

an essay:

## I CORINTHIANS 13 - THE GREATEST GIFT IS LOVE

νυι δε μενει πιστις, ελπις, αγαπη, τα τρια ταυτα: μειζων δε τουτων η αγαπη.

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I. INTRODUCTION

II. I CORINTHIANS 13:1

III. I CORINTHIANS 13:2

IV. I CORINTHIANS 13:3

V. I CORINTHIANS 13:4

VI. I CORINTHIANS 13:5

VII. I CORINTHIANS 13:6

VIII. I CORINTHIANS 13:7

IX. I CORINTHIANS 13:8

X. I CORINTHIANS 13:9

XI. I CORINTHIANS 13:10

XII. I CORINTHIANS 13:11

XIII. I CORINTHIANS 13:12

XIV. I CORINTHIANS 13:13

XV. IN CONCLUSION:

XVI. REFERENCES

## I. INTRODUCTION

What is love? Let us consider some definitions of “love,” of which Divine love is the highest form. The 1828 Webster’s Dictionary says of “love” in part: “The love of GOD is the first duty of man, and this springs from just views of His attributes or excellencies of character, which afford the highest delight to the sanctified heart. Esteem and reverence constitute ingredients in this affection, and a fear of offending Him is its inseparable effect.”<sup>1</sup>

Nelson’s Dictionary of the Bible comments of “love:” “LOVE [is] the high esteem which GOD has for His human children and the high regard which they, in turn, should have for Him and other people. [The Bible] records the greatest love story ever written – GOD’s unconditional love for us that sent His Son to die on The Cross. Love is not only one of GOD’s attributes: it is also an essential part of His nature. “GOD is love,” the Bible declares, the personification of perfect love. Such love surpasses our understanding, is everlasting, free, sacrificial, and enduring to the end!”<sup>2</sup>

I CORINTHIANS 13 speaks of love being the most excellent gift that can be received, being better than either faith or hope in I CORINTHIANS 13:13: “And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three: but the greatest of these is love.”<sup>3</sup>

Does the word “love” spoken of in I CORINTHIANS 13 convey a “special meaning to provide an adequate expression by which to talk about the love of GOD?”<sup>4</sup> Perhaps. Is there both a “a lesser degree of [human] love, meaning ‘I am fond of,’ and a higher level of GOD’s love, meaning ‘of Divine love?’”<sup>5</sup> Most certainly yes!<sup>6</sup> Let us consider a verse by verse study of I CORINTHIANS 13 from the New King James Version Bible text.<sup>7 8</sup>

## II. I CORINTHIANS 13:1

The King James Version reads, “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.”<sup>9</sup> The Greek,

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<sup>1</sup> 1, Webster’s 1828 Dictionary, p LOV to LOV, entry under “LOVE, n.,” 4th paragraph.

<sup>2</sup> 2, Nelson’s Illustrated Dictionary of the Bible, p 656.

<sup>3</sup> 3, Scofield KJV Bible, I CORINTHIANS 13, p 1224. Scofield notes “love” may be substituted for “charity” throughout I CORINTHIANS 13. New King James Version Bible reads “love” in place of “charity” in I CORINTHIANS 13. Therefore, I will do the same for clarity.

<sup>4</sup> 4, Carson, “Exegetical Fallacies,” p 51.

<sup>5</sup> 3, Scofield KJV Bible, p 1466. Scofield’s margin comments comparing “phileo - I am fond of” versus “agapao - I love;” as “of divine love.”

<sup>6</sup> 4, Carson, “Exegetical Fallacies,” p 53. Carson however warns against a simple word study of the words for love isolated apart from the Scripture’s surrounding text. Thus, he councils us to consider the “sentences, paragraphs, discourses, and so forth” and not single isolated words.

<sup>7</sup> 5, NKJV, I CORINTHIANS 13:1-13. For purposes of clarity I use here the New King James Version, where the word “love” replaces the word “charity” in the King James Version Bible. The English word “love” is the translation of the Greek word “agape,” the noun for “love.” while “agapo” is the verb form for “I love.”

<sup>8</sup> 6, Greek language Bible, I CORINTHIANS 13:1-13.

<sup>9</sup> 5, NKJV, I CORINTHIANS 13:1.

“εαν ταις γλωσσαις των ανθρωπων λαλω και των αγγελων, αγαπην δε μη εχω, γεγονα χαλκος ηχων η κυμβαλον αλαλαζον.”<sup>10</sup>

The love in question is described as "love (primarily of Christian love); show or prove one's love; long for, desire, place first in one's affections."<sup>11</sup> If we do not place GOD first in our affections, are we not lifting up things, people or powers of this world to be our idols in place of GOD? Are we not commanded in Scripture in love GOD first, and then our neighbor second? For if we do not exercise our GOD-given gifts for the benefit of the brethren and the needful with love, all is as dust. For it is written in MATTHEW 22:37-39, “JESUS said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy GOD with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself!”<sup>12</sup>

### III. I CORINTHIANS 13:2

The King James Version reads, “And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.”<sup>13</sup> The Greek Text reads, “και εαν εχω προφητειαν και ειδω τα μυστηρια παντα και πασαν την γνωσιν, και εαν εχω πασαν την πιστιν ωστε ορη μεθισταναι, αγαπην δε μη εχω, ουθεν ειμι.”<sup>14</sup>

Even if I have complete “knowledge, understanding [and] consideration” of all that is possibly knowable within this universe and beyond it - a knowledge that only The Almighty Himself possesses - if I am without love - I am as nothing.<sup>15</sup> Without love, even if I could move the very mountains, I am as worthless as total nothingness. Without love, no matter what abilities and gifts I may have, my very value of being is as though I never existed. Thus it is written in EPHESIANS 5:2, “And walk in love, as CHRIST also hath loved us, and hath given Himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to GOD for a sweet-smelling savour!”<sup>16</sup>

### IV. I CORINTHIANS 13:3

The King James Version reads, “And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.”<sup>17</sup> In Greek “καν ψωμισω παντα τα υπαρχοντα μου, και εαν παραδω το σωμα μου ινα καυχη σωμαι, αγαπην δε μη εχω, ουδεν ωφελουμαι.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> 6, Greek language Bible, I CORINTHIANS 13:1.

<sup>11</sup> 7, Greek-English Dictionary, entry for [love] "agapae," p 1-2.

<sup>12</sup> 3, Scofield KJV Bible, MATTHEW 22:36-40, p 1031.

<sup>13</sup> 5, NKJV, I CORINTHIANS 13:2.

<sup>14</sup> 6, Greek language Bible, I CORINTHIANS 13:2.

<sup>15</sup> 7, Greek-English Dictionary, entry for [knowledge] "gnosis," p 38.

<sup>16</sup> 3, Scofield KJV Bible, EPHESIANS 5:2, p 1254.

<sup>17</sup> 5, NKJV, I CORINTHIANS 13:3.

<sup>18</sup> 6, Greek language Bible, I CORINTHIANS 13:3.

Even if I "...give over, deliver up... deliver (to death), ... commit... commend" my very physical body into the flames of self sacrifice - if I have not love - then it is of no avail.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, is this not what our Lord JESUS CHRIST did for us on The Cross - that He gave himself up unto death because of His divine love for fallen man? For it is not written in vain in MARK 8:36, "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"<sup>20</sup>

#### V. I CORINTHIANS 13:4

The King James Version reads, "Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up;"<sup>21</sup> And in The Greek,

"η αγαπη μακροθυμει, χρηστευεται η αγαπη,[η αγαπη] ου ζηλοι, [η αγαπη] ου περπερευεται, ου φυσιουται,"<sup>22</sup>

Love is not "conceited," nor does it "brag."<sup>23</sup> Love is then an opposite of jealousy, conceit and arrogance. Love waits with all patience and is kind. Love warns us that arrogance invites calamity into our lives, our families and our very souls. A prideful spirit can not love GOD or other men, for it can not be humble. Love grows in the soil of righteous meekness and souls of the humble. For it is written in PROVERBS 16:18-19, "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall. Better is to be of an humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud!"<sup>24</sup>

#### VI. I CORINTHIANS 13:5

The King James Version reads, "[Love] does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil;"<sup>25</sup> And The Greek Text gives us

"[η αγαπη] ουκ ασχημονει, ου ζητει τα εαυτης, ου παροξυνεται, ου λογιζεται το κακον,"<sup>26</sup>

Pure love is not capable of "evil, bad, wrong, injury [or] harm" to another. Love does not conduct itself discourteously, even in the face of assault.<sup>27</sup> Rather, love is longsuffering in the face of affronts and insults. Love is not concerned with its own welfare but rather with the welfare of others. Love then seeks the opposite of whatever is evil. For it is written in ROMANS 12:9-17, "Let love be without [hypocrisy]. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good... Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer; ...Recompense to no man evil for evil!"<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> 7, Greek-English Dictionary, entry for [I deliver over] "paradidomai," p 132.

<sup>20</sup> 3, Scofield KJV Bible, MARK 8:36, p 1056.

<sup>21</sup> 5, NKJV, I CORINTHIANS 13:4.

<sup>22</sup> 6, Greek language Bible, I CORINTHIANS 13:4.

<sup>23</sup> 7, Greek-English Dictionary, entry for [I am conceited] "perpereuomai," p 141.

<sup>24</sup> 3, Scofield KJV Bible, PROVERBS 16:18-19, p 683.

<sup>25</sup> 5, NKJV, I CORINTHIANS 13:5.

<sup>26</sup> 6, Greek language Bible, I CORINTHIANS 13:5.

<sup>27</sup> 7, Greek-English Dictionary, entry for "kakos" [evil], p 91.

<sup>28</sup> 3, Scofield KJV Bible, ROMANS 12:1-21, p 1206-1207. Note "hypocrisy" may be substituted for "dissimulation" in the English text.

### VII. I CORINTHIANS 13:6

The King James Version, “[Love] does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth;”<sup>29</sup> “[η αγαπη] ου χαιρει επι τη αδικια, [η αγαπη] συγχαρει δε τη αληθεια;”<sup>30</sup>

Love can not take pleasure nor contentment in the face of sin. Rather, love takes pleasure and contentment in the face of what is “true, truthful, honest; real, genuine.”<sup>31</sup> The love of GOD for mankind is by nature the purest form of mercy and kindness. All that GOD is, does and says - the very truth of Who GOD is - fills the pious man with joy and thankfulness, for he knows the truth of GOD will never fail nor fall away. For it is written in PSALMS 117:2, “For His merciful kindness is great toward us: and the truth of The LORD endureth for ever. Praise ye The LORD!”<sup>32</sup>

### VIII. I CORINTHIANS 13:7

The King James Version reads, “[Love] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”<sup>33</sup> And in The Greek, “[η αγαπη] παντα στεγει, παντα πιστευει, παντα ελπίζει, παντα υπομενει.”<sup>34</sup>

Perfect love does not fail when difficult times come, but stays the course of the deepest affection for tho suffering. Perfect love does not turn its face from the afflicted, no matter how heavy the pain. GOD’s love is the ultimate example of “hop[ing] for; hop[ing] in; expect[ing]” that all men would come to salvation through our Lord JESUS CHRIST.<sup>35</sup> In His wisdom and grace, GOD’s love allows the wheat and tares to grow together in this world, hoping that all men will submit to the opportunity to repent and receive eternal life. For it is written in 2 PETER 3:9, “The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance!”<sup>36</sup>

### IX. I CORINTHIANS 13:8

The King James Version gives us, “Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away.”<sup>37</sup> And in The Greek, “η αγαπη ουδεποτε πιπτει. ειτε δε προφητεια, καταργηθησονται: ειτε γλωσσαι, παυσονται: ειτε γνωσις, καταργηθησεται.”<sup>38</sup>

No matter the spiritual gifts bestowed upon a saint living in the blessed Church in this world, they will all come and go - all but one: love. It has been noted that “Love,

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<sup>29</sup> 5, NKJV, I CORINTHIANS 13:6.

<sup>30</sup> 6, Greek language Bible, I CORINTHIANS 13:6.

<sup>31</sup> 7, Greek-English Dictionary, entry for “alethia” [truth], p 7.

<sup>32</sup> 3, Scofield KJV Bible, PSALMS 117:2, p 657.

<sup>33</sup> 5, NKJV, I CORINTHIANS 13:7.

<sup>34</sup> 6, Greek language Bible, I CORINTHIANS 13:7.

<sup>35</sup> 7, Greek-English Dictionary, entry for “elpidzo” [I hope], p 58.

<sup>36</sup> 3, Scofield KJV Bible, 2 PETER 3:9, p 1319.

<sup>37</sup> 5, NKJV, I CORINTHIANS 13:8.

<sup>38</sup> 6, Greek language Bible, I CORINTHIANS 13:8.

unlike the gifts of prophecy, tongues and knowledge, never fails, nor ceases its activity.”

<sup>39</sup> From where does the superiority of the gift of love arise? From GOD Himself, for love is an innate characteristic of He Who gives all men life. The man that loves GOD above all else, and loves his neighbors, is not far from the Cross of our Lord JESUS CHRIST. For it is written in I JOHN 4:7-8, “Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of GOD; and every one that loveth is born of GOD, and knoweth GOD. ...for GOD is love!”<sup>40</sup>

#### X. I CORINTHIANS 13:9

The King James Version, “For we know in part and we prophesy in part.”<sup>41</sup> The Greek, “εκ μερους γαρ γινωσκομεν και εκ μερους προφητευομεν.”<sup>42</sup>

While we live in this passing physical world, we have the holy Word of GOD, the indwelling of The HOLY SPIRIT, The Cross of our holy Savior and the blessings of The holy Church. Even so, our knowledge of our Creator and of ourselves is limited. Limited also is our ability when we “proclaim GOD’s message, preach; predict; speak GOD’s message intelligibly [as opposed to speaking in tongues]; use prophetic insights to make [things]” known.<sup>43</sup> While in this imperfect world, we who are The Church – though sanctified by The Body and Blood of JESUS CHRIST as a holy people unto GOD - are still but imperfect men.

But as the Day of the return of our Lord approaches, and as the Kingdom of GOD is established on earth, even so will GOD reveal through prophesy His glory to all men. For it is written in ACTS 2:17-18, “And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith GOD, I will pour out of My Spirit upon al flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams: And on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of My Spirit; and they shall prophesy!”<sup>44</sup>

#### XI. I CORINTHIANS 13:10

The King James Version reads, “But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.”<sup>45</sup> And The Greek Text, “οταν δε ελθη το τελειον, το εκ μερους καταργηθησεται.”<sup>46</sup>

There will dawn an age when GOD will reveal to men His will and glory in its “complete, perfect, whole [and] mature” form.<sup>47</sup> At that time, our partial knowledge of and relationship with GOD will enlarge into perfection, being replaced with the joy of dwelling with and seeing GOD The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit face to face.

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<sup>39</sup> 8, Wycliffe Bible Commentary, I CORINTHIANS 13:8-13, p 1252.

<sup>40</sup> 3, Scofield KJV Bible, I JOHN 4:7-8b, p 1324.

<sup>41</sup> 5, NKJV, I CORINTHIANS 13:9.

<sup>42</sup> 6, Greek language Bible, I CORINTHIANS 13:9.

<sup>43</sup> 7, Greek-English Dictionary, entry for “protheteuo” [I prophesy], p 156.

<sup>44</sup> 3, Scofield KJV Bible, ACTS 17-18, p 1150-1151.

<sup>45</sup> 5, NKJV, I CORINTHIANS 13:10.

<sup>46</sup> 6, Greek language Bible, I CORINTHIANS 13:10.

<sup>47</sup> 7, Greek-English Dictionary, entry for “teleos” [perfect], p 180.

Perhaps we will live in the end of this Age, when CHRIST will be seen descending to earth in His second coming. Or perhaps we will leave this world through death, to be brought to our home in Heaven, at which time our incomplete knowledge of our Creator will be replaced with a complete knowledge of He Who ordained that we should exist.

And, oh, that greatest joy that will overcome us in the day when we see our Redeemer as He truly is! For it is written in ACTS 2:19-21, “And I will shew wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath: blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke: The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before that great and notable day of The Lord come: And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on The Name of The Lord shall be saved!”<sup>48</sup>

#### XII. I CORINTHIANS 13:11

The King James Version, “When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.”<sup>49</sup> The Greek, “οτε ημην νηπιος, ελαλουν ως νηπιος, εφρονουν ως νηπιος, ελογιζομην ως νηπιος: οτε γεγονα ανηρ, κατηγορηκα τα του νηπιου.”<sup>50</sup>

In the dawning of our faith in CHRIST, we were all as a “baby, infant, child” in that our understanding of GOD and His love for us were as one who was “immature [and] innocent.”<sup>51</sup> And as was our immature understanding of GOD, so were our thoughts on and speech to GOD but the first steps of fellowship with Him. But as we matured in our Christian faith, so too our understanding of, thoughts on and speech to GOD became that of a mature “man,” i.e. a saint sanctified by The Lord.<sup>52</sup>

So too, in the dawning of early Christianity when the Church was but a newborn infant, the gifts of miracles were necessary as signs of Divine testimony to salvation in CHRIST. Tongues were spoken, prophecy was given and knowledge was revealed to bless the early Church with edification, exhortation and comfort. As the Church has matured, and the New Testament cannon solidified by the Holy Spirit, she looks with greater and greater anticipation to the return of CHRIST. The Church, as it matures, has more and more put away the early spiritual gifts in favor of presenting herself as a worthy bride for the return of our Lord JESUS CHRIST.<sup>53</sup> For it is written in I CORINTHIANS 14:3, “But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and

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<sup>48</sup> 3, Scofield KJV Bible, ACTS 2:19-21, p 1151.

<sup>49</sup> 5, NKJV, I CORINTHIANS 13:11.

<sup>50</sup> 6, Greek language Bible, I CORINTHIANS 13:11.

<sup>51</sup> 7, Greek-English Dictionary, entry for “nepois” [child], p 120.

<sup>52</sup> 7, Greek-English Dictionary, entry for “anep” [man], p 14.

<sup>53</sup> 8, Wycliffe Bible Commentary, entry for I CORINTHIANS 13:11, p 1252. “The illustration is designed to show the character of the period between the two comings of CHRIST. With reference to these particular gifts, it may be likened to the growing up of a person from infancy to manhood. The special and spectacular gifts were necessary in the early stages of the growth of the true Church for purposes of authentication and edification when there was no New Testament to give light.”



comfort!”<sup>54</sup>

### XIII. I CORINTHIANS 13:12

The King James Version, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.”<sup>55</sup> And The Greek, “βλεπομεν γαρ αρτι δι εσοπτρου εν αιγιματι,(τοτε δε προσωπον προς προσωπον) : αρτι γινωσκω εκ μερους, (τοτε δε επιγνωσομαι καθως και επεγνωσθην.)”<sup>56</sup>

In this present age of The Church, the reflection of our faith sees itself partly shrouded as a “dim [and] obscure” enigma.<sup>57</sup> Our understanding of the miracle of salvation given to us in CHRIST is limited in this physical world. But when our Lord returns to this world from Heaven, we shall see Him Who has redeemed us “face to face!” And so also in Heaven, we shall look upon the “face, countenance, appearance [and] presence” of GOD The Son - He Who knows us in every way!<sup>58</sup>

In either case, when we stand “in the presence of” The Perfect One of GOD, we shall be in perfect fellowship with The LORD. For it is written in JOB 19:25-27a, “For I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though, after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see GOD: Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another!”<sup>59</sup>

### XIV. I CORINTHIANS 13:13

The King James Version reads, “And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”<sup>60</sup> And The Greek Text gives us, “υνι δε μενει πιστις, ελπις, αγαπη, τα τρια ταυτα: μειζων δε τουτων η αγαπη.”<sup>61</sup>

Of all the Divine gifts and forces in the world, there is no greater than the “Christian love, concern [and] interest” besides which even the excellencies of faith and hope are but partial blessings.<sup>62</sup> We have faith in our Lord JESUS CHRIST. We have hope for this life and for eternity in Him. But in love we reflect the true nature of GOD and His love for mankind in The Passion of CHRIST. The Wycliffe Bible Commentary observes, “Love is the greatest force in the universe, and its true source and clearest expression is Golgotha.”<sup>63</sup> For, of The Greatest Gift of Love, it is written in JOHN 3:16, “For GOD so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever

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<sup>54</sup> Scofield KJV Bible, I CORINTHIANS 14:3, page 1224.

<sup>55</sup> 5, NKJV, I CORINTHIANS 13:12.

<sup>56</sup> 6, Greek language Bible, I CORINTHIANS 13:12.

<sup>57</sup> 7, Greek-English Dictionary, adverb of entry for “enigma” [dim image], p 5.

<sup>58</sup> 7, Greek-English Dictionary, from an adverbial expression of “prosopon” [face]; can also mean literally “face to face,” p 155.

<sup>59</sup> 3, Scofield KJV Bible, JOB 19:25-27a, p 581.

<sup>60</sup> 5, NKJV, I CORINTHIANS 13:13.

<sup>61</sup> 6, Greek language Bible, I CORINTHIANS 13:13.

<sup>62</sup> 7, Greek-English Dictionary, entry for “agapao” [love], p 2.

<sup>63</sup> 8, Wycliffe Bible Commentary, entry for I CORINTHIANS 13:13, p 1253.

believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life!”<sup>64</sup>

#### XV. IN CONCLUSION

By living in the love described in I CORINTHIANS 13, we approach the very nature of GOD, for Scripture reveals to us in I JOHN 4:8b, “for GOD is love.”<sup>65</sup> And the ultimate love of GOD the Son was giving up His very life - that all mankind may have the opportunity to be saved from eternal damnation. This is the perfect Divine Love, beyond which there is no greater, and against which all other love is measured. And by the Power of the HOLY SPIRIT that breathes into us the love of GOD for our brothers and sisters in CHRIST, we come to know GOD and walk in His very presence.

And love is, of all the gifts endowed to men by The LORD, the most precious of all - more so than knowledge, tongues or prophesy. Love is better than even faith and hope. And though all these other gifts be desirable for the pious Christian, yet unless they are animated with love for GOD and for others, they are of no effect and without power. Let us then seek the divine endowments of our souls with faith, hope and love. But first and above all else, let us seek the greatest gift, which is love. For, as it is written, “*νυι δε μενει πιστις, ελπις, αγαπη, τα τρια ταυτα: μειζων δε τουτων η αγαπη.*”<sup>66</sup> In The Name of GOD The Father, and The Son and The Holy Ghost. AMEN.

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<sup>64</sup> 3, Scofield KJV Bible, JOHN 3:16, p 1117-1118.

<sup>65</sup> 3, Scofield KJV Bible, I JOHN 4:8b, p 1324.

<sup>66</sup> 6, Greek language Bible, I CORINTHIANS 13:13.

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