

Christian Consciousness, a Witness for God

by Charles Finney

The sermon emphasizes the importance of Christian consciousness as the highest proof of the reality of religion and the best possible testimony.

Scripture: Psalm 34:8, Isaiah 43:10, Matthew 5:16, John 14:6, John 17:3, Acts 1:8, Romans 8:16, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Hebrews 11:1, 1 John 4:16

Topics: "Christian Experience", "Witnessing for God"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the significance of Christian consciousness as a powerful witness for God, arguing that true religion is rooted in personal experience and consciousness. He asserts that the testimony of Christians, based on their own experiences of transformation and knowledge of God, serves as the highest proof of the reality of faith. Finney contends that while counter-testimonies are merely negative, the positive experiences of believers provide undeniable evidence of divine truth. He encourages Christians to boldly share their experiences, as they are vital in affirming the truth of the Gospel and countering skepticism. Ultimately, he calls for a recognition of the profound impact of personal testimony in the realm of faith.

Transcript

"Ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord." Isaiah 43:10

When I first became religious, it seemed to me very wonderful that in all the preaching I had heard, there had been so little said of the testimony of personal experience. I had often heard appeals to the external evidences of revelation, such as make the reception of the testimony a mere matter of opinion; but I had rarely heard any allusion to the testimony of Christian Consciousness. This seemed to me a great omission.

I propose now to call your attention to the following points.

1. The religion of the Bible is a matter of consciousness.
2. Religious consciousness--the consciousness of religious truth--is the highest possible proof of the reality of religion.
3. Witnesses, who testify from consciousness, supposing them to be credible, are the best possible, and such testimony is the best possible.

4. All counter testimony is merely negative and amounts to nothing.

1. True religion is a matter of consciousness. It is a state of mind, and especially a voluntary state. Essentially, it is a state of voluntary committal to God, in which the mind, deliberately and of its own choice, determines to obey and please God. This action of the will controls the outward life by a law of necessity. Hence as the will is, so must the outward life be. But all acts of will are matters of consciousness, and therefore all true religion must be a thing of consciousness.

According to the Bible, every Christian is a new creature--passed into a new state of life and of moral action. Of this great change he must be conscious. Before it, he lived for self and sin,--this was a fact of consciousness; after it, he lives for God; of this he is conscious. Before it he pleased himself; after it he pleases God. Of all this he must be conscious.

Again, he is conscious of possessing various knowledge which he had not before. He knows God. Before conversion, he had the conviction that there is a God, but this alone is no proper knowledge of God. After conversion, he truly knows God. So the Bible teaches. It invites men to acquaint themselves with God, and assumes that when converted they do in fact come to know God in a far higher sense than ever before.

So of Christ. Those who do not receive him as their Savior cannot know him truly. They must be void of that experience of his power to save, which they might have. The Bible always assumes this.

Yet further, real Christians know that God is love. They may have had some idea or notion of this before, but they did not know it. Now they do. Their own experience is a witness to their souls. It has become to them a matter of consciousness.

Moreover, they know that Jesus is a Savior from sin. They have tried and proved this precious truth. Whereas he said--"My grace is sufficient for thee;" they believed and therefore have had the promise verified to themselves.

They also know that the Bible is true. They know it is from God, for they have felt its power--a power it could never have if it were a fiction and the belief in it a mere delusion. No one can become a Christian without seeing more of God and knowing more of his power and love than any unconverted men can see and know.

Christians know that the Bible gives the true account of man's natural state. Their own experience confirms this. So also does their experience show that the Bible gives the true account of the Christian state. This is a matter of every-day testimony. I could refer you to numerous cases in which, under the teaching of their own experience, men have passed at once from a state of doubt as to the Bible to a state of assured faith. Nothing is more common than for men who have been stubbornly skeptical as to the Bible, to see their skepticism instantly depart as soon as they came to feel a just sense of their own sin. The same conviction which flashed on their minds a sense of sin, revealed also the truthfulness of the Bible. They saw at once that their grounds for rejecting it were fallacious--that its truths correspond so perfectly with their own personal convictions that it must all be true. Such testimony, I say, is exceedingly abundant.

2. Consciousness of religious truth is the highest proof possible of the reality of religion.

On all subjects in which consciousness is legitimate proof, it is the highest proof possible. We cannot doubt that of which we are conscious. We know it to be true. No other testimony carries to our minds such

conviction. If therefore we confine ourselves strictly to what we know in consciousness, we cannot be mistaken.

3. Witnesses who testify from consciousness, supposing them to be credible, are the best witnesses possible, and their testimony the best possible.*

Let it be supposed that their statements are credible; then, if they can testify from their own consciousness, there can be no ground for doubting their testimony. No testimony can be better than theirs.

Now if it be true that religion is a matter of consciousness, it follows that the testimony of Christians is positive, and is the best that can be had.

4. All counter testimony is merely negative and amounts to nothing.

To illustrate this let us make a supposition. Though very strong, it will not be so strong as the case of Christian testimony which I adduce it to illustrate.

Let it be supposed that one hundred thousand persons have had a certain disease, have taken one particular medicine, and have all been cured. The point in this case is the strength of the testimony, furnished by their experience. I maintain that, though very strong, it is not so strong as the testimony from Christian experience to the truth of divine revelations. For, in the case of the disease, it is barely possible that nature alone, without the medicine, may have cured every one of them. Yet no reasonable man would doubt such testimony. You would think it ridiculous to call it in question.

Suppose, further, that the only counter testimony is simply negative. Some men come forward and testify--"We had the same disease; we did not take the medicine and we were not cured." This amounts to nothing. It is a well known principle in law that such testimony goes for just nothing.

But the testimony of Christians is even stronger than the positive testimony of the men cured of disease, for they are not only conscious of being cured of the plague of sin, but they know in their consciousness to what they must ascribe this change. They know what sin is and how it lived and reigned before. They know it never did and never would cure itself. It is a matter of certain knowledge by what means the power of sin in their hearts is broken. They know God as the power that saves. They know the melting, subduing influence of his love. They have felt the transforming power of his truth. One hundred thousand persons who have lived in sin now come forward and testify that, under the gospel, they came into a new life, and became subjects of a new and most blessed influence. Now then, you may look at this new life. You may see them going forward in this new life till they die and lying down at last in death, under its unabated influence. Are not such men the most credible of all witnesses? Is not theirs the most absolute and conclusive testimony? Surely this is perfectly conclusive. To deny it is far more absurd than to deny the existence of such a city as London. You say you don't believe there is such a city as London. You don't! Well, that is not so absurd as to deny the reality of religion and the truth of revelation. What is this testimony? Is it like the testimony of spiritualists, founded on raps and table-tippings? Nothing like it. The senses may be imposed upon. Modern spiritualism has many an open door for deception or mistake. But this experience of Christians is intensely strong and rich, broad and deep, it pervades the whole mind and character, and leaves no door open for deception or mistake. He who never had it may err by supposing he has had it; but he who actually has it knows that there is divine power in it. He knows that he has God's presence and smiles. Thousands of times, it may be, he has had this experience. He knows that he

communes with God. It is not possible that he should know any fact with more certainty than he knows this. To reject such testimony as his is therefore vastly more ridiculous than to call in question the existence of a London.

Consequently, the position of infidels is simply ridiculous. What are they doing? They are treating religion as a mere matter of opinion, ignoring all the testimony of consciousness. Shall we give them the credit of being reasonable men? No. I would sooner sit down to prove to a skeptic the existence of London, than admit the attitude of skeptics as to revelation to be reasonable.

In this matter, deceived professors have properly no testimony to give. They can only say, they took a quack medicine, and it did not cure them. An ocean of such testimony would be good for nothing. No amount of it can begin to disprove the testimony of those who say they took the true medicine and it actually cured them.

REMARKS

1. The objection that religious faith is a prejudice of education and nothing better, is altogether groundless, Some young men say--I have not examined this subject myself. I have been told so and so;--nothing more. Hence I can easily throw off opinions that have no other and better foundations.

My dear friend, don't you believe your father and your mother? Can you doubt that they love you and mean to tell you the truth? No matter if they have not so much science or so much education in general as many others. This thing is one of experience and not of science; and don't you see that they must know enough to make their experience the best possible testimony?

The fact is, that the testimony on which they rely is the very best that can be. They say what they know, and teach you what they have felt. These are matters of consciousness to them. Furthermore, you know they love you, and cannot wish to deceive you. Why not then accept their testimony?

2. It is objected, very foolishly, that people are influenced to believe the Bible, by what men say to them. True enough they are, and truly they ought to be. They ought to be influenced by good testimony; why not? God made us to believe in good testimony, and society could not exist otherwise.

3. The great mass of men who admit the truth of revelation and of revealed religion, do it on proper grounds. They do not hold this belief on the ground of an original examination of all the external evidences, but on the evidence of consciousness, either their own, or that of others. This is perfectly substantial and indubitable evidence.

4. It is indeed true that when the doctrines of the Bible are brought clearly before unconverted men, they usually ensure a conviction of their truth. They appear so reasonable that few men are unreasonable enough to deny their truth. But in nine cases out of ten in which men are converted to God, they believed the Bible on its internal evidence, as revealed in Christian consciousness and brought to them by God's witnesses. They have never seen miracles wrought, but they have seen men turned from sin to God and made new creatures in Christ. And they have had the good sense to infer that such great changes must indicate a power more than human. I said they had not seen miracles. In the first ages of Christianity, God deemed it wise to sanction by miracles the men who were to teach and write his word by authority. We have no evidence that miracles are wrought now.

5. It is a great error that so little stress is laid on the testimony of consciousness. Theodore Parker stands up in Boston declaring, that Jesus is only a man and not to be relied on to teach an infallible system of truth. Openly does he reject all proof from consciousness. He thinks the question of revelation is simply and wholly historic. Yet if he would, he might see that there are thousands who can testify that they know God, and that they know Jesus Christ. They can confirm the great doctrines of revelation most triumphantly by their own experience.

It is a great error when Christians allow themselves to be driven by infidels from the testimony of experience to the evidence of the historic argument. They should not allow their enemies to choose the strong-hold in which Christians shall entrench themselves, nor the weapons they shall use in their warfare for truth. Let Christians see that they know their own strength and then use it.

Suppose one should try to prove to me that I do not know God, nor the power of his truth. Shall I try to prove the Bible to be from God by any foreign historic testimony? No; I come at once to my consciousness. Does he reject this? He has no right to reject it. I know what the sinning state is and what the Christian state is also. My experience perhaps takes a broader range than his.

Suppose he denies the real divinity of Christ, and affirms that he is only a man. We meet him with the testimony of Christian consciousness. For almost two thousand years, Christians have been enjoying communion with Christ--thousands at the same moment in every part of the world. They know this to be the case. They are perfectly conscious of this communion. How will the Unitarian, or rather the humanitarian, explain this? Is Jesus an omnipresent man? Is he so near omniscient too that he can hold communion of mind and heart with thousands of his people at the same instant, "always even to the end of the world?"

It is a great error that Christians should withhold this testimony of experience. Sometimes they are too modest, and seem to think it will be obtrusive. But this is a false modesty. It inflicts a great wrong on the cause of truth. It is a wrong to God. They ought to become his witnesses. It should be remembered that these great gospel truths are not only in the Bible, but they are in us--in our hearts. Therefore we ought to get over this false modesty which is dumb as to the testimony of consciousness, and not allow the defenders of inspiration to be driven back on to the ground of the historic evidences only.

This testimony settles all the great questions of theology; the divinity and work of Christ; the depravity of man; the work of the Spirit; and the fact of repentance. All these great truths find ample attestation in Christian experience.

Bearing upon the truth of the Christian religion, a very pertinent case is related, on this wise:--a lawyer attended a public religious conference; took his seat and began to make notes of things said. After the meeting had progressed considerably he arose and said--I came into this meeting to take testimony. I was anxious to know whether there actually is any sufficient evidence for the Christian faith. I have taken down the names of sixty witnesses. They all speak of what they do know and testify what they have felt. I am constrained to admit that no men could possibly be better certified of the facts than they. Besides, I know these men and I must admit their honesty. I should believe them on any other subject which they understood. I am compelled to believe them now. As I have been taught and trained to receive testimony, I cannot reject this. No testimony was ever stronger. So he said.

Is not this altogether reasonable? Yes, here was testimony enough. A tenth part of which would convict any man of murder.

This point of our argument is specially forcible now. What clouds of fresh witnesses are rising up in all the land! Indeed God has never since the Christian era suffered his truth to lack this sort of testimony; yet it comes in special copiousness in our own day. Will you not believe it?

6. How awful it must be to bear a false testimony as to God! Professed Christians do this when they forsake him, and dishonor his truth.

How guilty also it must be to withhold evidence and fail to testify when God calls you to bear witness for Him! It must be awful to bear contradictory testimony, now this and now that. Better it were none at all! Nothing so shakes the confidence of intelligent men of the world.

Again, it is fearful for the minister to preach the gospel and his church to unpreach it;--for him to show what Christian experience is, and his church to gainsay every word of it by their ungodly lives. We should remember that worldly men are always by, taking notes. They are sure to take down our testimony. We ought to see to it that they have no excuse for getting it wrong, and also that they have no false testimony to get. The lawyer did so till he had the testimony of sixty witnesses. Think of that! So it is always. Somebody is noting down our daily testimony. All men are bound to take this testimony. One such witness is good against any amount of negative testimony. "In the mouth of two or three witnesses, shall every word be established."

Probably every one of you would say--"I have seen some good witnesses on whom I am bound to rely." One evening while I was in N.Y., a Christian lady introduced to me her husband, then in an anxious state of mind, and soon afterwards converted. Then he said to me--"I have been from early youth skeptically inclined, but my wife has made it impossible for me to become a skeptic. Before me continually was her holy life and her wise and timely conversation, always convincing me and compelling me to believe the gospel a reality. Hers was a constant testimony. I could not gainsay it; I could not disbelieve the gospel in the face of such evidence of its power." So he said to me. Ought not such testimony to be conclusive?

But many of you are saying--"I am no skeptic, but I am not ready yet to become a Christian. I cannot make up my mind to begin yet.["] At one of the meetings in N.York last winter, the captain of the Brig that spoke the steamer, Central America, just before she went to the bottom of the Atlantic, rose and gave a brief account of that event. Just before nightfall, as the brig came near enough to see the situation of the Central America, her captain saw that something was wrong, therefore bore down towards her to offer his aid. Hauling up near enough to be heard, he put his trumpet to his lips and shouted--"Can I render you any assistance?" The steamer's captain shouted back--"Lay by me till morning." Again the brig's captain cried--"Shall I not render you some assistance?" The second time and again the third, the steamer returned the same answer--"Lay by me till morning." "Hang out your lights then, so that I can keep you in my eye till the morning comes." The steamer hung out her lights; but before ten o'clock, they went down beneath the surges of the Atlantic.

That, said the captain as he spoke in the meeting, is just what I have been doing in the salvation of my soul. Jesus shouted to me in my distress--Shall I come near and render you some assistance? But I only answered--"Lay by me till morning." But when the steamer went down to the bottom and I thought of her captain's cry--"Lay by me till morning," it made such an impression on my mind, that I said, I cannot wait any longer, lest my vessel go down beneath the fearful billows before another morning dawns.

And now, dear young friends, out on the treacherous ocean of life; bearing down on the breakers of damnation;--when Jesus Christ draws near you and hails aloud--Can I offer you any assistance? Will you

answer him--"Lay by me till morning?" Will you say that? Ah, should that hoped for morning never dawn on you! Who is that, lifting up his voice and crying aloud--Can I render you any assistance? That loving voice--whose is it? Will you put him over till morning? Alas! that morning may never come!

* Not italicized in original--Ed.

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