

Letters on Revivals--No. 9

by Charles Finney

Fanaticism can arise in revivals when individuals become overly excited and focused on rebuking sin, without exercising benevolence and love.

Scripture: Galatians 5:22

Topics: "Fanaticism", "Love in Ministry"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the dangers of fanaticism that can arise during religious revivals, warning that heightened emotions can lead individuals to act in ways that are contrary to the spirit of love and benevolence. He emphasizes that fanaticism often manifests as a harsh and censorious attitude, where individuals become overly critical and judgmental, mistaking their indignation for righteousness. Finney cautions that this spirit can infiltrate the church, leading to a breakdown of unity and love among believers, and encourages ministers to be vigilant against such tendencies. He calls for a balance of enlightenment and benevolence to prevent the malign influence of fanaticism from taking root in the hearts of the faithful.

Transcript

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

Dear Brethren:

While upon the subject of excitement I wish to make a few suggestions on the danger that highly excited feelings will take a wrong direction and result in fanaticism. Every one is aware that when the feelings are strongly excited, they are capable of being turned in various directions and of assuming various types according to the circumstances of the excited individual. Few persons who have witnessed revivals of religion have not had occasion to remark this tendency of the human mind, and the efforts of Satan to use it for his own advantage, by mingling in the spirit of fanaticism with the spirit of a religious revival.

Fanaticism results from what a certain writer calls "loveless light." Whenever the mind is enlightened in regard to what men ought to be and do and say, and is not at the same time in the exercise of benevolence, a spirit of fanaticism, indignation, rebuke, and denunciation is the almost inevitable result.

By fanaticism I mean a state of mind in which the malign emotions take the control of the will, and hurry the individual away into an outrageous and vindictive effort to sustain what he calls right and truth. He contends for what he regards as truth or right with a malign spirit.

Now in seasons of religious revival there is special danger that fanaticism will spring up under the influence of infernal agency. It is in many respects a peculiarly favorable time for Satan to sow in a rank soil the seed of some of the most turbulent and outrageous forms of error that have ever cursed the world.

Among the crowd who attend preaching at such times, there are almost always persons who have a strong fanatical tendency of mind. They are strongly inclined to censoriousness, fault-finding, vituperation, denunciation and rebuke. It is a strong and ultra democratic tendency of mind, anti-conservative in the extreme and strongly tending to misrule. Now in proportion as persons of this character become enlightened respecting the duties and the sins of men, they are very likely to break forth into a spirit of turbulent fanaticism.

It is well known that almost all the reforms of this and of every age have been cursed by this sort of fanaticism. Temperance, Moral Reform, Physiological and Dietetic Reform, Anti-Slavery,--all have felt the blight; almost nothing has escaped. When lecturers or others take up these questions and discuss them, pouring light upon the public mind, it often seems to disturb a cockatrice's den. The deep and perhaps hitherto hidden tendencies to fanaticism are blown up into flame, and often burst forth as from the molten heart of a volcano. Their indignation is aroused; their censorious and vituperative tongues are let loose; those unruly members that set on fire the course of nature and are set on fire of hell, seem to pour forth a stream of burning lava to scorch and desolate society. Their prayers, their exhortations, every thing they say or do, are but a stream of scolding, fault-finding, and recrimination. They insist upon it, they do well to be angry,--almost to manifest any thing less than the utmost indignation were profane, and suited neither to the subject nor the occasion.

Now it is remarkable to what an extent this class of minds have been brought forward by the different reforms of the day and even by revivals of religion. No matter what the subject is,--if it be the promotion of peace, they will contend for peace with the spirit of outrageous war. With their tongues they will make war upon every thing that opposes them; pour forth unmeasured abuse upon all who disagree with them, and make no compromise nor hold any communion with those who cannot at once subscribe to their peculiar views. If the subject be Anti-slavery, they contend for it with the spirit of slaveholders; and while they insist that all men are free, they will allow freedom of opinion to none but themselves. They would enslave the views and sentiments of all who differ from them, and soon castigate them into an acquiescence with their own opinions.

In revivals of religion this spirit generally manifests itself in a kind of scolding and denunciatory way of praying for all classes of people. Next, in exhortation, preaching, or in conversation. It especially attacks ministers and the leading influences of the church, and moves right on progressively until it finally regards the visible church as Babylon, and all men as on the high road to hell who do not come out and denounce her.

Now this spirit often springs up in revivals so stealthily and insidiously that its true character is not at first detected. Perhaps the church is cold, the minister and leading influences are out of the way, and it seems no more than just, nay even necessary that some severity should be used towards those who are so far out of the way. The individual himself feels this so strongly that he does not suspect himself of fanaticism though he deals out a large measure of rebuke in which a sprinkling of the malign elements is unconsciously mingled. He pleads the example of Christ, of apostles and prophets, and can quote many passages from the Bible very similar to those which he now uses, and deems himself justified in using inasmuch as they are drawn from scripture. He assumes their application as he applies them, and also

that himself stands in God's stead and is the mouth of God in rebuking iniquity.

Now when this spirit first appears it grates across the tender minds of those who are in a spirit of love. At first it distresses and agonizes them; but by and by there seems to be so much truth in what is said; their prayers and exhortations are so exciting; their own attention being directed to the faults that are so sternly rebuked, they begin to drink in the same spirit and partake of that boisterous and fiery zeal which was at first so inconsistent with the sweetness of their spirit. They begin to see as they suppose, how the denunciations of the prophets of Christ and of his apostles apply to those among whom they live. Their attention is wholly engrossed with the faults of the church and the ministry, and they can see nothing good. They begin to doubt and query whether the visible church are not all hypocrites. At first they fear but soon believe that nearly all the ministers are self-deceived, hirelings, conservatives, ambitious, stewards of the devil. Church organizations are looked upon first with suspicion, then with contempt and abhorrence. "Coming out of Babylon," becomes the order of the day.

Fanaticism takes on a very great variety of types. Its modifications are almost innumerable. From the spirit of the crusades when men went forth with boots and spurs, with fire and sword to convert their fellow men to Christianity, down to the obscure professor of religion who mutters in a corner his scolding and fault-finding with every body and every thing, all the intervening space is filled with the multiform phases of fanaticism. From the fiery zeal with which the itinerant declaims, vociferates and denounces both church and state, down to the individual who rather looks than speaks out his fanaticism, you may find this class of persons kindling up and nursing the fires of fanaticism in almost every corner of Christendom.

Now this is doubtless the spirit of Satan which he has manifested in the church and in the world through all past ages.

We have one able book on the subject of fanaticism; but we need another which shall take up and expose its more modern developments--which shall delineate as on a page of light the workings of this dark spirit whose malign influence, silently working like leaven, would fain leaven the whole lump and make this earth malign like hell. More of this at another time.

Your Brother,

C.G. FINNEY.

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