

John Humphrey Noyes

by Charles Finney

The sermon explores the significant dialogue between Charles Finney and John Humphrey Noyes on the doctrine of perfect holiness and its implications for the church.

Scripture: Philippians 3:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Hebrews 12:14

Topics: "Holiness", "Open Dialogue in Faith"

Description

Charles Finney addresses John Humphrey Noyes, expressing a willingness to engage in dialogue about the doctrine of holiness, emphasizing the importance of understanding and discussing spiritual truths without fear of controversy. Finney acknowledges the potential for misunderstanding regarding Noyes' views and expresses a desire to learn from him, highlighting a mutual pursuit of truth in the context of Christian love. The conversation reflects a broader concern about the perception of perfectionism within the church and the need for open communication among believers.

Transcript

To John Humphrey Noyes

3 April 1837

[Published in The Witness (Ithaca, N.Y.), Volume 1, no. 1, (August 20, 1837), page 2.]

In 1834, during the May Anniversaries, Mrs. Finney had a visit from John Humphrey Noyes, who was in New York, set upon "the task of clearing Perfectionism of the disreputable mysticism and barbarisms which had begun to discredit it." It was on the suggestion of Charles Weld, Theodore Weld's brother, that Noyes "called on Mrs. Finney, wife of Rev. C. G. Finney, who was then absent on a voyage for his health."

She lived at Wm. Green's. Rev. J. R. McDowall was at the house when I called, and I had a short interview with him. When I made known to Mrs. Finney my profession and my object in calling, she entered into conversation with me on spiritual subjects with considerable interest. I gathered from what she said, that she and her husband were thinking much on the subject of holiness, but were fearful of the errors and fanaticisms connected with it. One of her remarks was substantially as follows: 'Mr. Finney sometimes tells me that I may be perfect, but says that it will not answer for him, as it would ruin his influence.' She asked me to pray with her children, which I did. I imagined that her object in this was to try my holiness by the New Measure test, i.e., to see whether I could pray well. Whether I acquitted myself to her satisfaction, I

never ascertained.

Three years later Noyes was again in New York. In an article in The Witness, in August 1837, he wrote:

In April last, as I was passing through New York on my way to Newark, I heard a discourse from Charles G. Finney, on the exceeding sinfulness of sin. My mind was much interested by it, and soon after I wrote him a short letter in relation to it. The following was his reply.

NEW YORK, 3d April, 1837.

Dear brother Noyes,

I have this moment received and read your letter, and thank you for it. I have often heard of you, and of your extravagances of course. But, precious brother, I have learned not to be frightened if it is rumoured, that any one has received any light which I have not myself. You speak as if you thought it doubtful whether I would correspond with such an one as you. Now, it is true, that I have supposed, from report, that you carried some of your views too far, but whether this is true or false, I should consider it a great privilege to possess myself thoroughly of your views. My engagements are such, that I can not enter into anything like a lengthy correspondence with any one; but it would give me extreme pleasure to see and converse with you. I have inquired after you this winter, but have not been able to learn where you were. You are well acquainted with my beloved brother Boyle: I had hoped to see him and have a full explanation of his views, but believe that he has gone west. I am expecting to leave the city in a short time, i. e. a week from to-day; and should you be in the city in the mean time, I should be rejoiced to see you at my study in the Tabernacle, entrance 95 Anthony street. I think I am anxiously inquiring after truth; and although I am at last aware that I need and can have but one teacher, yet it would be a great satisfaction to me to hear from your own lips "what thou thinkest, for as concerning this way, I know that it is every where spoken against." You have had time to weigh and turn over and over your past experience and views, and have, I hope candour enough to declare the whole truth in regard to the present state of your feelings and views, &c. I have heard so often, and, as I supposed, so correctly, that you had been deranged, that I have believed it. I do not mean that I supposed you are so now, but that your first excitement upset you and drove you into some extravagances. Now, brother, I should like, in the warmth of christian love, to converse this matter over with you, and learn whether you have discovered any hidden rocks on the coast, and dangerous quicksands upon which an inexperienced navigator is in danger of falling. I have no fear of the doctrine of holiness, perfect, instantaneous, perpetual holiness; and know full well, that like justification, sanctification is to be received by faith, and that we are as much at liberty, and as much bound "to reckon ourselves dead unto sin," as unto damnation. I am reading, as occasion offers, the Perfectionist, a copy of which I have by me. I suppose that contains your views. I have as yet, read but little for want of time, and must defer my further perusal of it until I get to Oberlin. I am too busy to write, and too much exhausted by continued conversations.

Your Brother,

C. G. FINNEY.

Noyes added:

Immediately upon receipt of this letter, I went to New York, and had an interview of several hours with Mr. Finney. He received my conversation in the spirit which his letter manifests, and I rejoice that I have an

opportunity of publicly testifying, that the candour and kindness of his behaviour toward me was surpassingly beautiful and refreshing. In the course of our conversation, he bore witness repeatedly and with warmth, that he perceived in me no indications of insanity, and I left him with a reanimated hope of gaining for myself and the gospel which I preach, that public confidence, without which testimony is powerless. I regarded him as the representative of a large and prominent body of professing christians, and his letter as an expression of friendship, and a demand for testimony, not merely from an individual, but from the most efficient, if not the most numerous, division of the American church.

Many subsequent circumstances confirmed me in the persuasion, that a great and favorable change of spirit and opinion in relation to the subject of perfect holiness, has taken place within the last year, insomuch that I now believe with assurance, that a public assertion of the doctrine, even by a person despised and abhorred as I have been, will not be regarded by most of those whose favour is desirable, as obtrusive or untimely.

As a lover of Jesus Christ, I am bound to serve his people, not indeed with self-defeating officiousness, but with self-sacrificing promptness; I shall therefore take for granted, at a venture, that there are many, who, like Mr. Finney, "have no fear of the doctrine of holiness, perfect, instantaneous, perpetual holiness," who would "like, in the warmth of christian love, to converse this matter over," though they have not yet professed the attainment. To such as thus "have an ear to hear," I offer my service, with a joyful willingness to communicate whatsoever I have learned about the "rocks and quicksands of the coast," by several years of perilous and stormy experience.

I confess I have long anticipated and desired the ministry upon which I am now entering. But especially since the publication of the Perfectionist ceased, I have sought the opportunity which is now presented, of effectually declaring that that paper does not "contain my views," as Mr. Finney and others suppose. It ought to be known, if it is not, that, although I was several months connected with James Boyle in the publication of that paper, I held but a subordinate office in the business, and that there was a material difference of sentiment between him and me, insisted upon by him and acknowledged by me from the beginning. My liberty of testimony was limited always by his judgement, and within a few months after I abandoned the partnership, my writings were rejected or tardily published. Moreover, many things appeared, especially in the second year of the Perfectionist, which I have been constrained to condemn.

Footnotes:

John R. McDowall was the pioneer of moral reform societies and founder of McDowall's Journal which became the Advocate of Moral Reform, of which William Green's wife was the editress. The Greens later had Noyes to stay for several weeks, and subsequently became perfectionists themselves, although they later fell away. See George Wallingford Noyes (compiler and editor), *The Religious Experience of John Humphrey Noyes* (New York: Macmillan, 1923), p. 337; John Hutchinson to Finney, November 17, 1838, *Finney Papers*; and "Home-Talk by J.H.N.-- No. 25." *The Spiritual Moralist* (Oneida Reserve, N.Y.), Volume 2, no. 23 (January 10, 1850), p. 355.

It was in mid-March that Noyes travelled to Newark, spending one day in New York. He had arrived in Newark by the March 22nd, which was the date of his famous "Declaration of Sentiments" which he wrote to William Lloyd Garrison. On March 30th he wrote to his mother from Newark: "Finney, who has been corresponding with some of the brethren here, sent for and received the whole of *The Perfectionist*. He and Leavitt thought at first they would write against it, but concluded to let it alone." (G. W. Noyes, *The*

Religious Experience of John Humphrey Noyes, p. 330. See also p. 329; and "Declaration of Sentiments" Newark, N.J. March 22, 1837, The Liberator [Boston], Volume 7 [October 13, 1837], p. 166).

It was later claimed that the view of perfection held by Finney and others at Oberlin, was that "those who have been wholly sanctified may afterwards fall into sin." Commenting on this, Noyes drew attention to this letter:

Whether the expression 'perpetual holiness,' can be so explained as to mean only temporary and occasional holiness, or whether Professor Finney has changed his mind since 1837, I shall not take upon me to decide; but will merely say, I understood him as assenting to the doctrine of perpetual holiness which was presented in the Perfectionist; of which doctrine he then knew me to be the advocate (The Witness, Vol. 1, no. 18 [May 27, 1840], p. 144).

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/charles-finney/john-humphrey-noyes/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net