

First Epistle to the Corinthians

24 – Essay Four: Women and Men in Church (4.4) – The Way of Love

1 Corinthians 12:31-14:1a

1. Outlines

a. *ESV Study Bible*

- i. Divisions over Corporate Worship (11:2–14:40)
 1. Head coverings and worship (11:2–16)
 2. Social snobbery at the Lord’s Table (11:17–34)
 3. Elevating one spiritual gift above others (12:1–14:40)

b. *Reading the New Testament Series*

- i. Problems in Corporate Worship (11:2-14:40)
 1. Prayer and Prophecy (11:2-16) – Different Though Equal in the Lord
 2. The Lord’s Supper (11:17-34) – Social Significance of the Supper
 3. Prayer and Prophecy (12:1-14:40) – Regulation, Not Suppression of Spiritual Gifts

c. *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle*

- i. In Response to the Corinthian Letter (7:1-16:12)
 1. Marriage and Related Matters (7:1-40)
 2. Food Sacrificed to Idols (8:1-11:1)
 3. Women (and Men) in Worship (11:2-16)
 4. Abuse of the Lord’s Supper (11:17-34)
 5. Spiritual Gifts and Spiritual People (12:1-14:40)

d. Bailey¹

- i. Worship: Men and Women in the Church (11:2-14:40)
 1. Men and Women Leading in Worship (11:2-16)
 2. Order in Worship: Sacrament (11:17-34)
 3. Gifts and the Nature of the Body (12:1-30)
 4. The Hymn to Love (12:31-14:1)
 5. Spiritual Gifts and the Upbuilding of the Body (14:1-25)
 6. Order in Worship: Word (14:26-33)
 7. Women and Men Worshipping (14:3b-40)

2. Rhetoric

a. Seven-part ring composition

- i. Center is “Love defined negatively”
- ii. Outer envelope: zeal in pursuit of gifts

b. Repetition of themes

- i. Tongues, prophecy, knowledge
- ii. Love, faith, hope
- iii. Complete vs. incomplete
- iv. Permanence vs. temporality

¹ Bailey, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians*, loc. 3428.

Table 1: Bailey, location 4107

	1 Corinthians 12:31-14:1a (ESV)	Motifs
1	12:31 But earnestly desire [<i>zeloute</i>] the higher gifts [<i>charismata</i>]. And I will show you a still more excellent way [<i>kath hyperbolen hodon</i> ; lit. "more extremely way", directions for a journey over the mountain pass].	Zeal
2	13:1 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 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 have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned [so that I may boast], but have not love, I gain nothing.	Love and the spiritual gifts Tongues Prophecy Knowledge Faith Hope
3	4 Love is patient and kind;	Love defined positively
4	love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist [<i>zetei</i>] on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful [not recording wrongs]; 6 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing [injustice], but rejoices with the truth.	Love defined negatively (Center of center)
5	7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.	Love defined positively Faith Hope
6	8 Love never ends [falls]. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.	Love and the spiritual gifts Prophecy Tongues Knowledge Partial/imperfect Complete/perfect Parable of child and man Imperfect/immature Perfect/mature Parable of mirror Imperfect/perfect Love, faith, hope
7	14:1a Pursue love, and earnestly desire [<i>zeloute</i>] the spiritual gifts [<i>pneumatika</i>]...	Zeal

3. Outer envelope ([1,7] vv. 12:31, 14:1a)
 - a. 12:31a and 14:1a flow together seamlessly
 - b. The reader would not miss chapter 13, if Paul had omitted it
 - i. The rhetoric flows nicely into the continuation of the discussion of tongues
 - c. Some think Paul inserted a pre-composed “hymn” into his discussion
 - i. He may have written it, or it may be something that was present already
 - ii. The problem: the details are specifically tailored to the problems in Corinth
 - d. Chapter 13 is distinct and a self-contained unit, yet it is intricately tied to the rest of the letter

Unfortunately, however, the love affair with this love chapter has also allowed it to be read regularly apart from its context, which does not make it less true but causes one to miss too much. Even worse is that reading of it in context which sees it as set over against "spiritual gifts." Paul would wince.²

- e. Zealously desire the higher gifts
 - i. Traditional interpretation is that the spiritual gifts listed in chapter 12 are good, but love is better
 1. Problem 1: Love is never spoken of as a “gift” – it is a “fruit” (Galatians 5)
 2. Problem 2: 14:1 reiterates zealously desiring spiritual gifts and then continues on to discuss them
 - ii. Another traditional interpretation is that the list of 12:28 is a hierarchical order of gifts and the imperative of 12:31 is to desire those higher on the list
 1. Problem: Paul has already established that there is no hierarchy to gifts
- f. A more excellent way?
 - i. Is Paul contrasting love as a better way than gifts?
 - ii. 12:31b has interpretation difficulties – literal translation doesn’t make good sense
 - iii. Bailey notes that “hyperbole” can also refer to “a mountain pass”³
 - iv. Words that can describe a mountain journey are found throughout this passage⁴
 1. Higher gifts, journey over a pass (12:31); faith that removes mountains (13:2); love that never falls (13:8); highest of these is love (13:13)
 - v. Therefore, we do not have to read this as gifts and love being in the same category
 1. Gifts are not being compared against love with one better than the other
- g. Spoiler alert!
 - i. What Paul does show is that spiritual gifts have a limited life-span – it is for the church until the “perfect comes”
 - ii. Love is permanent
 - iii. Love is the only context in which Christianity can exist – religion without love, even with 100% orthodox doctrines and actions cannot be Christianity
 1. Corinthians: We are Christians because we manifest gifts
 2. Paul: But do you have love? Let me explain to you what love looks like and compare that to what I’m seeing in your community. Decide for yourself.
 - iv. The pillars of Christianity are faith, hope, and love – the greatest being love

² *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle*, “3. The More Excellent Way (13:1-13)”

³ Bailey, location 4205. He references several ancient works that use *hyperbole* in this manner.

⁴ Bailey, location 4208.

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 have no usefulness at all—but then neither does much of anything else in the Christian life...⁵

Love is not an idea for Paul, not even a "motivating factor" for behavior. It is behavior. To love is to act; anything short of action is not love at all. Second, love is not set over against the gifts, precisely because it belongs in a different category altogether. For Paul it is not "gifts to be sure, but better yet love"; rather, love is the way in which the gifts are to function. To desire earnestly expressions of the Spirit that will build up the community is how love acts in this context.⁶

4. Love and the Spiritual Gifts ([2], 13:1-3)

- a. This should not be misinterpreted as devaluation of gifts. Paul assumes their value and necessity.
- b. List begins with "tongues," the most immediate concern of this essay – exercise of tongues, whether other languages or of a celestial tongue, is not a sign of spirituality
 - i. Corinth was noted for its brass work. Banging and clanging of metal over which words could not be heard would have been a familiar image.⁷
- c. Next is "prophecy." This, we will see (14:1b) is what Paul considers a more useful gift and what he would like all to exercise. Both tongues and prophecy are "utterance gifts." But manifestation of prophecy, too, by itself is not a sign of spirituality.

Manifesting spiritual gifts, even a gift that Paul values, is useless without love.⁸

- d. Paul goes on to "mysteries and knowledge." These were issues discussed earlier in this letter. Possessing knowledge and even being able to explain them are not signs of spirituality.
 - e. Neither is faith (as to remove mountains).
 - i. The isthmus between the two harbors was connected via a narrow path of about 3-5 miles (depends on source). Ships were carried over this path, rising to 259 feet, with a maximum gradient of 6%.
 - f. Nor even acts of self-giving and self-sacrifice. (Self-sacrifice is not love, though love [*agape*] is self-sacrificing.)
 - i. "To be burned" is a phrase that is not found in the oldest manuscripts. When Paul wrote this letter, martyrdom through burning was unknown. It is believed that later copyists changed "boast" (because it tends to carry a negative connotation in common use) to "burned" to match their experiences.⁹
 - ii. Paul often sees "boasting" as a positive idea. Boasting about self-sacrifice, when done under the Spirit's guidance, is a beneficial thing.¹⁰
 - iii. Paul is writing about hope of a "reward on the Day of Judgment"¹¹
- #### 5. Love defined ([3-5], 13:4-7)
- a. What is this "love" [*agape*] of which Paul speaks?

⁵ NICNT, 1 Cor. 12:31

⁶ NICNT, "3. The More Excellent Way (13:1-13)"

⁷ Bailey, location 4246.

⁸ *Understanding the Bible Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, 1 Cor. 13:1-3.

⁹ NICNT, 1 Cor. 13:3 and Bailey, location 4275 (there is a single character difference between the words).

¹⁰ NICNT, 1 Cor. 13:3 and Bailey, location 4289.

¹¹ Bailey, location 4308.

- i. Greeks of Paul's day had *eros* and *phileo* to describe love. But these were inadequate for Paul. *Agape* appears in the LXX Song of Songs. Its occurrence is rare in classical Greek. Paul selects this rarely used word to fill it with new meaning.¹²
- b. This section specifically refers to Corinthian problems (negatives) and to what is missing from their community (positives)
- c. Love is personified – “it becomes a person... Paul's ethical model is Jesus...”¹³
- d. Bookends: “patient” and “endures” – both describe patience
 - i. Love is patient [*makrothymos*] – “This is the patience of the powerful who have the clout to retaliate but choose to refrain”¹⁴
 - ii. Love endures all things [*panta hypomenei*] – “If *makrothymia* is the patience of the powerful, *hypomene* is the *patience of the weak* who unflinchingly endure suffering.”¹⁵
- e. Negatives – what Corinthians are exhibiting to one another¹⁶
 - i. Envy resents others
 - ii. Boasting can be about one's own group or about flattering others to manipulate them
 - iii. Arrogance stops listening to others – they don't exist
 - iv. Rude – without good order – opposite of having concern about one's self (actions and appearance) for the regard of others
 - v. Does not insist on its own way – this is the climax
 - 1. *Zetei* may be a play on *zeloute* found at the beginning and end of this text
 - 2. The Corinthians were overly concerned about their individual spiritual status
 - 3. Paul: Christian spirituality is about caring for the common good – not just about my rights, but about yours, too
 - vi. Not irritable – about self-control – about absorbing hostility
 - vii. Keeps no record of wrongs – an accounting metaphor – does not track wrongs to bring up later in order to manipulate or for revenge
 - 1. This doesn't mean forgetting what has happened or inviting hostility back
 - 2. It is about not allowing the past to fester and to control one's responses toward another
 - viii. Does not rejoice at injustice – yes, it can include wrong actions of individuals but it is far more than that. This is directed against all types of injustice and oppression (particularly those that the “world” delights in; e.g., wealth, violence).
 - 1. Perhaps most importantly, it denounces delighting in the failures of others and gossiping about it. It rejoices when mercy and justice prevails, even with those whom we disagree.¹⁷
- f. Verse 7 – Four, quick, staccato phrases
 - i. Lit., “All {bears, believes, hopes, endures}”
 - ii. “Bears” → “covers over” → “doesn't leak” → “roof”
 - 1. Keeps all confidences – is trustworthy¹⁸
 - iii. *Bears* and *endures* directed primarily toward other people¹⁹

¹² Bailey, locations 4101-4107.

¹³ Bailey, location 4328.

¹⁴ Bailey, location 4332.

¹⁵ Bailey, location 4346.

¹⁶ Summary of Bailey, locations 4351-4448.

¹⁷ *NICNT*, 1 Cor. 13:6.

¹⁸ Bailey, location 4460.

¹⁹ Bailey, location 4473.

- iv. *Believes* and *hopes* directed primarily toward God
- 6. Love and the spiritual gifts ([6], 13:8-13)
 - a. Paul writes about those things that are permanent, and those things that are temporary and will no longer be necessary when the *Eschaton* arrives in its fullness
 - b. Love is the most permanent of the things discussed – it never falls (imagery of a mountain pass and a drop-off on one side)
 - c. Prophecy, tongues, and knowledge are temporary gifts
 - d. We must be ever aware of the partialness (incompleteness) of our knowledge and proclamations (including this one)
 - e. Parable of child and man
 - i. This is not about Paul saying he has reached spiritual maturity
 - ii. What he is saying: Just as when I became a man I gave up childish ways, when Christ returns to usher in the full *Eschaton*, the temporal gifts will also go away (so don't think of them as permanent possessions).
 - f. Parable of the mirror
 - i. Mirrors were made from brass – a Corinthian product
 - ii. Analogy of parable is not perfect – when you look in a mirror you see yourself, but the parable reads that when the mirror disappears we will see “face to face”
 - 1. Which may be why some translations use “through a glass, darkly” (KJV)
 - iii. The point is, again, our incomplete view about God at this time of our existence
 - iv. But also to “know” is not about factual, proposition knowledge, but about relational “knowledge”
 - g. Faith, hope, and love abide... the greatest of these is love
 - i. That these three are all permanent, or just love?
 - 1. Different opinions by scholars – no conclusive argument

One must not mistake this emphasis with a devaluation of the gifts themselves. The fact is that we are still in the present; and therefore in chap. 14 Paul will go on not only to correct an imbalance with regard to the gifts, but to urge their proper use. Pursue love (14:1), he says, because that alone is forever (13:8, 13); but that also means that in the present you should eagerly desire manifestations of the Spirit that build up the community (14:1–5).²⁰

It is not difficult to bring the final verse of this paragraph into the contemporary church; these are still the “three imperishables” for those who would live a truly Christian life in the present age... What is more difficult is the way the emphasis on the “present only” aspect of the gifts has been treated. Most have simply yielded to historical reality and have tried to make a virtue out of that reality, that for the most part these extraordinary gifts have already ceased for so many. The irony, of course, is that our present view is almost the precise opposite of that of the Corinthians, who thought of these things as eternal and therefore needed to have that view corrected. One wonders how Paul would have responded to present-day cerebral Christianity, which has generally implied that we can get along quite well without the Spirit in the present age, now that the church has achieved its maturity in orthodoxy. It seems likely that he would not be pleased to see this text used to support such a view of things.²¹

²⁰ NICNT, “c. The permanence of love (13:8-13)”

²¹ NICNT, 1 Cor. 13:13.