

THE PURSUIT OF LOVE IN 1 CORINTHIANS 12–14

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“Pursue love.” So the apostle Paul summarizes his guidance for Christians in Corinth who were struggling to love one another well while worshipping together (1 Cor 14:1). Paul discusses this complex subject across three full chapters of his letter to them (1 Cor 12–14). Arguably, these chapters form Paul’s most detailed discussion of love and its formation among Christians in his corpus of letters.

This essay explores Paul’s understanding of the formation of love. How, both theologically and practically, were believers to grow in love during their dysfunctional worship gatherings? For Paul, I will argue, the pursuit of love begins with recognizing where one stands in relation to God and thus in relationship to others. To pursue love, one must recognize God’s transcendent and immanent involvement in one’s interactions with others in Christian community. One pursues love practically by ongoing interaction with God in and through one’s interactions with others, giving and receiving love within the body of Christ.²

Throughout this essay’s interpretive survey of these three chapters in 1 Corinthians,³ I give special attention to the relationship between divine and human agencies in love’s formation, a subject which seems to be pivotal for Paul’s discussion. It is impossible, Paul would say, to understand and participate in the formation of love without rightly understanding how human beings are to relate to God and to one another.

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² I am aware that these chapters of 1 Corinthians are controversial, not just with respect to the historical reconstruction of Christian worship practices in the first century, but also with respect to their significance for contemporary Christian theology and worship practice. Regardless of one’s perspective on the manifestation of spiritual gifts today, for example, I believe that these chapters offer a fundamental paradigm for the pursuit of love as Christians in our interactions with others and in our interaction with God. A Christian does not have to attend a church in which tongues are spoken in order to pursue love in an ordered way. Similarly, a cessationist Christian, I would argue, pursues love within the same theological order established in 1 Corinthians 12–14.

³ There are many exegetical details and debates in secondary literature that I have chosen to pass over for the sake of presenting a concise overview. For further detail, see Justin R. Allison, *Saving One Another: Paul and Philodemus on Moral Formation in Community*, Ancient Philosophy & Religion, 3 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2020), ch. 7.

More specifically, I propose that one may best understand the grammar of Paul's theological arguments in these chapters, and *therefore* the nature of love's formation, by utilizing the following basic assumptions about divine and human agencies and how they relate as a starting point (a starting point shared by much of the Christian theological tradition).⁴ God's agency is unique, transcendent, and infinite by comparison to human agencies. God's agency is not simply a super-powerful version of human agency, nor simply the opposite of human agency, but is of a qualitatively different, unique, kind. This means, for example, that when Paul discusses God's acting alongside or within human acting (e.g., 1 Thess 2:13; 1 Cor 12:7; Phil 2:12–13), Paul does not describe a composite act, i.e., a collaborative effort in which God does a portion, and the human agent does the rest. God does not necessarily compete for space in his relationships with creaturely agency. Nor does Paul describe a divinization of human acting in such passages, such that a human act is transmuted into (or reduced to) an instance of divine acting. Rather, God is the creator and sustainer of genuine, integral human agency, and can act within human agency while maintaining its integrity (i.e., compatibilism, or *concursum dei*).

I cannot offer in this essay a robust, exegetical defense across Paul's corpus that he would have shared this theological framework. Nevertheless, I intend my reading of 1 Corinthians 12–14 to be a demonstration that Paul used this framework here, and that this framework provokes interpretive questions which lead the reader towards clearer understanding of Paul's theology and argumentation.

The present volume of the *Bulletin for Ecclesial Theology* focuses upon critical interaction with the field of positive psychology as an avenue by which Christians might better understand virtue formation, specifically, love. Thus, at the end of this essay I bring my reading of Paul to bear on the questions of whether, and in what ways, a dual-processing model of moral cognition (to be explained further below) is applicable to Paul's understanding of love's formation.⁵

⁴ I do not intend this starting point to be idiosyncratic or innovative, but to be a general starting point shared by many interpreters in Christian tradition. My understanding of these points in this essay has been heavily influenced by the work of, e.g., John M. G. Barclay, "By the Grace of God I Am What I Am: Grace and Agency in Philo and Paul," in *Divine and Human Agency in Paul and His Cultural Environment*, eds. John M. G. Barclay and Simon Gathercole, LNTS, vol. 335 (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 157; R. W. L. Moberly, *Prophecy and Discernment*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine, 14 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1–38; Susan Grove Eastman, *Paul and the Person: Reframing Paul's Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 160–62; Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988); Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key, Current Issues in Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 274–301.

⁵ In May 2021, the St. Basil Fellowship of the CPT held a symposium centered on formation of the Christian virtue of love. Specifically, the symposium discussed the theory and practice of virtue formation, as well as how a dual-processing model of cognition might fertilize a Christian understanding of love's formation. The original form of this essay was drafted as a contribution to that symposium.

I. RECOGNIZING WHERE ONE STANDS: IN THE BODY OF CHRIST (1 CORINTHIANS 12)

Across these chapters of 1 Corinthians, Paul seems to be responding to a situation in which some believers used spiritual gifts to foster division. When the community gathered for worship, it devolved into a chaotic mess, if a mirror-reading of Paul's guidance in chapters 12–14 is any indication. Some believers would spontaneously use their gift of tongues despite the fact that others in the gathering couldn't understand what was being said. Some would interrupt others or make it impossible for others to contribute. It seems likely that the use of specific gifts, like tongues, was highly valued in such a way that it led to the devaluation of those with other gifts, or at least those who couldn't speak or understand tongues.

Paul begins to address these issues with a ground-clearing sweep. Against those who might claim specific supernatural experiences or abilities as the foremost evidence of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, Paul first of all affirms that *anyone* who confesses Jesus as Lord does so only by the Holy Spirit (12:2–3). Paul aims to establish that all who make this confession stand in the Holy Spirit, not just some, a point he will continue to develop throughout chapter twelve.

Paul then develops this claim further with reference to the gifts of the Spirit (12:4–11) and in the process offers a condensed lesson on the relationship between divine and human agency. In 1 Corinthians 12:4–11 and throughout the rest of the chapter, Paul aims his discussion of divine and human involvement to establish the indispensability of human relationships within the Christian community in which God transcendentally acts.⁶ The first and foremost agent in the exchange of gifts is God himself—Spirit, Son, Father (12:4–6). God is the Lord of the gifts, who dispenses them to individuals according to his own choosing (12:11). Furthermore, God's agency is not limited to the giving of gifts, as though God gives humans a supernatural ability, and then ceases to be involved, allowing humans to use the gift independently as they see fit. This would be a misunderstanding of spiritual gifts and their exchange. Rather, God is active in the exchange itself, within the relationships and actions taken by the human agents who participate in giving and receiving. God “works all things in everyone” (12:6; cf. 12:11).⁷ How does he do this?

The nature of a spiritual gift, as defined by Paul, requires God's transcendent agency *within* the exchange of the gifts between human agents, not just as an external source of supernatural capacities. In 12:7, Paul summarizes, “To each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” Fundamentally, a spiritual gift is a “manifestation of the Spirit” (objective genitive), i.e., a display of God for the benefit of others. This manifestation of God facilitates interaction between God and those who receive a gift, and this divine-human interaction is fundamental to

⁶ In chapter 13, Paul will aim this same discussion towards clarifying the *transcendent* character of God's involvement in the gifts.

⁷ All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

the “benefit” of the gift. As a person receives a gift, they do so on two levels: (1) they receive the gift and its benefits as offered by the human agent within their ongoing relationship, and (2) they receive the gift as an encounter with God himself, who is revealing himself to the recipient in and through the gift and the giver for the recipient’s benefit (see 14:24–25 for a paradigmatic example). In order for a gift to be a gift, then, it must be a means by which God reveals himself to others for their benefit. God is transcendentally involved within the gift exchange process amongst human agents, and it is only because of this transcendent involvement that the gifts are actually gifts, i.e., not just patterns of human interaction but manifestations of God himself which create relational interactions with God as believers relate to one another.

However, God’s involvement in the gifts and their exchange does not displace or render irrelevant the human agencies by which believers share the gifts. Paul assumes that when the gifts are used, they are used by real human agents. Gifts are not pure divine acts disconnected from any human acting. Rather, the gifts are given through human acts of faith, laying on of hands, spoken words, uses of the intellect to know and discern. It is not as though, for example, God must supernaturally commandeer each individual who speaks on behalf of God, disconnecting their agency through some ecstatic state, in order for their speech to be a means by which God encounters others for their benefit. Nor is it the case that God’s self-communication rides along like a divine pill stuffed inside the gift, effectively separate and independent of the human gift’s content or character. Spiritual gifts are not *only* God’s speech or God’s act; they are fully human speech and acts through which God transcendentally reveals himself. This kind of relationship between divine and human agency seems presupposed when Paul discusses the discernment of gifts. When one member shares a gift, others receive it with a communal process of discernment, indicating that no one can claim to transcend the discernment process, to offer pure divine revelation unconditioned by their humanity (14:29; to be examined further below).

God’s activity in the gifts does not displace human agencies, and neither does God’s relating with believers in the gifts displace their relationships with one another. Paul will go on to emphasize this fact in the remainder of chapter twelve because he sees it as one of the most important implications of God’s transcendent involvement in spiritual gift exchange (12:12–31). God’s agency establishes the *necessity* of these human relationships in the congregation because God himself is the one who has created this particular Corinthian community of believers just as he wanted (12:18, 24). The relationships of the body are the natural environment in which gifts are exchanged over time. Paul repeatedly stresses that every member of the community plays a necessary part for the life of the whole by virtue of the benefit God brings through each one. No member can presume, because they do not have a particular kind of gift, that they do not have a part to play in the community, or that God does not use them to benefit others, or that God’s activity through others renders their contribution irrelevant or redundant (12:14–20). Nor can members legitimately conclude that

they do not need others simply because they deem others less important or significant (perhaps thinking, for example, that what others have to offer is inconsequential, or that one has matured sufficiently so as to no longer need what others have to offer). Rather, all members are dependent upon one another for the benefit which God works through each one (12:21–26).

One might object to the egalitarian claims of this reading on the basis of Paul's comments at the end of the chapter, in which he acknowledges a God-ordained social hierarchy within the community ("God has appointed...first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then..." 12:28). However, rather than contradicting the interdependence or indispensability of all members, I would argue that Paul is essentially reaffirming that spiritual gifts do not bypass normal group relationship dynamics in which some members take leading roles by virtue of personal maturity, experience, relational investment, authority, spiritual gifting, skill, etc. (cf. 16:15–16, describing local leadership in Corinth).⁸ Ultimately, to disregard a particular member of the community is effectively to disregard God who is at work in that member for the good of others, whether or not that member is an established leader.

One might wonder whether it is *always* the case that believers are interdependent upon one another's gifts. Could not a believer grow to sufficient maturity so as not to need others in this way? It seems that God's transcendent involvement in the gift exchange is the reason why believers have an ongoing dependence upon one another in the body of Christ, a need rooted in the bedrock of their faith as Christians. Believers need each other's gifts not simply because they occasionally find themselves sick and needing healing, or confused and needing discernment, or prideful and needing rebuke, or despondent and needing a call to worship. Believers do depend on each other in these ways, but the benefit offered in the meeting of these needs is not reducible simply to the human exchange of benefit. If this were the case, one could legitimately conclude that Christians need others' gifts only if they are sick or immature, but not if they are mature and healthy, for example. This would unravel Paul's contention that believers are meant to be interdependent in this way.

However, when a believer receives a gift, they receive it as a gift from a particular member of the community *and* as an encounter with God himself (as outlined above). Because God is transcendentally involved in the exchange of the gifts, no believer can claim that they do not stand in need of others' gifts. The benefit on offer is encounter with God himself, in and through the gift. There is no level of health or maturity as a Christian that would make a person no longer in need of the encounter with God offered in others' gifts, no longer bound to listen and obey as God speaks. To conclude that one had arrived at this state of self-sufficiency would be

⁸ The fact that God does the appointing of leaders does not mean these personal leadership qualities are irrelevant, or that the human agencies and relationships establishing such leaders are not involved.

a form of idolatry.⁹ Rather, giving gifts and receiving others' gifts in faith is a fundamental means by which a believer lives a life of faith in God, i.e., of trusting, obedient relating with God across the course of one's life.

One might summarize Paul's initial intervention in chapter twelve as a wake-up call for the Corinthian believers to recognize where they stand as Christians. They stand within the body of Christ. They need to recognize that the other believers who stand alongside them are also filled with the Holy Spirit, despite their differences in the kind of gifts they might offer and in how they are received (e.g., with appreciation, or derision, or confusion). The purpose of a gift is to benefit others in the community by facilitating others' encounter with God, not self-promotion. Because God has gifted all and is at work in all, no one can disregard others or promote oneself on the basis of exhibiting/not exhibiting a particular gift. Rather, believers are to recognize how they need one another, by God's design, for living a life of faith in God, who is constantly interacting with believers through their interactions with one another.

Bound up with this recognition of one's place within the Christian community, of course, is a recognition of one's standing before God, who has established the community and is at work within it. This standing before God is the main subject of chapter thirteen.¹⁰ In this next chapter, Paul gets to the heart of the matter as he helps believers properly recognize where they are standing in relation to God: in his love.

II. RECOGNIZING WHERE ONE STANDS: IN GOD'S LOVE (1 CORINTHIANS 13)

Paul's aim in chapter 13 is to communicate that pursuing love is fundamentally a matter of recognizing where one stands in relation to God. Believers stand in God's love. God's love shown to believers establishes the path of love to walk in their relationships with him and with others. As I will argue, a core element of this recognition is acknowledging God's transcendence—his permanent, qualitative otherness in relation to believers. Recognizing this qualitative difference between God and believers enables them to love God and love others in an ordered way.

For a chapter that never explicitly mentions God or Jesus Christ, this interpretation may seem excessively theological. One might contend that the goals of this chapter are far more straightforward and practical, not theological: (1) to argue that the virtue of love is the ultimate norm for believers' actions toward one another (vv. 1–3, 8–13), and (2) to describe love in action so that believers know how to chase after it when they interact

⁹ Whether they thought about it in precisely this way or not, this kind of self-sufficient mindset supported the behavior of Corinthian believers who refused to stop speaking in unintelligible tongues when gathered with others for worship. See further discussion on this theme below, in my comments on chapter 13.

¹⁰ In many ways my understanding of Paul's claims in chapter 13 has influenced my reading of chapter 12. I present this overview in a linear fashion, but in reality, I am reading from chapter 13 outward.

together in worship (vv. 4–7), a subject Paul will go on to elaborate in the next chapter. In verses 1–3, Paul argues that love norms all Christian behavior: there is no behavior or ability one might display that is valuable or significant in itself if it is not offered in love. In vv. 4–7, Paul catalogues relevant characteristics of love to be sought after in believers' interactions with one another in worship. Similarly, in vv. 8–13, Paul reiterates that love trumps the spiritual gifts, specifically. Love never ends, but gifts like tongues and prophecy do. Spiritually gifted knowledge is never complete, but always "in part," like partial answers to an unsolved riddle, but love is not partial in this way. When we become mature believers, we grow out of such partial knowledge, and embrace love instead (vv. 9–12). On this reading of chapter 13, Paul is basically telling the Corinthians to commit to the norm of love for one's actions, and to start putting love into practice with these characteristics of love as a guide.

I argue that there is more going on here. Chasing after love most certainly involves analyzing present behavior in accordance with the standard of love, modifying behavior, and practicing new behaviors. Learning to love well does not involve something less than taking these practical steps, but it does involve *more* than these steps. In order to love well, believers must first recognize where they stand in God's love, embracing a new perspective of who they are in relation to God, and thus in relation to others. This recognition of God entails more than embracing an abstract ideal of love as the moral standard for one's actions. Failing to reckon adequately with God at this point could start the pursuit of love down the wrong path, a path that could reduce the problem of love to the practicalities of human virtue formation. My task in this section, then, is to clarify the theological dimensions of love in this chapter, and to argue that this recognition of God is as significant for the pursuit of love as I claim.

Based on the way Paul describes love in this chapter, it seems that his talk about love necessarily involves talk about God. Paul claims that all spiritual gifts, knowledge, and mountain-heaving faith are meaningless, "nothing" without love (13:1–2). If these spiritual gifts are given by God himself, can human love in itself perform this role as the ground and norm for Spirit-empowered behavior? Love in chapter 13 is a perfect ideal, it "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (13:7). Love "never ends," it remains even after the End, when God's knowledge of believers replaces their abolished partial knowledge (13:8, 12–13).

Several clues in the rest of 1 Corinthians also indicate that God defines love for Paul. Earlier in 1 Corinthians, Paul uses Jesus's death for believers as an example of love to guide their interactions in relation to idol food (8:2, 11–13; 10:33–11:1). He also stresses that Christians cannot claim they have anything apart from God and his grace (1 Cor 4:7). Paul and other apostolic workers are "nothing" in comparison to God who causes growth in the church (3:7; believers are "in Christ," "from God," 1:30; Paul is who he is by God's grace, 1 Cor 15:10).

Paul is certainly concerned with shaping human patterns of love in chapter 13, but he is directing the Corinthians' attention to see that their

love participates in God's love. Their love participates in God's love in at least three ways: (1) a believer's love is a response to God's love shown to them in Jesus Christ, their calling by God (1 Cor 1:2, 9; 7:17, 27; 1 Thess 1:3–5); (2) a believer's love is defined and normed by God's love shown in Christ (1 Cor 8:11; 10:33–11:1; Rom 5:8; 8:35, 39); (3) a believer's love is a possibility created and empowered in an ongoing way by the Spirit, i.e., a believer loves by participating in an ongoing relationship with God (1 Cor 2:6–16; 4:7; 15:10).¹¹

What difference does this involvement of God make for our understanding of chapter 13, especially concerning the pursuit of love? How is it that paying attention to God's involvement in love helps us avoid starting down a false path? Closer attention to verses 8–13 provides the answers.

In this final section of chapter 13, Paul transitions to discuss love, spiritual gifts, and knowledge in relation to the eschatological End, the second coming of Jesus (described, e.g., as the arrival of "the perfect" to abolish what is incomplete, or seeing God face to face). In light of the mis-valuation of spiritual gifts in Corinth, Paul seems to be putting the gifts in their eschatological place. Paul contrasts love, on the one hand, with prophecy, tongues, and present knowledge, on the other.¹² Love never ends (v. 8), it remains even after the End has come (v.13), but spiritual gifts and knowledge will be abolished (v. 8, 9, 11, the language used to describe the destruction of evil powers in the present, see 1 Cor 2:6; 15:24, 26). Paul uses three metaphors to describe gifts and present knowledge: they are "partial" (v. 9–10), they are like a child's speaking, reasoning, and understanding in comparison to an adult's (v. 11), and they are like indirect and unresolved sight, "now we see by means of a mirror, in a riddle" (v. 12, my translation). The burden of these metaphors is to communicate that the gifts, and indeed all present knowing as believers, is qualitatively different from what will be in the End, when believers see God face to face, when their present knowing is abolished, and they know with God's own knowing (v. 12). The difference is not just that believers presently lack all the data that will be available in the End, but that their present epistemological perspective as a whole is qualitatively different from God's own knowing.¹³ Love, on the other hand, "remains," it is not abolished like present knowing and the gifts.

¹¹ For demonstration of a similar understanding, see Karl Barth, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, trans. H. J. Stenning, reprint, 1924 (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 79–88; Thomas Söding, *Das Liebesgebot bei Paulus: Die Mahnung zur Agape im Rahmen der paulinischen Ethik*, NTabh 26 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1995), 124–29.

¹² Some interpreters understand the referent of "knowledge" in this passage to be charismatic, supernaturally revealed knowledge, not knowing in general. Ian W. Scott, *Implicit Epistemology in the Letters of Paul*, WUNT 2,205 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 67; Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 644–48. I would argue that if Paul were only concerned with a certain type of knowledge (e.g., the content of prophetic speech or tongues), then there would be forms of human knowing that are not conditioned by love. This would seem to run against the grain of his key contentions in chapter 13.

¹³ Paul W. Gooch, *Partial Knowledge: Philosophical Studies in Paul* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 146–47.

Paul's point, I suggest, is that recognizing one's present "partial knowing" in relation to God and thus in relation to others is a fundamental step in an ordered pursuit of love. In order to pursue love, one must recognize that God is transcendent. One must recognize that all spiritual gifts and all forms of knowledge as a believer are "in part," i.e., they are always incomplete in comparison to God's own knowing. Believers stand in a relationship of love with a transcendent God who is always qualitatively different from them. God remains transcendent even as believers live their lives in this relationship of love, e.g., as they come to know him more deeply, as they grow in Christian moral character, as they interact with him through the gifts of others, as they give gifts from him to others. Believers stand in a relationship of continual dependence upon God, and thus upon others, because God has chosen to interact with believers in an ongoing way by revealing himself in their exchange of gifts.

It would be a denial of God's transcendence, and a denial of a believer's dependence upon God, to claim that one's knowledge or one's spiritual gifts are not "in part," i.e., not in need of God's agency to sustain or to use, not requiring the constant discipline of God's love, not open to development, challenge, or discernment, not qualitatively different than God's own knowing, not ultimately to be abolished and replaced by God's own knowing. Believers must recognize that, because of their partial knowing, they always have a need to interact with God, to receive from God as he reveals himself through others' gifts for their continual growth. To live as though one does not need others in this ongoing way is essentially to claim that one's knowledge is complete, not partial, to claim that the End has come when it hasn't yet.

One might object that this reading seems too skeptical. *All knowledge* as a believer is partial, immature? Doesn't the Holy Spirit himself reveal God's own mind to believers (2:9–13)? Didn't Paul claim that believers have the "mind of Christ" itself, by the Spirit (2:16)? Furthermore, Paul urges the Corinthian believers to "grow up" several times throughout 1 Corinthians (e.g., 14:20; 3:1–4), implying that one eventually can grow out of one's immaturity. Doesn't love "remain" now *and* into the eschaton, implying that as believers participate in love their actions align with God's own knowing to be revealed (13:8, 13)?¹⁴

It seems to be precisely Paul's point to emphasize this tension between present, Spirit-empowered life, on one hand, and the eschatological future brought by God alone. In doing so, Paul is likely combatting some Corinthian believers' dysfunctional understanding of the Christian life, one that assumes no qualitative distinction between a believer's present knowing

¹⁴ Paul is certainly no skeptic. Within chapter 13 there are two major indications of continuity between the present and the eschatological future: (1) Christians will still be themselves, and God will still be God; (2) Christians will continue to know and love God then, though in a radically different way. It seems clear, as well, that Paul assumes human moral character exists and that this character should develop into maturity, into likeness to Christ. My contention, however, is that Paul understands these continuities as anchored in God's ongoing relationship of love with believers, not in their present knowledge or moral maturity.

and God's own knowing. If *God* gives one a spiritual gift, one might argue, it communicates *God's* authority, *God's* knowledge; this divine gift is thus not answerable or accountable to any *human* knowledge or human relationships, even those within the body of Christ. Ultimately, however this is a form of idolatry; it is a refusal to recognize the qualitative difference between oneself and the transcendent God.

Thus, the pursuit of love as a believer is not *simply* a matter of analyzing present behavior by means of one's knowledge of the virtue of love, and then developing new behaviors that more closely align with it (again, pursuing love *must* involve this process, but it is not *reducible* to this process). Paul's point is *not* to promote one Spirit-empowered human ability—loving—over all the others because loving is somehow exempt from partial knowing, an exception to the eschatological boundary he has drawn. If that were Paul's goal, he would be committing the same misstep that the Corinthian believers made in their use of spiritual gifts. He would be championing believers' present acts of love (e.g., patience, endurance, rejoicing in the truth) as *divine*, unconditioned by the humanity of the believer, i.e., as not needing to be disciplined in love by dependence on God and on others, as not needing discernment and critique by others, as not being always conditioned by the qualitative difference between believer's knowing and God's knowing (and thus a believer's loving and God's loving). Rather, the pursuit of love involves a recognition that a believer can never achieve complete knowledge, or perfect love, on this side of the eschaton, because a believer is not God.¹⁵

The pursuit of love is, fundamentally, faithful participation in an ongoing relationship with God, a God who is always qualitatively different from believers, a God who continually interacts with believers he loves in and through their interactions with one another. To recognize this is to pursue love because it is recognizing the truth about who God is (the transcendent God of love) and the truth about who believers are (the human recipients of his love). Because the pursuit of love is participation in a relationship with this transcendent God, believers know that their moral character and acting is always "in part," it can never become so mature as to be a substitute for their ongoing interaction with God as he reveals himself to them. Because the pursuit of love is participation in relationship with this God, believers who pursue love maintain a continual openness in love toward others, listening for God's address to them which would challenge their present practices, leading to their repentance and obedience in faith.¹⁶

¹⁵ Believers' love "remains" beyond their present partial knowing into the eschaton in the sense that when believers love, they participate in a relationship beyond themselves with God and thus with others. Love's "remaining" into the eschaton is not based on the present perfection of a believer's acts of love (these will be abolished), but on the fact that believers are known and loved by God.

¹⁶ This "partial" knowing seems to be caused by human sin, as Paul's language suggests (see 14:20, 37–38, and the stark warnings of 13:1–3). However, it is also an implication of learning how to live in the present time of "already" and "not yet," and thus of relating to the

The pursuit of love is indeed a process of moral formation involving analysis and modification of behavior, but this process takes place as an ongoing interaction with God as he reveals himself through others. Believers have the possibility of pursuing love because God has established a relationship of love with them, a relationship in which they have ongoing interaction with God by the Spirit in and through their interactions with others. God's perfect love is the moral standard to be pursued, but this standard is pursued not as a moral ideal that can be systematized, but as an ongoing interaction with God. Thus, because the pursuit of love takes place in this ongoing interaction with the transcendent God, the process has no temporal end point. Love is *pursued*, it is not captured in categories of human moral character or knowing, because the pursuit of love is the pursuit of God.

III. PRACTICE: PURSUING LOVE IN THE EXCHANGE OF GIFTS (1 CORINTHIANS 14)

In chapter 14, Paul offers practical guidelines for pursuing love in the exchange of spiritual gifts. My aim in what follows is to show how these guidelines operate according to Paul's theological understanding of spiritual gifts and the pursuit of love, as presented thus far. The guidelines shape an environment in which gifts can be given and received as gifts from one believer to others within their ongoing relationships, as well as gifts that provide opportunity for faithful interaction with God in and through this human exchange. Generally speaking, Paul's guidelines may be boiled down to three: (1) gifts must be offered to benefit others, (2) no one may exclude or disrupt the contributions of others (e.g., by using their gift, or speaking out of turn),¹⁷ (3) all believers must take each gift offered seriously, i.e., they must receive it critically as a gift from the human giver and from God.

Paul's first and foremost guideline is that all gifts should be given to benefit others, not to benefit oneself (14:1–25). This is the rationale for his repeated rejection of the use of tongues which are not interpreted, and his promotion of prophecy as a gift to be sought after. Uninterpreted tongues are unintelligible by others, they bring others no benefit, and thus the purpose of offering them in gathered worship cannot be to benefit others, but to benefit oneself in some way (14:1–2, 4, 6–25). Prophecy, on the other hand, is not the *only* gift that can benefit others, or one that benefits others best (that would seem to conflict with Paul's claims in chapter twelve), but it is a gift whose form aligns explicitly with the purpose of a spiritual gift, i.e., it is one person speaking on behalf of God *for the benefit of others* (14:3–5, 19, 24–25). Prophecy is thus rhetorically useful for Paul to promote in

transcendent, eternal God as a creature. The distinction is not just between sin and grace, but between nature and grace as well.

¹⁷ I do not treat 14:33–35 in this essay, but my approach is to understand Paul's instructions there as a response to disruptive speech by some women in the community, not as an absolute prohibition of women's participation in gift exchange (a participation that seems presupposed in 11:5).

opposition to uninterpreted tongues. However, if tongues are interpreted so that others can benefit from what has been said, tongues and prophecy are equally legitimate and valid gifts (14:5, 18, 39).

Not only must gifts be offered for the benefit of others, but they must be offered in such a way that they do not exclude or override the contributions of others. Paul discusses this general principle in 14:26–33.

Paul assumes that when the community is gathered for worship, “each one” has an opportunity to share a gift of whatever sort for the benefit of others (14:26). No gift is excluded, even tongues, which has become especially problematic (cf. 14:39). There is not a requirement for each person to contribute at each gathering, but there is at least an assumption that each person should have the opportunity.

There is a limit placed on the number of those who can offer certain gifts, esp. tongues and prophetic speech, a limit presumably that applies for the duration of the meeting (14:27–29).¹⁸ Paul limits the offering of tongues and prophetic speech to two or three persons each. Presumably this limit is a reaction to the exuberance of some believers who continued offering additional examples of gifts that had already been offered, disrupting the meeting and the contributions of others. Perhaps this limit also ensures a diversity of exchanged gifts, so that those who do not offer tongues or prophecy may have an opportunity to share.

Paul stresses that gifts should be offered “one by one” (14:27, 31). This guideline ensures that each gift has adequate opportunity to function well, i.e., to be offered without competing for attention, and to be received by all with the seriousness it deserves. Paul’s comment about yielding the floor, so to speak, if another person has something to say from the Lord (14:31), is an example of this rule put into action.¹⁹

All gifts must be critically received through a communal process of discernment in order to function properly (14:29). Paul describes one example of this reception in 14:24–25, applied to a non-Christian who finds himself encountering God as others speak prophetically in worship. As explained above, this reception is essentially a reception on two levels, divine and human: a reception of the gifts offered by the human agents in relationship with them, and a reception of God’s interaction in and through the gifts offered. The outsider in 14:24–25 accepts the prophetic speech of the believers as true and applicable to himself, but in doing so he encounters and worships God and declares that God is in their midst. Previous guidelines limiting the number of speakers and ensuring their individuation help to provide adequate time and attention to the reception of each gift offered.

¹⁸ It is also possible that this limit to two or three speakers of tongues and prophecy is the maximum number allowed before a process of interpretation or critical reception.

¹⁹ Paul’s aside that “the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets” (14:32, NRSV) seems to be an anticipatory counter to those who might claim that they cannot stop speaking because God has taken control of them. If you are in fact a prophet, Paul seems to say, you will have the ability to stop speaking to allow others to contribute or to critically receive your message.

After two or three prophets speak, Paul directs, “let the others weigh what is said” (NRSV, 14:29). It seems Paul refers to a communal discernment process here. There would have been members who led this discernment process, who had the discreet gift of discernment or simply more maturity and wisdom, but it seems that all members would have actively received what was said in order for the gift to be taken seriously as human speech through which God speaks. Some limit the referent of “others” to other *prophets* in the community, but this does not seem justified given Paul’s assumption earlier in 1 Corinthians that believers are filled with the Spirit and can “judge” all things (2:15, ἀνακρίνω [anakrinō]), and Paul’s exhortations to communal discernment in other letters (see δοκιμάζω [dokimazō] in 1 Thess 5:20–21, concerning prophetic speech explicitly; cf. Rom 12:2; Phil 1:9–10). It is difficult to assess how long this discernment would have taken in a given meeting, and how explicit it was (Was it a detailed examination and debate of each claim made, or was it a brief moment for individual consideration and possible response? Perhaps it varied by circumstance). Yet it seems that it would have been a fully human process enabled and directed by relationship with God and others, just like the exchange of the gifts itself, a process that involved, e.g., rational argumentation, appeal to scripture, appeal to relational authority, etc.

Given that every gift offered is a manifestation of God for others’ benefit, an occasion by which God encounters others through the human believer offering their gift of whatever sort (12:7), it seems this discernment process would have applied to all other gifts as well (not just prophecy), whether explicitly or implicitly. Perhaps prophetic speech was lengthier and more theologically complex than, say, a prayer of thanksgiving to God or a hymn (14:16–17, 26), and this complexity required a deliberate moment of critical reception. If, however, it is true that all gifts, even simple acts of service, are human acts through which God reveals himself, then receiving each gift entails a moment of critical reception.

This process of reception has important implications for what it means to offer a gift in love. No one can claim that their speech or act is so aligned with God’s character that it does not require a process of communal reception by others. To offer a gift in love is to assume that one’s own gift is “in part,” just like one’s present knowing. It is to recognize that the gift is qualitatively distinct from God’s revelation of himself through the gift (recall the comments on chapter thirteen above). The one who offers the gift is not in control of the gift’s reception. The gift provides an opportunity for the recipient to interact with God, an interaction that is distinct from the interaction between giver and recipient. All gifts face the possibility that those who receive it may reject it, rightly or wrongly, as not of God. The one who offers a gift in love which is wrongly rejected by others will persist in seeking their good and will make further attempts (love “endures all,” 13:7). The one who attempts to offer a gift, but finds it rightly rejected by others (e.g., Paul or other local church leaders rejecting tongues spoken at communal worship without regard for others), can respond in love by recognizing that they encounter God’s love in and through the community’s

discernment of their gift, leading to the giver's growth and learning through this failure.

Even Paul's own claims throughout chapter 14 are subject to critical reception by the recipients of his letter, and thus his comments are an act of persuasion, an argument for a particular position over against conflicting opinions, a fact he draws attention to at the very end of this section (14:37–38). Paul seems clearly convinced that he is speaking in alignment with God's love by the Spirit, but he does not assume his recipients will automatically receive his words as God's words without a process of critical reception (and he was right not to, given that this letter seems to have led to greater relational tension between Paul and his audience, as 2 Corinthians seems to show).

I have argued that, for Paul, the pursuit of love involves recognizing where one stands in relation to God, and thus in relationship to others. To pursue love, one must recognize God's transcendent and immanent involvement in one's interactions with others in the body of Christ. The pursuit of love is fundamentally an ongoing interaction with God as he reveals himself in and through one's interactions with others. This pursuit involves real moral growth in loving character and action which takes place within one's interaction with God. Love is pursued, not captured. The practical guidelines for the exchange of gifts help the Christian community to pursue love by maintaining their focus on God's transcendent and immanent involvement in their giving and receiving of love.

IV. LOVE AS A "TYPE 1 PROCESSING" CHALLENGE?

As stated above, the present volume focuses on positive psychology as a discipline by which Christians can potentially better understand and practice the formation of love. I conclude this essay with a few reflections upon the relationship between Paul's vision for love's formation in 1 Corinthians 12–14 and a commonly used theoretical framework for understanding human cognition offered by the psychological sciences: dual-process models of cognition.²⁰

Dual-process theories of cognition propose that human thinking may be characterized as having two general types: Type 1, thinking which is intuitive, instinctual, fast, automatic; and Type 2, thinking which is reflective, slow, deliberative. Proponents of this dual-process model point to evidence from experiments in which participants' ability to use type 2 thinking to avoid bias and maintain logical consistency in complex tasks is hampered by performing these tasks while doing another activity or performing the tasks with limited time. Scientists also point to neural imaging evidence which shows significantly different brain activity when experiment participants use type 1 or type 2 thought, e.g., when participants respond to situations

²⁰ See, e.g., Daniel K. Lapsley and Patrick L. Hill, "On Dual Processing and Heuristic Approaches to Moral Cognition," *Journal of Moral Education* 37 (2008): 313–32; Jonathan St. B. T. Evans and Keith E. Stanovich, "Dual-Process Theories of Higher Cognition: Advancing the Debate," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 8, no. 3 (2013): 223–41.

on the basis of prior-held beliefs or on the basis of an active reasoning process. Any working dual-process theory will be far more specific in the distinction between the two processes, and there are many competing versions of such theories.

In a presentation at the St. Basil Fellowship symposium in May 2021, Dr. Richard Beck posed to the participants the question of whether Christians approach the problem of love and its formation as a type 1 or type 2 challenge. Often pastoral efforts at Christian virtue formation focus on type 2 formation, e.g., teaching Christian values and principles of love to shape behavior and decision-making. What might it look like, however, for love to be formed at the type 1 level, in which a life lived in love is intuitive, in which love, for example, shapes one's affective responses and not just the way one plans a personal budget? How might one practically form such intuitive, type 1 moral character? In what follows I offer a short response, based on the reading of 1 Corinthians 12–14 outlined above.

First of all, it seems important to consider whether the distinction between type 1 and type 2 cognition is at all relatable to Paul, and whether Paul considers love a type 1 cognition issue. My initial sense is that if Paul had the opportunity to consider the distinction between type 1 and type 2, he would have acknowledged both types to be important dimensions of what it means to live in love. Paul would have acknowledged that love is a type 1, not just a type 2, challenge.

My basis for this sense is that the world Paul navigated was shaped by competing philosophical schools which all offered sophisticated accounts of the best life. Essentially all of them held some sort of analogous distinction in the moral life between type 1 and type 2 cognition (of course without using such terminology). This distinction came out, for example, in comparisons between the person who was progressing in virtue and the person who had attained virtue. The truly virtuous person was *not* the person who, for example, when presented with another round of a delicious dessert, knew how to recognize and reign in their gluttonous desire for more. This person who reigned in their desire in that moment had awareness of the situation, understood the virtue of temperance and its opposite, and had the will and desire to deny the dessert and act temperately, not gluttonously, despite their attraction to it. The truly virtuous person, in contrast, *had no disordered response to begin with* when presented with the dessert, because such a person had so internalized temperance as to shape not only their minds but their instinctual desires as well. The truly virtuous person had mastered living virtuously in all of life's circumstances *at the type 1 level*, spontaneously, automatically, not just at the type 2 level of painstaking analysis and moral effort to overcome vice.²¹ Philosophical traditions would bicker over whose tradition offered the best account of type 1 living, not just type 2 analysis (e.g, whether and how the truly wise person would feel and act with emotions like anger).

²¹ See, for example, Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII.1–10.

One might be skeptical as to how deeply Paul was influenced by Greco-Roman moral philosophy. I am not proposing that Paul consciously or unconsciously followed a particular tradition and thus had a type 1/type 2 distinction. Rather, I am arguing that in the philosophical environment which he navigated, Paul would have met a ubiquitous assumption that there is a difference between a type 1 and type 2 moral life. And one could argue that this distinction is not just in the environment, but in the fabric of Paul's moral thought as well.

Glancing briefly back over 1 Corinthians 12–14, it seems that the characteristics of love listed in chapter 13 necessarily involve type 1 functioning, not just type 2 functioning. To love is not simply to properly identify and perform discreet loving actions in the right circumstances, but to have an ongoing affective posture toward others and toward God. The fact that love is “not irritable” (13:5) does not mean simply that a person who loves does not *act* in (unrighteous) anger, but that the person who loves is not vulnerable to getting angry. That love is “not envious” (13:4) does not just mean a loving person does not act out of covetousness, but that a loving person characteristically does not have such desire. The fact that love “rejoices in the truth” (13:6) seems to refer to some kind of intuitive recognition of what is true, a recognition that entails a spontaneous emotional response of joy, in order to celebrate what is true wherever it is found (How do you rejoice without joy in some sense? How can you so master the truth as to never be surprised by it?).

Additionally, if my reading of these chapters is correct, Paul's exhortations require an open-handed posture of love, an openness to God speaking or acting through others in an ongoing way, without concluding in advance how, what, why, and from whom. In other words, Paul assumes a robust, discerning, and continual practice of Christian *prayer*. There is no deliberative moral knowledge base or system that can render redundant or unnecessary the varied ways that others reveal God. To set up such a system is to close oneself off from the Holy Spirit. This openness of love seems to be a type 1 function, in which there is an ongoing commitment to “bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things” (NRSV adapted, 13:7). This does not mean type 2 is not involved; for example, there is a type 2 communal discernment process that would surely appeal to scripture, to argument and counter argument, to the history of personal relationships, to local leadership, etc. But it does mean that love must operate at the type 1 level in some way in order to be the full, open expression of love that Paul is after. Love is a type 1 issue for Paul, and he is using type 2 reflection and analysis in order to shape conscious and unconscious assumptions about who God is, who one's neighbor is, what love means, and what Christian community is designed to be.

At the same time, while Paul assumes that love can and will develop, he does not offer much detail regarding the moral psychology of love's formation or detailed examples of how love might develop within a person in these chapters. The formation of love seems to begin with a type 2 reflection on present practice to establish the path of love in worship gatherings

(Paul's letter to the believers in Corinth). Getting on this path enables further growth in love because the path insists on the "partial" knowing of all involved, it recognizes the formative roles of the community to direct love, and it recognizes the fact that love is an ongoing interaction with God, who ultimately defines and enables love. Love is actually *developed* as believers walk this path together in prayer and with critical reflection, giving and receiving the gifts with proper attentiveness to God's transcendent and immanent involvement in the exchange, only gradually coming to develop type 1 character as they learn to love one another in all the specificity of their relationships together in Corinth. Paul's lack of interest in describing this subsequent formation process psychologically may have a number of explanations, but it seems a major reason is that it can only be navigated in detail by living it, i.e., by actually participating in interactions with others, by prayerfully reflecting on one's responses toward others, by reflecting on what others have just said or done, by negotiating a continual discernment and learning process with other participants and with God.

Secondly, it seems significant to consider in what ways love and its formation are not simply type 1 issues, again drawing from 1 Corinthians 12–14. It seems to me that Paul would say love is *not* a type 1 challenge if this means that once one finally learns to engage and shape one's type 1 functioning to a sufficient degree (by research, by practice), then the issues of love and its formation are resolved, and one will be the integrated, loving person one was meant to be. If that is all that is meant by "love is a type 1 challenge," then this view is just another competing vision of the path towards the best human life alongside the Stoics, Epicureans, Aristotelians, etc., one that operates on roughly the same paradigm. This would be saying that the problems of love and its formation are simply problems of human character formation without remainder. Once we establish the right character (type 1 character, not just type 2) with the right techniques backed by the right research and the right moral framework, the issue will be resolved, love will flourish.

For Paul, this understanding of love and its formation is inadequate because it fails to reckon with the transcendent God's involvement in love and love's formation. Growth in love is first of all a response to God's love, who has established a relationship of love with the believer in Christ. There can be no degree of growth in type 1 or type 2 functioning that resolves the problem of love, that can ensure loving action and loving response in all cases, in and of itself. This is because to love is to encounter God in and through one's interactions with others, and to respond to this encounter with trust and obedience. To be surprised by God's address through others, or by his grace to discover one's failures to love others, are sure signs that one is pursuing love. Prayer is thus at the heart of a Christian pursuit of love.

Again, this does not mean that Christian love is not fully human, or that Christians should not pursue growth in love through study and practice, but only through prayer (God's involvement does not displace or limit the role of human character or human relationships in this divine-human interaction). The problem of love involves the formation of fully

human character (because it involves human agents), but it is not *simply* reducible to or resolvable by the formation of human character, because in that formation the transcendent God is at work in love, drawing us into interaction with him.

To pursue love as Christians in the twenty-first century is fundamentally to pursue a robust life of prayer, individually and corporately. Christian love develops especially as we learn to listen faithfully and humbly to the voice of God in our relationships with others in the body of Christ. The church is God's school of love, and classes are already in session. Are we attending?