Revelation - Commentaries by Frederick William Grant

Keeping Christ's Word, Keeping Christ's Word: Part 1 (3:8)

“Thou hast kept my word” is the first matter of distinct commendation as to Philadelphia which we can lay hold of as shoving what is in the Lord's mind as to them; and I do not ignore in this that the people thus commended are, first of all, Philadelphians. All the more striking on this account is what He commends in them. It is of great import and worthy of fullest emphasis that, while it is to a company of people who are characterized by “love of brethren” He is speaking, His praise is not that “thou hast loved the brethren.” This does not even form part of it. His thoughts seem elsewhere: the commendation is, “Thou hast kept my Word, and not denied my Name.” Again, “thou hast kept the word of my patience.” Yet in the promise to the overcomer He does not omit what has reference to the name they bear: for on the “pillar,” which he who has here but “a little strength” finally becomes, is inscribed not only “the name of my God,” and “my new name,” but also “the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem.” This is the home of the “brethren,” and has, I believe, distinct reference to “Philadelphian” character. Yet, I repeat, in His commendation of them, He says nothing of this. Is it not right to ask ourselves the reason of what is at first sight so strange? Now the title under which the Lord addresses them fully accounts for it. They are Philadelphians whom he is addressing: it is thus plain that if people have not this character He has nothing here to say to them. It is to those He is speaking whose hearts would seek, if it were possible, the recovery of this “church,” which should have been like “a city set on a hill,” or “a light upon a candlestick,” but has dropped, alas, into the invisibility which men ascribe to it, as if it were the necessary and normal state. Yes, it is to these that the Lord is speaking; and the first words He utters remind these, the seekers of church visibility, of His own essential holiness and truth: “These things saith he that is holy, he that is true.” How much need will they have to remember this! Think of the church that is scattered, and which we would so desire to see restored: what are we to do for its restoration? Shall we proclaim to them all, that it is the will of God that His people should be together? Shall we spread the Lord's table, free from all sectarian names and terms of communion, and fling wide open our doors, and invite all that truly love the Lord to come together? For in fact the “one loaf” upon the table does bear witness that we are ''one bread, one body"; and there is no other body that faith can own, but the “body of Christ.” Why should we not then do this?

I answer: “Tell them by all means that the Lord has welcome for all His own: that is right; but tell them it is the 'Holy and True' who welcomes, and that He cannot give up His nature.” How has the true church become the invisible church? Has it been without sin on her part? is it her misfortune, and not her fault? Take the guidance of these seven epistles in the book of Revelation, and trace the descent from the loss of first love in Ephesus to the sufferance of the woman Jezebel in Thyatira, and on through dead Sardis to the present time: can we just ignore the past, and simply, as if nothing had happened, begin again? What would it be but mere hardness of heart to say so?

Suppose your invitation of “all Christians” accepted, and that in the place in which you give out your notice, you are able really to assemble all the members of Christ at the table of the Lord—bring them together with their jarring views, their various states of soul, their entanglements with the world, their evil associations—how far do you suppose, would the Lord's table answer to the character implied in its being the table of the Lord? How far would He be indeed owned and honored in your thus coming together? With the causes of all the scattering not searched out and judged, what would your gathering be but a defiance of the holy discipline by which the church was scattered? what would it be but another Babel?

Can you think that visible unity is so dear to Christ, so that He should desire it apart from true cleansing and fellowship in the truth?

F. W. G.

(To be continued)

Keeping Christ's Word, Keeping Christ's Word: Part 2 (3:8)

Surely this address to Philadelphia is completely in opposition—in designed opposition—to all such thoughts. Why should it be that here we have not the Lord presenting Himself as One who “has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars” —plenitude of spiritual power, and His people in His keeping—but as “the Holy and True"? Strange indeed it may seem that dead Sardis should be thus reminded, and not Philadelphia! But to Philadelphia such an utterance would seem as if it meant no less than the recovery of the church by their means. To Sardis it is manifestly exhortation instead of assurance. Philadelphia, even as Philadelphia, needs rather the warning that they must not mistake, in any sanguine interpretation of present blessing, what the days are in which they live, and that they must guard against such a conception of practical unity as would set aside all the value of unity. How perfect in its place is every word of God!

Let us notice then, again, what the Lord commends. “Thou hast a little power—hast kept my word and not denied my name—hast kept the word of my patience.” Every one must remark these “My” 's, which continue to the end of the address. They show that the true Philadelphian clings to Christ Himself, to His word, His person, His strangership in the present, His certainty of the future. His work is to obey Christ, hold fast the truth as to Him, be waiting for Him. The work of gathering may, so to speak, look after itself, if this be done. We are to be united by the Center, and not merely or mainly by the circumference. And thus alone can there be anything that shall have fruit for God or commendation from Him who here speaks to His people.

It is easy to be seen then how the Philadelphian character may be lost by a false conception of it. “Brotherly love” is a precious thing when it is really what it purports to be; but see where the apostle, in his exhortation, puts it. “Add to your faith,” he says, “virtue; and to virtue

knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly love.” If this be the order (and as order he gives it), how many things are needed to precede its proper development! No doubt all these things are in the Christian in some sense at the beginning, just as petals, stamens, and other parts of the flower, are wrapped up in the bud before it opens. But there is a relation of these to one another shown in the order of appearance; and that is what is important here. No “love of brethren” —no Philadelphia—is true, save as these things are found in it. For it all, Christ must be both sap and sun; and this is what the word in Revelation emphasizes.

Philadelphian gathering is to Christ, then; and it is Christ who gathers. A common faith, a common joy, a common occupation, find their issue in that which is the outward sign of the spiritual bond that unites us. Who that knows what gathering at the Lord's table means would suppose that communion there could be other than hindered by the presence of what was not communion, any more than harmony could be increased by discord? Of want of intelligence I am not speaking: there is no discord in the presence of a babe; but an unexercised conscience, a heart unreceptive of divine things—which means receptive of how much else!—how must the power of the Spirit be hindered by them! The Scripture rule for times of declension is— “with those that call upon the Lord out of a pure heart” (2 Timothy 2:22); and the way to find these is not to advertise for them, but to “follow righteousness, faith, love, peace “; walking on the road in which they are walking.

It results, I am confident, that if we really seek the blessing of souls, we shall guard with more carefulness, not with less, the entrance into fellowship. We shall see that it be “holy and true,” as He is with whom all fellowship is first of all to be. Careless reception is the cause of abundant trouble and may be of general decline. “Evil communications corrupt good manners.” When trial comes, those that have never been firm of purpose, never, perhaps, convinced of the divine warrant for the position they have taken, scatter and flee from it with reckless haste, carrying with them, wherever they go, an evil report of what they have turned their backs upon. Such persons are, generally speaking, outside of any hope of recovery, and often develop into the bitter enemies of the truth.

We are incurring a great responsibility if we press or encourage people to take a position for which they are not ready; in which, therefore, they act without faith. It is just in principle what the apostle warns us of, the danger of leading others without an exercised conscience, to imitate a faith that is not their own. “Whatsoever is not of faith is sin.” No wonder there are wrecks all along the track of a movement for which this is so constantly required, and in which so many are endeavoring to walk without it. Ought we not to remember that it is the Holy and the True that is seeking fellowship with us? and that nothing but what answers to this character, can abide the test that will surely come?

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