

THE "PERFECT" CHRISTIAN

George A. Turner*

Introduction

For this issue of *The Asbury Seminarian* the Editorial Committee requested an example of expository preaching. The thought of the Committee is that sermons should not be primarily autobiographical, nor primarily a series of anecdotes, nor yet primarily a series of metaphors, symbols and allegories; not always topical; not always even textual. It was felt rather that greater emphasis should normally be placed upon **contextual** sermons in which attention is given not only to a topic or a text but also the context out of which the text grows. In other words, the sermons normally should include an awareness of the Bible writer's **message to his readers** in their historical situation; then look for the essential spiritual principles, and finally for the relevance of these principles to contemporary life. What follows is a response to the Committee's request.

The Text: I Corinthians 14:20 "Brethren, be not children in understanding, but in malice be babes, but in understanding be perfect (mature)."

The Context: I Corinthians 12:31–13:13

St. Paul's brief poem on love is perhaps the choicest portion of the New Testament. It is certainly one of the best known and best loved chapters of the Bible, but this description of divine love is best understood not in isolation but in the context of the entire letter to the Corinthians. With the exception of Ephesus, it was in Corinth that Paul held the longest "protracted meeting." The Corinthian church was the

*Professor of Biblical Literature, Asbury Theological Seminary

most vigorous of the churches of the New Testament. The Corinthian church was not only the most gifted but also the most troublesome of Paul's churches. Not all of its life and vigor was the most wholesome. The basic need of many of its members was that of Christian maturity. Paul calls them carnal (I Cor. 3:1) and yet they are recognized as "sanctified in Christ Jesus" (I Cor. 1:1).

They are called "sanctified" in the sense of being saved and set apart in Christ away from the world and yet "carnal" in the sense that there are many unchristlike elements in their lives and thought. These include such things as jealousy and bickering, the play of lesser loyalties, as over against the overarching loyalty to Christ. They are beset with spiritual pride and yet tolerant of immorality. They are inclined to set themselves up as models of rectitude while criticizing fellow believers whose consciences differed from theirs. Above all they are fascinated by spiritual gifts but lack appreciation for the spiritual graces. Like the recipients of the Hebrews Epistle they are described as immature babes (I Cor. 3:1-4; cf. Heb. 5:7-14).

After dealing with several problems concerning which they have written him, Paul turns his attention to spiritual gifts and desires to "clear up a wrong impression about spiritual gifts" (JB). His concern is to show that it is important to recognize the unity among the varied spiritual gifts. He lists these as the gift of faith, of healing, of miracles, of prophecy, of discernment, the gift of tongues, and the interpretation of tongues, but insists that it is more important to recognize the unity amid this diversity. He stresses the importance of cooperation rather than competition in the exercise of these gifts. He insists that one is not to regard another gift as inferior to his own and thus fall victim to the temptation to pride. He warns against the tendency to overemphasize the value of these gifts, especially those of prophecy and of tongues. Tongues seem especially to have been the problem and, after downgrading this gift in comparison with some others, Paul sets over against this gift and all other gifts something that is more important than any of them, namely, faith, hope and love. The point is that whatever gift one has he should major upon these graces of the Spirit, this fruit of the Spirit (cf. Gal 5:22-26).

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF DIVINE LOVE (I Cor. 13:1-3)

He notes that the gift of tongues is not adequate even though it be with the eloquence of men and angels. He notes furthermore that

prophecy, valuable as it is, and the discernment of spiritual truth, however penetrating, are of no value apart from divine love. Even mountain-moving faith is futile if devoid of love. Even generosity and the unselfishness that prompts it, so highly commended among the rabbis, is without merit apart from Christian love. Finally, even sealing one's Christian witness with the loss of life, even martyrdom for the faith—the highest expression of Christian faith and courage—is valueless apart from divine love. Love is therefore indispensable, outweighing all other of these highly prized criteria of Christian character.

II. THE NATURE OF LOVE (I Cor. 13:4–7)

In the world of Paul's day three Greek terms expressed different facets of the concept of love. The term most frequently used in pagan Greece and Rome was the term *eros* which was linked normally with romantic love. Because of its association with sex, the writers of the New Testament avoided the use of this term. Here Paul does not use the other synonym for love, the verb **phileo**, which means to be friendly, or affectionate, to have brotherly love (thus, Jesus loved Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha—Jn. 11:5). Paul and other New Testament writers selected the little used noun **agape** to express divine love, that which does not depend upon emotion, but is purposeful, calculating, and involves choice. It is similar in meaning to the Old Testament **chesed**, often translated, "lovingkindness" or "steadfast love." **Agape** therefore is distinctively Christian love. It is the love which God has for the world and which Christians must have for their enemies (Jn. 3:16; Matt. 5:44).

Paul then proceeds to tell what love is not. This divine love is never jealous or boastful; it is not conceited. The Corinthians, like other Greeks, laid great stress upon knowledge as the most prized of virtues or accomplishments. Five hundred years before, Sophists enjoyed great prestige in Athens, at least until their superficiality was exposed by the incisive questions of Socrates. Paul was eager that a believer's faith should not stand on human wisdom but upon God's power (I Cor. 2:5). It is not the wisdom of men but of God that matters, says Paul. To those who felt they already possessed adequate knowledge, Paul warned that while knowledge "puffs up," it is love which really "builds up" (8:1).

Several times Paul points out the danger of false knowledge or an exaggerated awareness of one's own knowledge or wisdom. The term **phusis** ("puffed up") appears in chapter 4, verses 6, 8, and 19. Those

who are inflated with a sense of their own importance are warned against self-delusion since the kingdom of God is not in the words of arrogant men but in God's power (4:21). This pride hinders repentance (5:2). In short, arrogance, self-esteem and pride have no part in divine love, in Christian maturity. Few sins of mankind come in for more frequent condemnation in both Old and New Testaments than the sin of pride. It can be said to be the seat of all sin.

Neither is discourtesy consistent with Christian maturity. Divine love is "never rude or selfish" (JB). The person who is characterized by divine love usually is more courteous and considerate of others than one skilled in the knowledge of etiquette. It is children who take the attitude of "me first." This mood, characteristically selfish people, including many of mature years, share in common with the animals. Pigs in a trough show little concern about the other pigs getting their fair share of the food. Love is considerate of others.

Another characteristic of spiritual immaturity is the tendency toward clannishness, schisms, jealousies, a gang spirit, a major problem at Corinth (1:10–17; 3:1–4). It is characteristic of children at a certain age. One boys' club or gang is normally exclusive in its membership and in competition, if not in quarrels, with other clubs or gangs. That this is not easily outgrown is seen in the popularity of exclusive clubs among adults. That it is not unknown among Christians is evident in churches that are exclusive, competitive, and arrogant. Also characteristic of childhood is stubbornness, a spirit which says, "If I can't have things my own way, I'll not play; I will take my dolls and go home." Even adults are known to resolve, "If this vote doesn't go the way I think it should I'll resign." By contrast, "Love does not insist on its own way" (13:5).

Another characteristic of children is peevishness and sensitivity. When a member of the Ladies Aid from a certain midwestern church was not re-elected president she stormed indignantly about the lack of appreciation on the part of the other women and proceeded to start another church aid society among her neighbors of which she was then, appropriately enough, made the president! Both groups of women supported the church but were intolerant of each other. But divine love "is not irritable or resentful" (13:5b).

Paul stresses the positive characteristics of this love. It has the capacity of being able to suffer yet be patient and uncomplaining through it all. It "suffers long and is kind" rather than becoming embittered, cynical, and resentful. It does not harbor self-pity nor seek consolation in bitterness and arrogance. Suffering can result in a certain

arrogance, a certain self-pity, an attitude of haughtiness toward those who have not experienced suffering. This kind of love rejoices in the truth and in good news concerning others and is not the kind that gains satisfaction from seeing another's humiliation. It does not relish gossip but does engage in loving service and witness. It can even rejoice in a rival's promotion, even though convinced that the rival's promotion is less deserved than one's own. This does not mean that one is not hurt and led to inquire as to why he is not more usable and useful, why his dedication and competence is not recognized. But nevertheless, by God's grace, he can rejoice in another's recognition, promotion and effectiveness. Such love is characterized by resiliency, and flexibility rather than brittleness. It can bend without breaking and spring back for more. Cast iron may be massive and look sturdy but breaks more easily than malleable iron. So love may appear weak because flexible, but it does not shatter. The wind breaks sturdy oaks more easily than flexible willows.

III. THE PERMANENCE OF LOVE (I Cor. 13:8–13)

In stressing the importance of survival Paul points out at least by implication that the traits which characterize so much of the Corinthian church are not really marks of maturity but of immaturity. The "assets" they prized most highly—knowledge, and other spiritual gifts—are seen to be "toys" which fascinate the immature but may imperil the quest for the greater good. They are things that are not permanent but at best transitory. By referring to his own childhood Paul says that knowledge is limited and prophesying is limited. The gift of tongues is but temporary. None of them has survival value. These gifts are characteristics of childhood or immaturity; such things as pride, peevishness, quarrelsomeness should be recognized for what they are, traits of the immature or the childish.

As the text indicates, we should be as innocent as babes with reference to malice, but at the same time, be perfect, be men, be mature with reference to love. So the Corinthians should grow up, they should move from spiritual gifts to the graces of the Spirit such as faith, hope and love. Otherwise they will be spiritual morons or dwarfs. The peril of Christians remaining stationary, or retrogressing even, after entrance into Christian life is apparent. The indispensable character of the love which lasts on is self-evident. A little girl fell out of bed during her sleep. The next morning she diagnosed the problem: "I think I went to sleep too near the place I got in." Are not some Christians like that? No

wonder they do not grow to maturity (perfection) but remain spiritual dwarfs or morons, victims of retarded growth. The remedy is to seek first the “**Giver** of every good and perfect gift,” to trust and obey. Only love has survival value!