

2 Corinthians 13:14

1. The God of grace, love and fellowship

What is the best-known verse in the Bible? On occasion I have asked this of church congregations where I have been preaching and also of classes at the theological college where I teach. A number of likely possibilities are usually put forward, but none of them get my vote. Not even John 3:16 which is probably the most quoted verse in evangelical churches, or Psalm 23 which is a favourite in many traditions, or the Lord's Prayer – or at least the first verse of it – which is familiar among many, including nominal Christians who remember being taught 'to say their prayers'. I think that 'the grace' or 'the benediction' – *May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all* – probably wins out as the best-known verse of all. It has been said at the beginning, within, and at the end of services of worship around the world and has become familiar to Christians down the ages, across the world and to people in every tradition of the church – even when they cannot identify it as a verse from the Bible!¹

Although no other Pauline statement has had the historically significant role of this verse, it is not the only trinitarian statement which can be found in Paul's writings, let alone the Scriptures as a whole. Paul frequently spoke in a triple form when discussing specific aspects of the Christian life. When discussing *prayer* he urged the Romans to join him in prayer 'to God', 'by our Lord Jesus Christ', and 'by the love of the Spirit'. In the ministry of *gifts* he

¹ Some English versions have these words of Paul as verse 13, following the versification introduced into Greek and English versions in the 1550s. Others, however, have 'All the saints send their greetings' as verse 13 instead of verse 12b, and the benediction becomes verse 14.

called on the Corinthians to recognize the role of ‘Spirit’, ‘Lord’ and ‘God’. When considering *election* he reminded the Thessalonians to be aware of the way ‘God chose’ people by the ‘work of the Spirit’ to ‘share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ’. And when considering the extent of *salvation* he argued in his letter to the Ephesians that through Christ Jesus all ‘have access to the Father by one Spirit’.² Paul relates every part of the Christian life to the Trinity and then, in this benediction, in three succinct phrases he sums it all up in the single most important trinitarian statement of the Christian faith.

Each of the three phrases in Paul’s trinitarian benediction connects an attribute of God with one member of the Trinity. They are then put in an order which reflects the experience of the believer: that is, it is through encounter with the *grace of Christ* that we come to know *God’s love* and thus participate in divine life and *fellowship through the Spirit*. Of course grace is not exclusive to Christ but also comes from the Father, and love is not restricted to the Father as it is also an attribute of Christ, and fellowship is not only found in the Spirit but also in Christ.³ Yet the connections are made very appropriately as they describe the distinctive and primary work of each person of the Trinity. A proper understanding of them deepens our relationship with God. It is a problem today that many Christians do not think or speak in terms of the Trinity. This affects their actual experience of God. Worship, prayer and personal discipleship, as well as the community life and mission of the church, will be enriched as Christians relate to God as Father, Son and Spirit rather than only as ‘God’ or ‘Lord’.

1. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ

The first of the three phrases of the benediction refers to *the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ*. In the original Greek the benediction has no verb and consequently it can be interpreted either as a prayer that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ *may* be with you all or as a declaration asserting simply that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ *is* with you all. It is also possible, and probably best, to combine both and understand it as a prayer⁴ which expresses a confidence that it will be fulfilled by God. Indeed, it is only possible to fulfil the instructions found in the preceding verses (*put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another*) and in the letter as a whole by the power of the grace which comes from God in Christ Jesus. In all

² Rom. 15:30; 1 Cor. 12:4–6; Eph. 2:18; 2 Thess. 2:13–14.

³ See 2 Cor. 1:12; 5:14; 2:17; 5:17; 13:5.

⁴ As it is in other blessings and farewells; see Rom. 15:5, 13; 1 Thess. 3:11–13; 5:23.

three parts of the benediction the emphasis falls upon *God* and what he does, an emphasis which belongs in every Christian's life and discipleship.

a. Experiencing the grace of God

How do we understand the word 'grace'? What lies behind this word which appears 155 times in the New Testament, including 100 times in Paul? Grace (*charis*) is one of a series of words derived from a Greek root (*char*) which in contemporary Greek literature referred to things which produce well-being, such as 'kindness', 'beauty', 'thanks' and 'favour'. The Greek-speaking Jews who translated the Old Testament some time before the birth of Christ thought *charis* was an appropriate word to translate the help given by someone in a superior position who comes to the aid of a weaker person. This is the kind of life-saving help given to starving people by Pharaoh's prime minister Joseph, the generous and undeserved honour offered by King Saul to the shepherd boy David and the rescue sought by widowed Ruth in her time of need.⁵ In the New Testament the word is used in a distinctive way to describe very specifically that power or favour which flows from God to people to enable them to believe and be saved. Paul makes this word central to his theology and fills it with a meaning that cannot be divorced from the salvation brought to humanity by Jesus Christ. Grace is the totally undeserved and yet freely given gift from God by which we are saved. This grace is personal, it comes from Jesus and touches people and changes lives. It is grace which welcomes the prodigal son home, which grants even the latest-coming workers a full day's pay and which forgives not seven times but seventy times seven.⁶ Into a world in which there is no such thing as a free lunch, where everyone expects – and hopes – to get what they deserve, comes the almost incomprehensibly free gift of God, offered unconditionally to all.

We note, firstly, the *means* by which this grace works. God's grace works in our lives by creating faith. As Paul expressed it, 'it is by grace you have been saved . . . through faith' (Eph. 2:5, 8). Many people consider this to be one of the most profound statements of the Christian faith. In my own journey of faith I still recall vividly the moment of sudden illumination which took place when I was a teenager as I read and then reread this passage. Although brought up from childhood within faith I still needed to understand, as all

⁵ Gen. 47:25; 1 Sam. 16:22; Ruth 2:2.

⁶ Luke 15:11–32; Matt. 20:1–16; Matt. 18:22.

Christians do, the assurance and peace involved in knowing the difference between being saved ‘by grace’ and being saved ‘through faith’. Saved ‘by grace’ says clearly that salvation depends upon God’s action in Christ and therefore rests securely in him. Saved ‘through faith’ says that the means God uses to achieve this salvation is the faith of the believer. It is important, however, not to turn this gift of faith into a human achievement, as though I am saved by *my* faith which *I* create and have in Jesus. As Paul said, ‘this [faith is] not from yourselves, it is the gift of God’ (Eph. 2:8). Self-generated and sustained attempts at faithfulness are futile. Self-salvation is not possible.

Secondly, we must note the *richness* of this grace. In Ephesians it is variously described as being ‘rich’, ‘lavish’, ‘incomparable’ and ‘unsearchable’.⁷ The Lord Jesus described it as being like a hidden treasure or a unique pearl of inestimable value for which the wise man or woman would give absolutely anything and everything. On the one hand, this great gift of God is given freely, it is the kind of love which is undeserved and unexpected. It is not for sale and it cannot be bought or demanded. It can only be accepted with gratefulness and praise. On the other hand, although grace is free it is not cheap. It is very costly, for it seeks a response which involves the whole of our lives. But it is a gift well worth receiving and the renunciation of those things which are contrary to a life with Christ is no real loss. Martyred missionary Jim Elliot’s well known saying is certainly true, that ‘he is no fool who gives away what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose’. But even then, in that act of commitment which every Christian makes, we must remember that it is God who is at work in us and that the emphasis lies upon what God does rather than upon what we can do. Every Christian is called to give witness to this, but as we do it is helpful to remember that we are not God’s lawyers, arguing well for him, but God’s witnesses, simply telling what grace has done.

Thirdly, it is necessary to understand the *comprehensiveness* of grace for the whole of life: it expresses the totality and completeness of salvation for the whole person at all times and in every circumstance. Nothing in the Christian life is outside the orbit of God’s grace. The whole person in every dimension of his or her life and being – physical, emotional, spiritual and mental – is saved by the grace of Jesus Christ. Everything is permeated by God’s grace and the Christian life not only begins with grace but must continue with it for, as Paul discovered in the midst of weaknesses, hardships, persecutions and calamities of all kinds, grace alone is sufficient for

⁷ Eph. 1:7–8; 2:7; 3:8.

everything.⁸ As John Newton's well-known hymn concludes, 'Tis grace hath brought us safe thus far, and grace will lead us home.' This does not mean that life will always be easy. Indeed, it is not always easy even to speak of God's grace to those who suffer. Yet time and time again in such situations there has been tremendous evidence of the grace of God – sometimes healing, sometimes simply encouraging or strengthening one who suffers, but showing clearly that every situation is open to the gracious working of our loving God. When people wonder why bad things happen to good people they often blame God. An equally significant but less frequently asked question is why good things should happen to bad people. The answer is grace, and God's nature is best understood as being expressed in grace, and especially in *the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ*.

b. Knowing the Lord Jesus Christ

Paul links grace so intimately and exclusively with Christ that it may be said that Christ *is* grace. He began his first letter to the Corinthians with this point when he thanked God for his grace 'given you in Christ Jesus' (1 Cor. 1:4). He expanded on this theme in the second letter, reminding his readers that the grace that comes to us from Jesus is preceded by an incarnation that was itself a profound act of gracious self-humiliation and sacrifice: 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich' (2 Cor. 8:9). One cannot overestimate the significance of this amazing fact. In the first place, it reveals to us the true character of God, showing that the eternal, infinite, almighty Creator of the universe was willing to leave aside divine glory and participate in the world that he made. In the second place, it shows that Christianity is unique for it defines the nature of God by reference to one historical, temporal person – Jesus Christ. It is not surprising that some of those who lived at the time of the ministry and death of Jesus of Nazareth felt that it was either a scandalous blasphemy or utter foolishness to identify in any way at all the eternal God with this one specific human being.⁹ Yet this is precisely the intention of this first phrase of Paul's benediction and it must be admitted that it would be an absurd idea were it not for the fact that its origin lies in the heart and will of God rather than human imagination. It is the incarnation which lies at the heart of

⁸ See 2 Cor. 6:1–9; 12:9.

⁹ John 19:1–16; 1 Cor. 1:19.

trinitarian Christianity, and this clearly distinguishes Christianity from any and every other theistic belief and thus makes it impossible to assert that ‘all religions are the same’ or that ‘they all worship the same God’.

The particular, historical person of Jesus of Nazareth is described by faith as the *Lord Jesus Christ*, a name which is, in each of its three parts, a trinitarian name. First, while the term *Lord* (*kyrios*) can be used in a non-religious sense, it can also be much more than merely a deferential title like ‘sir’. *Kyrios* was commonly said by Jews in place of the name of God (Yahweh), which was too sacred to pronounce. In the Gospels *kyrios* was used to designate God as well as the masters of slaves and owners of property, and its ambiguity allows the hearers to make their own interpretation.¹⁰ But for Paul, when it is applied to Christ it is clearly an attribution of divine nature which requires spiritual insight, for ‘no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit’.¹¹ It has trinitarian significance in that it identifies the human *Jesus* with the eternal *God* through the working of the divine *Spirit*. Secondly, the early Christians made no distinction between the baptism of believers in the name of *Jesus* (meaning ‘saviour’) and baptism in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.¹² Properly understood, the name Jesus implies everything that is contained in the latter, for Jesus is the true revelation of God. Thirdly, the addition of the title *Christ* also has a trinitarian dimension. *Christos* is the Greek version of the Hebrew ‘messiah’ (lit. ‘anointed one’), which refers to the one expected to fulfil the Jewish eschatological expectation that God would one day come and rescue his people. The baptism of Jesus shows him to be the anointed one, the messiah, as the Spirit descends and Jesus is declared to be the one sent by the Father.¹³ In other words, as Basil of Caesarea (c.330–79) said, ‘To name Christ is to confess the whole trinity.’¹⁴

To call God Trinity is to assert that God lives eternally as Father, Son and Spirit, not as three Gods and not merely as one God with three names. God is the Father, the originator of all things, the transcendent Creator and Lord of the universe, and also the Son, the incarnate, historical participant in human life, and finally the ever-present Spirit of life and love. In Jesus Christ we have a window to

¹⁰ E.g. Matt. 1:20; 10:24; Luke 1:66; 19:34.

¹¹ 1 Cor. 12:3. Also see Rom. 10:9; Phil. 2:11.

¹² Acts 8:12; 10:48; Matt. 28:19.

¹³ Dan. 9:25, 26; John 8:26, 28; Heb. 8; John 18:36; Rev. 17:14; Acts 10:38; Luke 4:16–19; Isa. 61:1–2.

¹⁴ *On the Holy Spirit*, in P. Schaff and H. Wace (eds.), *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Eerdmans, 1978), 12, 116.

God that allows us to see and understand something of this amazing divine nature, and he is himself truly, fully God. The astonishing nature of this is accentuated by the fact that this revelation of God in Jesus culminates in his death. While it is a death which is tragic, brought about by human sin, it is also, in the wisdom of God, a death not without purpose. In other words, *the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ* is not something only to be connected with his life, but also *especially* with his death and with God's purposes. Call it what you will, the epitome of grace, the hallmark of the gospel, the defining characteristic of God's nature, the high point of salvation, the greatest truth known to the world – but in any words it is the fact that God's greatest gift of grace comes to us through the death of Jesus Christ. The salvation of the world and the rescue of those alienated from God takes place 'by [God's] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith'.¹⁵ Sometimes this connection with the sacrifice of Christ is made memorable by treating the word as an acronym: **God's Riches At Christ's Expense**.

The extraordinary truth of this atonement should keep on surprising us, for it is a challenge to every human way of looking at things. There was a church which was undertaking a refurbishment of the interior of their building including the artwork they had. It was all done beautifully and everyone was very pleased – except that some were shocked at a crucifix which showed a twisted body and Christ clearly in physical and spiritual agony. It disturbed them so much that they asked for it to be removed. When they were asked why they responded, 'We wanted a lovely Christ.' Although it may at times disturb us, we will find in the death of Christ the greatest truth: that the grace of God comes through our Lord Jesus Christ who died precisely so that we do not have to.

2. The love of God

The grace that is shown in Jesus Christ reveals the great love God has for the world. Put simply, God loves you, Jesus proves it! In this way, the theology of the second phrase of Paul's benediction in which he prays for *the love of God* flows on seamlessly from the first part of the prayer for *the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ*. By putting together these two phrases about grace and love, Paul has taken a significant step towards creating what will be the definitive trinitarian statement of Christian faith. A comparison of the words

¹⁵ Rom. 3:24 (NRSV); also see 5:15–21; Eph. 2:7; 1 Cor. 1:18–31.

of this benediction with the parallel words at the end of his first letter to the Corinthians shows how this came about. At the end of 1 Corinthians Paul sought the blessing of the ‘the grace of the Lord Jesus’, but in that situation he followed it with a reference to his own love for them, saying, ‘*my love* to all of you in Christ Jesus’ (1 Cor. 16:23–24). He probably added these words in order to reassure the Corinthians that he still felt warmly towards them, because he had to say some critical words to them concerning their attitudes and behaviour.¹⁶ Now, however, instead of praying ‘*my love* to all of you’, he substitutes a prayer that the *love of God* would be with them all. To be loved by Paul or any other believer is a great thing, but to be loved by God means to be strengthened and empowered. With this change to his benediction the more theologically and fundamentally significant love of God is added to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and he thus creates a binitarian statement which is ready for a trinitarian conclusion.

In the meantime though, in this second phrase, at the centre of the benediction, and also at the centre of the Christian doctrine of God, is this statement of the love of God. This love, expressed in Christ, is the heart of the gospel and the foundation of all human love (2 Cor. 5:14). It is unique, profound and powerful. To know God is to be in love; where there is no God there is no love. Hinduism has *karma*, Islam has law, Buddhism has the eightfold path and secularism has self-improvement, but it is only Christianity which dares to say that we find our salvation and the meaning of life in God’s unconditional love. Love is the answer to the most fundamental questions of human existence. Without love nothing else really makes sense.

There are so many things one could say about the love of God¹⁷ because it is so central to the gospel, but the following four characteristics are perhaps some of the most fundamental and necessary.

a. God’s love is eternal

Very simply, love is eternal because love is the very nature of God. As the apostle John says, ‘Love comes from God ... God is love’ (1 John 4:7–8). In the same way Paul is able to remind the Corinthians that ‘love never fails’ (1 Cor. 13:8). Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430), the North African theologian whose work was to have a profound influence on the church of subsequent generations, reflected on this and sought to explain how it was that

¹⁶ 1 Cor. 3:1; 4:7–8; 5:1; 6:1; 9:1–3.

¹⁷ Paul prays that the Corinthians would know the love of *God* rather than the love of *the Father*, but when Paul’s theology is taken as a whole it is clear that this love comes from none other than God the Father of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 1:3; 11:31).

love constituted the inner life of God through the mutual relationships of Father, Son and Spirit. He said that the Father is the divine Lover, Jesus is the Beloved and the Holy Spirit is the love which exists between them. The great advantage of this is that it helps us see that love does nothing less than constitute the very nature of the Trinity by defining the inner relationships of God. Unfortunately, however, to describe the Spirit in a somewhat impersonal way as the bond of love does not seem to do justice to the biblical material, which speaks of the Spirit in very personal terms as one who actually loves.¹⁸ Nonetheless, the point is made that love flows from the very nature and being of God as Trinity. Love requires a relationship, it does not exist just on its own. It must be expressed by someone and received by another. Love simply could not exist if God was a solitary, undifferentiated being rather than the dynamic, loving community of Father, Son and Spirit. Love existed even before the world was created, for God is eternally a community of mutual love between Father, Son and Spirit. God did not need the world in order to be able to love: the eternal, almighty God *is* love.

b. God's love is powerful

The most fundamental characteristic of this eternal love of God is that it seeks the good of the other. It is the opposite of any and all selfish, self-centred attitudes. These are sin and the basis of all sinful actions. Love reaches out to the other and is grounded in the inner-trinitarian life of God, whose creative, outgoing love overflowed from the divine community and created the universe. This love then reached out to embrace and redeem humanity through the incarnation. It continues to be inclusive, in that God now calls us to share in the fulfilment of his purposes, by living a life of love in which we reach out to others.

You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

(Matt. 5:43–48)

¹⁸ See Rom. 8:26–27; 1 Cor. 2:10, 11; 3:16; 2 Cor. 3:6; Gal. 5:18; Eph. 4:30.

Love is truly godly love when it is reaching out to one who does not, or is not able to, love in return. Love of those who love us is what anyone can do. Christian love is that love which reaches out to the other, to the one who is different, to the unlovely and especially to the enemy. Love is made perfect in this. The implications of this obviously extend into every area of life from personal attitudes through family relationships to social structures, political actions and global concerns.

This distinguishes Christian love from that more natural, common feeling of one person for another which is also referred to as 'love'. Romantic love can be a wonderful thing and certainly has at least three elements which can be compared to, and differentiated from, Christian love. First, romantic love is strongly focused on another. This is also true of God's love, but whereas romantic love is exclusive in its attachment, God's love is all-encompassing and open to all. Secondly, romantic love can, like the love of God, bring about change. While romantic love can bring about significant change in one's personal life (and perhaps one's perception of the world), it is Christ's love which really changes the world and it continues to do so because it is an open, inclusive love. Thirdly, romantic love has an intensity or emotional charge which can be quite appropriately related to the relationship between God and his people. As the American theologian of revival Jonathan Edwards said, 'If persons have the true light of heaven let into their souls, it is not a light without heat.' The difference is that, although God's love involves emotion, it is not *based* on a feeling but on a chosen course of action. Love exists most particularly where it is offered towards those for whom one feels least: one's enemies.¹⁹ Love is based on nothing less than the cross of Jesus Christ, which is the ultimate revelation of God's love. As the apostle John wrote, 'this is love . . . that [God] loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins' (1 John 4:10).

c. God's love is constant

It is a universal truth that everyone wants and needs to be loved. It is an unfortunate and even tragic fact, however, that many people do not feel loved. When that is the case then it is inevitable that what will drive them is the search to *gain* love rather than any commitment to *show* love. This ought not to be surprising, for the truth is that we can only really love when we have been loved and so for some the focus falls on persuading others to love us. Insecurity

¹⁹ Matt. 5:43–48; Rom. 5:10.

about being loved lies behind many attempts to become lovable by being attractive in looks or successful in business, sport or education, but the reality is that God makes us lovable by loving us in Christ. To know the love of God is to be able to discover the true self. Paul Tournier spoke out of his own experience when he said, 'I am convinced that nine out of ten persons seeing a psychiatrist do not need one. They need somebody who will love them with God's love ... and they will get well.'²⁰

However, natural human insecurities make it hard for us to appreciate the love of God properly. It stands in impossible contradiction to our own poor love with which we are all too closely acquainted. Consequently, even Christians of some years' standing can find it hard to allow this love to permeate their lives. As Peter Van Breeman says, 'It is fairly easy to believe in God's love in general, but it is very difficult to believe in God's love for me personally.'²¹ Our trust in God's love is hindered by the awareness of our own sinful life and the conviction that sin renders us worthless, not only in our own eyes and before others, but especially in the sight of a holy God. There is no doubt that this comes about partly because of the general human tendency to value people according to their 'goodness' and partly as a result of specifically Christian teaching on the way in which God hates sin. But the doctrine of sin must never stand alone. At the same time one must always take into account the great, unchanging love of God which overcomes sin's power and effects. The English Puritan John Owen spoke eloquently on this: 'The love of God in itself is the eternal purpose and act of his will. This is no more changeable than God himself: if it were no flesh could be saved; but it changeth not, and we are not consumed. What then? Loves he his people in their sinning? Yes; his people, – not their sinning.' Owen went on to show that God may change in the way he deals with people; at particular times he might rebuke or chasten, but he never changes in his fundamental attitude towards us: 'Woe, woe it would be to us, should he change in his love, or take away his kindness from us!' We may change in our love for God, it may ebb and flow, we may lose our first love and then grow again, or be 'as unstable as water', but this is not how God is. 'What poor creatures are we! How unlike the Lord and his love!'²² Thank God!

It would be a grave mistake to assume that all the changes in a Christian's life come about as the result of his or her response to God's love. The whole point of God's love is that by grace 'God is

²⁰ Cited in J. B. Smith, *Embracing the Love of God*, 146.

²¹ Peter Van Breeman, *As Bread that is Broken* (Dimension, 1974), 15.

²² Owen, *The Works*, 31–32.

at work in us his wonders to perform', and this point must be made first. The writer to the Hebrews put it this way: 'May the God of peace ... equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen' (Heb. 13:20–21). God is at work in us through Jesus Christ.

Anthony de Mello tells a story about the need for love that one worried person had.

I was a neurotic for years. I was anxious and depressed and selfish. And everyone kept telling me to change. And everyone kept telling me how neurotic I was. And I resented them, and I agreed with them, and I wanted to change, but I just couldn't bring myself to change, no matter how hard I tried. What hurt me most was that my best friend also kept telling me how neurotic I was. He too kept insisting that I change. And I agreed with him too. But I felt so powerless and trapped. Then one day he said to me, 'Don't change. Stay as you are. It really doesn't matter whether you change or not. I love you just as you are; I cannot help loving you.' Those words sounded like music to my ears: 'Don't change. Don't change. I love you.' And I relaxed. And I came alive. And, oh wonderful marvel, I changed!²³

It is not the case that we must change to be accepted by God, but rather that we can change because we have been accepted by God. Of course, this does not mean that we do not have a part to play in love – we too can become lovers.

d. God's love is personal

Love is essentially a relationship which can only exist in God because God is Trinity, a community of love, and because this is so fundamental the concept of the Trinity becomes the foundation and structure for all Christian thinking. But this amazing fact, that God is Father, Son and Spirit, should not be reduced to a series of doctrines about grace, salvation, love and the world. 'Trinity' is not so much a concept as a name for God: the Blessed Trinity. It is true to say that 'Christianity is not essentially a philosophy of love but a love affair.'²⁴

In love affairs, of course, love must be shown by both partners. When Paul refers in his benediction to the *love of God* there is no

²³ A. de Mello, *Song of the Bird* (Gujarat Sahitya Prakash Anand, 1981), 83–84.

²⁴ Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel* (Multnomah, 1990), 214.

doubt that the ‘of’ should be understood in the first instance as a subjective genitive referring to ‘the love which *comes from* God’. But this is not ultimately separable from the objective genitive ‘the love which Christians *have for* God’ in return. From grammatical, theological and pastoral points of view it is important to keep these concepts together. Paul’s benedictory prayer not only asks that God’s love would be with us, but it also calls for our love in response. Similarly, John’s statement ‘God is love’ has as its logical implication ‘God loves *you*’. God calls to us in love and seeks our love in return, and the goal of our life is nothing other than to live in love with God for ever. As G.K. Chesterton said, ‘Love means to love that which is unlovable, or it’s no virtue at all; Forgiving means to pardon that which is unpardonable, or it’s no virtue at all; And to hope means hoping when all things are hopeless, or it’s no virtue at all.’²⁵

3. The fellowship of the Holy Spirit

Just as grace is the most characteristic quality of the Lord Jesus and love is the distinctive nature of God the Father, so this benediction nominates ‘fellowship’ or ‘communion’ as the most characteristic attribute of the Holy Spirit. The addition of this phrase makes this particular benediction unique among all the greetings and benedictions in Paul’s letters. On some occasions he will commence or conclude a letter with ‘The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you’, but the more usual form of prayer in these situations tends to be binitarian in form, for example, ‘Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.’²⁶ In this particular case, however, he adds a third and final phrase in which he prays that *the fellowship of the Holy Spirit* would be with them. What is this fellowship of the Spirit?

a. The Spirit creates fellowship

To have *koinōnia* (‘fellowship’ or ‘communion’) means to share in something together. In everyday use it described the partnership of the disciples Simon, James and John by which they shared (or ‘had shares in’) a boat and a fishing business (Luke 5:10). In the more specifically Christian sense it can be understood to refer to three interlocking relationships. First, it refers to the nature of the inner life of God. As with ‘the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ’ and ‘the

²⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (John Lane Company, 1905).

²⁶ 2 Cor. 1:2; also see Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; Phil. 1:2.

love of God', the reference to 'the fellowship of the Holy Spirit' is primarily a statement about the way in which God exists – that is, God exists as a community or fellowship of grace and love. Secondly, it refers to the fellowship which Christians share with God through the presence of the Holy Spirit, and finally, it refers to the fellowship which Christians share with one another through the mediating presence of the Holy Spirit. In every way then, it is the role of the Spirit to unite and bring fellowship.

As John V. Taylor points out, the benediction does not refer to 'the power of the Holy Spirit', or 'the light of the Holy Spirit', or 'the purity of the Holy Spirit'; it says 'the communion', the in-between-ness, of the Holy Spirit.²⁷ The fellowship that we experience in the church is the result of this gift of awareness which the Spirit brings, which opens our eyes to one another and enables us to see as we never saw before. The Holy Spirit, says Taylor, is 'the invisible third-party' who stands between us and the other, making us mutually aware. Supremely and primarily he opens our eyes to Christ. But he also opens our eyes to the brother or sister in Christ, to the fellow man or woman in need and to the heartbreaking brutality and the equally heartbreaking beauty of the world. The Spirit is 'the go-between God'.

b. The Spirit gives life

A graffitist scrawled on the wall, 'Life is a hereditary disease of which we all die.' Without a share in the life of God this is indeed the fate of all of us. The life-giving nature of the Holy Spirit is expressed in the Nicene creed, one of the great ecumenical statements of the church, which proclaims the Holy Spirit to be 'the Lord, the giver of life'.²⁸ To be given life is a great gift, but what we are given is actually fellowship ('a share') in God's own life. It is astonishing to think that the life of God should extend to include people, but this is exactly what happens. The various writers of the New Testament express this differently: Paul stresses union with Christ's death and resurrection and our participation in the Spirit; John focuses on fellowship with the life of the incarnate Son; and Peter speaks of participation 'in the divine nature'.²⁹ All of them

²⁷ Taylor, *Go-Between God*, 17.

²⁸ Sometimes known as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed, this is the form of the creed finalized at the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451). Apparently based on an early baptismal creed from Jerusalem, it was understood to represent the earlier work of the Councils of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381). Today it is almost universally recognized as a foundation statement of faith.

²⁹ Rom. 6 and 8; John 6:53–57; 2 Pet. 1:4.

stress the participation of the believer in the life of God and so Paul's addition of *the fellowship of the Holy Spirit* to his benediction is no insignificant afterthought, for it is only through this fellowship that we have life eternal – a life which is a shared life, communion with God.

In human terms it is hard for us to imagine what it means to share in the life of God, because even when we are very close to someone else – sharing their every experience, their joys and griefs – we are still living externally to them, experiencing our own life rather than theirs. But through the presence of the Holy Spirit we are able actually to share in God's life. This is eternal life and a life without eternity is unworthy of the name of life. When thinking of the first of the phrases of this benediction one is inevitably reminded of the words of John Newton's well known hymn, '*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound / That saved a wretch like me!*' When reflecting on the second phrase of the benediction Charles Wesley's equally well known hymn which proclaims '*Amazing love! How can it be? / That thou my God shouldst die for me?*' is likely to come to mind. Perhaps we also need a hymn that sings of the equally '*amazing communion*' which God shares with his children! It is indeed amazing and it is often neglected. Perhaps we too readily identify the fellowship of the Holy Spirit with the human dimension of that relationship which, while it is a profound communion in itself, is likely to be marred by dissension or some other less-than-perfect characteristic. However, we should not allow this to divert us from the great fact of fellowship in God, the fact that our primary calling in life is nothing other than to be available to God, to meet God, to know God and, by sharing in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, to live in God for ever.

c. The Spirit builds community

The Spirit is God who is on our side, in our lives, guiding the believer and enabling us to see Jesus Christ as Lord. The possibility of faith in Christ is not a human one, it is a special, inward act of God through the Spirit: an act of grace, love and communion. Consequently, we become aware of the Holy Spirit rather differently from the way we become aware of Jesus Christ. The Spirit is not discerned as an external manifestation but is experienced *inwardly* as the means by which we come to know God. As we grow in faith, hope and love we are more able to discern the prompting of the Spirit, but even then it can sometimes be hard to distinguish the leading of the Holy Spirit from the desires of our own spirit (Rom. 8:15–16). When this occurs we should remember

that the focus is upon the *fellowship* of the Holy Spirit, that is, it is primarily *in community* that the Spirit works and we actually distort our relationship with God if we believe that the primary focus of the Spirit's work is with *me*. We must not exclude others from the process of listening for the Spirit. The role of the community is critical and yet, under the influence of the general atmosphere of modern society, it is easy to fall into a ruinous and unbiblical individualism when we look for guidance or interpret the Scriptures. It is an act of great grace that God sends his Spirit to build community in our world. Through the Spirit God has joined us to join us to each other.

It is important to balance the presence of the Spirit in the life of the individual and the life of the community. On the one hand, there are dangers in perceiving the presence of the Spirit *only in the individual*. There are those who behave like the Montanists of the early church, a group founded by Montanus, a converted pagan priest (c. AD 155), who claimed to be possessed by the Holy Spirit and thus able to prophesy authoritatively. Montanus was joined by others who also believed that they alone had received special revelations of the Spirit which gave them unique knowledge and truth. Consequently they separated from the rest of the church. They perceived the Spirit leading them irrespective of what others said or did and it led to fragmentation, division and disunity. The Montanist movement brought what could have been of great use to the church, an enthusiasm for the work of the Spirit, a strong eschatological expectation and a commitment to morality, but it fell into extremism and an intolerance of other believers. This cannot be the work of the Spirit who calls us together as one body in Christ. The Montanists mistook their own extremism and enthusiasm for the presence of the Spirit. This can also happen today.

On the other hand, there are dangers in identifying the inspiration of the Spirit with *the life of the community* in such a way that it is thought that the community, the institution of the church, can do no wrong. In the medieval period this led to a form of Christendom in which the working of the Spirit was identified with the institution of the church. The church became dominant and controlled all areas of life, for it was assumed that whatever it did was the will of God whether that included war or torture or enforced conversion. Today another situation has emerged as it becomes clear that there has been considerable abuse of position and power within the church in the sexual abuse of children, women and those in dependent relationships. Certainly the individuals who perpetrated these abuses must bear much of the responsibility, but what has allowed individual sin to turn into large-scale tragedy is the fact that many refused to

believe that such things could happen within the church. Others could not see that they had a responsibility to act decisively to bring these actions to an end, and still others participated in cover-ups to protect the guilty. Clearly, many found it hard to believe that there could be such sin inside the church. These things do not arise from the will of God or the working of the Spirit but from the sinful failings of human beings. It must be accepted that the church can be affected by evil, that there is no-one who is without sin. No institution or person is perfect and we will always need the prophetic, inspired individual to speak to the church. However, even the individual who speaks in this way is not apart from or separate from the church. There is no believer who is not a part of the community of God. In every aspect of Christian discipleship we need *the communion of the Holy Spirit* – it is in the community that the Spirit works.

The benediction concludes with the prayer that God's grace, love and fellowship will *be with you all*. While Paul may only have had the Corinthian community in mind when he wrote about the 'you', the benediction has long since been recognized as a summary of the gospel which is appropriate for much wider use, especially as the final blessing in services of worship. In that context it should always be more than just a way of announcing the end of the service. We cannot do any better than to let this trinitarian prayer sum up our worship and become the theology at the foundation of our Christian lives. It would mean that our relationship with God was a dynamic, personal relationship of love, made possible by the grace of Jesus Christ and mediated by the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. That would indeed be a blessing – to us and to the world.