

**Reformed Theological Seminary**

**Perichoretic Graces:  
Paul's Theology of Faith, Hope, and Love**

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## Introduction

“What does it mean to be a Christian?” This is a familiar question to anyone who has spent any amount of time in Christian ministry. Many different answers have been offered throughout the years, different teaching methods have been adopted, and various catechisms and tracts have been written, in order to provide a brief summary of the essential beliefs and practices of our faith. In the ancient church, this question was just as common as it is today, if not more so, and just like today, pastors and theologians sought for concise ways to communicate the essence of the Christian faith. Many of them took inspiration from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, where he writes, “So now, faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:13).<sup>1</sup> In these words, they found three pegs on which to hang the core teachings of the Bible. They expounded upon what Christians ought to believe using the Apostles’ Creed, they taught Christians what they ought to hope for using the Lord’s Prayer, and they gave practical guidance in the practice of love using the Ten Commandments.

Although this threefold catechism was an ingenious teaching method—one which is still utilized by both Protestants<sup>2</sup> and Roman Catholics<sup>3</sup>—we are left wondering what Paul himself meant by faith, hope, and love. Christians have rightly noted throughout history that the triad must have played a central part in Paul’s understanding of the Christian life, yet he never provides for us a systematic discussion of the topic. Indeed, the information he gives us is relatively scant compared to his thorough discussion of other topics like justification. What do faith, hope, and love mean for Paul, and what is the relationship among them? This paper will

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV).

<sup>2</sup> E.g. *Luther’s Small Catechism* and *The Heidelberg Catechism*.

<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 10–13.

attempt to demonstrate that although he often emphasizes one element of this triad depending on the context and the particular needs of his readers, Paul understands faith, hope, and love as the mutually-supported and mutually-empowered work of God's grace in the lives of his people. In order to demonstrate this, we will look at three passages (1 Cor 13:13; Col 1:3–5; Gal 5:5–6) in which these three graces, and their relationships to one another,<sup>4</sup> are most clearly discussed by Paul.<sup>5</sup>

### **I Corinthians 13:13**

Of all the passages in which the triad of faith, hope, and love appear, this is undoubtedly the most well-known to the average Christian. Paul's discussion of love, however, did not simply drop out of the sky. This passage appears in the midst of Paul's broader teaching on the proper use of spiritual gifts within orderly worship (1 Cor 12:1–14:40). Apparently, it was reported to Paul that the Corinthians had a number of serious misunderstandings regarding the spiritual gifts, resulting in various abuses in how they were being used (1 Cor. 12:1–3).<sup>6</sup> Based on his discussion in these chapters and earlier in the letter (cf. 1 Cor 1:10–17; 3:1–4; 4:6–7; 6:1–8; 11:17–22), it seems that many of the problems in the church at Corinth, including their misuse of the *charismata*, stemmed from pride that manifested itself in sectarianism and spiritual one-

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<sup>4</sup> The triad also appears in 1 Thessalonians 1:3 and 5:8, but we will not be looking at those passages in this paper because of space limitations.

<sup>5</sup> Other passages where faith, hope, and love are mentioned together include Rom 5:1–5; Eph 1:15–18; 4:2–5; 1 Thess 1:3; 5:8. Moving beyond the Pauline Epistles they can also be found in Heb 6:10–12; 10:22–24; 1 Pet 1:21–22. Although not conclusive, the existence of the triad in writings outside of the Pauline corpus provides strong evidence that it did not originate with Paul, but belongs to the earliest apostolic teaching about the Christian life. See Archibald M. Hunter, *Paul and His Predecessors* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 33–35.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, Geneva Series of Commentaries (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), 237–39.

upmanship.<sup>7</sup> First Corinthians 13, then, is Paul’s attempt to strike at the heart of the problem. He does so by demonstrating the necessity of love for the proper experience of all other spiritual gifts (vv. 1–3), extolling the qualities and actions of love (vv. 4–7), and describing the enduring nature of love in contrast to the gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge (vv. 8–12). Finally, Paul brings his argument to a close in the famous words which are of interest to us in this study: “So now *faith, hope, and love* abide, these three; but the greatest of these is *love*” (1 Cor 13:13).

How then does Paul’s famous declaration fit into his broader argument? Although v. 13 functions as a climactic conclusion to the entire chapter, the immediate context is Paul’s discussion of the temporary nature of the gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge (1 Cor 13:8–12). These will “pass away” and “cease” (v. 8) when “the perfect comes” (v. 9), which is almost certainly a reference to the eschaton.<sup>8</sup> Love, in contrast to these, “never ends” (v. 8). The words *Νυνὶ δὲ* clearly connect v. 13 back to vv. 8–12, but the exact nature of this connection is unclear. Some have argued that “now,” should be understood temporally, as if Paul were saying, “So for the time being....”<sup>9</sup> Others, however, have seen this as a logical connection, with the sense of, “So in conclusion....”<sup>10</sup> Although a temporal element is not completely absent, a logical use of “now” appears to fit best with Paul’s argument, as can be seen from Paul’s use of *μένει* in v. 13, which corresponds with *οὐδέποτε πίπτει* in v. 8. In other words, what Paul says negatively about love in v. 8, “love *never ends*,” he now says positively about faith and hope as

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<sup>7</sup> W. Harold Mare, “1 Corinthians” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 268.

<sup>8</sup> W. Harold Mare, “1 Corinthians,” 268-69.

<sup>9</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 649-50.

<sup>10</sup> Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 299-300.

well in v. 13, “faith, hope, and love *abide*.”<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the spiritual gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge which have only a limited, temporary function within the church, these three graces, and particularly love as the greatest of them, will remain central to the Christian experience both now and forever.<sup>12</sup>

If these three graces of faith, hope, and love are described by Paul as the abiding qualities of the Christian life, in what sense is love “the greatest of these” (v. 13)? As we begin to consider this question, it is worth pointing out that Paul does not actually give us any specific reasons for *why* love is greater than faith and hope in this text. Therefore, any attempt to understand what Paul means here must necessarily move beyond the merely exegetical into the theological. Our exegesis may make some interpretations more or less likely, but it must be confessed at the outset that a clear answer is not provided for us in the text.

Some have argued on the basis of this text and others (Rom 8:24–25; 2 Cor 5:7; Heb 11:1) that love is the greatest because only love is eternal. Faith and hope will no longer be necessary when Christ returns and ushers in the consummation. On that day, faith will become sight, and what is hoped for will be experienced in its fullness.<sup>13</sup> However, this interpretation seems to conflict with Paul’s use of *μένει* earlier in this verse, which in context seems to refer to the eternally abiding quality of faith, hope, and love in contrast to that which is merely temporal.<sup>14</sup> It would be odd for Paul to single out faith, hope, and love over against that which is

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 275.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, NAC 28 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2014), 318-19.

<sup>13</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 652.

<sup>14</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1993), 470-71.

temporary, only further to single out love on the same basis.<sup>15</sup> Another possible explanation lies close at hand. In v. 7 Paul has already said that love “believes all things,” and “hopes all things,” using the verb forms of the same words that appear in v. 13 as “faith” and “hope.” Love is the subject, and faith and hope are actions performed by it. Faith and hope, then, are in some sense dependent upon love.<sup>16</sup> This may provide part of the answer for why Paul emphasizes love in v. 13, but as we will see shortly, it would be wrong to single out love as the ultimate empowering principle within the triad, because in other contexts Paul reverses the order and describes love as rooted in both faith (Gal 5:6) and hope (Col 1:5) respectively. When we compare Scripture with Scripture, it becomes apparent that Paul cannot be saying that love holds a unique place of causal priority within the triad. In other words, Paul is indeed teaching that love empowers faith and hope in v. 7, but when we look at his theology as a whole it becomes clear that this is unable to account for his absolute claim that love is the “greatest.” We will consider this issue again in the conclusion, once we have seen what Paul has to say elsewhere.

### Colossians 1:3–5

In our previous passage, Paul emphasized the centrality and abiding quality of faith, hope, and love for the Christian life, as well as the supremacy of love in comparison with the other two. In this passage, Paul fleshes out the content of these three graces and gives us more information about how they relate to each other. Our passage comes at the very beginning of

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<sup>15</sup> Another possibility is that Paul is teaching that prophecy, tongues, and knowledge will cease at some point before the eschaton, and therefore only faith, hope, and love “remain” throughout the church age. However, at the consummation, faith and hope will likewise pass away, and only love will remain. See Myron J. Houghton, “A Reexamination of 1 Corinthians 13:8–13,” *BSac* 153 (1996): 355-56. Although I agree with the author that these miraculous sign gifts no longer function within the church, I do not believe that Paul is making that point in this text. Other passages of Scripture and broader theological concepts must be brought to bear upon the issue.

<sup>16</sup> Raymond F. Collins, *First Corinthians*, SP 7 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1999), 482-83.

Paul's epistle to the Colossians. After giving his standard greeting, which includes a grace and peace blessing (vv. 1–2), Paul launches into his thanksgiving section (vv. 3–8). In it, he thanks God for the good fruits which the preaching of the gospel through the ministry of Epaphras has produced in the Colossian believers. It is within this context that Paul once again mentions the triad of faith, hope, and love: “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your *faith in Christ Jesus* and of the *love that you have for all the saints*, because of the *hope laid up for you in heaven*” (Col 1:3-5).

A few things are of particular interest to us in this passage. First of all, notice that Paul provides a fuller definition of faith here than in 1 Cor 13:13. Christian faith is not merely a character trait or disposition of spirit that inclines one towards belief in anything; it is specifically faith *in Christ Jesus*. Elsewhere, Paul speaks of faith as directed toward God in general (Rom 4:3, 17; 1 Thess 1:8; Titus 3:8; cf. Acts 27:25), but in the majority of cases in which Paul mentions the object of faith, it is faith in Jesus Christ as the crucified and risen Lord that is specified. The construction *πίστιν ὑμῶν ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ* (v. 4) is atypical for Paul.<sup>17</sup> Often when he means to indicate Christ as the object of faith he will use *πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ* (Rom 3:22) or similar constructions. Because of this, some have argued that *πίστιν ὑμῶν ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ* does not refer to Christ as the object of faith, but is pointing to Paul's doctrine of union with Christ. If this interpretation is correct, Paul would in effect be teaching that the Colossians' faith operates within the new, eschatological realm brought about by their mystical union with the risen Christ.<sup>18</sup> Such an interpretation, however, seems to be guilty of trying to find too much

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<sup>17</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 57.

<sup>18</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 41.

meaning in too little text. In all likelihood, the construction *πίστιν ὑμῶν ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ* should be understood as synonymous with *πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ*.<sup>19</sup> In both, the Lord Jesus Christ is being indicated as the object of Christian faith.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, in this passage the love of the Colossian believers is specified as “the love that you have *for all the saints*” (Col 1:4). Elsewhere in Scripture, Paul speaks of love for God (Rom 8:28; 1 Cor 2:9), or love for the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 16:22; Eph 6:24), but in this text, it is love for other Christians that is being emphasized. As Christ himself taught in his summary of the Law, the Christian virtue of love always encompasses the “vertical” dimension of love for God, and the “horizontal” dimension of love for others (Matt 22:37–39).

Second, Paul describes the logical relationship between the previous two graces and hope when he says, “because of the hope laid up for you in heaven” (Col 1:5). The word *διὰ* clearly indicates some sort of causal relationship, but there has been some debate over what Paul means. Some have argued that *διὰ* in v. 5 actually connects back with the *Εὐχαριστοῦμεν* in v. 3, instead of with *πίστιν* and *ἀγάπην* in v. 4. The reason given is that it is hard to understand why Paul would say that faith and love are “because” or “on account of” hope. This would seem to indicate that the Colossians’ faith and love are motivated by a hope of reward, but does it not undermine the very meaning of love to understand it in such a self-serving way?<sup>21</sup> By connecting *διὰ* with *Εὐχαριστοῦμεν*, these scholars understand Paul as saying something like, “We thank God because of your faith and love, *and we also thank God* because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.”

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<sup>19</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 57.

<sup>20</sup> BDAG, 819.

<sup>21</sup> T. K. Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 195-96.



While grammatically possible, it seems more natural to connect v. 5 with what immediately precedes it, not only because it is closer, but also because failing to do so breaks up the triad and doesn't seem to fit with what immediately follows.<sup>22</sup> In view of this, it seems clear that Paul is singling out hope as the cause or motivation of the Colossians' faith and love.

The Greek word *ἐλπίς* can be used either objectively or subjectively.<sup>23</sup> When used in an objective sense, *ἐλπίς* refers to “that for which one hopes,” or “that which is the basis for hoping.”<sup>24</sup> This is how Paul uses the term later in this chapter when he speaks of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col 1:27). When used subjectively, *ἐλπίς* denotes the act of “looking forward to something with some reason for confidence respecting its fulfillment.”<sup>25</sup> Paul uses *ἐλπίς* in this subjective sense elsewhere in his description of Abraham: “In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, ‘So shall your offspring be’” (Rom 4:18). The fact that Paul speaks in our passage of “the hope *laid up for you in heaven*” (Col 1:5) makes it almost certain that he is using *ἐλπίς* objectively.<sup>26</sup> The cause of the Colossians' faith in Christ and love for the saints is that for which they are hoping, which is stored and kept safe for them in heaven.

Nevertheless, the objective and the subjective uses of *ἐλπίς*, though they may be distinguished exegetically, can never be separated theologically. Each use of the word naturally

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<sup>22</sup> R. McL. Wilson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Colossians and Philemon* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 87-88.

<sup>23</sup> Curtis Vaughn, “Colossians,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 174-75.

<sup>24</sup> BDAG, 320.

<sup>25</sup> BDAG, 319.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Rockwell, “Faith, Hope, and Love in the Colossian Epistle,” *RTR* 72 (2013): 39.

implies the other, for in Scripture the subjective hope of believers is always grounded in objective reality, and this is precisely why it can be certain in the face of trials and persecution. Likewise, the objective reality is called “hope” precisely because it is that which is being subjectively hoped for.<sup>27</sup> In view of this, we can see that what Paul says about the relationship of objective hope to faith and love in this passage also applies to hope generally conceived. Just as love can in some sense be considered the motivating factor for faith and hope (1 Cor 13:13), so hope also encourages and builds up believers in the practice of love and faith (Col 1:3–5). “Christian mental and moral attitudes and activities such as believing, hoping, and loving, always react upon each other. In general, the more there is of one the more there will be of the other.”<sup>28</sup> By giving believers a firm confidence in what God will do in the future (1 Thess 5:8–9), based on the objective, finished work of Christ in the past (1 Pet 1:3), hope empowers them to remain patient and steadfast in their “work of faith” and “labor of love” here in the present (1 Thess 1:3).

### **Galatians 5:5-6**

It is often recognized that many of Paul’s letters can be divided into two more-or-less distinct sections. The first half is usually occupied with doctrinal matters, and the second half presents Paul’s application of doctrine to the lives of his readers.<sup>29</sup> In this epistle, Gal 5:1–6 functions as a sort of bridge to the hortatory section of Gal 5:7–6:10. Many of the themes which are mentioned by Paul in this text will be taken up and expanded upon in the verses immediately

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<sup>27</sup> J. M. Everts, “Hope” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, eds. Gerald H. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 415-17.

<sup>28</sup> William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 49.

<sup>29</sup> P. T. O’Brien, “Letters, Letter Forms,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 552.

following. However, the text before us also functions as a climax to the doctrinal section of Galatians.<sup>30</sup> In the previous chapters, Paul has been fervently arguing for the evangelical doctrine of justification by faith alone in opposition to those who were arguing that Gentiles must keep the Law of Moses in order to be saved. In particular, the issue of circumcision has been lying just below the surface during Paul's entire discussion. Earlier he had mentioned the "circumcision party" (Gal 2:12) in passing, but in Gal 5:1–6 he brings his argument to its conclusion and attacks his opponents' view of circumcision directly by showing that it is nothing less than a rejection of the gospel itself. Like a good chess player, Paul has taken the time to read the board and move his pieces into position, but now the trap is set and he goes in for the checkmate.<sup>31</sup>

Our passage may be divided into two roughly equal halves.<sup>32</sup> In the first half (vv. 2–4) Paul proclaims to the Galatians that those who accept circumcision are doing nothing less than seeking to be justified by the law. Those who receive circumcision are severed from Christ, and so they must keep the whole law perfectly if they hope to be justified—a possibility which Paul categorically rejects (Gal 3:10–12). In these verses, Paul makes abundantly clear to his readers that there is no mediating ground between Law and Gospel as means of salvation: either one is justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, or one is justified by perfect personal obedience to every jot and tittle of God's holy Law.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 327.

<sup>31</sup> Moo, *Galatians*, 318-19.

<sup>32</sup> Moo, *Galatians*, 318.

<sup>33</sup> Space limitations prevent a detailed discussion of these verses. For a thorough and helpful exegesis of this text, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 310-15.

In the second half, Paul contrasts this negative picture of vain self-righteousness with a positive presentation of the true Christian life,<sup>34</sup> and it is here that the familiar triad once again appears. “For through the Spirit, by *faith*, we ourselves eagerly wait for the *hope* of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only *faith* working through *love*” (Gal 5:5–6). Although much could be said about this text, the relationships between faith, hope, and love which Paul delineates here are of particular concern for our purposes. First, he connects faith and hope in v. 5 by saying ἡμεῖς γὰρ πνεύματι ἐκ πίστεως ἐλπίδα δικαιοσύνης ἀπεκδεχόμεθα. Paul is teaching that it is faith which enables true Christians to “eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.” Faith is that which looks to the promise, and patiently waits for its fulfillment (Rom 4:17–21; cf. Heb 11:1). Interestingly, up to this point he has described the believer’s legal standing of righteousness as a present reality, but here he speaks of righteousness as something for which believers are still hoping. Throughout this letter, Paul has used “righteousness” and “justify” as technical terms to refer to man’s standing before the judgment seat of God, and there is no reason to assume a different meaning here.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the “hope of righteousness” is likely a reference to a “future justification” on the Last Day when believers “shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment” (WSC 38).<sup>36</sup> By faith, believers can eagerly await that day with confident assurance and hope because in Christ the eschatological declaration has been brought forward in time.<sup>37</sup> That future

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<sup>34</sup> James Montgomery Boice, “Galatians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 488.

<sup>35</sup> Moo, *Galatians*, 327.

<sup>36</sup> Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 189.

<sup>37</sup> Herman N. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 168.

verdict will be nothing other than the open confirmation of their present justification, and for this reason Christians can look forward to it with hope instead of fear.

Second, Paul explains the relationship between faith and love in words which have been interpreted in various ways throughout the history of the church: *πίστις δι' ἀγάπης ἐνεργουμένη* (Gal 5:6). Indeed, this verse was prominent in the Reformation-era debates between Protestants and Roman Catholics over the proper relationship between faith and works. Crucial to our interpretation of this text is the question of whether *ἐνεργουμένη* should be understood as either a middle verb or a passive verb. If understood as a middle verb, it can be translated as “faith working through love” (NRSV) or “faith expressing itself through love” (NIV). In this case, faith is the cause of the action, and love is the means through which the action is accomplished.<sup>38</sup> This is the interpretation which was argued by the Reformers, as Luther memorably said, “Oh, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith.”<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, if understood as a passive verb, it means something like “faith being energized by love,” or “faith made effectual by love.” Interpreted in this way, the text is teaching that love gives faith its power; love is the active agent which is forming and perfecting faith. As can be guessed, this was the view espoused by the Roman Church because it supported their contention that faith alone does not justify, but only faith insofar as it has been formed by love.<sup>40</sup> However, since Paul always attributes justification to faith alone, and never to a combination of faith and love, it is best to understand *ἐνεργουμένη* as a middle verb.<sup>41</sup> Faith is the energizing principle not only of hope (v. 5) but also of love (v. 6).

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<sup>38</sup> Stephen J. Chester, “Faith Working Through Love (Galatians 5:6): The Role of Human Deeds in Salvation in Luther and Calvin’s Exegesis,” *Covenant Quarterly* (2014): 43-46.

<sup>39</sup> Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), xvii.

<sup>40</sup> Chester, “Faith Working Through Love (Galatians 5:6),” 42-43.

<sup>41</sup> Timothy George, *Galatians*, NAC 30 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 362.

For Paul, love is *what faith does*. It is how faith expresses itself, and that through which it fulfills the Law of God, not out of fear but out of gratitude (cf. Rom 12:1; 13:8–10).<sup>42</sup> As Calvin says,

But how can the mind be aroused to taste the divine goodness without at the same time being wholly kindled to love God in return? For truly, that abundant sweetness which God has stored up for those who fear him cannot be known without at the same time powerfully moving us. And once anyone has been moved by it, it utterly ravishes him and draws him to itself.... [F]or it is faith alone that first engenders love in us.<sup>43</sup>

### Conclusion

There is much more that could be said about each of the texts which we have surveyed, yet it should be clear at this point that the Christian experiences of faith, hope, and love exist in a sort of symbiotic relationship. As one author notes, “The perichoretic nature of the triadic elements is evident. All three are essential to Christian living and all three are dependent upon, and enriching for, each other.”<sup>44</sup> Although faith, hope, and love may be distinguished, they cannot be separated. Whenever one is mentioned, the other two are implied, and none can exist without the others. Faith without hope and love is nothing but dead intellectualism, hope without faith and love is nothing but carnal security, and love without faith and hope is nothing but self-deceived sentimentality. The true experience of any one of these graces must necessarily include the true experience of the others, and the absence of any exposes the others as counterfeits.

However, just because faith, hope, and love exist in a perichoretic relationship, it does not follow that there is no logical order among them. Following Calvin,<sup>45</sup> I would argue that faith

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<sup>42</sup> Schreiner, *Galatians*, 317.

<sup>43</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 589.

<sup>44</sup> Rockwell, “Faith, Hope, and Love in the Colossian Epistle,” 39.

<sup>45</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 588-92.

holds a place of logical, causal priority within the triad. This is not to say that faith has temporal priority as if true faith may exist for a season without hope and love. Rather, it is to say that faith is the root, and love and hope are the fruits, of the Christian life. This may be seen from the following: 1) Human beings are born in sin, naturally hating God as well as their neighbor, and this hatred cannot be overcome by human efforts or will-power (Rom 5:10; Eph 2:3). Only by being united to Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit can this old nature be destroyed and a new nature which loves God be created (Rom 6:1–5), and this union with Christ is effected through faith alone (Eph 2:4–10).<sup>46</sup> Faith, then, is the instrumental cause of our union with Christ, and our love for God and for our neighbor is the result of this vital union. It is impossible to know God as a merciful Redeemer in Christ apart from faith, and without this knowledge love is impossible. 2) Faith and hope are closely related concepts, so much so that in some cases hope seems to be virtually synonymous with faith, and vice versa (Rom 4:18–21; Heb 11:1). Nevertheless, when they are put forward as two distinct concepts, the object of hope is future glory and blessedness,<sup>47</sup> whereas the object of faith is Christ himself and what he has done for us.<sup>48</sup> In light of this, it is clear why faith must hold a logical priority, for what hope for future glory is there except that which Christ has promised to us and procured for us by his own blood? In the midst of trials and tribulations, hope is a great encouragement to perseverance in both faith and love, yet it cannot be doubted that it is faith which first opens the eyes of the believers to the hope set before them.

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<sup>46</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 521-527.

<sup>47</sup> Rudolf Bulmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 2, trans. Kendrick Grobel (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2007), 175-76.

<sup>48</sup> Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1981), 591.

However, if we are right in our understanding of the logical priority of faith, then in what sense can love be described as the “the greatest of these” (1 Cor 13:13)? Perhaps the best explanation can be found when we look at the broad context of Scripture to consider the divine character of love. Faith may be the great foundation on which the triad rests, but love is its pinnacle and capstone. The supremacy of love, even over the equally abiding and indispensable qualities of faith and hope, can be explained by the fact that love is central to the very nature of God himself.<sup>49</sup> As the apostle John says, “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*” (1 John 4:7–8). God is love because God is triune, and from all eternity the three Persons of the Trinity have exercised themselves in the self-giving act of loving, glorifying, and enjoying one another.<sup>50</sup> It is this very love which Paul says has been “poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:5). This divine love overflowed in the great acts of Creation, Providence, and Redemption, and now calls forth the same kind of sacrificial love in the lives of believers (cf. John 13:34; 15:9, 12–13; Rom 5:8; 1 John 4:19). Faith and hope, despite their indispensable importance, are ultimately means to the great end of love. Faith and hope are the proper responses of sinful creatures to the God who redeems them, but love goes beyond these because it is in some sense a participation in the very life of God himself which manifests itself in acts of self-giving service for others.<sup>51</sup> In view of this, may we confess along with the apostle, “So now, faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:13).

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<sup>49</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 471.

<sup>50</sup> Douglas F. Kelly, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Geanies House, UK: Mentor, 2008), 273-75.

<sup>51</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1073-74.