

“Faith Hope and Love” ... but what do they mean?

With no malice or slight intended for our dear sisters in Christ, 1Corinthians 13:13 was neither inspired nor recorded to provide a suitably godly phrase for decorative needle or other works of art to adorn our homes. Though the goal of making our earthly places of abode “Christian” is laudable, and the passage is indeed a subject worthy of display both for contemplation and reminder, I cannot help but wonder if our attraction to those three monumentally important words, as well as our penchant for reproducing and displaying them, has more to do with their *beauty* than their *meaning*- their *form* over their *function*. So let us pull back the tapestry, and consider *why* God the Spirit chose to immortalize these three particular words...

First, the obvious: the Text says they “*now abide*.” Paul has, in the previous verses, written of things that will be “*done away*” and “*cease*”- namely, Spirit-gifted *prophecy*, *tongues*, and *knowledge*, 1Corinthians 13:8. He has further explained *why* these would end: the coming “*perfection*” of the completed revelation would render these “*partial*” and “*dim*” renderings of inspiration obsolete in the reflection of “*full*” knowledge, 1Corinthians 13:9-12. But until that time came, *faith*, *hope*, and *love* would “*now abide*”! These three would serve as the ***foundation***, ***motivation***, and ***means/method of operation*** to bring the Corinthians (and all others!) to maturity when they could “*do away*” with *childish words*, *thoughts*, and *reasonings* manifested in their immature desires for and devotions to these *partial* spiritual gifts that were destined to *fade away*, cf. 1Corinthians 3:1-3 and 13:11. How so?

“Faith” is foundational. Originating from the *word of God*, Romans 10:17, *faith* provides the starting place from which both to begin and proceed, Hebrews 11:6. It is the *place to stand* from which Archimedes’ lever can move the world¹ and its *mountains*, Matthew 17:20; 21:21. It is *bedrock* belief in Jesus Christ born of revelation, Matthew 16:17, on which His church is built, Matthew 16:18, and from which His *kingdom* comes, Matthew 16:19 to those willing to believe.

“Hope” is motivational. It not only “springs eternal,” it is the *springboard* to the *eternal*! It provides the impetus to “*look not at the things which are seen, but at the things that are unseen*” while our “*outer man decays*,” and allows our “*inner man to be renewed day by day*.” It inspires us to measure and view our “*momentary light affliction*” as such in comparison to the “*eternal weight of glory*” that is “*far beyond all comparison*,” 2Corinthians 4:16-18. Thus, we not only “*live in*” hope, but *exultantly* “*through*” it, Romans 5:2; 8:20-25. And,

“Love” is the means or method of it all. Tolstoy knew it, “Love? What is love?” he thought. “Love hinders death. Love is life. Everything, everything I understand, I understand only because I love. Everything is, everything exists, only because I love. Everything is connected only by that. Love is God, and to die- means that I, a part of love, return to the common and eternal source,” (Leo Tolstoy, War and Peace, p.984). Perhaps he plagiarized the apostle Paul just a little, “*If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy,*

and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing. Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things,” 1Corinthians 13:1-7. The point is that love must not only be *how* we operate in this world, it must be *who we are* at most innermost... even as it so with God, so it must be with us, cf. 1John 3:1; 4:7-11.

And finally, perhaps *“the greatest of these is love”* (1Corinthians 13:13) because when *“faith”* becomes knowledge as the temporal veil of time and mortality is torn away, and when *“hope”* is realized and is thus no more a future expectation but the realized destiny, *“love”* will remain for eternity in heaven with God and those that love Him. (Philip C. Strong; Southport Church of Christ; 7202 Madison Ave, Indianapolis, IN 46227; online at southportcofc.org; email to mrpcstrong@hotmail.com)

¹ “Give me a place to stand, and a lever long enough, and I will move the world. ” -Archimedes, the great Greek mathematician, physicist, engineer, and inventor who lived from 287 – 212 B.C.