

THE APOSTOLIC BENEDICTION.

"The Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Ghost be with you all, Amen."—2 *Cor.* xiii. 14.

THE ordinary formula of courtesy, by which Greek letters, addressed to equals or inferiors, were concluded in the first century of our era, consisted of one word, ἔρρωσο or ἔρρωσθε, *Farewell*. A familiar instance is afforded from the Acts of the Apostles by the letter which the Apostolic delegates carried to Antioch, announcing the decrees of the Council of Jerusalem.¹ But this letter is only one among many hundreds which have come down to us formed on the same model and ending in the same way. The formula was almost universal, and we find it adopted (with some slight additions) in the second century by Christian writers so well known as Ignatius and Polycarp.² It is only when we realize that this was the usual way of signing a letter that we recognize the distinctiveness of Paul's signature. In none of his Epistles does he adopt the customary phrase ἔρρωσο: but he strikes out a formula for himself. It is always the same formula, and he tells us in one of his earliest letters that it was adopted of deliberate purpose. *The salutation of me Paul with mine own hand, which is the token in every Epistle: so I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.*³ *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, or sometimes more succinctly Grace be with you; that is the parting salutation which he substitutes for the familiar ἔρρωσο, Farewell.* "Ἐρρωσο had

¹ Acts xv. 29.

² E.g. Ignat. *ad Eph.* xxi., ἔρρωσθε ἐν Θεῷ πατρὶ καὶ ἐν Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ: *ad Magn.* xv., ἔρρωσθε ἐν ὁμολογίᾳ Θεοῦ: *ad Rom.* x., ἔρρωσθε εἰς τέλος ἐν ὑπομονῇ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ: *ad Smyrn.* xiii., ἔρρωσθε ἐν χάριτι Θεοῦ. The conclusion of the Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians is not extant in Greek, but there can be no doubt that the Latin version *incolumes estote in domino Jesu Christo* represents ἔρρωσθε ἐν τῷ Κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ.

³ 2 *Thess.* iii. 17, 18.

indeed become as formal and as unsuggestive of meaning as our "Good-bye," or as the expressions of friendship and regard with which among ourselves letters even to a chance acquaintance are concluded. And if any one thinks that the signature adopted by St. Paul in its place was an obvious signature for an apostle to use, he has only to turn to the Epistles of St. Peter and St. John to see how far this is from the facts. *Peace* not *grace* was the blessing which they invoked as they closed their letters of counsel and reproof.¹

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy Ghost be with you all. Once only does St. Paul write his signature and his parting message in this fuller and more comprehensive form. And the last words of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians have become so familiar to us that perhaps we do not always realize how much the words mean, or how instructive they are in regard to the faith of the Christian Church in the very earliest period of which we have a contemporary record.

I. In the first place, the use of this threefold formula of benediction, and more particularly the absence of any accompanying explanation, suggest to us that the teaching of the early Church must have been more explicit as to the nature of God, and as to the revelation of the Personality of God which was made in Christ, than is always recognized. It is true, indeed, that the profound questions as to the Divine Personality which pressed for a solution so soon as the Christian faith came into contact and collision with Greek philosophy, had not been definitely stated at so early a period of the Church's life as the period of St. Paul's labours. And it is no doubt also true that simple Christian believers in the earliest age did not understand all the philosophical implications of the revelation of God

¹ 1 Peter v. 14, *εὐρήνη ὑμῖν πᾶσι τοῖς ἐν Χριστῷ*. 3 John 15, *εὐρήνη σοι*.

in Christ any more than simple Christian believers in any succeeding age have done. No reasonable person can expect to find the phraseology of the Nicene Creed or of the Athanasian Creed in the New Testament; these great confessions are stated in terms which have reference to the controversies of the times when they were produced, and which would be misleading, if not meaningless, unless those controversies were kept in view. But none the less the statements of the Creeds as to the Triune Personality of the Supreme, as to the several "Persons"—for so we must continue to call them in default of a better term—as to the relations between the several "Persons" of the Godhead are ultimately based on the language of Gospels and Epistles alike, which presupposes the belief of the first Christians that the Supreme Being whom they worshipped was not a solitary Monad, but was in some sense Triune.

If we recall the circumstances under which St. Paul wrote *ἡ χάρις τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἡ κοινωνία τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος μετὰ πάντων ὑμῶν*, we shall see how significant the words are. He was addressing correspondents who were somewhat critical and who had shown that they were very ready to find fault with him. The party at Corinth which had called in question his authority was not likely to accept without scrutiny any novel doctrine from St. Paul. And on a question so fundamental as the Being of God—a question too which was not by any means strange to the speculative intellect of Greece—it was inevitable that any formula which brought other names into connexion and parallelism with the Name of the Supreme Being would be challenged, were there any doubt as to the authority on which the formula rested. *The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost be with you all.* This is quite

unlike anything in the Old Testament, where the Fount of all grace and love and blessing is consistently spoken of as One. It is, indeed, more emphatic in its Trinitarian teaching than any other passage in St. Paul's Epistles. And the incidental way in which this teaching is introduced witnesses, more conclusively than any elaborate argument could, to the belief of St. Paul and of his correspondents that the nature of Deity was not simple but admitted of inner distinctions. That such a belief, prevalent as it was within thirty years after the death of Christ, must have been able to appeal for support to the teaching of Christ Himself is a natural inference. No other could speak with assurance on the subject of His relation to the Father from whom He had come, and to the Spirit whom He was to send. And that the doctrine of the Trinity was little likely to grow up of itself on Hebrew soil, the long history of the later controversies between Jews and Christians sufficiently proves.

The justification, then, for this conjunction of the Names of the Father, Son and Spirit in one formula of benediction must have been quite unmistakable, before any pious Christian brought up, as St. Paul had been, in the bosom of Judaism, could have ventured upon it. And the simplest hypothesis is to find the justification in the words which Christian tradition ascribed to the Christ when He was giving His last commission to His Church: *Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.*¹ It may be admitted that the evidence that these very words were spoken by Christ is not quite free from ambiguity, for we are in the dark as to the date when St. Matthew's Gospel assumed its present form; and, further, a baptismal formula, triple in form, is not once again mentioned in the New

¹ St. Matt. xxviii. 19.

Testament.¹ Yet when the words are read in conjunction with the history of the Church's ritual in the second century, and particularly when they are read in conjunction with passages in St. Paul's letters like the passage before us, we feel that if not these very words, then words of equivalent significance must have been present to the mind of the early Church. St. Paul could not have ventured to use such a formula were he not convinced of its harmony with the teaching of his Master; and while baptism in the Name of the Lord Jesus alone may have been deemed adequate at an early stage of the Church's life, it could hardly have been so quickly superseded by the formula of the threefold Name were it not felt that the latter was justified by the teaching of Christ Himself.

We have, in brief, reached this point. The language of the farewell salutation in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians presupposes earlier teaching in regard to the Triune nature of God, and its similarity to the Baptismal formula suggests the source from which it was probably derived.

For all that, we cannot say that the doctrine of the Trinity is *formulated* in the New Testament. It was not an age of formal creeds; it was an age of faith—of faith so strong that, for the moment, its intellectual aspects seemed of minor consequence. And the order in which St. Paul places the clauses of his benediction is characteristic of the practical point of view from which he expounds Christian doctrine. He begins, not as a metaphysician would, with the Name of God the Father, but with the Name of Christ. For, after all, he is only expanding his customary salutation. His signature must begin with the message of grace, whatever else he may add to it. He is

¹ I have tried to show in the *EXPOSITOR* for Jan. 1902 that the words of St. Matt. xviii. 19 do not necessarily prescribe a *formula* to be recited in the baptismal ritual.

not thinking of speculative theology, but of his correspondents at Corinth, to whom he is writing a message with his own hand. And so this letter, full of varying moods, of rebuke and rejoicing, of sorrow and perplexity and affection, is not ended quite like his other letters. He would have his friends realize how full of significance is the signature which he has chosen. When they read: *Grace be with you*, he would have them think of all that is implied in the grace of Christ. This is the core of the message with which he has been entrusted. For it is through the grace given by Christ, and through the right use of it, that man learns something of the Love which God has for man, as it is through the grace of Christ that the Love of God manifests itself, and is reflected in the love which man has for his fellows. No doubt, when we try to reduce our poor thoughts about God to system and coherence, the first place, in the order of logic, is occupied by the conception of the Divine Love which encompasses all that It has called into being, which, as Eternal Love, has always had fit objects of affection within itself, for *God is love*. That is a fruitful line of thought; it has been followed some distance by all the great Christian theologians, beginning with St. John. But it is not the direction in which St. Paul's thoughts are travelling in the passage before us; nor does it suggest what is here in his mind.

For, it is not knowledge so much as practice which concerns men who have a work to do in the world. And if we strive sincerely to fulfil our work, we learn very soon that the hindrances in our path are not altogether of the world's making. For our worst failures, our own indolence or weakness or sin is responsible. This we recognize in proportion as we are honest with ourselves. And it is because the message of Christ is a message of help and grace, bringing the power of recovery as it breathes the inspiration of

hope, that is ever fresh and new. The power of Christ's grace, startling even to the man himself, reveals to him—though it may be in strange fashions and by slow degrees—that there is a Providence which guards his life and is not careless of his failures. The grace of Christ, which St. Paul puts first in the order of benediction, is the revelation of the love of God. The recognition of the grace of Christ, as strong to help and defend in temptations of flesh and spirit, is the revelation of the love of God, the love which God has for man. Each soul learns, or may learn, for itself that, as St. John has it, it was because *God loved the world that He sent His Son*.

Each soul learns, or may learn, the revelation of love for itself; yet will the lesson be but half learnt if it stop short here. For the same Love of God manifests Itself in the world and in the Church even now—not indeed in invisible Incarnation of the Divine, such as those saw who accompanied with Christ in the flesh—but in and through the Spirit, whose fruit is love and peace.

The fellowship of the Holy Ghost be with you all. What did St. Paul mean by that? That the men to whom he wrote should be inspired by the Divine Spirit to think and do all rightful things? No doubt that was a part of his meaning; it is part of the meaning the prayer usually has for us. But it is not the primary and direct application of his words. The balance of the sentence, the parallelism of its clauses, assure us of that. For, as *the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ* means the grace which Christ gives to man, and as *the Love of God* means the love which God bestows on man,¹ so *the Communion of*

¹ This is a point of exegesis which is often overlooked. The "love of God" with St. Paul always means the love which God has for man, e.g. Rom. v. 5, viii. 39, 2 Thess. iii. 5; cp. also Rom. xv. 30, Eph. ii. 4, Col. i. 13. So the "love of Christ" in his phraseology *always* means the love which Christ has for man, e.g. Rom. viii. 35, 2 Cor. v. 14, Eph. iii. 19, and not conversely the love which man has for Christ. That is, the genitive of

the Holy Ghost must mean the communion which is the Spirit's gift. The *κοινωνία* the fellowship, the sense of membership, the brotherly kindness, the joy and strength of being members one of another : this is all the gift of the Holy Ghost. It is this blessing which St. Paul prays may come upon the Corinthian Church, rent and distracted by faction, to whom his last word before he invokes the blessing is *Be of the same mind ; live in peace.*¹ There is no thought nearer to St. Paul's heart than the thought of human brotherhood in Christ, as there are few words more characteristic of his style than the word *κοινωνία* and its cognates—*members one of another.*² *All the members being many are one Body.*³ *The Bread which we break is a κοινωνία, a communion of the Body of Christ.*⁴ And in 2 Cor. xiii. 14 he places the blessing of *κοινωνία*, the common life in Christ, which is the Spirit's gift, as on a par with the blessings of Christ's grace and God's love. The fellowship of the Holy Ghost, the mutual trust and reverence and affection, which are the fruits of the Spirit ; herein is to be the issue of Christ's grace and the manifestation of God's love in these later ages of the world and of the Church.

Men try to fathom the depths of the Divine nature, and they find themselves baffled again and again. It must be so, for God perfectly understood would cease to be the Supreme Object of faith and hope, would cease to be God. Of the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity in its deeper relations, the warning of the wise man is still wise : *God is in heaven and thou upon earth : therefore let thy words be few.*⁵

the person after *ἀγάπη* in St. Paul's Epistles is always subjective ; he often uses the verb *ἀγαπάω* to express man's love towards God, but never the substantive *ἀγάπη*. St. John's usage, on the other hand, varies, the genitive after *ἀγάπη* sometimes being subjective and sometimes objective (cp. St. John v. 42 and 1 John ii. 5, 15, iii. 17, iv. 9, v. 8) but St. Paul's is not doubtful.

¹ 2 Cor. xiii. 11.² Rom. xii. 5.³ 1 Cor. xii. 12.⁴ 1 Cor. x. 16.⁵ Eccles. v. 2.

But of its practical results, St. Paul will teach us, if we permit him, as he taught the Greeks. He will teach us that God is love, despite all appearances to the contrary, despite all sorrow and failure through all the changes and chances of life.

He will teach us that the grace of Christ is a power which is even now within our reach, in prayer and in sacrament, to deepen, chasten, purify our lives, so that they may be fashioned after the One Perfect Example.

He will teach us that the common life of men, with its common ambitions and disappointments, its common joys and common fears, in the family, in the world, in the Church, is the very Body of Christ—that this common life is so sacred and precious a thing, just because it is, in its perfection, the gift of God's Spirit—it is the fellowship of the Holy Ghost.

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