

Letters on Revival--No. 4.

by Charles Finney

The sermon warns against the extremes of Antinomianism and Legalism, and emphasizes the importance of a true Christian activity, energized by the Spirit of Christ.

Scripture: Matthew 7:21, John 15:5, Romans 8:2, Romans 12:1-2, 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, Galatians 5:6, Ephesians 2:8-10, Philippians 2:12-13, James 2:17, 1 John 3:18

Topics: "Faith and Works", "Balance in Christianity"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the dangers of Antinomianism and legalism in his sermon 'Letters on Revival--No. 4,' emphasizing that both extremes deviate from true Christianity. He explains that Antinomians, having rejected self-righteous efforts, often fall into spiritual indolence, mistaking passive faith for true faith, which should be active and energizing. Finney argues that true faith is characterized by a deep sympathy with Christ and a commitment to benevolence, leading to active participation in the mission of the church. He warns against following mere feelings instead of being guided by the Word of God, urging believers to find balance in their spiritual lives. Ultimately, he calls for a revival that embodies the true spirit of Christianity, avoiding both extremes.

Transcript

To All The Friends And Especially All The Ministers Of Our Lord Jesus Christ:

Dear Brethren:

I said in my last that there seemed to be two extremes toward which different classes of persons are continually verging. Those extremes are Antinomianism on the one hand, and legality on the other--both manifestly at an equal remove from the true idea of religion. In that letter I made some remarks upon the class of legalists; in this I propose to notice the Antinomian class.

Antinomianism is the opposite extreme of legalism. Legalists are all work, and Antinomians no work. The latter have almost universally been legalists and very self-righteous. They have done a great deal of hard labor in their own strength, and in a perfectly legal, as opposed to an evangelical spirit. They have depended on their own resolutions, and have found them a bruised reed and a broken staff. In short, they have generally gone through nearly every stage of legal experience, from the dead formality of a self-righteous Pharisee to the sharp conflicts and agonizing efforts described in Romans seventh. They have known what it is to be blind to their own sins, and also what it is to be in a good measure awake to

their own sins; what it is to make almost no effort to serve the Lord, and what it is to make most agonizing efforts in their own strength. They have generally been brought to see the futility, emptiness, and downright wickedness of all these self-righteous, self-originated, and self-sustained efforts. Finding their own impotence, and being bad philosophers, they vault quite over into the opposite extreme, and from being all work and no faith, they become all faith and no work; not considering that this kind of faith is dead, being alone. They seem not aware that their faith is a state of the sensibility and not of the heart; a passive and not an active state of mind. It does not touch the will; if it did, their works would show it.

That they come into this state usually, by swinging like a pendulum from one extreme to the other, is most manifest. Having learned the folly of self-righteous and self-originated efforts, they feel a kind of contempt for all effort, and fall right back into a state of supineness and quietism. Professing to have yielded up their whole agency to Christ, they throw all the responsibility upon him and do nothing. Under pretence of being led by the Spirit and of waiting for God to reveal his will to them, they give themselves up very much to spiritual indolence.

This class of persons are extremely apt to suppose that all efforts to promote revivals, are of course legal efforts, such as they are conscious they used to make. The active Christian who sympathizes with Christ and is led by the Spirit to labor as Christ and the Apostles labored, they look upon as being engaged as they formerly were, running before they are sent, going forward in their own strength, self-righteous and legal. Now these dear souls do not realize that there is such a thing as great spiritual activity and aggressiveness, and that true spirituality always implies this; that true faith always begets sympathy with Christ, that true Christianity is always and necessarily the spirit of missions, of revivals, of self-sacrifice, of holy activity; that it is a living, energizing principle; that holiness in man is just what it was in Christ; indeed that holiness is always one and the same thing--benevolence or good-willing--and by a law of its own nature is continually putting forth efforts to realize the great end of benevolence; namely, the highest good of all beings. True Christianity is the law of love written in the heart by the Holy Spirit, and of course necessarily acted out in practical life. Now any thing that professes to be Christianity and does not sympathize with Christ, must be a delusion.

The mistake of the Antinomian lies not, as with the legalist, in the want of apprehending the emptiness, folly, and even wickedness of all self-righteous efforts to please God, but rather in a mistaken apprehension of the nature of faith and of true religion. They do not distinguish between that faith which consists in a persuasion of the intellect, accompanied by a corresponding state of feeling, in which however there is no assent of the heart or will; and that faith in which the heart or will most fully yields to perceived and admitted truth. The faith of the heart is necessarily a powerful and active principle. The faith of the intellect, or mere intellectual apprehension, accompanied with corresponding feelings, is not a voluntary, active, and energizing principle. This should always be understood. It is often not very easy to distinguish between these two. It should always be remembered, that where the faith of the heart or true faith exists, the other also does and must exist; that is, where the heart confides in the truth of God, there must be an intellectual apprehension of truth and a corresponding state of feeling, so that true faith cannot exist without the other, though the other may exist without it; that is, the intellect may apprehend the truth, the feelings may be affected by it, while the heart does not receive it.

There is another mistake into which Antinomians fall, of a very serious character. Indeed there are many, but one is of too much importance to be omitted here. I refer to their mistake in respect to being led by the Spirit of God. The manner in which they expect and profess to be led by the Spirit, seems to be that of impulse rather than divine illumination through the word. They sometimes seem to suppose that the Spirit

leads the people of God by impressions upon their sensibility or feelings, rather than by enlightening their intelligence, and leading them to act rationally, and in accordance with the written word. This is undoubtedly a great and fundamental error. True religion does not consist in obeying our feelings, but in conforming our heart to the law of our intelligence. Mere feeling is blind; and to follow it is never virtue. Now for persons to give themselves up to follow mere impressions on their sensibility, is not to be led by the Spirit of God, but by the ever-varying fluctuations and effervescings of their own restless and agitated sensibility. There is no end to the mistakes into which souls may be led in this way. God has given us reason, and requires us to understand what we are about. He has given us the written word, and the Holy Spirit to shine upon it, to make us understand its great principles and the application of them to all the circumstances and duties of life. Surely then it is a great mistake to give ourselves up to blind impulse, instead of submitting ourselves to be taught and led of God in his plainly appointed way. Antinomians amuse themselves very much with views and consequent feelings. They often seem to be very happy in certain views which they have of Christ and of gospel salvation, while it cannot be perceived that they really sympathize with Christ in the great work of saving souls.

Now as I said in my last, this is one extreme, and legality is another extreme. The truth lies between them. A true Christian is active, but his activity and energy arise out of a deep sympathy with the indwelling Spirit of Christ. Christ is formed within him. The Spirit of Christ is the mighty energizing power of his soul. The law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made him free from the law of sin and death. In short, he has become dead to the law. He may be as active as he ever was in the days of his most strenuous legality, and even more so. His strenuousness, energy and zeal are not at all abated, but generally increased. Indeed they are always increased, unless the comparison be made with his most convicted and agonized legal states. But his activity is that of love and faith. It is the activity of the eternal life of Christ that dwells within him. Now Antinomians commit a great mistake when they do not distinguish between this activity and their own former legal activity.

Again, I should say that legalists are exceedingly apt to reproach Antinomians without any very good reasons. In their bustle and zeal they seem to have the very spirit of Jehu. They drive furiously and seem to say--"Come see my zeal for the Lord." Now as a matter of fact, their legal bustle is not a whit better than Antinomian quietism. They would indeed compass sea and land to make one proselyte; but he is after all, a legalist like themselves; for they beget children in their own likeness.

Now it appears to me to be of the last importance that such discriminations should be made as to guard, if possible, against these two extremes, and so to conduct revivals of religion that the churches will take the middle ground; that is, that they will have the true idea of religion developed in their minds, and the true spirit of it in their hearts. So far as this can be secured, religious excitements are valuable and desirable, but no farther. It is very easy to show that there are many excitements that are not revivals of true religion; but this must be deferred to a future number.

Your brother,

C.G. FINNEY

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