

The Appropriateness of Warnings

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When compared with his letters to the Corinthians, the Galatians, or to Timothy and Titus, Paul's letter to the Philippians is couched in very mild terms. The Philippian Church was apparently free of such major problems as those he addressed in the aforementioned epistles. Paul was thus able to devote more of his letter to Philippi to commendation and instruction, rather than to correction.

However, there is one explosion of forceful terminology in Philippians—a stringent, explicit warning: “Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the concision” (3:2). My purpose is not to provide an exposition of this verse nor to identify those to whom it originally applied. Rather, I want to emphasize the fact that, even in an otherwise mildly worded letter of encouragement, the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to caution those brethren. Warnings about spiritual dangers posed by false teachers and their doctrines are appropriate or the Bible would not be so full of them, as every Bible student knows it is. Please consider the following thoughts concerning some of the “whys” and “hows” of these necessary warnings:

- Such warnings are needed as a preventive measure. Preventive medicine is the best kind and is usually the least painful. While no righteous person rejoices in the news of a brother, a school, or an entire congregation that has abandoned the Truth, it is better to be warned of such than to be led astray by them through ignorance and/or innocence. Appropriate and timely warnings of men gone astray and of what they are teaching (whether within or without) are a necessary preventive measure so that brethren can thus be fortified. By sounding forth warnings of the errors being circulated we can fortify many brethren and prepare them to withstand the errors. Paul did exactly this in his three-fold “Beware of the ...” message in the foregoing passage.
- Warnings are also needed to cure problems that have already developed from false teaching. Paul did not get the warnings about the evil workers to the Galatians in time to prevent grievous problems from occurring. However, he did not hesitate to sound forth the warnings of the follies and consequences of succumbing to the false teachers, although they had already done their dirty work. Problems caused by false doctrines can never be cured by ignoring them. The sources of the heresies, as well as the errors themselves, must be exposed by due warnings concerning them if any of those ensnared by them are to be rescued.
- When warnings are given, they must be in such terms that those who hear may recognize and identify the source of the danger. Otherwise, the warnings are of little worth. Paul used great plainness in the warnings of our text, identifying the “dogs” and the “evil workers” as the Judaizing teachers. He was even more specific when he warned Timothy to shun Hymenaeus and Philetus because their doctrine (that the resurrection was already past) was erroneous

and cancerous and had already corrupted some (2 Tim. 2:16-18). We are commanded to mark those who cause division through false doctrine so as to identify them and warn others of them (Rom. 16:17). We should always take great care to avoid slandering or falsely accusing others, nor should anyone want to defame another person or institution unnecessarily for any reason. However, when souls are at stake, we are derelict in our duty if we do not sound the warnings plainly, including calling the names of men, institutions, or congregations where necessary. May all our warnings be issued from a broken heart full of love for the sinner, but even more for the Lord, His Word, and His people.

We must emphasize the need to hear and act upon the warnings. We live in a strange time in church history when even the elect have come under the influence of so much human philosophy that they do not want to hear the warnings upon which the salvation of their very souls depends. Because of such shallow and perverted thinking, many brethren are critical of preachers, churches, or publications that are “issue-oriented,” as they are wont to say. Some members of the church are hypersensitive to any exposure or identity of a false teacher or his doctrine, regardless of how destructive he or it may be. Others will come right out and tell you that they do not want to hear about any “problems” in the church, as if ignorance of them would cause them to disappear. Ira Y. Rice, Jr., was right: “You just cannot warn some brethren”!

The Scriptural admonitions are frequent, so that we get reliable spiritual warnings and can act upon them, thereby avoiding many dangers. The Lord wrote seven letters to as many churches, issuing many warnings designed to save their souls (Rev. 2-3). At the conclusion of each letter He urged, “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches” (Rev. 2:7, et al.). Clearly, He intended for them not only to hear, but also to heed and act upon the warnings He issued. Some preachers take pride in not keeping up with “the issues,” as if to do so were somehow an unspiritual or vain activity. Too few elderships in my acquaintance are careful to stay abreast of the many winds of false doctrine that are blowing ever more strongly and of the men that are blowing them. Preachers and elders who are wise will stay informed themselves and will keep their respective congregations informed. Not all will listen with appreciation, but all need to hear the warnings anyway. Paul wrote the warnings in Philippians (and in many other passages) because he knew brethren (then and in every age) needed to hear them for their own spiritual safety.

[**Note:** I prepared this article for, and it was published in The Gospel Journal, of which I was editor at the time. The article above is basically an excerpt from my MS, “Living the Life of Dogs (Philippians 3:1-2),” the entirety of which appears on our “Manuscripts” page of this Website.]

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