Evangelical Review of Theology

A Global Forum

Volume 44 • Number 3 • August 2020

Published by

WEA

WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE

Department of Theological Concerns

Printed by

WIPF *and* STOCK *Publishers*
199 West 8th Avenue • Eugene OR 97401
wipfandstock.com

To order hard copies, contact orders@wipfandstock.com

ERT (2020) 44:3, 276–281

Faith, Hope, Love and Jesus' Lordship: A Simple Synthesis of Christianity

Andrew Messmer

Capturing the essential nature of the Christian faith in a simple phrase or set of ideas is valuable for several reasons: to keep our Christian life balanced, to evaluate our behaviour, and to explain to inquirers or new Christians what we believe and how we live out Christian obedience. Drawing on a series of illustrations from Scripture and church history, Andrew Messmer suggests describing Christianity in terms of a familiar triad: faith, hope and love.

As Christians, we do and believe many things: we go to church, interpret Scripture, meditate on Jesus, seek to serve and witness to those around us, and so on. For many of us, these can become isolated beliefs and practices that are not fully integrated with each other. When we approach Christianity in this way, we fail to see it as a coherent and comprehensive system of inter-connected beliefs and practices. Accordingly, I believe it is beneficial for us to seek ways to synthesize the Christian faith in simple fashion.

In this article, I suggest that beneath Christianity's multi-faceted realities lies a very satisfying and simple logic: much of what we believe and do can be summarized by the three theological virtues of faith, hope and love, which are themselves encompassed in one of the earliest and simplest confessions of faith: 'Jesus is Lord!' I will define these three virtues, show how they appear in different Christian beliefs and practices, and demonstrate their internal unity as different aspects contained in our confession of Jesus' lordship. My aim is to help Christians and churches comprehend and communicate their Christian faith more clearly, and to open up new avenues for theological reflection and synthesis.

Theological virtues

Although many Protestants—especially those of the low-church and evangelical variety—do not realize it, for several centuries most Christians have recognized that the three theological virtues of faith, hope and love lie at the centre of the Christian faith. The key biblical text in support of this set of virtues is 1 Corinthians 13:13, 'So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love' (ESV), but there are many other similar texts as well.[1]

1 For other triadic texts (although some with expansions), see Rom 5:1–5; Gal 5:5–6; Eph 4:1–6;

Andrew Messmer (PhD, Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, Belgium) is associate professor at the Facultad Internacional de Teología IBSTE (Barcelona, Spain) and academic dean of the master's program at Seminario Teológico de Sevilla (Seville, Spain).

As a step towards defining these virtues concretely, let us note an interesting feature that they all share. Faith, hope and love can all be understood from the perspective of the subject or from the perspective of the object. That is, they can refer to the person who is believing, hoping and loving or to what we place our faith, hope and love in. This subject–object ambiguity (or better, fulness) appears in Scripture in expressions such as "the righteousness of God" (Rom 1:17) and "the love of Christ" (2 Cor 5:14). Thus, each virtue contains two poles that exist in a dynamic relationship, and the specific meaning of each term depends on the particular context.

Faith can refer to the act of belief (what we do) or the object of what one believes (God and his gospel). Hope can refer to confident expectation and steadfast persistence (what we do), or the object of what one hopes in (God and his promises). Last, love can refer to a disposition towards, or preference for, something or someone (what we do) or the object that one's love desires to achieve (God himself).

Dividing Christian belief and practice into faith, hope and love does not mean that the three are isolated from one another. On the contrary, they can lead to and depend on each other. Perhaps it would be helpful to understand these virtues within a *perichoretic* light, just as we think of the three persons of the Trinity—in other words, they can be distinguished from each other but are also characterized by inter-penetration.

I will now show how this set of theological virtues can provide the basis, unity, and logic of many aspects of Christian faith and life.

Traditional catechetical texts

In his *Enchiridion*, Augustine argued that the three theological virtues correspond to three well-known texts: faith to the Apostles' Creed, hope to the Lord's Prayer, and love to the Ten Commandments. The genius of this system lies in the fact that each article, petition and commandment of these texts functions *synecdochally*—in other words, each part stands for a greater whole. Thus, the whole of Christian doctrine, spirituality and ethics can be subsumed under these three texts, allowing both the simple and the more advanced to meditate on the same texts and apply them as their respective abilities and maturity levels allow. This approach became the basis for catechetical instruction in the West and has continued into the present for many Christian traditions. We will look briefly at these virtue–text pairings.

Faith corresponds to the Apostles' Creed, because this creed can be seen as a systematic and comprehensive (although not exhaustive) presentation of the New Testament proclamation (Greek *kerygma*), which is nothing less than the gospel itself.[2] Therefore, faith can be described as believing in the God whose person and work are described in the Apostles' Creed.

Col 1:4–5; 1 Thess 1:3; 5:8 (cf. Is 59:17); Heb 6:10–12; 10:22–24; 1 Pet 1:3–8, 21–22. Since the triad is so widely used, some have argued that it is a very early formula that could go back to Jesus himself; see e.g. A. M. Hunter, *Paul and His Predecessors* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1961), 33–35.

2 For a fuller explanation of the connection between the Apostles' Creed and the New Testament *kerygma*, cf. my 'The Apostolic *Kerygma* and the Apostles' Creed: A Study in Compatibility,' *St. Vladimir's Theological Journal* 62, no. 4 (2018): 373–81. Others have expressed a similar view; for example, Alister McGrath writes, 'The Apostles' Creed is a splendid summary of the apostolic teaching concerning the gospel.' McGrath, *I Believe: Exploring the Apostles' Creed* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 1997), 12.

Similarly, hope corresponds to the Lord's Prayer, which is structured around six or seven[3] petitions that express biblical hope in different ways. What unites them is their confident expectation in God and his promises. Although all prayer is an expression of hope, this prototypical prayer, the one given by Jesus to teach believers how to pray (cf. Lk 11:1), provides us with the best expression of biblical hope.[4]

Finally, love corresponds to the Ten Commandments. As Jesus and his apostles stated, the whole Law can be summarized in two commandments: love God and love others (e.g. Mk 12:29–31; Rom 13:8–10; Jam 2:8). Although eight of the ten Commandments are stated negatively as prohibitions, Jesus and his apostles understood love to be a positive requirement, thereby allowing each of the Ten Commandments to be understood both negatively and positively (e.g. Matt 7:12; Eph 4:20–32).[5]

Early church life

Although I would not want to press the imagery too far, I think it is fair to suggest that the elements of faith, hope and love are found in the summary statement of early church life in Acts 2:42. Teaching corresponds to faith, prayers (and possibly the breaking of bread) to hope, and fellowship to love. The benefit of this connection is that it unites catechetical instruction with church life in a very practical way: catechizing can be seen as teaching people about church life.

Prosper of Aquitaine's formula

Beginning in seminal form with Prosper of Aquitaine (a follower of Augustine), it has been custom to use the formula *lex orandi lex credendi*, which roughly means 'what we pray (or how we worship) is what we believe'. Later, the formula was amplified by some to include a third component, *lex vivendi*, thereby making the whole phrase mean 'what we pray is what we believe, which in turn guides how we live.' The point is that there is an inherent connection between the Church's praying, believing and living. The connections between this formula and the three theological virtues are clear: faith refers to *lex credendi*, hope to *lex orandi*, and love to *lex vivendi*.

Spiritual interpretation of Scripture

From the earliest times of the Christian church, many believers have interpreted Scripture in other than strictly literal ways (see e.g. Gal 4:21–31). By the Middle

3 Enumerations differ, depending on whether 'lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil' is treated as one request or two.

4 Some have attempted to demonstrate that the Psalms can be organized under the different topics treated in the Lord's Prayer, which would be a good argument in favor of incorporating them into the catechetical process as well. Although this works well for some psalms, I understand the Psalms as more than just prayers, embracing other functions such as teaching.

5 Some have argued that the Sermon on the Mount is a useful complement to the Ten Commandments, since it explicitly internalizes what many see as an externalizing tendency in the Ten Commandments. Like the Psalms, the Sermon on the Mount is thus a particularly valuable component of catechetical instruction.

Ages, biblical interpretation was systematized and divided into its 'literal' and 'spiritual' senses, with the latter containing three distinct aspects: allegorical, tropological and anagogical. Allegorical interpretation referred to the theological meaning of a text and told Christians what to believe (faith), often finding its fulfilment in Christ or the church; tropological interpretation referred to the moral or ethical meaning of a text and told the church how to live (love); and anagogical interpretation referred to the eschatological meaning of a text and told the church what eternity would be like (hope).[6]

Christ's offices

Beginning with John Calvin's 1545 edition of his *Catechism*, it has been customary to speak of Christ in terms of his threefold office as prophet, priest and king. Christ as prophet means that he is our new lawgiver and teaches us how to live. Christ as priest means that he is our intermediary between us and God and our mutual representative. Christ as king means that he rules over all (including his primary enemies—Satan, sin and death), and that we owe him our allegiance as citizens of his kingdom. Once again, I believe there are parallels to our three theological virtues: faith corresponds to Christ's kingship as we declare our allegiance to him and his gospel, hope to Christ's priesthood since he is the true pray-er and intermediary between us and God, and love to Christ's prophetic office since he teaches us how to live according to the law of love.[7]

One could also suggest that the three traditional theories of the meaning of Christ's atonement can correspond to faith, hope and love. The *Christus victor* theory, which refers to Christ's kingly victory over evil forces, corresponds to faith in that he frees us from bondage and slavery and allows us to confess allegiance to him. The penal substitutionary theory, which emphasizes Christ's priestly satisfaction of God's wrath, embodies hope in that we have a firm confidence in God's promises to forgive us through the intermediary work of his Son. Finally, the moral influence theory, which features what Christ's death prophetically teaches us about the love of God, corresponds to love.

Church practices

Although I will not enter the debate over how many 'sacraments' or 'ordinances' there are, we can agree that many Christians acknowledge three practices as lying near the centre of church life: baptism, the Eucharist, and confession (or repentance). In baptism, one expresses one's faith in the triune God—normally in the form of a recitation of the Apostles' or Nicene-Constantinople Creed—and is received into the church.[8] The Eucharist is where one identifies with and receives the ben-

6 Incidentally, I believe that we could benefit from applying this same ancient (or better, apostolic) hermeneutic today.

7 Christ's three offices also roughly correspond to three key components of his incarnational work: his life corresponds to his prophetic office as teacher (love), his death corresponds to his priestly office as sacrifice (hope), and his resurrection corresponds to his kingly office as victorious king (faith).

8 It should also be remembered that beginning early in church history, exorcism was connected

efit of Christ's death. In confession, we forsake sin and turn again to righteousness.

We can capsulize the significance of these practices in terms of the three theological virtues: faith corresponds to the belief in and commitment to the Christian faith that are expressed at baptism;[9] hope corresponds to the Eucharist through its connection to Christ's second coming and as an anticipation of the eschatological meal we will have with him at his return; love corresponds to the penitent's confession of having broken God's law and of desiring to turn back to the path of love.

Summary and further unity

I believe there are still more ways in which faith, hope and love can illustrate the basis, unity and logic of different aspects of Christian faith and life,[10] but the examples given above should illustrate the point well. However, if you are like me, perhaps you are wondering if faith, hope, and love can be unified further into a single reality. I think they can be, and I think that what unifies them is one of Christianity's oldest confessions: 'Jesus is Lord!' (Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 8:6; 12:3; 2 Cor 4:5; Phil 2:11). Briefly, I would like to show how this confession includes aspects of faith, hope and love.

To confess Jesus is Lord is a theological declaration of faith. As Oscar Cullmann and others have shown, this confession and others like it in the New Testament summarize Christian doctrine as it developed within the first century.[11] This simple confession, and all that it implied with respect to God, Jesus' death and resurrection, the sending of the Spirit, and the formation of the Church, can be seen as the backbone of the New Testament *kerygma*, which itself finds expression in the Apostles' Creed. The confession 'Jesus as Lord!' is the gospel in its most succinct form.

To confess Jesus is Lord is also an expression of hope. This Jesus was crucified and accursed of God, but Christians proclaim him as the resurrected one and await his second coming! The entirety of Christian hope is based on the sure belief

with baptism, which evokes the idea of authority and kingship.

9 I do not mean to imply that baptism is *only* a subjective expression of faith; it can also be seen as an objective reception of God's grace. Also, whether one believes in the practice of infant baptism or believers' baptism, the point remains that *someone* is confessing *something* at baptism, thereby making faith present somehow.

10 For example, three of the historical Protestant traditions can be viewed through the lens of their predominant tendencies with respect to the three theological virtues: the Reformed tradition focused on doctrine, and thus on faith; the Lutheran tradition focused on justification, and thus on hope; the Anabaptist tradition focused on Christian living, and thus on love. Taking a broader perspective, the Christian traditions can be seen through the same lens: Protestants focus on confessions of faith and biblical exposition, and thus on faith; Catholics focus on the sacraments, and thus on hope; and Orthodox focus on deification, and thus love. (For an understanding of deification as 'Christians shar[ing] in the Son's relationship to the Father', see Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009], xiv; cf. 6–9). Finally, there may be some connection to three typical personalities in the church: teachers focus on doctrine, and thus faith; mystics focus on the beatific vision, and thus hope; pastors focus on shepherding people, and thus love.

11 Cf. Oscar Cullmann, *Les premières confessions de foi chrétiennes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948); Ethelbert Stauffer, *Die Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1948), 212–34, 316; Vernon Neufeld, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (Leiden: Brill, 1963).

that, even though we do not see his kingdom in its fulness, God has raised him from the dead and made him the first fruits of our resurrection as well as the restoration of the whole of creation. To confess Jesus is Lord is to proclaim that our reality is connected to Jesus' reality, no matter what the current situation may be.

Finally, to confess Jesus is Lord is an expression of love. If he really is Lord, then we are his servants, called to imitate his life. As the New Testament amply demonstrates (e.g. Jn 13:1), Jesus' life, teachings and death had love as their source and goal. If Jesus fulfils the Law, and if the Law is love, then Jesus is the fulfilment of love itself, and we are called to follow our Lord by imitating him.

Thus, the three theological virtues of faith, hope and love are simply different applications of the one, singular confession of the Church, that Jesus is Lord. This is, in my opinion, what unites Christian belief and practice.

Summary chart: faith, hope and love throughout Christian thought and experience

1 Cor 13:13	Catechetical texts	Acts 2:42	Prosper of Aquitaine	Spiritual interpretation	Christ's offices	Atonement theories	Church practices
Faith	Apostles' Creed (and other creeds)	Teaching	*lex credendi*	Allegorical (Christ/church)	King	*Christus victor*	Baptism (and exorcism)
Hope	Lord's Prayer (and the Psalms)	Prayers (breaking of bread?)	*lex orandi*	Anagogical (future)	Priest	penal substitutionary	Eucharist
Love	Ten Commandments (and Sermon on the Mount)	Fellowship	*lex vivendi*	Tropological (moral)	Prophet	moral influence	Confession (repentance or penance)

Other possibilities (see note 10 for explanations of the last three):

- Christ's incarnational work: life = prophet (love); death = priest (hope); resurrection = king (faith)
- Protestant traditions: Reformed = faith; Lutheran = hope; Anabaptist = love
- Christian traditions: Protestant = faith; Catholic = hope; Orthodox = love
- Church offices/personalities: teacher = faith; mystic = hope; pastor = love