

Letters on Revivals--No. 8

by Charles Finney

Charles Finney discusses the importance of distinguishing between two kinds of excitement in revivals, one produced by clear manifestations of divine truth and the other by loud and exciting appeals.

Scripture: Daniel 10:8

Topics: "Spiritual Discernment", "True Revival"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the nature of excitement in religious revivals, emphasizing that true spiritual experiences often lead to physical prostration due to overwhelming clarity of divine truth, as seen in biblical figures like Daniel and Saul. He distinguishes between genuine excitement from the Holy Spirit, which promotes clear understanding and calmness, and the chaotic, emotional excitement often generated by loud preaching or sensationalism. Finney warns against confusing these two types of excitement, advocating for discernment in recognizing the work of the Holy Spirit in individuals' lives. He shares a personal observation of a camp meeting where superficial excitement overshadowed genuine truth, underscoring the need for a focus on clear manifestations of God's truth rather than mere emotional displays.

Transcript

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

Dear Brethren:

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 last 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 enquire 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 Wm. 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 overpowering flow of soul which is produced by the Spirit of God revealing Jesus to the soul. I have sometimes feared that these different kind 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 enquire 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 however great it may be.

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 enquiry 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 cannot but regard such movements as calculated to promote any thing 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.

Your Brother,

C.G. FINNEY.

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