

# Letters on Revival--No. 5.

by Charles Finney

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*The true idea of religion is love and benevolence, and preachers should set forth the gospel in its burning power to promote true religion.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 22:37, 1 John 4:8

**Topics:** "True Religion", "Love and Benevolence"

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## Description

Charles Finney addresses the misconceptions surrounding true religion, emphasizing that many believers equate their faith with mere feelings or passive states of mind rather than understanding it as active love and benevolence. He argues that true religion is fundamentally about love for God and others, and warns against the dangers of selfishness, which he believes is often overlooked. Finney stresses the importance of clear teaching that not only defines the philosophical nature of faith and love but also compels individuals to act on these truths. He calls for a revival of genuine understanding and practice of Christian virtues, urging ministers to present the gospel powerfully to inspire true conversions. Ultimately, he highlights that true religion is not just an intellectual understanding but an active commitment to love and serve God and others.

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## Transcript

To All The Friends And Especially All The Ministers Of Our Lord Jesus Christ:

Dear Brethren:

Another error in the promotion of revivals is a want of such discriminations in the instructions given, as thoroughly to develop the true idea of religion in the mind. I have been astonished and greatly pained, to find how few professors of religion seem ever to have had the true idea of the christian religion distinctly in their minds. Great multitudes suppose it to consist merely in certain feelings and emotions, and mere passive states of mind. Consequently when they speak of their religion, they speak of their feelings. I feel thus and so. They seem to suppose that religion consists almost if not altogether in certain states of the sensibility, in which strictly speaking there can be no religion at all.

Multitudes make their religion consist in desires as distinct from choice and action of the will, in which certainly there can be no religion, if we use the term desire as I now do, in the sense of a passive as opposed to a voluntary state of mind. Others have supposed religion to consist in a merely legal state, in which the mind is lashed up by conscience to a reluctant performance of what it calls duty. Indeed there is

almost every form of error in respect to what really constitutes true religion.

Men seem to have no just idea of the nature of sin or of holiness. Selfishness is often spoken of by many professors of religion as if it were hardly to be considered sinful, and if sinful at all, only one form of sin. When I have had occasion to preach in different places, on the subject of selfishness, I have been surprised to find that great numbers of professors of religion have been struck with the idea as if it were new, that selfishness is entirely inconsistent with a religious state of mind.

They seem never to have dreamed that all selfishness is inconsistent with religion. In preaching in one of our cities I was endeavoring to develop the true idea of the christian religion and demonstrate that it consisted alone in love, or in disinterested, perfect and universal benevolence. The idea that religion consisted in benevolence, seemed to be entirely new to great multitudes of professors of religion. And on one occasion when this subject had been presented, and turned over and over until the congregation understood it, a deacon of one of the churches remarked to me as I came out of the pulpit, that he did not believe there were ten real christians in the city, and a lady said she did not know of but one person in the church to which she belonged who had the religion of benevolence.

All the rest, as far as she knew them, appeared to be under the dominion of selfishness. If I am not mistaken, there certainly is a great want of just and thorough discrimination of this subject in most of the congregations in this land, and especially is this manifest in seasons of revival. This is the very time to bring out and press these discriminations until the true idea of religion stands out in full development. Unless this is done, almost endless mistakes will be fallen into by professed converts.

In a future letter I may point out some of these mistakes in detail; but here suffice it to say that it must be of essential importance that persons should understand what religion is, and that it is all summed up in one word, love; and that every form of true religion is only a modification of love or disinterested benevolence; that whatever does not proceed from love is not virtue or true religion. The enquirers should be instructed that to be converted is to love God with all their hearts.

To repent is to turn away from selfishness, and give their hearts to God; in short that the first and only thing which they are required to do is to love the Lord with all their hearts and their neighbor as themselves, and that until they do love, whatever else they do they are not religious, and no farther than they are actuated by supreme love to God and equal love to man are they truly religious in any case whatever. Too much pains cannot be taken to correct the errors into which men are constantly falling on this subject.

But while it is of vital importance to make these distinctions, let it be forever remembered that these discriminations themselves will never convert men to true religion. And here is another error into which if I mistake not some have fallen. They have spent their whole strength in making these distinctions and showing the philosophical nature of faith, of benevolence, or repentance and of the different Christian graces. They have perhaps made just discriminations and urged them nobly and efficiently until they have really developed correct ideas in the mind, but they have fallen short after all of promoting true religion, on account of one fundamental defect.

For instance, when they have made just discriminations, and developed the true idea of faith, they have stopped short and suffered the mind to please itself with the idea, while the heart does not go forth to the realization of the idea. In other words they have failed to present the objects of faith, and to hold them before the mind until the mind believes. They philosophized, perhaps correctly about the nature of faith,

but they have not so forcibly arrayed before the mind the truths to be believed as to beget faith.

They have made men understand what faith is, but have not succeeded in persuading them to exercise faith. They have been satisfied with developing the idea, without pressing the truth to be believed, and holding the objects of faith before the mind, until the will yields and commits itself to them in the exercise of faith. The same has been true of every other Christian grace. They have developed the true idea of benevolence, but have not pressed those considerations that tend to make the mind benevolent, until it has broken loose from its selfishness and wholly committed itself to the exercise of benevolence.

It is certainly an important distinction which I have before my mind. A man may understand the philosophical nature of benevolence without being benevolent. If we satisfy ourselves with developing the true idea of benevolence and do not so present God, Christ, the love of Christ, the great interests of the universe, and all the moving considerations which tend to make the mind benevolent, although we may develop the true idea of religion, we may fail of securing true religion.

Some as I have said have greatly erred in not making just discriminations in respect to the nature of true religion, and converts have taken up with something else, supposing it to be the religion of Christ. Others have made just discriminations until they have developed the idea, and converts have mistaken the idea of true religion as it lies developed in the intelligence for religion itself. Seeing what it is so clearly, they think they have it. They understand it and do not realize that they do not exercise it.

Now both these things need to be thoroughly attended to, in order to secure sound conversions. Especially is this true since a false philosophy has engendered false ideas of religion in so many minds.

What is true of faith and love, is true of repentance, humility, meekness, and every grace. Not only should its philosophical nature be defined, until its true idea is developed in the intelligence, but those truths that tend to produce it should be pressed, and turned over and explained and held up before the mind, until the heart goes forth in the exercise of these virtues. Let it be understood that the philosophical explanations which develop the idea of these virtues have no tendency to beget them. It is only a lucid and forcible exhibition of appropriate truths, such as makes it appeal to the heart, that can ever be instrumental in begetting true religion. And here I would say that if either class of truths is to be omitted, the discriminations of which I have spoken can be omitted with the greatest safety, for if we hold forth the objects of faith and love, and strongly present and press these truths, they tend to beget repentance, faith, love, humility, meekness &c. We may expect in multitudes of instances to beget these forms of virtue in their purity without the subject of them having an idea of their philosophical nature. By presenting Christ for instance, a soul may be led to believe in him, without once thinking of the philosophical nature of true faith. By holding forth the character of God, true love may be begotten in the mind without the philosophical nature of love being at all understood by the mind, and this may be true of every grace, so that it is far better to hold forth those truths that tend to beget these graces, and omit the discriminations that would develop their philosophical ideal, than to make discriminations, and leave out of view, or slightly exhibit the truths that are indispensable to engage the obedience of the heart. The discriminations of which I have spoken that develop the true idea are mostly important to cut up the false hopes of old professors and spurious converts, and to prevent enquirers from falling into error. And I would beseech my brethren who are engaged in promoting revivals of religion, to remember and carry into practice this important consideration, that the gospel is to be set forth in all its burning and overcoming power, as the thing to be believed, until the Christian graces are brought into exercise, and that occasionally in the course of revival preaching, the preacher should bring forth these fundamental discriminations. They should develop the

true idea of religion and prevent false hopes.

Your brother,

C.G. FINNEY

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