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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

The Triple Blessing

THE benediction with which St. Paul closed his correspondence with the Corinthian Church is one of the most succinct and sufficient expressions of the Good News that comes to us from the Apostolic age. The language, though later pressed into the service of theological formulation (and rightly so), is primarily the interpretation of a living experience which enables us to feel the pulsations of a great heart that has pondered reverently and drunk deeply of the inexpressible fulness of God.

As we approach this spring of everlasting life we may pause to ask if there is any significance for us in the order of the phrases, differing as they do from the more formal sequence of the great missionary manifesto in St. Matthew's Gospel. Without being dogmatic, perhaps we may suggest that such a lesson lies to hand. Is not this the normal order of our apprehension of the great and undivided experience of the salvation of God?

Paul was on the wrong track in his search for God until he met Christ on the Damascus road. In that manifestation of Glory he discovered the GRACE that heals and re-directs the soul. That was the point of first contact, and in that concrete experience a door was opened in heaven whereby Paul discovered that "the heart of the eternal is most wonderfully kind". Grace enabled him to read that "God is love". That event in 37 A.D. was of a piece with the unchanging character of God. His personal encounter which enabled him to say "He loved me" was but a fragment of that everlasting love wherewith God loved His Israel. Moreover, this dual experience of Grace and Love was constantly being made over to him in the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The grace manifested on the Road and which was from everlasting was no hallowed memory, no religious philosophy, but an immediate and ever-deepening experience. Thus this loveliest of all our liturgical formularies was in its origin the out-breathing of a soul satisfied with the God of his salvation.

From the whole let us turn to the contemplation of each separate part.

GRACE. When these words were penned St. Paul had been a Christian believer for upwards of twenty years, but life had not lost its zest, nor had the tempo of his service settled down to the level of quiet religious respectability. He was still profoundly conscious of his debt. He still rejoiced in the experience of grace. The word thrilled him. It contained the very music of heaven for his soul as he pondered the old past and contrasted it with the present. It saturated his thought and dominated his mind. Paul was veritably "dyed in the wool" of grace. More than any other word, it enshrined his Gospel. What did he discover in it?

(i) *Undeserved favour.* He was very conscious that God had not dealt with him after his sins nor rewarded him according to his wickedness. Like the Prodigal, Paul's reception was beyond his expectation or imagination. The proud, stiff-necked, blaspheming Pharisee had

been treated with unspeakable forbearance and mercy. The rebel and despiser had been received as son and heir.

(ii) *Ever-present Help.* Grace did not expend its resources in that original condescension. Forgiveness and restoration to the Father's favour were followed by the constant loading of his life with the divine bounty. Had Paul given us his autobiography (and what an enrichment of every minister's library that would have been) he might well have forestalled Bunyan and called it "Grace Abounding", for the word has the character of a refrain running through his whole life. Whether he was thinking of the normal development of the "man in Christ" or of some particular victory won over circumstances without or fears within, he invariably attributed all to grace. "By the grace of God I am what I am."

(iii) *Transformation of Life and Character.* The word has a fundamental meaning of beauty of form. It suggests not only rugged truth but truth moulded upon lines that delight the eye. It speaks not only of holiness but of a certain becoming beauty that accompanies it. It reminds us that when grace has had her perfect work "we shall be like him".

LOVE. Paul learned the meaning of love from a specific experience of its action in the soul. Love confronted him as he pursued his mission of hate towards Damascus. Love in God was no abstract-general principle deducible from one's observations of nature or providence. It was not an expression akin to "the good God" of reverent philosophical contemplation. Paul's eyes had been turned to the Cross. There on the Tree of Shame he saw love in its essence, and when he turned his eyes again it was to be seen that they shone with the light of wonder, love and praise. That Cross demonstrated God's love for all—and for him. "He loved me, and gave Himself for me." Here was the balm for the troubled conscience. Here alone was the fountain for sin and uncleanness. Here was the assurance that all things do work together for good to them who love God—in spite of all the crushing problems of our world. Nor is this any sentimental, soothing syrup to deceive us from seeing the worst, but the taking up into Himself of the whole weight and wounding of sin—"in His own body on the tree". With this assurance—but surely not otherwise—life in ancient Corinth or modern Manchester becomes not only a possibility but a glorious triumph.

FELLOWSHIP. "My Spirit abideth among you, fear you not." In these words we see that the Old Order was not ignorant of the inwardness and immediacy of religion pure and undefiled. "He shall testify of Me . . . He shall take of Mine and reveal it unto you" is the New Testament counterpart. The life of God in the soul of man is ever the mark of genuine faith. And until this takes place we remain mere spectators on the balcony instead of participators in the arena of the great drama of our most holy faith. Until the Spirit speaks and works in us, the Father's love is afar off in the recesses of the everlasting hills and the grace of Christ is embalmed in the pages of history. But at His touch they start into life, for it is His work to create, maintain and communicate those very things to our souls. He witnesses with our spirit that we are the sons of God and joint-heirs with Christ.

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