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THE  
FAITH OF CHARITY.

BY  
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AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION,  
BOSTON.

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# THE FAITH OF CHARITY.

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CHARITY BELIEVETH ALL THINGS. — 1 Cor. xiii. 7.

THE chapter from which the text is taken contains the most complete and beautiful picture of the Christian life ever painted. It shows its central and ruling principle, which is charity, or love. It shows its humility, its patience, its simplicity; and then it shows its glory. Charity is the greatest and the most enduring of all things. The picture, indeed, is not that of the ideal of the world. This hoping all things, believing all things, enduring all things, is not in accordance with the faith or the practice of worldly wisdom. The ideal picture of the spirit of worldliness would be more after this style, "beareth little, believeth little, hopeth little." The world has rather a contempt for the soul that endures patiently. It is quick to perceive, or, at least to suspect and to resent an injury. It is high-strung, and not to be trifled with. Most of all does it hold in contempt this credulity which is a mark of charity, the one which I have singled out from the others as the subject of this discourse. "Believeth all things!"—what simplicity, what a refreshing lack of worldly wisdom and experience; what a dupe such credulity must be; how it is imposed upon and played upon and cheated." Such is the verdict of the worldly spirit, which suspects all things, which is easily provoked, and thinketh all evil.

But, however foreign to the worldly ideal, the picture that Paul gives us is the Christian ideal. As one approaches this, one draws near to Christianity and to Christ. I am willing to compare the two and let them stand on their own merits. I am willing to take the characteristic of charity named in the text, the simplest and most unsophisticated of all. I am willing to take this credulity of charity and place it beside the incredulity of the world, and let it be seen which is the wiser, which is the more shrewd.

One man, we will suppose, is too ready of belief. He trusts too much in man, and, if it be possible, in God; the other trusts in nothing. Now of these two, the last is the greater dupe. He prides himself upon his shrewdness; "nobody shall impose upon him." He imposes upon himself. He is so sharp that he cheats the man whom he boasts that nobody can cheat, namely, himself. He is suspicious of everybody. He will trust in nobody. His business, I think, would shrink. A man doing a large business must have more or less confidence in the world. He must have confidence in those whom he employs, and in those with whom he deals. It must be a wise, not a random, confidence. He must not trust everybody. He must trust somebody. The man who does not, I think, would narrow his business. But this is of small account; I am very sure that he would narrow himself. There are some men who are suspicious of all the world. Every needy person they take for granted is an impostor; every prosperous man they think is a sharper; every unprosperous man is an imbecile. If they suffer from any one, it is intentional injury; if they are neglected, it is a proud scorn; if one does them a favor, it is for some selfish end. Now, so far as a man approaches this state, he cheats himself. He cheats himself out of the luxury of doing

good, out of the luxury of free and open-hearted intercourse with his fellowmen, out of all that makes life worth the living. Many, very many, extend this self-over-reaching shrewdness into spiritual things. They will believe nothing that goes beyond their senses. They hug themselves in their self-gratulation at their own wisdom. They are so cunning that they cheat themselves out of their human birthright. They lower themselves, as nearly as possible, to the brute. They give up the blessed light of immortality, of God's present love and care. They shut themselves into outer darkness and boast of their wisdom, — "nobody can cheat them."

Charity believeth all things. A dupe, is it? I ask you which is the greater dupe, the charity that believes all things, or the selfishness that believes nothing? There are knaves in the world, there are superstitious in the world, there are deceivers and deceived; but one who lives as if these were all loses the good and invites the evil. Before the cold gaze of suspicion, hearts close themselves as the sensitive flower closes beneath the cloud. "What a bright, pleasant world it is," quoth the sun. "What a dark, cold world it is," answered the cloud. Men, to a large extent, make their own world, as the sun and the cloud make theirs. The over-suspicious man in the world is like a man who in a crowd keeps clapping his hand on his pocketbook to see if it is safe; he invites the pickpockets. Over-suspicion stimulates fraud; it invites neglect and injury. Over-suspicion in religion invites delusion, — either the delusion of superstition, which is often a repressed religious instinct claiming its rights, or the delusion of materialism.

Some persons are continually afraid of believing too much. They want to narrow their belief to the smallest point. Now, the more a man believes the better. I

would have, not the minimum, but the maximum of faith. I would have that charity which believes all things.

We hear much said in these days about positive faith. We do not want, it is said, negations on negations; we want a positive faith; the more positive and the more to be believed, the better. This is well. But let us ask, What is the large faith of charity? what is a positive faith? Is it a belief in signs and wonders, in sacred spots, in this or that special sanctity? These things may be believed, they may be held in connection with the faith of charity; but such belief is not the faith of charity; such beliefs are not necessarily positive. They may be so held as to exclude more than they include. They may cry, "God is here," or, "God is there." The cry of love, of the faith which springs from love, is, "God is everywhere." The large and positive faith of love does not necessarily express itself in long and multiplied articles of belief. The words "positive belief" and "large belief," we begin to see, are often wrongly used.

When, in this age of ours, elaborate and technical forms of belief are beginning to shrink and waste away, as the icebergs shrink and waste away as they float down towards the southern seas; when there is hardly a church, however guarded, in which this process is not to some extent going on; when from the heart of the religious bodies that were supposed to hold most strictly to the old formulas, comes a cry for relief, a demand that the ancient creeds must be revised in order that they may meet the demands and the needs of these later times, — when, I say, this disintegration of old beliefs is going on, there are those who cry that the ages of faith have passed; and who look back with longing to the ages when faith reigned supreme in the hearts of men. When did those ages exist? I suppose that when the "ages of faith" are spoken of, what is

meant is the time that we call mediæval. At any rate, this time may serve well enough as the type of a period in which what is so often called "faith" was most nearly supreme upon the earth. Now let us, in our imagination, try an experiment. Let us suppose that one who has felt something of the life of this nineteenth century be put back into one of these so-called ages of faith; I do not care from what relations you may take this person who is to serve for our experiment. He may be a Catholic or a Protestant, he may bear any label that you will; for there is no religious organization into which the breath of the later life has not found entrance, and in which it has not inspired many a soul. Put such a person, I say, back into one of these ages of faith, and ask whether in this old environment—old, yet to him new—his faith finds itself cramped, or enlarged. Doubtless his faith would find much to delight and stimulate it. There would be the glory of art, there would be the solemn pomp of worship, the beauty of processions. The presence of the Church would make itself felt every day, and under all the circumstances of his life. For one, I love the old Church, and I rejoice in what it has done for the world in its larger history; for the consolation and the strength that it has brought to many an oppressed spirit. Still the question remains: Would the person with whom we are trying our experiment find his faith enlarged or cramped by the change? He has looked upon God as the loving Father of men; he finds that His favor is narrowed to the children of the Church. He has looked with hope upon the men and women about him; he finds that his hope must be limited by the walls of an organization. He has found the glory of God in the heavens and upon the earth, and in the great history of man, and in the order of nature. All this is not excluded; but there is ever pressed upon

him this glory as manifested at special times and places, in a single line among the complicated threads of human history, and in interruptions of the order of nature. In a word, his faith, by whatever name it may be called, has caught from this modern age a certain freedom and largeness; put back into the older Church, he finds it bound and made artificial.

I am not arguing in regard to the truth or error of any form of belief. This is something with which, at the moment, we have nothing to do. I ask simply, which form of belief is most fully to be called faith? Which makes most demands upon the faculty that we call faith? Which flies most into the face of apparent facts and visible circumstances? There are inequalities in the world; there are differences, terrible differences, of opportunity and circumstance. That to which we are often pointed as the ideal faith emphasizes such differences and takes them up into itself. The faith to which the name is sometimes denied looks beyond them to a sphere or a time in which they shall exist no more. To which do the terms "positive" and "negative" most truly belong? To the one which is clad in the flowing garment of the divine love, or to the one that is shivering in scanty rags of hope and promise? The older and longer creed is positive in one sense. A board nailed over a window is something positive; it is real and tangible. It is a negation for all that, since it shuts out something of the light of heaven.

Do not think, then, that because the creeds are growing smaller, faith is therefore growing less. One of my earliest remembrances is of the shower, or rather the storm, of meteors that has been famous ever since. Unhappily, I did not see it. A servant of the household, who had risen early for some domestic duty, saw it and reported its fearful splendor. When asked why she did not sum-



mon the family, she said that she knew but three stars. They were those of Orion's belt, though she called them by a humbler name. She did not wish to leave the window until she had seen these join in the general havoc. She thought that the stars of heaven were falling, and stood watching with awe and terror the great catastrophe. The stars of heaven still shine on unmoved, types of the eternal truth which satisfies the gaze of faith. Clouds may pass, meteors may shoot across the sky, but the stars remain.

What I have called the larger faith is, at least, the faith of charity. Its essence is to believe the best of everything. It believes the best of man, it believes the best of God, it believes the best of immortality. It reaches in all directions after the best and the highest. When it has reached the best and the highest of which it can conceive, it believes it. If you ask for its evidence, its answer is, "I believe it because it seems to me the best. If it is false it is because there is a better which I have not yet found." This is argument enough. In its simplicity it cannot doubt that the best is omnipotent, and that the omnipotent is best. Such is the faith of the charity which hopeth all things and believeth all things.

But while you listen to this statement, while you read the words of Paul, beautiful as poetry, tender as a hymn, lofty with the very aspiration of his mighty soul, you must not forget what it is that believes and hopes and endures all things. The whole nature of the description depends upon this. Suppose it spoke simply of a man, or a woman, or a spirit, that believed all things, and hoped all things, and endured all things; it might be the description of a weak nature. It might imply foolishness, or absence of strong traits of character. A child will believe anything you tell it. It believes all things, but it is be-

cause it has neither experience nor judgment. I imagine that many reading these words of Paul look at the predicate and not at the subject. They are impressed by the hopefulness, by the inoffensiveness, by the endurance, by the credulousness. But there flows into the picture the full tide of life-blood when you think what it is that believes so much, and hopes so much, and endures so much. What was sweet as an idyl becomes sublime as a tragedy. What may have seemed weak as a dream of an impossible and bloodless ideal becomes strong as the mightiest passions of the heart, when you remember that it is charity, or in our heartier Saxon tongue, that it is love, which does all this. It is love which hopes all things. It is love which believes all things, which endures all things. It is real, passionate, human love, which in spite of what it sees and hears and knows clings to its object; endures from it all things, hopes for it all things, and believes in it in spite of all things. You see a mother leaning with a mother's pride and tenderness upon a son. The son you know. You know his vices, the evil habits to which he has yielded himself. You pity the mother for her fond blindness to what all others see so plainly. Pity her if you will, not because she is blind, but because she sees so much. Love is not blind; least of all, a mother's love. Do not believe that she failed to mark the first slight veiling of the pure confidence of the glance that used to be so frank, the first closing of the heart which used to be open to her as the day, the first sinking of the spirit which was so buoyant in its pure aspiration. She sees all as only love can see. She feels all as only love can feel. And yet because she loves she trusts, in spite of what she sees, in spite of the sorrow that fills her heart, — sorrow which she would breathe in no ear but one. Her love sees all, yet for its object it believes all things and hopes all things.

Such is the faith of love. It does not believe because it does not see, or because it does not feel. It believes because it loves. Extend this to more general relations. There is a faith in human nature that is mere indifference. It takes for granted that all will come out right because it does not care to trouble itself any further. It may call itself liberal, — as if there were any great liberality in thinking that things may be left to care for themselves! There is a faith in human nature which is romantic and sentimental. It is the fancy of the young. It is the dream of the visionary and the recluse. It will probably vanish if ever it comes in contact with men, and finds them, as they so often are, sordid, selfish, and mean.

There is another faith in human nature which is the faith of love. This can never lead to inaction; the greater its confidence, the heartier its stroke. It believes in men because it loves them. It sees their faults and their follies, their vices and their sins. It sees with the eye of love more of these than the satirist sees with the eye of scorn. What provokes his laughter moves its tears. But it finds something besides these faults and vices. Because it loves man, it believes in him. Did not Jesus know the evil that is in man? Did he not feel it, hanging on his cross? — save the weak women that followed him from afar, the friendliest face in view that of the centurion who was executing his sentence; all others full of scorn and hate. Yet even then he believed in men, because he loved them. “Father,” he cried, “forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

There is a faith in Jesus which is hard, dogmatic, traditional. It makes great account of what is official and functional. And there is a faith which is the faith of love. It sees his beauty, his tenderness, his holiness. It finds in him its ideal fulfilled, and it cares for little else.

Others may contend about the hard, dry, mechanical theories which men cling to as to him. It has reached his heart and nestles there. The faith that is jealous for outward and formal service and technical honor, may cry, "Lord, dost thou not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? bid her, therefore, that she help me." May it not be that Jesus would answer, "Thou art careful and troubled about many things. But one thing is needful." The love that simply rejoices in my love has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from it"?

There is a faith in God which is theoretical, traditional, mechanical. Some believe from habit, some from fear. But there is a faith which is born of love. He that in a flower, or a child, or in a tender mother's heart, or in the great soul of Jesus, or in his own spirit has caught sight of a flash of divinity, who in any way has come in contact with God, has seen anything of his beauty and his glory, so that a love for Him has filled his nature, and a faith which springs from love, — he believes indeed. He believes all things of God. All love, all holiness, all tenderness, all wisdom he finds in him. He resents all mingling of what he feels to be unjust in men's thought of him; he pities him who neither believes nor loves. But for himself, he would trust himself and all things to him.

This faith, wherever it is found, is the faith of love. Whatever its formal creed, it interprets it to suit itself. It may find itself surrounded with mysteries which it cannot solve, mysteries in its technical theology, mysteries in the outward nature; but it pierces through the mysteries till it finds Him in whom it believes.

The motto which Daniel Webster affixed to the published speech which turned the heart of New England from him was this: *Vera pro gratis*, — "Not the pleasant, but the true." It is a noble motto wherewith to meet the

hard experiences of life. It would make one bold to look facts in the face, to see things as they are. It would teach one not to live amid fancies, like an Eastern monarch among flattering slaves, until the realities of life no longer to be repressed, break in upon the fictitious peace, and the fleeing fancies leave the soul more helpless than at the first. I do not doubt that Webster himself gained courage from this motto. When he uttered terrible truths which his countrymen refused to hear, when he prophesied of evil which his statesman's eye foresaw, — evil which he knew would come unless the course he pointed out was taken; evil which did come, darker and more terrible than he dared to paint it, — I have no doubt that these words often rang through his thought: *Vera pro gratia*, — “Not the pleasant, but the true;” though I believe there was a truth, stern and awful, which even he did not dare to face.

It is a noble motto for life, but many would carry it into the realm of faith. They would apply it also to our belief in matters that concern the highest life. They picture, perhaps, God as cruel and unforgiving, and when our hearts protest, they answer, “Not the pleasant, but the true!” Or they may deny all reality to our dreams of spiritual things. They may see in the universe only material facts, only whirling atoms, and the driving forces which urge on their restless whirl. And when the orphaned heart cries out in its loneliness for the living God, they answer with words that give an air of nobility to their denial, “Not what is pleasant, but what is true.”

But there are maxims that grow out of our little earthly experience which fail when they are applied upon a larger and freer scale. We have a proverb that tells us that the longest way may be the shortest. This is true as we move among the obstructions of the earth. Even our

railroads wind in and out among the hills. It is not true just a little way above our human paths. Where the bird flies, the straightest is the shortest. So we say that the day is always followed by the night. Just outside the shadow of the earth this is not true. There is no night there. So in our earthly life the true and the beautiful stand often over against one another. They meet in tragic collision. But in that vaster realm of infinite realities, that realm where the good and the beautiful blend into the true, the strife is at an end. In the limits of our earthly life love must plead often for its rights. It must learn often to forego them. It must wander often all the days of its human pilgrimage hungering for sympathy, disappointed where it had hoped the most, sorrowing with hope deferred, until it learns the great lesson, to see things not as it would have them but as they are. Here love is at the mercy of all things, but in that larger realm of which I spoke it reigns as queen. Here all things are reckoned more real than love, but there it is the central fact.

Such is the faith of charity. But upon what rests its faith? What demonstration can it offer of its truth? If it had demonstration, it would be no longer faith. There are, indeed, reasonings that may do something to suggest or to confirm it. There are arguments that go a little distance with it, as friends accompany one who is to start upon a journey and see him a little way upon his course; just as in regard to the physical world there are facts and arguments that accompany a little way the great faith in induction as it starts upon the flight which is to sweep the universe.

These arguments we are not to consider here; I point you now merely to the love that believeth all things.

When we come to the last analysis, what is this love

of the perfect which is an unfailing factor in the soul's life? What is this love which craves infinite satisfaction? This love that even in darkness sees the light, that even in the midst of the sternest stress and strain of the hard material forces of the world, feels the presence of a sublime companionship? What is this love that judges, condemns, commands? Other things change and pass away. Tongues shall cease, prophecies shall fail, knowledge shall vanish away; love alone endures, more mighty, more tender, through every change. This, by its very permanence, this by the divinity that shines out from it, must be recognized as the truest representative of the eternal reality; and schemes and systems must adapt themselves to this. Its touch tries them all. Only where it is supreme is there any truth. The poor, sad, earthly motto, — poor and sad however heroic it may be, — “Not the pleasant, but the true,” loses its force and meaning in the presence of the sublime reaches of the infinite goodness, which is one with the infinite truth.

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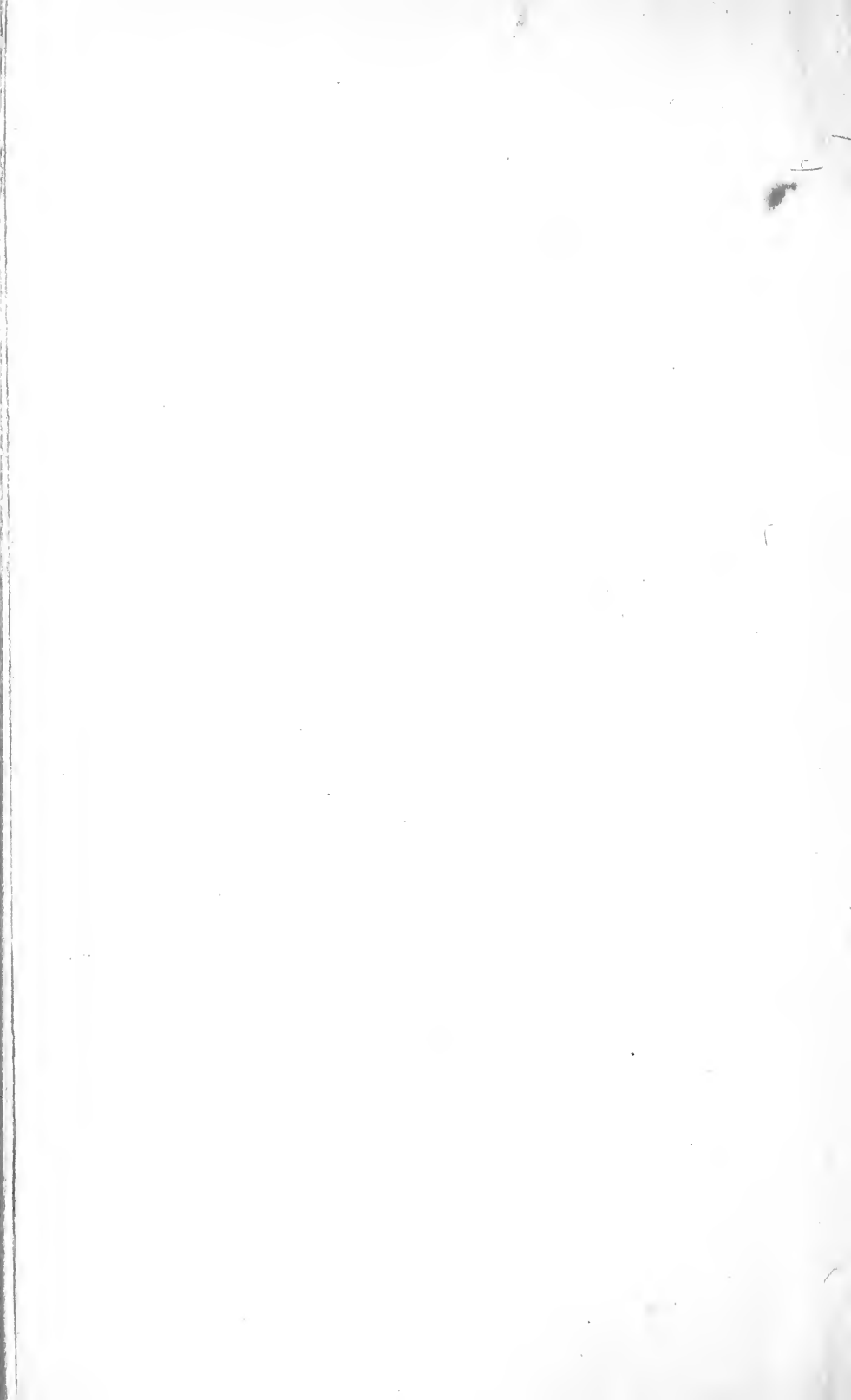
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