, Exod. 34: 6, Matt. 18: 26–27; the Hebrew wise man prized it above military prowess, Prov. 16: 32, and the disciple of Christ must show it to others in imitation of Christ's patience with him, Col. 3: 12–13. Faced with injustice, selfishness, and the inhospitality of man to the coming of God's Kingdom, love is patient, and so wins through, bearing it out even to the edge of doom.

It is helpful. This is the active counterpart of forbearance. Taking an adjective (*chrestos*), meaning "kind", "pleasant", "easy", Paul turned it into a verb: "love does kind things." Like Jesus' easy (*chrestos*) yoke, love makes life easier for others. Such kindness is what Dr. W. E. Sangster called "love in its briefer contacts." With a goodness and courtesy that come

from the heart, it wins the small moments and the brief encounters for Christ.

Love is not possessive. At the root of this word is the thought of burning for something. Paul used it above: "be jealous for the more important gifts." It can be used in a bad sense (envious) or in a good sense (zealous). I have adopted J. B. Phillips' translation ("not possessive") to bring out an important aspect of the Apostle's rebuke. Jealousy has twin-sisters: Suspicion, who like Medusa breeds poisonous vipers in her head that have ruined many a friendship and many a marriage; and Possessiveness, who feeds on another's life and, found in a parent, may warp the growing life of a child. Love defeats these two, for love trusts and love sets free. Love is no Love Vine. Hence any definition of love as "self-giving" must be carefully qualified: sometimes love refrains from giving, stands back, and "gives" the other room. In Corinth jealousy appeared as party-spirit, and there is often a good measure of this in denominational loyalties!

Love does not advertise itself, or become inflated. It does not disregard propriety. (a) The first word here refers to ostentation, or boasting. "Makes no parade," Moffatt translates. This is its only occurrence in the New Testament. Basil of Caesarea commented that "everything assumed not for necessity, but for show, deserves the charge of self-advertisement." But this seems rather a severe curtailment of God's gifts of colour and beauty. However, vocal self-advertisement is more probably what Paul intended

here. (b) The second word is derived from the Greek for "bellows"! Love does not puff itself up, like the frog in the fable who wanted to be as big as the cow. Six of the seven New Testament occurrences of the word are in I Corinthians: the church at Corinth was in great danger from "spiritual" people, proud of being in the know, or of having the right experience, and despising others. "Knowledge inflates, love builds," Paul reminded them (I Cor. 8: 1). (c) The third word is one that takes its colour from the context in which it is used. Love is not unmannerly or rude. It has an eye for what is fitting to an occasion or to a relationship. Cp. I Cor. 7: 36: Keeness in a young Christian does not excuse disrespect for parents or elders; nor does feeling inspired allow someone to disrupt the progress of a church meeting. "Let all be done decently and in order," I Cor. 14: 40.

It is not out for its own ends. It does not get annoyed, nor keep a tally of wrongs. This trio refers to (a) covetousness, or selfishness. Christ emptied Himself of all but love, and bids His followers to give up their right to themselves and accept the sentence of the Cross (Phil. 2: 7; Mark 8: 34). Many today think of right and wrong only in terms of what is convenient or inconvenient to themselves. Love has lost this self-reference. Love will keep its pledge, come what may (Psalm 15: 4). (b) Phillips translates the second phrase, "It is not touchy." Touchiness is at the root of the sharper provocation to which the word refers. English gets "paroxysm" directly from the Greek word used here, which is the word used to

describe the "sharp contention" between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark (Acts 15: 29). Moulton and Milligan quote a papyrus in which "a woman complains that her husband is being *provoked* against her by her sister." But love does not let itself be forced into the role of antagonist, or suffer from "anti-" complexes. Love is sensitive, but being free of self-reference, does not take offence. When it meets a frustration, it uses the dammed up emotion to find a creative way to handle the situation.

(c) The next phrase is a bookkeeper's: "Love keeps no ledger account of wrongs done to it." What a happy gift from God it is, to be able to forget the grievances of the past! (The phrase could be translated, "Love never thinks of a wrong" – done to it, in the sense just given; or, never thinks of a wrong to do to another, which is the sense of Zech. 8: 17, which could possibly, but not probably, be in mind here. But it is an unfortunate mis-translation, as J. Héring points out, to read, "Love thinks no evil," in the sense of not suspecting it. The Christian sets no premium on gullibility. Harmless as the dove, he must be wise as the serpent!)

The phrase that follows is a reminder that love is holy. There is an aseptic and antiseptic quality to love. *It finds no pleasure in wickedness, it is only happy in the company of Truth.* Its consistent reaction is to be gladdened by goodness, saddened by badness. It will not permit the prevailing ethos to lower its standards, nor further the chain-reaction of hurtful gossip, nor indulge in the "I-told-you-so" atti-

tude. Christian love is clean; happy only in the company of God's reality.

With quick hammer blows Paul concludes this section: *It stands every strain, is always trusting, always hoping, always steadfast.* (a) Stands every strain: the root meaning is "to cover", and this may be interpreted either as "covers up", that is, conceals (hence Moffatt's "slow to expose") or as "covers to protect", that is, keeps off, bears up under, endures. I agree with Moulton and Milligan, as against Héring, that the latter meaning is preferable in the New Testament occurrences, cp. I Cor. 9: 12, I Thess. 3: 1, 5.

(b) Is always trusting, always hoping: *not* believes all things, hopes all things. The "all" is not the object of the verb: it is an accusative of general reference, or specification, used in the sense of an adverb: "in all circumstances" love is full of faith, full of hope.

(c) Always steadfast: one of three similar words used of love in this chapter. Their meanings, however, are separable: love is patient – with intractable persons; love stands every strain – no matter what the pressure put upon it; love is steadfast – holding to the course before it, despite the difficulties.

LOVE ALONE CONTINUES

Love will not lapse, ever. This is a pivotal statement. It sums up the preceding section by affirming that despite the threats and challenges to its existence love will never be defeated, never fail. Then, anticipating a further comparison between love and the charismatic gifts, it declares that, unlike them, love will never lose its stan-

ding. It is too strong to say that the other gifts will be abolished: rather, they will be fulfilled, they will fade out as the light of a torch does at the rise of the sun.

But as for prophetic preaching, it will be superseded; as for ecstatic speech, it will be discontinued; as for knowledge, it will be superseded. For we know only partially, and our proclamation is partial, but with the advent of what is perfect, the partial will be superseded.

Two illustrations of this theme follow: (i) The child matures, and in maturing outgrows what was appropriate to his youth. (ii) We are now like diviners peering into a magic mirror² to see the course of history, but the time is coming when we shall not have to consult such baffling reflections: the Face of Love will appear – for Love has a definite personal reference, Love is another name for Jesus Christ. *When I was underage, I spoke as one underage, I thought as one underage, I reasoned as one underage; when I became a man, I outgrew the ways of my youth. For at present we are looking with the help of a mirror, and it is not clear; but then it will be face to face. At present I know in part, but then I shall understand – the way God³ understands me.*

“Faith, hope, and love” constitute an early Christian triad, and Paul now bids the other two companions join Love in the limelight. These three are lasting, though love is the greatest and the others owe their existence to love – for faith is trust in Love come, and hope is expectation of Love coming. Love it is that undergirds our universe. *So, therefore, faith, hope, and love last on, just these three; and of these the most important is love.*

With a final summons – *Go in pursuit of love* – Paul returns to his exposition of the need for and use of the gifts of the Spirit: *but be zealous too for the spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophetic preaching.*

NOTES

¹ Reading the better attested, “that I may boast” (or “glory”; or even perhaps, “be given glory”). Cp. I Cor. 9: 15, “No one shall make my boast an empty boast,” as indication of Paul’s frequent concern with what was legitimate “glorying”. But many commentators still prefer the other reading, “that I may be burnt”.

² The mirror may not be a magic one; it may simply stand for symbolic knowledge in contrast to direct vision. For the thought, cp. Exod. 33: 20, Numb. 12: 6–8.

³ The passive may be taken as a circumlocution for the name of God.