

Speak Out Sunday 2010

Commentaries on I Corinthians 13:1-13

A Baptist Perspective

I have to make a confession. Saying the phrase "1 Corinthians Chapter 13" to me is equivalent to ringing a bell in front of Pavlov's dog; I immediately begin to salivate. 1 Corinthians 13 has become a standard reading in so many weddings that when I hear the opening verse, my mind is not focused on the words but it immediately jumps to the wedding reception full of punch, cake, mixed nuts and mints. It is as though 1 Corinthians 13 shouts aloud, "Alright taste buds, get ready for some delicious wedding cake!" I bet that I am not the only person affected by such a condition. But I do have a fear though; I am afraid that because 1 Corinthians is so overused in weddings that we glaze over the words like a thick sweet layer of icing. We don't take the words or the passages structure. Too often victims of family violence will state that

A Catholic Perspective

This text appears to break the connection between chaps. 12 and 14. However, it appears to be a text composed for another occasion and inserted here by Paul (Barrett, Conzelmann). It is recommended by the quality of the writing (Weiss) and the use of the Hellenistic literary form "praise of the greatest virtue" (cf. U. Schmid...) which made its way into the Jewish sapiential tradition. (e.g., Wis 7:22-8.1; 1 Esdr 4:34-40). Nonetheless, the links with the immediate context and the Corinthian situation are so specific as virtually to impose the view that chap. 13 was written specifically for its present place in 1 Cor. 1-3. The three

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

1 If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have 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 do not have love, I am nothing.

3 If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain

A Presbyterian Perspective

Analysis This passage comes in the middle of a discussion of spiritual gifts. Paul's use of the image of the body and its members emphasizes that many different kinds of gifts are necessary but it is the ones that build up the church are the superior ones (if any are superior) and that ultimately, love is more important than any spiritual gift.

An Episcopal Perspective

Exegesis

In this most famous and most quoted section of all of the writings of Paul, it seems to sound another most quoted passage from 1 St. John 4:7 ff, another proclamation that God intends that we relate to one another through love rather than judgments, and it is love that we most powerfully know the presence of God. Paul's effort here is to describe love rather than urge it.

The reading has three sections: (a) the superiority of love (vss. 1-3), (b) the nature of love (vss. 4-7), and the permanence of love.

He establishes his understanding that only things done through love are truly reflective of the will of God as shown in the life and death of Jesus, and when this is done, it is far superior to even the

A Jewish Perspective

These verses are known for being used as part of the wedding service. Just as Christianity uses the metaphor of marriage for the relationship between Jesus and the Church, so Judaism uses the metaphor of marriage for the relationship between God and the House of Israel. Both are characterized by faithfulness and redemption, and the expectations of holiness and obedience to the values of

A Baptist Perspective (continued)

I Corinthians was read at their weddings and the abuser keeps quoting verse 7 to the victim – “It (love) bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” In other words, the victim has to put up with the abuse to fulfill the pledge to bear all things. I would like to propose a different way of reading verses 4 – 8a, the crux of this epistle reading. What happens with we view these verses as a contract? What if we say that this is a “if-then” contract? If a person fulfills the first part verses 4-6 in which the person is patient and kind in addition to avoid being envious, proud, rude, demanding, resentful or sinful, then the other person is obligated to fulfill the second part of verses 7-8a and has to persevere, hope, endure and never falter. Using this contractual interpretation, a victim of abuse is not required to endure in a relationship in

A Catholic Perspective (continued)

statements are all constructed on the same model. In each case the conditional protasis contains an allusion to a charism mentioned in chap. 12, viz. tongues (v 1+ 12:28). prophecy (v 2= 12:10, 28), knowledge (v 2 = 12:8), faith (v 2= 12:9), helping (v3= 12:28). There is a progression from the lowest gift, tongues (14:6-12), via the intellectual gifts and miracle-working faith to acts of supreme devotion benefiting others. **2. I am nothing:** Only by loving does the Christian exist authentically (1:30). **3. to be burned:** The reading *kauthesomai* is to be preferred to (*kauchesomai*.) After the surrender of possessions, only that of the body remains. Burning was considered the most horrible of

nothing.

4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant

5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;

6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never ends. But as for

A Presbyterian Perspective (continued)

The type of love Paul is talking about here is *agape*—love that is unmotivated and which confers goodness on the object loved (as opposed to *eros*, in which love is attracted by the goodness of the object loved.) *Agape* begins with God, who is all in all and thus needs nothing; God brings creatures into being solely out of love, and this love ennobles the creatures. *Agape* is further expressed by “the self-giving of Christ, who loved us not because we were good but while we were still sinners.” (Brown, p.533) And

An Episcopal Perspective (continued)

highest apparent expressions of devotion and the use of spiritual gifts. Even the tongues of “men and of angels” are of little worth unless they are expressive of the love of God. Further, the love of God in human life is dynamic and active, not static, and is expressed in the care of others. Otherwise, eloquent and even mysterious speech, and prophetic (preaching) powers that can move people to emotional excitement, the deep understanding of mysterious things and even deep knowledge are nothing more than meaningless sounds—like the sounds of gongs and cymbals that are not lasting.

Noteworthy is the fact that seldom in the New Testament is prophecy (the early name for preaching) criticized, but we are told that in the absence of love it is rendered meaningless. Without love it is only external display...even so in the embracing of poverty (giving away of all possessions). Even those who are taken into slavery, or are tortured and martyred for their faith or give themselves to be sacrificed,

A Jewish Perspective (cont.)

justice and compassion. These are the values that we are expected to bring to a marriage, and which are shattered by domestic violence. A violent marriage is not a loving marriage. A marriage that is loving and trusting, faithful and full of faith on the outside, but full of fear, intimidation, and violence behind closed doors is empty and vain.

We can think of Amos and

A Baptist Perspective (continued)

which the abuser is not behaving in a loving way as they should or vowed to do so in their wedding vows.

A Catholic Perspective (continued)

deaths. **4-7.** Rather than define love Paul personifies it. The 15 verbs all involve another person and were chosen in order to highlight virtues neglected by the Corinthians. The strong were not “patient and kind” (1-13) The sexual ascetics amended to “insist on their own way” (7: 1-40). The community “rejoiced at wrong” (5:1-8). **8-13.** Paul contrasts the present (“now”) in which the Corinthians overvalue spiritual gifts with a future (“then”) in which they will give supreme importance to the essential virtues of faith, hope, and love (see E. Miguens, CBQ...) **10.** *When immaturity will be abolished:* This interpretation of the *to teleion-to*

prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end.

9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part;

10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

A Presbyterian Perspective (continued)

as we are given worth by Christ’s sacrificial love (*agape*)—justified by faith through grace, which flows out of that love—we also pass on to others this same love—a love not motivated by what we will get out of it or because of our evaluation of the goodness of the other.

Application It is part of our human uniqueness that we all have “spiritual gifts”, (although they may be called “talents” in some situations.) But our real humanness comes from our ability to love others in a self-giving rather than self-satisfying ways.

In human relationships, love tends to be based on attraction—we form friendships, romances and marriages around our partner’s physical, mental or social attractiveness, and our degree of interest or “love” increases as our own personal satisfaction with our partner increases. At a basic level, our own self interest is primary: will our partner satisfy our physical, emotional or

An Episcopal Perspective (continued)

without love it is meaningless if they are not containing the love of God.

This is looked on as a refutation of certain practices and attitudes of within the Christian faithful in the Corinthian community, but might well apply to all faith communities everywhere. The love of God is for the people of the world in the experience of faith in their lives, is not to be a private personal experience. The gift of love is to be exercised in faith and trust for all. There is no mention of God’s love being reserved for the baptized or the “good”.

That description of the work of love follows: it is kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way, is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth (i.e.—does not work through deception, cheating, or other kinds of iniquity, but works for what is

A Jewish Perspective (cont.)

Hosea, who spoke against the hypocrisy of worship without living a life of love and respect, of justice and compassion and peace. Paul’s poetry is beautiful, but if we are charmed by the language and miss the message, then we gain nothing and we, too, are hypocritical. As preachers and pastors, we must be wary of this tendency in ourselves, as it is as easy to use such words as it is to avoid confronting their meaning, and confronting those who subvert their own marriage service, in which they affirmed these words, but do not live them.

A Catholic Perspective (continued)

ek merous contrast is recommended by the following verse. Paul considered the Corinthians childish (3:1; 14:20) and desired them to “mature” (14:20). **12. to see face to face:** The metaphor says no more than *epignosomai*, “I shall really know,” and is used in the OT to express the quality of Moses’ knowledge of God (Exod33:11; Num 12:8; Deut 34:10) in this present life. There is no reference to the beatific vision. *as I have been known:* See 8:3; Gal 4:9; Rom 8:29. **13.** Faith and hope are incompatible with the beatific vision, but with love are esse

Reflection:

Paul is talking to Corinthians who think that knowledge is everything. They think that they know what it is to be Christian but their behaviors say otherwise. St. Paul is trying to help them see that no matter what “great thing” they do, it doesn’t matter if they are not loving at the same time.

Paul contrasts how love behaves with its opposite: Love is patient and kind: love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. The invitation today is to examine ourselves on these contrasts. Am I patient and kind? Or am I the opposite? rude, irritable or resentful, envious? Do I insist on having my way?

We all have our moments, don’t we? Fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters. Jesus may be

Notes

12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

monetary needs? This is not necessarily a bad thing, as long as both partners are balancing their own self-interest against the interest of the other; it is just not as pure a form of love as the love God in Christ has for us. Within these relationships it is also possible to have the *agape* present; the other becomes elevated in our eyes and we want to work for their good regardless of how we ourselves are affected.

In the abusive relationship, the self-interest balance is thrown off. The abuser’s self interest becomes all important in the relationship, while the victim often completely disregards her or his own needs and desires in deference to the other. The “love” the abuser claims to have for the victim is a false love because it is so strongly based on fulfillment of his or her own needs and desires at the expense of the other. The

An Episcopal Perspective (continued)

RIGHT.) Love does not keep track of wrongdoings. It bears all things. That is it *believes* in the best, and *hopes* for the best, and endures to enrich life. Prophecy (preaching), tongues, and knowledge have no permanence or will become meaningless and shall either cease or change, but love will continue in care and hope given through the people of God to a suffering world. There is to be no secret knowledge in the work of God.

In God’s new way for us all, there is faith,, hope and love, and the most powerful and greatest of these is love.

REFLECTION:

All that separates and damages us is a distortion of the intention of God. The strength that we might have is not

A Catholic Perspective (continued)

asking us today to consider whether these types of behaviors are a habit with us. He calls us to change at least one habit that shows a lack of love in our lives and in our families. Jesus invites us to the happiness that follows loving actions; that makes our homes places of joy. Imagine a meal without bickering!

In our church family, this is crucial for building up the Body of Christ. As we examine our actions, how do we fare? Is my gossip a sign of envy, of not having my way at the last church supper, or my irritability with a certain chatty person? Christ called sinners. We each fit into that category. The joy is that our Lord knows us and forgives us. God's knowledge of us is intimate and total. God calls us to love the imperfect human beings in our lives and forgive them for sinning differently than we do.

An Episcopal Perspective (continued)

intended to be a torture and pain to others, but an empowering force we give each other. When in relationships there are any of the many forms of destruction and belittling of those closest to us, or the isolation from others, or tortures of various kinds, we are experiencing the distortions of what is good and healthy for us, for the children, and what should be right in the life of the one who controls the others.

The writing of Paul to the Corinthians sets the tone for a healthy society and life. It is one that is given to the care of others in patient endurance and hope, receiving the help of those who will continue to care because of the deep conviction that those who are involved in family violence do not deserve that kind of treatment and personal control through fear, threat and torture. It is care that is especially available to all victims.

We believe that each person should have the opportunity to be safe, to be protected from those who would hurt them, and to be lifted from that fear and misery to a better path for them and for any children involved.

Consequently, there are those who are ready to help, to protect, and to guide a person and the children into a freer life of personal achievement and growth as a responsible adult involved in the life of a wider society... a life given to the care for others and in straightforward "truth" and honesty. It is the basis of personal growth, freedom and the ability to help others, which is what makes life richer.

There are those who will "hang in there" with you.

A Presbyterian Perspective (continued)

abuser expects the victim to meet all of his or her (often unreasonable) expectations and finds it a personal affront when, inevitably, those needs are not met. At this point, violence, manipulation, or other abusive behaviors ensue, and the relationship is broken, regardless of whether or not there is physical separation between those involved.

At its heart, love reflects our ability to be human to one another. Our humanness is based on our creation, by God, in God's image—so we are created to have the *agape* type of love for each other. We are also created to love each other in less pure, more self-interested (but still healthy) ways. Our lives are also tainted by sin, however, and each type of love can become twisted into something unrecognizable. Our role as people of God is to overcome, within ourselves, that which distorts the love God intended for us to have for each other—to become more human in the way God intended us to be human. Abusers destroy that humanness in the one they are abusing, and at the same time use their own human imperfection as an excuse for the abuse (while denying the same defense to the other.) The good news is that our humanness comes from God, not other humans, and thus cannot be destroyed by the abuser; it is merely set aside, and in time can be reclaimed by the victim.