

Necessity and Nature of Divine Teaching

by Charles Finney

The necessity and nature of divine teaching in regeneration and sanctification, and the role of the Holy Spirit in this process.

Scripture: Philippians 2:12

Topics: "Divine Influence", "Cooperation with the Holy Spirit"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the necessity and nature of divine teaching, arguing that human effort alone cannot achieve holiness without the influence of the Holy Spirit. He explains that selfishness blinds the mind to spiritual truths, necessitating an external divine influence to redirect attention towards God. Finney outlines the characteristics of this divine influence, which must be spiritual, moral, enlightening, and capable of engaging the will. He asserts that the Holy Spirit actively works in believers to guide them towards truth and holiness, highlighting the importance of cooperation between divine and human agency in the process of salvation and sanctification.

Transcript

'Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God which worketh in you, both to will and to do of his good pleasure.'--Phil. 2:12, 13.

'Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.'--Heb. 13:20, 21.

'Howbeit, when He, the Spirit of truth, is come, He will guide you into all truth, for He shall not speak of Himself, but whatsoever He shall hear, that shall He speak: and he will show you things to come. He shall glorify me; for He shall receive of mine, and shall show it unto you.'--John 16:13, 14.

'But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, He shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.'--John 14:26.

I. NECESSITY OF A DIVINE INFLUENCE IN REGENERATION AND SANCTIFICATION.

II. THE KIND OF INFLUENCE NEEDED.

III. THIS KIND OF INFLUENCE IS ACTUALLY EMPLOYED.

IV. THE CONSISTENCY AND CO-OPERATION OF DIVINE AND HUMAN AGENCY IN THE WORK.

I. Necessity of a divine influence in regeneration and sanctification.

1. A selfish mind will, as a matter of fact, never recover itself to holiness. This will appear evident from the nature of selfishness. Selfishness consists in the committal of the will to self-gratification, or the indulgence of the constitutional propensities.

2. Now observe that selfishness is the supreme choice of the mind. It is choosing self-gratification over and above all other and higher interests. It is making self-gratification the ultimate end--the thing to which every other thing is made, by the mind, to sustain the relation of means, and which is therefore chosen for its own sake.

3. I have shown, in a former lecture, that choice necessitates outward actions--the attention, and through it the thoughts, emotions, and desires. The choice of an end, necessitates the use of means for its accomplishment, and gives direction to the action of all the mental powers. As choice directs the intelligence, it, of course, in a great measure, decides the motives that shall be addressed to the mind through it. As desire and feeling are dependent, to a great extent, upon the intelligence, and as that is directed by choice, it follows that choice, to a very great extent, decides the motives that shall address the mind through the sensibility. Thus all the actions and states of mind are necessarily controlled by choice. Hence, while a given choice exists, it of course shuts the mind, to a great degree from the influence of all objects inconsistent with itself, and gives the attention to all those things which accord with it. A man, for instance, who gives himself up to making money, will naturally so direct his attention to things connected with that object, as to be but very little influenced by any thing else.

4. Choice is necessarily an act of the will, and is, therefore, free; but the freedom of the will consists in the power, not to choose without motives, but to choose one way or another, in view of any given motive--to choose or refuse any object presented to it. But no mind can choose an object which it does not perceive. Hence, whatever prevents from perceiving, of course, prevents from choosing--whatever prevents from apprehending a motive, or object of choice, renders it impossible for the mind to choose that object.

5. If it be an existing choice, which diverts the mind from one class of objects or motives, and directs it into another channel, although the mind is entirely free, yet failing to perceive objects from which it is thus diverted, it does not possess within itself the means that will ever secure its choosing in accordance with them. I do not mean to say that an existing choice, whether selfish or holy, absolutely prevents the mind from perceiving any motives to a choice contrary to itself; for, as I showed in my lecture on the Christian warfare, our sensibility will always lay us open to temptation, however holy we may become. But a holy choice naturally shuts out motives hostile to itself as far as possible, and keeps its attention upon the opposite class. So, on the contrary, a selfish choice cannot utterly hush the voice of reason, and shut out all motives to holiness, but it naturally does so as far as it can; and, as a matter of fact, we find selfish minds so much open to motives to selfishness, and so diverted from all others, that selfish motives have the entire influence over them. Unless, therefore, some agency external to itself is employed to engage the attention, and cause the mind to apprehend and consider another class of motives, than those to which it has committed itself, the case is hopeless. While it is thus taken up and engrossed, it will not perceive objects of a different character so as to come under their influence, but will be drifted along to the depths of hell. All its choices will be between different forms of selfishness. It has committed itself to the

stream, and notwithstanding the spontaneous remonstrances of reason, it will float onward. Persons may even hear daily the best of instruction, and the most solemn warnings, and yet so divert their attention from it, as to feel its power but little if any. Thus Judas was always thinking of money, so that even the preaching of Christ did him no good. So, multitudes of persons have so employed themselves in selfish pursuits that although they hear, every Sabbath, the most pungent and solemn truths, they do not seem to be in the least degree affected by them, but even sit in the house of God plotting schemes of selfish enterprize, and thus, by the action of the laws of their own minds, rush on to certain destruction, unless arrested by some foreign influence.

6. Another point to be considered is, that spiritual truths are not addressed to us through the senses, and since sensual objects are constantly appealing to the propensities, and calling off the attention, a spiritual influence is constantly needed to keep up the attention to the great truths of religion. It is therefore certain, that even converted persons need a constant divine influence to keep them from relapsing--to hold up to their view constantly the motives to holiness.

II. Show the kind of influence needed.

1. It needs to be spiritual in opposition to material. It needs a spirit to gain access to the mind, and draw it off from the material objects around us.

2. The influence necessary, is moral as opposed to physical. It must be something which can influence to choice, the will is not like a steel spring which can be bent by force; it must be influenced by motives. Physical power cannot move will; it moves freely.

3. It must be an enlightening influence so as to supplant and put away the darkness of the mind. Not only does the sinner move in an envelope of darkness which must be driven away, but there needs to be a constant blaze of light poured upon the Christian, to detect his deficiencies and lead him forward. When a Christian has backslidden, and become selfish, what but the light of heaven, can remove his darkness and delusion?

4. It needs to be sufficiently wise and powerful to arrest and keep the attention. It is manifest that an influence is needed, not merely to argue and gain the assent of the mind, but so to convince, as to gain and keep the attention. Nothing is more common than for persons to assent to arguments without really perceiving their true force, and an influence is therefore needed, that can actually show the truth to the mind, quicken the conscience, and develop the sensibility in its favor. Where any truth is presented to the mind, it gives increased power to the truth if a corresponding feeling can be aroused. An agency is therefore needed that knows perfectly the laws and whole history of our minds, and just how to approach them in order to make them feel--and to possess them of the true knowledge of God. Who has not been struck with the difficulty of making sinners understand the true nature of religion? Even professors of religion stumble at the true character of God. I was astonished at this, on hearing of certain objections made to my sermon about putting on Christ. You recollect I said in my sermon, that we ought, in all circumstances, and in every calling, to inquire how Christ would do were He in our place--even were He a physician, a mechanic, or even a street-sweeper. "What!" say certain ones, "compare Jesus Christ to a street-sweeper, or a washer-woman! It is blasphemous! I can't go to hear him again." Now, do let me ask, what such persons know about religion? Why if they had seen Him washing his disciple's feet, they would at once have declared He could not be the Christ! What! suppose any necessary and honest labor below Christ! I wonder if they do not think it was below Him to be a carpenter. Some Infidels maintain that it is

altogether below God to take any notice of this world. That is their notion about God. They think it would lower his dignity to concern Himself about it. Shame! So professors of religion do not know the nature of true religion. If they did, they would never indulge their foolish prejudices against people of color, and on a thousand other points on which they should be as honest and solemn as the Judgment. They need an agency to teach them the truth about God and his service.

5.* This agent must be able to reveal to the mind such truths as are calculated to inspire confidence and love. Otherwise all his testimony will only confirm their selfishness, and leave them stil[ly] 'carnal, sold under sin.' He must also possess immeasurable patience. Men often get out of patience, and even parents with their own children. What patience then is necessary in order to influence men to obey the will of God. Moreover, He must also be Omnipresent, and characterized by vast benevolence. Just think what benevolence is required. The Atonement is made, but sinners heed it not, and here something additional must be done to remove the blindness, and overcome the sottishness of man--to lead him to accept its offers and obey its precepts.

III. This kind of influence is actually employed.

1. The Holy Spirit strives with every generation, and with every individual altogether gratuitously. He receives no pay for it. Oh how great must be his benevolence! His influence has all the characteristics above specified. It is spiritual, John 16:7-8. 'Nevertheless I tell you the truth; it is expedient for you that I go away; for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send Him unto you. And when He is come, He will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.'

It is moral, as opposed to physical. He works in us to will and to do, by motives, by truth. See the texts. Also, James 1:18. 'Of his own will begat He us, with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.' 1 Pet. 1:23. 'Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever.' Jn. 17:17. 'Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.' All these passages, not only assert that the Spirit exerts an influence, but plainly teach that it is moral in kind. The Atonement of Christ, furnishes the motives by which to effect the work, both of converting sinners, and sanctifying saints. If it should occur to you, that there were persons converted before the Atonement was made, I answer, that it was through that class of truths which the Atonement presents, and they were shadowed forth in the Jewish ritual, and revealed in prophecy. It certainly was not by merely legal influences. Law only drives a sinner to despair. What! a selfish sinner brought to love by the threatenings of the law? Impossible! Conscious of his selfishness and guilt, he looks up, and sees God clothed in terrors and frowns, with the red thunderbolt in his hand to dash him to hell. Has this a tendency to induce in him a disinterested submission to, and love for God? No, but directly the contrary. It condenses his selfishness into fiercer opposition. But how different the manifestation of love in the Atonement. It is, as Paul says--Romans 12:20. 'If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink; for in so doing, thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.' If you meet your enemy, you may scold and threaten to shoot him; and while you upbraid him, he may blush; while you threaten, he may tremble; but he will not love. We know the influence of such a course, by our own consciousness. But if we manifest benevolence towards him, we heap coals of fire on his head. We change him into a friend. So, when the sinner sees God all love instead of frowns, with what a magic power it wilts him all down! While he sees only the signs of wrath, he stands as unbending as a marble pillar, and if he weeps, his tears are the tears of a rock; but as the Spirit takes and shows him the things of Christ, he is instantly all unbraced--his stubborn knees bow, his heart breaks, and he lies all along, subdued at the foot of the cross. Such is the work of the Spirit.

IV. The consistency and co-operation of divine and human agency in the work.

1. We are conscious of being active in every step of the work. The Spirit does not first convert men and they then become active. We are conscious that we are perfectly active all along, every step of the way; just as much so as in business, or any thing else in the world.

2. The Spirit is not employed to suspend, or set aside our own voluntary agency, but to secure the right direction and use of it. He could not make us holy, and save us without our own agency, for holiness consists in right voluntary action. To talk of being made holy passively, is to talk stark nonsense. The thing is impossible.

3. Without his agency, though perfectly free and responsible, yet being selfish, and voluntarily shutting ourselves up to the consideration and influence of motives to selfishness, we should do nothing to recover ourselves out of the snare of the devil. He works in us to will, and to do of course, since willing necessitates doing. He addresses Himself to the work of influencing the will, because that is just the place to begin. All the actions we perform which are good, are truly ours, but the agent who persuades us to them, is the Holy Spirit. He wisely charms our wills into conformity to the will of God.

REMARKS.

1. In all this work, we are conscious only of the influence of truth, as the Spirit presents not Himself to our view, but the truth. We are conscious of perceiving, and acting, and feeling, in view of the truth, but of nothing else.

2. See the error of those who are expecting and waiting for a physical change, and a physical sanctification. A great multitude of impenitent persons are waiting to be passively converted, and professors of religion encourage them in it. They are also waiting to be sanctified in a similar way. Now, prevalent as this notion is, and extensive as has been its sway in the Church, I do not hesitate to say that there is nothing more absurd, and unsupported by the Bible. It is a superstitious notion. As though the divine influence were like an electric shock, or some such influence. It is to overlook the very nature of religion, and of the Spirit's influences, and has ruined thousands, and, I may say, millions of souls.

3. Whenever we find our attention drawn to the consideration of spiritual things, we may know that the Spirit is at work with us, and conduct ourselves accordingly. If a sinner would know whether the Spirit strives with him the way is easy. Does truth seem to have a stronger influence than formerly? Do solemn influences come in upon the mind from abroad? It must be the work of the Spirit. Walk softly lest you grieve Him away.

4. The truths of the Bible never influence us inwardly, only as they are revealed to us individually, and set home upon us by the Spirit. I have feared a great many overlook this. They read the Bible as they would a catechism or lesson, and often wholly overlook its real import. They must have the Spirit to make it plain to them. They never seem to have a passage brought home to them by the Spirit. But to read the Bible so, does them no good, but infinite hurt--the mind hardens under it, and this is the reason so many read it without finding its spirit. The truth is, it is not enough that it has been revealed to Isaiah, and Paul--it was never meant to be a rule of life as a mere outward thing; you might as well have it on tables of stone; it is a mere savor of death unto death, unless it is so revealed to you as to be spirit and life. You must be taught what its meaning is by the Spirit of God. What Christian does not know this to be true in his own consciousness? You have sometimes read a hundred passages and they seemed to do you no good.

Nay, it seemed as though you could find nothing to suit you in a whole volume of promises. But, by and by, God makes one come home to you like electric fire. It sets you all in a glow and becomes food for many days. It serves also as a key to many other of the deep things of God. We observe the same thing in the biographies of distinguished Christians. How often we hear them talk about the Spirit giving them the meaning of a passage. They had read it before a hundred times, and it seemed to possess no special meaning--they had only an outside view of it. But suddenly they saw in it a profoundness of meaning that they had never conceived of; it is as light from heaven.

5. We have power to resist the Spirit. The will has the command of the attention, and if, when the Spirit presents truth the will averts the attention, and continues to do so, the Spirit might present it forever, and it would do no good. Hence we are commanded not 'to resist'--not 'to grieve' the Holy Spirit, and to 'work out our salvation with fear and trembling for it is God that worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure.'

6. Objects of sense, habits, the world, the flesh and [S]satan, render divine influence constantly indispensable.

7. See the vast patience, pains-taking, compassion, perseverance and love of the Holy Spirit. I shall never forget the impression made on me by the thought that came into my mind once when reflecting on the work of the Spirit. I asked myself how long it had been since I was converted and what the Spirit had done for me during all that time; and I could testify that, during all that time, through all my provocations, He had continued to strive, to lead and guide me, faithful till that moment, in his work of love. Oh, how could I ever grieve him again!

8. How greatly our ingratitude must grieve Him. I have been afraid Christians did not think enough of their indebtedness to the Spirit. They often seem to regard the Savior with great complacency, the Father with less, and the Spirit with none at all, or but little; whereas all the persons of the Trinity, are equally interested and engaged for our salvation, and have equal claims to our gratitude. The Father gave the Son, the Son made the Atonement, and the Spirit secures our acceptance of it.

9. See what Rom. 5:6, means. 'For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.' But for the Atonement, the Holy Spirit could not sanctify us for want of motives adapted to slay our selfishness. But the Atonement gives Him that power over us.

10. God is often employed in influencing the decisions of our will, when we are not at all aware of it. How often men find themselves having arrived at thoughts and made up decisions, for which they cannot account to save their lives. This is often the case with even impenitent sinners. Perhaps some of you can remember instances of decisions which even saved your life. I can remember such instances in my own history. It would be extremely interesting to gather up facts on this point. We should, doubtless find many wonderful things coming to light, respecting the intervention of the Spirit.

11. The Spirit is always in his people, but often his inward, gentle teachings and whisperings, are drowned in the din of outward objects. He loves to lead the mind in his own strait way, by breathing, gently, his influences upon the soul, but often times the mind is in such great excitement and bustle that it cannot hear Him speaking in his own inward sanctuary.

12. The mind is often diverted from his teachings by the teachings of those who are not under his influence. I have often heard people say that they had a sweet time in their closet on the Sabbath morn,

but they have gone to meeting and by the time it was through, have found it all dissipated. The teachings they heard there conflicted with those of the Spirit of God, and they grieved Him by giving it their attention.

13. Excitement, measures, and talk often quench his influences. When persons give themselves up to much talk, there is little inward communion; and when there is so much that is outward in means to promote religion, the mind grows poor and lean, and takes up with the flummery and show of outside religion.

14. See the importance of having the inward ear open, and of understanding that the senses are not to be confounded with the outward organs of sense. The ear is not a sense but the organ of the sense of hearing. It is no more to be confounded with the sense, than is the trumpet you hold to the ear. So the eye, the bodily organ of sense, is no more the sense itself, than are your spectacles. The glasses do not see, nor does the eye, but the sense of sight sees through them. Hence, you can keep your senses awake and active while you dispense with the outward organs. Why do you shut your eyes when you pray? To prevent your attention from being caught away from God. In like manner you can close your outward ear, so that you may hear God speak. Did it never seem to you as if you actually heard Him speak?--sometimes a Bible passage? I recollect a time, a number of years ago, when the Lord showed me his glory. So sensible was his presence that I never suspected, at the time, that I did not see his glory with bodily eyes. Soon after I was converted, I used to go about before, or at the break of day, to get brethren up to pray, (and I may say that was the first morning prayer meeting I had ever heard of.) One morning I could not get them up; I felt distressed, and in my agony was going away to pray, when all at once the glory of God blazed all around me, and it seemed as if all nature praised the Lord, and none but men looked down and were mute. I wondered they could not see. It seemed to have been some such view that Paul had, when he could not tell whether he was in the body or out of it. When persons experience this, it seems more than a figure of speech to talk of seeing God, but if you want to see Him, you must let the inward senses be awake to the influence of the Spirit.

15. See how the soul is sanctified by the Spirit, and belief of the truth. When the Spirit presents the truth you must believe it. Sanctification is, and must be by faith.

16. See the importance of understanding the ground of the necessity of the divine influence. The reason is that the mind has so shut itself up to selfish influences that the Spirit alone, can break the spell that binds it. Its greatness is manifest by the same reason.

17. The necessity for the Spirit's influence, is our sin, and hence never ought to be brought up as an excuse.

18. All the holiness on earth is induced by the Spirit.

19. If you grieve away the Spirit, you are lost. Nothing else in the universe can save you.

20. See what it is to be led by the Spirit. It is to yield to his influences.

21. How amazingly careless many persons are, in disregarding the influences of the Spirit. Until you are more careful how you talk and act, you will never know what it is to be taught of the Spirit. There is a man who would not grieve his wife for any consideration, but will daily grieve the blessed Spirit. The Spirit stands away back from such a man, knowing it will do no good to interpose. Poor man! If he continue to grieve Him, he will soon do it once too often, and never be forgiven.

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