

# To Ministers of the Gospel of All Denominations. [#6]

by Charles Finney

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*Charles Finney challenges ministers to overcome the fear of change in religious knowledge and embrace new truths for the advancement of the Church.*

**Scripture:** Proverbs 1:5, Isaiah 43:19, Matthew 9:17, John 16:13, Acts 17:11, 1 Corinthians 2:9-10, Ephesians 4:15, Colossians 3:10, 2 Timothy 2:15, Hebrews 5:12-14

**Topics:** "Overcoming Prejudice", "Advancement in Knowledge"

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## Description

Charles Finney addresses ministers of the Gospel, urging them to overcome the fear of changing their opinions on religious matters. He highlights the unreasonable public sentiment that discourages the advancement of religious knowledge, suggesting that it is seen as a crime to discover new truths that past generations did not know. Finney emphasizes the importance of continual learning and growth in understanding God's word, arguing that the church must not remain stagnant but should embrace innovation in theology. He calls for ministers to reject the prejudice against new ideas and to boldly proclaim the truths they discover, as this is essential for the church's spiritual maturity.

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## Transcript

BELOVED BRETHREN:

Another topic upon which I wish particularly to address you, is the fear of being thought to have changed your opinions upon religious subjects. There is something very wonderful in the state of public sentiment, to which the attention of ministers and all others needs to be called, and against which all good men should set their faces. It has, for a long time, appeared to me to be generally regarded as a crime for a man to make any advances in religious knowledge, and especially that he should suppose himself to have discovered any thing that past generations did not know. The present state of the public sentiment seems to demand, either that a man should assume at the outset, that he is omniscient, or else make up his mind to remain for ever in ignorance. It seems to be regarded as a sufficient objection to any thing new which a man learns, that he did not always know it. And it seems to be regarded as something disgraceful and criminal, for a man to advance in religious knowledge. As an illustration of this, to my present views of entire consecration to God in this life, it seems to have been regarded by some as a sufficient objection, that I did not formerly believe and preach it as I now do.

Now several things are here assumed which are utterly untrue--that the former generations were the men, and that wisdom has died with them--that the Christian fathers knew all about theology--and that the divines of President Edward's day, were so wise, as that to differ from them in opinion is to be wrong of course. It seems also to be generally assumed, that for a man to hold any new opinions, of which he was himself formerly ignorant, is evidence of great instability of character and of a strong tendency to fanaticism. Now, certainly, all these assumptions are entirely unreasonable. The present generation ought to be ashamed, if we have made no real addition to the religious knowledge of past generations. And every minister ought to be ashamed of himself, who is not from Sabbath to Sabbath bringing forth to his people new truths. A scribe that is well instructed, will bring forth things new as well as old. And certainly it is a very absurd objection to any truth which a man may discover as taught in the Bible, that he did not know it before. It is easy to see the bearing of this unreasonable prejudice in the public mind. Its tendency is to stereotype all our knowledge upon a subject upon which of all other things it is most important that we should make rapid and constant advancement. Certainly the field of religious truth is infinitely extensive. The science of theology is as vast as the nature, attributes, providence, and government of God.

I have thought that ministers seem afraid to acknowledge any thing new, simply because it is new. And, on account of public prejudices, upon this subject, they fear to avow the fact that they have learned any thing of which they were before ignorant.

Now if this principle or prejudice be applied to any other branch of knowledge, it is easy to see how disastrous its effects would be. Indeed it has been applied, in the dark ages of Popery, to philosophy, and astronomy, and many other branches of science. Great and good men have been pronounced heretics for teaching any thing new in philosophy, astronomy, &c. What was the result, but to cover the earth with a cloud of darkness, to exclude the light of science, and shut up the human mind in all the ignorance and mummeries of papacy? Now is there not still a powerful current setting in upon ministers and religious teachers, calculated greatly to hinder advances in religious knowledge? Let any man, in these days, discover almost any new and important truth on the subject of religion, and make it known, and with the great mass of minds, it seems to be a conclusive argument against it, that he did not always know it, and that such men as Edwards and Augustine did not know it. Now this is an unreasonable and ridiculous state of mind, and its downright absurdity and dangerous tendency, would be seen, if applied to any other than religious truth. God has revealed Himself in many ways, principally in His works, and providences, and in His word. The book of nature has always been open to the observation of mankind; but yet how little of its contents have ever been understood. Until the present century, comparatively little advance has been made in some of the most important branches of human knowledge. How little has been known, or is now known of vegetable, animal, and human physiology, and consequently of the true principles of temperance?

Now suppose, that to the new truths that are continually coming before the public upon these and other important subjects of knowledge, it should be objected that they are new opinions--that their authors had never known them before--and that as they have always been discoverable to past generations, it is unreasonable to suppose that the great men of by-gone days should not have discovered them, if they are true. The inconclusiveness of such reasoning would be seen at once. But the objection is just as good against advancement in any department of science as against advancement on religious subjects. It is no answer to say that past generations have had the Bible as well as we, and that it is unreasonable to suppose that it contains truths which they did not discover or which we ourselves have not discovered until now; for past generations have had the whole field of science, as well as the book of nature open before

them as well as we, and who ever pretended to say, that the revelation God has made in His works has more than begun to be understood? For myself I am free to say, that the more I read the Bible, the more I am convinced that neither myself nor others of past or present generations, so far as my knowledge extends, have more than fairly begun to understand its profound and glorious truths. And when I read it under the light of the Holy Spirit, I can scarcely get through a chapter or paragraph, without discovering new and thrilling truths. Indeed, wonders rise upon wonders, as often as I read and re-read, search and re-search, pray over, and attempt to fathom the word of God. I confess it has been far otherwise with me in much of my past religious history. I was, to a wonderful extent, blind to my profound ignorance of the word of God, till within about three years past. Since that time I have been enabled to read it with a degree of astonishment in respect to my former ignorance which I cannot express. I think the Lord has made me willing to acknowledge my ignorance and to profess a determination by the grace of God, in future to make some advancement in religious knowledge. And I pray the Lord to deliver me, and to deliver the ministry from the absurd prejudice, that chains them and the Church to a set of stereotyped opinions on all religious subjects.

In regard to doctrines, and measures, and modes, and forms, public prejudice is and has been for many centuries so entirely unreasonable, as it seems to me, that ministers should thoroughly and unsparingly rebuke it. Attempts have been made to put down reforms on all subjects and in all ages, by the cry of novelty and innovation, than which there are not two more unreasonable things in the whole universe. Why, this objection assumes that every thing is now right, and that any change will be wrong of course. It is as certain as that the world stands, that there must be great innovation, and an almost universal turning of the world upside down, before it is consecrated to God. And if almost every thing is wrong as is certainly the fact, how infinitely unreasonable is it to put down reforms, by the cry of innovation! Why it is time the world should know that innovation is the thing needed, and that God has commenced a system of innovation by which He intends to change the whole moral condition of the world.

Christ and His apostles were often faced down with the objection that their views were new, and their measures were innovations, and disorganizing in their tendency. Luther and Calvin had to confront the same impudent and unreasonable objection, for Judaism and Popery were alike sticklish for the stereotyped notions of the Church. In later days, Wesley and Whitefield, in England, and Edwards and his associates, in America, were considered and treated as disorganizers and dangerous innovators. They were all, in their day, more or less in advance of the age in which they lived, and of mankind in general. And in looking back upon those periods, we can now discover the unreasonableness of those who thought the objection of novelty and innovation against them.

Should any one object to these suggestions, that they are entirely uncalled for, and that there is no such thing in fact as a public sentiment demanding that no advances should be made in religious knowledge, or that any thing is regarded as suspicious is not false because it is new, I would reply:--That such an objector would seem to me not well to understand the state of public sentiment. Not long since a sermon was sent to me from a distance, preached by a prominent minister at the opening of a Synod, and published at their request, a leading design of which was to echo this public sentiment of which I have been speaking; and to rebuke with no small degree of severity the idea that the Church at the present day are to expect to make any advances upon the knowledge of past generations. I could mention many other facts, by adverting to the periodicals of the present or almost any by-gone period, or by reference to the history of Polemic Theology, in every age of the Church, in confirmation of the assertion that such a public prejudice does exist, and long has existed, and that ministers are and ever have been very much under its

influence. And I repeat it, if this prejudice is to be continued, and suffered to cramp the energies of the ministry, to limit their inquiries, to rebuke their advances, and to shut them up to ringing changes upon the stereotyped technicalities of a Catechetical Theology, it appears to me plain that the Church must continue in a state of religious baby-hood.

Now, beloved brethren, the object of this letter is not to recommend rash speculations and an incautious and reckless removing of ancient landmarks, nor a wild driving in every direction in search of novelty, nor the embracing of every or any opinion merely because it is novel. But the object is simply to call your attention to the evil of suffering yourselves to remain stationary in religious knowledge, and to look at the unreasonableness of refusing to embrace and proclaim any opinion simply because it is new.

Your brother in the bonds of the gospel,

C.G.FINNEY

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