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Theological Reflection 1000 words.**

Project Violet: Addressing the accepted ways of doing things.

TITLE:

Faith Hope Love or Love Faith Hope: Does Word Order Matter?

A Theological Reflection on Silence versus Discourse in the LGBTQIA+ Theological Debate

within Baptist Churches of South Australia.

“Now these three remain Faith Hope Love. But the greatest of these is love.” (1 Corinthians 13:13). Most Christians know this verse by heart. I've preached this Scripture – Well what pastor hasn’t? These virtues are widely promoted as the characteristics of our faith. However, word order matters and starting the list with ‘faith’ can signal social priorities and influence perception. Despite the Apostle Paul saying that love is the greatest of these three attributes, there is an implicit bias on' faith'. It should be Love. Faith. Hope. Even saying that word order feels wrong.

If you already know that faith and hope can only stem from love, please bear with me in the following analogy on the implicit bias of word order, which gives preference (dare I say even power-over) to ‘faith’ over the other two attributes. Changing my language to Love Faith Hope may seem almost inconsequential. However, as the saying goes, “big doors swing on little hinges”, and correcting my language has challenged what I prioritise in my faith and praxis.

I've been reflecting on Love, Faith, Hope because I navigate the LGBTQIA+ discourse in my local church. While challenging, this discourse can potentially transform our understanding of these virtues as at times, there is little love is lost between the ‘rival sides’. My experiences inform today’s theological reflection. Allow me to share briefly my context to illustrate this connection.

As an accredited Baptist pastor of a member church of the Baptist Churches of South Australia and Northern Territories, I am committed to facilitating dialogue. I value the Baptist distinctive of the priesthood of all believers and freedom of conscience, striving to include diverse voices and experiences. Yet, I recognise that conversations involving differing perspectives stemming from sacred values central to identity and understanding of God can be challenging. These sacred values are not negotiable and can lead to a ‘Diabolical Dialogue’ that polarises people when core beliefs clash.

Through a research project at Flinders University and Adelaide College of Divinity, I explored what happens when dialogue clashes with sacred values. Focusing on the LGBTQIA+ discourse among Baptists in South Australia, I sought to understand the lived experience of those involved. It is through open and inclusive dialogue we discover new ways to navigate these challenges and grow as a community.

The study found that a prevailing silence dominates the LGBTQIA+ discourse within the Baptist community. This silence is harming LGBTQIA+ individuals and their families. Most participants shared stories of the pain they had experienced or witnessed. Yet, they preferred to maintain a culture of silence on the topic. Why would this be, when they felt the pain of the stories acutely? Why would they choose a Don’t Ask. Don’t Tell approach in their church family, rather than addressing these issues and working to mitigate the hurt they cause?

The answer is probably obvious if you’ve had experiences within the LGBTQIA+ debate. Most participants feared or had experienced its divisive nature. They viewed it as a for-or-against conversation, with a predisposition for vitriolic messages on social media. Or as joining the non-affirming/affirming debate that forced them to declare their allegiance or explain their heresy (their words, not mine) when their perspective differed from the social majority. They spoke of the corrosive effects on relationships with people from either camp. Silence seemed the safest course of action, a way of lessening the pain. One participant described silence as creating a place of grace rather than a Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy. Is silence over a different perspective on Faith love? Is silence a wise (or desperate) attempt to keep the relationship and keep the love?

For some participants, remaining silent about LGBTQIA+ issues felt like the safest expression of love they could adopt. However, the research revealed that silence caused new suffering, leaving individuals isolated, voiceless, and powerless, with no space to share their experiences and questions with their church family. Love thrives on connection, and connection is facilitated by communication. Love finds ways to engage in conversation and remain committed to it.

Not all Baptists in South Australia avoid discussing their differences. However, the study found that participants struggled to broach the subject of sexual and gender orientations. When they did, conversation often began with ‘faith’, meaning a focus on spiritual truth focusing on Scripture. Interestingly, the Baptist distinctives of local church autonomy and freedom of conscience were rarely mentioned. Instead, the focus remained on Faith and the question, “How can I express my beliefs in love?”

Now, I argue that we should approach conversations with a foundation of love rather than focusing solely on faith-based topics. This doesn’t mean we should avoid discussing Scriptural interpretations or faith and praxis. Instead, *before* beginning these conversations, we should reflect on Love. Faith. Hope, with the greatest of these being love. I suggest we learn from Martin Buber (1878-1965), a Jewish philosopher and dialogue theorist who distinguished between I and It and I and Thou dialogue. According to Buber, when you talk to a person about ‘it’, the topic becomes an object, and the person is reduced to a means to an end. For example, I saw a clickbait headline: ‘Watch this: Christian wins conversation with the agnostic.’ Conversations framed this way from an I-It basis may win arguments but lose opportunities to love unconditionally despite our differences.

In contrast, I-Thou dialogue prioritises relationships, potentially fostering empathy and respect. I-Thou conversations involve talking with a person– and note the word ‘with’. We don’t speak ‘to’ someone, that’s a monologue. I-Thou conversations focus on mutual listening rather than dominating the discussion.

Critics of Buber’s I-Thou dialogue philosophy argue that you must talk about ‘it’ at some point. I agree; we must talk about faith, praxis, and hermeneutics. However, I am not convinced faith is where to start conversations over differences. Theologically, reflecting on reordering language from Faith Hope Love to consciously thinking Love Faith Hope challenges me to launch all conversations from love.

My experience as a Baptist in South Australia tells me this: we’ve talked about ‘it’, our understanding of LGBTQIA+ orientations and now we’ve fallen silent. But that silence is causing harm in our churches. We need to start talking again- but not through another I-It discussion. This time, I want to prioritise Love, Faith, Hope- in that order. A practical way to do this is through I-Thou dialogue, which centres on relationships and genuine connections—conversations where the defining characteristic is Love.