

Letters on Revivals. --No. 11.

by Charles Finney

Charles Finney warns against the dangers of fanaticism and false excitement in religious revivals, emphasizing the need for true love and discernment in spiritual movements.

Scripture: Galatians 5:22, 1 John 4:8

Topics: "True Revival", "Spirit of Love"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the dangers of false revivals, emphasizing that true religion is characterized by love rather than bitterness and zeal without compassion. He warns that many supposed revivals are marked by a spirit of fanaticism, leading to fault-finding and a lack of genuine Christian love among both supporters and opponents. Finney encourages ministers to be vigilant against this spirit, advocating for a gentle and loving approach to correction and guidance. He highlights the need for discernment in recognizing true revivals and the importance of maintaining a spirit of unity and love within the church. Ultimately, he calls for a balance between fervent evangelism and the gentle spirit of Christ.

Transcript

TO ALL THE FRIENDS AND ESPECIALLY ALL THE MINISTERS OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST.

Dear Brethren:

If I am not entirely mistaken, many excitements that have been supposed to be revivals of religion, have after all had but very little true religion in them. It seems to have been nearly or quite overlooked, that all religion is love. And it is remarkable to see to what an extent, in some instances at least, there is a manifestation of fiery zeal, often tintured strongly with bitterness and sarcasm, instead of the gentleness and sweetness that characterizes the true religion of Jesus. If you attend the meetings of any kind, if you converse with the brethren, with the professed converts, with any who are influenced by the excitement, you find that there is a strain of evil speaking, fault-finding and scolding which is any thing but the true religion of Christ. There is to be sure a great excitement, a great deal of bustle and conversation, a great many means and measures, in short a great deal of every thing calculated to promote a certain kind of excitement. There is indeed a powerful revival, but certainly not a revival of pure religion. Sinners are speaking in great bitterness of Christians, and professed Christians are speaking with very little less bitterness of them. The preaching is very much in a strain of vituperation, and this begets almost of course the like spirit and strain in every thing else connected with the excitement. There seems to be in it a deep, turbid and bitter current of feeling, that is the very essence of fanaticism. The spirit of s[S]atan, instead of

the spirit of God, has, no doubt, been poured out on the people. It has been an outpouring of a spirit, but not of the Holy Spirit of God. It seems to be a going forth of infernal agencies, a letting loose of the powers of darkness, a season of deep delusions; and what is surprising is, that even good people are often for a time carried away with it, and for weeks and perhaps for months do not discover their mistake. As a brother who had himself been laboring under this mistake, expressed it--"I have been trying," said he, "to cast out devils, through Beelzebub the prince of the devils."

You will very often see the evidence of this state of mind in the very countenances of those who are deeply excited. They look cross; there is a deep dissatisfaction of mind manifested in their countenances. You go to a prayer meeting, or other meeting where numbers who have this kind of excitement are assembled, and you will see a dark cloud gathering on the faces of the excited ones. Instead of that open, sweet, calm, meek, but deeply solemn and humble state of mind which invariably shows itself in the countenance, there is in the eye, and in all the features of the mind, a distracted, fanatical, determined look; a self-will and denunciatory expression that seems to say, "Stand by thyself, for I am holier than thou."

I hardly know how to describe what I have sometimes witnessed in such cases. And perhaps I cannot so describe it, as to make myself understood to any except those, who in the providence of God, have fallen under circumstances to witness it. Sometimes this state of mind will not be generally manifested, in an excitement. Perhaps a revival of pure religion commences, and there is no manifestation of this spirit at all. But I scarcely ever saw a powerful revival any where without seeing more or less of a fanatical spirit in the course of the revival, manifesting itself in some one or more cases.

If the leader in such revivals keeps himself entirely clear of this spirit, and watches its development narrowly on every side round about, and is entirely faithful and timely in private and personal exhortation and warning, in the case of those who are seized with it, it can no doubt generally be prevented.

It will not unfrequently manifest itself at first in prayer meetings, if liberty is given; or if liberty is not given for any one to pray who feels disposed, you will sometimes see a man or woman break forth in a prodigiously excited manner, and let off in a torrent of vituperation of their prayers. There will be in it a strain of bitterness that will be very shocking to all who do not deeply sympathize with such a state of mind. Now if the minister at once goes to that man or woman immediately after meeting, has a plain and affectionate conversation, and sets before the individual the true state of his mind, he may succeed in the outset in so opening his eyes, as to detect the delusion and save him from farther evil. But if he neglect it, the evil will spread rapidly, the delusions will increase in the mind of the individual himself, and probably in the course of a few days, or at the utmost, weeks, it will completely change the type of the revival, grieve away the Spirit of God, and let in a flood of infernal agencies to desolate the church.

I hope my brethren will not understand from what I have said and intend to say on the subject of fanaticism, as it often appears in connection with revivals, any thing that shall give occasion to speak reproachfully of the most faithful and pungent dealing with the consciences of backsliders and impenitent sinners.

I am aware, and who that has ever seen revivals is not aware, that the spirit of complaining, fault-finding, and censoriousness, is by no means confined to those who are endeavoring to promote the excitement or revival, and that the spirit of fanaticism is by no means confined to this class of persons. It is often more appallingly manifested among those who partake not at all of the spirit of promoting revivals. It is very

common indeed to see the opposers of revivals both in and out of the church, manifesting at such times, a most turbulent and intolerant spirit, and a form of fanaticism, not less disgraceful and unreasonable than that to which I have alluded.

Sometimes even ministers, prominent professors of religion, as well as those without the church and who are opposed to the revival or excitement, or whatever its character may be, are seen to be filled with the spirit of caviling, censoriousness, complaining and faultfinding, and whose minds seem occupied almost altogether with real or apparent, or at least, imagined defects in the spirit of those who are engaged in promoting the work, or in the means used by them.

It is very common to hear this class of persons find fault with really the most unobjectionable things. They seem to have the spirit of calling evil good, and good evil. Any thing like faithful and pungent dealing, any thing like a thorough searching and probing the heart of backsliders and sinners, to the bottom, is by them called abusive, personal, vituperative, and such like things.

Now what I desire to say, brethren, is this, that there are great dangers, and oftentimes great errors on both sides to be apprehended and guarded against. I have already intimated that the spirit of fanaticism, as it appears in those who are endeavoring to promote a revival, is generally provoked and developed by a spirit of fanaticism, opposed to the revival. An unreasonable opposition on the part of others, seems to develop oftentimes, in those who are trying to promote the work a spirit really hostile to the work itself.

For my own part I have seldom seen a spirit of fanaticism manifested itself among promoters of revivals, only as it was provoked and developed by a spirit of opposition to revivals. When opposition takes on certain forms, and is found to exist among ministers and leading professors of religion, there is then the greatest danger that the good and praying people will be overcome of evil, instead of overcoming evil with good. This should be always guarded against.

Your brother,

C.G. FINNEY

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