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AN EXEGESIS OF 1 CORINTHIANS 12: 31 - 13: 1-3

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A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology-Seminary of Saint John's
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Monastic Studies

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY-SEMINARY
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AN EXEGESIS OF 1 CORINTHIANS 12: 31 - 13: 1-3

Description: At the presentation on 1 Corinthians, I wondered why the Apostle Paul had written this piece that did not seem to be connected to the whole letter. This paper gives response to this question. The first part talks about the basic historical, social, cultural and literary contexts of the passage. The second, which is the formal analysis, considers the literary genre and the literary form of the passage, its structure and its movement. That is, how the text flows from beginning to end. The detailed analysis is a verse-by-verse discussion of 12:31 to 13:1-3. At the end there is a synthesis and reflection.

This paper may not be duplicated

April 3rd, 2009.

INTRODUCTION

One of the reasons this chapter of 1 Corinthians 13 is important to me because of my potential ministry celebrating weddings. In almost all of the nuptials I have attended, this passage has been held up as a model for conjugal bliss, or been otherwise touted as an ideal toward which to strive. Love here is conceived as a divine-human reality, a medium by which human beings participate in a divine way of living. Rudolf Bultmann defines man as a living unity. He says:

Man is a person who can become an object to himself. He is a person having a relationship to himself (*soma*). He is a person who lives in his intentionality, his pursuit of some purpose, his willing and knowing (*psyche, pneuma*). This state of living toward some goal having some attitude, willing something and knowing something, belongs to man's very nature and in itself is neither good nor bad.¹

According to Bultmann, for Paul the gift of the life-giving Creator offers the possibility of choosing one's goal, of deciding for good or evil, for or against God. The first verse of this exegesis is an exhortation of Paul to the Corinthians to avidly desire, to desire earnestly, to strive eagerly for the greatest spiritual gifts. Paul is inviting us to pursuit the goal of love which is a decision for God.

This topic of Chapter 13 has always played a very important role in my life since it represents the highest Christian virtue. It has helped me understand how I can live my Christian life and specifically, my monastic life in community. The message looks quite simple. It is very difficult to follow though. The "law of Christ" is the demand that one love. The bearing of one another's burdens which Paul terms the fulfilling of this law, is nothing else than a manifestation of being servants of one another through love.² It is love (*αγαπη*) which builds up the

¹ Rudolf Bultmann. *Theology of the New Testament*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 209.

² *Ibid.*, 344.

congregation, my monastery, the married life, friendship and so forth. It requires the waiving of one's "authorization" or "right." It is love that requires the Christian not to "seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor" (1Cor. 10:24; 13:5).³

At the presentation on 1 Corinthians I wondered why the Apostle Paul had written this piece that did not seem to be connected to the whole letter. This paper will give response to this question. The first part talks about the basic historical, social, cultural and literary contexts of the passage. The second, which is the formal analysis, considers the literary genre and the literary form of the passage, its structure and its movement. That is, how the text flows from beginning to end. The detailed analysis will be a verse-by-verse discussion of 12:31 to 13:1-3. I will take the verses from the Catholic Study Bible. At the end there will be a synthesis and reflection.

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Corinth was an ancient city of Greece; its name antedates the coming of the Dorian Greeks early in the first millennium B.C. It was built on the north side of the Acrocorinthus, which rises 1900 feet above the plain and served the Corinthians as their citadel. As Corinth was a Roman colony, its citizens were Romans, probably freedmen from Italy. However, the population of Corinth was greatly augmented by Greeks and Levantines, the latter including a considerable Jewish community.⁴ Paul arrived in Corinth "in weakness and in much fear and trembling" (1Cor. 2:3). Paul's ministry in Corinth, at that moment a large and cosmopolitan port city, and the surrounding countryside stretched on for eighteen months. "When Paul wrote 1

³ Ibid., 344.

⁴ Frederick Fyvie Bruce. *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 248-250.

Corinthians the church was troubled. Intense rivalry, jealousy, partisanship, quarreling, immorality, contention, and divisiveness threatened to splinter the church.”⁵

Most scholars agree that the root cause of the problems of the Corinthian church was a multifaceted religious enthusiasm. Some so valued ecstatic speech as the spirit inspired language of angels (13:1) that they looked condescendingly on the less gifted. Some apparently made glossolalia a prerequisite for rather than an expression of life in the kingdom.”⁶ Embedded between two chapters with an ecclesiological perspective, chapter 13 is anthropological and theological. This chapter underscores the essential quality of the Christian life. All such comparing of one’s self with others and all judging of one’s neighbor has ceased in “love.”⁷ Love, *αγαπε* (agape) is the *sine qua non* of the Christian life.⁸ The purpose of chapter 13 is straightforwardly ethical. It is to insist that love must govern the exercise of all the gifts of the Spirit. By describing the qualities of love, Paul is seeking to promote the character formation of the members of the Corinthian community.⁹

Love is the fulfillment of the love whose demands are summed up in “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Such fulfillment of the law is no “work” in the sense of meritorious accomplishment, but is a deed done in freedom. To perform this deed of love believers are “God–taught” (1Thess. 4:9). Love, then, is an eschatological phenomenon; in it the faith which transplants men into eschatological existence is at work (Gal. 5:6).¹⁰

⁵ Calvin J. Roetzel. *Paul: the Man and the Myth*. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1999), 106.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁷ Rudolf Bultmann. *Theology of the New Testament*. 345.

⁸ Raymond F. Collins. *First Corinthians in Sacra Pagina Series; Vol. 7*. (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 471.

⁹ Richard B. Hays. *First Corinthians*. (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1997), 221.

¹⁰ Rudolf Bultmann. *Theology of the New Testament*. 344.

Bultmann summarizes the nature of love described by Paul by placing the parallel statements of 1Cor. 7:19; Gal. 5:6 and 6:15 side by side. He says:

For the man of faith the characteristics “circumcision” and “uncircumcision,” which once determined a man’s classification, have sunk into insignificance; all that now matters is “keeping the commandments of God” (1Cor. 7:19) or, in the second case, “faith working through love” or, in the third case, “a new creation.” That is, God’ demand is for love; it becomes real as the manifestation of faith in living, and it is just in this that eschatological existence becomes reality; this existence, moreover, the “new creation” is to be found only “in Christ” (2Cor. 5:17)¹¹

According to the Catholic Study Bible, 1 Corinthians can be divided into six main divisions: Address, disorders in the Corinthian community, answers to the Corinthians’ questions, problems in liturgical assemblies (Chapters 11, 2–14, 40), the resurrection and conclusions. This chapter thirteen is included in the fourth division known as spiritual gifts.¹²

FORMAL ANALYSIS

The Catholic Study Bible at the beginning of Chapter 13 states:

All or part of the material may once have been an independent piece in the style of Hellenistic eulogies of virtues, but it is now integrated, by editing, into the context of chapter 12– 14 and into the letter as a whole.¹³

This makes clear that this chapter belongs to a specific context. The following are also some of the different points of view regarding the form of this text: This chapter 13 is often taken as an abstract meditation of love, with little connection to the discussion of spiritual gifts.¹⁴ This

¹¹ Ibid., 344

¹² *CSB: The Catholic Study Bible*. Donald Senior, ed.(New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) 253.

¹³ Ibid., 268.

¹⁴ Maria A. Pascuzzi. *New Colledgeville Bible Commentary: First and Second Corinthians*. (Colledgeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2005), 76.

passage describes an aretalogy of love, which falls into an ABA'-pattern.¹⁵ "This famous 'hymn to love' has sometimes been identified as a digression, or even as an interpolation, perhaps not even written by Paul.¹⁶ The reasons for this are not at all obscure. For one thing, the passage thrusts itself out from the Corinthian letter as if to invite special attention. Secondly, the chapter forms a neat, self-contained literary unit dealing concisely with the theme of love. Thirdly, the theme meets people on a level which they can understand (or think they can understand) while the more complicated theological constructs of Paul do not. And finally, the theme of love is expressed in noble literary form, making its retention in the memory easy.¹⁷ Also, it is readily noticeable that if one eliminates the stitches in 12:31 and 14:1, the whole of chapter 13 could be eliminated without breaking the continuity between chapters 12 and 14. This is the principal reason why some authors consider chapter 13 to be an interpolation. It is true that chapters 12 and 14 go together and that chapter 13 could be excluded without breaking the line of thought from chapter 12 to 14. However, it is equally true that, whether Paul wrote chapter 13 for this context or for some other occasion and interpolated it here himself, the hymn fits perfectly between chapters 12 and 14 and elucidates magnificently Paul's central argument stated earlier in 8:1: "knowledge inflates with pride, but love builds up." The arguments given for Paul's writing of chapter 13 for some other occasion are that the literary quality, the powerful rhythm, and the admirably chosen vocabulary of the chapter are such that they suggest an independent writing in a different, more exalted frame of mind and for a more solemn occasion.¹⁸ Anthony

¹⁵ Charles H. Talbert. *Reading Corinthians*. (New York, New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1987), 86.

¹⁶ Richard A. Horsley. *1 Corinthians*. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1998), 174.

¹⁷ Eric L. Titus. 1959. Did Paul Write 1 Corinthians 13? *Journal of Bible and Religion*. Vol. 27, No. 4 (October), 299-302 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1459706> (accessed 28/04/2008).

¹⁸ Peter F. Ellis. *Seven Pauline Letters*. (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1982), 96.

Thiselton begins his commentary on this passage by claiming that Paul is the author of this chapter based on Ceslas Spicq's notes:

Spicq observes that this chapter 'contains the word *agapē* ten times' and 'is undoubtedly the most important in the entire New Testament concerning charity.' Spicq himself entertains no doubt that Paul himself is the author of this chapter, although he acknowledges that many argue to the contrary, partly on the ground that it appears to constitute a literary rather than an epistolary style, and that supposedly it interrupts the flow of chapters 12-14 on gifts within the church.¹⁹

"Chapter 13 has an exalted style that stands out from its literary context, and should be seen as a brief encomium, which in ancient rhetoric was a speech in praise of a hero or, in this case, a virtue."²⁰ Hans Conzelmann states that this chapter stands out from its context as a unity *sui generis*. But internally the section is made up of different stylistic forms. He observes:

The surprising wealth of Greek and Jewish parallels points in the first instance to the assumption of Greek motifs by Hellenistic Judaism and their transformation in the style of the Jewish Wisdom tradition. The most important Greek parallels are provided by Tyrtæus, Plato's praise of love (Eros, *Symp.* 197c-e), Maximus of Tyre; the most important Jewish parallel is 3 Ezra 4: 34-40.²¹

Conzelmann like most authors agree that the chapter has three clear divisions which are mainly (a) vv1-3; (b) vv4-7; (c) vv8-13. The different authors that I consulted think that this passage is well structured into these three distinct parts. They keep the same divisions by verses, but they use different names or descriptions according to their own exegetical points of view. Table 1 provides this information.

¹⁹ Anthony C. Thiselton. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 1027.

²⁰ Richard A. Horsley. *1 Corinthians*. 174.

²¹ Hans Conzelmann. *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 218.

Table 1. Division of 1Corinthians 13 according to different authors.

Division of Chapter 13	VV 1-3 <u>A</u>	VV 4-7 <u>B</u>	VV 8-13 <u>A'</u>
Malina and Pilch ²²	A progressive comparison of charismata and agapē.	A description of agapē.	A series of antitheses underlining the excellence and staying power of agapē.
Thiselton ²³	Love's nature: the fruitlessness of gifts or sacrifices without love.	The dynamic action of love.	The permanence and solid futurity of love.
Harrisville ²⁴	The gifts as nothing without love. (Verse 12:31b is included)	The nature and activity of love.	The imperishability of love.
Talbert ²⁵	The superiority of love.	The characterization of love.	The superiority of love.
Hays ²⁶	The futility of all religious practices without love.	Encomium to love.	Contrast: The provisional character of all the spiritual gifts, juxtaposed to the abiding character of love.
Fee ²⁷	The necessity of love.	The character of love.	The permanence of love.
Snyder ²⁸	Without love	Love is.	The greatest is love.

²² Bruce J. Malina and John Pilch. *Social-Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul*. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2006), 116.

²³ Anthony C. Thiselton. *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 217-229.

²⁴ Roy A. Harrisville. *1 Corinthians*. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987), 217-222.

²⁵ Charles H. Talbert. *Reading Corinthians*. 86.

²⁶ Richard B. Hays. *First Corinthians*. 221.

²⁷ Gordon D. Fee. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 628-641.

²⁸ Graydon F. Snyder. *First Corinthians: A Faith Community Commentary*. (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1992), 173.

Virtually all commentators draw attention to the three parts of the passage. In my opinion, if Chapter 13 is taken as an isolated unit, that is, read apart from its context, any of these outlines will be good enough to illustrate its message. Regardless the names of the different divisions, the text flows from beginning to end conveying the same message. As aforementioned, the text is structured in chiasmic fashion. A = these verses affirm that without love charismatic gifts have no real value. B = these verses offer a panorama on love, featuring both its positive and negative qualities, that is, what love does and what love does not do. A' = these verses contrast love with the spiritual gifts, affirming that love never ends. Essentially, A and A' affirm that love is God's gift par excellence. The last verse of the chapter sums up Paul's argument, providing a conclusion to the encomium of love.²⁹

However, reading the passage apart from its context may cause one to not grasp its full importance. This chapter is a necessary link in the argument of putting *charismata* in their proper place. This is not love versus gifts; love is presented as the only context for gifts. The theology of Paul cannot be understood without this chapter on agapē which is connected to all his teachings. Bultmann claims, "Though the Christian in a certain sense is no longer 'under Law,' that does not mean that the demands of the Law are no longer valid for him; for the agapē demanded of him is nothing else than the fulfillment of the Law."³⁰

I would not use the division presented above by most authors illustrated in Table 1 because this division does not answer the question that I formulated in class. As my outline, I will follow the division presented by Lund, quoted by José Enrique Aguilar, because it shows

²⁹ Raymond F. Collins. *First Corinthians*, 472.

³⁰ Rudolf Bultmann. *Theology of the New Testament*. 262.

that this is a proper context for Chapter 13. It also shows a correspondence between the spiritual gifts and love. This author proposes a chiasmic structure of the type XYZY'X'. This is illustrated in Table 2.³¹

Table 2. Lund's division.

X	Exhortation.	12:31
Y	Comparison of love with the gifts: love gives them value.	13:1-3
Z	The characteristics of love: love stands the test of life.	13:4-7
Y'	Comparison of love with the gifts: love abides while the gifts cease.	13:8-13
X'	Exhortation.	14:1a

Paul uses the first person singular. Although some interpret Paul's words in a general sense as if "I" meant the generic human being, the natural sense of the words suggests that Paul is referring to himself in his first person statements. His deliberative style prompts the use of autobiographical example as a rhetorical argument. Along with the rhetorical devices of gradation, Paul's argument profits from the use of metaphor, including hyperbole, which is a kind of metaphor, and comparison.³²

DETAILED ANALYSIS OF 12:31 to 13:1-3

According to Bultmann, love is designated as an eschatological phenomenon by the fact that it is the primary fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). Though Paul lists other fruits after it, 1Cor. 13

³¹ José Enrique Aguilar.2007. 1 Cor. 12-14 Literary Structure and Theology. *Analecta Biblica* 166: 33-36.

³² Raymond F. Collins. *First Corinthians*. 472.

shows that love really cannot be regarded as just one of the Spirit's gifts by the side of others. This chapter calls it the "still more excellent way," the way that exceeds all other "gifts" and without which all the others are nothing. Though all the Spirit's other gifts will disappear when "that which is perfect" comes, yet love, like faith and hope, will abide, and not only abide, but will be the greatest of the three. It can be called nothing less because in it the possibility opened up by "faith" and "hope" becomes reality in concrete existence.³³

(12:31) "*Strive eagerly for the greatest spiritual gifts. But I shall show you a still more excellent way.* Some of the authors claim that this verse is transitional. They say that it is more an introduction to the praise of love in Chapter 13 more than a conclusion to the discussion of the variety of gifts in Chapter 12.³⁴ The connection with δέ, "but" is not good. Verse 31a abides by the terminology used so far (χαρισματα) charismata, yet appears to bring a shift of accent with the summons ζηλοῦτε, "strive for" up to this point Paul has spoken of the gifts in terms of criticism and reduction. His criticism was directed not at the gifts, but at the Corinthians' self-understanding. Now he directs their attention to higher gifts, ones that allow of no self-development and no self-contemplation on the pneumatic's part.³⁵ Most commentators take the verb (ζηλοῦτε) zeloute, "avidly desire" as an imperative. The phrase may be taken as an indicative, in which case it would introduce chapter 13 along with v. 31b, but the thrust of Paul's argument seems to demand that it be taken as an imperative.³⁶ According to Thiselton, the meaning of ζηλοῦτε is also disputed because various lexicographical sources list a variety of uses: in a positive sense *to strive, to desire earnestly, to exert oneself*, or in a negative sense *to*

³³ Rudolf Bultmann. *Theology of the New Testament*. 344-345.

³⁴ Richard A. Horsley. *1 Corinthians*. 174.

³⁵ Hans Conzelmann. *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*. 215.

³⁶ Raymond F. Collins. *First Corinthians*, 471.

envy or *to covet*.³⁷ Paul might be rebuking their competitive *envy* of other people's gifts. He would then be redirecting this to the one gift that everyone can possess, namely the gift of love.³⁸ Verse 31b introduces *agapē* (ἀγαπᾶ) as a more excellent way. In Hellenism, the word "way" (ὁδός), labeled moral teaching as well as the behavior that conformed to such teaching.³⁹ The figure of the way is widespread. The Old Testament speaks of the ways that God takes, on which He leads his people or the individual. The conduct of life is a "walking." Conselmann makes the following analysis on the "way":

Qumran dualistically contrast the two ways that are determined by the two spirits (of light and of darkness). In addition to this, the contrasting of the two ways as ethical possibilities is a paraenetic (sermon, exhortation) pattern that was taken over by Christianity. The symbolism of the way was employed by the Greeks from the time of Parmenides. Paul does not promise a way that leads to the πνευματικα, "spiritual gifts," but one that leads beyond them; nor is it a way that leads to love, but love is the way, at the same time also the goal of the "striving for."⁴⁰

Love is the way, the manner of life within which all the gifts are to find their proper place. Love is not merely a feeling or an attitude; rather "love" is the generic name for specific actions of patient and costly service to others. Love rejoices in the truth and bears all suffering in the name of Jesus.⁴¹

(13:1) ***"If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal."*** The New Testament speaks about two different phenomena with the labels "tongues". Xenolalia (Acts 2) is a gift of the Spirit that enables people listening to hear in their own language; glossolalia (1Cor. 14:4) to "speak in a tongue"

³⁷ Anthony C. Thiselton. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. 1025.

³⁸ Anthony C. Thiselton. *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary*. 216.

³⁹ Bruce J. Malina and John Pilch. *Social-Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul*. 116.

⁴⁰ Hans Conzelmann. *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*. 216.

⁴¹ Richard B. Hays. *First Corinthians*. 222.

equals to “pray in a tongue”, or to “speak in the tongues of angels”.⁴² It is a vitally important point that Paul begins with values that are significant in the community of Corinth: speaking with tongues, prophecy, etc. This is a strong link with the context. The language of men and angels means all possible languages, including the languages of those in altered states of consciousness, one of the *χαρισματα* listed by Paul. Angels were thought to have their own language of worship as in Isaiah 6:3 and often in Revelation. Gonging bass and clanging cymbals were use in temple worship around the Mediterranean. The verbal arrogance of public speakers was also labeled as the sound of a gong or cymbal. For a Jesus-group member to speak in tongues without group allegiance is like the noise made by an inarticulate musical instrument (see 1Cor. 14:2, 9, 11, 28).⁴³ These manifestations, like miracles, were signs and were not intended to be exhibited in the ordinary work of preaching and teaching. Because the Corinthians placed too high a value on tongues, Paul considers it first. According to Lenski, we cannot assume that Paul is writing only hypothetically when he refers to tongues of angels for this would conflict with his evident purpose, namely to show that love must animate all, even the highest gifts.⁴⁴

That the Corinthians at least, and probably Paul, thought of tongues as the language of angels seems highly likely for two reasons: First, 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 they were put on they allowed Hemera, for

⁴² Charles H. Talbert. *Reading Corinthians*. 89.

⁴³ Bruce J. Malina and John Pilch. *Social-Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul*. 117.

⁴⁴ R.C.H. Lenski. *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s 1st and 2nd Epistles to the Corinthians*. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 545-546.

example, to speak “ecstatically in the angelic dialect, sending up a hymn to God with the hymnal style of the angels. Second, one can make a good deal of sense of the Corinthian view of “spirituality” if they believed that they had already entered into some expression of angelic existence. This would explain their rejection of sexual life and sexual roles and would also partly explain their denial of a future bodily existence (1Cor. 15:12, 35). It might also lie behind their special interest in “wisdom” and “knowledge.” For them the evidence of having “arrived” at such “spiritual” state would be their speaking the “tongues of angels.”⁴⁵

(13:2) ***“And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have all faith so as to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.”***

Prophecy, knowledge and faith are higher charismata. “Prophecy” refers to utterances deriving from altered states of consciousness experiences that apply the gospel of God to a new situation. Prophecy indicates what has to be done in the here and now in line with the experience of Jesus. To know mysteries is to know the secrets of God, to know God’s will for the here and now. To have knowledge is to penetrate into the depth and meaning of God’s ways in human society, a sort of theology flowing from an altered state of consciousness experience. Faith means trust in the God of Israel, that is, unwavering reliance on God. To move or uproot a mountain, as much later rabbinic sources indicate, is an idiom for to make what is impossible possible. Paul may be alluding here to a tradition about the teaching of Jesus, as attested by Mark 11:22-24 and Matthew 17:20. The point here is that without agapē these charismata are nothing.⁴⁶

(13:3) ***“If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.”*** Jesus gave himself on the cross. For the powerful or

⁴⁵ Gordon D. Fee. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. 630-631.

⁴⁶ Bruce J. Malina and John Pilch. *Social-Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul* . 117.

autonomous Christian the model of self-giving has become identified with Christianity itself. To give up one's possessions to feed others is a mandate for true discipleship.⁴⁷ To distribute all one's wealth for the benefit of one's poorer fellows is a heroic gesture in the story of Jesus (Matt 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 14:33 and 18:18-30). To hand oneself over to be burned for the sake of one's community was well known courageous behavior in Asia Minor. In Corinth itself, tradition told of a certain Hellotis and one of his young sisters throwing themselves into the burning temple of Athena rather than surrender to the Dorians. The Corinthians celebrated this noble deed in the feast of the Hellotia, a deed of supreme sacrifice in face of atrocious torment. One of the usual objections against "be burned" is that Christian martyrdom by fire was not yet known in Paul's time; however, this objection carries little weight, for traditions of martyrdom by fire were thoroughly familiar in Judaism, as demonstrated by the narratives of the deaths of the Maccabean martyrs (e.g. 2 Macc. 7:1-6). Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine why later scribes would have changed "be burned" to the rather perplexing "boast", whereas the reverse change is entirely understandable. I guess it was a spelling mistake because at issue is only one Greek letter, an easy error for some copyist. These two words are very similar *καυτηεσομαι* (boast) and *καυχηεσομαι* (burn). The best witnesses read to "boast" yet that reflects a later period when pride in martyrdom might have occurred. Thus, on balance, the reading *καυτηεσομαι* ("so that I may boast") is to be preferred.⁴⁸ Anyway, it is believed that the Spirit-inspired impulses to give away one's goods on behalf of others and to die for the good of others

⁴⁷ Graydon F. Snyder. *First Corinthians: A Faith Community Commentary*, 175.

⁴⁸ Richard B. Hays. *First Corinthians*. 225.

are the noblest of charismata, yet without agapē even such noble deeds on behalf of others are useless to the one performing them.⁴⁹

SYNTHESIS AND REFLECTION

The chapter can be read as a self-contained unity. Here the gifts of the Holy Spirit are inseparable from the very presence and personal action of the Spirit of God. Paul urges that the desire for spirituality is not religious technique but experience of the Spirit. The gift of love is noncompetitive by its very nature. However, to strive eagerly means more than to pray; it includes effort towards cultivating and toward producing receptivity and fitness on our part. The Spirit bestows the gifts only on those who are fit to receiving them. The Spirit also works the fitness but does so only on those who allow the Spirit full sway in their hearts. An important point is the type of the gift desired. We should seek the higher types. According to Paul the motive for having and making use of the gift is the motive of love. That is, love is to be the all dominating motive in seeking and in using spiritual gifts. The idea is not that love is more excellent than gifts. Paul elaborates the thesis that love is preferable to gifts.⁵⁰

The way the Corinthians were going was basically destructive to the church as a community; the way they were being called to is one that seeks the good of others before oneself. It is the best way of edifying the church and of seeking the common good. In this context one will still earnestly desire the things of the Spirit, but precisely so that others can be edified. Thus it is not “love versus gifts” that Paul has in mind, but love “as the only context for gifts” for without the former, the latter had no usefulness at all. The recognized values of the city of

⁴⁹ Bruce J. Malina and John Pilch. *Social-Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul*. 117.

⁵⁰ R.C.H. Lenski. *The Interpretation of St. Paul's 1st and 2nd Epistles to the Corinthians*. 540-543.

Corinth are relativized: they cannot make man anything worthwhile without love. God's "grace" is a power that determines the life of the individual. Paul speaks of agapē as it reveals itself in a deed, agapē at work, in action. God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us. We usually call God; "God of love," agapē means all that God has done or bestowed for salvation. The activity of the Holy Spirit is termed "love".⁵¹

Love is the basic attribute which alone confers love. Paul will continue to "give his body so that he might boast"; he will specially 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 put on love"; for without love one misses the point of being Christian. According to Bultmann, the way in which the verb "to live" is used shows clearly that Paul understands this verb as the life a man leads in his concrete existence, the intentionality of human existence:

Zoe (life) means the life that a man lives as the subject of his own actions, his living self (i.e. his striving, willing self)...This self-hood is a thing entrusted to him – hence, that he factually lives only by constantly moving on, as it were from himself, by projecting himself into a possibility that lies before him... He sees himself confronted with the future, facing the possibilities in which he can gain his self or lose it. This finds expression in the fact that he does not simply "live," but is always "leading his life" in some particular way. Living is always a "walking."⁵²

Paul is showing love as a concrete intentionality of human existence. Love has been entrusted to human beings. In the Old Testament it is mentioned several times God saying to his people, "love your God with all your heart. In the New Testament Jesus is giving us the commandment

⁵¹ Rudolf Bultmann. *Theology of the New Testament*. 292.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 210.

of love. In the life of the Church Paul is teaching us to lead a life walking to love. Love, as sheer existence for one's neighbor, is possible only to him who is free from himself. That is, to him who has died with Christ, to live no longer for himself but for him who for his sake died and was raised and hence is obedient to the "law of Christ," the love commandment.⁵³

⁵³ Ibid, 344

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