

Understanding Love

1 Corinthians 13

April 22

1 Corinthians 13 is one of the best known, best loved, yet misunderstood passages in the entire Word of God. As I minister, I often quoted the passage in a marriage ceremony, although I realize the passage is not specifically about the married love of husband and wife. The context of this beautiful passage is the exercise of spiritual gifts. The Corinthian church prided itself on the exercise of spiritual gifts within the membership. 1 Corinthians 12 concludes with a mention of “a more excellent way” (1 Cor. 12:31), now Paul describes and depicts love as the more excellent way.

As Southern Baptists launch a Great Commission Resurgence, it is appropriate that we focus on a “more excellent way.” 1 Corinthians reveals the emptiness of spiritual gifts and ministries without love. Jesus gave unbelievers the right to judge the reality of our relationship with Him on the basis of love (John. 13:35). Without a Great Commandments Resurgence (the command to love), the Great Commission Resurgence will accomplish nothing. Let us acknowledge before God the sin “that so easily besets us” us – a competitive lust for power and control rather than the humility of spiritual love.

What does Paul teach about love in the so-called “love” chapter of the Bible?

First, Paul highlighted the necessity of love (1 Cor. 13:1-3). In these three verses, Paul mentioned in quick succession the spiritual gifts of tongues, prophecy, knowledge, faith, giving, and martyrdom. (Since martyrdom occurs in a context of a listing of spiritual gifts, many New Testament scholars conclude that the Spirit gives to some Christians the gift of martyrdom.) Paul detailed three realities of the exercise of spiritual gifts without love. First, the clear message of the gospel is not communicated. Without love, any communication of spiritual truth sounds like the unharmonious, unmelodious, worship of the pagan gong and cymbal (v. 1). Second, a loveless Christian is nothing, unusable in the kingdom of God (v. 2). Third, a loveless Christian gains no personal benefit from the exercise of a spiritual gift (v. 3). Without love, I gain nothing, I am nothing, and I do nothing. Yet, the focus of Paul is not “I” the individual. Paul wrote to the fragmented, divisive, immature Corinthian church. An unloving individual does not build up the church.

Second, Paul described the nature of love (1 Cor. 13:4-7). Paul’s description of love portrays a glorious portrait of Christ. No human being can truthfully claim this passage describes him or her. The description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 is the type of loving heart for which every Christian should strive. Paul divides the nature of love into seven positive actions and seven negative actions. All seven negative actions - envy (3.3), boastful (4.6), arrogant (4.18), rude, self-seeking, irritable, and keeping of records of wrongs - describe the behavior of the members of the church at Corinth.

Paul portrayed the nature love by means of verbs. Love is something a believer does, as well as some matters a believer does not do. Love, then, extends beyond mere talk. All the verbs are present tense verbs that describe the on-going, habitual nature of the love virtues produced by the Spirit.

Third, Paul celebrated the permanence of love (1 Cor. 13:8-13). First, since love is an attribute of God, love will be never end. Love is eternal. Love characterized the relationship between Father and Son in eternity past (John. 17:24). In contrast, the purpose of prophecies, tongues, and knowledge will be realized in temporal affairs when the perfect comes, perhaps a reference to the second coming of Jesus. Love never ends because love provides the dynamic for faith and hope. As G. Campbell Morgan noted, “And love, the greatest of these is love, for never forget that love is at once the strength of faith and the inspiration of hope.”