

*' I ' AND ' WE ' IN THE THESSALONIAN
EPISTLES.*

THE question has often been discussed whether the plural pronoun of the first person, as it is found in St. Paul's Epistles, is to be interpreted as a real plural. There are those who so understand it, while others regard it as practically equivalent to ' I,' comparing it with an editorial or author's ' We.'

The two Epistles to the Thessalonians, whose Pauline authorship will here be taken for granted, form an excellent starting point for the consideration of this question, for in these, more than in any other Epistle, does St. Paul employ the plural pronoun ' we.' Five times only does he say ' I ' (1 Thess. ii. 18, iii. 5, v. 27, 2 Thess. ii. 5, iii. 17).

Now it is to be observed that both these Epistles begin with a salutation from Paul, and Silvanus, and Timothy to " the Church of the Thessalonians," and the most natural thing then would be to understand the oft recurring ' we ' throughout the Epistles as intended to include the three of them, or, if one of the three be excluded by the context, then the other two. Some reason would have to be sought to account for the occasional lapse into the singular such as we find in the five verses given above.

There are, however, other Epistles which open with a salutation from others besides the Apostle himself, and in only two of these does he employ the plural ' we.' Before then we hastily conclude that the ' we ' of the Thessalonian Epistles is a proper plural, it will be well to inquire whether any reason can be found why St. Paul should associate others with himself by using the plural ' we ' in some of his Epistles and yet not do so in others, even though the opening words contain a salutation from more than the Apostle himself.

In 1 Corinthians St. Paul speaks throughout in his own name, and employs the singular 'I.' Yet in this Epistle the salutation comes from "Paul, called to be an Apostle through the will of God, and Sosthenes the brother." It is easy, however, to understand why, though the name of Sosthenes occurs in the salutation, he has no real part in the Epistle. Sosthenes was, it would seem, a member of the Corinthian Church (Acts xviii. 17), possibly a leading member, who happened to be with St. Paul at Ephesus when he was writing the Epistle. There was therefore an appropriateness in including him in the salutation; but Sosthenes, though a prominent convert in Corinth, had not been instrumental in founding the Church there. To the Corinthian Christians he would be but one of themselves. He could not speak authoritatively, as Silvanus or Timothy might have done. We know from the narrative of the Acts that it was with the aid of Silvanus and Timothy that St. Paul evangelised, and founded the Churches of Macedonia and Achaia. It is perfectly intelligible, then, that in writing to the Thessalonians he should associate them with himself in what had to be said to them. Accordingly, nearly everywhere in the Thessalonian Epistles it is, as we have seen, 'we' and not 'I.'

In 2 Corinthians there is frequent use of the plural 'we,' but as the salutation comes from "Paul, an Apostle of Christ Jesus through the will of God, and Timothy the brother," and Timothy had been a fellow-worker with St. Paul in the founding of the Macedonian and Achaian Churches, the associating of Timothy with himself in parts of the Epistle is capable of a natural explanation. 'We' can be interpreted naturally as a real plural.

In the other two Epistles of the third missionary journey—namely, those to the Churches of Galatia¹ and to the

¹ I have given my reasons elsewhere (*The Epistle to the Galatians, its*

Romans—St. Paul employs the singular ' I ' throughout. This is easily explained. For the opening salutation in the Epistle to the Romans is from the Apostle only ; and though in the Epistle to the Galatians he couples with himself in the opening words " all the brethren who are with me," it was hardly to be expected that this general body of Christians gathered round him would be associated with him in his exhortations and rebukes addressed to the unfaithful Galatians.

Coming now to the group of Epistles belonging to the first Roman imprisonment, we find that in the Epistle to the Ephesians it is the singular ' I ' which is employed. This needs no explanation, seeing that that begins with a salutation from St. Paul alone. The case is different in regard to the Epistles to the Colossians, the Philippians, and Philemon. In all these Timothy is named in the salutation along with Paul, and yet in Philippians and Philemon it is everywhere ' I,' while in Colossians we find at first ' we ' and then ' I.' Now it²⁰ must be remembered that these Epistles belong to a period of imprisonment. St. Paul was a prisoner, Timothy was not. The strength of any appeal made in these letters depends in large measure upon the fact that he who made it was a prisoner. We can understand, then, that the Apostle might very well speak more in his own name in these Epistles, even though Timothy was with him, than would otherwise be the case. In Colossians he begins with a ' we '—" We thank God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," etc.—and he continues to use the plural when in verse 9 he writes : " For this cause we also, since the day we heard it (i.e. your love in the Spirit) do not cease to pray and make request for you, etc." He lapses

Destination and Date) for adhering to Lightfoot's dating of *Galatians*. I have remained undisturbed in my view by subsequent criticism.

into the singular quite naturally at i. 23, when he speaks of his own special ministry and goes on to rejoice in his sufferings. For the most part the 'I' persists through the Epistle, though there is a return to 'we' in i. 28.

In the Epistle to the Philippians it is everywhere 'I.' We might have expected that having associated Timothy with himself in the opening salutation, the Apostle would have said in i. 3: 'We thank God'—as indeed he does when writing to the Colossians—instead of 'I thank God.' But the reason for his personal thanksgiving is not far to seek. For we gather from the Epistle that the Philippians had sent a contribution to their prisoner Apostle in Rome. This seems clear from iv. 10: "But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at length ye have revived your thought for me; wherein ye did indeed take thought, but ye lacked opportunity. Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therein to be content." And the Apostle refers (iv. 15) to a previous time when these same Philippians had given substantial proof of their love for him: "Ye yourselves also know, ye Philippians, that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church had fellowship (*ἔκοινωνήσεν*) with me in the matter of giving and receiving, but ye only; for even in Thessalonica ye sent once and again unto my need."

Now when we refer to the subject of the Apostle's thanksgiving at the beginning of the Epistle, we find that it is a matter of 'fellowship' (*κοινωνία*) for which he expresses his gratitude: "I thank my God . . . for your fellowship in furtherance of the gospel (*ἐπὶ τῇ κοινωνίᾳ ὑμῶν εἰς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον*) from the first day until now. And this word *κοινωνία* is employed by St. Paul in other Epistles to denote a contribution. The subject of both 2 Corinthians ix. 13, and Romans xv. 26, where the word occurs, is the collection made

by the Apostle among the Gentile churches on behalf of the poor Christians in Jerusalem. It seems natural, then, in view of this use of *κοινωνία* and in view of the passages already quoted from Philippians iv., in which the verb *ἐκοινωνήσεν* is employed, that in Philippians i. 3 *κοινωνία* includes, if it be not confined to, a contribution sent by the Philippians for the benefit of the Apostle. This being so, we can understand why the thanksgiving is a personal one, so that St. Paul says 'I thank' rather than 'We thank.'

The absence of the plural 'we' in the Epistle to Philemon needs no explanation, for it contains an essentially personal appeal, and the plural would have been out of place.

In the Pastoral Epistles, whose genuineness I accept, St. Paul writes from himself alone and the singular 'I' is consistently used, as was to be expected. It makes no difference to our present argument whether these Epistles are genuine or not.

Enough has now been said to shew that there is a very good case for interpreting 'we,' when it occurs in the Pauline Epistles, as a proper plural. St. Paul only uses 'we' when he is associating with himself those who have been connected with him in the work of founding the churches which he is addressing. The most natural thing, then, is to suppose that when he writes 'we' he means 'we,' and when he lapses into the singular he has a reason for so doing. There can be nothing surprising that he should pass from 'we' to 'I,' seeing that he is himself the Apostle, able to speak authoritatively. While he associates his fellow-workers with him in passages where it is appropriate to do so, it comes quite natural to him, when occasion requires, to speak in his own name and with the authority which is his own and not theirs.

Let us now, understanding the 'we' of the Thessalonian Epistles as a proper plural, see whether the lapses into the

singular first personal pronoun are explicable. We have four passages to consider.

The first place where 'I' occurs is ii. 18—*διότι ἠθελήσαμεν ἐλθεῖν πρὸς ὑμᾶς, ἐγὼ μὲν Παῦλος καὶ ἄπαξ καὶ δὶς, καὶ ἐνέκοψεν ἡμᾶς ὁ Σατανᾶς*. The transition to the singular here is very marked; *ἐγὼ* is emphatic, and the emphasis is fortified by the addition of the name *Παῦλος*. To explain the transition and the emphasis, we must consider the context. It runs as follows:—

“But we, brethren, being deprived (*or* orphaned—*ἀπορφανισθέντες*) of you, for a short season (*πρὸς καιρὸν ὥρας*), in presence not in heart (*or* affection) endeavoured the more exceedingly to see your face with great desire, because we wanted to come to you *ἐγὼ μὲν Παῦλος* once and again, and Satan hindered us.”

The punctuation in the R.V. seems to me somewhat too heavy here. To place a colon after 'desire' is to disconnect *διότι ἠθελήσαμεν κ.τ.λ.* from what has gone before, whereas this sentence gives the reason for the strong desire (*ἐν πολλῇ ἐπιθυμίᾳ*). Moreover, a semicolon after 'once and again' leads to a misunderstanding of the following words 'and Satan hindered us,' which must be closely connected with the statement 'we wanted to come to you.' Their great desire had been to return to Thessalonica, but Satan had hindered them. The very hindrance had intensified the desire, so that we might translate: “We, brethren, endeavoured the more exceedingly to see your face with great desire (*or* longing) because, though we wanted to come to you *ἐγὼ μὲν Παῦλος* once and again, Satan hindered us from so doing.”

I take it that the insurmountable obstacle, which is here ascribed to Satan, was the refusal of the politarchs of Thessalonica to allow Paul and Silas entrance into the city, from which they had been expelled in consequence of the opposi-

tion of the Jews, which had resulted in a riot (Acts xvii. 5-10). But a discussion of this point is not necessary here. Our chief concern is with the words—*ἐγὼ μὲν Παῦλος*. Why does St. Paul here specially refer to himself with such emphasis, instead of being content with the 'we' which he has just used? It would seem either that he has something to say of himself which he cannot say of his associates, or that he has some special reason for emphasising his own wish to return to Thessalonica.

The particle *μὲν* may be used here absolutely, in the sense of 'indeed' or it may imply an adversative *δέ*. Lightfoot explains it in the second of these two ways, and interprets the words as meaning: I Paul desired it more than once, whatever may be the feelings of Silvanus and Timothy. "The suppressed clause with *δέ* might have run *οἱ δὲ ἄλλοι περὶ ἑαυτῶν λεγέτωσαν*." In this case St. Paul differentiates himself from his colleagues in that his wish to revisit Thessalonica had been repeated, theirs not. The words *καὶ ἅπαξ καὶ δις* are thus very closely linked with *ἐγὼ μὲν Παῦλος*. They have all wanted to go, but for himself alone he can speak in saying that the desire had been recurrent.

This explanation is, of course, grammatically possible, and it would account for the transition from the plural to the singular. It does not, however, seem to me satisfactory, for, according to it, the words would imply that the eagerness of his two associates was not equal to that of the Apostle himself. A better sense and one which accords with the general tone of the Epistle is obtained if *μὲν* be not taken to imply an adversative *δέ*. The Apostle need not here be making a statement applicable only to himself as distinguished from his colleagues, but he may be emphasising that to be true of himself personally which was true also of them. In this case the point of the parenthetical *ἐγὼ μὲν*

Παῦλος may well lie in this, that St. Paul wished to lay stress on the fact that he wanted to visit the Thessalonians personally and not by deputy. It did not satisfy him to send to learn about them, and he would have his converts know that it was from no want of personal interest in them that he had not come himself to revisit them. In the next chapter he goes on to speak of the sending of Timothy to them, and there seems to be an undercurrent of apology in this part of the Epistle that he did not go himself. Whether or not insinuations had been made that he did not really care for his converts but left them to endure persecution, we cannot of course decide. But the Apostle, whose sensitiveness is unconsciously portrayed in his writings, seems to have been jealous of his honour in the matter.

Thus I take the parenthesis *ἐγὼ μὲν Παῦλος* to mean, 'Yes, I Paul in person,' and I do not think that the words *καὶ ἅπαξ καὶ δις* belong specially to the parenthesis, but I should understand the sentence to mean: because we wished to come to you—yes, I Paul in person—once and again, and Satan hindered us.

I said just now that there appears to be an undercurrent of apology in this section of the Epistle, and I find such in the two verses which immediately follow those which we have been considering. It seems as if the Apostle were afraid that the Thessalonian Christians would fancy that he did not think enough of them, and he goes on: "For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of glorying—Are not even ye?—before our Lord Jesus at His coming? Yes, ye (emphatic) are our glory and our joy."

And when he goes on as he does in the next few verses (iii. 1 ff.) to speak of the sending of Timothy to Thessalonica, he exalts him very highly in calling him a *συνεργὸς τοῦ θεοῦ*, an expression which he nowhere else applies to him—an expression moreover which has been watered down into

διάκονος τοῦ θεοῦ by copyists, or the τοῦ θεοῦ has been omitted, leaving Timothy only a fellow-worker of Paul and Silas. Why does the Apostle thus exalt Timothy in the eyes of the Thessalonians? May it not well be that he would have them understand that he had done his very best for them under the circumstances? He and Silvanus had made a sacrifice in sending Timothy from them—this is implied in the words, "We thought it good to be left behind in Athens alone"—and as they could not come themselves they had sent one whom they call their brother and "God's fellow-worker in the gospel of Christ." He was no mean substitute, one who could be thus described as *συνεργὸν τοῦ θεοῦ*.

All this seems to me to confirm the view which I take that the Apostle is offering a kind of apology for not coming himself to Thessalonica. He had wanted to come, yes to come in person, but that had been impossible.

The Apostle's personal care and anxiety about his Thessalonian converts is emphasised once again in this same passage a few verses on. After speaking of the mission of Timothy (which the use of 'we' implies to have been the act of Silvanus as well as himself), and its purpose, he adds in verse 5: "For this cause I too (*καὶ γὰρ*)—I too on my own account—when I could no longer bear it, sent to know your faith, lest by any means the tempter had tempted you, and our labour should prove to be in vain."

It has been suggested that this was a second mission sent from Athens subsequently to that of Timothy. But it seems wholly unnecessary to understand the passage thus. Timothy had been sent to establish (*στηρίξαι*) the Thessalonian Christians and to comfort them for the furtherance of their faith (iii. 2); but there was a further reason why he was sent. On his own personal account the Apostle says he had sent him, to relieve the tension of his anxious

mind, for he wanted to know whether his labour had been in vain. I take it that the *διὰ τοῦτο* of verse 5 is prospective, not retrospective like *διὸ* of verse 1. The *ἐγὼ* which follows and is fortified by *καί* (*διὰ τοῦτο καὶ γὰρ μηκέτι στέγων ἔπεμψα κ.τ.λ.*) is very emphatic. For this reason I because of my own personal anxiety sent, namely, that I might gain the assurance that I had not laboured to no purpose. Here again, then, the Apostle by his use of the first person singular impresses upon the Thessalonians his personal interest in and care for them.

We will now briefly consider the use of the singular in 2 Thessalonians ii. 5. Here, after speaking of the *ἀποστασία* and the revelation of "the man of lawlessness" which were to precede the Parousia, the Apostle parenthetically adds: "Remember ye not that while I was still with you I told you these things?" The 'I' is not emphatic here, but by his use of the singular St. Paul shows that the responsibility for the teaching was his own. Not but what he speaks in 1 Thessalonians i. 5 of "*our* gospel," so associating Silvanus and Timothy with himself in the ministry of the gospel. But it would appear that the particular teaching referred to in the passage under consideration from the second Epistle was specially the Apostle's own. This it would be if, as I believe, and as I have argued elsewhere,¹ it is St. Paul's interpretation of the signs of the times.

I have now given what seems to me the explanation of the transition from the plural to the singular first personal pronoun in 1 Thess. ii. 18, iii. 5, and 2 Thess. ii. 5. There remain the two other places where the same thing occurs. These are at the end of the first and second Epistles, and we may with advantage consider them together. The first Epistle ends thus: "I adjure you by the Lord that

this epistle be read unto all the brethren. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you." And the second Epistle concludes with these words: "The salutation of me Paul with mine own hand, which is the (*or a*) token (*σημείον*) in every Epistle; so I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all."

We gather from these last words of the second Epistle that St. Paul concluded the letter with something written by his own hand, and that it was his habit so to do. There is, therefore, no difficulty in explaining the use of the first person singular in these two places, which form the conclusion of the two Epistles. St. Paul is writing with his own hand, and there is therefore nothing more natural than that he should use the singular ' I ' in so doing. " I adjure you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the brethren." " The salutation of me Paul with mine own hand, etc." While, then, the Apostle is pleased to associate his fellow-workers with himself in the Epistle generally, he must in conclusion give what has been written the imprimatur of his personal approval and authority. We can never forget when we read St. Paul's Epistles that while he may, in appropriate parts of them, be content to speak as if he were only a partner in their composition by using the plural ' we,' yet the Epistles are really his. But I can see no reason for thinking that he ever says ' we ' when he means ' I.'

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