

20.11

1 Thessalonians 1:2–3—Labor of Love

A bit of Bible trivia: the expression “labor of love” appears to have been used for the first time in 1 Thessalonians 1:2–3. Paul writes, “We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and **labor of love** and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” The phrase also appears in Hebrews 6:10, where the KJV preserves the more precise syntax: “For God *is* not unrighteous to forget your work and labor of love.” Scholars speculate that the apostle Paul coined the phrase and they sometimes point to the usage in Hebrews as an indication that the author of that letter was familiar with Paul’s works.

Of course, it could simply have been a phrase current at the time, which Paul and the author of Hebrews used independently; we have no evidence of it elsewhere but that could be due to a paucity of our sources. In any case, the phrase would be used for centuries in exclusively religious contexts, often with clear allusion to Paul’s scriptural bidding.

Eventually, however, it would take on a more secular meaning. Shakespeare notably chose to title one of his plays *Love’s Labour Lost*, perhaps intending a play on words that took the word “love” in a romantic rather than a spiritual sense. In time, the phrase “labor of

love” became applicable to any task that one undertakes voluntarily rather than for compensation.

One authority notes that for Benjamin Franklin, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, “the expression is merely proverbial, with little or no recollection of its biblical source.”¹ In our current era, the phrase “labor of love” has likewise entered the modern idiom without any apparent allusion to Paul or the New Testament:

- *Labour of Love* was a 1983 reggae album by U240
- “Labour of Love” was a 1987 pop song by the Scottish duo Hue and Cry
- “Labor of Love” was a 1993 pop song by the Australian alternative rock group Frente
- *Labor of Love* was a 1995 country album by Radney Foster
- *Labor of Love* was a 1997 country album by Sammy Kershaw
- *Labor of Love* was a 2016 book about dating by Moira Weigel

It just turned out to be a memorable phrase!

But returning to the religious context—albeit with a completely different meaning—“Labor of Love” is also the title of a 2004 Christmas song written by Andrew Peterson. It recounts the travail of

Mary's difficult delivery ("labor" = childbirth) and has been recorded by numerous artists, including country star Randy Travis.

1. David Lyle Jeffrey, ed., *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 430.