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THE LOVE CHAPTER, 1 CORINTHIAN 13, AND ITS SETTING WITHIN THE EPISTLE

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ABSTRACT : I Corinthians 13 has often been used in isolation from the context in which it finds itself. This popular use of it as a separate entity has also been how it is studied in many academic studies where both the unity of the chapter and its setting in the epistle as a whole has been questioned. The two transitional clauses in 12:31b “And I will show you a still more excellent way” and 14:1a “Pursue love...” have been interpreted as editorial linkages. Yet, this article will maintain that, for example, verses 4-7 are far from detached from the situation at Corinth, where virtually every behavioural problem at Corinth is mentioned. It is clear that in many writings, speakers can break off from the use of prose and actually draw upon the help of poetry to express themselves. There is a strong connection between Paul’s exaltation of love and the problems relating to the exercising of spiritual gifts as discussed in chapters 12 and 14. The place of chapter 13 should not be assessed as much from a literary perspective as to seek to note the theological connections between it and the gift chapters.

KEY WORDS: Love, Greek and Hebrew poetry, edification of the church, exercising spiritual gifts, spiritual gratification.

1 Corinthians 13 is commonly known as the love “chapter.” The content of this section of the epistle is familiar to many people throughout the world. As well as appearing on wedding invitations, greeting cards and other such sentimental memorabilia it is commonly read during wedding services. While this is to be expected the chapter is often used

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in isolation from the context in which it finds itself and is treated as a separate and individual entity. What is true in the popular treatment of the chapter is also true of many academic studies. Various works have been produced questioning both the unity 1 Corinthians 13 and its setting in the epistle as a whole.² In many ways this is understandable since the chapter is a literary masterpiece and is well able to stand alone as a self-contained unit. Spicq's comments regarding the apostle's ability to express himself in a variety of forms shows how significant the style of the chapter is in the debate about whether or not this was written by Paul and intended for use here or whether it was inserted at this point by a later editor. 1 Corinthians 13 clearly adopts a more literary style than the epistolary style which is characteristic of the rest of the letter. Héring³ points out that although the passage does not have the rhythm, style and structure of Greek poetry the stanzas are nevertheless reminiscent of Hebrew poetry as found in the LXX. Scholars such as Héring⁴ and Schmithals⁵ who question the position of the chapter within the book believe that the two transitional clauses in 12:31b "And I will show you a still more excellent way" and 14:1a "Pursue love..." have been added as editorial linkages. For this reason, they argue that 1 Corinthians 13 existed as a separate entity, maybe even as part of another epistle. The opinion is that an editor whom Héring⁶ suggests may have been Sosthenes has wrongly inserted it in its current location. Titus⁷ goes as far as to deny that Paul had any part in the composition of this chapter although he appears to be somewhat alone in that assertion. Conzelmann believes that the importance of treating this chapter as a separate and individual entity is such that to

2 See E. L. Titus, "Did Paul Write 1 Corinthians 13?" *JBR* 27 (1959), 299-302

3 J. Héring, *The First Epistle of Saint Paul to the Corinthians* ET (London: Epworth Press, 1962), 135.

4 Héring, *The First Epistle*, 134.

5 W. Schmithals, *Gnosticism in Corinth: An Investigation of the Letters to the Corinthians*, 2nd edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971).

6 Héring, *The First Epistle*, 134.

7 Titus, "Did Paul Write 1 Corinthians 13?" *JBR*, 299-302.

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properly understand 1 Corinthians 13 “the passage must be expounded in the first instance on its own.”⁸ Héring⁹ argues that chapter 13 quite obviously interrupts the discussion on spiritual gifts. Weiss¹⁰ argued that the chapter has been inserted in the wrong place within the epistle viewing it as a polemic against Gnosticism. In this understanding it is believed that 1 Corinthians 13 would be better placed alongside chapter 8:1-13 where there is an appeal to those with knowledge to be sensitive to the reservations of those who are not as knowledgeable. Weiss argues for the link between chapters 13 and 8 on the grounds that; a) there is a similarity of views expressed in chapter 13:13 i.e. that love is not “puffed up” and chapter 8:1 where Paul writes “knowledge puffs up but love builds up”; b) the absence of *avga,ph* in the Greek is ἀγάπη in 12:1-30 and 14:1-40 and is an indication that the chapter has been displaced.

Titus¹¹ also suggests that the transition from chapter 12 to chapter 13 and from chapter 13 to chapter 14 has all the hallmarks of interpolation. It is to be noted that 12:31 reads: “Earnestly desire the higher gifts.” But when one looks at 14:1 it becomes clear that the phrase translated “Earnestly desire” is again employed as if to continue the discussion on gifts at the precise point where it had been broken off, in chapter 12:31. This organising of the material is understood to be the work of a later editor who wanted to accommodate the insertion of the love passage. Titus suggests that this editor may have disagreed with the exaltation of prophecy and corrected it with his own view that love is the more superior way.

In response, it can be maintained that rather than being displaced the chapter is an integral part of Paul’s argument in these chapters dealing with a proper understanding of spiritual gifts and is climactic in Paul’s treatment of the difficulties being experienced by the Corinthians in their

8 H. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians, Hermeneia*, E.T. (Lincoln: Fortress Press, 1975), 218.

9 Héring, *The First Epistle*, 134-135.

10 J. Weiss, *Der erste Korintherbrief*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910), 309-16

11 Titus, “Did Paul Write 1 Corinthians 13?” *JBR*, 299-302.

relationships with each other. Contra to the view that the love chapter is displaced because the word ἀγάπη is not mentioned in chapters 12 and 14 Mitchell¹² makes that important point that since these two chapters (12 and 14) are concerned with the edification of the church through spiritual gifts then it is not unexpected that he should mention love within this context. Paul has already pointed to the importance of love in relation to this issue in chapter 8:1.¹³ A further insight significant for the article is Mitchell's argument that although the word ἀγάπη is not used in chapter 12 or 14, Paul's description of love in chapter 13, such as it not seeking its own advantage, and not rejoicing in wickedness but co-rejoicing in the truth, echo parts of Paul's advice in these surrounding chapters.¹⁴ Hurd¹⁵ also has noted the similarity in interest between chapter 13 and those chapters at either side of it. So, one can see that chapter 13 takes up the themes of γνῶσις, knowledge¹⁶ γλῶσσάι, tongues¹⁷ and προφητεῖαι, prophecies¹⁸ which are central to the discussion in chapters 12 and 14. Although verses 4-7 do not mention the spiritual gifts discussed throughout chapters 12 and 14 they are far from detached from the situation at Corinth. Further, Garland's point should be noted that "virtually every behavioural problem at Corinth is mentioned in vv. 4-7."¹⁹

As for the change in style Spicq²⁰ reminds us of the tendency of many speakers to break off from the use of prose and to draw on the help of po-

12 M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation, An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians*, (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1991), 168-171, 270-279.

13 ἡ ἡ γνώσις / ἡ ἡ ἀγάπη / ἡ ἡ ἀγάπη οὐκ ἐκ τοῦ ἑαυτοῦ ἀγαπᾷ.

14 For example, see the concern the body should have for its members as mentioned in 12:26.

15 J. C. Hurd, *The Origin of 1 Corinthians*, (London, 1965), 189.

16 13:2, 8, 9, 12.

17 13:1, 8.

18 13:2, 8, 9.

19 D. E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003) p.607.

20 C. Spicq, *Agape in the New Testament*, (Origen: Wipf & Stock, 1965), Vol. 2, 140.

etry or lyric to express themselves more adequately if they have the ability to compose this kind of material or if it is readily available. Those who are accustomed to public speaking know only too well how often this shift in style takes place. Therefore, it can be pointed out with Fee that although chapter 13 is undoubtedly a digression in the argument of 12 and 14, it is a digression that is fully relevant to the context.²¹ Paul “employs a *digressio* which does not wander away from the main theme but amplifies or illustrates it.”²² This technique is used elsewhere in the letter. For example, in chapter 7 the apostle is dealing with questions surrounding marriage and celibacy when in verse 17-24 he abruptly turns to address the topics of circumcision and uncircumcision and slavery and freedom. However rather than being a filler or a discussion completely independent of the passages that precede and follow it these verses serve as the very hub of his discussion. It illustrates the point that no earthly status, such as one’s racial background or social standing is incompatible with the Christian life. Slaves are no less accepted by God than those who are free. Both belong to Christ and their social status is largely insignificant. Whether a Christian is circumcised or uncircumcised, slave or free, married or single is inconsequential to God.²³ There is no perfect set of circumstances in which the will of God can be more ably fulfilled. Ferguson²⁴ has made the significant point that there is an emphasis on the role of love in the exercising of spiritual gifts not only here in Corinthians but in a number of other places throughout the New Testament. In 1 Peter 4:10-11 the readers are exhorted to use their gifts for the benefit of others which ob-

21 G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 626.

22 Garland, *1 Corinthians* p.605.

23 For the purpose of the *digressio* see A. C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: MI/Cambridge, UK/Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 2000), 545.

24 S. B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit: Contours of Christian Theology*, (Leicester, IVP, 1996), 209.

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viously puts the gifts firmly within a framework of love.²⁵ Although it is possible that chapter 13 and verses 4-7 in particular existed in some form prior to Paul's use of it, it does present itself as having been written with the immediate context in mind. Verses 1-3 and 8-13 only make sense within the context of the wider discussion on spiritual gifts and would be somewhat out of place within a self-contained unit. The first three statements of the chapter contain allusions to one or more of the spiritual gifts mentioned in the previous chapter. In the final section Paul returns to the gifts of prophecy, tongues and knowledge in order to show their subservience to love. The common interest of the first and last section of chapter 13 and the chapters at either side of it regarding those issues surrounding the exercising of spiritual gifts makes a very strong case for them being composed at the same time and raises reasonable doubt over them ever having existed apart from each other. Verses 4-7 is less obviously related to chapter 12 and 14 and so it is thought to be the section that most likely existed apart from the Corinthian epistle. However, even these verses reflect a choice of words that have the problems of Corinth in mind. So, it should be noted as Craig has commented, that "On a closer examination it is seen that almost every word in the chapter has been chosen with this particular situation at Corinth in mind."²⁶ We have noted already Garland's²⁷ claim that the behavioral problems at Corinth are summed up in vv. 4-7. Paul seems to say that the real problem is their lack of love, for love does behave the way they do."

Hitchcock's point that this chapter could only have been the product of careful and time-consuming composition and not something that would instantly come to mind during the actual dictation of a letter is a significant one. Again, Bruce²⁸ provides a very plausible answer to the apparent problem when he reminds us that the material may have been

25 See Romans 12:3-8, 1 Peter 4:10-11 and Ephesians 4:16.

26 C. T. Craig, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* IB 10 (New York, 1953), 165.

27 Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 607-608.

28 F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Corinthians*, NCB (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott; Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1980), 124.

composed prior to writing and included because of its relevance to the situation with which he was dealing. So, it is possible that the material was formulated over a period of time as the apostle considered the problems of Corinth and how he might address them. It may well have been that while Paul thought about the difficulties in Corinth and the fact that they were largely due to an absence of love within the community that he began to formulate his thoughts and give expression to them in this poetic format meaning that when he actually came to write the letter, he had the material largely formulated and ready to dictate. It must also be remembered that the formulation of this was not beyond Paul nor uncommon to the Pauline epistles.²⁹

So, 1 Corinthians 13 occupies an unmistakably important place between 12 and 14 and shows that love is the greatest means of mutual edification. Love is the one thing the Church in Corinth was neglecting and yet it was the one thing above all others they should have been pursuing and cultivating. It is interesting that Fee³⁰ believes the chapter has been written to put the Corinthian “zeal for tongues in a broader ethical context that will ultimately disallow uninterrupted tongues in the assembly.” That context is love for others and a concern for the building up of the church over against self-interest and self-promotion. Other scholars support this view. For example, Grosheide argues that the purpose of chapter 13 is to “assign *glossolalia* its rightful place.”³¹ Also, Thiselton believes Paul’s purpose then in the use of this material is to counter “self-centred spirituality.”³² “The reason for the gifts is the edification of the Church, which is precisely what love aims at, but uninterpreted tongues does not.”³³ Again, Dunn identifies with this point when he writes, “It is written in recognition that charismatic ministry and other important expres-

29 See Ephesians 5:14, Philippians 2:5-11, Colossians 1:15-20, 1 Timothy 3:16.

30 Fee, *The First Epistle*, 627.

31 F. W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1953), 303.

32 Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p.1028.

33 Fee, *The First Epistle*, 572.

sions of the Christian life and congregation could often be exercised in a selfish and uncaring manner.”³⁴ Therefore, it can be maintained that the role of the chapter in this section of the letter seems very obvious and its position between chapters 12 and 13 is perfectly valid. “Love means concern for the community and is the check on the exercise of the gifts for personal gratification or the gratification of some rather than all.”³⁵ So, for Spicq³⁶ it fits the context of the chapters around it precisely in that the concern of the apostle is one of edification. “Far from being a displaced hymn singing the praise of love as a virtue, chapter 13 is a call to a way of life that addresses real problems in the church.”³⁷ This then is the intent of this article; to maintain the strength of the link between chapter 13 and the chapters before and after it. There is a strong connection between Paul’s exaltation of love and the problems relating to the exercising of spiritual gifts as discussed in chapters 12 and 14. The place of chapter 13 should not be assessed as much from a literary perspective as to determine the theological connection between it and the gift chapters. Robertson and Plummer³⁸ argue that the list of things that love does and does not do is “aimed at the special faults of the Corinthians.” Hurd suggests that omitting the negatives in each clause leaves us with a good description of the Corinthians’ behavior. They are impatient and unkind, filled with jealousy, vainglory and puffed up. Such specific repetition of catchwords and phrases cannot be accidental: Paul intends to praise love by choosing acts that blame the Corinthians.”³⁹ Further study of the con-

34 J. D. G Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 596.

35 K. Stendahl, “Glossolalia and the Charismatic Movement” in *God’s Christ and His people, Studies in Honour of Nils Alstrup Dahl*, edited by J. Jervell and W. A Meeks. (Oslo: Aarhus University Press, 1977) p.124.

36 Spicq, *Agapē*, Vol. 2, 140-141.

37 Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 608.

38 A. Robertson, A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, ICC, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1914), 292.

39 J. G. Gountos, “The Genre of Corinthians 13” *NTS* 40, (1994), 257.

text of chapter 13 would involve looking at certain background details that shaped the outlook and behaviour of the Corinthians as well as Paul's understanding of love and its place in the life of a Christian. Also, the importance of looking at the connection between love chapter and the gift chapters at either side of it.⁴⁰

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40 To add further argument concerning the position, note how Hurd, *The Origin of 1 Corinthians*, 112-113 can point out how much 1 Corinthians 13 has in common with the rest of the epistle. Again, M. Miguens, "1 Cor 13:8-13 Reconsidered CBQ 37 (1975), 80. points out it has ties to the letter as a whole as well as the immediate context of chapters 12-14. For a helpful treatment of 1 Corinthians proposing „Love” as the unifying theme see Corin Mihăilă, „The ABA” Structure of Paul's Argumentation in 1 Corinthians. Love as a Unifying Theme,” *Semănătorul (The Sower)*, Volume 4 Number 1, *The Emanuel Journal of Ministry and Biblical Research*, (Oradea: Tell Romania Publications), 77-113.

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