

The Most Excellent Way

1 Corinthians 13-14

The Necessity of Love

- ❑ The Corinthian Christians did not lack any spiritual gift (1:7).¹ However, some of them had wrong attitudes concerning their gifts. Some who had the more spectacular gifts² considered their gifts to be more spiritual. Thus they were “puffed up” and they looked down on others.
- ❑ In chapters 12-14, Paul seeks to correct their understanding and behavior. In chapter 13, Paul talks about proper attitude – that is, “the most excellent way” (12:31). In chapter 14, Paul applies this attitude to the actual practice of spiritual gifts in the church assembly.
- ❑ Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-13.

1. Why would Paul say that tongues, prophecy, knowledge, faith, giving, and even dying for one’s faith are “nothing” without love? (8:1b, 12:7)



The Behavior of Love

Characteristic (vv. 4-7)	Further Explanation
patient	includes “endurance of injuries without retaliation” (Carson, 62)
kind	“kind and compassionate ... forgiving” as God is in Christ (Eph 4:32)
does not envy	negative feelings over another’s gifts, abilities, success, possessions
does not boast	bragging that elevates self over others
is not proud	“proud” (φουσιουται, <i>physioutai</i>) – lit. “puffed up” (4:6, 18, 19: 5:2; 8:1).
is not rude	behaving improperly toward others (e.g., 7:36)
is not self-seeking	seeking one’s own advantage, neglecting the interests of others
is not easily angered	touchy, irritable, easily offended
keeps no record of wrongs	truly forgives
does not delight in evil	rejoicing in unrighteousness or injustice (5:1-2; 6:1-8) (Garland, 619) ³
rejoices with truth	rejoices in what is true, right, and just
always protects	πάντα στέγει (<i>panta stegēi</i>) - “bears all things,” “endures”
always trusts	never loses faith, which is based in God
always hopes	never loses hope, which is based in God
always perseveres	endures, even in trouble and suffering

2. According to one dictionary, “love” is 1) a very strong affection; 2) a passionate attraction or desire; or 3) a strong liking.⁴ How would you define “love?” Based on verses 4-7, how would you describe “Christian love?”⁵

¹ A “spiritual gift” generally refers to a God-given ability, service, or working, which is a manifestation (showing) of the Holy Spirit (12:4-7). Paul provides partial lists of spiritual gifts in 12:8-10 and 12:28.

² Spectacular gifts would include healing, miraculous powers, tongues, and interpretation of tongues. Based on Paul’s statements in chapter 14, some Corinthians had an extremely high view of tongues (see definition in footnote 12).

³ More broadly, love rejects “rejoicing over evil, gossiping about the misdeeds of others; it is not gladdened when someone else falls” (Fee, 639).

⁴ *Encarta Dictionary* lists these three definitions along with eight others, with two “Christian” definitions (#9, #10).

⁵ “love” (ἀγάπη, *agapē*) in this context is patterned after the love of God in Christ Jesus. This love involves volition and action, and is not dependent on the “loveliness” of the one loved. It seeks the welfare of others. Christian love is modeled in the life and sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Romans 5:8; 1 John 4:9-10; Galatians 2:20).

3. The standard of Christian love is very high. How can a person love like that? (Consider 1 John 4:7:21; Galatians 5:22-23.)⁶

The Permanence of Love

- ❑ Paul says that prophecies, tongues, and knowledge⁷ will pass away or cease,⁸ but “love never fails” (13:8). The gifts will pass away when “perfection comes” (13:10).⁹ Perfection comes at Christ’s return.¹⁰ At that time, God’s plan of salvation will be completed (perfected).
- ❑ While the referenced gifts pass away, “these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love” (13:13). “God is love” (1 John 4:14). Thus love is the “most excellent way” (12:31).

Reflection & Application

- Review the characteristics of love in verses 4-7. Does this describe your “loving?” Identify two or three characteristics that seem to be deficient in your life, and commit to change by God’s grace.
- You cannot “love” like verses 4-7 without God. This type of love is a “fruit of the Spirit.” If you have not trusted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, that is the first step. Experience His love, and seek to have His love change you and flow through you.

The Application of Love

- ❑ Paul applies “the most excellent way” to the Corinthian controversy about spiritual gifts (14:1). He says, “Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.” Thus Paul reveals his preference of prophecy¹¹ over tongues¹² in the assembly.
- ❑ Read 1 Corinthians 14:1-5 (14:1-25).

⁶ “God is love” (1 John 4:16); “love comes from God” (1 John 4:7); Love is a “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22).

⁷ Though only three of the spiritual gifts are mentioned here, all might be included by implication.

⁸ Some Christians use this passage to argue that some spiritual gifts (including tongues and prophecy) have already ceased. However, I do not agree with their interpretation. For more information on this subject, ask Jay.

⁹ “when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears (καταργηθήσονται).” “The imperfect” (το εκ μέρους) refers to the partial nature of the gifts (εκ μέρους is translated “in part” twice in 13:9). “Perfection” is literally “the perfect” (το τέλειον, *to teleion*). What is “the perfect?” When does it occur? Interpretations include 1) the consummation of salvation at Christ’s return (the majority interpretation); 2) maturity of the church (or individuals); 3) completion of the New Testament canon. However, 13:12 points to the first interpretation, which is the one reflected in my notes.

¹⁰ Paul uses two analogies: 1) a child becoming an adult; and 2) indirect sight becoming direct sight. In the first analogy, Paul is *not* saying that tongues and other gifts are “childish” – that is, something to be abandoned when one becomes mature. He is saying, “There is an age appropriate to certain activities, but there comes a time when these activities are no longer appropriate” (Garland, 623). In the second analogy, the mirror represents indirect sight, not necessarily poor quality (high quality mirrors did exist). The phrase is literally, “we see through a mirror in a puzzle.” It is more like seeing a photograph of someone and then seeing them in person (Fee, 648).

¹¹ “prophecy” - proclamation of a “revelation” from God, especially for the purpose of edification, encouragement, and comfort (14:3, 6). A “revelation” (αποκάλυψις, *apokalypsis*) in this context is “some kind of utterance given by the Spirit for the benefit of the gathered community” (Fee, 662). Does the New Testament gift of prophecy have similar authority to Old Testament prophecy or Scripture itself? This is debated, but many Bible scholars emphasize “No.” I agree. Otherwise, the prophecies would not need to be weighed carefully (evaluated) (14:29). (See 2000: Grudem)

¹² “tongues”(in this context) – Spirit-enabled language (particularly in prayer, praise, and worship) that is not understood by the speaker, and usually not understood by the hearer (at least in this context; in Acts 2:4-8 the hearers *did* understand). The gift of interpretation is needed to make tongues understandable so that others can be built up.

4. In general, why does Paul prefer prophecy over tongues in the assembly?

For the Sake of the Church

- ❑ Paul stresses the importance of intelligibility so others can understand. The edifying¹³ (building up) of the church is most important. Thus he says, “I thank God that I speak tongues more than all of you. But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue” (14:19, NIV).¹⁴

For the Sake of Unbelievers

- ❑ Paul says that prophecy may benefit an unbeliever, while tongues may drive him or her away, thinking the believers are out of their mind. But if an unbeliever comes in while the church is prophesying, he will be convicted of his sin, “and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you!’” (14:25, NIV)¹⁵

The Order of Love

- ❑ Read 1 Corinthians 14:26-40. The “way of love” includes doing things in “a fitting and orderly way” (14:40). “For God is not a God of disorder but of peace” (14:33). Paul provides practical instructions for orderly worship in the assembly.
 - “If anyone speaks in a tongue, two – or at most three – should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret.” (14:27, NIV; also see verse 28)
 - “Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said.” (14:29, NIV, also see verses 30-32).¹⁶
- ❑ After Paul provides instructions for the church, he warns them. What he is writing is “the Lord’s command,” and they better not ignore it. Neither should we ignore Scripture!

Reflection & Application

- How is Paul’s instruction concerning prophecy and tongues relevant to you and your church or fellowship?
- How is Paul’s instruction concerning orderly worship relevant to you and your church or fellowship?



¹³ “edifying” (οικοδομῆν, *oikodomēn*) – translated “strengthening” in 14:3 and 14:26.

¹⁴ Perhaps this is evidence that most of Paul’s tongues-speaking takes place in his private times of prayer and praise.

¹⁵ Verses 20-25 are difficult to interpret. In what way are tongues a sign for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign for believers? A “sign” (σημεῖον, *sēmeion*) is an indication of God’s attitude (2000: Grudem, 148; Fee, 682), used in both negative and positive senses. Tongues is a negative sign for unbelievers because it hardens them in their unbelief, as “strange tongues” did for the Jews (Isaiah 28:11-12, paraphrased in 14:21) (Garland, 650). Prophecy also functions as a “sign” (though that word is not stated) indicating God’s blessing and presence among believers (14:25).

¹⁶ Verses 34-35 seem to contradict 11:5, 13, and are bothersome to many. Fee dismisses them as inauthentic (Fee, 699-705). Carson refutes Fee’s argument (1991: Carson, 141-145). Interpretations vary. Some say these women were disrupting the service with noisy questions, corrections, or challenges, which was bringing shame on their husbands or other male authority figures. They needed to observe the social conventions of the culture and behave more submissively. Grudem and Carson say these verses should be understood in the context of the preceding verses, including the instruction to evaluate prophecies (14:29). Women “could not give *spoken* criticisms of the prophecies that were made in a church service” (2000: Grudem, 188). Their “questions” might be viewed as criticisms. In a sense, such evaluation and criticism might put women in a position of authority over men, like teaching, which Paul prohibits elsewhere (1 Timothy 2:12). Reference to “the Law” points to Genesis 2:20b-24 (the creation order) which Paul uses as a basis for male authority (11:8-12; 1 Timothy 2:13-15) (1991 Carson, 152). The debate continues.

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