

Explanatory Remarks From Prof. Finney Upon Certain Points

by Charles Finney

Ministers have a responsibility to address politics, but should always prioritize the gospel and fundamental truths, and focus on converting sinners and sanctifying the saints.

Scripture: Matthew 5:16, Romans 13:1, 1 Corinthians 1:30

Topics: "Role of Ministers", "Political Responsibility"

Description

Charles Finney addresses misunderstandings regarding his views on the role of ministers in discussing politics, clarifying that while he believes all aspects of human conduct should be addressed in the pulpit, the primary focus must remain on the gospel's transformative power. He emphasizes that ministers should educate their congregations on their civic duties without losing sight of the need for heart reformation, as true political change stems from a changed heart. Finney argues that the pulpit has been too silent on political responsibilities and encourages ministers to engage their congregations in discussions about their roles as citizens, while ensuring that the core message of salvation and sanctification remains paramount.

Transcript

Dear Brother Cowles:

I find that some things in my sermon reported by you on 1 Cor. 1:30, have been misapprehended by some of the brethren abroad. They have understood me to disapprove of ministers preaching at all upon the subject of politics.

Now this is by no means my view of the subject as every one knows who has heard my Lectures on Pastoral Theology, or who is acquainted with my real views. I hold and maintain that every department of human conduct is to come under review in the pulpit, and in its place be made the subject of instruction, discussion, reproof, warning, encouragement, or rebuke. But I also hold and maintain that care should always be taken to put and keep the gospel right end foremost, so to speak; that is, that the truths of fundamental importance should always have the greatest prominence--that the reformation and the sanctification of the hearts of men should always be the great theme of pulpit instruction, and that reformation in the different branches of morals should always have their appropriate place.

The thing which I intended in that sermon was to animadvert upon the conduct of ministers who it seems to me are guilty of a great error in turning aside to lecture altogether upon some particular branches of morals.

This did not Christ, nor his Apostles, nor it seems to me will any man do it who thoroughly understands the spirituality and power of the gospel, and carries it out constantly in his instructions.

I have no doubt it is the duty of ministers to instruct their people as occasion may require respecting their duties as citizens under an elective government; to lay down and enforce the great principles upon which they are to be actuated in coming to the polls. I believe also that at proper times and as occasion may demand, they ought to preach and enforce the instructions of the Bible respecting their duties in all the relations they sustain to God and man. I think also that at the present time there is a peculiar call for ministers to be unusually explicit, frequent, full, and pungent upon the subject of electing their representatives to act in our halls of legislation, and I do not believe that in general, ministers err on the side of paying too much attention to this question, and enforcing too frequently and pungently the great principles upon which Christian men are to act in their political relations. But as a general thing I am satisfied that the error is on the other side, and that there is by no means enough of pulpit teaching in regard to the responsibilities and duties of Christians in their political relations. The pulpit has been too long almost silent upon this subject.

The thing which it seems to me is wise in ministers in regard to their public teaching upon the subject of politics, is to hold forth in their public praying and preaching incidentally and by way of inference and remark on almost all occasions, enough to keep the people's mind awake to their duty and informed on all important points, and then it will never be necessary for them to leave their congregations or turn aside and give themselves up wholly to preaching and lecturing upon politics, on the Sabbath or on any other day. Such a necessity as this, if it be indeed a necessity, has arisen out of too general a negligence on the part of ministers to give the people their requisite kind and amount of instruction.

It will not be denied that the gospel aims primarily at converting sinners and sanctifying the saints, and that all outward reformations are to follow as a result from a reformation of the heart. It seems to be of little comparative importance to bring about a merely political reformation while the heart remains entrenched in selfishness. It is entirely below the high aims which a minister of the gospel ought to have, to go out among the cold churches and impenitent sinners, and give himself up to influencing the votes of men in respect to a particular candidate or election. This seems to me to be turning aside from the proper work of the ministry, and it must and will be felt to be so by a thinking community. The conduct of rulers and the ruled, the conduct of Christians at the ballot box and every where else, is to be me the subject of free and full discussion and animadversion by the ministers of God as occasion may offer.

But I humbly conceive that all the branches of outward morals should always be so pressed upon mankind as that they shall distinctly understand that there is no real reformation which does not begin at the heart, and that duty is never done unless with a holy heart. In particular localities and under particular circumstances it may be greatly important that ministers should be very thorough, discriminating, and persevering in their instructions upon the political relations of Christians at the present time. In other places there may not be this necessity for ministers to say so much upon the subject, for the reason that many lay-men and women are exerting themselves to diffuse light and arouse the public mind upon this subject. In such a case the principle of a division of labor will be brought to bear upon a community, which is of great importance in the church of God. If the lay-members of the church, who have property, talents,

and influence, will put forth appropriate exertions to scatter light on political questions,--will be honest Christians throughout,--it will save the minister the necessity of doing any thing more than incidentally and occasionally to sanction their principles and measures in his prayers and preaching. But when the lay-members of a church are asleep, or are all wrong on political subjects, there has manifestly been a great want of ministerial faithfulness, and in such cases ministers should redeem the time and come out faithfully and thoroughly, acknowledging their past delinquencies and giving the people appropriate instruction.

By appropriate instruction I do not mean that they should content themselves with enforcing the obligation of right outward political action, but that they should go to the heart, and insist upon it that men should be universally benevolent and act in obedience to the law of universal, disinterested benevolence at the polls and every where else.

But I do not wish to prolong this communication. My only object is in as few words as possible to correct a misapprehension which in many ways I have found to have arisen from reading the sermon to which I have alluded. My motto is, Let ministers preach on politics and on any and every thing else as circumstances may demand, never however forgetting at any time to make the conversion of sinners, and the sanctification of the church the great end at which they aim,--always insisting that right political action will follow and must follow from a right state of heart whenever the people are rightly instructed.

Your brother,

C.G. FINNEY

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