

THE
FIRST THING IN THE WORLD;
OR,
THE PRIMACY OF FAITH.

BY

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THE FIRST THING IN THE WORLD

OR

THE PRIMACY OF FAITH

It is no doubt true, according to the saying of Paul, that of these three, Faith, Hope, and Love, the greatest is Love. Howbeit, that which is greatest is not always first; and there may be need of just a word of caution, lest we make Love the fundamental grace simply because it is the capital grace. The tree is greater than the root; but if, on that account, it be tempted to boast, it may hear a distinct rebuke from the scripture: "If thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee." [Rom 11:18]

Faith is as radical, as Love is expansive; the latter has little power to branch out, and bear the

incomparable fruits of kindness, and patience, and humility, and unselfishness, except, as through the former, it is rooted in Christ and draws constant life and nourishment from Him. Have we sufficiently noticed the fact that, in the repeated groupings of the Christian graces, found in scripture, Faith is invariably assigned the first place, being made to stand nearest to Christ, as a kind of head and sponsor to all her sister virtues? Beautiful and impossible of translation is the picture given us in 2 Peter 1:5-8: "Add to your faith, virtue; and to virtue, knowledge, and to knowledge, temperance; and to temperance, patience; and to patience, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, charity." Looking into the original Greek, we find the picture of a chorus, whose minstrels are selected, one after another, and linked into a chosen band. Standing at the head, not only leading, but recruiting this choir of Christian graces, is Faith.

She is the divinely appointed chorister, who is responsible for all the rest—virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, charity—and who directs their song.

If we ask why such pre-eminence is accorded to her, the answer is found in the verse just preceding: “Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.” Here we see two heredities set in contrast: “The corruption which is in the world through lust;” human nature fallen and depraved through Adam’s sin, so that all who are in it are inclined to evil, and incapable of holy love. Into this inheritance we come by our first birth. On the other hand, is “the divine nature”—God’s own blessed and incorruptible life, brought into the world through Christ, the second Adam. Of this we are made partakers by the second birth. As writes the apostle Peter: “*Being born again not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever,* * * * and this is

the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.” [1 Peter, 1:23, 25]

And which grace shall be counted worthy to receive this word, and to appropriate the unspeakable gift which it contains? To Faith, only, is accorded this high honor: “Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” [Rom. 10:17] With ear bent close to the life-bearing promise, with hand immediately touching the life-giving Lord, she alone receives the gift of God for us, and for all her kindred graces. “He that believeth” on the Son hath everlasting life” [John 3:36] “As many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, *even to them that believe on His name:* which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” [John 1:12, 13.] What wonder that this revelation of the divine birth, and of the new heredity which it involves, should call for a song, and that Faith should be

bidden to gather this chorus for the anthem? An entire octave of graces now appears arrayed. And if we question them, each will acknowledge her subordination to Faith. “Knowledge” will say, that, in the school of grace, we do not do good works in order to obtain eternal life but we attain eternal life in order to do good works. As for blessed *Agape*, who we name “Love,” we find her standing at the end of the line—the last in the row of sings, and, as we praise her as the greatest grace in the world, her modest answer is: *Love is of God, and every one that loveth hath been begotten of God* [1 John, 4:7]. Thus readily confessing that her own existence depends on Faith, through whom alone eternal life is communicated. So it is that by her own companions and kindred is her primacy and headship of Faith accorded.

No doubt Faith itself is the gift of God, as well as the medium of our acceptance of “the gift of

God, which is eternal life.” But, as man is made responsible for its exercise, we desire to emphasize this fact, though admitting that, while it is appropriating faculty, really, in conversion, God lays hold of us through our laying hold of Him. And this we must maintain as firmly as we do the equal truth that we lay hold of God through His laying hold of us. The divine and the human here have a mutual interaction, like the two springs of a watch; the main spring containing all the power in itself, but depending upon the hair spring to take off that power and convey it to the machinery, moving it, yet moved by it. So saith the scripture: “By the power of God *through* faith *unto* salvation” [1 Peter 1:5]. Therefore we must believe in the absolute accountability for its exercise as the expression of our free will.

It is, however, of the most honored *triad* of

Christian graces that we desire to speak.

“And now abideth

FAITH,

HOPE,

LOVE,

These three; but the greatest of these is Love.” [1 Cor. 13:13.] Of these three Faith looks backward to the cross of Christ, Hope looks forward to the coming of Christ, and Love looks upward to the throne of Christ, singing, as she gazes, “Whom not having seen we love, in whom, though now we see him not, yet believing, we rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory;” and then reaches outward to a lost and suffering world with hands full of mercy purchased by the atonement of Christ, and hands full of blessing and reward to be brought in at the advent of Christ. Hear, therefore, the apostolic injunction concerning these servants of the soul [Heb. 10:19-25, R.V.]: “Having, therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holy place by

the blood of Jesus by the way which he dedicated for us—a new and living way—through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; and having a great High Priest over the house of God:

Let us draw near in fullness of

FAITH.

Let us hold fast the confession of our

HOPE.

Let us consider one another to provoke to

LOVE.”

Here, again, we have Faith standing at the head of the column, and for obvious reasons. The throne of God and the holiest of all have come into view. “Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord, or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands and a pure heart” [Ps. 24:3]. If any have these requisites let him press in by all means. But, as unto the typical tabernacle, “went the high priest alone once every year, *not without blood*, which he offered for himself and for the errors of the people;” and as “into heaven itself” Christ has entered by his

own blood, having obtained eternal redemption for us;” surely the best of us sinners will hardly venture to draw nigh without cleansing. But just as we are looking at our stained hand and guilty hearts, mourning our lack of the divine requirements, we hear a voice from heaven: “Having, therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holy place by the blood of Jesus, and having a great High Priest of the house of God, let us draw nigh with a heart in full assurance of faith; having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our body washed with pure water.” But how do we get this heart-cleansing and hand-purifying? By the atonement of Christ as God’s appointed provision for the putting away of sin; and by our personal faith as the appointed means of appropriating that provision. All of this wondrous discourse concerning the sprinkled blood, and the eternal redemption, is simply designed to make us understand that the obstacles to our approach unto God, and our acceptance with him, have been put away by the work of Christ upon the

cross. And what is wanted now is, not that we do something for our acceptance with God, but that we appropriate that which He has done; not that we bring something to Him, but what we accept what He has brought to us. And Faith is the only one of these graces that can stand next to Christ’s redemption and appropriate it merits, as she alone could stand next to Christ and His word and appropriate eternal life.

Love comes with full hands bringing something to God; Hope comes with outstretched hands expecting something yet to be given from God; Faith comes with empty hands to receive something which he has already been given by God. Therefore, since it is necessary that we receive, before we give, Faith must come first, however welcome her sister graces may be afterwards. For let it be distinctly recognized that Faith originates nothing; she only recognizes what is, and receives it on the soul’s behalf. The opening eye did not create the lovely landscape which it pictured to the mind;

it simply apprehended what was there already, and received the impress of it upon its sensitive retina, and so made an inward reality of what before was an outward fact. So Faith appropriates and rests in the accomplished work of Christ. She could not make peace with God for the soul; but, Christ having “slain the enmity by the cross; so making peace” [Eph. 1:16], she can arrest in the fact, whereby “being justified by faith we have peace with God” [Rom. 5:1]. She could not even obey the summons, “Let us draw near,” except as we had first been brought near. But, since “Now in Christ Jesus ye who sometime were afar off are made nigh by the blood of Christ” [Eph. 1:13,] She could not even obey the summons, “let us draw near,” except as we had first been brought near. But, since “Now in Christ Jesus ye who sometime were afar off are made nigh by the blood of Christ” [Eph. 2:13,] She can believe the fact, and bid the soul rest in the place of closeness and fellowship which it Redeemer has secured for it. Faith has been aptly called the eye of the soul; and, as such, she holds undisputed primacy among the spiritual senses. Try to put either of the other graces into her place at this

point and see how inadequate they are for the service required of them. Bring Hope, and say to her, “Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world,” and she will answer: “What a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it’ [Rom. 8:24]. It is not given to me to look at Christ crucified, but to expect Christ coming.” Bring Love, and pointing her to the cross, read to her: “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him might not perish, but have everlasting life;” and say, “Oh blessed Love, appropriate this gift for my soul, by requiting and returning this matchless, divine affection.” And Love will reply: “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He love us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” [1 John 4:10]. And then Love will tenderly recall her history before she was born again; how from Sinai God said, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with

all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might,” and how she had utterly failed to keep this commandment; so that in all her history she had never found a human heart through which she could exercise a perfect and holy affection toward God; and ho, in her despair, God himself at last interposed for her help, saying: “Since none in the world has been found to love me with all the heart, I will show men that I love the world with all my heart, and I will give my only son as the pledge and assurance of that love,” and, recalling all this, she will lay her finger on that scripture, where it is written: “And we have known and believed the love which God has to us: [1 John 4:16], and then beckon to her sister, Faith, to draw near and appropriate this word, promising that afterward she will take up her part and sing: “We love Him because He first loved us” [1 John 4:19].

A hearer raises a question at this point about our saying that “Faith originates nothing,” and asks whether faith is not the condition of forgiveness.

doubtless, the condition of our receiving forgiveness, but not of God’s bestowing it! For the whole ground of His mercy toward us, is in Jesus Christ, and not in anything of us. What we long to make plain is that in settling the quarrel with God which our sin has provoked the Lord Himself has taken the initiative and abolished the enmity. So then we have not now to beg Him to be propitious toward us because we are sorry, but rather to behold Him in Jesus Christ “exceeding sorrowful unto death” for us, and yield to Him in affectionate trust and self-surrender. Our message to men is that “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself;” and therefore “we pray you in Christ’s stead be ye reconciled to God.” Our faith does not effect a reconciliation; it accepts a reconciliation already made, and rejoices in it. Behold the canceled bond! Did you contrition erect the Cross, or does the Cross beget your contrition? “Having forgiven us all our trespasses, having blotted out the *bond written in ordinances that was against us,*

which was contrary to us: and He hath taken it out of the way, nailing it to the Cross” [Col. 2:14, R.V.J]. See it there—all that justice and judgment have written against you guilty soul, punctured through with the crucifixion nails! Believe the fact that Christ settled the whole question of sin, and accepted the settlement as yours. This is Faith—the open hand that takes forgiveness from the pierced hand.

“Therefore, being justified by

FAITH,

We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. By whom we also we have access by faith unto this grace wherein we stand and rejoice in

HOPE

of the glory of God. And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also, knowing that tribulation worketh patience, and patience experience, and experience hope, and hope maketh not ashamed, because the

LOVE

Of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us” [Rom. 5:1-5].

“Faith, Hope, and Love”—we may liken them to the three rays of the sunbeam, one of which gives color, another light, and another warmth.

1. The first, the actinic ray, as it is called, is the one that photographs for us. This is Faith. “The light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God,” fall upon us in the word, and through Faith is appropriated and imprinted upon the inward spirit, and thus we become “renewed unto knowledge after the image of him that created us” [Col. 3:10]. The divine life, put with in us, in other words, contains the principle of the divine likeness. He who has predestinated the Christian “to be conformed to the image of His Son” has not left him to attain this image by outward effort and imitation. As the life of the parent, communicated to the child whom he has begotten, carries with it the elements of moral and physical resemblance,

which are certain, in due time, to be manifested; so, being made “partakers of the divine nature” through faith, we possess an inward hereditary likeness to God, which is destined to be more and more revealed in our outward character. Of course, we are now speaking especially of moral and spiritual traits.

After the fall, “Adam begat a son in his own likeness” [Gen. 5:3], and all his posterity has perpetuated the family resemblance. But in Christ we are begotten anew in the image of God, who in the beginning said: “Let us make man in our own image, after our own likeness” [Gen. 1:26.]

2. Hope is the light of the soul, did we say? It is so because her eye is toward the day-dawn,, watching for Him who says: “Behold I come quickly, and my reward is with me to give to every man according as his work shall be” [Rev. 22:12]. “I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star” [Rev. 22: 16.] But until

the day star arise in the heart” [2 Peter 1:19,] the Morning Star will not be looked for, upon the horizon. Hope does not precede Faith, but results from it: “Christ in you, the Hope of Glory,” writes the apostle [Col. 1:27]. The expectancy of the Lord’s glorious return is impossible for those who have not had Christ begotten within them. Or rather—lest we dishearten any by telling them what they cannot do—we affirm how joyfully they wait the footsteps of the returning Lord who have had Christ formed within them, and in whom he abides by a living and vital experience. What is this Christ within us, but the indwelling Holy Ghost? God does not leave us to do what we are unable to do’ and therefore, he give us the Spirit to help our infirmities. If we are set to imitate Christ, and copy His holy likeness, then, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, we are changed into the same image from glory to glory, *as by the spirit of the Lord*” [2 Cor. 3:18]. It is only the Spirit of the Lord

abiding in us that can reproduce the likeness of the Lord set before us. And so of watching for His appearing. Except we have been united to Christ by the inward betrothal of Faith, we cannot desire and long for his coming as the blessed Bridegroom. How fitting, then, that the apostle should exhort us to “fullness of faith,” before he bids us “hold fast the confession of our Hope without wincing,” for so the words mean. Wincing! How much there is in the scorn and contempt which many, even professed Christians pour upon this blessed Hope, to make us wince! But, being accompanied by the other graces, this one stands firm.

2. Love, with her divine warmth, now appears in the hearts of those who have become “Song of God through faith.” Indeed, this is named as the distinctive birth-trait of the renewed: “We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren” [1 John 3:14], and, loving the, the Elder Brother, “the First Born among many brethren” will be loved pre-eminently, and therefore

looked for earnestly. For now it is written: “And Hope maketh not ashamed, *because the Love of God is shed abroad in the heart through the Holy Ghost, which He hath given unto us*” [Rom. 5:5]. Most gracious saying is this! God knows how little love we can give Him, and therefore, he pours his own love through our hearts by the Spirit, that we may return Him his own. Let us not contend, even unconsciously, for the sufficiency of our own love, but rather humble ourselves, and admit our spiritual poverty, that so we may be “enriched unto all bountifulness” by this divine gift. He who lay in Jesus’ bosom at the last supper never once mentions his affection for his Lord; but five times he names himself “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” and of all the evangelists, he has in his epistles touched the loftiest strains in discoursing of divine love. But there is nothing of sentiment or spiritual romance in his utterances. On the contrary, while the sterner Paul would have us: soften our dogmatism by “truthing in love” [Eph. 4: 15], John would have us

guard our charity by “loving in truth” [3 John 1]. We feel the heat of His flaming heart as well as its genial warmth; the holy intolerance, which forbids us to receive the errorist into our house, or bid him God-speed [2 John 10], as well as the tender compassion which impels us to lay down our lives for our brethren. How in all his letters, he “provokes us to love and good works! How exacting, as well as exalting, his utterances! “Hereby know we love, because He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoso hath this world’s goods, and beholdeth his brother in need, and shutteth up his compassion from him, how doth the love of God abide in him?” [1 John 3:16, 17, R.V.]. Only as we keep close to the heart of the Man of Sorrows, can we get close to the heart of our sorrowing humanity; compassion is the measure of charity. “My little children, let us not love in word, neither with the tongue, but in deed and truth.” [1 John 3: 18.]

Love is a feeling, an emotion, a passion; and, when passing into action, often a crucifixion and a martyrdom. And just because it is so great, we must be careful not to put it into the place of Faith, let it take the attention from the Lord himself. We are indebted to John Henry Newman for the saying that sincere faith is utterly unconscious of itself, like the atmosphere, the transparent medium for seeing Christ, and only visible when clouded with our feelings and emotions. Let us take heed, therefore, of saying that to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ is equivalent to loving Him, let, instead of colorless medium, we place a sensible object between us and Him. We emphasize this caution, because in directing seeking souls, we have found it their greatest temptation to believe in their feelings, to rest in their emotions, or to trust in their love, instead of believing on the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians [1 Thess. 1, 2, 3], we meet our triad again, but now

each one is busily employed in the Master's service.

*"We give thanks to God always for you all,
making mention of you in our prayers, remembering
without ceasing your work of FAITH,
and labor of LOVE,
and patience of HOPE."*

All are here diligently engaged, but their tasks are various. The "works" which the beloved James urges to persistently as the ground of justification, Faith has taken up, and is performing with all earnestness; the wearisome labor, of which the indefatigable Paul often speaks in his catalogue of toils and travail, Love is joyfully fulfilling; while Hope is watching in patient expectation, proving true the singer's words:

"They also serve who only stand and wait."

Whatever difference of value there may be in their service, all are equally recognized by the Lord, who, looking down from heaven, says: "I know thy works, and thy labor, and thy patience" [Rev. 2:2].

Therefore, let there be no rivalry or strife for pre-eminence among these three. Yet we can but

observe that Faith stands in her old place at the head of the line. And why this persistent priority? Only because we are justified by Faith; and justification is the first and initial transaction of the Christian life.

Now, however, we mark that Faith no longer occupies the attitude of passive recipiency, but that of active endeavor; "the work of Faith." True, and it is her office not only to look toward Christ, but to labor toward men; not only to take salvation from the Saviour, but to bring salvation to the sinner. Thus we explain the seeming contradiction between Paul and Paul, who no tells us that we are "justified by His blood," and now, "by faith" and between Paul and James, the latter of whom declares that we are "justified by works." The complete statement is that we are justified

*Meritoriously, by Christ,
Instrumentally, by Faith,
Evidentially, by Works.*

As the bridge is supported by the pier, while the pier itself is supported by the solid earth, so our

works rest upon our faith, and our faith rests upon Jesus Christ. Faith, therefore, always stands next to the Lord and His word. Why has every attempt to invert the order of these graces, preaching love, and the labor of love first, proved futile? So it has, from the days of Hans Egede I Greenland, to the latest missionary in modern times, who has thought to use the law as a preparation for grace. On the contrary, David Brainerd speaks with a kind of suppressed astonishment of what he observed among the degraded North American Indians; how preaching to them the good news of salvation through the atonement of Christ, and persuading them to accept it by faith, and then hastening on in his rapid missionary tours, he found, on returning upon his track a year or two later, that the fruits of righteousness, and sobriety, and virtue, and brotherly love, were everywhere visible, though it had been possible to impart to them only the slightest moral or ethical teaching. So, true, is Martin Luther's joyful discovery that "We are not

saved by good works."

We know that to many this putting of the matter is distasteful; and we will not needlessly wound such by taking up the strain, "cast your deadly doing down." Rather will we tenderly exhort them to lift up their eyes to that divine doing on the cross, wherein One wrought in the travail of obedience unto death, till an eternal "It is done" was accomplished. "Not of works, lest any man should boast." [Eph. 2:9]—how the words empty our hand of self-confident labors! "Not of yourselves"—how the saying presses us into spiritual bankruptcy, and compels us to take the poor debtor's oath! But how graciously God meets us at this point: "By grace are ye saved through faith." Why, then, contend with the Almighty upon this questions? Why try to walk with the lame feet of penance over the *via dolorosa* of expiation, which Christ has trodden for us with his own bloody footsteps? Why

strive to accomplish with weary fingers that redemption which the Savior wrought with pierced hands on Calvary? Our hearts are sore pained with us that so many are still going about to establish their own righteousness by hand-works, and head-works, and will not “submit themselves unto the righteousness of God”—“The righteousness which is of faith.” Would that we could make know to such the joy of falling at Jesus’ feet in sovereign overthrow, and saying, “Lord, not my works, but myself, Thy workmanship!” “Is not this the Carpenter?” [Mark 6: 3], asks George McDonald, and he answers:

“Lord might I be but a saw,
A plane, a chisel, in thy hand!
No, Lord, I take it back in awe—
Such prayer for me is far too grand,
I pray, O Master, let me lie
As on thy bench the favored wood,
Thy saw, thy plane, thy chisel ply
And work me into something good.”

If we humbly consent to be His “wood” He will certainly honor us in due time to be His workers. “*If.*” We say. Here lies the whole question. We

must be taught by Him before we can be His yoke-fellows: “Take My yoke upon you, and *learn* of Me.” We must be wrought by him before we can be His co-workers; “For we are His *workmanship* created in Christ Jesus unto good works” [Eph. 2: 10]. Not toilers first, not even tools, but workmanship, in order to good works. So radical is the change from law to grace, that, whereas, under the first, man was required to do in order to live, under the last he is made to live in Jesus Christ, in order to do. “But that no man is justified by law I the sight of God is evident; for the just shall live by faith” [Gal. 3:11]. Therefore, believe oh reader, trustingly, assuredly, persistently; believe in Jesus Christ our righteousness, and our life. Then will you learn the unspeakable difference between working *for* life, and working *from* life. What a deep significance there is in Paul’s words: “Knowing that your labor is not in vain *in the Lord.*” The work of words is so wearisome, unsatisfying, dryly mechanical! Have you had no

experience in it? – doing for the sake of doing, without the repose in activity, the joy in toil which belong to the work of faith? “I used to get so tired of doing nothing without Christ,” says one, “I now so rest, in doing all things through Christ that strengtheneth me.”

As for “the labor of Love,” how blessed it is just because it has its spring in Him! Some of us know the difference between giving a cup of cold water to a thirsty soul, when the cup has been filled at an earthly fountain, and when it has been drawn from a heavenly spring. Ministering help to the drunkard by paying his debts, by giving him food and clothing, and by getting him work; all in the line of most praiseworthy philanthropy, but fruitless and useless; then, some day, dipping the cup into “the pure river of water of life” and getting him to drink it by appropriating faith! His whole life now changed; his whole house renovated! So have we seen it, and seeing, determined henceforth never again to lose our communication with the fount of

love or draw from empty cisterns when the well of redemption is full and accessible.

“Our condition was wretched; our children were starving; we had not one to speak for us; we heard that the Son of God was looked for to come, and we grasped at the story.” Such was the pathetic confession of Red Cloud, the Indian, in regard to the recent disturbances among his people. And is “the patience of Hope: a useless gospel to preach to such? Who is it that says to the defrauded laborers, “Be patient, therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord?” [James 5: 7].

Finally, if we obey the gospel, “these three” who have been ministers for us, with faces toward Jesus Christ; and works for us, with hands toward our great humanity; will be warriors for us, standing against a hostile world.

‘Therefore let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of FAITH and LOVE, and for a helmet the HOPE of salvation. [1 Thess. 5: 8].

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By Adoniram Judson Gordon College
1891

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