

1 Corinthians 14:1-5
Our Great Purpose

“Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.”¹

Reciprocity is a mark of spirituality. By that, I mean that each Christian is responsible both to receive ministry from others and to invest service in others. Christians are not to live as though each person is an island, but rather Christians are to recognise and embrace the need to serve one another in love.

That reciprocal aspect of the Faith is the focus of the message today, and in order to get a handle on our purpose in the church, I ask you to consider the words of the Apostle to the Gentiles. In his first letter to the Corinthian congregation, Paul wrote of our purpose. Though he did not specifically say that we were to serve one another in the passage under consideration, he did nevertheless emphasise reciprocity in service.

THE OVERARCHING PRINCIPLE — “Pursue love...” Paul begins this portion of his instruction with an admonition to seek love—and to do so ardently. This is a call both to love and to seek what reveals love. It is a plea for the people of God to see the best in one another, even as they interact with one another. One translation commands, “Be constantly pursuing this love, earnestly endeavouring to acquire it.”² Another asserts, “Go after a life of love as if your life depended on it—because it does.”³

The preacher urging his congregation toward love is the stuff of caricature. The world ridicules the ubiquitous emphasis on love that characterises the Christian message. We are compelled to speak of love since love is integral to our Faith. God is presented as loving; accordingly, we are taught from earliest days that “God is love” [1 JOHN 4:8]. All that we are and all that we do as Christians is coloured by God’s love for His people.

John reveals the impact of God’s love in the life of the Christian when he writes, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² Kenneth S. Wuest, **The New Testament: An Expanded Translation** (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1961)

³ Eugene H. Peterson, **The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English** (NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO 1993)

“By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the Day of Judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother” [1 JOHN 4:7-21].

Love is from God, because God is love; even so, those who know God reflect the love of God toward others. In the Greek tongue, different words are translated into our English tongue by the word “love.” One of those words, *éros*, is not actually found in our New Testament; the word represents sexual love. Another word translated into English as “love” is the word *phílos*; it is used of feelings for a dear friend or family member. The third word is that which is used in our text—*agápe*. The word connotes unconditional love—love without consideration of the object. *Agápe* is a selfless form of love that is focused outward, instead of being focused solely on the “self.”

Paul invested two chapters providing instruction concerning the use of spiritual gifts. In CHAPTER 12, he spoke of the variety of gifts and how this diversity reflected the multifaceted character of Christ as revealed through His Body, the church. In CHAPTER 13, he provided a parenthesis as he spoke of the character of love itself. Reading this chapter, we begin to understand what love looks like. Now, at the outset of CHAPTER 14, the Apostle to the Gentiles begins by insisting on the need to pursue love ardently as the guiding principle of all that is done as a Christian.

It is fascinating that we agree that in our interactions with outsiders we should demonstrate love, though too often the love demonstrated is strained and even contrived. The call we have received as Christians is to love as Christ loved, giving ourselves for the benefit of the world and making the effort to both inform others of the love of Christ and to reveal the love of Christ to all people. Despite agreement that we are to love the world as Christ did, declaring His mercy and calling on all to accept His grace, yet we are too often unclear about pursuing love within the Body of Christ.

The Christian that truly understands the love of God is an individual who recognises that the gifts God has bestowed were given for the benefit of others. The loving Christian is an involved Christian, investing the spiritual gifts entrusted to build up fellow believers. Speaking bluntly so that no one will misunderstand, the uninvolved Christian is an unloving Christian at worst, and at best an ignorant Christian.

I am unapologetic in emphasising that if you imagine your gift consists of hurrying the preacher along through grumbling about the length of the sermon, or that your gift is being present at every potluck of the church, you are actually demonstrating a lack of comprehension of the love that God has invested in you. God’s love—the gifts He entrusted to you—is for the benefit of His Body. The profession of an uninvolved individual rings hollow because he demonstrates no interest in the welfare of the Body of Christ. You cannot honour God with a love that is divided between multiple interests.

“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other” [MATTHEW 6:24], is one of Jesus’ poignant sayings. While it is true that Jesus specifically spoke of the conflict that arises between being captive to the materialism that characterises the world and service to Him, it does no violence to His words to include in the application condemnation of any aspect of life that threatens focused service to Him and to His people. The gifts He has given to His saints were given so that they could be exercised in love to benefit His people.

I remind you that love is an action, not a feeling. Love is not a passive concept; rather it is active. In DEUTERONOMY 6:4, Moses pens what has become known to pious Jews as the Shema Prayer: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” He quickly follows that prayer with the impact that knowledge should have in the life of one who follows the Lord God. “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” [DEUTERONOMY 6:5]. He then continues by pointing out that total love will lead the one who loves to instruct his family and to live out the divine precepts that flow from the mind of God.

This concept that love is active is repeated in DEUTERONOMY 11:1. “You shall therefore love the LORD your God and keep his charge, his statutes, his rules, and his commandments always.” This concept of love for God leading to action is iterated elsewhere in that same book. In DEUTERONOMY 10:12, 13, this command to love God totally, is repeated with a slightly different twist. “What does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good?” The principle to remember is that *loving God is equated with serving God*.

I have taken extra time to focus on these verses so that we can absorb the knowledge that the love God expects of His people is never passive—it is always active. “God so loved the world, that He gave...” [JOHN 3:16]. God’s love is active; the love of God led Him to be involved, to give His life because of us. Just so, the love of Christ revealed through us will be seen in what we do. We have been conditioned to think in terms of love being defined as a feeling, or in terms of expressing love through words alone. However, love demands action. Referring to the text before us, we recognise that the pursuit of love will lead us “earnestly [to] desire the spiritual gifts.”

SEEK GOD’S GIFTS — “Earnestly desire the spiritual gifts...” We who are Christians are to welcome spiritual gifts. In fact, because we love one another and because we love the Body of Christ, we are to *desire* the spiritual gifts. This does not necessarily mean that we are to seek the presence of the various gifts in our own life; it means that we are to long for the spiritual gifts to be evidenced and to be exercised within the Body of Christ.

Do you actually long for the Spirit to be at work among us? What would it mean should the Spirit be actively at work within a congregation? I have been privileged to be present when God moved in revival. I have been privileged to stand in holy fire as the Spirit of God touched many souls, bringing sinners to repentance toward God and faith in the Risen Son of God and bringing Christians to commitment—intense allegiance and compelling devotion to Christ Jesus the Lord. I have witnessed His power to unite a congregation in love to work together, and I can honestly say that one who has witnessed such movement of the Spirit can never again be satisfied with the *status quo*.

What would the presence of the Spirit—in full demonstration of His power—look like among us? The Apostle has answered that question by noting what occurred among some of the churches to which he wrote. According to the Word of God, among us would be many who declared, “Jesus is Lord” [1 CORINTHIANS 12:3], if the Spirit were to be permitted to move in power. I know that the Spirit of God working in our midst would glorify the Lord Jesus, and I know that we would share in that glory [2 CORINTHIANS 3:8]. Where the Spirit works mightily, I know that His people experience unusual freedom in life and in worship [2 CORINTHIANS 3:17]. I have no doubt that as the Spirit reveals His presence among us, we will witness miracles [GALATIANS 3:5], and we will not need to manufacture explanations for what we witness.

Where the Spirit of God works, there is supernatural unity [EPHESIANS 4:3], and “the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” [GALATIANS 5:22, 23]—will be seen in ever-greater measure. I know that where the Spirit dwells in power, God’s people will address “one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,” as we each “make melody to the Lord with all our heart” [EPHESIANS 5:18]. When the Spirit of God works in power in our midst, there will be an attitude of prayer at all times [see EPHESIANS 6:18]. I know that where the Spirit of God rests on the people, the preaching of necessity is marked by power and conviction [1 THESSALONIANS 1:5].

Shortly after writing the words of our text, the Apostle held up the mirror of the Word to the congregation. Keep in mind that the congregation was commended as a church that was “not lacking in any spiritual gift” [1 CORINTHIANS 1:7]. Listen to the Paul’s assessment of a typical worship service on a typical Sunday at the Corinth Baptist Church [1 CORINTHIANS 14:26]. “Well, then, my brothers, whenever you meet let everyone be ready to contribute a psalm, a piece of teaching, a spiritual truth, or a ‘tongue’ with an interpreter. Everything should be done to make your church strong in the faith.”⁴

Everything should be done to make your church strong in the faith!

These words should become the guiding principle for the exercise of our various ministries. This should be the desire of each of us as Christian as we serve one another in love and as we seek the spiritual gifts God longs to distribute among us. Then, the Apostle continues. “If any person speaks in another language, there should be only two, or at the most three, each in turn, and someone must interpret. But if there is no interpreter, that person should keep silent in the church and speak to himself and to God. Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should evaluate. But if something has been revealed to another person sitting there, the first prophet should be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that everyone may learn and everyone may be encouraged” [1 CORINTHIANS 14:27-33a].⁵

In that Corinthian congregation, the gifts of the Spirit were present, and each member participated in the service. One had a hymn; one had a lesson; one had a revelation. One spoke in a foreign language to address the assembly, and another served as the interpreter. Man! That must have been a phenomenal service of worship! Something, however, was missing among these gifted Christians. Because love was not dictating their worship, all of their activity failed to build up *others*! They had become merely noisy gongs or clanging cymbals—worship had become discordant.

⁴ J. B. Phillips, **The New Testament in Modern English** (Macmillan Company, New York, NY 1958, 1960)

⁵ **The Holy Bible: Holman Christian Standard Version** (Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, TN 2003)

In the church ruled by love—love for God and love for one another—all the gifts will to be exercised; but instead of chaos, there will be order. The Spirit of God will distribute His several gifts and He will reign over the exercise of those gifts. Those who seek to minister will be considerate of others, so that if one receives a revelation, they will receive opportunity to speak. There will not be many people clamouring to speak at the same time, but one at a time will speak. If someone insists upon speaking in a foreign language, that individual will first determine whether there is an interpreter present. The congregation will practise restraint in the exercise of their individual gifts.

Let me put formulate some rules for use of the gifts. God is pleased with **participatory** worship; God is pleased when all His people participate through singing, through relating what God is doing in their individual lives and through sharing what God is teaching through daily study of the Word and through meditation. In the Spirit-filled church, each individual member of the congregation is not only encouraged to participate, but each one eagerly and willingly participates—always focused on building others.

Most members will participate quietly at times, but all *will* participate. I say this because the gifts are not all “speaking” gifts. Many of the gifts are “serving” gifts, and some will be “sign” gifts. You will doubtless recall this division of gifts by recalling the apostolic instruction [e.g. **ROMANS 12:4-8**; **1 CORINTHIAN 12:27-30**; **1 PETER 4:10, 11**]. Every member will exercise the gift that the Spirit has entrusted for the benefit of all.

Not only will the worship be participatory, but worship will also be **considerate**. This does not mean that there will be no disagreement, but it does mean that the members in a church where the Spirit holds sway will demonstrate courtesy toward one another as each participates in corporate worship of the Lord Jesus. As one preaches (prophesies) the other preachers will weigh what is said. If there is need to correct error, it will be done immediately in order to ensure that no inaccuracy is permitted to linger in the mind of worshippers. Should one lift her hands in praise, others will be unconcerned. If one stands with hands clenched tightly, it will not be an occasion for concern. Each worshipper will think the best of others sharing in the worship of God, because each will love deeply from the heart the others who seek honour for the Lord.

Worship in the church where the Spirit of God holds sway will be **orderly**, revealing the character of God who brought light from the darkness. Paul concludes this portion of his instruction by admonishing the Corinthians that “all things should be done decently and in order” [**1 CORINTHIANS 14:40**]. A sense of peace will pervade worship in the church where the Spirit of God works in power. Planning cannot replace the presence of the Spirit of God, but neither does planned worship hinder His effective work among His people. Because the people love one another, and because they seek to honour one another, harmony will characterise all that is done in the church where the Spirit works.

In a letter to the Church in Colosse, the Apostle rejoices to see their “good order,” which is associated with “the firmness of [their] faith in Christ” [see **COLOSSIANS 2:5**]. Apparently, good order and firmness of faith are related. Those that are insecure in their faith seek some evidence that their faith is real. However, those who walk by faith rejoice in the knowledge that they are accepted in the Beloved Son of God. Such people do not need evidence, for the Word of God is sufficient evidence. Those who seek some evidence to verify their faith and who seek some evidence to verify the quality of their faith, discover to their chagrin that no evidence is ever sufficient. Those who accept the promise of Christ are confident in Him and need no other evidence other than His Word.

The worship of a Spirit-filled church will not be flashy or showy, but it will be **powerful**; worshippers will not draw attention to themselves, but outsiders coming in will be impressed by the presence of Christ. Paul rebuked the Corinthians because they were ignorant of real power. They were focused on what they considered powerful, but all their efforts were rendered showy and ostentatious through their abuse. They only drew attention to themselves. They all wanted what seemed to them to be the most amazing gift of all—speaking in another language. Each tried to speak in other languages as though such ecstatic speech were a mark of spirituality. However, others were not built up, and outsiders were not convicted through this gaudy display of “self.”

Contrast that truth with the apostolic insistence that where the message of Christ is delivered in power, and every member shares in echoing the message of life, “the secrets of the [outsider’s] heart [is] disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among [His people]” [1 CORINTHIANS 14:25]. Would you see outsiders convicted by the power of the Spirit? Then, begin to participate in the worship of God. Do you long to see people brought to faith, confess Christ and discover the joy that He gives? Then, come prepared to participate in the worship of God.

Above all else, the Spirit-filled church will be **constructive**. Worshippers will be taught and encouraged—each member will be edified [1 CORINTHIANS 14:31]. Our focus as Christians must always be to build others in the Faith. Indeed, we want to see sinners come to faith in the Son of God. We want to see those who are lost discover the love of Christ, receive the forgiveness of sin and find the peace and joy that characterises our lives as children of the Lord. However, in worship, we seek to build one another in this most Holy Faith. Our goal at worship is to edify the people of God.

If “the manifestation of the Spirit” is given to each of us and if that gifting is for “the common good” [see 1 CORINTHIANS 12:7], then we must be cautioned against acting as if the particular gift we may have received has been entrusted to us solely for our own benefit. If we are not building, we are destroying. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers all are responsible to edify the people of God. Undoubtedly, they have other responsibilities to the broader community of mankind; but their primary responsibility is to build the Body. Those gifted to prophesy, to teach or to exhort are to exercise their gift to build the people of God among whom they are appointed.

Administrators, those gifted to help and those gifted to serve are to make every effort to build the people of God where they worship. Those gifted to be generous are to bless the church where they worship through being generous. Those gifted as leaders and those gifted to perform acts of mercy are to lead and to encourage the people with whom they worship. The one gifted with faith must point fellow worshippers to look to Christ, just as those gifted to provide the utterance of wisdom and the utterance of knowledge are responsible to provide their “utterances” to the people among whom they worship.

The sign gifts—gifts of healing, working of miracles, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in various kinds of languages and interpreting languages—are all given so they can be exercised among the people where the gifted individual worships. ***Fellow worshippers are to be the primary beneficiary of our spiritual gifts.*** Moreover, the exercise of our gifts must result in building up the saints at worship. There is no provision in the instruction the Apostle has delivered for us either to build ourselves or to refuse the exercise of a legitimate gift. The test of a gift is whether the exercise of that gift builds up others within the Body of Christ and therefore honours the Lord Jesus.

All that I have observed concerning worship—the characteristics of spiritual worship, that it is **participatory, considerate, orderly, powerful and constructive**—is simply demonstration of the multiple facets of responsible worship. Responsible worship is nothing less than the outward demonstration of responsible service. All God's people are called to a life of service—serving one another in a spirit of humility toward God and in love toward one another.

KNOW THE PURPOSE OF GOD'S MERCIES — “So that the church may be built up...” Clearly, each Christian is responsible to make every effort to build up the church. This means that we are to endeavour lovingly to strengthen one another. This means that we must train ourselves to obey the neglected injunction of **PHILIPPIANS 2:3, 4**: “Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

The Apostle's words set the stage allowing us to grapple with the essence of our life—to grow toward Christ. Therefore, he continues by writing, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus” [**PHILIPPIANS 2:5**]. We might say, “Have the attitude of Christ Jesus.” Jesus said He came “to seek and to save the lost” [**LUKE 19:10**]; so, we must seek the salvation of the lost. Christ said He was among His disciples as “one who serves” [**LUKE 22:27**]. Our Lord “came to serve” [**MATTHEW 20:28**]; and so we must cultivate the servant's heart. The spirit of service should be honoured among all the saints of God, but especially should each Christian accept responsibility to serve through using the gift(s) that the Spirit of God chose to give to benefit the Body of Christ where God sets that individual.

When we come together to worship, I urge you to come determined to serve. Come prepared to exercise the gift that God entrusted to your care; come prepared to build up others. If we each do this, there will be no more complaining that wearies the preacher as when the self-centred saint bleats, “I was not fed”; as when the petty tyrant grumbles, “I was neglected”; as when the dyspeptic drone complains, “I was not properly recognised.” Too many modern Christians are suffering “I” strain; they have become so focused on fulfilling their own desires that they fail to worship—they certainly fail to employ the gift that God entrusted to them. Consequently, such saints become increasingly discouraged and they find themselves farther, ever farther, from Christ.

I have oftentimes spoken of the unique role each Christian has received; and I now speak of the great purpose God has assigned to us. The Body of Christ will reflect diversity because God is creating His Body—not His mouth or His hand, but His Body. Each member of the Body is enjoined to realise the great purpose for which God gifted him or her—building up the Body of Christ. We accomplish this mighty purpose as we do what God has charged us to do; we fulfil our ministry as we serve one another in love.

What would happen if each one listening to this message today was to determine that during the coming week he or she would invest five minutes at the start of each day considering how to build fellow Christians? What would happen if each of us were to pledge before God that we would spend an additional five minutes thinking of how we can strengthen our fellow members of the Body? Then, throughout each day of the coming week we would pray from time-to-time, asking God to make our worship sweet with His presence and pleading with God to reveal His powerful Spirit as we meet. What would happen? Would we not see revival? Would Christ not be glorified?

I read of great revivals in years past, and I long for the movement of the Spirit among us. I read of the movement of the Spirit of God in Saskatoon in the sixties, of the movement of the Spirit of God during the eighties at Asbury Seminary in Kentucky and at Southwestern Baptist Seminary, and I wonder, why not now and why not here? Should we not long for the Spirit of God to work among us? Should we not seek to prepare ourselves to honour the Lord Christ so that He will send His Spirit to work among us in power? Should we not seek to build one another in this Holy Faith so that Christ will be glorified here in this place and at this time?

Some who are called by the Name of the Son of God among us need to turn from the pursuit of their own self-interests; they need to consider again the welfare of the Body of Christ. Some listening today need to repent of the wickedness of grumbling, repent of the wickedness of living as though Christ will not return, repent of the evil that lulls us to grow casual in the service of the King. Here is an altar. Now is the time to begin to do those things that honour God. Come, now. Come, and may God give you strength and power to fulfil His will to serve others.

Others who listen to this message need to be born from above and into the Kingdom of God. Such people may be church members, but they are compelled to confess that there is no practical evidence that they have been saved. Professed love is meaningless, if you have no love. Professing a changed life is meaningless if one's life is actually unchanged. Each one must accept the sacrifice of Christ the King so that her sins can be forgiven and so that she can be born again into life eternal.

The message I deliver is a plea for each individual who is an outsider to believe. That plea may be found in **2 CORINTHIANS 5:17-6:2**. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

"Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says,

‘In a favourable time I listened to you,
and in a day of salvation I have helped you.’

“Behold, now is the favourable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.”

I urge all who hear this message to receive this grace of God on the basis of God's gracious promise. "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved... For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'" [**ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13**].

Believe this message. Live the life that you have confessed. Honour Christ the King. Amen.