

# 1 Cor. 13: A More Excellent Way

**Love is Crucial.** Love is the very essence of the Christian faith. The divine circle of love, which existed before time began, is the sphere into which we have been called. Love is a family trait and the very character of God. In fact, it is the very essence of our faith. Love for God demands love for one another and obedience to His word (1 John 5.1-3). Indeed, our capacity to love, whether *upward* (God) or *outward* (man), is due entirely to God's prior love *for* us and *in* us (1 John 4.19). At Corinth, love was the critical missing ingredient and root of every behavioural problem and division. Love affects and influences our *witness* (John 13.35), *walk* (Ephesians 5.2), *works* (1 John 3.17) and *words* (Ephesians 4.15).

**Love and its Character.** There are *four* words in classical Greek for love, *three* appear in the Greek NT:

- Eros is not found in the NT. It describes sexual passion between a husband and a wife. *Eros* is a desire which seeks its own satisfaction.
- Storge occurs x3 in the NT. *Storge* is natural, obligatory love for family members, like a mother for her children.
- Phileo occurs x106 in the NT. This is a personal affection and attraction that responds to love (kindness) *from* or qualities *in* another.
- Agape is the most frequent word for love in the NT (x320) and the word used throughout 1 Corinthians 13. *agapē* is practically unknown in non-biblical Greek. It is therefore a word which derives meaning from God's overtures and actions towards lost sinners. *agapē* is not simply an emotion, but rather an action of the will. It is a deliberate choice to sacrifice self for the blessing and benefit of others, regardless of their merit, worth or attraction. This kind of love is active, volitional and unconditional.
- To simply describe *agapē* as divine love and *phileō* as human love is an oversimplification. *agapē* is actually used of unbelievers in John 3.19. Usually the Father's love for the Son and the description of John as the "disciple whom Jesus loved" use *agapē*, but sometimes *phileō* (cf. John 5.20; 20.2).
- In this chapter, love is *described* (not so much *defined*) with *active* verbs. Love is not sentimental, emotional and romantic, but rather *behavioural* and *energetic*. *agapē* love is a lifestyle choice.

Though the AV generally translates *agapē* as "love", throughout this chapter the word is "charity". The AV is following the Latin Vulgate which uses the word *caritas*, meaning 'love' or 'compassion for others' from *carus*, meaning 'costly' or 'valued'. It is from these Latin words that the English "charity" is derived. The word 'charity' today refers primarily to organisations that raise money for those in need, or the voluntary giving of help. But in its *archaic* use the word was more aligned with selfless (gratuitous) giving, a disposition of heart which thinks and acts favourably and compassionately towards fellow men.

**Love in its Context.** This chapter is not a *parenthesis* or *digression* – it is essential. The Corinthians needed to understand that spirituality is not measured by gift. For Paul, a spiritual person was one whose character and conduct was formed and regulated by the Spirit of God. The Corinthians were deficient in spiritual *fruit*, not spiritual *gift*. They needed to learn to put greater value on the *permanent* fruit of the Spirit than *transitory* gifts of the Spirit (tongues).

Paul has described the *provision* of spiritual gifts, emphasising the *personal* responsibility to exercise that gift for the mutual benefit of the body (12). Later, he will discuss the *practice* by which they operate in the local assembly (14). But this chapter (13) declares the *principle* of **love** as the energy in which spiritual gift (service) is exercised. The proper motivation for Christian service is unswerving love for God and man, which cannot be divorced the one from the other (cf. 1 John 5.1-2). This is essential truth. Every passage that speaks of spiritual gifts refers to *love* in the near context (cf. Romans 12.9; Ephesians 4.2, 15; 1 Peter 4.8). Love is the framework in which all gifts, greater and lesser, must be used. It is all so ironic when Paul was writing to saints in a city whose patron deity was in fact Aphrodite, the goddess of love.

## The Priority of Love [vv.1-3]

**v.1:** In vv.1-3, Paul uses *hyperbole* – exaggerated statements or claims not meant to be taken literally. These are imaginary extremes which have an apparent ascending scale of dazzle factor in the glory accrued for the individual. "Though I" signals a shift to the *first person* singular – so rather than being pointed and personal, Paul presents himself as the illustration of failure and thus exemplifies the kind of selfless love and humility he commends throughout the chapter. Given the obvious hyperbole, "though I" could be rendered as 'if somehow it was possible to' or 'suppose I could' – this is a *hypothetical* case. The "tongues of men and of angels" describes every conceivable mode of speech, whether earthly or heavenly. Paul is imagining being able to speak every human language known to men. The "tongues of angels" does not suppose there is a heavenly, angelic language (cf. 2 Corinthians 12.4) but represents the ultimate in linguistic ability that has never been realised by human beings. It should be noted that when angels speak in Scripture it

is always in a human tongue readily understood by the hearer (cf. Daniel 8.16; Luke 1.19, 26). Perhaps some with the gift of tongues believed they were speaking in a mysterious, celestial language. Nonetheless, apart from love, all such hypothetical eloquence is merely like an annoying and irritating clanging – it is empty and meaningless noise. “Sounding brass” describes a formless piece of bronze which made a clattering noise when struck. *“It was not musical, but instead was a reverberating sound that aggravated the eardrums”* (RL Thomas). Corinth was renowned for the quality and excellence of a special bronze alloy (of copper and tin) manufactured in the city and even used on the doors of the temple at Jerusalem. The “tinkling cymbal” might sound relatively ‘pleasant’ but describes a repeated and loud clanging sound akin to the expression of grief made by sounds of wailing or mourning (cf. Mark 5.38). The “cymbal” was a concave-shaped metal plate as we know them today. Both ‘instruments’ were characteristic of heathen worship. Without love, even the coveted gift of tongues was no better than the uproar of Gentile worship. MacArthur concludes, *“The greatest truth spoken in the greatest way falls short if not spoken in love.”*

**v.2:** Paul moves from the gift of *tongues* to the gifts of *prophecy* and *faith*. A biblical “mystery” is divine truth hitherto unknown and unknowable by men but now revealed by God (cf. 15.51). A NT prophet was one who could receive such revelation directly from God before the canon of Scripture was complete (14.29-31). The word “knowledge” (cf. 12.8) describes one who had an intelligent apprehension and understanding of divine truth. Paul is therefore speaking of a hypothetical person who has received the totality of divine revelation – even to the extent of fathoming the fullest extent of God’s mind – which would almost equate such a person with deity. Clearly this is the ultimate in terms of receiving revelation, but another impossible case, as Paul himself indicates (v.9). Another individual may have “all faith” (the gift of faith to work miracles) to such an extent that they could *keep on* “moving mountains” – a proverbial expression for accomplishing something impossible by way of a great miracle. Yet, if all this is done without love for God and His people as motivation, “I am nothing” – I am of no weight or value to the church, a nobody.

**v.3:** Finally, Paul expands the gift of “giving” (Romans 12.8) to its hypothetical fullest outcome. To “bestow all my goods” involves breaking down all one’s possessions and systematically giving them out in small quantities to benefit as many poor as possible. If these actions are not motivated by love for Christ as well as for the poor (with whom He identified) it “profiteth me nothing” in the ultimate assize at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Even if a believer gave his body “to be burned”, the most terrible of deaths, such service has no weight or value apart from love – it is wood, hay and stubble! There is considerable doubt as to whether “burning” was used as a form of persecution for Christians in the early days of the church, but such was certainly the case with Polycarp in c.156AD. In any case, believers would have been familiar with the story of Daniel 3 and the days of the Maccabees. Malcolm Horlock concludes nicely, *“I can have the most wonderful speech in my mouth; have a complete understanding of God’s mysteries and truth in my mind; have great resources of faith in my heart; and have to my credit the most sacrificial of actions in my conduct and because I don’t love I achieve nothing, I am nothing and I benefit nothing!”*

#### The Portrait and Practice of Love [vv.4-7]

**v.4:** Paul paints a full-length portrait of *love in action*. The various virtues can be clearly seen in the life of Christ and mirrored in the gospel – God’s love in Christ to a world of lost sinners. There are *fifteen* qualities in total, *sixteen* if the transitional statement of v.8a is included. The list is carefully constructed to highlight the failures of the Corinthians. Garland says, *“Omitting the negatives in each clause leaves us with a good description of the Corinthians’ behaviour. They are impatient and unkind, filled with jealousy, vainglorious, and puffed up. Although the gifts of the Spirit are conspicuous in their assembly, their lack of love is even more conspicuous.”*

Love’s attitude to reproach. The first two qualities summarise love as having both a *passive* and an *active* character.

Quality [NET]	Meaning	Example of Christ
1. Patient <i>makrothymeō</i>	The capacity to patiently accept being wronged or endure injury without the desire for retaliation. It shows self-restraint when provoked and is patient with people who cause aggravation. By contrast, an impatient person prioritises self, thinking that one’s own schedule should take priority over the needs of others.	Matthew 26.63, 67 Luke 13.7-9 1 Peter 2.22-23 2 Peter 3.9
2. Kind <i>chrēsteuomai</i>	Patience <i>suffers</i> injury and hurt whereas kindness <i>bestows</i> benefits on others. The root word means ‘useful’, so love puts itself at the disposal of others. Garland says, <i>“The kindness of Christians in the second century so surprised their pagan counterparts that they called Christians ‘chrestiani’ instead of ‘christiani’, i.e. made up of mildness or kindness.</i>	2 Samuel 9.1 Isaiah 42.3 Romans 2.4 Titus 3.4 1 Peter 2.3

Love's action in relationships [vv.4b-5]. The next *seven* qualities describe how love does not behave. A person cannot behave in this way and yet claim to love.

Quality [NET]	Meaning	Example of Christ
3. Not Envious	Love does <u>not</u> boil with jealousy or envy. Envy desires to <i>deprive</i> another of what they have, jealousy desires to <i>have</i> the same sort of thing for itself. Love does not have intense negative feelings over the achievements and success of others (cf. 3.3).	Luke 10.21 John 1.12; 4.10 John 10.28 Galatians 2.20
4. Does Not Boast	Love does <u>not</u> boast (constantly brag) in its <i>ability</i> or <i>achievement</i> , neither does it have a desire to gain popularity, superiority or applause. <i>"True love will always be far more impressed with its own unworthiness than its own merit."</i> (William Barclay) By contrast, the flesh is aggressive, pushing itself to prominence but love is retiring and reticent. The Corinthians were boastful of their knowledge (8.1-3) and constantly vying for public attention, even in their gatherings (14.26).	Matthew 16.20 Mark 8.29-30 John 8.59 John 12.28, 36
5. Not Puffed Up	Love is <u>not</u> inflated with its own self-importance. Rather, it takes the lowly place of serving others. The Corinthians were arrogant (4.18; 5.2).	Matthew 20.28 Philippians 2.6-7
6. Not Rude	Love does <u>not</u> dishonour or insult others with bad manners. Instead, love is courteous and polite to all. The behaviour of love is always proper. The word group is often used of appropriate sexual behaviour and may therefore connect to 5.1-13 or 6.12-20.	John 19.26-27
7. Not Self-Serving	Love is <u>not</u> selfish and does not insist on its own way or pursue its own interests (cf. 6.1-8). Rather, love seeks the good of others. Love does not insist on its rights but thinks more of its duties towards others (cf. 10.24, 33). Love is not self-absorbed or self-obsessed.	Luke 22.42 John 4.34; 8.50 Philippians 2.4-8 Philippians 2.20-21
8. Not Easily Angered	Love is not irritable, touchy or quick to take offence by actual or imagined insults. It is able to endure slights without becoming exasperated.	John 8.48-50
9. Not Resentful	<i>logizomai</i> is a word that can describe an accountant's ledger where debts can be recorded so as not to be forgotten. But love keeps no record of being wronged and does not carry the bitterness of resentment. Neither does love plot or harbour revenge. Love not only forgives, love also forgets! Sadly, the Corinthians found it difficult to forget (cf. 6.1-8).	Mark 15.28 Luke 23.34 John 8.11 Romans 3.28; 4.8

Love's appetite for righteousness [v.6]

Quality [NET]	Meaning	Example of Christ
10. Not Glad about Injustice	Love finds no pleasure in any kind of wrongdoing or unrighteousness (as the wicked, Proverbs 2.14). There should be no joy or malicious pleasure in injustice served to others or hearing of a believer's downfall. The Corinthians should not have <i>gloried</i> in but rather <i>mourned</i> the sin in their midst (5.2, 6).	Luke 22.31-32 Hebrews 1.9 Revelation 2.6
11. Rejoices in the Truth	Love delights in the truth of the word of God. Therefore, to compromise (suppress) the truth, or propagate error is inconsistent with love. However, as this statement is set in apposition to "iniquity", it is probably conduct (in the form of integrity and uprightness) conformed to the truth of the gospel which is in view (2 John 4). Love therefore takes delight when the gospel flourishes and advances (cf. Acts 11.23). Jack Hunter remarks, <i>"In a world that is bent and crooked, those marked by love stand always for what is upright, and just and honest."</i>	John 1.14, 17 John 8.40, 45 John 18.37

Love's adverb to remember [v.7]. The final *four* qualities are presented in the form of hyperbole – overstatements for the sake of emphasis. The key word is "all" (*panta*) which can be translated adverbially as "always". This is what love *continually* does. The statements are chiasmic, the *first* and *last* forming a pair, and the *second* and *third* another pair.

Quality [NET]	Meaning	Example of Christ
12. Bears All Things	The word <i>stégō</i> derives from a covering or roof that can withstand the wind and rain. So, love endures what is unpleasant or difficult (affliction),	Psalms 69.7, 9 1 Peter 2.23

<i>stegō</i>	and oftentimes in silence. The thought of a roof is also suggestive of hiding ( <i>keeping confidential</i> or <i>passing over in silence</i> ) the faults or weaknesses of others, rather than exposing them by gossip (1 Peter 4.8). Love does not divulge an injury from another and seeks to protect from ridicule or harm.	John 8.5-11 John 12.7
13. Believes All Things <i>pisteuō</i>	This does <u>not</u> mean believers are gullible! Rather, in relation to <b>God</b> , love believes His every word unconditionally. In relation to our fellow <b>men</b> , love believes the <i>best</i> of others (and credits them with the best of motives) even in doubtful circumstances. It prefers to err in the direction of trusting <i>too much</i> rather than <i>too little</i> . By contrast, the flesh is doubtful and suspicious.	Psalms 40.7-8 John 12.7
14. Hopes All Things <i>elpizō</i>	Love believes God, and therefore has steadfast and sure hope. If, in relation to fellow men, trust is disappointed, love still hopes for the best and looks for improvement and spiritual growth. Love never accepts failure as final. The flesh, however, presumes wrongdoing and believes the worst.	Matthew 18.22 Luke 22.32
15. Endures All Things <i>hypomenō</i>	<i>hypomenō</i> has a military background. It is the quality that sustains a person in the face of violent persecution and suffering. Love maintains a belief or course of action in the face of opposition. William Barclay writes that <i>hupoménō</i> is one of the great Greek words: “Love can bear things not merely with passive resignation, but with triumphant fortitude, because it knows that ‘a father’s hand will never cause his child a needless tear’.” Love perseveres in trial, knowing there is a higher purpose.	Hebrews 12.2-3 Luke 9.51 Luke 13.33

### The Permanence of Love [vv.8-12]

**v.8:** Charity “never faileth” (*ekpiptō*) in the sense that it is never out of place, never out of date and will never come to an end (cf. Song 8.7). The word translated “faileth” carries the basic idea of *falling*, and sometimes with finality; to fall into *decay* or be *abolished*. It was used of a flower or leaf that falls to the ground, withers, and decays. But love, by its very nature, is permanent because it is part of the essence of deity. Spiritual gifts, however, do not share the same character of permanency – hence the word “but” by way of contrast. In taking one revelational gift from each of the three groups in 12.9-10, Paul is indicating the need for direct revelation would ultimately cease. “Prophecies” and “knowledge” would “fail” or “vanish away” – both of which are the same word in Greek (*katargeō*). *Katargeō* means to ‘set aside’ or ‘put out of commission’ (render inactive). The word is *passive* indicating there is an outside agency or power (defined in v.10) that would cause them to be abolished. On the other hand, “tongues” would naturally “cease” (*pauō*) – a milder word which implies a *willing* rather than a *forced* cessation. The gift of tongues will ‘just stop’ after it has served its purpose. Though *pauō* is in the *middle* voice it does not necessarily mean tongues will cease of their own accord (cf. Luke 8.24). The occasion of their ceasing was likely around AD70 for two reasons. **1.** Tongues was *confirmatory* (Mark 16.20). It was a sign gift attesting to the divine origin of the gospel, part of God’s programme reaching out to *all* nations (and tongues), not merely *one*. By AD70, a 40-year period of confirmation was at a conclusion. **2.** Tongues were *condemnatory* (14.21-22). The speaking of foreign languages in the land of Israel indicated a nation under divine judgment – which judgment was fully realised in AD70. Note. Tongues were also *revelatory* to some extent (14.2). This aspect of the gift would no longer be required when the NT scriptures were completed.

**v.9:** Paul now sets out to explain and illustrate why revelatory gifts were temporary. Tongues may be excluded in this verse because it was primarily a *sign* rather than a *revelatory* gift. Prophecy and knowledge would cease because they were “partial” in the sense of being incomplete (not imperfect). Divine revelation through OT and NT prophets was partial, piecemeal and progressive. No one person had a full revelation, not even the apostles. Prophets could only reveal what God had given them.

**v.10:** But what was *incomplete* would be replaced by what was *complete* – the “perfect”. The best explanation of this statement is to take it as referring to the completion of prophecy, or, in our language, the completion of the NT (canon of Scripture). The word “perfect” is *teleion*, which can mean perfect, mature (cf. 14.20) or complete. In this sentence, *teleion* is contrasted to “in part”, so ‘complete’ is the best rendering. Thus, *complete* prophecy and knowledge will replace *partial* prophecy and knowledge. Paul was in no doubt of his own involvement in the writing of Scripture (cf. 2.13; 14.37; Colossians 1.25; 4.3). About ten years later, Peter was certainly aware that Paul had written inspired books (2 Peter 3.15-16). The word “perfect” is *neuter*, not masculine, hence “that” which is perfect, not “he”. This refers to the fully developed and mature revelation of God, which includes the truth of the mystery of the church (Colossians 1.25; 4.3). James uses the same word to refer to the “perfect law of liberty” (1.25), because scripture is complete, unchanging, and liberating when obeyed! The Lord Jesus promised the disciples would be guided into “all truth” (John 14.26; 16.13). It is entirely logical that the ‘perfection’ would be in the same realm as the partial, i.e. the realm of divine

revelation. The word *teleios* is never used of heaven or the glorified state. If this, or the coming of the Lord, was in view then the inference is that the gifts of prophecy and knowledge continue, and therefore revelation is not complete, and we can add to the word of God. This is patently not the case (Revelation 22.18).

**v.11:** When complete prophecy had come, it would not only be a movement from the **partial to the complete** (v.10), but also from **infancy to maturity** (v.11) and **obscurity to clarity** (v.12). The illustration of a “child” well describes the immaturity of the ‘partial’ stage of revelation. It is possible, though a little forced, to see “speaking” as a child relating to *tongues*, thinking (“understood”) as a child relating to *prophecy* and reasoning (“thought”, *logizomai*) as a child relating to *knowledge*. But childhood is not permanent. A young person grows into the maturity of adulthood, and in so doing gradually “puts away” childish language and behaviour. So, just as the days of childhood are temporary so are the days of partial revelation and the inevitable associated spiritual immaturity.

**v.12:** A second illustration concerns the mirrors (“glass”) for which Corinth was famous for manufacturing (cf. James 1.23). Pettegrew says, “*The Corinthian mirror was a highly polished metal, and it gave an imperfect revelation of a person. The average Corinthian, especially, would not be able to afford a better-quality mirror and would have to look into a mirror which reflected only a distorted image.*” At the time Paul was writing, the manner of seeing was by means of (*dia*) a mirror. The reflection was ‘puzzling’ or ‘like a riddle’ (“darkly”) because it was imperfect and incomplete, and received mediately through a prophet – a perfect illustration of partial revelation. To “see” is often used for mental perception so understanding of truth was also incomplete. However, when the complete revelation had come, believers would be able to see “face to face”. This probably contrasts seeing a distorted, reflected image in a mirror with seeing another person face to face in the flesh. How much clearer it would be! So, complete revelation is direct, clear and lucid. The phrase “face to face” is drawn from Numbers 12.6-8 where the context is the clear and distinct revelation given to Moses in contrast to the partial, piecemeal visions and dreams given to other prophets: “*The LORD said, ‘Hear now my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the LORD will make myself known to him in a vision; I will speak with him in a dream. My servant Moses is not like this; he is faithful in all my house. With him I will speak face to face, openly, and not in riddles.’*” The similarity of language between these two passages is striking.

To further impress the point, Paul describes the days of complete revelation as “then shall I (fully) know even as also I am known”. This fulness of knowledge does not refer to a sudden complete understanding of all divine truth at the rapture or in heaven. Albert Leckie notes, “*Our condition will not be static in glory... Glories of the Person of Christ will be unveiled and enjoyed.*” Rather, when the days of complete prophecy (NT) come, Paul would know “even as also I am (fully) known” *by others* (not by God). In the days before modern mirrors existed, people were seen more clearly and precisely by *others* than they were by themselves! Paul is speaking about clarity! As believers with a complete revelation, we have the capacity to “know” all that God has revealed (cf. 1 John 2.20). However, “*it is one thing to have a perfect revelation; it is another thing to know it perfectly*” (McShane).

#### The Pre-eminence of Love [v.13]

**v.13:** As a fitting conclusion to the paragraph (from v.8), Paul re-emphasises that what is *permanent* is of greater value than what is *temporary*. “And now” (*nuni*) appears to have a *temporal* sense and refer to a prolonged period of the present age (cf. Romans 3.21). The word is different to the “now” (*arti*) of v.12 which refers to the time of writing. In passages where the words occur together, *arti* seems to have a more immediate sense thus in v.12 Paul contrasts the ‘now’ of partial revelation with the ‘then’ of complete revelation.

In contrast to the three gifts of v.11, “faith”, “hope” and “charity” abide *throughout* the present age. But there is a sense in which *faith* will give way to sight (2 Corinthians 5.7-8) and *hope* will be realised (Romans 8.24). *Love*, however, will abide and be enjoyed for eternity. For this reason, love is the “greatest” of the three virtues – it outranks and outshines both faith and hope. After all, love is the very character of God. God is not hope and God is not faith, but God **is** love.