

New Years' Address

January 1858

By J. C. Philpot

Ever since the subject of our Annual Address has presented itself to our thoughts, a word of the Lord has been on our mind, which we feel should be our guiding rule, not only in what now lies before us, but be ever present with us from the beginning to the end of the year, if we are to be of any real service or spiritual profit to the Church of God in the position which we occupy as the Editor of the "Gospel Standard." The word is this— "Take heed unto yourself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them; for in doing this you shall both save yourself, and those who hear you." (1 Tim. 4:16.)

They are the words of Paul the aged, Paul at the end of his race and in sight of his crown; to Timothy, his own son in the faith; and they are words of solemn warning and admonition, which should ever be before the eyes and in the heart of every servant of Christ; for though written by the pen of Paul, they are, as part of the inspired testimony, the express language of the Holy Spirit to all whom he has made overseers to feed the Church of God which he has purchased with his own blood. If the Lord, then, in his providence and grace, has placed us in a position whence we may speak in his holy name to any of his redeemed and regenerated family— if he has given us any singleness of eye to his own glory, or any desire that what we send forth from our own pen, or that of others, may be made a blessing to his people; and if he has bestowed upon any who seek his face and believe in his dear Son any willingness to receive with affection what, in all faithfulness and love, is in our pages set before them, we are bound by every gracious tie to listen to the admonition that we have quoted, and which seems so peculiarly adapted to our case and situation.

I. The first part of the admonition come home with solemn weight and power to our own conscience, "*Take heed to YOURSELF.*"

As all evil begins, so all good commences in a man's own bosom. Sad then must be the lamenting cry for any minister, or any editor of a religious periodical, to be compelled to take up, as his own bitter and painful experience, "They made me a keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept." To take care of other men's souls, and take no care of one's own; to warn, to admonish, to reprove the flock of Christ, and listen to no warning, admonition, or reproof that belongs to one's self; to teach others, day by day, and week by week, and seek

no heavenly instruction from the Lord for ourselves; to contend for a living faith, without any inward experimental acting of it, on its Author and Finisher, or any earnest breathing to the God of all grace to bestow a larger measure of it, and draw it forth into more living and continual exercise; for a good hope through grace, and not to realize it; for love to the Lord and his saints, and neither to feel, nor to be desirous to feel it; to set before the people the joys of heaven and the smiles of God, with the terrors of hell and the frowns of the Almighty, yet neither seek the one or dread the other— surely, surely, there are no men, much less ministers, so deceiving or deceived as to act thus!

Yes; but there are, and more in number than any of us probably dream of; no, such shall we, and you, you ministers who read these lines, and all be, who fill any public office in the Church of God, but for special grace. Familiarity with sacred things has a natural tendency to harden the conscience where grace does not soften and make it tender. Men may preach and pray until both become a mere mechanical habit, and they may talk about Christ and his sufferings until they feel as little touched by them as a tragic actor on the stage of the sorrows which he personates. Well, then, may the Holy Spirit sound this note of warning, as with trumpet voice, in the ears of the servants of Christ. "Take heed *unto yourselves.*"

It was Paul's public warning to the elders of the church at Ephesus. (Acts 20:28.) It was Paul's private warning to his friend and disciple, his beloved son, Timothy. And do not all who write or speak in the name of the Lord need the warning? Are they not all then— men of like passions with their hearers, and usually more tried and tempted than they? Have they not, besides the snares common to all the children of God, snares peculiar to themselves— snares connected with the ministry itself? How many a star has fallen from the bright skies of the church! How many burning and shining lights, as they were once considered, have smouldered out, or been suddenly extinguished! How many have cooled in their youthful zeal; left their first love; fallen into sin; embraced error; and made themselves and their profession to stench in the nostrils of men.

If the way to heaven is strait and narrow— if surrounded with snares and pits on every side; if the heart of man is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked; if Satan is ever on the watch to deceive and allure; if all our strength is weakness, all our knowledge ignorance, all our light darkness, (and such they are without grace in its continued supply), who can walk in this path except as guided by the Spirit, and upheld by the power of God? The mercy is, that those whom the Lord loves, he loves unto the end— that those whom the Father has given him, he keeps in his name; and that he who is in the midst of the candlesticks holds the stars in his right hand, that none may pluck them thence, hide their luster, or extinguish their beams.

But apart from this special and divine keeping, as the Lord does not work mechanically, but makes use of the word of his grace, of his own promises,

precepts, and admonitions, as gracious means to keep the feet of his saints, we shall do well to give earnest heed to the things which we have heard from his lips, lest at any time we should let them slip. And sure we are that no Christian man or minister will, in his right mind, think himself placed in a position where such an admonition can be safely neglected; or, that while he is in the flesh, he is beyond the necessity or reach of such warnings.

There are few Christians, and we may well add, few Christian ministers, who have not ever found SELF to be their greatest enemy. The pride, unbelief, hardness, and impenitence of a man's own heart— the deceitfulness, hypocrisy, and wickedness of his own fallen nature; the lusts and passions, filth and folly of his own carnal mind will not only ever be his greatest burden, but will ever prove his most dreaded foe. Enemies we may have, enemies we shall have from outside, for all who will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution, and we may at times keenly feel their bitter speeches and cruel words and actions. But no enemy can injure us like ourselves. In five minutes a man may do himself more real harm than all his enemies united could do to injure him in fifty years.

And if this is true of a private Christian, how much more will it hold good in the case of one who occupies a public situation in the church of God? "Take heed then to yourself." To yourself you can be the most insidious enemy and the greatest foe. "Take heed to yourself," minister of the Gospel, writer, reader, editor, that your loins may be girt, your lamp burning, and you engaged in the Master's work, with the Master's presence, the Master's smile, and the Master's blessing.

We would then, in the opening of the present year, view this admonition as placed before our own eyes as a lamp unto our feet, and a light to our path, and as such we would open the words a little more closely and fully, as bearing more immediately upon our own conscience.

1. First, we seem specially admonished thereby to take heed that we ourselves should experience the POWER, and live under the influence of the truths for which we contend. It is impossible for us otherwise to fulfill our office as the glory of God and the good of the Church both require. We have many communications to read, many inquiries to answer, many intricate and difficult points to weigh, the good of many to consider, the petulance, quibblings, and enmity of many to endure; many books to peruse, many Reviews to write, friends whom we must not flatter, foes whom we must not fear, and, above all, to be ever looking up for wisdom to guide, and power to strengthen; feeling, as we do, that we have neither one nor the other in our own hands, or at our own command.

We have instrumentally, unworthy as we are of the position, and inadequate as we are to the task, some of the saints of the Most High to instruct, others to comfort, others to encourage, others to feed— and when we say "we," it is meant thereby to include whatever appears in our pages, whether written by our own

pen, or that of others. Without, then, the continual power and influence of the Blessed Spirit upon our heart, how soon the hands hang down, how soon the knees totter, how soon do eyes and ears and heart all become weary in well-doing.

2. We are also admonished thereby to take heed TO OUR OWN SPIRIT. Here we are liable chiefly to fail. We are not much afraid of being entangled in the slough of Arminianism— at least, as far as regards any open adherence to, or expressed sanction of, its God-dishonoring views and sentiments. The truth as it is in Jesus is, we hope, too dear to us to sacrifice it to any obvious and palpable error, come from what quarter it may, and last of all from a point that proclaims, with shameless forehead, creature strength and righteousness. But to maintain truth in a spirit of tenderness, affection, and love; not to be betrayed into a contentious, wrangling temper, nor be provoked by any obstinate opposition to call down fire from heaven on all who do not or will not see as we see, and believe as we believe; here we have much need to watch our own spirit, lest it betray us into words and expressions unbecoming the meekness of Christ and the spirit of the Gospel.

To be bold and faithful, on the one hand, in defense of truth and godliness, yet without wrath and bitterness, and to maintain, on the other, "the love of the Spirit," the affection and tenderness which ever become a sinner in this valley of tears, and a follower of the meek and lowly Lamb, and yet not to be entangled in that wretched 'universal charity', that false and canting spirit which, either in pretense or self-deception, thinks well, hopes well, and speaks well of everything and everybody who can prate about Jesus Christ and the Gospel— this safe, this Christian path, we would desire to tread. The servant of the Lord is to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints; (Jude 3;) but he is not to strive, but be gentle to all men, apt to teach, patient in meekness, instructing those who oppose them; (2 Tim. 2:24, 25;) and he is to put away all bitterness and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and evil speaking. (Eph. 4:31.)

3. We are also warned and admonished, in taking heed to ourselves, to watch against any CARNAL INFLUENCE that, under the guise of religion, may work with deviousness and subtlety on our own mind, and impose itself upon us for the work and witness, the power and teaching of the Holy Spirit. We are expressly bidden in the word of truth, "not to believe every spirit, but to test the spirits, whether they are of God." Spirit has its filthiness as well as the flesh; (2 Cor. 7:1;) and if not so gross and sensual, is much more subtle and deceptive.

In all its forms, whether in our bosom or that of others, in a profession or out of it, in the pulpit, the pew, the closet, or the study; SELF in its inmost spirit is still a deceitful, subtle, restless, proud, and impatient creature; masking its real character in a thousand ways, and concealing its destructive designs by countless devices. We have but to look on the professing church to find the highest pride under the lowest humility, the greatest ignorance under the vainest

self-conceit, the basest treachery under the warmest profession, the vilest sensuality under the most heavenly piety, and the foulest filth under the cleanest cloak.

But if self be such, and those who know its features will be the best judges of its likeness, well may we take heed to ourselves lest, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety, we should be deceived by the twining movements and glowing speeches of this serpent, and, professing to exalt Christ, be secretly exalting ourselves.

4. To be kept from all EVIL and to be preserved from all ERROR may form also a part of that solemn admonition, "Take heed to yourself." We know too much of what we are as a fallen sinner, to think for a moment that we can keep ourselves from either evil or error. Sin is sweet to the flesh; error suits well the reasoning mind. Who can mortify the one, who can shut out the other, without special help from the sanctuary? But if we take no heed to our steps, or receive without fear or care doctrines that are preached and taught from pulpits and books without number, we may soon fall into as much sin as may make us limp all our days; and embrace as much error as shall make us a wandering star and a rainless cloud to the church of God.

"Take heed then to yourself," but in so doing may a sense of the Lord's own blessed keeping ever be deeply engraved on your heart and conscience. "He keeps the feet of his saints;" "I the Lord do keep it; I will water it every moment. Lest any hurt it, I will keep it night and day." "Keep me as the apple of your eye—hide me under the shadow of your wings." "He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep." "Kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation." Only in the strength of these promises and in the experience of their fulfillment, would we say to ourselves, would we say to those who have ears to hear, "Take heed to *yourself*."

II. But we are bidden also to "take heed to the DOCTRINE."

And surely this is a most needful admonition, not only to us, but to all who profess, whether by tongue or pen, to teach the church of Christ. Few, comparatively speaking, seem to realize sufficiently the solemn position of standing forward to teach the church of Christ. Almost anybody who has a little fluency of tongue thinks himself able to preach, and almost everybody in a profession who can hold a pen deems himself capable of writing upon the weighty matters of salvation. But in so doing they profess to be the mouth of God. Well, then may every one who fears God and trembles at his word take heed what words his mouth utters; for God can only speak his own truth, and it is a fearful position to stand up as his mouthpiece, and then to speak lies in his great and holy name. How careful, then, should we be, that what we speak by mouth and what we teach by pen is according to the oracles of God.

By the word "doctrine" we understand all that holy truth, whether viewed as one consistent, harmonious whole, or as branching out into various parts, which the blessed Spirit has revealed in the word of truth, and which he makes experimentally known in the hearts of the people of God. The word "doctrine" has in the New Testament a larger, broader, and nobler meaning than that comparatively limited signification which is generally attached to the term. Doctrine is often now spoken of as something distinct from experience and precept, whereas it comprehends both. The word "doctrine," translated literally, means, "teaching;" and therefore includes every branch of divine truth which the Holy Spirit teaches, whether outwardly in the inspired Scriptures, or inwardly by his sacred unction and power. As used with reference to the ministry of the word, it means, as well as includes, all that "teaching" with which a servant of God, according to the ability bestowed upon him, instructs, feeds, comforts, and admonishes the Church of Christ. In this sense our pages should be full of "doctrine," that is, of heavenly truth, according to the teaching of the Holy Spirit in the word and in the heart.

What need, then, is there that we, as Editor of these pages, should take heed to the *doctrine!* in other words, carefully watch and examine whether what we write ourselves, or insert as written by others, be in strict accordance with the truth of God as revealed in the Scriptures, and as experienced, under the power and teaching of the Holy Spirit, in the heart of his saints.

1. If we are enabled then to take heed to the doctrine as there directed, the first quality looked for will be purity. How "clear as crystal," did holy John see the pure river of water of life proceed out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. (Rev. 22:1.) Such should be, though alas! from human infirmity, never can fully be, the truth as preached by God's ministering servants.

Three times in one short Epistle does the apostle Paul urge on his son Titus "sound doctrine," (1:9, 2:1, 8,) that is healthy, untainted with error, free from all the sickly corruptions and pestilential disease of human wisdom or human ignorance. "In doctrine," again he urges, that is, in your teaching, in what you set before the people, "showing uncorruptness, gravity," (not jokes and ridiculous anecdotes, to make fools laugh and saints sigh,) "sincerity," (not deviousness and hypocrisy, flattering the rich and keeping back the truth for fear of giving offence,) "sound speech," wise and weighty, "that cannot be condemned," as commending itself to every man's conscience in the sight of God from its intrinsic authority and power. Whether the writing and preaching of the day resemble this divine model, let those judge whose ear tests words, as the mouth tastes food. But it should ever be our earnest desire, and watchful care, to preach and write only what bears this divine stamp upon it.

2. In taking heed to the doctrine we should see that it be impregnated with the life of God, anointed with his unction, watered with his dew, and accompanied by his

power. What is all our preaching and writing worth, if it falls upon the ears and hearts of the saints of God with no weight or influence; if it never melts or softens, comforts or blesses his tried and exercised people? There is a power in the word of his grace, when God is with his servants, to kill and to make alive, to wound and to heal; there is then in their hands a two-edged sword, which pierces even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit; there is a balm, too, which brings pardon and peace to a troubled, distressed mind; and there is an influence that reaches the inmost thoughts, lays bare the hidden depths of conscience, and speaks with a voice that unmistakably assures the soul it is the very voice of God himself.

It is true that he who has the keys of David, who opens and no man shuts, and shuts and no man opens, keeps in his own hands this power, for it is his own heavenly voice by which he himself speaks to his own sheep. But he does from time to time thus speak from heaven by his own sent servants; and when they thus preach, it is Jesus himself who gives them mouth and wisdom; (Luke 21:15;) yes, the Spirit of their Father which speaks in them. (Matt. 10:20.) And his sheep know his voice and follow it, but they will not hear the voice of strangers.

Now, are we to take no heed to our "doctrine" whether it be accompanied or not with this heavenly power? Is it quite enough to preach or write consistently with the mere letter of truth, and there leave it, with a sort of reckless, Antinomian carelessness, "I can only preach the truth; God must apply it"? True; but are there no blessings to be called down upon your preaching by prayer and supplication? Is there no inward experience in your own soul of the power of God, no sense of his absence or presence, of his opening or shutting up? How can you preach or write to the comfort and edification of the saints of God, if you are an utter stranger to the things in which is all their life and all their religion?

And if you do not know vitally and experimentally the things you preach and write, why do you preach or write at all? If you call experience "cant," and the life of God in the soul "frames and feelings," beware lest God say unto you, "What have you to do to declare my statutes, or that you should take my covenant in your mouth; seeing you hate instruction and cast my words behind you." (Psalm. 50:16, 17.)

3. That the doctrine shall be such as shall save the soul. This is what the Apostle seems chiefly to insist upon in his admonition. "Take heed to yourself, and to the doctrine," for he adds immediately, "continue in them; for in doing this, you shall both save yourself and them that hear you."

When the people of God come to hear a servant of Christ, or read a book that professes to show the way to heaven, they want to be well assured that what they hear or read shall be such saving, vital truth, that they can rest their souls upon it for time and eternity. A man's own soul is a tremendous stake to put into the balance; and he who holds the scales should be equally well satisfied that

they are such as Christ holds in his own hands for heaven or hell. "What this man preaches, what this book teaches, can I rely on it as able to save my soul? Is it the real truth of God? Have I any evidence that it is so from salvation having reached my heart through the truth I now read and hear? Can I, as before a heart-searching God, with heaven and hell both before my eyes, hang all the weight of my soul for eternity upon what I hear from this pulpit, or what I read in this book?"

Well may a dying sinner thus narrowly and anxiously weigh and consider this point; well may he interrogate again and again his own conscience in this matter, for if he has no internal evidence, from what he has felt in his own soul of its saving power, that this man preaches or writes what can and does save, let him at once leave the man, let him without delay throw aside the book. A guide who does not know the way, a chart that does not mark the rocks, a pilot who cannot steer the ship— to follow or be in company with such is to seek death and destruction.

But men by thousands are contented with reading and hearing book after book, and minister after minister, without ever having or seeking to have any secret testimony in their own consciences that there is salvation in the things which the man preaches or the book declares. And why, but because they hug the deception and love the deceiver?

But our limits admonish us that we must now draw to a close. We are writing an Address, not preaching a sermon, though, perhaps, our almost sermonizing strain may to some appear not very unlike it. Yet a few words more.

"CONTINUE in them," says the apostle. In what? in the things that you have known and felt— in the truths of the gospel as revealed in the scripture and in your own conscience. The truth of God in its life and power, the truth of God as saving and sanctifying the soul, cannot be taken up and laid down like a trade or a business.

Nor is a man to be all for his soul this week and all for the world next— making the children of God his friends and companions on the Sunday; and his partners, his carnal relatives, or his fellow workmen, his chosen associates on the Monday. If truth is worth knowing at all, it is worth knowing for life; if worth having, it is worth having forever, for salvation reaches down to death, in death, and after death. He that endures unto the end, he, (and he only,) shall be saved.

As conducting the "Gospel Standard," we have no new views to offer, no new patterns for the coming Spring, no novelties of the season to please and attract a crowd of customers. We have only one Gospel, for there is but "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in all."

The Gospel is our Standard; we have, and we want to have no other— and by this standard we hope ever to abide. Each revolving year only confirms us more strongly, and roots us more deeply in that precious truth which now for many years it has been the object of our pages to set forth. All that we want is to experience more of its power, live more under its influence, and adorn it more by our life.

Friends and readers, do you see eye to eye, and feel heart to heart with us in these important matters? However the truths we love may be despised by the profane and professing world, may they be more and more dear to us! Many read our pages whom we have never seen, whom we may never know; but if we are taught by the same Spirit, a bond of union knits us together, and in doing so unites us to one common Lord.

We have no promises to make for the year upon which we are now entered; but we desire to be ever looking up to Him from whom comes every good and every perfect gift, that he would give us grace and wisdom, if he still spare life and grant health, equal to our task, and make his strength perfect in our weakness.

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