

The Abiding Trinity

By Cornelius R. Stam

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“Charity [love] never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.

“For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.

“But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.

“When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

“For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

“And now abideth faith, hope, charity [love], these three; but the greatest of these is charity [love].”

—I Cor. 13:8-13.

POPULAR INTERPRETATION

The above passage from the pen of Paul is popularly interpreted to mean that whereas prophecies, tongues and knowledge are passing things, faith hope and love will abide even after this life is over. Thus the things of our present childhood will some day be put away to be replaced by the things of our future manhood. Probably more than nine out of ten Bible commentaries present this view.

Even the great Bishop Ellicott says of this passage: “The natural childhood and manhood of this life are analogous to the spiritual childhood of this life and the spiritual manhood of the life to come.” Hence, like so many of our day who are confused on this point, he makes the sign-gifts, here classed as “childish things,” the evidence of true spirituality, and, though indeed cautiously and half-heartedly, sanctions the apparent employment of them in the present dispensation.

THE CORRECT INTERPRETATION

In this passage the Apostle, by the Spirit, deals with three subjects:

1. That which was to be done away.
2. That which was to take its place.
3. That which was to abide throughout.

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First it should be clearly understood that the things which were to be “done away”¹ and would “cease” were sign gifts. The passage does not teach that prophecies would fail to come true, but that the *gift* of prophecy, possessed by some at that time, would be done away. Nor does it teach that people would stop talking or knowing things, but that the *gifts* of tongues and of supernatural knowledge would “cease” and be “done away.”

The next thing which should be clearly understood is that these sign gifts were to be done away *presently, in that day*. They were part of the transition from an earthly program to a heavenly and spiritual one. They belonged to a *childhood* which was consistent with that transition. The great, grand truth of the mystery was only gradually revealed to Paul himself. He was even then still receiving divine revelations as to the new economy and there was yet more to come (Acts 26:16; II Cor. 12:1). Hence he says: “*We know in part...we prophesy in part...we see through a glass² darkly.*” But the revelation was soon to be complete (Col. 1:25) and with its completion “childish things” and “that which is in part” were to be “done away.”

From Paul’s own letters it is evident that he was not willing to wait, or to have other believers wait for heaven, to pass from childhood to maturity. Indeed, he chides these very Corinthians for failure to grow with the truth, calling them “carnal” and “babes” (I Cor. 3:1-4). And in Eph. 4:14 he exhorts “*that we henceforth be no more children.*” Again, in Colossians he speaks of his intensive efforts to “*present every man perfect [mature] in Christ Jesus*” (Col. 1:24-29) and refers to Epaphras’ fervent prayers that the Colossian believers might stand “*perfect [mature]³ and complete in all the will of God*” (4:12).

THE ATTEMPTED RECOVERY OF THE SIGN GIFTS TODAY

From all this it is evident that notwithstanding the claims made by many Fundamentalists, the “great commission” and the program of Pentecost with their sign gifts *cannot* be carried out today. God has rendered this *impossible*, for these supernatural manifestations have been “*done away*” and have “*ceased.*” Hence the attempt to recover them is not of God but of Satan, who would use even the Scriptures to rob God’s people of their most precious possessions.

As Satan used the Word of God itself to tempt our Lord, and used it again to cause the Galatians to “fall from grace” into the bondage of Moses’ law, so he uses it in our day, pointing to the Scriptures themselves to draw sincere believers away from a full appreciation of “all spiritual blessings in the heavenlies” to the lesser blessings of a former dispensation. Our adversary is pleased when untaught Christians say: “If it’s in the Bible it’s enough for me,” but there are two Scriptures he will never point men to: Rom. 11:13 and II Tim. 2:15, for were they heeded the confusion and division in the Church would be dispelled.

¹ The word rendered “fail” and “vanish away” in Ver. 8 is *katargeo*, to do away.

² Lit. “*a mirror.*” The mirrors of those days were but polished metal surfaces and did not give the bright reflection of modern mirrors.

³ The same word, *teleios*, is used in the phrase: “When that which is *perfect* is come” (I Cor. 13:10) and refers, not to heaven, but to the full-orbed or fully developed revelation of truth which their spiritual growth was to accompany.

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It should be further observed that the attempted recovery of the sign gifts today is a distinct sign of *immaturity*. The sign gifts abounded in the Corinthian church (I Cor. 1:7 and chaps. 12-14) and the Corinthians boasted of them, yet Paul let them know in no uncertain terms that they were mere “babes in Christ” (I Cor. 3:1) unable to digest solid food (I Cor. 3:2) and their “envying and strife and division” (I Cor. 3:3) proved that he was right.

In the light of this let no modern Pentecostalist imagine that his supposed “gifts” of healing or prophecy or tongues are signs of spirituality or maturity. The Corinthians had all these, yet were pronounced *carnal* rather than spiritual, *childish* rather than mature. Supernatural gifts in themselves were *never* an indication of spirituality. They were simply temporary *signs* associated with the *Messiahship* of our Lord. Indeed, a visit to a Pentecostal meeting should convince the thoughtful student of the Word that spiritual maturity is not one of their characteristics. A man rises to speak in an “unknown tongue.” Another follows with an “interpretation.” Or a “prophet” rises with some special revelation from the Lord. And what do they say? Do they offer some refreshing light on the Word, or discuss “the deep things of God”? No, they make such statements as: “The Lord is pleased with the meeting,” or “The Lord is coming soon and we must be ready,” or “There is a backslider in our midst and the Lord wants him to know that if he doesn’t soon seek God’s face he will be cut off.” And what brings the greatest response from the audience? The speaker who goes to the greatest extremes of physical or vocal exertion, the suggestion that the Holy Spirit is about to come down in power, or the mere mention of healing. But “the riches of the glory” of God’s “mystery among the Gentiles,” which God “would make known” (Col. 1:27) and by which believers are established (Rom. 16:25) is utterly unknown to them. No, in the words of another: “What they look upon as superior spirituality is actually instability and emotionalism that lasts only so long as the spell is upon them and then drives them into a state of depression which is closely related to melancholia.”

Referring to one who embraced Pentecostalism and had been ruined by it, Sir Robert Anderson rightly says: “This complete surrender of mind and will—his entire personality—to what he believed to be the guidance of the Holy Spirit, left him a prey to the terrible delusions in which he was at last engulfed” (*Spirit Manifestations*, p. 19).

But the Corinthians had an exaggerated estimate of the value of the sign gifts at a time when they were at least in order. What shall we say of those who make much of them after God has suspended them and made them to cease? The surging waves of emotionalism, the constant emphasis on the miraculous, the self-deceit and the deception of others, the failure to recognize Paul as the God-appointed apostle of the present dispensation—all this is not of God, but of Satan.

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THE ABIDING TRINITY

“And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three.”

The word *now* is not used here in a temporal but a *logical* sense. It could be rendered: “And *thus* these three remain.” It is the next logical step in his argument that while some things will pass away to be replaced by others, there are certain basic factors which will “*abide*” or *remain*. These are *faith, hope* and *love*, and with the passing of the sign gifts these give *full and sufficient evidence* of normal and healthy Christianity. Let those of *that* day possess them and they will grow in grace, passing naturally from infancy to maturity, from “that which is in part” to “that which is perfect [fully developed].” Let the believer *today* possess them in good measure and they will keep him from spiritual decline.

The three are a trinity. While the apostle may speak of any one or two or of all three together, yet they are so wholly one that no one can exist apart from the other two. Furthermore, each is equally important in its way. *Love* is the “greatest,” the crowning virtue. It is of *paramount* importance. Yet *faith* is of *primary* importance. Faith must come first, for “without faith it is impossible to please Him.” And *hope*, or expectancy, is of *perpetual* importance. It lies at the center of our daily Christian experience.

It was these three graces that the apostle looked for in each one of the churches, judging the genuineness of its profession by the measure of their presence or absence. He never asked: “How many baptized converts have you?” or “How many of you have the sign gifts?” The program was no longer: “*He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved...and these signs shall follow them that believe*” (Mark 16:16, 17). He always looked for faith, hope and love.

In writing to the *Romans* he recognized the fact that their “faith is spoken of throughout the whole world.” But is their faith accompanied by an equal measure of hope and love? He has never been among them and cannot fully know since they are at so great a distance from him, but he does tell them what is necessary in this regard, particularly in Rom. 5:1-5 “Being justified by FAITH, we have peace with God” and “access into this grace wherein we stand.” And more: though in ourselves we still “come short of the glory of God,” we may “rejoice in HOPE of the glory of God.” And this hope “maketh not ashamed; because the LOVE of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.”

The *Corinthians* had broken his heart. With their exaggerated emphasis on the sign gifts they had neglected faith, hope and love. The apostle is most guarded in addressing them in both his letters to them. While he praises others for the evidence of their salvation, in the case of the Corinthians he merely writes: “*I thank my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ*” (I Cor. 1:4). They bore some evidence of FAITH (I Cor. 1:4-6) and some of HOPE (Ver. 7) but little of LOVE, and this affected their faith and hope as well (1:10-12). Even after the rebuke of his first letter it was still necessary for him to exhort them to “prove the sincerity of your love” and “show...the proof of your love” (II Cor. 8:8, 24).

Thus in I Cor. 13 we find him emphasizing their need of all three—especially love.

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The *Galatian* church was another keen disappointment to Paul. Their departure from the grace of God, “so soon” after having come to rejoice in it, left him stunned and grieved (Gal. 1:6-10). With the Galatians it was *faith* that was basically involved but this affected their *hope* too, for he asks them: “Where is then the blessedness ye spake of?” (4:15) and also their *love*, for, says he: “All the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. But...ye bite and devour one another...” (5:14, 15).

Warning them that submission to circumcision implies that Christ is of “no profit” to them and has “become of no effect,” and that it involves them in an obligation to keep “the whole law,” the apostle again groups the three graces together, as he says:

“For we through the Spirit wait for the HOPE of righteousness by FAITH...which worketh by LOVE” (Gal. 5:5, 6).

The so-called *Ephesian* epistle was doubtless an encyclical letter, sent to a group of churches, including that at Ephesus. Of them he had better things to say:

“Wherefore I also, after I heard of your FAITH in the Lord Jesus, and LOVE unto all the saints,

“Cease not to give thanks for you...” (Eph. 1:15, 16).

As to their HOPE, he reminds them that upon believing they were “sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession” (Vers. 13, 14). But he would now establish them in a greater, more wonderful hope, and prays:

“That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of [Christ]:

“The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know WHAT IS THE HOPE OF HIS CALLING...” (Eph. 1:17, 18).

The reference here, of course, is to His calling us to a *present* position and *present* blessings in the heavens.

Of this glorious calling Paul writes to Timothy:

“[GOD] HATH SAVED US, AND CALLED US WITH AN HOLY CALLING, NOT ACCORDING TO OUR WORKS, BUT ACCORDING TO HIS OWN PURPOSE AND GRACE, WHICH WAS GIVEN US IN CHRIST JESUS BEFORE THE WORLD BEGAN” (II Tim. 1:9).

Every believer should know and experience “the hope of His calling,” or, as Weymouth renders it: “the hope which His call to you inspires.”

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The *Philippian* church had been threatened with division over personal misunderstanding, which Paul hastened to deal with, but as a whole they were an outstanding group. That they had a special place in Paul's affections is evident from the opening words of his letter to them:

“I THANK MY GOD UPON EVERY REMEMBRANCE OF YOU,

“ALWAYS IN EVERY PRAYER OF MINE FOR YOU ALL MAKING REQUEST WITH JOY” (Phil. 1:3, 4).

The steadfastness of their *faith* was proven by their fellowship with him in the gospel “from the first day until now” (Ver. 5). Their *hope* too was strong, for they had even suffered with him (Ver. 7, 29, 30). Moreover *he* was confident that God, who had begun this “good work” in them would complete it (Ver. 6). As to their *love*, this had been to some degree adversely affected by the misunderstanding that had arisen (4:2, 3) but he seeks to bind them firmly together again as he addresses them “all” (1:1) assures them of his prayers and rejoicing over them “all” (Ver. 4) of his confidence in them “all” (Ver. 7) and his longing for them “all” (Ver. 8). And while he does not use very words, he again groups faith, hope and love together in his closing exhortation:

“Stand fast in the Lord” (4:1).

There is FAITH.

“Be of the same mind in the Lord” (4:2).

There is LOVE.

“Rejoice in the Lord alway” (4:4).

There is HOPE.

The *Colossians* had their difficulties too, with heresy creeping in, but they also stood on a high spiritual plane. Hence the apostle writes of his thanksgiving and prayers for them.

“Since we heard of your FAITH in Christ Jesus, and of the LOVE which ye have to all the saints,

“For the HOPE which is laid up for you in heaven...” (1:3-5).

To them too he could write of the deeper, more glorious truths associated with “the mystery,” so that in the *Colossians* letter we are again taken to the very heights of spiritual truth.

The *Thessalonian* congregation has long been known as “the model church” and in Paul's letters to them (probably his earliest) we find faith, hope and love most strikingly grouped together. In their case especially *hope* is generally mentioned last, consistent with the fact that these epistles are basically concerned with “the blessed hope,” concerning which they needed some instruction.

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In the opening words of his first letter to them the apostle recalls their “work of FAITH,” their “labor of LOVE” and their “patience of HOPE” (1:3). Then he recalls how they had “*turned to God from idols*”—there is FAITH—“*to serve the living and true God*”—there is LOVE—“and to *wait for His Son from heaven*”—there is HOPE (1:9, 10). Indeed the whole first chapter is divided into three parts, the first having basically to do with their FAITH (Vers. 1-5) the second with their LOVE (Vers. 6-8) and the third with their HOPE (Vers. 9-10).

Even at that the apostle urges them to “put on the breastplate of FAITH and LOVE and for an helmet, the HOPE of salvation” (5:8).

Upon turning to the salutation to the second epistle we are refreshed to see how they have grown since he last wrote. Says the apostle:

“... your FAITH groweth exceedingly,

“And the LOVE of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth;

“So that we...glory in...your PATIENCE OF FAITH [or Hope] in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure” (II Thes. 1:3, 4).

Oh, that these graces might abound in us, the members of Christ’s Body! The individual believer in whom these virtues abound has all he needs and all that God expects of him. All else is bound up in these three. Likewise, the church in which they abound is a full church, whether composed of twenty-five members or twenty-five hundred members.

Sacrifices, circumcision and the law have passed away; the sign gifts have ceased, but these graces remain as an abiding trinity and will abide forever.

One of our hymns reads:

Faith will vanish into sight;

Hope be emptied in delight.

Love in heav’n will shine more bright.

Therefore give us love.

But this is not wholly true. While many things we now believe will then be seen and known, it does not follow from this that our faith will then cease. Indeed it will then be *perfected*.

Similarly, while things we now hope for will then be realized, it does not follow that hope, or expectancy, will then cease, for the life to come will be progressive in the glories it unfolds.

Love, the crowning grace of all will, of course, also be perfected in heaven. What a prospect is ours!