

New Years' Address, January 1851

by J.C. Philpot

True religion flows out of the life of God in the soul, and is a divine work, not a human effort.

Scripture: John 3:3, John 4:24, Acts 20:28, Romans 10:3, Ephesians 4:15

Topics: "True Religion", "Spiritual Life"

Description

J.C. Philpot preaches about the essence of true religion, emphasizing that it flows from the life of God in the soul. He discusses the importance of divine life within individuals, highlighting that all genuine religion is rooted in this divine work. Philpot delves into the separation between those born of the flesh and those born of the Spirit, pointing out that false religion often revolves around self. He warns against the dangers of Pharisaism and Antinomianism, stressing the need for a vital union with Christ and a pursuit of divine teaching.

Transcript

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All true religion flows out of the life of God in the soul. Wherever this divine life exists, there will true religion be found. Where it exists not, there may be the name of religion; but it will be a shadow without substance, a form without power, an imitation without reality. Almost the first truths that are sealed on the conscience in the earliest dawn of life and light, when men are beheld as trees walking, are connected with the life of God in the soul as a divine work.

That God is a Spirit; that he must be worshiped in spirit and truth; that there is a new birth; that the seat of all true religion is in the heart; that everything must be given up for Christ; that sin is a dreadful internal reality; and that therefore grace and salvation must be internal realities too- amid all the darkness and confusion of mind in the beginnings of the work of grace, these truths stand prominently forth, as the mountain tops lift themselves up out of the mists of the valley.

Nor are these simple truths ever shaken or undermined by subsequent experience. Much may have to be renounced. Many opinions, prejudices, pursuits, connections, attachments, may have to be abandoned; much pride, self-righteousness, creature-strength and wisdom to be burnt up; the soul may be stripped naked and bare, and "left like a beacon upon the top of a mountain, and as an ensign on a hill;" but this truth is never swept away, that the kingdom of God set up in the heart with a divine power is the main point, the one thing needful, the treasure in the earthen vessel, the white stone and the new name, without

which all profession is but a mask and a show. No, all the storms, waves, and billows that, rolling over the soul, bury and drown all religion that is of the flesh and the creature, only settle and ground it more deeply in the firm persuasion that all true religion is a divine work, a new creation, and that it is begun, carried on, and perfected by the sovereign, efficacious power of God alone.

Hence springs the separation between those that are born of the flesh and those that are born of the Spirit. Probe all false religion to the bottom; put the scoop into its heart and center; strip off its garments and trappings, and what will you find? SELF.

False religion may assume a thousand shapes, from preparation for Confirmation at a young ladies' boarding school to the hair shirt and bleeding back of a Popish saint. It may run through all shades of profession, from wild Ranterism or Mormonism to the highest flight of doctrinal Calvinism. But hunt it down through all its turnings and windings, and you will find the creature at the end of the chase.

How this leaven met and thwarted Paul at every step! "You must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses," was the first stumbling block cast into the path of the Gentile believers. And by whom? By "certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed;" (Acts 15:5;) who, in bondage themselves to the law of works, envied the Gentile saints the liberty with which Christ had made them free. With them, as with all who are not effectually humbled under the mighty hand of God, the grand stumbling stone and rock of offence was this--that Christ must be all and the creature nothing. "I bear them record," says the apostle, "that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they, being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God." (Rom. 10:2, 3.)

And so it is in our day. The "straitest sect of the Pharisees" did not die out in the days of the apostles. Its roots still lie deep in the human heart. It is a religion taught at the mother's knee, nurtured and fed by schools, tutors, and governesses, strengthened in maturer years, where not knocked to pieces by worldly lusts, by sermon upon sermon and tract after tract, and handed down in old age as a precious legacy to the rising generation.

Nor is it confined to what is called "the religious world," and to be found only in little books bound in crimson watered-silk as Christmas presents for good little boys and girls. Alas! it is found in a higher, purer atmosphere, intruding itself into the church of God- a noxious, rampant weed in the garden of spices. Nearly all the mistakes, errors, confusion, strife, and division everywhere seen in the churches that hold the truth arise either from the lack of divine life, or from mingling with it what is of the creature and the flesh.

Religion is with some almost as indispensable as the air they breathe or the food they eat. It is a natural craving that requires a suitable nourishment. In some it is Popery, in others Arminianism, in others Calvinism- a numerous tribe of sisters, but with a strong family likeness stamped on all. "Let us have some religion. We cannot do without religion. Our church, our chapel, our pew, our minister, our people- we can't exist without them." Such is the feeling, such the language of hundreds who have not a grain of real religion, not a spark of divine teaching- who, with all this clamor about religion, have never once, perhaps, in their lives cried from a broken heart, "God be merciful to me a sinner," or ever had one sight, by living faith, of the King in his beauty. When this strong natural feeling of religion is well varnished over by a few tears under a sermon, gilded by a sound Calvinistic creed, and kept duly polished by a consistent life, who can wonder that there are shoals of professors in the churches in whom the very root itself of divine life is

lacking?

Now these, though embarked under a free grace profession, will be either Pharisees or Antinomians. The leaven, though hidden for a time, will, and must work; and when it breaks forth, contention must ensue. For errors and mistakes must arise where the Spirit of truth is not; strife and division must exist where the Spirit of love is not; pride and self-righteousness must prevail where the Spirit of Christ is not; carnality and death must reign where the Spirit of life is not; and sin must rule where the Spirit of holiness is not.

A spirit of loose Antinomian licentiousness has, it is to be feared, deeply infected many Calvinistic churches. They have argued, or, if not argued, have almost acted, as if free grace were a freedom to evil, and gospel liberty a liberty to please the flesh and the world. And need we wonder that in churches where the admission is so easy, where so shallow a work is considered sufficient for membership, there are many real Antinomians- Antinomians in heart and secret practice, who are not sufficiently so in life to bring them under church censures?

But because there is this great evil in one form, shall we correct it by an equally great evil in another form? To avoid Scylla, must we fly to Charybdis? (Scylla was a rock on one side of the narrow strait between Italy and Sicily, and Charybdis, a whirlpool on the other; and as it often happened that in avoiding one a ship fell on, or into the other, it became an ancient proverb to express how, in endeavoring to shun one difficulty, a person ran upon the opposite.) Because the Antinomian has bent the stick in one direction, shall we straighten the curve by passing it into the hand of the Pharisee to bend it in the other direction? That were to break the stick, not straighten it.

Pharisaism is every whit as deadly an enemy to Christ as Antinomianism. Gentile sinners and Jewish Pharisees crucified, by mutual consent, the Lord of life and glory. The austere priests of the Hebrew Sanhedrin "spit in his face and buffeted him," and the wild soldiers of the Roman camp mocked him with the crown of thorns and the purple robe. One error is not to be corrected by another--an abused gospel cannot be rectified by introducing into it a strong tincture of the law. Error of any nature or shape, introduced into the gospel of Jesus Christ, is like the introduction of a foreign body into the human system--it must fret and irritate until dislodged or worked out. Arminianism is as much a grain of sand in a living eye as Antinomianism. In a gospel church a handful of Arminians will cause as much confusion as a handful of Antinomians. The gospel of Christ fights equally with both; and therefore both equally fight with the gospel of Christ. No, the greatest confusion frequently arises from the Arminian quarter. Fretted and irritated by a condemning law, which they are vainly endeavoring to keep, they are ready to quarrel with a straw, and secretly hate a free grace gospel, because it will not go partners with their righteousness.

Need we wonder if, under these circumstances, there is so much confusion and division in the churches, and so little love and union among the ministers?

But what should all do who love vital, spiritual, experimental godliness? Contend for all truth and oppose all error. And above all, seek to be endued themselves with power from on high, and to get their religion from the Fountainhead; to be satisfied with nothing short of divine teaching and divine testimony- to buy of Christ gold tried in the fire, and to beg of him to anoint their eyes with his own precious eye-salve, so that they may see.

A mighty conflict is apparently at hand, which may arouse the most sleepy and try the most strong. We shall need in that battle, not notions, but faith- not only union with a church, but union with Christ; not a lazy hearing of sermons, as though that were the all in all of religion, but sheddings abroad of the love of

God- not a sitting under the vine and fig-tree of the pulpit, and a snug corner in a Calvinistic chapel, but a putting on of "the whole armor of God, that we may be able to withstand in that evil day, and having done all, to stand."

While the officers have been quarreling, and the crew asleep, the pirates have come alongside the ship. Rome has hoisted her black flag, and we may have to contend with her foot to foot, and shoulder to shoulder, upon a deck flowing with blood. When the day comes "for the slaying of the witnesses" (Rev. 11.)- a prophecy yet unfulfilled, for the testimony of the gospel has never yet been silenced- realities, divine realities will be found needful. There will be no nice, neat, well pewed, softly cushioned chapels then, no quiet sleeping corners to nestle down in after the text has been given out. "Our chapel" may be then a store-house or a granary; "our minister" be an exile or in prison; and "our people" gone over, two thirds of them, to Popery.

While, then, a breathing time remains, let us be seeking that which can alone "Stand every storm, and live at last,"--a vital union and communion with the Son of God.

As a humble instrument, then, in the hands of the Lord, would we, while opportunity is allowed, "contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints."

We have spoken of the black flag of Rome. Let ours be a different banner- the banner of truth and love. (Psalm 40:4; Song 2:4.) "You have given a banner to those who fear you, that it may be displayed because of the truth."

1. The new man of grace has a pure appetite. Husks cannot satisfy it. Truth, pure truth, is the air it breathes; bread, heavenly bread, the food it eats; water, living water, the stream of which it drinks. This air, this food, this water, it seeks as with a spiritual instinct. As the new-born babe seeks the mother's breast, the new-born soul desires "the sincere milk of the word, that it may grow thereby."

Truth revealed by the Spirit is the soul's food, whether milk for the babe or meat for the man. This truth, in its purest form, is contained in the Scripture. But it often needs to be dealt out. Truth flows in God's word as a mighty river- but it often reaches the soul through canals, pipes, conduits appointed of God or sanctioned by him.

Among these canals or conduits of divine truth we would gladly hope the "Gospel Standard" has a place. May it be our increasing desire that through it pure truth may flow. But what truth? Not truth in a dry, dead, cold, abstract form. It is vital truth, truth impregnated with the power and unction of the Spirit,- truth wet with the dew of heaven, truth to which the Holy Spirit has given bone and sinew, life and breath- that alone is profitable. What this is requires a spiritual eye to see and a spiritual heart to feel.

2. But we need over us also the banner of love. Paul has beautifully combined both in one short sentence- "Speaking the truth in love," (Eph. 4:18)- love to Jesus, love to the people of Jesus, and love to the truth as it is in Jesus. Love in the heart and truth in the lips form a beautiful and harmonious union; and both are needed to blow the silver trumpet of the gospel and bring forth its melodious and joyful sound.

An archer needs a mark, a pilot a compass, a runner a goal, an architect a plan. Without this definite object, the arrow has no aim, the ship no course, the racer no prize, the building no symmetry. What, then, is or should be the object of a Periodical that, like the "Standard," circulates widely among the living family? The same object that Paul set before the Ephesian elders, (Acts 20:28) "to feed the church of

God." "Feed my sheep," "Feed my lambs," was Christ's thrice repeated injunction to Peter. Every preacher, writer, and editor that addresses himself to the church of God should have this set before him as his whole aim and desire.

This we can honestly say is ours, and the only motive which keeps us at our difficult and responsible post. Here we feel our conscience clear. It is not worldly interest, or ambition, or aiming at popularity and influence, but a desire to be instrumental in feeding living souls, that bears us up and keeps us at our post amid many discouragements, from both within and without, best known to ourselves.

Added to which, we are deprived of the valuable aid and advice of our late dear friend and coadjutor, poor M'Kenzie, who, in mercy to himself, but with a heavy loss to the church, has been removed from this valley of tears. Pressed with the difficulties of our post, wearied with its toils, sensible of our own insufficiency, cast so much upon our own judgment that, as regards our editorial task, we may well say, "Of friends and counselors bereft," wishing to do right, but often not knowing how- anxious to avoid what is wrong, but often entangled unawares in it, our path as editor resembles very much the exercised path of a Christian. Let such sympathize with us. Let them consider our difficulties; bear with our infirmities; hold up our hands at a throne of grace, and beg of the Lord to endue us with grace and wisdom needful for our post. We can assure them the bitters much outweigh the sweets. But, through mercy, there are sweets. Our labor is not in vain in the Lord. Again and again have we been on the point of resigning our post, but some instance of a blessing has come to our ears, which has encouraged us to persevere and to hold on, "faint, yet pursuing."

During the year now before us, may the blessing of God accompany what is brought before the church of Christ in our little work.

This blessing, as it has rested upon our pages, so we hope it may rest upon them again; and that will be an ample reward for all the difficulties and discouragements that have hitherto beset our path, and will, if we be faithful, beset it to the end.

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