

Letters on Revivals--No. 2.

by Charles Finney

Charles Finney laments the decline of deep conviction and breaking up of the heart in modern revivals, attributing it to a lack of emphasis on the depravity of the heart and the necessity of divine influence.

Scripture: Psalm 51:17, Jeremiah 4:3, John 16:8, Acts 1:8, Romans 3:23, 2 Corinthians 7:10, Galatians 5:22-23, Ephesians 2:8-9, James 4:10, 1 Peter 5:6

Topics: "Conviction of Sin", "Revival"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the decline in the depth and effectiveness of modern revivals compared to those of the past, noting a lack of deep conviction of sin and humility among converts. He emphasizes that recent revivals often fail to probe the heart's depravity and guilt, leading to superficial conversions that lack the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. Finney calls for ministers to focus on exposing the true nature of sin and the necessity of divine influence in the revival process. He expresses concern that many ministers are hesitant to pursue revivals due to the disappointing outcomes of recent ones. Ultimately, he urges a return to the foundational principles that characterized earlier, more impactful revivals.

Transcript

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

Dear Brethren:

I have observed, and multitudes of others also I find have observed, that for the last ten years, revivals of religion have been gradually becoming more and more superficial. All the phenomena which they exhibit testify to this as a general fact. There is very much less deep conviction of sin and deep breaking up of the heart; much less depth of humility and much less strength in all the graces exhibited by converts in late revivals, than in the converts from the revivals which occurred about 1830 and '31 and for some time previous. I have observed, as have others also, that revivals are of much shorter duration, and that a reaction comes on much more suddenly and disastrously than formerly. Also that fewer of the converts make stable and efficient Christians; that those who so persevere, appear to much less advantage, and exhibit, as a general thing much less of the Spirit of Christ than in former revivals; have not so much of the spirit of prayer, and are not so modest and humble. In short, all the phenomena of the more recent revivals, judging from my own experience and observation and from the testimony of other witnesses, show that they have, at least very extensively, taken on a much less desirable type than formerly. Christians are much less spiritual in revivals, much less prevalent in prayer, not so deeply humbled and

quicken and thoroughly baptize with the Holy Ghost as they were formerly. These statements I do not suppose to be universally applicable to modern revivals, but I do believe them to be applicable generally. As revivals now exist, I believe ministers are not nearly as desirous of seeing them in their congregations as they formerly were, nor have they good reason to be. Those ministers who have witnessed none but the later revivals of which I speak, are almost afraid of revivals. They have seen the disastrous results of modern revivals so frequently, that they honestly entertain the doubt whether they are upon the whole desirable. Those, as I have good reason to know, who saw the revivals which occurred ten or twenty years ago, greatly prefer revivals of that type. They are distressed with the superficiality of many recent revivals. I make this as a general, not a universal remark, and state only my own opinion of public sentiment. I have often heard it said both among ministers and private Christians, We long to see the days return when we shall have such revivals as we saw years ago. I have been anxiously watching the progress of things in this direction, and enquiring as carefully and prayerfully as I could into the causes which are operating to produce these results. If I am not misinformed, and have not greatly misapprehended the case, the following will be found among them.

1. There is much less probing of the heart by a deep and thorough exhibition of human depravity, than was formerly the case. It has been of late a common remark, and a brother who has long labored as an evangelist made the same remark, that for the last few years there has been little or no opposition made by impenitent sinners to revivals. Now it is not because the carnal mind is not still enmity against God, but I greatly fear it is for the want of thoroughly turning up to the light the deep foundations of this enmity in their hearts. The unutterable depravity of the human heart has not, I fear, been laid open to the very bottom as it formerly was. A few sermons on the subject of moral depravity are generally preached in every revival, but I fear this is by no means the great theme of the preaching so much and so long as it ought to be, in order thoroughly to break up the fallow ground of the sinner's and the professor's heart. From my own experience and observation, as well as from the word of God, I am fully convinced that the character of revivals depends very much upon the stress that is laid upon the depravity of the heart. Its pride, enmity, windings, deceitfulness, and every thing else that is hateful to God should be exposed in the light of his perfect law.

2. I fear that stress enough is not laid upon the horrible guilt of this depravity. Pains enough is not taken by a series of pointed and cutting discourses, to show the sinner the utter inexcuseableness, the unutterable wickedness and guilt of his base heart. No revival can be thorough until sinners and backsliders are so searched and humbled that they cannot hold up their heads. It is a settled point with me, that while backsliders and sinners can come to an anxious meeting and hold up their head and look you and others in the face without blushing and confusion, the work of searching is by no means performed, and they are in no state to be thoroughly broken down and converted to God. I wish to call the attention of my brethren especially to this fact. When sinners and backsliders are really convicted by the Holy Ghost, they are greatly ashamed of themselves. Until they manifest deep shame, it should be known that the probe is not used sufficiently, and they do not see themselves as they ought. When I go into a meeting of inquiry and look over the multitudes, I see them with heads up, looking at me and at each other, I have learned to understand what work I have to do. Instead of pressing them immediately to come to Christ, I must go to work to convict them of sin. Generally by looking over the room, a minister can easily tell, not only who are convicted and who are not, but who are so deeply convicted as to be prepared to receive Christ. Some are looking around and manifest no shame at all; others can not look you in the face and yet can hold up their heads; others still cannot hold up their heads and yet are silent; others by their sobbing, and breathing, and agonizing, reveal at once the fact that the sword of the Spirit has wounded them to their very heart.

Now I have learned that a revival never does take on a desirable and wholesome type any farther than the preaching and means are so directed, and so efficient as to produce that kind of genuine and deep conviction which breaks the sinner and the backslider right down, and makes him unutterably ashamed and confounded before the Lord, until he is not only stripped of every excuse, but driven to go all lengths in justifying God and condemning himself.

3. I have thought that at least in a great many instances, stress enough has not been laid upon the necessity of divine influence upon the hearts of Christians and of sinners. I am confident that I have sometimes erred in this respect myself. In order to rout sinners and backsliders from their self-justifying pleas and refuges, I have laid, and I doubt not that others also have laid too much stress upon the natural ability of sinners to the neglect of showing them the nature and extent of their dependence upon the grace of God and the influence of his Spirit. This has grieved the Spirit of God. His work not being honored by being made sufficiently prominent, and not being able to get the glory to himself, of his own work, he has withheld his influences. In the mean time multitudes have been greatly excited by the means used to promote an excitement, and have obtained hopes, without ever knowing the necessity of the presence and powerful agency of the Holy Ghost. It hardly need be said that such hopes are better thrown away than kept. It were strange indeed if one could lead a Christian life upon the foundation of an experience in which the Holy Ghost is not recognized as having any thing to do.

Your brother,

C.G. FINNEY

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