

HOW CAN I EXPRESS LOVE?

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

If I named a Christian denomination and asked you to tell me a few words that would characterize that denomination in the minds of most people, we might be surprised as to the picture we would paint of Christianity today. Let's try that starting with the following:

Lutheran, Anglican, Presbyterians, Congregational, Brethren, Christian, Methodists, Holiness, Baptists, Pentecostal, Quakers, Mennonites, Amish, Seventh Day Adventists.

Aside: There will be several revelations when going through this exercise. The first is "how little we know about other Christian groups." The second will be that we tend to characterize a group by something that we might consider to be "odd" as compared to the way we do things or what is considered to be the "norm." We might choose some description as formal worship services for Lutheran and Anglican. We might say "predestination" for the Presbyterians. The "Christian" church might be characterized by having the Lord's Supper every week. The Baptist might be thought of in terms of "not drinking" or having the requirement to be immersed to be a church member. Pentecostal might be related to speaking in tongues and the Quakers as pacifists.

It would be my guess that none of the above groups would be characterized by "how they love each other." It was Jonathan Swift who said that we have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to cause us to love one another. That may be an overstatement in the context of denominationalism in our area of the world; however, Swift's observation is true when it comes to religions with broader differences such as Islam versus Christianity or Judaism. It is seen in Hinduism, Shintoism, Buddhism, and even with Protestant versus Catholic issues. It would seem that in all our "busyness" and doing of things and making ourselves distinctive that we may have missed the main point of it all. We certainly see this "missing the point" in the smaller microcosm of the church at Corinth where they were caught up in a lot of different issues just within their local church and the issues were crowding out the main feature that should characterize the Body of Christ.

The issues at the church at Corinth were wide-ranged. There were factions and associations that created disunity. Many in the church embraced worldly wisdom and put a lot of stock in gaining knowledge. They used their learning to set themselves apart from others who were not as knowledgeable. Some in the church were taking others in the church to civil courts in lawsuits and some were cheating fellow Christians. There were controversies regarding whether a person should marry or not. They argued over whether it was OK to eat meat sacrificed to idols. They abused the observance of the Lord's Supper and were in competition with each other regarding Spiritual gifts and ministries. Every one of these issues would not have been a problem if the people loved each other and wanted what was best for their fellow Christians. So in the midst of addressing the questions they raised regarding gifts, ministries and workings of the Spirit, Paul gave them the solution or framework for every problem that they were encountering.

Understand Love's Importance (13:1-3)

¹ If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² 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 do not have love, I am nothing. ³ And if I give all my possessions to feed *the poor*, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing. 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 (NASB95)

Notice how many of the "gifts" Paul mentioned here as he tried to put abilities and capabilities in the proper perspective. He started with the gift that was likely causing the most

controversy in the church and that was glossolalia or speaking in various languages. There is some debate as to whether Paul literally means languages of men and angels or that he is using hyperbole to make an all-inclusive statement that it doesn't matter what language one uses; the conclusion is the same: Without love, what a person says is just so much noise.

Paul then moved on to various ministries and abilities that use language in their implementation. Prophecy involves proclaiming a divine revelation that impacts the church and the implementation of the Kingdom of God. This could involve insight into understanding Old Testament scriptures whose meaning was not clear. Prophecy would also include sharing inspired insight into the happenings that were current at the time. In some cases, there were inspired messages regarding what was going to happen in the future. The key point is that prophecy (whether it is addressing past, present or future) is divinely inspired.

The next item in the list (understanding mysteries) was not in the list Paul gave them in chapter 12. It is difficult to know if Paul is introducing another "Spiritual gift" or if this is amplification of the prophecy ministry. A prophecy could be an inspired revelation of a truth given in the Scriptures that was not understood up to that point; that is, it was a mystery. Another possibility is that Paul is using "understanding mysteries" as an alternate name for "wisdom." Closely associated with any of these possibilities is the enablement of having all manner of knowledge. This enablement was mentioned in chapter 12 as a "word of knowledge." It is difficult to know if Paul is including all factual information a person has or if this was a specific reference to "inspired" knowledge that is by revelation of the Holy Spirit. The distinction is significant in that many people have a lot of acquired information because someone told them something, they read it or they have personally seen or heard something. This kind of "knowledge" is contrasted to "revealed truth" that did not come about because you read it or saw it or whatever. For example, how do you know that there is one true God? How do you know that there is a difference between righteousness and unrighteousness? How do you know that you are saved? Some have argued that all "true knowledge" is revealed and everything else is just information and is not sure or certain.

The final gift or enablement mentioned in this list is "faith" or "works of faith." This is not "saving faith" but is faith that accomplishes great changes in things thought to be immovable. It is likely that "moving mountains" was a reference to effecting great changes in cultures or world views rather than physically displacing topological features.

Any of these gifts of the Spirit may be operational in a person's life and if these are sources of pride or if a person is using his ability for personal gain or even "out of duty" rather than love, then they are of no eternal significance.

The final activity that Paul mentioned was that of sacrificial giving regardless of the extent. If it is done for the wrong motive, then it is of no spiritual value. You can give motivated by pride or guilt or a sense of obligation and there is no spiritual or eternal profit for the giver.

Demonstrate Love's Qualities (13:4-7)

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind *and* is not jealous; love does not brag *and* is not arrogant, ⁵ does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong *suffered*, ⁶ does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; ⁷ bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (NASB95)

If unselfish, Godly love is the **only** acceptable basis (motivation) for a Christian's thoughts, words and deeds, then that love will find expression in what we think, what we say, and what we do. When a person becomes a Christian, this kind of love is put into the essence of

our very being (God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit . . . Rom 5:5). This kind of love IS the nature of God. When this love finds expression in us, it is, in a very practical sense, a result of *God being present in us*. For the old nature, love of self comes “naturally.” For the new nature (if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature) selfless love comes “supernaturally.” As Christians, we are endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable characteristics. We are no longer able to excuse ourselves with a plea of “I’m only human.” Such a confession denies the **new birth** and the indwelling presence of God in us which does NOT dwell in the rest of the world.

Our new “supernatural” behavior (thoughts, words, and deeds) should, in reality, be totally NATURAL for us *as Christians*. In Paul’s list of characteristics (vs. 4-7) we can see a mixture of ways of thinking, ways of expressing ourselves and actions. Unselfish love in the heart of the believer produces patience, kindness, and good will. It causes us to realize that we are nothing apart from Jesus and that our boast is only in Him. Selfless love has no motivation to promote *self*, since *self* died on the cross in Christ. Petty slights and put downs by others do not cause anger since “selfless love” believes the best about others. It causes us to hear criticism as an opportunity for us to grow in the Lord and become more like Christ by putting more and more of self to death as we take up our cross each day. The kind of love that Jesus showed us transforms our ideas about what gives us pleasure and causes us to recognize and to value truth. Just as God is the protector of the helpless and poor, we too will see opportunity to help those who cannot help themselves. Finally, *true Godly love* produces optimism and causes us to press on toward the goal “being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” (Phil 1:6)

Exhibit Love’s Permanence (13:8-13)

⁸ Love never fails; but if *there are gifts of prophecy*, they will be done away; if *there are* tongues, they will cease; if *there is* knowledge, it will be done away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part; ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known. ¹³ But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love. 1 Corinthians 13:8-13 (NASB95)

I guess when all is said and done; “the bottom line” is all that really matters. To a lot of people “the bottom line” simply means *what it costs*. Instead of thinking about the costs, we need to think of *what will remain* after everything else is taken away. In other words, what are we “betting on” for the future? Where does our focus lie?

As Christians, we should be well removed from having to be convinced that money, material things, power, and fame are not points in which we should put any confidence. Before we became a Christian, bank accounts, investments, insurance, careers, positions and the like were “the important things” or the bottom line issues.

After becoming a Christian, we still need to be careful. It is possible to get caught up in a completely new set of bottom line issues. For example, we could put our focus and confidence in the fact that we have certain spiritual gifts. It may be a great gift, having value to the church, such as *prophecy*. Our gift might be at the other end of the spectrum such as *speaking in an unknown tongue*. It may be that God has given us the *gift of knowledge*. Whatever it is, there will come a time when prophesy will not be needed since we will be fully united with Jesus and not be hindered by the “veil of the flesh.” We will be able to fully communicate with God (Spirit to spirit) and not have a need for *interpretation*. There will be full knowledge for all since we will be in His presence. What will be our focus or our point of confidence then?

At that point, if someone were to raise the question, “How do you know you are doing God’s will?” what would you say? Now we might say, “God gives our church prophetic messages through me.” Some might say, “I speak in unknown tongues.” Others may find their identity and focus in great healing ministries or evangelism and they might say that so many were healed or so many were saved under their ministry. I know people who put their confidence in their giving. While all these are wonderful and great and God can use them, they are limited in scope. They are not “the big picture” issues and they will pass away. So what IS the bottom line? The **only** answer that can be acceptable is “I am in Christ Jesus and He is in me.” This affirmation is an exercise of **Faith** that is based on the **Hope** found in the word of God. However, the evidence of His presence is the essence of His person: God is **Love**. This is foundational.

God is eternal. He is permanent. If we are in Him, then we, too, are eternal. That is really is the **heart** of the matter.