

Letters on Revivals--No. 23.

by Charles Finney

The church must take a different attitude towards reform and lead in promoting it, or revivals will cease and the Spirit of God will be grieved away.

Scripture: Matthew 5:13

Topics: "Spiritual Revival", "Church and Social Reform"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the church's neglect of its role in societal reform, emphasizing that the church has largely abandoned its mission to combat sin and promote righteousness. He laments the indifference and opposition many churches show towards necessary reforms, which he believes grieves the Spirit of God and hinders spiritual revivals. Finney calls for a return to the church's foundational purpose as a body of reformers, urging ministers and ecclesiastical bodies to lead in promoting justice and righteousness. He warns that without this commitment, the church risks losing its spiritual vitality and influence. Finney's passionate plea highlights the urgent need for the church to engage actively in reforming society and addressing moral issues.

Transcript

THE PERNICIOUS ATTITUDE OF THE CHURCH ON THE REFORMS OF THE AGE.

[Pt. 1]

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

Dear Brethren:

There is one subject upon which I must remark further, and yet I fear it will be impossible to do it justice without giving offence. One of the most serious impediments that have been thrown in the way of revivals of religion and one that has no doubt deeply grieved the Spirit of God is the fact that the church to a very great extent has lost sight of its own appropriate work and has actually left it in a great measure to be conducted by those who are for the most part illy prepared for the work. The work to which I allude is the reformation of mankind.

It is melancholy and amazing to see to what an extent the church treats the different branches of reform either with indifference, or with direct opposition. There is not, I venture to say upon the whole earth an inconsistency more monstrous, more God-dishonoring, and I must say more manifestly insane than the

attitude which many of the churches take in respect to nearly every branch of reform which is needed among mankind.

To such an extent is this true that scarcely a church can be found in the land which as a body will have any thing to do with reform. Hence the only way in which Christians in the churches who would do any thing towards reforming mankind can make their influence felt is by forming societies, composed often partly of Christians and partly of those who profess no religion. These unite together to concentrate their influence against some form of iniquity that is cursing mankind.

Now the great business of the church is to reform the world--to put away every kind of sin. The church of Christ was originally organized to be a body of reformers. The very profession of Christianity implies the profession and virtually an oath to do all that can be done for the universal reformation of the world. The Christian church was designed to make aggressive movements in every direction--to lift up her voice and put forth her energies against iniquity in high and low places--to reform individuals, communities, and governments, and never rest until the kingdom and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the most High God--until every form of iniquity shall be driven from the earth.

Now when we consider the appropriate business of the church--the very end for which she is organized and for which every Christian vows eternal consecration, and then behold her appalling inconsistencies every where apparent, I do not wonder that so many persons are led to avow the solemn conviction that the nominal church is apostate from God. When we consider the manner in which the movement in behalf of the slave has been treated by ecclesiastical bodies, by missionary associations, by churches and ministers, throughout the land, is it any wonder that the Church is forsaken of the Spirit of God?

Look at the Moral Reform movement. A few devoted self-denying females, engaged in a mighty conflict with the great sin of licentiousness. This struggle has been maintained for years; and yet how few comparatively of the churches as such have treated this effort in any other way than with contempt? A few devoted Christian women in various churches form societies to aid in this work; but where are the churches themselves as a body? Where are these sworn reformers--these men and women who profess to be waging everlasting war against every form of sin? Where are the ministry? Do they lift up their voice like a trumpet? Do they cry aloud and spare not? Do they as John Adams says, thunder and lighten from their pulpit, every Sabbath against these sins?

It is amazing to see what excuses are made by ministers for remaining silent in respect to almost every branch of reform.

And pray what can be meant by the sickening cry of moral suasion? The Church with a great many ministers have resorted to the plea of using moral suasion as the means of ridding the world of intemperance, licentiousness, slavery and every other legalized abomination; but pray what can be meant by moral suasion? Moral Government surely is a system of moral suasion. Moral suasion includes whatever is designed and adapted to influence the will of a moral agent.

Law, rewards, and punishments--these things and such as these are the very heart and soul of moral suasion. It would seem as if a great many people mean by moral suasion nothing more than flattery and palaver. Consequently when efforts are made to secure legislation that shall put these abominations away, they are afraid to employ government lest it would be a departure from the system of moral suasion. But is not God's government one of moral suasion? Are not his mighty judgments on the one hand and his

mercies on the other, moral suasion?

But not to dwell on the subject of moral suasion; the idea I wish to present to the brethren is this--the great sin and utter shame of the Church and of so many of the ministry in neglecting or refusing to speak out and act promptly and efficiently on these great questions of reform. How could they more directly grieve and quench the Spirit of God than by such a course? Abandon the great work to which they are pledged and sworn, and yet profess to be Christians! No wonder that such a church and such a ministry should look coldly on revivals and find it impossible to promote them. After so much light has blazed before the churches on these subjects, it cannot be that they resist or neglect without great sin.

And shall it be persevered in? If so there can be no doubt that revivals must utterly cease--that the Spirit of God will be grieved entirely away from the ministry and the churches, and nothing better can be expected than utter and universal desolation.

Believe me, dear brethren, it grieves me greatly to feel constrained to speak thus. Is it not a shame; are we not ashamed and shall we not blush to see the Church of God not only turn back from reforming the world--refusing to lead in reform as she ought to do, and then turn around and oppose others who are compelled to lead for want of the help and countenance of those who ought to go forward in these enterprises? If doctors of divinity--if ecclesiastical bodies, theological seminaries and colleges would but lead on in these enterprises, God forbid that they should not have their place. If they would but go forward the Church would follow them, and many who are now compelled to lead because these refuse, would rejoice to fall in behind and sustain them with all their might.

But if the church will not lead--if doctors of divinity, ecclesiastical bodies, colleges and seminaries will do nothing but get together to pass resolutions condemning the movements of reform, what shall be done? Shall they refuse to work in these departments and so hinder those who would work? Who pretends that so great wisdom has been manifested in the various branches of reform as might have been, had the Church with her spiritual leaders only taken the right position? What can be expected but error and confusion, while nearly all the spiritual influence in the world is brought to oppose instead of promote reforms? My brethren, if ecclesiastical bodies, colleges and seminaries will only go forward, who will not bid them God speed? But if they will not go forward--if we hear little nor nothing from them but complaint, denunciation, and rebuke in respect to almost every branch of reform, what can be done?

My soul is sick and agonized with such a state of things. The position of the Church is one of the greatest wonders of the world;--and yet we are gravely asking, why we do not have revivals of religion? Why has the Spirit of God forsaken us? and many are even glad to have revivals cease, and seem disposed to quell every thing down into a state of death-like apathy on every branch of reform.

Now until the Church shall arise and take a different attitude, I am confident that nothing else can be expected than a retrograde movement on the part of the Churches until not even a form of godliness remains among them.

Why cannot we all do in respect to reforms as Pres. Edwards did in respect to revivals? He fearlessly pointed out whatever was wrong and of evil tendency in the means used to promote them, and at the same time was careful to show a more excellent way. His opposition to what was wrong, although fearless and uncompromising, was never so prominent as to overshadow all his engagedness in promoting them. He was their powerful, zealous, and successful advocate and promoter. It became him then to speak out and rebuke whatever was wrong. Every body saw that his rebukes arose not from opposition to revivals as

such, but from his great love for them and from a quenchless zeal to promote them. When he lifted his admonitory voice, the friends of revivals would listen because they knew it to be the voice of a friend and not of an enemy of revivals. Every body knew he spake of the evils sometimes connected with revivals because he loved them in their purity.

Now why cannot we all do so on the subject of reform? My brethren, let us all come forward and show ourselves to be reformers--put our heads and hearts together to promote every branch of reform and also revivals of religion, and then we shall hold a position in which we can successfully oppose and correct the errors of the day either in revivals or reforms. But who will listen to ministers, ecclesiastical bodies, doctors of divinity, missionary societies, or any body else who make no aggressive movements at all in respect to any reform and say almost nothing except to rebuke and condemn? They can talk eloquently of the evils incident to revivals, but are not like Pres. Edwards, zealous and successful in promoting them themselves. They can denounce the madness of abolitionists and the errors and extravagances of both the leaders and followers in others reforms; but alas, how few of them have any thing efficient or impressive to say to promote these great objects either by encouragement, instruction or counsel.

Now if ecclesiastical bodies generally, doctors of divinity, colleges and theological seminaries, had uniformly manifested zeal in all departments of reform, they would be heard. If ministers had manifested zeal and efficiency in these reforms, their church would hear and respect them, and the ministry might lead them anywhere. But now the ministers are complaining that their churches are divided--that themselves are losing the confidence of their people--that ministerial influence is becoming paralyzed--the church influence an abomination.

Is it possible, my dearly beloved brethren, that we can remain blind to the tendencies of things--to the causes that are operating to produce alienation, division, distrust, to grieve away the Spirit, overthrow revivals, and cover the land with darkness and the shadow of death? Is it not time for us, brethren, to repent, to be candid and search out wherein we have been wrong and publicly and privately confess it, and pass public resolutions in our general ecclesiastical bodies, recanting and confessing what has been wrong--confessing in our pulpits, through the press, and in every proper way our sins as Christians and as ministers--our want of sympathy with Christ, our want of compassion for the slave, for the inebriate, for the wretched prostitute, and for all the miserable and ignorant of earth?

May the Lord have mercy on us, my brethren.

Your brother,

C.G. FINNEY

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