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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

CHARITY NEVER FAILETH

“Covet earnestly the best gifts; and yet show I unto you a more excellent way” (I Corinthians xii. 31).

THE thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians is without doubt one of the best known and most highly prized passages in all Scripture. It stands out in its own right for beauty and sublimity, an inspired hymn in praise of Charity. St. Paul here uses a word which was quite unknown in Classical Greek, possibly also in the common speech of his time, but which was to become a distinctive word in the Christian vocabulary. It was needed to express a new thing that had come into human experience through the Life and Ministry of Jesus Christ; that unwearying, patient, compassionate, earnestly seeking Love of God, which, in spite of all rebuffs, and counting no cost too great, finds its object in needy, wayward, sinful humanity; that saving Love of God wherewith He so loved the world that He gave His Only-Begotten Son, which was manifested in every word and deed of Jesus Christ, and supremely in His giving Himself a ransom for many, and which flows on deep and strong in those for whom Jesus Christ is indeed Lord. Perhaps it was something of this kind which the Seer had in mind when he spoke of the pure river of the water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb, on either side of which is the Tree of Life producing abundant fruits continuously, and its leaves for the healing of the nations.

It is to be deplored that modern usage has tended to evacuate the word charity of its noble meaning, and to allow it to denote something cold, icy, repellent—in fact to identify it with one of the things that St. Paul asserts have no necessary connection with it. “Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor . . . and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.” Charity in the full Christian sense is not something that can be simply given, given away. It is a steady disposition, which like the quality of mercy “blesseth him that gives and him that takes”. It is a real impoverishment of St. Paul’s great hymn to replace the word Charity by the word Love. We still require a special word, an august and royal word, for this thing which alone can sweeten the embittered relations of men, and which men

need, and in their hearts know that they need, even when they scorn and repudiate it.

By its very splendour the Hymn of Charity is apt for most people to stand in a kind of splendid isolation. They are barely conscious of the context in which it occurs. In the First Epistle to the Corinthians St. Paul is dealing with a great variety of problems, many of them seemingly trivial and tiresome, which had emerged in the little Christian community he had founded. There were intellectual doubts and moral failures. There were divisions developing into factions as some professed to be followers of Paul, others of Peter, others of Apollos. Some pretended to brush all these aside and follow only Christ. There were well-intentioned people, perhaps over-scrupulous, anxious and narrow-minded, who in fear of contamination from the heathen life around them demanded complete withdrawal from every kind of contact with it, even refusing to eat meat bought in the market-place on the ground that it had very likely, almost certainly, come from victims slaughtered in sacrifice to idols. Others felt themselves to be spiritual persons, strong by comparison with these weaker brethren. They pooh-poohed their scruples. Idols were nothing and sacrifices were nothing. There was nothing wrong in sitting at meat in an idol's temple! There was no need to break off social relations with pleasant neighbours simply because they were idolaters. Strong broad-minded people!

But even among the spiritual persons there were differences. They had different spiritual gifts. Some were teachers with wisdom to impart. Some were prophets impatient to announce the message that was burning in their hearts. And some had the mysterious gift of ecstatic utterance, all the more wonderful because of its detachment from rational experience. These spiritually gifted persons compared their gifts with those of their brethren and disputed which were the greatest.

Patiently St. Paul takes up all these questions one after the other, giving sound practical advice concerning them all with a fine Christian reasonableness; until something happened within him. "Covet earnestly the best gifts . . ." and then somehow his soul caught fire, and he broke out—not into reproaches of the Corinthians for consuming his time with their petty problems—but into his Hymn of Charity, one of the finest and most memorable short pieces in all literature. "Charity

suffereth long and is kind; seeketh not her own; is not easily provoked; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things; Charity never faileth." What had happened to St. Paul? Clearly there had come to him one of those spiritual experiences to which he refers from time to time, though humbly and unwillingly, lest he should seem to boast. May we not surmise that here, as at the Damascus gate long before, he saw the Lord? At all events it is no abstract idea of Charity that enraptures him, for what he is describing is nothing less than the Figure of Jesus Christ, as He too handled the human situation which confronted Him.

Then as if an ecstasy had passed, St. Paul returns to his task, resuming his theme just where he had left off. "Follow after Charity and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy."

It would of course be quite wrong to regard the Hymn of Charity as a poetic interlude in an otherwise prosaic document. It is not as if the Apostle was taking a brief holiday from the problems and cares of daily practical experience, endeavouring as it were to forget the Corinthians with their tiresome, irksome disputes. It is not that he is withdrawing from a petty disagreeable world of clamant duties and calls to some kind of ideal world of the imagination where he can find undisturbed peace. Otherwise he could hardly return without some sign of resentment, some expression of impatience. Whatever discontinuity there may be, the Charity of the Hymn in fact suffuses the whole Epistle from first to last. But the spectacle of the endless practical problems of human life with its prides, prejudices and strifes, its failures and sins, the care of the churches which pressed upon him daily, failed to irritate or embitter the Apostle because he had the spiritual resources necessary to meet them all. In contemplating the face of Jesus Christ, Who also bore the contradiction of sinners and the burden of the needy, he found flowing into him and through him the divine stream of never-failing Charity. And he knew it to be the one solution of the disharmonies of life. There is no escapism in 1 Cor. xiii, but a refreshment of soul making it possible to grapple anew and with new assurance with the arduous difficulties of life in the world which else might prove insuperable.

The Church of Corinth was but a tiny community of unimportant people—not many wise after the flesh, not many

mighty, not many noble—but that did not hinder them from having pretensions of a religious kind, and from being correspondingly difficult. They had plenty of “tongues”, of prophesying, of knowledge, excellent things in themselves, but disruptive if not held together in the bond of charity. For prophets put statesmen and party leaders; for teachers put experts, and magnify the whole to a world scale; and you have the Babel of tongues which confronts us to-day, where even well-known articulate words lose their meanings in diversity of usage. You have problems arising one upon another in bewildering complexity, to which the natural man’s reaction is apt to be cynicism or despair.

In such a situation is Charity hopelessly irrelevant? Or is it an absolute necessity? Who shall bring it to bear on the life of men and nations? Let the Christian read and re-read, ponder and meditate St. Paul’s Hymn of Charity, not as an escape from a disagreeable world, not as a way of enjoying a beautiful dream that may distract his attention for a moment from things that oppress him, but as a means of invigorating faith and hope and charity. What the world needs is charity, more and more of it; charity of thought and speech and behaviour. But charity is the outflow of the Love of God made manifest in Christ Jesus, never failing therefore in its source, carrying with it the promise of healing for the nations, and flowing through channels which itself has hollowed out and flooded. These are consecrated disciples of Jesus Christ.