

June 23, 1841 to the Editor of the Oberlin Evangelist

by Charles Finney

Charles Finney warns against the dangers of an article in a commentary that undermines the divine inspiration of the Bible and promotes infidelity.

Scripture: Psalm 119:160, Proverbs 30:5, Isaiah 40:8, Matthew 5:18, John 10:35, Romans 15:4, 1 Thessalonians 2:13, 2 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 4:12, 2 Peter 1:20-21

Topics: "Inspiration of Scripture", "Defense of Faith"

Description

Charles Finney expresses his deep concern over an article in the 'Supplement' of the Comprehensive Commentary that undermines the divine inspiration of the Bible, particularly the historical accounts in the New Testament. He argues that if the narratives of Christ's life are deemed uninspired, it casts doubt on the doctrinal teachings as well, leading to a spirit of infidelity among believers, especially the youth. Finney emphasizes that the supposed contradictions among the Gospel writers actually support their credibility, as they indicate no collusion. He urges ministers to address this issue within their congregations to prevent the spread of such dangerous ideas. Finney's call to action highlights the importance of defending the integrity of Scripture against misleading interpretations.

Transcript

Dear Brother;

I have recently been both surprised and grieved, to find in the "Supplement" of the Comprehensive Commentary, (a book that possesses many excellencies,) a commentary designed particularly for the use of Sabbath Schools, an article on the divine inspiration of the Bible, which appears to me to be of a most dangerous tendency. It seems to me, that ministers, and all classes of Christians, should have their attention called particularly to the infidel character and tendency of that article. The ground taken by the writer is, that the historical parts, especially of the New Testament, are not inspired, not even with the inspiration of such a degree of divine superintendence as to exclude error and contradiction from them. He takes the ground, that there are palpable inconsistencies and flat contradictions between the writers of the gospels, and points out several instances, it appears to me, very much with the art and spirit of infidelity, which he affirms to be irreconcilable contradictions. The ground taken by him is, that the doctrinal parts of the New Testament are inspired, but that the historical parts, or the mere narrative, are uninspired.

Now upon this piece I feel constrained to say the following things;

1. The piece is eminently calculated to diffuse among the young, and indeed among all classes of persons who have not thoroughly examined the subject, a spirit of infidelity and contempt for the Bible. For who will not see at first blush, that if the writers were mistaken in recording the acts of Christ, there is equal reason to believe, they were mistaken in recording the doctrines of Christ? Who does not know, that the record of the doctrines preached by Christ, is mere narrative and history, just as much as the journeyings, conversations, and acts of Christ? To say that the narrative of the gospel is uninspired, with the inspiration of superintendency, is the same thing as to say, that the whole gospel is uninspired. For, what are the gospels, but narratives or histories of Christ's birth, life, preaching, conversations, miracles, death, resurrection, ascension, &c.? Now what an inadmissible distinction is attempted, when it is affirmed that the didactic or doctrinal portions of the gospel are inspired, while the narrative is uninspired! Only convince the world and the Church, that the narrative of the gospel is uninspired--that there are irreconcilable contradictions between the writers, and who will, or who can consistently believe, that they may not have committed errors in stating the doctrines of the gospel?

That this is a dangerous article, I am convinced from the fact, that my attention was first called to it by a young man who had read it, and seemed ready to adopt the views of the writer. The article, to be sure, when examined by one used to such investigations, is easily seen to be a weak production. But to those who are not acquainted with the principles upon which such questions are to be settled, the article in question would be, as I have said, of most dangerous tendency.

2. The cases brought forward by this writer, supposed by him to be irreconcilable contradictions, are specimens of just that class of apparent discrepancies which forbid the idea of collusion among the witnesses. When such apparent discrepancies as these, exist among witnesses in courts of justice, and it is found, on a thorough examination, that they can be reconciled with each other, such apparent discrepancies are considered as greatly corroborative of the truth, and add much to the credibility of the witnesses, upon the ground that they forbid the supposition of collusion among them. Now nothing is to be regarded as a contradiction, except that which cannot by any possibility be reconciled. And there is no serious difficulty in any of the cases adduced by the writer, in showing that the account of each of the Evangelists may be strictly true, one omitting some circumstances mentioned by others.

It is, I suppose, unnecessary for me to take up those cases and show how their statements can be easily reconciled with each other, as this has so often been done in answer to the objections of infidels. It is passing strange to me, that such an article as that should have found a place in such a work, under the superintendence of such an editor. And I must say, that my surprise and grief, that such a thing should have occurred, has been very great. I would not have noticed the article, but from the deep conviction pressed upon my mind, that unless the attention of the Church and of ministers was called to this point, the book, in the hands of Sabbath School teachers, would, unobserved, diffuse a spirit of infidelity among the rising generation. It is amazing, that the writer of that article should not have ingenuity enough, if he had never seen the subject examined, to discover some way in which those writers could be easily enough reconciled with each other, and their apparent discrepancies satisfactorily explained. In all such cases we are bound to show, only, that they may be consistent with each other.

In conversation with a brother minister, but a few days since, in reference to the article in question, he remarked that he knew the writer and understood the dangerous tendency of the article, and that on this account he had never owned and would not have the book in his library.

I do not mention this to injure the credit of the book; for as I have said, it is, in many respects, a valuable work, and on this very account, this striking defect in it should be pointed out. I beseech ministers of the gospel to call the attention of their congregations, where this commentary, with this Supplement, is in their hands, to the false, and dangerous character of the article in question. It may be found in Part III. pp. 113-16, of that work.

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Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/charles-finney/june-23-1841-to-the-editor-of-the-oberlin-evangelist/>

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