

Exposition of 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a

by

Pius Hau

Chapter 13 of the First Epistle to the Corinthians has been called the “love hymn,” or “hymn to love.” With its “sheer beauty and power”¹ and its “fantastic climax to a robust crescendo of extraordinarily powerful language,”² it is often regarded as poetry even though only the first three verses are actually poetic in Greek.³ It is read out of context all too often, without regard to the role it plays in this letter from Paul to the Corinthians.⁴ Even worse, as Fee contends, is this chapter being read in context but being interpreted as pitting love *over against* spiritual gifts.⁵ So what exactly is 1 Corinthians Chapter 13, if it is not quite poetry? What is Paul’s purpose in writing the chapter? What exactly is Paul saying, and how does this chapter relate to the rest of the letter? This paper expounds on verses 4-8a of 1 Corinthians Chapter 13 within the context of the chapter, its larger context, and the context of the letter.

As the capital of the Roman province of Achaia, Corinth was populous, wealthy, and morally corrupt,⁶ with an abundance of sexual sin.⁷ The Corinthian church was also infested with a multitude of problems, such as “immaturity, instability, divisions, jealousy and envy, lawsuits, marital difficulties, sexual immorality and misuse of spiritual gifts.”⁸ Paul writes the First Epistle to the Corinthians to counter spiritual corruption, to correct disorders, to answer certain questions

¹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 626.

² Anthony C. Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 225.

³ Fee, 626n3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 626.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 20n6, 21.

⁷ Fee, 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2356.

from the Corinthians, and to teach doctrine such as the resurrection.⁹

Chapters 12-14 of the letter focus on the Corinthians' attitude toward and their misuse of spiritual gifts. They seem to regard only spectacular gifts as a sign of spiritual expression, resulting in the speaking of tongues being considered higher than even prophecy.¹⁰ Their exercise of the gift of tongues also leads to disorder during worship. In chapter 12 Paul writes about the manner in which the Spirit bestows gifts upon believers, how it results in interdependence and unity within diversity, and the divine purpose for such gifts.¹¹ In chapter 14 Paul contrasts the gifts of prophecy and tongues, putting the former above the latter due to its intelligibility,¹² and instructs the Corinthians about the proper and orderly manner in which to exercise their gifts, with a view to edifying the church.¹³ Tying chapters 12 and 14 together, Paul writes chapter 13 to provide the context in which spiritual gifts are to be exercised in order to achieve their divine purpose. Paul does not consider love the greatest gift, so chapter 13 is not about "love versus other gifts," but about love as the *only context for spiritual gifts*.¹⁴ In other words, no gift counts for anything unless it is exercised in the context of love. As such, chapter 13 is not a digression, as some commentators suggest, but an essential part of Paul's argument.¹⁵ Indeed, Thiselton quotes C. T. Craig in declaring, "almost every word in the chapter has been chosen with [the

⁹ Morris, 30.

¹⁰ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 558-559.

¹¹ Nigel Watson, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 2nd ed. Epworth Commentaries (Werrington, Peterborough: Epworth, 2005), 125-126.

¹² *Ibid.*, 143.

¹³ Fee, 652.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 625.

¹⁵ Morris, 174.

Corinthian] situation in mind.”¹⁶ This close integration is reflected in the chiasmic structure of chapters 12 through 14:¹⁷

- A. Lead-in to the topic of spiritual gifts (12:1-3)
- B. The bestowing of gifts and unity within diversity (12:4-31)
- C. Love as the context to exercise gifts (13:1-13)
- B’. The gifts of prophecy and tongues (14:1-36)
- A’. Concluding instructions on spiritual gifts (14:37-40)

Note that the “love” under discussion in this letter is *agape*, as opposed to *eros* and *philia*. *Agape* is used in the NT to describe the relationship between God and believers, and also among believers themselves.¹⁸ It is driven by “*care, regard, and respect* for the other and for the well-being of the other” (italics author’s).¹⁹ It “*creates value rather than responds to value*” (italics author’s).²⁰ In contrast, *eros* seeks gratification of its own desires,²¹ while *philia* “denotes devotion to one’s own, whether self, or family, chosen friend, or lover.”²²

Both the function and structure of chapter 13 fit the Greek rhetorical form of encomium.²³ The encomium may be used to praise people, virtues, or other subjects.²⁴ It consists

¹⁶ Thiselton, *Shorter Exegetical*, 217.

¹⁷ Garland, 559-560.

¹⁸ W. Harold Mare, "1 Corinthians," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 10. Edited by Frank E. Gaebelein and James D. Douglas (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 267.

¹⁹ Thiselton, *Shorter Exegetical*, 219.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 1050.

²² O’Brien quoted in Garland, 618.

²³ James G. Sigountos, "The Genre of 1 Corinthians 13," in *New Testament Studies*, vol. 40, (1994), 247.

²⁴ Ibid., 248.

of five elements: *prologue*, *birth and upbringing*, *acts*, *comparison*, and *epilogue*. However, the *birth and upbringing* section is used for people, so it is omitted in a praise of virtue such as love.²⁵ Verses 1-3 make up the *prologue*.²⁶ However spectacular, however gifted, and whatever the sacrifices, all spiritual gifts and Christian deeds are worthless if they are not exercised or done in the context of love.²⁷ Verses 4-7 make up the *acts* section of the encomium, listing the praiseworthy “deeds” of love as a virtue personified.²⁸ This is where Paul describes the character of love.²⁹ Verses 8-12 make up the *comparison* in which the eternal nature of love is contrasted with the temporal nature of spiritual gifts.³⁰ Verse 13, together with the first phrase of 14:1 (“Pursue love” ESV), is the *epilogue*.³¹ Here Paul magnifies love even more by declaring that it is even superior to the essential Christian virtues of faith and hope.³² The *epilogue* also carries an exhortation in 14:1 to pursue love.³³ With this encomium structure in mind, we will begin to expound on verses 4-8a, that is, the *acts* component of the encomium (verses 4-7) plus the first part of verse 8 (“Love never ends” ESV).

Verses 4-8a contain a series of verbs, not adjectives, that describe the characters of love in terms of what love *does* or *does not do*. As Garland puts it, “Love is dynamic and active, not something static. [Paul] is not talking about some inner feeling or emotion. Love is not conveyed

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 251.

²⁷ Thiselton, *Shorter Exegetical*, 221.

²⁸ Sigountos, 255-256.

²⁹ Fee, 628.

³⁰ Sigountos, 259.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Garland, 625.

³³ Sigountos, 259.

by words; it has to be shown. It can be defined only by what it does and does not do.”³⁴ Garland goes on to quote Spicq, “It would be necessary to translate *agape* as ‘demonstration of love’” (italics author’s).³⁵ It is precisely the desire to stay faithful to the Greek verbal structure that has driven Thiselton to come up with a translation that is unlike most English translations which render certain verbs as adjectives. Thiselton’s translation is more wordy than, say, the ESV or NIV, but it seeks to convey the meaning of the text as vividly as possible by expressing the “dynamic pictorial imagery” of the verbs.³⁶ One might argue that actions are implied in adjectives. After all, who that does not *wait patiently* can be considered *patient*? Who that does not *show kindness* can be considered *kind*? Nevertheless, verbs do emphasize the active aspect of love vividly which is what Paul is trying to stress here with some rarely used verbs, as we shall see later. The following is Thiselton’s translation,³⁷ except for verses 7 and 8a which are taken from the ESV.

(4) Love waits patiently; love shows kindness. Love does not burn with envy; does not brag – is not inflated with its own importance. (5) It does not behave with ill-mannered impropriety; is not preoccupied with the interests of the self; does not become exasperated into pique; does not keep a reckoning up of evil. (6) Love does not take pleasure at wrongdoing, but joyfully celebrates truth. (7) Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (8a) Love never ends.

(4) The verb *makro-thume'o* can mean *to be patient* or *to be long-suffering* in the sense of “*enduring misfortunes and troubles ... bearing the offenses and injuries of others*”³⁸ (italics

³⁴ Garland, 616.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 1053.

³⁷ Ibid., 1026.

³⁸ Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Coded with Strong's Concordance Numbers*, 4th ed. Reprinted with Strong's numbering added by Hendrickson Publishers (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1896), 387.

author's). While *long-suffering* sounds more sensational and may be considered a more important virtue, one that is perhaps harder to attain, it is somewhat redundant given the *pas ... hupomeno* (*endures all things* ESV) in v.7. Thiselton chooses *waits patiently* – love “deals patiently with the loved one ... [as] *the right timing* plays a huge part in securing the welfare of the other” (italics author's).³⁹ Indeed, even suffering injustice, as *long-suffering* entails, requires loving patience (Mt 18:26, 29), as Paul exhorts the Corinthians to rather be wronged than have lawsuits against each other (1 Cor 6:7).⁴⁰ This highlights the Corinthians' premature assumptions about Paul and other ministers (4:5) and their realized eschatology (4:8).⁴¹

Paul's deliberate use of verbs to convey the active and dynamic aspect of love really shows in his use of the next verb. While its adjectival and noun forms are used widely, the verb *chresteuomai* (*shows kindness*) is extremely rare, occurring only here in the NT and only in the writings of Clement of Rome and Eusebius in early Christian literature.⁴² Indeed, Findlay considers it a possibility that Paul may have coined the word for this purpose.⁴³ Love serves others kindly, and returns goodness for ill-treatment.⁴⁴ Love does its best to be thoughtful and helpful in a pleasant way, and strives for magnanimity.⁴⁵ Showing kindness is such an important part of Christian witness that, according to Tertullian, second-century pagans called Christians *chrestiani* (“made up of mildness or kindness”) rather than *christiani!*⁴⁶

The rendering *does not burn with envy* (*ou zeloo*) conveys the intensity better than the

³⁹ Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 1046-1047.

⁴⁰ Garland, 617.

⁴¹ Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 1047.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Findlay quoted in Ibid.

⁴⁴ Morris, 177,

⁴⁵ Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 1047.

⁴⁶ Garland, 617.

BAGD's "to be filled with jealousy or envy".⁴⁷ The Corinthians envy each other in their factionalism (1 Cor 3:3).⁴⁸ Some of them behave as Paul's rivals for attention (4:18).⁴⁹ Their zeal and improper attitude toward spiritual gifts certainly stirs up envy (14:2).⁵⁰ Love does not burn with envy when another is honored, but "*delights in it for the sake of the other*" (italics author's).⁵¹ Indeed, love is about how best to serve those whom Christ has died for.⁵²

Another extremely rare verb, *perpereuomai*,⁵³ literally means "to behave as a braggart" or "be a windbag," suggesting self-centered attention-seeking for oneself.⁵⁴ The Corinthians are guilty of pursuing rhetorical sophistication over against substance (1 Cor 1:17; 2:1).⁵⁵ They brag about their presumed wisdom (3:18), knowledge (8:2), and spirituality (14:37).⁵⁶ Bragging is a "blatant sin," and goes hand in hand with arrogance.⁵⁷ *Ou perpereuomai* (*does not brag*) means refraining from all the egotistic pursuit of the Corinthians.

The next verb, *phusioo*, literally means to be "puffed up," a characteristic of many in the Corinthian church (1 Cor 4:6, 18-19, 5:2; 8:1),⁵⁸ so much so that this letter contains "six of the

⁴⁷ Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 1048.

⁴⁸ Watson, 141.

⁴⁹ Fee, 637.

⁵⁰ Garland, 618.

⁵¹ Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 1048.

⁵² Fee, 637.

⁵³ Garland, 618.

⁵⁴ Fee, 637,

⁵⁵ Garland, 618.

⁵⁶ Fee, 638.

⁵⁷ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*. New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1993), 459.

⁵⁸ David W. J. Gill, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, vol. 3. Edited by Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 168.

seven occurrences of this verb in the NT.”⁵⁹ The Corinthians engage in parading their “gifts” and “spirituality.”⁶⁰ Paul calls for the exact opposite in *ou phusioo* (*is not inflated with its own importance*). As Morris puts it, “Love is concerned to give itself, not to assert itself.”⁶¹ Inflated selfishness and love are mutually exclusive.⁶²

(5) The verb *aschemoneo* means “to behave disgracefully, dishonorably, indecently,” and reflects the inappropriate attire of some women (1 Cor 11:5-6) and the Corinthians’ improper table manners during the Lord’s Supper (11:17-22).⁶³ Carrying sexual overtones, it also refers to Paul’s chastising the man having his father’s wife (5:1-2), his advice to the man engaged to a virgin (7:36),⁶⁴ and his exhortation to flee from sexual immorality (6:12-20).⁶⁵ *Ouk aschemoneo* (*does not behave with ill-mannered impropriety*) means having “*courtesy, good taste, good public manners, and propriety*” (all emphases author’s).⁶⁶

Ou zeteo heautou (*is not preoccupied with the interests of the self*) captures the essence that *agape*, unlike *eros*, does not seek its own gratification,⁶⁷ but rather the good of others, even enemies, as the fullest expression of Christian love.⁶⁸ It points to the Corinthians’ schisms (1 Cor 1-4), jealousy (3:4), their suing each other in pagan court (6:7), and their preoccupation with self-

⁵⁹ Garland, 618.

⁶⁰ Thiselton, *Shorter Exegetical*, 222.

⁶¹ Morris, 177.

⁶² Kistemaker, 459.

⁶³ Watson, 141.

⁶⁴ Garland, 618.

⁶⁵ Sigountos, 258.

⁶⁶ Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 1049.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 1050.

⁶⁸ Fee, 638.

gratification during the Lord's Supper (11:21-22).⁶⁹ Paul offers himself as a positive example (9:18) and exhorts them to seek not their own interests but the welfare of others (10:24, 33).⁷⁰ This is about giving up one's rights for the good of the other (6:12), and about behaving in a considerate manner during worship (1 Cor 14:27-28, 29-33).⁷¹

Another rare verb, *paroxuno*, “draws on the metaphor of *making sharp* or *making acid*” (italics author's) to describe being provoked to irritation.⁷² The only other place this verb appears in the NT is in Acts 17:16 where Paul saw the extent of idolatry in Athens.⁷³ *Ou paroxuno* (*does not become exasperated into pique*) means not taking offense even when one's self-regard is sharply dented.⁷⁴ The Corinthians endured provocations arising from issues of factions, immorality, lawsuits, marriage, and food offered to idols (1Cor 3:3; 5:1-2; 6:7; ch.7; ch.8).⁷⁵

The love of God in Christ does not keep a reckoning up of our sins (2 Cor 5:19); likewise, love does not keep a tally of wrongdoing.⁷⁶ *Ou logizomai kakos* (*does not keep a reckoning up of evil*) exposes the Corinthians' lack of love when they went to pagan court against each other (1 Cor 6:7).⁷⁷ Love forgets the number of times one has forgiven, and “absorbs evil without calculating how to retaliate.”⁷⁸ It does not harbor feelings of hurt.⁷⁹

(6) Having reprimanded the Corinthians about their sexual immorality (5:1-5) and strife

⁶⁹ Sigountos, 258.

⁷⁰ Kistemaker, 460.

⁷¹ Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 1051.

⁷² Thiselton, *Shorter Exegetical*, 223.

⁷³ Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 1052.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Kistemaker, 460.

⁷⁶ Fee, 639.

⁷⁷ Garland, 619.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Morris, 178.

in pagan court (6:1-8), Paul tells them that love *ou chairo epi adikia* (*does not take pleasure at wrongdoing*).⁸⁰ Love takes no pleasure at war or the suppression of the marginalized,⁸¹ at the fall or failure of another,⁸² or at the need to lecture someone for wrongdoing.⁸³ There is no self-congratulation, arrogance, or tolerance concerning evil deeds.⁸⁴

Love *sugchairo aletheia* (*joyfully celebrates truth*) captures the meaning of active participation in congratulating and applauding truth. Both Fee and Morris contend that the *truth* in this verse refers to the truth of God in the gospel,⁸⁵ while Thiselton opts for integrity or the factual reality in a given situation.⁸⁶

(7) The fourfold *pas* (literally *all things*) convey “the absence of all limits” according to Hering,⁸⁷ rather than an “*all-inclusive content*” (italics author’s).⁸⁸ According to Thiselton, The rendering *bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things*, or the equivalent in the use of *always*, such as *always believes*, fosters the Marxist view of Christianity as opium and Nietzsche’s idea of Christianity as “servile mediocrity,” as well as Freudian projection theory about wishful thinking, among other negative views. Hence Thiselton opts for a rendering of double negation for *pas stego, pas pisteuo, pas elpizo, pas hupomeno* (*never tires of support, never loses faith, never exhausts hope, never gives up*).⁸⁹ However, one can

⁸⁰ Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 1054.

⁸¹ Fee, 639.

⁸² Thiselton, *Shorter Exegetical*, 224.

⁸³ Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 1054.

⁸⁴ Thiselton, *Shorter Exegetical*, 224.

⁸⁵ Fee, 639; Morris, 178.

⁸⁶ Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 1055-1056.

⁸⁷ Hering quoted in *Ibid.*, 1056.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 1056-1057.

never cater to every non-Christian notion of Scripture interpretation, or be hindered by non-Christian biases in the task of faithful translation. The world will never understand Christianity apart from the Holy Spirit, no matter our rendering (1 Cor 2:14). That is why I have taken the translation for verse 7 from the ESV, which has preserved the verbal structure in a literal, accurate, and meaningful rendering (*bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things*). This recalls images of Paul's ministry examples⁹⁰ (4:10-13; ch.9) as well as prepares for the eschatological hope that he will expound on in ch.15.⁹¹ *Belief* (as in faith) and *hope* are also joined with *love* in v.13 as eternal virtues that will outlast the passing away of this world, pointing to the timeless nature of these verbs. That, plus the limitless nature of *pas*, is why some translations render *always* instead of *all things*.

(8a) The verb *pipto* means *to fall down, to fall in ruins, to fall into sin or wickedness, to perish as in coming to an end, or to fail*.⁹² The BBE, ESV, RSV opt for the meaning of *ends*, while the ASV, DBY, KJV, NASB, NIV, WEB, YLT render the meaning of *fails*. It depends on whether v.8a is part of the *comparison* component of the encomium, which contrasts the permanence of love with the temporal nature of spiritual gifts, or whether it is part of the *acts* section, that is, the extolling of the praiseworthy characteristics of love. The little word *de* (v.8b) sheds light on this issue. Rendered as *but* in NIV and *as for* in ESV, it expresses a continuation of thought from the previous clause or sentence. That means v.8a really belongs in the *comparison* of the encomium, and contributes to the emphasis of the permanence of love. Hence the translation of *oudepote pipto* to *never ends*. This relates to chapters 3 and 8-10 regarding

⁹⁰ Fee, 640.

⁹¹ Garland 620.

⁹² Thayer, 510-511.

knowledge and love, as well as chapter 14 regarding prophecy, tongues, and love.⁹³ As God is love (1 Jn 4:8, 16), love is eternal – love abides forever while the creation is passing away.⁹⁴

Paul seems to have digressed from his discussion of spiritual gifts in writing ch.13, but this chapter is really an integral part of his argument, as the most excellent way to the use of spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:31 NIV). Far more than feelings and emotions, love is characterized by actions in its demonstration of patience, kindness, and all the other characteristics we have explored. Most of all, love is eternal, and is even greater than the essential Christian virtues of faith and hope! As such, it is really the only context in which spiritual gifts are to be exercised by followers of Christ, who have been renewed through God's love in that while they were still sinners, Christ died for them (Rom 5:8). It is not a question of whether Christians should love in any given situation, but how closely they can imitate the love of Christ. Our anticipation of the Lord's return must be grounded in our active and faithful obedience to the two greatest commandments (Mk 12:28-31). Indeed, all the commandments can be summarized into one: to love (1 Tim 1:5)! Such is the greatness of love, and such is what we bargained for when we accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior.

⁹³ Thiselton, *Shorter Exegetical*, 229-230.

⁹⁴ Kistemaker, 463.

Bibliography

- Fee, Gordon D. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987.
- Garland, David E. *1 Corinthians*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003.
- Gill, David W. J. *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, vol. 3. Edited by Clinton E. Arnold. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984.
- Kistemaker, Simon J. *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*. New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1993.
- Mare, W. Harold. "1 Corinthians." In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 10. Edited by Frank E. Gaebelein and James D. Douglas, 173-297. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976.
- Morris, Leon. *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985.
- Sigountos, James G. "The Genre of 1 Corinthians 13." In *New Testament Studies*, vol. 40, 246-260, 1994.
- Thayer, Joseph H. *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Coded with Strong's Concordance Numbers*, 4th ed. Reprinted with Strong's numbering added by Hendrickson Publishers. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1896.
- Thiselton, Anthony C. *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006.
- _____. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans

Publishing Company, 2000.

Watson, Nigel. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 2nd ed. Epworth Commentaries. Werrington, Peterborough: Epworth, 2005.