

Excitement in Revivals - Letter Six

by Charles Finney

Charles Finney argues that true excitement in revivals comes from clear manifestations of Divine truth, not from external means or unintelligent excitement.

Scripture: Daniel 10:8

Topics: "Revival", "Discernment in Spiritual Experiences"

Description

Charles Finney discusses the nature of excitement in religious revivals, emphasizing that true excitement arises from clear manifestations of Divine truth rather than from emotional or sensational appeals. He illustrates that genuine experiences of God's presence can lead to physical prostration, as seen in biblical figures like Daniel and Saul of Tarsus, but these moments are characterized by calmness and clarity of mind rather than chaotic emotionalism. Finney warns against confusing this authentic spiritual excitement with the boisterous and often unintelligent excitement generated by loud preaching or emotional manipulation. He encourages discernment in evaluating such experiences, noting that true excitement will lead to a deeper understanding of God's truth and a transformed character. Ultimately, he advocates for a revival that is rooted in the Holy Spirit's revelation rather than mere emotional fervor.

Transcript

I have by no means done with the subject of excitement as connected with revivals of religion. In every age of the Church, cases have occurred in which persons have had such clear manifestations of Divine truth as to prostrate their physical strength entirely. This appears to have been the case with Daniel. He fainted and was unable to stand. Saul of Tarsus seems to have been overwhelmed and prostrated under the blaze of Divine glory that surrounded him. I have met with many cases where the physical powers were entirely prostrated by a clear apprehension of the infinitely great and weighty truths of religion.

With respect to these cases I remark:

1. That they are not cases of that objectionable excitement of which I spoke in my former letter. For in these cases, the intelligence does not appear to be stultified and confused, but to be full of light. The mind seems not to be conscious of any unusual excitement of its own sensibility; but, on the contrary, seems to itself to be calm, and its state seems peculiar only because truth is seen with unusual clearness.

Manifestly there is no such effervescence of the sensibility as produces tears, or any of the usual manifestations of an excited imagination, or deeply moved feelings. There is not that gush of feeling which

distracts the thoughts; but the mind sees truth, unveiled, and in such relations as really to take away all bodily strength, while the mind looks in upon the unveiled glories of the Godhead. The veil seems to be removed from the mind, and truth is seen much as we must suppose it to be when the spirit is disembodied. No wonder this should overpower the body.

Now such cases have often stumbled those who have witnessed them; and yet, so far as I have had opportunity to inquire into their subsequent history, I have been persuaded that, in general, these were sound cases of conversion. A few may possibly be counterfeits; but I do not recollect any clearly marked case of this kind in which it was not afterwards manifest that the love of God had been deeply shed abroad in the heart, the will greatly subdued, and the whole character greatly and most desirably modified.

Now, I again remark that I do not feel at liberty to object to these cases of excitement, if they may be so called. Whatever excitement attends them seems to result necessarily from the clear manifestations which God makes to the soul. This excitement, instead of being boisterous, unintelligent, and enthusiastic, like that alluded to in my former letter, seems to be similar to that which we may suppose exists among the departed spirits of the just.

Indeed, this seems to me a just principle: We need fear no kind or degree of excitement which is produced simply by perceived truth, and is consistent with the healthful operation of the intellectual powers. Whatever exceeds this, must be disastrous.

In general, those cases of bodily prostration of which I have spoken occur without the apparent intervention of any external means adapted to produce such a result. So far as I have observed, they occur when the soul is shut up to God. In the case of Daniel, of Saul, of William Tennant, and others, there were no human instrumentalities, or measures, or exciting appeals to the imagination or sensibility; but a simple revelation of God to the soul by the Holy Ghost.

Now the excitement produced in this manner seems to be of a very different kind from that produced by very boisterous, vociferous preaching, exhortation or prayer; or by those very exciting appeals to fear which are often made by zealous exhorters or preachers. Exciting measures are often used, and very exciting illustrations are employed, which agitate and strain the nervous system until the sensibility seems to gush forth like a flood of water, and for the time completely overwhelm and drown the intelligence.

But the excitement produced when the Holy Ghost reveals God to the soul is totally different from this. It is not only consistent with the clearest and most enlarged perceptions of the intelligence, but directly promotes and produces such perceptions. Indeed, it promotes the free and unembarrassed action of both the intelligence and the will.

This is the kind of excitement that we need. It is that which the Holy Spirit always produces. It is not an excitement of sympathy; not a spasm, or explosion of the nervous sensibility; but is a calm, deep, sacred flow of the soul in view of the clear, infinitely important, and impressive truths of God.

It requires, often, no little discrimination to distinguish between an effervescence of the sensibility produced by loud and exciting appeals--by corresponding measures, on the one hand; and, on the other, that calm, but deep, and sometimes over-powering flow of soul which is produced by the Spirit of God, revealing Jesus to the soul. I have sometimes feared that these different kinds of excitement are confounded with each other, and consequently, by one class of persons, all alike rejected and denounced; and by another class, wholly defended. Now it appears to me of great importance to distinguish in these

cases between things that differ.

When I see cases of extraordinary excitement, I have learned to inquire, as calmly and affectionately as I can, into the views of truth taken by the mind at the time. If the individual readily and spontaneously gives such reasons as naturally account for this excitement, I can then judge of its character. If it really originates in clear views presented by the Holy Ghost, of the character of God and of the great truths of His government, the mind will be full of these truths, and will spontaneously give them off whenever there is ability to utter them. It will be seen that there is a remarkably clear view of truth, and, where power of speech is left, a remarkable facility in communicating it. As a general thing, I do not fear the excitement in these cases.

But where the attention seems to be occupied with one's own feelings, and when they can give no intelligible reason for feeling as they do, very little confidence can be placed in their state. I have frequently seen cases when the excitement was very great, and almost overwhelming; yet the subject of it, upon the closest inquiry, could give no intelligent account of any perceptions of truth which the mind had. The soul seemed to be moved to its deepest foundations; but not by clear exhibitions of truth, or by manifestations of God to the soul. Hence the mind did not seem to be acting intelligently. I have learned to be afraid of this, and to place little or no confidence in professed conversions under such circumstances. I have observed that the subjects of these excitements will, after a season, look upon themselves as having been infatuated and swept away by a tornado of unintelligent excitement.

ILLUSTRATION--A FACT

As an illustration of what I would say upon this subject, I will relate a fact that once occurred under my own observation. I attended a camp meeting in the State of New York which had been in progress two or three days before my arrival. I heard the preachers and attended the exercises through most of that day, and there appeared to be very little--indeed no visible--excitement. After several sermons had been preached, and after much exhortation, prayer, and singing, I observed several of the leading men to be whispering to each other for some time, as if in profound deliberation; after which, one of them, a man of athletic frame and stentorian voice, came down from the stand, and pressed his way along into the midst of a company of women who were sitting in front of the stand, and then began to clap his hands, and halloo at the top of his voice: "Power! Power! Power!" Soon another, and another, set in, till there was a general shouting and clapping of hands, followed presently by the shrieking of women, and resulting, after a little time, in the falling of several of them from their seats. Then it was proclaimed that the power of God was revealed from Heaven. After pushing this excitement to a most extraordinary extent, the minister who began it, and those who united with him and had thus succeeded, as they supposed, in bringing down the power of God upon the congregation, retired from the scene of confusion, manifestly much gratified at the result.

This scene, and some others of a similar character, have often occurred to my mind. I can not but regard such movements as calculated to promote anything else than true religion. In the getting up of this excitement there was not a word of truth communicated; there was no prayer or exhortation,--nothing but a most vociferous shouting of "Power! Power! Power!" accompanied by an almost deafening clapping of hands. I believe this to have been an extraordinary case, and that probably but few cases occur which are so highly objectionable. But things often occur in revivals which seem to beget an excitement but little more intelligent than this.

Such appeals are made to the imagination and to certain departments of the sensibility as completely to throw the action of the intellect into the shade. So far as such efforts to promote revivals are made, they are undoubtedly highly disastrous, and should be entirely discouraged.

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