

# Love Marches Victorious Over Self-Glorification

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There is a movement in architecture called Brutalism. It is named after a French architect and the French word for "raw concrete." But the play on words in English quickly took on hold because Brutalism is described by many as a cold, soul-crushing form of architecture. Brutalism is brutal. It emphasizes exposed raw concrete, unusual blocky shapes, and has a minimal number of windows which are typically as small as possible. The architects who are proponents of Brutalism are often greeted with disgust by the people who have to live with and view their work. I'm not sure what you think of this type of architecture, but most people polled don't like it one bit. Architects who design with Brutalism style might be praised in elite architecture magazines as modern and trendy. But I would argue that its cold design, lack of plant life, disorienting features, and disdain for traditional beauty make it oppressive to all who must live with it. The blocky, industrial concrete buildings are even mocked as looking like they belong to some type of society ruled by a post-apocalyptic totalitarian dictatorship. Architects who use Brutalism design might boast about their magnificent achievements. But they don't seem to care about the grief which their designs bring most people. Instead of designing buildings that will uplift people and be pleasing, they would rather make a statement, appear trendy, win awards, and crush those who must live around or work in their designs.

Why am I even talking about architecture design trends? It's because architecture is a good example of how different people can place different values on what is truly excellent. Differing opinions about what is valuable can affect churches today. And I'm not just talking about church architecture. When the apostle Paul wrote to the church of God in Corinth, he was dealing with people who had different opinions on what was spiritually valuable. Some were touting their spiritual gifts as superior to all others. Others were getting trampled on by the proud and boastful.

Still today churches can struggle with understanding what is most important. Those who have certain gifts or ideas can end up dominating over others and getting a big head. Many would rather make a big impression on the whole world than serve the person who is sitting right next to them. Self-glorification has always been a real problem in this world and even in Christian churches. How do we address it? Paul's response in 1 Corinthians 13 shows us how love marches victorious over self-glorification.

Paul is writing to believers who struggled with correctly evaluating and using spiritual gifts. In ancient Corinth, as in every Christian congregation, they had various gifts from the Spirit. This included the gift of prophecy, the gift of generous giving, the gift of teaching, the gift of discernment, and along with many others the gift of speaking in tongues. Speaking in tongues received a special recognition by many as the greatest gift. It included speaking in other human languages and evidently also included speaking in unknown celestial languages which required an interpreter. Keep in mind that in a place like ancient Corinth people probably would have highly regarded speaking in tongues for some wrong reasons. Greek false religion taught that certain individuals could have a special connection to the gods. The Oracle at Delphi, for example, had functioned for hundreds of years by the time of Paul. With her trances and utterances, she claimed to reveal the will of the divine. And this was a common practice in religion of ancient Greece. So, you can imagine that some people in the early church found the gift of speaking in tongues as most impressive.

I think there is a similar sentiment in the church today. Certain gifts such as the gift of prophecy have been given extra attention in many Christian circles. You only have to look at which Christian messages get the most attention online. Those who claim a direct connection to the divine, who say they can feel the Spirit, get the most video views. Some spirit-filled prophets will even look down on other Christian preachers who don't claim a direct revelation from the Spirit. Consequently, other gifts of the Spirit are sometimes considered less impressive than the gift of prophecy.

But the apostle gives us an important reminder about spiritual gifts. He wrote in response to all the envy, boasting, factions, and backbiting in the church at Corinth. Paul first notes what makes any gift valuable: *"If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing."*

Love is a vital ingredient for every gift! If someone is a virtuoso on the organ or one of the greatest speakers of their day, it means absolutely nothing if they use it without love. If a pastor like Paul is able to display gifts and smarts but doesn't love their co-workers in ministry or fails to love someone under their care, they are worthless. In the end they won't be able to accomplish any good. And this truth applies to more than church work! It applies to everything a Christian does with their various gifts from God. If a family member earns a high wage and generously gives his family fancy cars and clothes, but doesn't show them love, he is worthless to them. If a teacher or parent is super smart but is condescending to his students, he is worthless as a teacher or parent. If a parent reads every book on how to discipline and train their child but doesn't do it with love, he is worth nothing. Don't get me wrong. Paul isn't saying

the gift of prophecy, knowledge, tongues, giving generously, are worthless. They are valuable gifts. But without love what good are they? They are just noise, like a musical instrument in the hands of someone who can't play.

Brothers and sisters, consider whatever gift you might have from God to serve as a father, mother, husband, wife, friend, or neighbor. Consider how you have served, led, or carried out your role. How have you let love guide the use of your gifts? We can't help but hear Paul's guiding description of true love and long for it in our lives! *"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup> It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup> Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."*

You probably heard that listing of what true love is like and initially thought, "Amen!" Then maybe your mind wandered to the person who most recently failed to be loving toward you. It made their greatest accomplishments seem worthless to you, didn't it? Then your mind might have wandered to the person in your life you failed miserably in the past. That person wasn't patient, kind. But was rude, self-seeking, and proud. Like a Brutalist architect they constructed an obstacle in your life that cast a soul-sucking shadow over everything.

But are you able to look at that description of love and see the times when you were the Brutalist? You thought what you were doing was necessary or the most important thing. But with humble reflection maybe you now realize you were constructing your own little raw-concrete obstacle which trampled over others for your own glory.

And don't think you can just say, "Well nobody is perfect. We shouldn't expect perfect love." But perfect love is what we should desire! Is it ever okay to dishonor others in any way? Shouldn't we demand perfect love? God does. And perfect love doesn't settle for evil. It rejoices in the truth. It always protects, always perseveres. Part of Paul's point here is that we look at what true love involves, and we see a reflection of ourselves tainted with lovelessness.

But Paul wants us to lift our eyes past the ugly little loveless things we have constructed to see what love really is. He wants us to see what it truly means to be valuable and good. What is excellent and beautiful? God is love. And when we look above the self-glorification of this world and our little ugly Brutalist castles, we see what God created in love.

It is something which will forever be praised as the most beautiful piece of architecture the world has ever seen. It was built with true love and beauty in mind. And it wasn't built for self-glorification. It was built for sinners. God sent his Son to build this wonderful building. He started with the cross which he hung upon on the hill outside the city. In loveless hate people spurned his picture of love. They mocked what he designed. But it was the kind, patient, humble love of God seeking the lost ugly sinner. Jesus Christ hung upon the cross to give us the greatest gift: love.

By his death he laid the cornerstone. We hear about the greatest building project ever undertaken. In love Christ died for sinners. In his great love he removes the record of our sins. He makes us his own forgiven people. In love he builds up his church. He gives us a place as part of his temple. A famous guitar player once said, "When the power of love overcomes the love of power the world will know peace." In many ways that statement is right. The power of love did overcome the love of power. Jesus Christ set aside all his glory and power to love us all.

He is still building his Church in love. He graciously pours out the gifts of his Spirit on each member. In his great love he patiently calls us to set aside self-glorification and self-interest. In love each member forgets about self-glorification and serves others just as Christ came to serve and give his life as a ransom.

And God, who is called Love, never fails. Jesus rose in power from the grave to pour out his love on all who trust in him. His love is everlasting. When we think that our achievements are the greatest, we need to remember that they are temporary. But the love of Christ and his Church built on love is eternal! *"Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away."* It won't matter in eternity if you were the smartest man who ever lived or had the highest praise on earth. What will matter is that you knew the love of Christ and shared it with the lowliest person next to you.

Finally, Paul reminds us that we can't even grasp the size and beauty of what he is building for us! Our eternal home will be so marvelous! Glory with Christ will forever be filled with love and beauty. Right now, it is like we are just looking at the threshold of his temple. The beauty of seeing his church acting in love is only a small window into eternity. Imagine when the doors are opened, and you see for yourself what his Church was built to be! *"For we know in part and we prophesy in part, <sup>10</sup> but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. <sup>11</sup> When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. <sup>12</sup> For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."*

Brutalism insists that it is the most honest architecture because it removes all beauty. The design is actually meant to convey the idea that happiness is not real. It claims happiness is only an illusion. But happiness is real because God's love is real. And you are the movement meant to convey it to the world today. And if it had a title, I guess it would be called Christian Love. Because with Christ love marches victorious over self-glorification.