

Letters on Revival--No. 15.

by Charles Finney

Charles Finney argues that the decline of revivals is due to a lack of wholesome food for churches, leading to a legal spirit and ineffective efforts to convert sinners.

Scripture: Matthew 5:48, John 15:5, Romans 6:1-2, 2 Corinthians 7:1, Galatians 5:13-14, Ephesians 4:1-3, 1 Thessalonians 4:3, Hebrews 12:14, 1 Peter 1:16, 2 Peter 3:18

Topics: "Holiness", "Revival"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the decline of revivals, emphasizing that churches have been starved of the true gospel while being urged to work for conversions. He argues that ministers have focused too much on the impenitent and neglected to nourish the faithful with the fullness of Christ, leading to a legalistic spirit and ineffective evangelism. Finney warns against the fear of antinomianism that has caused many to lower the standard of holiness, resulting in backsliding within the church. He calls for a return to preaching entire sanctification and the expectation of holiness in believers' lives to revitalize the church's spiritual health. Finney urges ministers to adopt a higher standard of holiness to prevent further decline and promote genuine revivals.

Transcript

TO ALL THE FRIENDS AND ESPECIALLY ALL THE MINISTERS OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST:

Dear Brethren:

Another cause of the decline of revivals, in my estimation is, that a right course has not been pursued with the churches. In some instances they have been urged to labor and visit, and put forth active efforts for the conversion of sinners, while they have had very little wholesome food to live upon. Much labor has been demanded with too spare a diet. They have heard very little else than mere legal preaching. Ministers have been preaching almost exclusively to the impenitent, and perhaps for months have given the church scarcely one wholesome meal of the real gospel. If Christians are to labor for God and souls they must be fed with a plenty of the bread that cometh down from heaven--they must be made to know and feel where their great strength lies--must have Christ, in all his offices, and relations, and fullness, frequently presented to them. If this course is not pursued, their own piety will not only greatly suffer, but they will come into a legal spirit and all their efforts for the conversion of sinners will be only bustle and legality; and in this state they may encompass sea and land to make proselytes, and fill the church with spurious converts.

If I am not entirely mistaken, this has been, to an alarming extent, the fact in revivals that have prevailed within the last few years. Christians have had so little of the Gospel that they have become legal, self-righteous, blustering, carnal, mechanical, unbelieving; and their efforts have made converts like themselves; which has brought revivals into great disrepute.

Again, ministers by preaching too exclusively to the impenitent, and dwelling so little on the marrow and fatness and fulness of the gospel, have greatly suffered in their own piety--have themselves become, in many instances, legal, hard-hearted, and censorious. In this state they cannot promote true revivals of religion. Not living themselves on Christ, not dwelling in God and God in them they are in no state to feed the church or promote true and thorough revivals of religion.

Again, there has been so great a fear of antinomianism among ministers, for the last few years, that I fear they have greatly neglected to hold up the real fulness and perfection of a present gospel-salvation. Many of them have been misled entirely by false statements that have been made in respect to antinomianism, in the public journals which they take and read.

I have been astonished, as I have been abroad, to find how much misinformation was afloat in regard to the real views which we have here entertained and inculcate, and the results of exhibiting our views to this and other churches. This misinformation has led a great many ministers to feel it necessary to guard their people strongly against error in this direction. And in exposing what they have supposed to be the errors of Perfectionists and Sanctificationists, they have practically greatly lowered the standard of gospel holiness in their own churches. I mean this has been the practical result. Preaching against the doctrine of entire sanctification in this life, and holding out the idea, as many have, that Christians are expected to sin as long as they live,--the practical result has been a perpetual backsliding on the part of their churches. Prejudice has been created against the doctrine of sanctification in the church; and, if I am not mistaken, ministers have greatly suffered in their own piety, in consequence of this course. And a consequent and corresponding descent in spirituality has been manifest in their churches.

I am fully persuaded that my brethren in the ministry will find it indispensable to insist on entire holiness of heart and life, as a practical attainment in this world, or they can never sustain a healthy piety in their churches.

My dear brethren, you may try it as long as you will; but if you take any lower ground than this, your churches will backslide until you yourselves will be appalled by the result. I am perfectly satisfied, from long experience, that there is no other way but to lodge the deep impression in the churches, that they are not only required, but expected to "cleanse themselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." All pleading for sin, or anything that has the practical tendency of denying the practicability of attaining this state in this life, is the greatest and most ruinous error that can be inculcated on the churches. And said an English writer not long since--"No error is so destructive and to be so greatly denounced, as that Christians are expected to sin during this life."

My beloved brethren, in what I now say I am not endeavoring to win you to my opinion; but I wish to fix your attention and the attention of the church on the fact; and to have you witness the results of inculcating any lower practical standard than that which I have named.

The fact is, the churches are going rapidly away from God for want of the true bread of life; and because the ministry have, to such an alarming extent, been guarding their churches more against the doctrine of sanctification than they have against sin.

I beseech my brethren to adopt a different course, and urge the church right up to holy-living, and let them know that they are expected to obey the law, and the gospel of God. Try it my brethren, and you will find it to be life from the dead in your churches. Do not be afraid of antinomian perfectionism. It is not to me at all wonderful that at first, the true doctrine of sanctification and antinomianism should be confounded in many minds, and that the defenders of the one should be confounded with the defenders of the other. But, beloved brethren, is it not time for ministers to understand as clear as sun-light the distinction between the two, and no longer be prejudiced or alarmed themselves, and no longer prejudice and alarm the church, by confounding things that so entirely differ?

I hope in what I now say, I shall not arouse the prejudice of my brethren so that they will not further hear me in what I have to say, in regard to the errors that have prevailed in the promotion of revivals of religion; and in regard to the causes that have operated to make them so few and far-between, and of so superficial a character.

My dear brethren, my heart is full of this subject and I have a great deal to say. I beg of you to hear me patiently, and inquire honestly whether there has not been a great error in the direction that I have just named.

Your Brother,

C.G. FINNEY

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