

Bible Commentaries

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1 Corinthians 13 ▾

Verse 1

1 COR. 13

Barclay said, "For many, this is the most wonderful chapter in the New Testament";^[1] but as McGarvey said, "It has been admired by all ages, but, unfortunately, practiced by none!"^[2] A sample of the marvelous praise which has been heaped upon this chapter is the following:

It is a glorious hymn or paean in honor of Christian love, in which St. Paul rises on the wings of inspiration to the most sunlit heights of Christian eloquence. Like **Psalms 45**, it may be entitled "A Psalm of Love."^[3]

There are elements of misunderstanding, however, in the view that "This passage found in the middle of a protracted argument suggests that we have here the result of a sudden burst of inspiration!"^[4] Not part of, but **ALL** that Paul wrote was inspired of God. Furthermore, this whole chapter may not be separated from the argument in the preceding and following chapters; for itself is part of the argument, a very telling part of it.

The chapter falls easily into three divisions: (1) the absolute necessity of love (**1 Corinthians 13:1-3**), (2) the characteristics of love (**1 Corinthians 13:4-7**), and (3) the permanence of love (**1 Corinthians 13:8-13**). Despite this classification, **1 Corinthians 13:13** evidently stands apart. The disorders of the Corinthian church are continually in view. Both the positive and negative attributes of love in **1 Corinthians 13:4-7** are clearly the opposites of conditions among the Corinthians. Also, such words as "tongues ... prophecy ... knowledge ... faith so as to move mountains cannot be understood, except as references to the miraculous gifts at Corinth. This chapter should never be construed as merely an abstract teaching on love, parenthetically inserted. The situation at Corinth was still the center of Paul's attention here.

^[1] William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), p. 131.

^[2] J. W. McGarvey, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Standard Publishing Company, 1916), p. 127.

^[3] F. W. Farrar, *The Pulpit Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950), Vol. 19, p. 422.

^[4] T. Teignmouth Shore, *Ellicott's Commentary on the Holy Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), p. 337.

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am become sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal.
(**1 Corinthians 13:1**)

Tongues of men and of angels ... No affirmation is made here regarding the language of angels. Hodge paraphrased this as "all languages, human or divine."^[5] That the speech of angels should have been brought in here could have derived from Paul's own experience in which he was caught up into heaven and heard words "unspeakable, unlawful to utter" (**2 Corinthians 12:4**). There is also an assumption here that "angels are superior in all respects to men."^[6] Thus, Paul made his argument more overwhelming with the contrast between the tongues of angels and the distressing tongues of Corinth.

But have not love ... Three Greek words for "love" are [*@eros*] (erotic love), [*@fileo*] (affection), and [*@agape*], the latter being the word here. "The word was not classical Greek. No heathen writer had used it."^[7] Yet it was in the Greek language and was used in the Septuagint (LXX). Thus, the Spirit chose a word for Christian love which was free of the sensual overtones of more common Greek words. [*Agape*] is considered to be one of the grandest words in the New Testament.

Sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal ... The cacophonous pretense of heathen worship included the clashing and banging of gongs and cymbals and the braying of brass trumpets. Barclay identified such noises as characteristic "especially of the worship of Dionysus and Cybele."^[8] Paul teaches two things by this: (1) that the exhibitions of the Corinthian tongue speakers were of the same significance as heathen worship and (2) that both were noisy, empty and worthless.

^[5] Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), p. 266.

^[6] Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1949), p. 242.

^[7] F. W. Farrar, *op. cit.*, p. 422.

^[8] William Barclay, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

Verse 2

And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

Prophecy ... knowledge ... faith so as to move mountains ... These are to be added to "tongues" mentioned in **1 Corinthians 13:1**, all of them being miraculous gifts which had caused so much trouble at Corinth.

All faith ... Although this refers to a miraculous gift, faith is never to be viewed as appearing in various varieties, being of one kind only. In all the word of God, there is no mention of several kinds, or even two kinds of faith. It is always the **AMOUNT OF FAITH** which is determinative. True to that fact, Paul is not here speaking of some special kind of faith, but of "all faith," meaning the superlative **AMOUNT**, not some special "kind." No greater misunderstanding exists among religious people today than the notion that there is any such thing as "saving faith," understanding it as a special quality or variety of faith that inevitably procures salvation.

Paul's words here are a sufficient refutation of the popular heresy regarding "faith alone" or "saving faith." "All faith" cannot mean anything less than faith in its superlative degree (degrees of faith being often mentioned ... "little faith ... great faith ... etc."); and if certain "kinds of faith" contrary to all

Scripture, should be supposed as existing, there would be no way to exclude them from being included in Paul's sweeping words "all faith." Significantly, not even "all faith" can avail any man of salvation unless his heart is filled with love of man and of God. This obvious truth has resulted in some of the exegetes placing a false construction upon "love" as Paul used it here, making it to mean "God's love of men," not their love of God. Throughout this chapter it will be observed that it is love of humanity as a reflection of the love which Christians have for God which is being discussed. See under **1 Corinthians 13:13**.

Prophecy ... The miraculous gift of prophecy belonged to Balaam, but his having love neither of God or Israel caused his ruin. Caiaphas as God's high priest uttered prophecy; but his loveless heart made him an enemy of God (**John 11:51**; **Numbers 24:1ff**; 31:8).

All faith so as to remove mountains... While true enough that removing mountains was a well-known Jewish metaphor for solving difficult problems (see **Matthew 17:20**; **Luke 17:6**, especially the comment in my Commentary on Luke, pp. 370-371), it is clearly the miraculous manifestation of faith that is meant here. As Wesley said, "This means the highest degree of miracle-working faith."**[9]**

Judas Iscariot was cited by David Lipscomb as being an example of faith to perform miracles, but with no love of Christ. "Judas had faith to work miracles (**Matthew 10:1**); but he did not possess love, betrayed the Lord, and went to his own place."**[10]**

[9] John Wesley, One Volume New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1972), in loco.

[10] David Lipscomb, Commentary on 1Corinthians (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1935), p. 194.

Verse 3

And if I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profiteth me nothing.

Bestow all my goods ... "The Greek word here means to feed others by giving them morsels of food,"**[11]** giving the meaning of giving away all the giver's property a little bit at a time so as to reach the greatest possible number.

My body to be burned ... Coining as it did before the savage persecutions in which Christians were burned for their faith, this is surprising, being perhaps prophetic. Some have supposed that Paul was here thinking of the Hebrew children (**Daniel 3:23**), and Barclay thought it possible that Paul "referred to a famous monument in Athens called 'The Indian's Tomb.' It honored an Indian who had burned himself in public."**[12]**

Whatever may have prompted Paul's words here, the lesson is clear, that no liberal giver nor fanatical ascetic may be assured of eternal life without the all-important, indispensable virtue of love. In the days of the persecutions, some were tempted to seek martyrdom as a sure means of attaining eternal life; but a proper regard for what Paul said here would have discouraged such a thing.

Paul in these first three verses did not mention all of the miraculous gifts, but the most respected; and thus what is said here of the examples chosen applied with equal force to all the others.

[11] T. Teignmouth Shore, op. cit., p. 338.

[12] William Barclay, op. cit., p. 132.

Verse 4

Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up.

Patient endurance and active good are qualities of love. Paul enumerated fifteen qualities of love in **1 Corinthians 13:4-7**; but this is far from being a methodical dissertation on love as an abstract subject. The qualities cited here have the utility of contrasting with the extraordinary gifts so coveted at Corinth; and they are presented here as exactly opposed to the characteristic of the puffed-up Corinthians. As Hodge said:

Those traits of love are therefore adduced which stood opposed to the temper which they exhibited in the use of their gifts. They were impatient, discontented, envious, inflated, selfish, indecorous, unmindful of the feelings or interests of others, suspicious, resentful and censorious.^[13]

Verse 5

Does not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not its own, is not provoked, taketh not account of evil; rejoiceth not in unrighteousness, but rejoiceth with the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

The true meaning of all of these qualities is seen in their opposites as cited by Hodge (under **1 Corinthians 13:4**).

Seeketh not its own ... Barclay rendered this "Love does not insist upon its rights."^[14] He also stated that "It would be the key to almost all the problems which surround us today, if men would think less of their rights and more of their duties."^[15] The essential selfishness in all human nature has been exploited politically in this generation, and the ultimate fruits of unbridled selfishness are yet to be reaped.

Believeth all things ... As Johnson said, "This does not include gullibility, but means rather that the believer should not be suspicious."^[16]

[14] William Barclay, op. cit., p. 135.

[15] Ibid.

[16] S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., Wycliffe Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), p. 632.

Verse 8

Love never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall be done away; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall be done away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when that which is perfect is come, that which is in part shall be done away.

Beginning here, and to the end of the chapter, it is the permanence of love, as contrasted with the supernatural gifts which were so highly treasured by the Corinthians, which is stressed. And before moving to declare that all of these things which had so dazzled and inflated the Corinthians were soon to end, Paul had just outlined the glory and desirability of Christian love, the same being the "most excellent way" mentioned in **1 Corinthians 12:31b**. But here he made the unqualified declaration of the end of supernatural gifts in the church. It may only be hoped that the Corinthians got the point better than many of the modern commentators.

Love never faileth ... As in the **RSV**, "Love never ends."

Prophecies ... shall be done away ... This cannot mean that prophecies shall be contradicted by events, but as Hodge said, "The gift (of prophecy) shall cease to be necessary, and therefore shall not be continued."**[17]**

Tongues ... shall cease ... This means that the **TRUE** gifts of tongues would cease. In many generations after those days, the gift of so-called "tongues" would flourish at intervals throughout the history of Christendom; but Paul's words here absolutely deny any authenticity whatever to the so-called charismatics of the present day. True, it is only said here that "tongues **SHALL** cease"; but there is no reason whatever to believe that this least of all supernatural gifts should have survived when supernatural knowledge, divine prophecy, and the gift of miracle-working faith perished; which, of course, they did. Any authentic speaking in tongues is here restricted by the apostle Paul to the age of miracles; and when that ceased, the tongues ceased, except for the affectations of those who indulge, from whatever motives, the counterfeit "tongues" of the present day.

The very fact of Paul's showing "the more excellent way" declared that the supernatural gifts would soon pass away, otherwise that generation would not have needed the instruction. Those gifts at Corinth had a purpose. In that day in Corinth, no man had a copy of the New Testament; therefore it was necessary that supernaturally endowed men should teach and lead them; but today, "No preacher or teacher has any message from God unless he gets it from the Bible."**[18]**

During the childhood age of the church, miracles authenticated the message of the inspired preachers (**Mark 16:20**). Miracles were to confirm the word of God. "No miracle today could confirm the word of God; it is already confirmed. Men need simply to believe and obey it."**[19]**

The burden of proof must rest upon those who suppose the age of miracles is still upon us. If there are super-natural gifts, where are they? The contradicting claims of religious bodies pretending to work miracles are mutually destructive. This writer believes that there are no miracles being performed today by any persons whomsoever. Paul said they would cease; and they have ceased! That there are marvelous providences, so singular and astonishing as to startle people, is not surprising; for it may not be denied that God is still working in the world, and especially in his kingdom; but that quality of miracles bearing witness as a confirmation of God's word is not discernible in such merciful providences. What about the answer to prayer? Yes indeed God answers prayer, and sometimes in the most astonishing ways; but such a thing bears no likeness to the supernatural and visible wonders of the apostolic age.

The character of people pretending to perform miracles in this generation refutes their claims. They get rich doing it; but the apostles never took money for healing anyone.

As Foy E. Wallace stated it:

The miraculous endowments designated **SPIRITUAL** gifts have **FAILED**, have **CEASED**, have **VANISHED AWAY** and are therefore no longer in force. All such powers were temporary and provisional and cannot now be exercised.**[20]**

There is a meaning in such words as "cease ... fail ... vanish away," not merely of continuing no longer, but of being superseded by something else. As Russell noted, "Tongues prophecies, and ... knowledge shall be superseded."**[21]** Despite the fact of Russell's taking a dispensational view of this passage, his idea of "superseded" is correct. And what was to supersede the tongues, etc.? It was the inspired writing of the New Testament. Thus, the fact of the appearance of that which was to do the superseding proved the near approach of the time for it to occur. In a sense, this Epistle superseded the tongues of Corinth.

When that which is perfect is come ... The great problem before Paul was the instruction and guidance of the church in Corinth; and the most acceptable view of what might be called "perfect" in connection with that problem would be the completed canon on the New Testament. McGarvey understood it as "the recorded word."**[22]** Kelcy called it "The body of truth fully revealed."**[23]** DeHoff identified it as "The New Testament."**[24]** The comparison which Paul at once made contrasted the childhood age of the church with the church's maturity, not the present dispensation with the ultimate condition of the saints in heaven; and this demands that the expression "that which is perfect" must be associated, not with conditions in heaven, but with the maturity of the church; and that condition is met only by referring the words to God's completed revelation, the Bible.

A great many commentators insist upon referring "that which is perfect" to conditions in heaven, as for example in the following:

This anticipates the Parousia, the culmination of the age. To suggest that "the perfect" refers to the completion of the Canon of Scripture fails to find any support in the Biblical usage of perfect ... Such an interpretation exists to explain the absence of certain **CHARISMATA** in many churches today.**[25]**

Regarding the "Biblical usage" of "perfect," it should be noted that even of the Old Testament it was said, "The law of the Lord is perfect converting the soul" (**Psalms 19:7**); thus "perfect" most assuredly is applied to the revealed word of God; and such being true of the Old Testament makes it even more applicable to the New Testament. As for the absence of "certain [@charismata]" in present-day churches, it may be dogmatically affirmed that "ALL [@charismata]" is absent from all present-day churches, with the exception of counterfeit tongues affected by certain groups, the behavior of whom invariably demonstrates their so-called "manifestations" as being contrary to the orders of the Holy Spirit, unscriptural and thus bearing no resemblance whatever to the genuine gift which existed in the times of the apostles.

That which is in part shall be done away ... Failure to see that "**MIRACULOUS** knowledge, tongues, prophecies, etc." called in these chapters "spiritual gifts," are to be identified with the things in part that shall be done away involves interpreters in an impossible position. Take ordinary "knowledge," is this to be done away with when we get to heaven? Certainly not. Later, at the end of the chapter, Paul gives a glimpse of eternity, but not here. The things in part which were soon to be done away were the supernatural gifts of the infancy age of the church. "Paul considered the days of spiritual gifts as the process by which the goal of maturity should be reached."**[26]** As Lipscomb said it:

These gifts were to continue in the church to guide and instruct it until the completed will of God was made known. They were to serve a temporary purpose; then when their office was fulfilled, they were to pass away and give place to the revealed will of God.**[27]**

The pattern of many commentators is like that of Macknight who paraphrased this thus:

When the perfect gift of complete illumination is bestowed on all in heaven, then that which is partial, namely, the present gifts of knowledge and prophecy, shall be abolished as useless.**[28]**

However, who can believe that Paul was trying to control the outrageous situation in Corinth by assuring them that all of those miraculous gifts would disappear when they all got to heaven? The perfect illustration of what he really means was childhood giving way to maturity, stated in the very next line.

[17] Charles Hodge, op. cit., p. 271.

[18] George W. DeHoff, Sermons on First Corinthians (Murfreesboro, Tennessee: The Christian Press, 1947), p. 96.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Foy E. Wallace, Jr., A Review of the New Versions (Fort Worth, Texas: Foy E. Wallace, Jr., Publications, 1973), p. 435.

[21] John William Russell, Compact Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1964), p. 426.

[22] J. W. McGarvey, op. cit., p. 132.

[23] Raymond C. Kelcy, First Corinthians (Austin, Texas: R. B. Sweet Co., Inc., 1967), p. 61.

[24] George W. DeHoff, op. cit., p. 96.

[25] Paul W. Marsh, A New Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1969), p. 404.

[26] Raymond C. Kelcy, op. cit., p. 62.

[27] David Lipscomb, op. cit., p. 200.

[28] James Macknight, op. cit., p. 219.

Verse 11

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I felt as a child, I thought as a child; now, that I am become a man, I have put away childish things.

Can this be anything if not a suggestion that the Corinthians should stop being children and grow up? In case any of them might have missed the point, he added a bit later, "Brethren, be not children in mind" (**1 Corinthians 14:20**). Furthermore, the admonition was given in the same breath with Paul's statement that five intelligible words were worth more than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue!

Verse 12

For now, we see in a mirror, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know fully even as also I was fully known.

In this there surely must be a glimpse of eternal things; and it evidently occurred to Paul in connection with what he had just said of the childhood age of the church giving way to maturity, applicable to the current era of that day; but like many other examples in the Bible, it has a secondary reference to something much more remote. (Other examples of this same type of thing are in **Matthew 2:15**; 2:18 ... See my comments in my Commentary on Matthew, pp. 18-19). We may therefore refer the words about seeing through a mirror darkly, and knowing "in part" to the present dispensation of God's grace, and the words about being "face to face" (presumably with the Lord) and knowing "fully" may be understood as descriptive of conditions in eternity. That there is, in fact, just such an emphasis in this **1 Corinthians 13:12**, is proved by Paul's prompt return to the "now" in the final verse immediately after this. A failure to observe this limitation of **1 Corinthians 13:12** is fatal to any true interpretation of this passage.

In a mirror darkly ... Ancient mirrors were of polished metal, easily tarnished, and any image was only dimly seen. Paul himself referred even to the Christ as "the image of God" (**2 Corinthians 4:4**; **Colossians 1:15**); and although it would be sinful and incorrect to suppose any deficiency in the blessed Saviour, mortal life is limited. Nothing is dim about Christ as God's image except the tarnished mirrors by which mortal men behold it. There shines in these words the essential need for people to walk by faith; because what they may "see" even under the best of circumstances must be described as seeing "darkly." See my Commentary on Hebrews, pp. 209-210.

Then face to face ... In the resurrection, we shall behold the face of the Beloved. "We know that if he shall be manifested, we shall be like him; for we shall see him even as he is" (**1 John 3:2**).

Now I know in part ... Note the temporal "now"; and note also that Paul was not referring to the Corinthians who knew far less than he did; for it is of himself that this is said. What a shocking rebuke of intellectual arrogance is this! The greatest mind of the apostolic age, other than that of Christ himself, here stressed the partial and incomplete nature of that whole body of revelation which Paul, more than any other, delivered to mankind. "The permanent danger of intellectual eminence is intellectual snobbery,"^[29] as Barclay said; but there is surely an antidote for it in such a passage as this.

Verse 13

But now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

But now ... This means "in this present state." "If we give it any other sense, as though Paul said, 'now to sum all things up,' then we have him saying that faith, hope and love are eternal."^[30] As Barclay said, the stress in this verse regards "the supremacy of love,"^[31] not its permanence which was treated in **1 Corinthians 13:8** in this paragraph. "Now" in this verse meant that Paul had returned to the present situation after the digression to speak of eternal things in **1 Corinthians 13:12**, which should be treated, actually, as a parenthesis. Shore and many others insist that "**NOW** is not here temporal, but logical";^[32] but this viewpoint should be rejected, as James Macknight declared:

The clause "now abideth" implies that these graces (faith, hope and love) are not always to abide; at least the graces of faith and hope shall not abide; for seeing that faith is the persuasion of things hoped for (**Hebrews 11:1**), and hope that is seen is not hope (**Romans 8:24**); in heaven, where all the objects of our faith and hope are put in our possession, there can be no place for either.^[33]

By the above comment, Macknight clearly construed the "now" of this verse as temporal, that is, a reference to the time present. All of the clever arguments adduced to show how we shall still have faith and hope in heaven fall to the ground in the light of the truth that both faith and hope deal with uncertainties, and there shall be no uncertainties in the eternal world.

Abideth ... here has the force of saying that the miraculous spiritual gifts shall not abide; and, of course, they did not; nor do they exist now. It is in this dispensation that faith, hope and love abide; but what is especially stressed, "Love is the greatest" of the trio.

And the greatest of these is love ... It is an unqualified disaster for advocates of the "faith only" theory that love should here be ranked ahead of faith; and, consequently, it is usually interpreted as meaning "God's love of men," not men's love of God and of each other. Thus, Guthrie commented on this verse, "greater than these is the love (of God)."^[34] Throughout the chapter, it has been made clear that love as a virtue of men, not as an attribute of God, is meant. It is true, of course, that the love in Christian hearts has been shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Spirit; but by the virtue of that very fact it becomes a Christian virtue.

WHY LOVE IS THE GREATEST THING

Love is the fulfillment of the law, which was never true of faith (**Romans 13:10**).

Love outranks faith in the power to motivate people.

Love includes obedience (**John 14:15**), which is not true of faith or hope.

Love is the heart of the Great Commandment to love God and one's neighbor (**Mark 12:28-31**).

Love shall abide eternally, whereas both faith and hope shall not, except in some exceptional sense.

Love, if lacking in the heart, would be a sufficient deficiency to prevent one's salvation, even if he possessed "all faith" (**1 Corinthians 13:2**).

Love works the greatest miracle of transformation in human hearts, distinguishing it from faith, which exists in some pretty cold fish!

There is no wonder, then, that Paul extolled the virtue of love in his wonderful efforts to correct the puffed-up Corinthians. This chapter may be viewed as one of the most important in Scripture, not merely for the truly marvelous things said of love, but also for the firm word therein regarding the cessation of the miraculous age. For further comments on "miracles" and why they ceased, see my Commentary on Hebrews, pp. 42-44.

Concerning the subject of love, there is none other that so fascinates and inspires the hearts of people; for this gift ranks first among the fruits of the Holy Spirit (**Galatians 5:22ff**). There is even a sense in which it is a continuing "miracle" throughout the church age, not any less than the "confirming miracles" of the apostolic period, merely different. It is the signature of God himself in the hearts of all the redeemed.

GOD'S SIGNATURE

Love is God's imprimatur Upon the human heart, A glorious investiture, His image to impart.

Love is chief of all the graces, The royal prothonotary, Assigning each and all their places In God's economy.

It is the precious bridal song, The prothalamion hymn Of Jesus Bride, the ransomed throng Who have believed in him.

Upon the entire human race, To prove them born above, The Father stooped His name to trace. The signature is Love.

James Burton Coffman New York City November 27, 1965

[30] J. W. McGarvey, op. cit., p. 133.

[31] William Barclay, op. cit., p. 140.

[32] T. Teignmouth Shore, op. cit., p. 339.

[33] James Macknight, op. cit., p. 221.

[34] Donald Guthrie, *The New Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), p. 1069.

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