

*Introduction:*  
**Faith, Hope, and Love  
as Problems of Theology**

Faith, hope, and love are facts of every Christian's experience. Why should one wish to make theological problems of them? Such a question might be expected to arise in the mind of the layman. And just because the three are such common and popular pulpit themes, the theologian might ask with equal justification why a theologian should choose them as subjects for a series of lectures. Standing between these two fires as, in the main, I do; being consciously a lay theologian; never forgetting that the vast majority of Christians are not theologians, and having also observed, again and again, that the questions that worry the layman are both more interesting and more difficult than those which are the favored subjects of discussion by theologians, I have chosen a theme that is certainly close to the interest of laymen and also difficult enough and even new enough, for the theologian.

Although these three words are in common use, not only among Christians, but in the general vocabulary,

and although the triad constitutes a popular series for sermons, it is a fact and a strange fact that, at least so far as my knowledge goes, it has never been made the subject of thorough theological study. Why, in the New Testament, are these three words related in such a close and conspicuous unity? What is the connection of the three concepts – faith, hope, and love – each of which is, in its own right, one of the main words of the Christian message? As long as we do not know why these words have thus been brought together, we do not really know what each of them means and what its importance is in the Christian life. This, then, is the theological problem that I propose to deal with in these three lectures.

The strange thing about faith, hope, and love is that in Christian doctrinal thought they constitute, so to speak, rivals, in so far as each one of them could claim to be the most important. Even more, each of them expresses the whole of Christian existence, the totality of what it means to be a Christian. Each of them is, not merely one, but *the* criterion of true Christianity. They are not, as Roman Catholic doctrine declares, the three supreme virtues; they are not virtues at all, as we shall see later. Nor is their “threeness” a mere sum, so that one can be added to the other. Each one expresses the totality of Christian existence. How is this possible?

This problem was to me a subject of worry for many years; until I discovered that the threefold totality is related to a basic fact of man’s existence as

a human being – every man's existence is in the three dimensions of time. He lives in the past, in the future, and in the present. We live in the past – by memory. Without having our past with us, without remembering both our individual history and the history of man or mankind, we should not be *human*; we should be animals only. Man is the historic being, the being that has his past with him.

But we live also in the future – by expectation, hoping, fearing, planning. Without anticipating our future we should not be human either. It is as well the foreseeing of what we might, could, and should be that distinguishes us from the animals. We live, of course, in the present, but for the most part we are not aware of the fact that this “being in the present” is most problematic. I wish I could say that I do live in the present; that is indeed my highest ideal. Somehow it must be true that we do live in the present; otherwise we should not live at all.

Since this is true of human life as such – that we live in the past, in the future, and in the present – we must now ask how we, as Christians, live in the past, in the future, and in the present, and that means how our relation to Jesus Christ affects our living in the past, the future, and the present. The answer of the New Testament is precisely these three words: we live in the past by faith; we live in the future by hope; we live in the present by love. That is the reason why each one of these three great words expresses the whole of our existence without competing with the

others. If Saint Paul says, “Love is the greatest of these,” this does not mean a difference of greater or lesser importance. All are equally essential and total, because each expresses the relation to Jesus in a particular dimension of time.

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