

Making Beautiful Music Together:
An Exploration of Agape in 1 Corinthians 13

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In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul is giving the body of Christ in Corinth the fundamental tool for navigating the space between things we can control, as individuals, and things we cannot control but nevertheless encounter as a community living out the message of Christ. We cannot see clearly in the mirror, on dimly, in riddles, like the visions and dreams God sent to the prophets of old; and so when our way is not clear, the only thing upon which we can depend in order to do the will of God is to love. The noisy gong or cymbal is set up over and against the ability to make beautiful music, in both unison and in harmony--something that is unique to humans and represents not only our presence on this earth but our call to something more--our reaching back to God. According to Paul in this letter to the Corinthians, when in doubt, do not resort to glossolalia, or prophecy, or the giving away of things, but consider every action in the light of whether or not it is a loving one. Yes, those gifts of the here and now may aid us in our life of receiving the grace of God's love through Jesus Christ, but they are not the grace of God in and of themselves. Paul is teaching that while God has shown us the music of salvation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, it is still up to us to make that music for the rest of the world.

Hans Conzelmann, in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, makes several points about chapter 13 as a rhetorical structure that appears out of place between chapters 12 and 14. First, it "stands out from its context *sui generis*" and "must be expounded in the first instance on its own."¹ When analyzing the form, he identifies it as "the assumption of Greek motifs by Hellenistic Judaism and their transformation in the style of the Jewish Wisdom tradition."² The

¹ Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1975), 218.

² Ibid.

association with this particular tradition is so strong that chapter 13 has "no trace whatever of Christology" and the Christian focus of Paul's teaching lies solely "in the context and in the definitions of the three concepts faith, hope, love in other passages."³ The use of this rhetorical structure allows Paul to presuppose "that there are universally recognized values" (faith, hope, love) which he then specifically links with acts that are valued in Corinth in particular: "speaking in tongues, prophecy, etc."⁴ Conzelmann considers this "vitaly important" to the form, because it allows Paul to present a direct context in 1 Cor 13:1-3 for Corinthian readers while still preserving the message of his rhetoric for a broader audience.⁵ With such an emphasis on form and structure to relay a message, the choice of sound as the first example of three used in chapter 13 should not be ignored. In chapter 12, he has identified the gifts of glossolalia, prophecy, healing, etc., as gifts from God and the Holy Spirit, but in chapter 13 he is making it clear that such gifts have no worth without the understanding of love to guide their use. While verses 2 and 3 end with the gift being nothing, verse 1 equates glossolalia in the absence of love not as nothing but as a disruptive something. Conzelmann's insistence on Paul's deliberate structure requires a close look at this difference and what its placement at the beginning of the section means.

William Beardslee agrees with much of Conzelmann in his commentary on 1 Corinthians; in particular is his conclusion that "[t]he style and form that Paul adopted in chapter 13 is that of Hellenistic Jewish Wisdom teaching. This was a tradition that tried to focus on the generally human features of behavior, rather than emphasizing the concrete historical

³ Ibid., 220.

⁴ Ibid., 221.

⁵ Ibid.

circumstances, for instance, of Jewish life."⁶ According to Beardslee, Paul's use of this very specific form--one that required more universal language with a distinct absence of Christology to explain itself⁷--was Paul reaching out to the audience he knew would be reading the letter: "That Paul chose a style that could so easily have been used by those with whom he was in debate is a sign of the largeness and flexibility of his vision."⁸ Taking that one step further, Paul is reaching out with love and attempting to harmonize with the people of Corinth in order to make music as a larger community of Christ, as opposed to simply sounding his own noisy gong or clanging cymbal in order to be heard without coming from a place of love for the Corinthians. Paul's own writing is an example of his opening message in verse 1. This is in line with what Beardslee claims Paul does throughout 1 Corinthians, which is "not really permit a separation between basic affirmation of faith and exhortation or practical application to life. The two elements are intimately interwoven from start to finish."⁹

Robert Bratcher's translation guide provides some more insight for those who do not know the original Greek. He agrees that the use of "noisy gong or clanging cymbal" is significant because "these two instruments (RSV 'gong... cymbal') are loud but they cannot produce a melody; they are noisy but lack meaning."¹⁰ By using this comparison, Paul is addressing those in Corinth who would make noise not only via speaking in tongues, but any manifestation of presence that is empty of meaning as opposed to coming from a place of love and community.

⁶ William A. Beardslee, *First Corinthians: A Commentary for Today* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1994), 122.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 10.

¹⁰ Robert G. Bratcher, *A Translator's Guide to Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1982), 125.

Without a melody, there can be no harmony. Also of interest is Bratcher's analysis of 1 Cor 13:3, in which he notes the original Greek indicates is about boasting instead of burning¹¹; this would then add pride to the list of issues Paul is addressing in verses 1-3 as opposed to martyrdom. A direct connection can be made between one who makes noise without meaning in order to be heard and the pride required to be that disruptive at the expense of the community. Bratcher also notes that in the middle section of chapter 13, specifically verses 4-5, "it is to be noticed that in Greek all these descriptions are verbs or verbal phrases, not adjectives or noun phrases. Paul's view of love is that it is an active force, not a passive sentiment."¹² This is grammatical corroboration of Beardslee's assertions that Paul's message about love and faith was inextricable from living out that message in actions and deeds.

Going back to the issue of pride and noisy, empty accomplishments, Richard Horsely takes note of Paul's use of hyperbole in verses 1-3: "Paul first mockingly exaggerates both the Corinthians' favorite spiritual gifts and his own central values and commitment, and then suddenly deflates them. Perhaps by rehearsing the words and phrases stacked one upon another, we may sense the exaggerated and excess".¹³ Horsely emphasizes that men are placed over and against angels, prophecy over and against knowing all things, and that verse 3 can be interpreted as either burning or boasting without losing the sharp edge of Paul's intent.¹⁴ Once again, the specific form deliberately chosen by Paul to convey his letter also conveys the larger message at a meta level; with the use of hyperbole, Paul is not only taking down the Corinthians who have

¹¹ Ibid., 126.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Richard A. Horsely, *1 Corinthians* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 176.

¹⁴ Ibid.

misheard or misinterpreted the teachings of Paul's ministry, but also himself as an infallible leader. Telling the Corinthians all the things they were doing wrong, without any other rhetoric or care in the writing of the letter, would cause discord, like the sounding of a noisy, one-note gong. Instead, Paul chooses to place himself inside the deflating metaphors, to show as example of humility and love to the community which he is attempting to foster over the distance.

Without the form of chapter 13 allowing for a discourse on Christology, however, it becomes necessary to examine Paul's outreach to the world specifically in the name of Jesus Christ, as opposed to his history as a Hellenistic Jew or other source of Wisdom as could be portrayed in that writing tradition. Ralph Martin says that for Paul, "whatever may have been his training in the hellenistic Jewish schools, the face of God is vitally seen in Jesus Christ. So theology merges into christology, not explicitly but by a process of osmosis whereby God's character is set by what he (Paul) had discovered in his encounter and continuing communion with his Lord."¹⁵ He also points out that Paul "is registering an appeal to be made in 14:6-12: 'tongues' must be regulated to produce not only sound but sense, that the church as a whole may be edified in love."¹⁶ By defining things in a Christian context in other passages while preserving a universal appeal to his strongest rhetorical, Paul not only humbles himself, but teaches the Corinthians by example as well as words, all the while creating a foundation of rhetoric that can be used for future ministry in the name of Christianity.

Ben Witherington, in his commentary that specifically analyzes the socio-rhetorical aspects of the Corinthian epistles, goes further into Paul's use of love as it relates to God's grace:

¹⁵ Ralph P. Martin, *The Spirit and the Congregation: Studies in 1 Corinthians 12--15* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 42.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

"Because Paul believes that this love is something that only God can give and does give in Christ, he also believes that Christians like himself can manifest such love. His call to imitate himself and Christ (11:1) is based on the assumption that both he and Christ act on the basis of grace of God, which is in Christ."¹⁷ Again, the use of worthless noise in verse 1 as opposed to the worthless nothingness of verses 2 and 3 is made apparent; not only can noise be made out of pride, but actions without foundation in the love we learn from God, and from the teachings of Christ, are also without worth: "The setting of ch. 13 makes evident that Paul is not talking about 'natural' human love, but of a sort of love that a human being can only express and share when he or she has been touched by God's grace and enabled by God's Spirit."¹⁸ It not enough to bang a gong or ring a cymbal, which make only one note and are remnants of old covenants and empty rituals. If one is going to make music, to make love manifest in the world, it must come from making music first with God. The harmony of living in a loving community first requires our ability to hear the melody God sings to us.

¹⁷ Ben Witherington III, *Conflict & Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 273.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 272.

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