

# Fanatical Excitement-Letter Seven

by Charles Finney

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*Fanaticism is a danger that can arise in revivals, leading to a spirit of outrage and vindictiveness, and it is the responsibility of revival preachers to guard against it.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:33

**Topics:** "Eternal Perspective", "Divine Retribution"

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## Description

The sermon focuses on the Greek word 'Apodidomi,' which means to give back, pay back, or recompense. It emphasizes the idea of fulfilling obligations and responsibilities, whether it be repaying a debt, selling something, or fulfilling one's duty. The preacher highlights the importance of divine and human retribution, both positive and negative, based on one's deeds. The sermon encourages believers to live with the perspective of eternity, eagerly awaiting and loving the appearing of Christ, which promotes perseverance in the face of persecution.

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## Transcript

While upon the subject of excitement, I wish to make a few suggestions on the danger that highly-excited feelings will take a wrong direction, and result in fanaticism. Every one is aware that, when the feelings are strongly excited, they are capable of being turned in various directions, and of assuming various types, according to the circumstances of the excited individual. Few persons who have witnessed revivals of religion have not had occasion to remark this tendency of the human mind, and the efforts of Satan to use it for his own advantage, by mingling in the spirit of fanaticism with the spirit of a religious revival.

Fanaticism results from what a certain writer calls "loveless light."

Whenever the mind is enlightened in regard to what men ought to be and do and say, and is not at the same time in the exercise of benevolence, a spirit of fanaticism, indignation, rebuke, and denunciation is the almost inevitable result.

By fanaticism, I mean a state of mind in which the malign emotions take the control of the will, and hurry the individual away into an outrageous and vindictive effort to sustain what he calls right and truth. He contends for what he regards as truth or right with a malign spirit.

Now, in seasons of religious revival, there is special danger that fanaticism will spring up under the influence of infernal agency. It is, in many respects, a peculiarly favorable time for Satan to sow, in a rank

soil, the seed of some of the most turbulent and outrageous forms of error that have ever cursed the world.

Among the crowd who attend preaching at such times, there are almost always persons who have a strong fanatical tendency of mind. They are strongly inclined to censoriousness, fault-finding, vituperation, denunciation, and rebuke. It is a strong and ultra-democratic tendency of mind, anti-conservative in the extreme, and strongly tending to misrule.

Now, in proportion as persons of this character become enlightened respecting the duties and the sins of men, they are very likely to break forth into a spirit of turbulent fanaticism.

It is well known that almost all the reforms of this and of every age have been cursed by this sort of fanaticism. Temperance, moral reform, physiological and dietetic reform, anti-slavery,--all have felt the blight; almost nothing has escaped. When lecturers or others take up these questions and discuss them, pouring light upon the public mind, it often seems to disturb a cockatrice' den. The deep and perhaps hitherto hidden tendencies to fanaticism are blown up into flame, and often burst forth as from the molten heart of a volcano. Their indignation is aroused; their censorious and vituperative tongues are let loose; those unruly remembers that set on fire the course of nature, and are set on fire of hell, seem to pour forth a stream of burning lava to scorch and desolate society. Their prayers, their exhortations, everything they say or do, are but a stream of scolding, fault-finding, and recrimination. They insist upon it, "They do well to be angry,"--that to manifest anything less than the utmost indignation were profane, and suited neither to the subject nor the occasion.

Now it is remarkable to what an extent this class of minds have been brought forward by the different reforms of the day, and even by revivals of religion. No matter what the subject is--if it be the promotion of peace, they will contend for peace with the spirit of outrageous war. With their tongues, they will make war upon everything that opposes them; pour forth unmeasured abuse upon all who disagree with them, and make no compromise nor hold any communion with those who can not at once subscribe to their peculiar views. If the subject be anti-slavery, they contend for it with the spirit of slave holders; and while they insist that all men are free, they will allow freedom of opinion to none but themselves.

They would enslave the views and sentiments of all who differ from them, and soon castigate them into an acquiescence with their own opinions.

In revivals of religion this spirit generally manifests itself in a kind of scolding and denunciatory way of praying for all classes of people. Next, in exhortation, preaching, or in conversation. It especially attacks ministers and the leading influences of the Church, and moves right on progressively until it finally regards the whole visible Church as Babylon, and all men as on the high-road to hell who do not come out and denounce her.

Now this spirit often springs up in revivals so stealthily and insidiously, that its true character is not at first detected. Perhaps the Church is cold, the minister and leading influences are out of the way, and it seems no more than just, nay, even necessary, that some severity should be used towards those who are so far out of the way. The individual himself feels this so strongly that he does not suspect himself of fanaticism, though he deals out a large measure of rebuke in which a sprinkling of the malign element is unconsciously mingled. He pleads the example of Christ, of apostles and prophets, and can quote many passages from the Bible very similar to those which he now uses, and deems himself justified in using, inasmuch as they are drawn from Scripture. He assumes their application as he applies them, and also

that himself stands in God's stead, and is the mouth of God in rebuking iniquity.

Now when this spirit first appears, it grates across the tender minds of those who are in a spirit of love. At first it distresses and agonizes them, but by and by there seems to be so much truth in what is said; their prayers and exhortations are so exciting; their own attention being directed to the faults that are so sternly rebuked, they begin to drink in the same spirit, and partake of that boisterous and fiery zeal which was at first so inconsistent with the sweetness of their spirit. They begin to see, as they suppose, how the denunciations of the prophets, of Christ and of His apostles, apply to those among whom they live. Their attention is wholly engrossed with the faults of the Church and the ministry, and they can see nothing good. They begin to doubt and query whether the visible Church are not all hypocrites. At first they fear, but soon believe, that nearly all the ministers are self-deceived, hirelings, conservatives, ambitious, stewards of the devil. Church organizations are looked upon, first, with suspicion; then with contempt and abhorrence. "Coming out of Babylon" becomes the order of the day.

Fanaticism takes on a very great variety of types. Its modifications are almost innumerable. From the spirit of the Crusades, when men went forth with boots and spurs, with fire and sword, to convert their fellow men to Christianity, down to the obscure professor of religion who mutters in a corner his scolding and fault-finding with everybody and everything, all the intervening space is filled with the multiform phases of fanaticism.

From the fiery zeal with which the itinerant declaims, vociferates, and denounces both Church and State, down to the individual who rather looks than speaks out his fanaticism, you may find this class of persons, kindling up and nursing the fires of fanaticism in almost every corner of Christendom.

Now this is doubtless the spirit of Satan, which he has manifested in the Church and in the world through all past ages.

We have one able book on the subject of fanaticism; but we need another, which shall take up and expose its more modern developments--which shall delineate, as on a page of light, the workings of this dark spirit, whose malign influence, silently working like leaven, would then leaven the whole lump, and make this earth malign like hell.

I beg leave to call the attention of the brethren to the danger of revival preachers themselves introducing the spirit of fanaticism. When they meet with great opposition from the Church, or the world, or the ministry, they sometimes indulge in a strain of remark that is strongly tinged with bitterness, or, at least, with the appearance of bitterness and denunciation.

There are sometimes streaks and dashes of this in the preaching and spirit of good men. Satan seems to take advantage of their circumstances to infuse, imperceptibly to themselves, into their spirit and strain of preaching, praying, and talking, a dash of bitterness and vituperation. This strongly tends to beget a fanatical state of mind in their admirers.

Revival preachers have sometimes been greatly opposed by ministers until they have become sore and somewhat irritable; and in this state of mind, have sometimes gone so far as to preach and speak of those ministers in a very censorious spirit. This inevitably does great mischief in the revivals in which they are engaged. It catches like fire among the converts, and among those professors who are most immediately under his influence, and tends strongly to run the revival, out of the spirit of love, into a spirit of recrimination and bitterness. A sore and bitter state of mind will be manifested by those who think

themselves engaged in the work of the Lord, while the spirit of meekness, gentleness, brotherly kindness, and of deep and compassionate sympathy with Christ and with His Church will be almost entirely supplanted.

If I am not mistaken, revival preachers have often greatly erred in this matter. Whitefield sometimes did so, as he himself confesses, and the result was such as I have named, as every one knows who has read the history of the revivals that occurred under his labors. There is not one among the revival preachers of modern times who has not erred to a greater or less extent in this respect. I am sure that I have sometimes done so; and I do not know of a revival preacher of whom I do not think that, to some extent, the remarks just made are applicable. A little spice of this spirit in a revival preacher will work like leaven until it leavens the whole lump, and if indulged in, will sooner or later totally change the character of the excitement in which he labors, until it will become a revival of arrant fanaticism instead of pure religion. This result may occur without his once suspecting that such is the tendency of his spirit, preaching, and movements. Hence, ere he is aware, the evil is too far developed to admit of a remedy.

It does appear to me that revival preachers should be exceedingly honest with themselves on this subject and, withal, very guarded, forbearing, mild, and conciliatory in their manner of speaking and preaching, especially concerning those who oppose their views and measures. It is often better to take no public notice whatever of opposition, and especially not to allude to opposers, and by no means to speak of or pray for ministers or Christians in such a way as may blow up into a flame the latent sparks of fanaticism that are smothered in so many bosoms.

In thinking of this subject, in looking over the state of the Church, in reading the history of revivals of religion in all ages, I have been struck and deeply affected with the innumerable instances in which promoters of revivals have erred in substantially the manner I have described. They have unwittingly imbibed more or less of a spirit of fanaticism themselves, and it manifests itself so much in their public efforts as greatly to mar the work of the Lord, and of course to grieve the Spirit of God. Indeed, some revival preachers appear to me to have forsaken the right way without being aware of it, and really to have become highly fanatical in their spirit, preaching, and general bearing, until God has manifestly been obliged to rebuke them by withdrawing His Spirit, and closing the doors of the church against them. If revivals of pure religion are to be preserved from fanaticism, the utmost pains should be taken to preserve the leaders from this spirit. It is one of the grand devices of the devil to infuse this spirit stealthily into the leaders, and thereby poison the revival to death.

In what I have said, I would not be understood to intimate by any means that revival preachers alone have fallen into this error, for I am very confident that they have not so frequently fallen into it as some who have never promoted revivals of religion. The latter have more often fallen, for the reason that their general strain of preaching has so much of jangling, of controversy, of rebuke, censoriousness, and bitterness against all who differ from them, that the Spirit of God seldom if ever refreshes the heritage to which they minister. I have known several such ministers, who were far enough from being revival preachers, and whose preaching tended only to revive and perpetuate the spirit of fanaticism and rebuke. But what I have intended in this letter is, that revival preachers themselves have sometimes fallen into this error, which is so common with many other preachers.

Indeed, sectarianism in all its forms is only a modified species of fanaticism, as might easily be shown; and revival preachers who have connected sectarian movements with their revival operations, have perhaps uniformly shown that a fanatical spirit was the result.

My brethren, let us be careful that our own spirit is heavenly, Christ-like--that we have the wisdom that cometh down from above, which is "first pure, then peaceable, gentle, full of mercy and good fruits." Let us labor in this spirit, and the result will show that we are workmen who need not be ashamed.

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