1 Cor 13:7 – the language of love and trust

One of the most famous and beloved passages in the NT is 1 Corinthians chapter 13. I have been digging into the Greek text of verse 7 and thought I might share my thoughts with you. Focus is on the meaning of the Greek word for "believe in" or "trust".

The Greek words are: πάντα στέγει, πάντα πιστεύει, πάντα ἐλπίζει, πάντα ὑπομένει.

RSV provides a fairly literal translation: Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

NIV says: It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

The verse is poetic in two ways: the rhetorical *repetition* of πάντα (panta) – all things or everything or all the way and also the *chiasm*. Let me explain the chiasm.

The Greek word στέγει (stegei) is very close in meaning to ὑπομένει (hupomenei), so the first and last words are close. Similarly the word for believe and hope are close in meaning, so the two middle words correspond to each other. A chiasm is a structure like A B B' A' where the inner two are close in form and meaning while the outer ones are also close to each other. It is a common poetic feature in Hebrew and to a lesser degree in Greek poetry.

The first verb στέγω (stegō) only occurs 4 times in the NT and all of them are in Paul's letters. Let us look at them:

1 Cor 9:12 – we endure everything (NET), we put up with anything (NIV)
1 Cor 13:7 – bears all things (NET), always protects (NIV)
1 Th 3:1 – we could bear it no longer (NET), we could stand it no longer (NIV)
1 Th 3:5 – I could bear it no longer (NET), I could stand it no longer (NIV)

I like the NIV idiom "I cannot stand it". This idiom is mainly used in a negative construction, I believe, so for the positive usage NIV says "we put up with anything" in 1 Cor 9:12. Why NIV did not also say "Love puts up with anything" in 1 Cor 13:7 I do not know. It would be consistent with 9:12 and give the meaning nicely. Why did they use "protect" and why say "always" instead of "everything" or "anything"? Is it because the related noun στέγη (stegē) means a roof? Paul commonly used the standard word for always (pantote). I can only guess the reason for the NIV rendering. My guess is that it was to forestall possible misuses of the text. Because we have a long tradition of pretty unreadable Bible translations, Bible readers, including pastors, find it hard to read many verses at a go before they get tired. Maybe that is one reason for their habit to take one or two verses out of context and meditate or preach on them. The result is often some strange teaching and ideas. Of course, we are not to "put up with everything" in every situation. But this text talks about the characteristics of love. It must be set in the context of a relationship between people, especially the context of a natural and spiritual family. PANTA – everything/all things is a rhetorical hyperbole, it does not literally and absolutely mean everything, but it does mean a lot. A loving person puts up with a lot that an unloving person would not put up with. Another reason for the NIV may be that a text

is supposed to be read aloud, and ”Love bears everything” might possibly be understood when spoken as ”Love bares everything.” Or maybe ”bear” is just too old-fashioned English?

The final word ὑπομένω (hupomenō) means to endure something, to stay put when others might have left. These words describe love very well, including the relationship between husband and wife. If I have love, I can put up with (almost) everything in my spouse, and I will stay put in the relationship through difficult times.

The two middle words are πιστεύω (pisteuō) and ἐλπίζω (elpizō). PISTEUW can have a semantic frame with three participants or with two. When pisteuō has three participants, it means that A (Agent) entrusts P (Patient) to G (Goal).

We see this in John 2:24 IHSOUS OUK EPISTEUEN AUTON AUTOIS – Jesus was not entrusting him(self) to them. Jesus is Agent, him(self) is Patient and AUTOIS is the Goal/Direction. It is normal for the semantic Patient to be encoded with the accusative case and the Goal with the Dative case or a preposition such as EIS and occasionally EN or EPI, and this is how PISTEUW is used.

In many instances of this verb, the Patient is not expressed openly, but assumed, and in that case it refers to the same person as the Agent. In John 3:15 we find hO PISTEUWN EN AUTWi and the next verse has the variation with the same meaning hO PISTEUWN EIS AUTON. John 4:21 has PISTEUE MOI – entrust (yourself) to me. This is the same as “put your trust in me” or “believe in me.”

This tri-valent APG verb is sometimes used in the middle-passive. One of the functions of passive is to make the Agent (or Goal) implicit. Usually the Patient takes over the subject slot in a passive construction, but in some cases the Goal can also be subject in Greek.

Examples:

1 Cor 9:17 OIKONOMIAN PEPISTEUMAI – a stewardship has been entrusted to me or: I have been entrusted with a stewardship. Implied/assumed Agent is God, Patient (accusative) is OIKONOMIAN and Goal is me, expressed as subject.

Gal 2:7 PEPISTEUMAI TO EUAGGELION – the gospel has been entrusted to me (also 1 Th 2:4)

1 Tim 1:11 TO EUAGGELION…hO EPISTEUQHN EGW – the gospel which has been entrusted to me. (also Tit 1:3)

Rom 3:2 EPISTEUQHSAN TA LOGIA TOU QEOU – The words of God were entrusted to them. The implicit Agent is God, the Patient is TA LOGIA TOU QEOU and the Goal is represented by the plural subject – they/them.

Now, the verb PISTEUW can also have only two participants with the meaning “accept as true”. In this case, we have the Agent (or Experiencer) and the Patient (object). The Patient can be in the form of a clause introduced by hOTI (that) or it can be an infinitive (or participle) with accusative or it can be a noun that stands for a statement.

Examples:

Mat 9:28 PISTEUTE hOTI DUNAMAI TOUTO POIHSAI – Do you accept as true that I am able to do this?

John17:9 (+21) EPISTEUSAN hOTI SU ME APESTEILAS – They accepted as true that you have sent me.

John 11:27 EGW PEPISTEUKA hOTI SU EI hO CRISTOS hO hUIOS TOU QEOU – I have accepted as true that you are the Messiah, the Son of God.

Acts 8:37b (v.l.) PISTEUW TON hUION TOU QEOU EINAI TON IHSOUN CRISTON – I accept as true that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

Jn 11:26 PISTEUEIS TOUTO – Do you accept this as true?

Rom 14:2 hOS PISTEUEI FAGEIN PANTA – he who accepts as true that he can eat anything.

1 Cor 13:7 PANTA PISTEUEI – it (love) accepts all things as true

Quite often the verb is used without any object or prepositional phrases, and in such cases there is no way to know whether it is the tri-valent verb "entrust" or the di-valent verb "accept as true". Context will usually clarify it, but not always.

So, "accept everything as true" shows the attitude of love. You accept that this other person (husband, wife, child, etc.) speaks the truth and can be trusted. It does not mean that we are to accept and believe every wind of doctrine that comes our way. The accusative object "everything" indicates that this is not a matter of believing in God or Jesus, but of accepting as true what the other person is saying.

ἐλπίζω (elpizō – hope) can be used with a semantic Goal in the dative case or a preposition like EIS (towards), e.g. John 5:45 "Moses, in whom you have placed your hope." (NET). Also 2 Cor 1:10, 1 Pet 3:5. Sometimes EPI (on) is used as in Rom 15:12 "The root of Jesse will come, and the one who rises to rule over the Gentiles, in (EPI) him will the Gentiles hope." (NET). Also 1 Tim 4:10, 5:5, 6:17, 1 Pet 1:13. Or an EN (in) can be used as in 1 Cor 15:19 and Php 2:19 "I hope in the Lord Jesus" (KJV has trust here – I place my hope and trust in Jesus).

However, in most cases ἐλπίζω (elpizō) has the two semantic participants Agent and Patient (object). This object may be a clause introduced by hOTI (that) or it may be a noun that stands for something that you can hope and expect will happen.

In 1 Cor 13:7, the two words hope and believe are parallel in the sense that they are both used with an object (Patient). Love accepts everything as true and hopes for everything. A relationship has hopes and aspirations, but these hopes require acceptance and love to be realized.