

Estomihi 7 February 2016 Hillcrest, KZN

Paul writes to the Corinthians: 1 If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

5 It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 8 Love never fails.

But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.

11 When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.

12 For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

“Shopping centre collapses” the headlines read. A major tragedy! Just two years after being completed a section came down, without warning, injuring many Customers. Investigations reveal: the builder took a shortcut and saved on steel re-enforcing. Since the re-enforcing is concealed in concrete, the cheating was not visible. It only became apparent when movement of the earth put strain on the structure and the concrete collapsed.



“Our walls are cracking” the young woman complains, tears streaming. Their dream house, so beautifully built and decorated, is starting to show cracks in many walls. Further investigation shows why: the builders forgot to put brickforce into the walls. I learnt to do bricklaying with my uncle, after his house had burnt down. Step by step he showed me what to do, how to lay bricks straight, how to make shure that the walls are level and upright etc. One day he came with roles and roles of steel mesh - it looked like roll-up ladders for plants to grow on. “It’s time for the first layer of brick force” he explained and showed me how to put these “wire steps” down before laying the next layer of bricks.

He explained to me how this brick force forms a bond right along the total length of each wall, and around the corners, preventing cracks from developing. And if a crack should appear, it cannot expand, because the brickforce keeps the parts together. The supporting ground was fairly stable, reducing the chance of cracks. But he still insisted that we put in another layer of brick force a few rows up. “Just for safety” he said.

If you examine the completed walls, there is no indication of this brickforce. It is buried in the cement, covered by plaster. But rest assured - you will notice if it is missing, as the unfortunate home owner found out when it was too late!



Yesterday, as we gathered in your new hall with the mission committee, there was a sudden tremor in the building. At first I thought that a very heavy vehicle was passing by, causing the building to shake. However, it turned out to have been an earth tremor that stretched across 120 km from the coast to Howick. Your building remained in tact. No cracks appeared. So it seems that the builders did a good job, and did include sufficient reinforcements in the floors and brickforce in the walls! Otherwise we would have noticed it after the tremor!

Paul is writing to the Corinthian Congregation. It was young, vibrant, in a fast growing Metropolis. It could show proud roots - most major Apostles had played a role in their beginnings - there were those who became Christians through the preaching of Paul, others had been reached by Apollos. Some had even been ministered to by the chief Apostle Peter! What a solid foundation, what a good line up of teachers!

Yet, instead of this being an asset, it became a cause of division when the various groups tried to show that they were the best, the real Christians, because they believed that their teacher was the better one! Cracks started developing in the congregation.

The congregation was blessed with an abundance of spiritual gifts. Any other Christian congregation had reason to be jealous of them. Their services were vibrant, one speaker after the other stood up and spoke, almost like a debating competition. And then there was the singing and speaking in tongues! Boy, they were special. Of course many a newcomer only came once, because they were not ready for such deep spirituality yet and misunderstood it to be a chaos! Of course some Christians felt unhappy, and they had every reason to, because they were too immature for this special congregation, too worldly, to be filled by the Spirit!

Another speciality of Corinth was their multicultural and multifaceted composition. Everybody was welcome. Their membership encompassed wealthy ship owners, business people and high society on the one hand, up to labourers and slaves on the other. What an

example of being “one in Christ”.

Of course it was not always easy. All too often the congregation had to wait till late for the slaves to arrive after work, before being able to celebrate communion. (Keep in mind that in those times the Christian Sunday was a normal working day, and they had to hold their services on the Sunday evening after work) But, like good Christians, they waited. Fortunately they could start off with the less important “bring and share” meal while they waited. It did not bother them, because the slaves hardly ever brought anything to share anyway. It was a bit of an embarrassment when some of the early comers had had a bit too much wine and openly complained about the sweat drenched slaves coming so late. But at least they could then all celebrate communion together! And that was the most important anyway!

But Paul challenges them: the congregation is breaking apart! It is totally unacceptable for Christians to behave like that!

After these issues were mentioned in the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians, he comes to 1 Corinthians 13. It is not written as a beautiful ode to love - but in it Paul points out to this seemingly wonderful congregation that there is something seriously wrong with them. They are lacking love! The “brickforce” is missing in their walls, the re-enforcement missing in their foundations. Outwardly the congregation appears to be an example to all, beautifully blessed, richly gifted. But closer inspection reveals cracks every where.

They are proud of who they are - but love is missing - and that is a serious situation!

As long as everything goes well, they seem to be a congregation to envy. But when tensions and trouble hit, the congregation starts to crumble. Brickforce is missing.

This brickforce is called “love!”

If I listen how Paul describes love, I realise that love, like brickforce, is not that clearly visible. It is “buried in the walls” “hidden in the concrete” - love is not an outward feature, but part of our character - or not! *“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking.”*

Love is a deeply rooted attitude, not an “in the face” quality for everybody to admire in me. Paul continues: *“Love is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 8 Love never fails.”*

That is almost how my uncle described the working of brickforce to me. It is always there, bearing the strain, keeping the wall together when the ground is shaking.

I recall a Bible study from my school days, where the leader said: You can replace “love” with “Christ” in this passage, and then you will see what Jesus does for you. Indeed, Christ is the brickforce in the life of a Christian. When I am in danger of crumbling and falling apart, he does not give up on me, but carries me through. When I fail and fall, he does not, but helps me up again. BUT ... Jesus Christ then wants to work through me, so that his love, through me, also becomes part of the congregation! The Corinthian congregation was made up of Christians - each one set free by Christ, each one having Christ as “brickforce” in their own life. But the love did not spill over. The attitude of Jesus did not radiate from them.

1 Cor 13 is a harsh criticism by Paul of those in the congregation who think that they are better, cleverer, maturer than others. “You think like a child, act like a child that thinks it knows already everything that is to be known”

“Now that I am a man, I know that I only know in part” Paul says. He does not pretend to be better than the Corinthians. But his journeys through many cities and countries have shown him: There are many things that I don’t know. But I have observed: When love is lacking, things crumble!

He has seen congregations erupting with the joy and excitement that new Christians sometimes display. And he has seen them quieten down. Some continued and grew as vibrant congregations. Others started to crumble and died again. That made him realise: those who survived were the ones with “brickforce” - with love. Those where people cared about one another, accepted each other with their shortcomings, those where strangers and newcomers are not only tolerated, but welcomed and integrated. The congregations that continued were those where the gifts of the spirit were put to use to build the community, rather than as a display of own maturity.

That leaves me with one last question:

How do we make sure that this brickforce, this re-enforcement of love is part of our congregation?

The answer is given in the last verse of the previous chapter: “But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.” Then follows Chapter 13, which leads to 14,1: “Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy”.

Just like a bricklayer needs to remind himself, or be reminded, to put in brickforce, we as Christians need to “pursue” love - keep on asking whether love is motivating us, or other reasons. We need to strive for excellence, have the urge to grow in faith. But most of all we need love! When other motivators, such as honour, or prestige, or boasting take over, I need to stop and pursue love - grab hold of the brickforce - before I proceed again. The qualities of Christ that keep my life together, should flow through me, through us, and make the congregation strong.

Dear Hillcrest congregation - you build a beautiful hall. I trust that the re-enforcement and brickforce are in place.

You are busy building a wonderful congregation. Make sure that love, as described in the verses 4-8 forms an integral part of your fellowship and your interaction with each other and those that come to you:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

Then you will be strong, even when there are tremors and storms.

Amen

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