

# Consensus

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Volume 18

Issue 2 *Word and Worship: Essays on Preaching and Liturgy*

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Article 7

11-1-1992

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### Recommended Citation

Crossman, Richard C. (1992) "But the greatest of these is love," *Consensus*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol18/iss2/7>

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# But the Greatest of These is Love

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**Text: 1 Corinthians 13:1–8, 12–13**

I'm sure it would come as no surprise to any of you if I observed that we live in an age of "uncertainty".

We are told that Christians are declining in numbers in Canada and that our culture will soon be made up only of a number of religious minorities.

We often sense that the moral standards of our community are being eroded by a rising secularism.

Add to that the growing awareness that the ethnic makeup of Canada (culturally and visibly) is becoming more diverse.

Beyond this...

There are now emerging, ever more strongly, groups which have special concerns and interests, wanting the support of community to be focused on them.

Moreover, in the face of these competing cultures, and faiths, and interests...

there is a press to seek either the lowest common denominator,

or, to affirm the creeping tolerance of complete  
 “relativism”,  
 or, to press even more strongly for one’s own  
 special interests, values, or culture  
 at the expense of others  
 (in the name of “righteousness”, of course).

Anyone who has been reading the papers or listening to  
 T.V. about the Canadian constitutional debate,  
 can’t help but recognize the general feeling  
 that as a community—a nation—  
 in many ways we are “uncertain” as Canadians  
 who we are, anymore.

It’s a time of honest concern!

In many ways our Epistle lesson  
 reflects a similar kind of concern.

As you know, Corinth (at the time Paul was writing this  
 Epistle) was a bustling crossroads of that part of the  
 world:

- there was a wide number of religions represented  
 in the city;
- there was a large variety of cultures present  
 in the city;
- there were special interest groups of all sorts  
 competing with one another;
- there was a spirit of being a “wide-open” town;
- it was a centre of international trade  
 and youthful vigour;
- it was a place of great potential—  
 which wasn’t always realized, because  
 of the fractionalizing of the community.

And it was a place where Paul got a community of  
 Christians started:

a community he apparently cared for very much.  
 (He wrote a number of letters to them.)

You see, Paul’s concerns were not unlike our own,  
 as Canadians and Christians.

Paul was confronted by a church in Corinth which was easily divided and often divisive toward one another:

- along lines of vocation
- along lines of learning
- along lines of status
- along lines of influence
- along lines of special interest
- along lines of piety.

Paul was thus faced with a very real challenge: "How does one create and maintain a community?"

If one were going to enable a fledgling movement like Christianity to flourish, then this challenge had to be met.

But the answer had to be one that did justice to *both*:

- the sense of common "wholeness" as a group;
- the richness and diversity of the gifts of each of the members.

Paul found the answer in an image we have all grown to love and respect; the image of the "body", which has many "parts", each of which is different, but makes a necessary contribution to the whole.

The solution was ingenious! (But not entirely new, for Plato had also come up with a similar idea.)

Nevertheless, the image worked well: it organizes and integrates things around a stable balancing among the parts.

The place and role of each part is clearly identified;

- boundaries are clearly delineated
- tasks are clearly set
- levels of cooperation are nicely defined.

But something was missing!

Paul saw that if one doesn't have something more, this gospel image is primarily turned into a formula for only adjustment and accommodation.

It becomes an image for the status quo of

“cooperative adjustment”:

“Know your place and live accordingly.”

In fact, that is often how this text is read:

- the different parts of the community should not be critical of one another;
- they should not count wrongs done to one another;
- they should not become angry with one another;
- they should be self-effacing;
- they should be long suffering toward one another.

It's no wonder that many Christians,  
 persons of colour,  
 women,  
 the marginalized,

feel somewhat uneasy with this passage  
 understood in this way.

They say, “O Lord, how long?”

But Paul sees this need.

He recognizes that without “something else”,

- injustices within the body would by implication become institutionalized;
- “liberation” of the gospel message could be liberation of the parts within the whole, but not the whole itself.

And Paul identifies just what this “something else” needs to be if the Christian movement and community are to grow, and develop, and be renewed as part of God's Kingdom.

The image of the body must be seen through a special set of glasses; a “bias” if you will.

There must be built into the image  
 a strategy for social growth  
 and transformation,

rather than simply accommodation and adjustment.

That new set of glasses Paul invites us to put on is the Love of God, as it is given to us in Jesus Christ.

It is a “transformative love”, a gift;

which celebrates who we are, so as to bring us together into an ever increasing wholeness of “community”.

It is a love which seeks to discover and be a part of the future God is preparing for us...

“On earth, as it is in Heaven” (as we pray in the Lord’s prayer).

What then are the marks of such a person who sees the world through the glasses of God’s “transformative love”?

Allow me to parallel, expand, and amplify on the words of Paul:

1. Persons with love are *patient*.

They know how to pace themselves, so as to use their gifts and talents in the most effective way for renewal, and justice, and the needs of the neighbour.

2. Persons with love are *kind*.

They seek to discern the “seed of God’s presence” and to focus on it in others, in their own selves, and in the community—

to focus on the place where God is working to renew and recreate life.

3. Persons with love do not *brag*.

They are persons who “listen” and are not deafened by their own voice; they seek rather to be attentive to God’s voice, even when it is “still and small” and spoken through the lives of others.

4. Persons with love are not *envious*.

Rather they celebrate the gifts of others as strengths, as things which complement our life together, rather than as things which will threaten or diminish us.

5. Persons with love are not inflated with their own *importance*.

They count success a thing not to be possessed, but rather consider it the interesting by-product

that remains after the neighbour has been well served.

6. Persons with love are not *graceless*.

Rather such persons give space for another to save face in the process of addressing an injustice for which that individual has been responsible.

Persons who live out of love know that truth is more profound when it is exercised with tact, courtesy, and care.

7. Persons with love do not reduce life to a set of *rights*.

A person who lives out of love lives rather out of a sense of God's acceptance, despite our sinful unacceptability; and lives for the resultant call to stewardship on behalf of the neighbour and creation.

8. Persons with love are people whose lives aren't clouded by their own *anger*.

Loving persons don't lose sight of the Christian ideal as they deal with the exasperations of daily communal life.

They don't allow their sense of injustice to cloud their vision of what the community could become.

9. Persons with love don't keep records of past corrected *injustices*.

They are more concerned with how justice in the community can be a fuller reality in the future, rather than being preoccupied with the extent of past injustices and how they have been repaid.

These persons know the power of forgiveness for renewal.

10. Persons with love don't celebrate another's *weakness*.

The person whose life is based in love does not seek to find the clay feet of

others or delight in such exposures,  
but rather seeks a renewed life for all.

11. Persons with love endure and never stop *hoping*.  
They are persons who are not afraid to take a risk on behalf of the neighbour and his or her need, knowing that God is quite capable of surprising us with renewed life.
12. A person with love *trusts* God in and through others.  
The loving person knows that life exists in an imperfect way, and ambiguity can't be avoided. Therefore each of us must always be sensitive to both the real possibilities and the real limitations of every new thing we do.

This then is Paul's insight for true Christian community. He lifts it up for us, and recommends it to each of us. And he assures us of God's promise to be with us. as we put love at the centre of our lives and our community.

Therefore, as it was for the church in Corinth, may it also be said of our community here:

In our life together we found that these three things abide,  
Faith,  
Hope, and  
Love;

but the greatest of these was Love. Amen.