

To the Editors of Periodicals Who Are Professing Christians.

by Charles Finney

Charles Finney emphasizes the importance of the influence of periodicals on the Church and the responsibility of editors to promote a good spirit and avoid perpetuating prejudice and slander.

Scripture: Proverbs 18:21, Ephesians 4:29, Philippians 4:8, James 3:5

Topics: "Spiritual Responsibility", "Influence of Media"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the editors of periodicals who profess Christianity, urging them to recognize the profound influence their publications have on society and the church. He emphasizes the responsibility they bear in shaping the character and spirit of their readers, warning against the dangers of publishing slanderous or divisive content. Finney calls for editors to be spiritually discerning and to promote a spirit of holiness and love in their writings, as their influence can either uplift or poison the church and the world. He encourages a collective commitment to prayer and spiritual integrity among editors to foster a revival of true Christian spirit in their publications.

Transcript

TO THE EDITORS OF PERIODICALS WHO ARE PROFESSING CHRISTIANS.

DEAR BRETHERN:

It becomes me to speak with unfeigned modesty and humility in addressing you on a subject of the highest importance to this nation and to the world. It is no part of my design to enter into any controversy with you, nor to take upon myself to decide in regard to the manner in which you shall discharge your responsible duties. But I beg to be allowed to speak to you in love as a christian brother, and to suggest several things, or rather to make several inquiries in regard to the influence which your periodicals are exerting upon your numerous readers.

1. Is it not a well settled truth, that "evil communications corrupt good manners?"
2. Is it not also a well settled truth, that the spirit of a disciple is almost certainly, in a great measure, modified and molded by the spirit of his teacher?

3. Is it not a fact, to which the experience of almost every man can testify, that "like priest, like people," is a maxim of unerring truth--that the spirit of a church partakes in a great measure, of the spirit of its pastor--and that those who love and have confidence in him, will almost certainly drink in his spirit, and strongly sympathize with him in whatever engages his heart and draws forth his soul? If he is secular, his church will be so. If he is sticklish about orthodoxy, or has no settled views at all, such in general will be the character of his church. In short whatever he is, so far as he has influence, his people will be. Those who are not at all influenced by him, who have little or no confidence in him, may, and very likely will be almost the reverse of his spirit. But it is plain, that in proportion to their confidence will be the degree in which their characters will be molded by his influence.

Does not the same truth hold good with regard to the authors with whom an individual and a people commune?

And does not the same truth hold good in regard to periodicals? Will a man take and pay for a periodical unless he is pleased with it? And can he be pleased with it unless he drinks in the spirit which it breathes? And do not the periodicals and literature of the day, modify and mold the character of a people or nation, as a pastor does that of a particular congregation?

4. Is not the present a day of general rebuke, censoriousness, strife, bitterness, and mobocracy, both in and out of the Church? Do not the openly ungodly, manifest the turbulence of their spirit by breaking forth into the most outrageous misrule, setting aside all law, and trampling under foot every thing that is lovely and of good report? And do not grave ecclesiastics and professed christians trample on the constitutions and laws of their respective denominations, setting aside, the ordinary and constitutional modes of procedure, and in the true spirit of ecclesiastical mobocracy proceed, without law or order, to a spiritual lynching of those who are subject to their jurisdiction?

Now, beloved brethren, I would humbly inquire, is not the press, to a very great extent, chargeable with all this misrule? Is it not certain that the periodicals of the day to a very great extent breathe this spirit, and have been the principal instruments of enkindling and diffusing it through every department of society? Was not the press, in the city of New York, justly chargeable with the mobs that prevailed there some years since; and has not this been the case throughout the length and breadth of the land? Was not the press chargeable with the horrors of the French Revolution? Are not the commotions of the Church, its janglings and misrule chargeable in a great measure upon the professedly religious presses? Are not the pastors and religious teachers throughout the land greatly excited and their whole character and influence greatly modified by this same press? Is not every minister's preaching upon the Sabbath, in a great measure, suggested and modified by his reading through the week; and where his periodicals are charged with highly inflammatory, sectarian, slanderous, and censorious pieces, does he not drink into their spirit and by degrees come to feel that these are things that ought to be preached and insisted upon, and does he not thus to a great extent become the echo of the religious press? If he reads much he almost certainly does, whether he is aware of it or not. What pastor has not felt the constant, and I might say uncontrollable influence of periodicals in his own congregations?

5. Now, beloved brethren, if these things are so, what awfully responsible stations do you fill. Is it not of the utmost importance that you should be eminently holy men? And if you are not highly spiritual men, is it not true that the greater your talents, the more is the Church and the world cursed by your influence? Ought not a man to have as particular regard to the periodicals which he reads and the editor whose thoughts and selections are pouring their constant influence over his mind and the minds of his family, as he would

in the selection of a pastor under whose instruction he and his family were to have their characters molded for eternity? For myself, I must say that I could no more suffer a news-paper edited by a man who has a bad spirit to come into my family, and breathe its silent influence over our souls, than I would willingly have the plague or any other evil influence come in among us. I regard editors as sustaining the most important relations to the world, of any men in the world, for they give to themselves, through their publications, a kind of ubiquity. They live and move in and breathe their influence over the whole heart of the nation. Their influence is felt over hundreds of pulpits, thousands of domestic circles, and millions of hearts; and in fact the whole land is molded by them as it were by a kind of omnipresent influence.

Dearly beloved brethren, is it not then of infinite importance that you should fully appreciate the solemnity and responsibility of your stations and have a special regard to several things which you will now permit me to mention?

1. In regard to the spirit of the writers whose productions you allow to find a place in your columns. Were you promoting a revival of religion, as a pastor of a church, would you allow a man with a fiery, sectarian, bitter, sarcastic, censorious and denunciatory spirit, to preach to your people?--Would you encourage or allow such a man to take the lead in any meeting, and exhort, and pray, and diffuse his spirit through your congregation? Or if it were not a time of revival would you, could you prevent it, allow such a spirit to be diffused among your people? Who has not, in seasons of revival, seen a single prayer, or exhortation in a bad spirit, do immense mischief in a congregation? And who has not witnessed the disastrous influence of the spirit of such writers in periodicals, changing the sweetness of christian love into the bitterness of gall, and pouring in a current of death upon the gardens of spiritual life?

Should it not then be the universal practice of editors to exclude from their columns every thing that is inconsistent with the spirit of holiness and perfect christian love?

2. Is it not of the utmost importance that pieces bearing injuriously on the character of any man, or set of men, should be published with great care, and only under such restrictions and upon such conditions as cannot reasonably be expected to injure the cause of truth, by a prodigal casting away of christian influence? Is it not a great error for editors to suppose that they have a right to publish any thing, however slanderous, if the writer will only give his name; and to give any thing to the public which the malice, or prejudice, or mistaken zeal of any man shall suggest? Are editors exceptions to the common rules of Christ's kingdom in this respect?

In the days of Jeremiah, the prophet complained of the people in this language, "Report say they, and we will report it. All my familiars have watched for my halting." The doctrine seems to have been in those days, that if any one would originate a report, they were at liberty to retail it whether true or false, and leave it to those against whom it was reported to contradict it or not as they chose or were able. Of this the prophet complained as a grievous wickedness. And I would humbly inquire whether there is not something extremely like this in the conduct of many editors?

I have good reason to know from my own personal knowledge and observation for many years past, that it has been customary with some editors to publish things which I knew to be most false and slanderous. Most of this could have been, to be sure easily disproved. But in this way most of the time of the calumniated individuals must have been occupied in repelling slanders. When editors give themselves up to spreading such pestiferous influences over the land, either a great multitude of persons must spend their time in contradicting and correcting such statements, or the public mind must be suffered to become

deeply and bitterly prejudiced, and the cause of Christ suffer immense injury from their influence.

For myself, I have seen so many statements and things reported as facts, which I know to be false, that I am compelled to place but very little confidence in the religious publications of the day. I cannot but reason in this manner: that, if in respect to the dearest interests of religion, the most sacred things, and character, and proceedings, such utter misrepresentations are unblushingly published in so many instances within my own knowledge, what reason have I to believe those things where I have not personal knowledge--nay, what right have I to believe them?

Now is it not a great evil when the spirit of the periodicals press is such that a most disastrous influence is avoided only by giving very little credit to its statements? I design to speak with the greatest kindness. But my heart is too often and too much pained upon this subject to remain silent any longer. If I hear any report of a brother, whether it be true or false, have I a right to give it to the public without laying the subject before him, admonishing him to repent and knowing what he has to say to the charge?

If the thing is untrue have I any right to publish it at all? And if it is true have I any right to give it to the public without the most urgent necessity? Can it be right for me or for any man on earth, to give publicity to whatever I suppose myself to have good authority for believing? If because I believe a thing to be true, I have a right to send it abroad as upon the winds of heaven, and leave it for individuals concerned to contradict it or not, as they may be able? Is not this as far as possible from the spirit and rule of the gospel?

But are editors any more at liberty to transgress this plain principle of christian law than other men? And is not a most fearful amount of transgression in this respect causing the religion of Jesus to bleed at every pore?

3. Is it not of the utmost importance that the tendency of every article should be well weighted by the editor, before he gives it a place in his columns? Is the editor to suffer the writer to be the only judge of the tendency of his article, and to suppose himself to have no responsibility in this respect? As well might he fire a loaded cannon upon masses of human beings, simply because another man had loaded and leveled it, and bade him apply the match. Shall a man in such a case shut up his eyes, apply the match, and say I am free from the blood of all men, or is he bound to open his eyes, see what is before him, and whether the contents of the gun are likely to do mischief, if he applies the match? Whether therefore, an article prepared for your columns be true or false, is not the only question. Is not its tendency a thing for which you are personally and in the highest sense responsible? I have been astonished that editors should sometimes admit and sometimes deny this principle to suit their own convenience and prejudice. Sometimes they will refuse to publish articles on the ground of their evil tendency, alleging that they are responsible for their tendency; and at other times when expostulated with for publishing other articles, will contend that they are not responsible for the tendency of articles written by others. And thus we often find it impossible to depend upon the stability and consistency of their course.

4. Again, is it not the greatest importance, that editors should keep their own minds free from the influence of prejudice, and not suffer themselves or their correspondents to publish what will beget or perpetuate prejudice. Suppose a minister were to allow himself to become prejudiced in regard to members of his own congregation, and spread and perpetuate the prejudice, would not his words eat like a canker? And how amazingly injurious must be the influence of an editor who allows his own mind to become prejudiced on an important subject; and to increase and perpetuate such a prejudice on so large a scale!

5. In regard to editorial articles, permit me, dear brethren, to make two suggestions.

(1.) Is not great evil often done by editors replying to the personal reflections of other editors upon themselves; and would it not be altogether better for the cause of truth and for the spirit of this nation and of the church, to take no public notice of any personal reflections whatever? I have supposed it to be the duty of ministers and editors to attend to God's business, and let him attend to theirs--to defend God's character, and let him defend theirs. Upon this principle I have endeavored to act, and I have never had reason to complain of a want of faithfulness in my Divine Master, in regard to these things. Always when I have been the most solicitous to attend to His business and His interests, He has been the most careful of mine. And when I have taken the most pains to defend His reputation and the least to defend my own, I have found by experience, that He has been tender of my reputation in proportion as I have been alive to His. And I have always remarked, that in proportion as any man or set of men betake themselves to the defence of their own character, and the keeping of their own reputation; just in that proportion, God leaves them to take care of themselves.

(2.) Has it not been too much the case, that editors have supposed themselves obliged to maintain the character of infallibility, and have thought that their influence would greatly suffer, if they were frank and full in confessing any mistake or error into which they had fallen? Indeed I once heard an editor say, that editors must be infallible, and that for him to confess, would greatly injure his influence. I have known some ministers to adopt the same principle, and take the same attitude than which to my own mind, nothing is more unreasonable and injurious. There are indeed some praiseworthy exceptions to this rule. For an editor, as well as other men to confess his errors, is christian. It is truly blessed and heavenly in its influence. --Few things come over the mind with such heavenly sweetness as a frank, candid, humble, confession of a fault.

6. Again let me inquire whether it is not true, that an editor may not and often does not, without being himself aware of it, get into a bad spirit, by immersing his mind in other periodicals, many of which breathe a bad spirit, and gain an influence over him before he is aware of it, suffering his exchange-papers gradually to poison his own spirit, and bring him forward into the arena of controversy, sectarianism, and slander, before he is fully awake to his danger.

7. A paper conducted with a bad spirit, may for a while succeed in maintaining a large subscription list. But God is against such a paper, and He will sooner or later put it down. Besides there is a tendency in the paper itself to work its own ruin. It will in all probability, in process of time, beget so bad a spirit in its readers, and lead them so far from God, that they will neglect paying for their paper, and finally feel so little interest in religion, as to refuse to take it at all. If I am not mistaken I have known some periodicals to fail in this manner. I know it is true that the editor may go so gradually into a wrong spirit as to carry his readers so imperceptibly into backsliding that they will not perceive where they are, or what the spirit of their favorite editor is. Just as a member of a church may under such preaching sink down into a state of sin, without being aware that either his pastor or himself is in a bad state of mind. But let this same man go abroad and come under other influences, and get his mind imbued with a sweet revival spirit, and how it will distress him to return and mingle with the church, and sit under the preaching of his own pastor. How plainly will he perceive that they are all entirely away from God, and know not what manner of spirit they are of.

In the same manner a christian may take a bitter periodical without observing the contrariety of its spirit to that of Christ, because he has the same spirit with its editor. But if by any means he can be kept from

reading his paper long enough to get into a revival spirit--long enough to get his eyes open, and his heart broken, how terribly will his religious newspaper grate upon his soul. He will soon find himself unable to read it, and preserve the spirit of Christ; and he will either discontinue it, or fall again under its influence, and be carried by it away from God and holiness. For my own part I must say, there are few things against which I have been obliged to be more watchful, than the promiscuous reading of religious periodicals. And I can heartily say that, I do not know a minister of my whole acquaintance, who is in the habit of acquainting himself with the periodical publications of the day, who seems to possess a high degree of spirituality. Their influence upon the ministry is just what it appears to be on editors themselves. --And is it not often true that the correspondents of papers excite a bad spirit in the editor, and the editor in his turn excites a bad spirit in the writers, and thus a reciprocal influence is given and received, which often waxes worse and worse till the piety of the Church is well nigh extinct. I ask with pain and with the deepest humility whether this is not the case at the present time? Beloved brethren, how would you expect a pastor to keep his people free from a censorious spirit? Would it not be by abstaining altogether from such a spirit himself, and by pouring the sweet spirit of the gospel upon their souls from Sabbath to Sabbath and from day to day? And when disturbing causes came in upon his people, to do all in his power to divert their attention from them, and fix their minds upon these highly spiritual considerations which alone can promote their growth in grace?

8. Do not understand me, dear brethren, as insinuating that there is not much that is good and profitable in your paper. There really are many judicious and excellent things written both by yourselves and your correspondents, which are cheering to the heart of piety, and I trust cause many thanksgivings to God. But I inquire what is the influence of your periodicals as a whole--and what is the influence of the ministry as a whole? Does not the present state of the Church tell the whole story? Is it not manifest, that while there are many good things in your papers, as there are many good sermons preached by the ministers at the present day, yet is not the influence of the good things in your papers worse than neutralized by the many bitter and slanderous things contained in them?

The state of the human heart is such that a few caustic, sarcastic, bitter, sectarian sentences or pieces, will take a deeper hold, and make a more permanent impression than ten times the amount of spiritual matter that is calculated to counteract the influence of sin. A few pernicious paragraphs, catching the eye of a reader, will often poison his spirit more than a whole page of matters that has a good tendency will do it good. Who does not know, that let a minister preach the most powerful and spiritual sermon, under which the deepest and most salutary impression is produced, if he be followed by an exhortation or prayer even of five minutes in length, by an individual in a bad spirit, it will destroy the whole good effect of his sermon, and worse than counteract it, because it will divert the whole flow of excited feeling into this pernicious channel. So that the audience will retire really in a worse and more perturbed state than if they had heard nothing else than the bitter exhortation or prayer by itself, when in a calm and unexcited state. So let your readers become interested by reading what is never so good and powerful and moving, and then before they lay aside their paper, let them read but a short article breathing a bitter and slanderous spirit, and their whole excitement of mind will be turned into a wrong channel, and ten to one if they do not rise from their reading, and be guilty of slander and bitterness the first time their mouths are opened.

9. And now, dear brethren, how shall we promote a great revival of religion in the land? How shall a sweet and heavenly spirit be diffused through all our churches, unless the periodical press can be sweetened, and spiritualized, and made to exert a holy influence?

Beloved brethren, you are breathing your own spirit into the very bosom of the Church of God from week to week. You are constantly molding and forming the public heart, and continually influencing the characters and the destinies of the Church and the world! O how you need the prayers of christians! How much you need to be eminently praying men yourselves! Much of your time must be spent upon your knees in direct and sacred communion with God, or you will poison the Church and the world to death. O brethren, do receive what I have to say to you in kindness. I say it in love, and with a full heart. I will try to pray for you. And may the God of grace guide you, and help you to exert wholly a right influence upon His Church.

Do not understand me as taking the attitude of a censor or a dictator. I would gladly get down at your feet and beseech you, and pour out all my heart before you in strong importunities, that you will not be instrumental in diffusing a wrong spirit through the Church of the blessed God.

Were I sure that it would be kindly received, I would propose a day of fasting, humiliation, and prayer, to be observed by the editors, ministers, writers, and readers of religious periodicals. O it does seem to me as if the Church might be greatly benefitted by having their minds called particularly to this subject--the necessity of prayer for ministers, and especially for the editors and writers of religious periodicals. My soul is sick with the present state of things. May the Lord pour out His Spirit and direct us how to demean ourselves so as to bless the Church.

I have many more things which I may suggest at a future time, if I have reason to believe that these are well received.

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