

Letters on Revival--No. 6.

by Charles Finney

The dangers of philosophical preaching and the importance of holding forth facts to develop and strengthen faith.

Scripture: Proverbs 3:5-6, Matthew 11:25, John 20:29, Romans 10:17, 1 Corinthians 8:1, Colossians 2:8, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Hebrews 11:1, James 1:5, 1 Peter 1:8-9

Topics: "The Authority of Scripture", "Faith vs. Philosophy"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the dangers of philosophical preaching that prioritizes human understanding over faith in God's revelation. He warns that such an approach can lead to pride and a lack of true faith, as it encourages believers to rely on their own reasoning rather than the authority of Scripture. Finney emphasizes the importance of presenting the gospel as facts to be believed on God's testimony, rather than requiring philosophical explanations that may undermine faith. He advocates for a balanced approach that nurtures faith while also allowing for understanding, cautioning against the pitfalls of intellectualism in spiritual matters. Ultimately, he calls for a return to humility and reliance on God's word to foster genuine spiritual growth.

Transcript

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

Dear Brethren:

Another error which has prevailed to some extent, I fear, in the promotion of revivals, has been a kind of preaching that has rather puffed up than humbled and subdued the mind. I mean a kind of preaching which dwells much more on the philosophy of religion than the great facts of revelation. Into this mistake I am sure that I have often fallen myself. Where the preaching is so metaphysical and philosophical, as to leave the impression that every thing about religion can be comprehended, and that nothing can be received which cannot be explained, and its philosophy understood, great mischief is a certain result. I do not suppose that any have fallen into the error of declaring that nothing is to be received by faith that cannot be philosophically explained and understood, yet if I am not mistaken this impression has been left after all. The human mind is so desperately wicked, so self-complacent on the one hand, and so unbelieving on the other, that it is greatly flattered and puffed up when it indulges in metaphysical and philosophical speculations about the truths of religion until it fancies itself able to comprehend most or all of the great truths that relate to God and his kingdom.

Now two evils result directly from this course of instruction. First, it substitutes our own ratiocinations for faith. When men philosophize or speculate about a doctrine until they see it to be philosophical, they are exceedingly apt to rest in their own demonstrations or philosophical conclusions rather than in the testimony of God. But this is not faith. When men have formed this habit, they will either wholly reject all doctrines which they cannot philosophically comprehend and explain, or they will hold them so loosely that it can be easily seen they have no real confidence in them. Such men, so far as you can commend yourself to their intelligence, by explaining every thing to their comprehension, will go along with you; but they manifestly go along under the influence of your speculations and reasonings, and not at all because they implicitly confide in the testimony of God in regard to the facts of the gospel. Now it will be found that this class of Christians either absolutely reject, or hold very loosely some of the most important and precious doctrines of the gospel, such as the divinity and humanity of Christ, the doctrine of the trinity, the divine purposes, and many other truths connected with these. This kind of preaching serves not to humble the pride of the human mind but conveys the very kind of knowledge which Paul says puffs up. I have often thought of that passage in witnessing the spirit of the class of converts to which I allude. They are manifestly wise in their own conceits. They understand what they believe. They pride themselves on being philosophers and in not ignorantly and weakly believing what they cannot understand. Now I have observed it to be perfectly manifest, that this class of persons have no real faith. Their confidence is not at all in God, and the Bible, or in any of its statements, simply because God has declared them. They are pleased with and confide in their own speculations, and of course have but very little reverence for God, very little reverence for his authority, and no true confidence in his word.

The evils of this kind of philosophical preaching are, first, it does not beget faith. Secondly, if faith once existed it has no tendency to develop, strengthen, and confirm it, but rather to wither and destroy it. It is a remarkable fact that the inspired writers never philosophize, but always assume a correct philosophy. They throw out facts on which faith may lay hold. Although they never philosophize, yet it will be seen that their method of presenting truth is truly philosophical, when we consider the end which they had in view.

It is very plain that the scriptural method of presenting truth is the very one which of all others is calculated to secure the end which God has in view. Faith in the character and testimony of God is forever indispensable to heart-obedience to God in all worlds. Some talk about faith being swallowed up in vision in heaven; but this can never be. Confidence in God and his character, wisdom, goodness, and in the universality and perfection of his benevolence, will no doubt be just as indispensable in heaven to all eternity as it is on earth.

From the nature of the case it must be that very many of the divine dispensations in a government so vast, managed with a policy to us so inscrutable, must be deeply mysterious and perplexing to us unless we have the most implicit confidence in God's benevolence and wisdom. Now in this world the great object of God is to restore confidence in himself and his government; to beget and develop faith to the utmost. Consequently He presents facts without explaining them. He enters not at all into their philosophy, but simply asserts the facts which he desires to communicate, and leaves it for faith to lay hold upon and rest in them.

Now many of these facts we can never comprehend. We may understand that a thing is true while we cannot explain its philosophy. This is no doubt true of myriads of facts which will be ever coming up in the administration of God's government. It is therefore indispensable that we should be trained in the very beginning of our Christian course to rest unhesitatingly in the facts and wait for the explanations until we are able to receive them. Too much stress therefore cannot be laid on so presenting the gospel as to give

full scope for the exercise of faith.

By this I do not mean that the facts are not to be explained if they admit of philosophical explanation, but I mean that too much pains should not be taken to explain and philosophize on facts lest by so doing you leave the impression that every thing must be explained before it is received. In my own experience I have found that I have greatly injured my own piety by insisting too much on understanding every thing before I would receive it; that is I have not been satisfied oftentimes with merely understanding that such things were asserted as facts, but was restless, unsatisfied, and unstable, unless I could comprehend and explain the philosophy of the facts.

Surely this has formerly been my experience on the subject of the atonement. I found myself not satisfied with the bare announcement that Christ had died as my substitute, but I must understand the how and the why, and the great principles of divine government and the policy of Jehovah's empire on which this great transaction turned. I can indeed explain to my own satisfaction the philosophy of this transaction, and have often succeeded in explaining it to the most skeptical minds; but after all from subsequent reflection I have been persuaded that had the bare facts been pressed on them, and had they received it first as a fact on the authority of divine testimony, it would have been more healthful for their souls.

Within the last year or two, I have been led more to consider the importance of holding forth facts as such until they are believed as facts, and then from time to time explaining their philosophy. I find this exceedingly healthful to my own soul, and to the souls of others, who first believe the facts without hearing the philosophy of them explained. This develops and strengthens faith. It leads them to feel that God is to be trusted, and that whatever he says is to be received barely on the authority of his own testimony.

When afterwards the philosophy of it is opened to their view, they do not believe the fact any more firmly than before; but they are greatly edified, and even charmed with the philosophical illustrations of those things which before they have believed as facts on the authority of God. This I find to be exceedingly healthful to my own mind, and so far as I have had experience, to the minds of others. Indeed it is easy to see that the gospel should be presented and received in this way.

This is the manner in which the Bible everywhere presents it. First, receive the facts as facts, simply because God affirms them; afterwards explain such as can be explained and comprehended, for the edification and growth in knowledge of God's dear children. But reverse the process; first, explain every thing, and there is really no room left for faith; and if there is, you will find that professed converts really have no faith, and will either wholly reject or hold very loosely and doubtfully every declared fact or doctrine of the Bible which does not admit of clear philosophical analysis and explanation. This I am sure is the result of too much philosophizing and metaphysical speculation in preaching.

But let me say again that this kind of preaching is very pleasing to certain classes of hearers, although the truly and highly spiritual will soon find themselves growing lean on it. Yet a congregation generally will be puffed up, pleased, and from sermon to sermon think themselves greatly edified, and benefitted; whereas it will generally be seen that they do not grow more prevalent in prayer, more humble, more consecrated to God; do not attain more of the meekness of a child and more of the patience of Jesus Christ. Their growth is not truly Christian growth. It is rather a philosophical growth, and oftentimes pride and egotism are the most prominent characteristics of a congregation who are fed with philosophy and metaphysics instead of the humbling facts of the gospel. I surely have been guilty enough in this respect, and I am certainly not alone in this condemnation, although others who have taken the same course substantially

that I have in this respect, may not have seen their error so fully as I have been forced to see it. I wish not to be misunderstood. I would be far from advocating a mere presentation of facts without any explanation at all. I would take a middle course, so as on the one hand, not to puff up by a disproportionate development of the intelligence, while almost no room is left for the exercise of faith in divine testimony; nor on the other hand to stultify the intelligence by simply holding forth facts for the exercise of faith.

Your Brother,

C.G. FINNEY.

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