

New Years' Address, January 1857

by J.C. Philpot

J.C. Philpot's New Year's Address emphasizes the vital importance of unity in the church and the guiding role of the Holy Spirit in overcoming divisions among believers.

Scripture: John 16:13, Romans 15:5, 1 Corinthians 10:31, Ephesians 4:3-5, Philippians 2:3, Colossians 3:14, 1 Peter 3:8, 1 John 4:7

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Church Unity"

Description

J.C. Philpot, in his New Years' Address of January 1857, emphasizes the importance of seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit in all endeavors, especially in preaching and writing, to avoid seeking personal glory and instead focus on spiritual welfare and the glory of God. He highlights the need for ministers and writers to edify, comfort, instruct, and lead the family of God with love and unity, emphasizing the vital union of the church with Christ and with each other. Philpot addresses the tendency to focus on divisions and faults within the church, urging believers to look beyond surface conflicts and strive for genuine spiritual union and affection among the brethren.

Transcript

New Years' Address, January 1857

by J. C. Philpot, editor of the Gospel Standard Magazine

In venturing once more, at the opening of another year, to greet our readers with our Annual Address, we desire to come before them under the gracious teachings and influences of the blessed Spirit- that holy Instructor, that promised Comforter, that unerring Guide into all truth; for if we are but favored with his heavenly dew and divine anointing, we shall not write in our own spirit, or seek our own glory; we shall not arrogate to ourselves any undue authority, presume upon our position, or abuse our privilege; we shall not use flattering words, or seek the passing breath of human applause; but shall, by manifestation of the truth, commend ourselves to their conscience in the sight of God, as seeking their spiritual welfare and the glory of the blessed Redeemer.

To edify, to comfort, to instruct, to lead on, to encourage the family of God, amid all their trials and sorrows, temptations and conflicts, is, or should be the aim of all who, as preachers or writers, stand on the battlements of Zion. If God, then, in his providence and grace, has placed us in a position whence we can, if not with voice, yet with pen, address many, very many of his dear children; if he has inclined any of

their hearts to listen to us as believing that we know and love the truth as it is in Jesus, we are bound, not only by the weight which eternal realities have with our own soul, but by the very readiness of our friends and brethren to receive our words, to seek to the uttermost their spiritual profit.

To be of the least spiritual service to the Church of Christ; to profit the souls of any, though the least and lowest, of God's dear children; to promote in any way a spirit of love and union in the churches of truth specially, and among individual believers generally; to contend for the faith once delivered to the saints earnestly, but affectionately; to testify boldly against all error and all evil; and be a favored instrument of advancing in any measure the kingdom of the Redeemer, the cause of vital, experimental godliness, and the glory of a Triune God- what earthly rank or dignity, what place of worldly power or profit can for a moment be compared with an honor such as this?

And are any of us, friends and brethren, so highly favored and honored? Blessed are our eyes, dear Readers, if they have seen any divine beauty and blessedness in Jesus; blessed are our ears if we have heard his voice with sweetness and power; blessed are your tongues, you servants of God, if, in testifying of his Person and work, love and blood, suitability and preciousness, you have felt the dew of the Spirit dropping from your lips- and blessed are your fingers, you whose pens seek to trace his worth, if what you write is attended with the unction of his grace to contrite, believing hearts. If this is our experience, and this our aim and end, one living bond of union will knit together editor, writers, readers, servants of God, members of Gospel churches, and believers generally among whom our pages come.

The union of the church with Christ her living Head, and the union of all the members of his mystical body with each other in him, are truths so vital and essential that, if lost sight of or not realized, confusion in doctrine, experience, and practice, must be the necessary result. "I am the vine, you are the branches." "Abide in me, and I in you." "We are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones." "That they all may be one- as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be one of us." If these divine truths are hidden or obscured- if these springs of love to Jesus and of love to his dear saints cease to flow into our hearts; if they are dried up by contention, or muddied by error or evil, we at once lose sight not only of our own standing in Christ, but of the place which the church holds in his person and heart. We would then, the Lord enabling, fix our eyes steadily on these two points as guiding stars, as we sail over the waters of time; and we invite our readers to look at them with us in this opening season, that, with the help and blessing of the Lord, they may influence our hearts, lips, and lives, day by day in our walk before God and our walk with his children, from the beginning to the end of the year.

From ignorance or forgetfulness of these grand distinguishing truths of the glorious gospel of the grace of God, many, both preachers and writers, who appear to have some desire for the welfare of Zion, have dwelt, we think, too exclusively, and some almost angrily on the evils which afflict, on the divisions which separate the sheep of Christ; and, in their zeal and warmth against what they consider the low, carnal state of the church, seem well near, if not quite, to lose sight of her covenant standing in the Son of God, her place in his heart, her interest in his blood and righteousness, as well as of his tender care over her, and that what she is she is by his sovereign grace, or by his all-wise permission.

We may look at the church sometimes as we often look at ourselves, seeing in her, as in our own evil hearts, nothing but what is carnal and vile; and with much the same result- unbelief, and hopelessness of any better or brighter days. But, as the more we look at ourselves apart from Christ, the lower we shall sink, so the more we look at the church separate from him, the worse she will appear. To be ever fixing our eyes on the low state of the church, and be ever censuring her for her spots and blemishes, is a spirit

akin to that which sees nothing in individual believers but their faults and infirmities. A parent may keenly grieve that his eldest child is a cripple, or a husband that his wife is afflicted in body or mind; but the love that so deeply feels the affliction will not be ever roughly uncovering these family infirmities to the crude gaze of the common eye; nor is the child less a dear son, or the wife less a beloved partner because of them.

Are we members of the family in heaven and earth, (Eph. 3:15,) that royal family, all of whom are made kings and priests unto God? (Rev. 5:10.) Let us, then, be jealous of the family honor; not stain with contention the family dignity; and, while deeply lamenting family infirmities, still manifest family love, and cleave in affection to every member of the family as equally dear to their covenant Head, and for that reason, dear also to us. Take away the people of God, where are our friends, our companions, our brothers? Do we hope to spend with them an eternity of bliss? Can we not, then, bear with them a little on earth, if we hope to be forever with them in heaven?

To be always dwelling on their infirmities, is to speak a language very different from the language of Christ to his bride, and from all that the blessed Spirit has revealed of the covenant standing of the affianced spouse of Jesus. To view the church separate from Christ, is to look at a headless trunk; to view the members of his mystical body, apart from their union with each other, is to see only scattered limbs. Such unscriptural views must lead to a wrong judgment, and must necessarily make us dwell more upon what the church is in herself, sunk and fallen, than what she is in her covenant Head- all fair, without spot, or wrinkle.

In the same spirit many seem also much disposed to dwell upon the breaches of Zion, the divisions which undoubtedly exist among those who profess the same truths, and to believe in the same blessed Lord. But here, too, they appear to lack the anointing eye-salve, which would show them that as there is more in the blood of Christ to save the individual believer than there is in sin to damn him, so there is more in grace to unite together the members of Christ than there is in strife to separate them.

Whatever be the divisions and dissensions that rend the visible church, which at the best is a mixed multitude; a firm, indissoluble union binds together the living members of Christ's mystical body. Small are their differences compared with their points of agreement. A stranger to the spiritual union which knits the members of Christ to him as their living Head, and to each other in him, sees only the divisions which separate; while he who knows the strength and sweetness of that inward life which gives him union with Christ, feels the power of that grace which gives him also union with his brethren.

Unless we believe that sin is stronger than grace, Belial than Christ, the world than faith, the works of darkness than he who was manifested to destroy them, we have no ground to believe that disunion, division, strife, contention, and discord are stronger than love, union, affection, concord, and peace. To a common eye the ship of the church may seem tossed with every wave, driven out of her course, or pursuing no definite course at all, her sails rent, her masts and ropes broken, her pilot heedless, her officers asleep, and her crew at strife. But the spiritual eye looks beyond all that meets the common gaze, and sees that there is at her helm an almighty and unerring, though invisible, Pilot, who steers her after his own will, who holds the winds in his fists, governs and directs the movements of all on board, overrules all their ways and wills to his own glory, and is bringing her through every storm to her desired haven.

Let us freely acknowledge that there is not always that love and affection, that tenderness, kindness, gentleness, forbearance, meekness, and brotherly interest manifested by the children of God to each

other, which should mark Christ's disciples. Let us confess that among many who really fear God there is often a lack of mutual consideration for each other's feelings, a lack of sympathy with each other's trials and temptations, an inability or an unwillingness to make any allowance for differences of station, education, or natural disposition- all which things are very trying to tender minds, and especially so to those who are disposed to lean too much upon them for help and comfort.

No, let us go a step further, and own that in many instances there is more than a lack of love and affection; that there is actual strife and contention; envy and jealousy in the pulpit, sullenness and bitterness in the pew; members of the same church who will hardly speak to each other in public, and almost cut off each other in private; pride or covetousness in one, love of dress and the world in another, a censorious, quarrelsome spirit in a third, a readiness to take offence and an inability to bear the least reproof in a fourth, a caviling, contentious disposition upon every point or no point at all in a fifth, a hot, fiery temper in a sixth, a self-pitying, self-bemoaning complainingness in a seventh, that always feels or fancies it is ill treated and imposed upon by every one. Allow that all these evils, which, beyond doubt, sadly impair union, exist in many churches; still, we assert and are willing to stand by our assertion, that under all these hindrances there lies a firm bond of union among the family of God; which, as being of grace, and, therefore, eternal and indestructible, as much surpasses in strength and duration all these temporary ills as the sun outshines the mists, or eternity stretches beyond time.

The man who stands on Dover cliffs sees merely the channel that divides England from France. He looks on the wild waste of waters that is spread between, on the rolling waves that sunder them from each other. But, underneath the dividing sea, lies the electric cable, hidden indeed from view, but carrying every moment messages to and fro, and binding our island to the continent more closely than the channel keeps it asunder. No, the very waves themselves are but seeming barriers, for over them speed the ships laden with goodly merchandise, and bearing to each country the productions of the other. So, under all the waters of contention which seem to separate the living family of God, there lies a firm bond of spiritual union; and over the very sea of discord there pass occasional winged prayers for each other's good, and kind, affectionate feelings, not the less deeply felt because not always freely expressed, that tend more to unite than the waves to divide.

Union with Christ, our living Head, and union with his people as living members of his mystical body, stand on the same foundation with the other blessed truths of the everlasting gospel. Do we believe that the everlasting covenant stands ordered in all things and sure; that the work of Christ is a finished work; that his blood cleanses from all sin; that his righteousness perfectly justifies; that he has fulfilled the law, conquered Satan, destroyed death, and gained a full and final victory for all that believe on his name? These are the foundations of our most holy faith, and the ground of all our hope. But if the foundations be destroyed, what shall the righteous do?

Let it, then, not be forgotten, that as sin cannot destroy grace, or the law overthrow the gospel; as Satan cannot triumph over Christ, as death cannot reign over life, and as hell cannot defeat heaven, so all the divisions and dissensions that harass the church cannot break to pieces the bond of union that knits together the family of God.

These divisions are works of the flesh, (1 Cor. 3:3; Gal. 5:20:) the evil fruits that hang on the boughs of our fallen nature; the spawn and filth of that old man which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and all influenced and drawn out by the restless agency of Satan, acting upon our carnal mind. But as there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, as they stand complete in him, without spot or blemish or

any such thing, as all the members of his mystical body must be partakers of his glory, and can no more fall out of his body than he himself can fall from his throne, we must view all these divisions as mere passing things of time, evils, it is true, much to be lamented, and as much to be avoided, but not touching the foundation, nor removing the church from her standing in Christ's person, or Christ's heart.

And even admitting that divisions do exist in the visible church, yet we believe they are very much confined to those who are 'out of the secret'- mere professors of the truth, without divine light or life, liberty or love. Say that a church appears, and, indeed, is much divided. But before we begin to lament and bewail how a church of Christ is so rent and torn, it might be as well to examine a little more closely the actual condition of that church. Perhaps it is very large, made up of members, hastily, almost heedlessly, taken in, when the pulpit was filled by an unsound minister, or an undue influence exerted by worldly deacons; perhaps, even at the present moment, more respect is paid to money and respectability than grace; a spirit of contention is fostered from the pulpit; great laxity of discipline and order prevails; evils are allowed to grow instead of being nipped in the bud; loose-living characters are tolerated; doctrine is more contended for than experience and the power of godliness; and a general deadness and stupor evidently pervade the whole.

Now, if such a church be rent and torn with divisions, it will not do to point to it as a specimen of a gospel church and say, "See how the children of God are divided," when, perhaps, not half are children of God at all, or, if children, sunk so low into carnality and death as to give little evidence of the life of God being in them. Instead of looking at the contentious spirits who fight and wrangle in the van, fix your eyes upon those who, out of the din and strife, occupy the rear. Search and look for the broken in heart, the quiet in the land, the sick and afflicted, the tried and tempted, the doubting and fearing, the simple and sincere, the slow to talk but quick to act, the tender in conscience, the exercised and distressed, the warm-hearted and affectionate, the prayerful and watchful, the humble and spiritually minded. Put aside the fighting men and women, the talkers, the brawlers, the boasters, the contentious, the self-conceited, and the ignorant; and see if you cannot, when you have blown away the foam, get at something more palatable and drinkable; when you have swept away the chaff, and empty ears of corn; if you cannot find some precious grain below.

It is among the mourners in Zion, the weighted with a heavy cross, the plagued all the day long and chastened every morning; it is among the true lovers of Jesus, who have some personal experience of his love and grace; it is among those who know the sweetness of communion with Christ, and love the brethren with a pure heart fervently, that you must look for union. These do tenderly and affectionately cleave to each other.

Say that the leaders of the church are at variance; minister and deacons jarring; the word little blessed either to call or deliver- the main supporters of the cause worldly and proud, keeping the poorer members at a distance, and little disposed to words of kindness or deeds of liberality towards them; beneath all this sad state of things, in a church sunk even so low as this, there may still be a deep, close, and blessed union among those unknown and unnoticed sheep of the flock, whose souls are alive to God, and who are favored with his teaching and blessing.

It is then neither true nor fair to represent the real church of God, that which alone deserves the name, as torn with divisions, when these contentions and quarrels are much confined to dead churches, sunk into worldliness and error, or to those members of living churches who are either destitute of grace, or sadly departed from it. Sure we are that no one living under the influence of grace can be quarrelsome or

contentious. That holy Dove, who, as a Spirit of peace and love broods over contrite hearts, never rests upon that bosom which indulges in constant war amid strife, and in which allowed enmity rankles against any of the dear saints of God.

We do not believe it then, to be a fact that God's real children, at least those who are daily living under the influences of the blessed Spirit, are divided, or are ever jangling and wrangling with each other. It is true that unkind, angry feelings may at times, with all other evils, work in their carnal mind, and may occasionally, to their grief and sorrow, manifest themselves in hasty words or cold looks; but these are passing clouds- for the same grace which subdues their other sins restrains also this beginning of strife, and that promise is fulfilled in them with this, as with other iniquities, "Sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under the law, but under grace."

We have known during our pilgrimage many dear saints of God, some now before the throne, and others still in the wilderness, in different parts of England, and we would desire to leave it on record when God calls us away from this mortal scene that we have received little else but the greatest kindness and affection from them, that with those with whom we have been brought into closer connection we have lived in undeviating love and union, and that except for a few passing moments the noise of strife has not been heard in our gates. And we may add, that as a Christian, as a minister, and as an editor, the desire of our soul is to seek and pursue peace, love, and union with all who fear God and love the Lord Jesus Christ, and to avoid as much as possible contention and strife.

True it is that strife in churches as well as among individuals cannot always be avoided, for there are contentious spirits, who, if permitted, would set any church on fire- salamanders who live in the flame, birds that revel in a storm. Mark and avoid all such, you saints of God. (Rom. 16:17.) If in the church, treat them kindly and courteously, but bring no fuel to their fire, (Prov. 26:20, 21,) nor make them bosom friends; if out of the church, do all you can that they do not get in. (Prov. 22:24.)

But enough, and perhaps more than enough, has been said by us on this subject. Other points, besides that of Christian union, call for some notice from us in our annual appeal to our readers' hearts and consciences.

If we are, as we profess to be, followers of the Lamb, three things, we believe, will be with us primary objects of spiritual desire-

1. The glory of God.
2. The edification of our own souls.
3. The good of our brethren.

If we lack the first, our eye cannot be single, and, therefore, the light that is in us must be darkness; if we lack the second, eternal realities can rest with but little weight and power upon our conscience; if we lack the third, pure love to the brethren cannot dwell in our breast. In opening, then, and dwelling upon these three points a little more fully, we may, perhaps not unprofitably occupy the rest of our Address.

1. The glory of God. Neither preachers, writers, or editors can expect God's blessing to rest upon their labors, if the glory of God is not their main object. Yet how little of this singleness of eye, this simplicity and godly sincerity, is seen in many who call themselves ministers of Christ and servants of God. And how painfully evident the contrary often is in them, to such as are possessed of any measure of spiritual

discernment.

Pride, self conceit, and self exaltation, are both the chief temptations, and the main besetting sins, of those who occupy any public position in the church. Therefore, where these sins are not mortified by the Spirit, and subdued by his grace; instead of being, as they should be, the humblest of men; they are, with rare exceptions, the proudest.

O did we but see what we really and truly are; had we a penetrating, abiding view of the depths of the fall, in which we as sinners are so fearfully sunk; did we carry about with us a daily, hourly sense of what our heart is capable of, if left by God to itself, and what but for grace we could say or do the very next moment; were we continually sighing and mourning over our ignorance, unbelief, ingratitude, shortcomings and miserable unfruitfulness; did we bear in constant remembrance our slips, falls, and grievous backslidings; and had we, with all this, a believing sight of the holiness and purity of God, of the sufferings and sorrows of his dear Son in the days of his flesh, and what it cost him to redeem us from the lowest hell, we would be, we must be clothed with humility, and would, under feelings of the deepest self abasement, take the lowest place among the family of God, as the chief of sinners, and less than the least of all saints. This should be the feeling of every child of God.

But if, in his infinite condescension, the Lord has made any of us his servants, and has qualified and commissioned any of us to preach the gospel to his people, what special, what additional self abasement does this call for! If we did not know the human heart, and how it takes advantage of God's own gifts, and even of his very grace to lift itself up against him, we would at once say, "A proud minister of Jesus Christ, a self-conceited servant of God! A man to preach humbling grace, and yet be proud of his way of preaching it! The thing is impossible! It is a self contradiction! Such a man is a monster, not a Christian, still less a Christian minister." Truly he is a monster; and such the Lord makes some of his dear servants feel themselves to be when this accursed pride lifts itself up in their hearts, and they see in the light, of his countenance what a hideous guest is lodged there. But until this pride be in some measure crucified, until we hate it, and hate ourselves for it, the glory of God will not be our main object, and we shall lie under the weight of that cutting reproof, "How can you believe which receive honor one of another, and seek not the honor that comes from God only?"

Readers, friends, brother ministers, may we all with one mind and heart seek the glory of God with a single eye, and be ever willing to be nothing that Christ may be all in all. Let the world, profane and professing, seek their own honor, their own pleasure, and their own profit. Let us who profess ourselves to be "a peculiar people, zealous of good works," seek the honor of that dear Lord, who, as we trust, has called us by his grace, brought us near to himself, and is employing us in some measure in his service.

2. The spiritual profit of our own soul, the blessing of the Lord, as a personal, experimental reality in our own conscience, the dew of his favor resting on our branch, and our own growth in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ- how weighty, how essential should these blessings be felt to be by us. Surely our own soul's salvation and consolation should be our main concern. What are our farms, our shops, our business, our property, our families, our friends, our very bodies and lives themselves, compared with the worth and value of our immortal souls? If it be well with our souls, all is well; if ill with them, all is ill.

And if any of our readers are called to minister to the souls of others, with what power or earnestness, we may well say with what face can we press eternal realities on the conscience of others, when they have so

little weight with ourselves, or bid them keep their vineyards clean, when we are so neglecting our own? If our soul is like the garden of the sluggard, overrun with thorns and briars, never weeded or watered, the fences broken down, and the wild boar of the woods ravaging it, and we are idly looking on, careless what the crop is, or whether there is any crop at all, we shall prove sorry gardeners of the church of Christ- that "garden enclosed," into which she invites her beloved to come that he may eat his pleasant fruits.

Now, without a spirit of prayer, reading, meditation, seclusion from the world, self searching and communing with one's own heart; without visitations of the Lord's presence, and the operations and influences of the blessed Spirit, we can never be fruitful in every good word and work. "Abide in me and I in you; as the branch cannot bear fruit of itself except it abide in the vine, no more can you except you abide in me." Associating with worldly people, gossiping and visiting from house to house, lounging their precious time away in empty talk; not giving themselves to reading, meditation, or study, but spending hour after hour in utter idleness of mind; neither tried, nor exercised, nor crying to the Lord, nor even thinking about eternal things at all, much less enjoying the Lord's presence- if such be their state week after week, can we wonder if the occupiers of the pulpit are rather a burden than a benefit to the occupiers of the pew; and if, instead of being honored and resorted to, they gradually become despised and forsaken? "By much slothfulness the building decays- and through idleness of the hands the house drops through." When we look around and see decaying buildings and dropping houses, well may we say, "Slothfulness and idleness have done this!"

3. An earnest desire for the good of the brethren will flourish or fade much in proportion to the weight and power with which eternal realities press on our own soul. In this desire for the welfare of Zion, this love to the people of God for Christ's sake, this pure, unselfish, affectionate solicitude that the blessing of God might rest upon them, does the grace of the gospel shine forth so conspicuously, and forms such a noble contrast with the spirit of the world. The spirit of the world says, "All for me, none for you- all I get I keep- all you get I grudge." But the noble, unselfish principle of grace says, "Dear brother, I want you to be blessed as well and as much as myself- for the more the Lord gives me, the more I want him to give you. We are partners, not rivals- friends and brethren, not antagonists and foes!"

In nothing does divine grace more display its heavenly origin than in seeking the good of the brethren. Ministers seeking the spiritual welfare of their flock- members of churches desiring the blessing of God upon those connected with them in church fellowship- believers generally laboring in prayer and supplication for the power of God to rest upon his servants, his churches, his people- how befitting the gospel is this, how consistent with our profession, how following the example of the blessed Redeemer,

"Who spared no pains, declined no load,

Resolved to buy us with his blood.

We wish to say little of ourselves, lest we fall into the same spirit of self exaltation that we have been condemning- but this much, we trust, we may say, that in editing this periodical, we desire to seek the good of the brethren among whom it comes. In what falls from our pen, as well as in selecting what is sent by our correspondents for insertion, our main aim and object are to profit the Lord's people, to avoid all questions that may minister to contention and strife; and while we contend for the truth in the power and experience of it in the heart, to do so in a spirit of tenderness, affection, and love.

In this spirit have we desired to write what we now lay before our readers, and if any of them think we have, in some expressions, borne rather hard on existing evils, let them forgive us this wrong, and

attribute it to our desire to be faithful, as well as affectionate, and not, under a show of seeming gentleness, smooth over manifest inconsistencies. "Brethren, pray for us," is the best request and the most fitting close that can be offered to those of our readers who know and love the truth, by their affectionate friend and servant.

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