

# Prof. Finney's Letters--No. 32

by Charles Finney

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of Christian faithfulness in reproofing sin, especially in the Church, and warns against the dangers of censoriousness and complaining of reproof.*

**Scripture:** Proverbs 9:8, Proverbs 27:6, Matthew 18:15, Galatians 6:1, Ephesians 4:15, 1 Thessalonians 5:14, 2 Timothy 4:2, Hebrews 3:13, James 5:19-20, 1 Peter 5:5

**Topics:** "Reproof", "Christian Accountability"

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## Description

Charles Finney addresses the Church about the critical distinction between censoriousness and Christian faithfulness, emphasizing that reproof is a necessary aspect of spiritual growth and accountability. He argues that many confuse the act of reproofing sin with being judgmental, which can lead to detrimental consequences for the Church. Finney insists that ministers, like all Christians, must be open to correction and that failing to accept reproof reflects a proud spirit. He calls for a culture of compassionate and faithful reproof within the Church to ensure its health and integrity. Ultimately, he encourages a humble acceptance of correction, citing biblical examples to support his points.

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## Transcript

Dear Brother:

Permit me, through your columns, to address the Church upon a subject of great delicacy, and yet of immeasurable importance. From repeated remarks in different Religious Periodicals, I have observed, that a very important distinction is overlooked, which appears to me calculated to work incalculable mischief in the Church. The writers to whom I allude appear to confound censoriousness with Christian faithfulness, than which a more ruinous error could scarcely be entertained or taught; and especially does this confusion seem to exist in their minds, and in their writings, in respect to whatever is said of the delinquencies of ministers of the gospel. They seem to assume, either that ministers of the gospel are universally in a state of entire and permanent sanctification, or if they are not, they are not, like other men, to be reproofed for sin, and exhorted to repentance. It would seem, that nothing can be said of the sins of ministers, and that they cannot be reproofed or warned, even in the utmost kindness and love, without its being regarded and treated by those writers, as of course censorious and denunciatory.

2. By the class of writers to whom I allude, it seems also to be supposed, that to speak plainly and pointedly of the sins of the Church, "to reprove, warn, exhort, and rebuke" them, in a pointed, though in an affectionate and earnest manner, is also censorious and denunciatory.

3. In short, it seems to be the practice of many writers of the present day, utterly to confound, as I said, Christian faithfulness with censoriousness. Now, if this confusion is suffered to pass without notice, till reproof, instead of being considered a virtue, shall be regarded as a vice, the Church is inevitably ruined. If, to reprove the sins of ministers, or any class of Christians or men whatever, is to be regarded as of course censorious and denunciatory, then the power of the glorious gospel must be destroyed. Permit me now to point out--

I. What I suppose to be the true distinction between censoriousness and Christian faithfulness.

II. To show that Christian faithfulness is universally obligatory.

III. That ministers are as much bound to administer reproof to their fellow-ministers, as to any class of persons whatever.

IV. That a disposition to complain of this, is conclusive evidence of a proud and turbulent spirit.

I. The difference between censoriousness and Christian faithfulness.

1. I suppose censoriousness to consist in a disposition to censure, blame, or condemn others, and to manifest itself in speaking of the faults of others, with a selfish and wicked intention.

2. It manifests itself in passing severe and uncharitable judgments in regard to others' motives, when their conduct appears to be right.

3. In giving publicity to their faults, in a manner that is not demanded by the great principle of benevolence.

4. I regard Christian faithfulness, in respect to the delinquencies of others, as consisting in reproofing others for their sins, from love to God and the souls of men.

5. In reproofing, warning, and exhorting men to forsake their sins, for the honor of God and the good of his Church. Christian faithfulness, so far as reproof is concerned, consists in that plain, faithful, pointed, yet compassionate dealing with all classes of men, which was manifested by the prophets, by Christ, and the Apostles. The sins for which the inspired writers reproofed and rebuked men, were not sins which they knew merely by inspiration, but sins which lay open to the public view, and sins of which they knew them to be guilty, by their own observation. In the reproofs, therefore, which they administered, we learn the great fundamental principles upon which reproofs and rebukes are to be administered. And we are to regard those principles as the laws of Christ's kingdom, and to administer reproof in accordance with them. Let me, therefore, be understood to say, that Christian faithfulness in regard to reproofing sin, consists in a thorough, yet compassionate and benevolent withstanding, reproofing, and if, need be, rebuking every form of sin, in high and low places.

It consists in speaking freely, when the circumstances of the Church and the glory of God demand it, of the public sins of all classes of persons, in high as well as in low places. But again, I say, to speak unnecessarily, or from malicious motives, of the sins of any class of men, however public and outrageous their sins may be, is censoriousness.

It. Christian faithfulness is universally obligatory.

1. This is an express command of the Bible: "Thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, and not suffer sin upon him." There are a great many passages of scripture that expressly enjoin this duty.

2. The nature of the case shows, that it must be a universal duty. It is a plain dictate of benevolence. A benevolent man will just as naturally reprove others for their sins, and warn them to flee from the wrath to come, as he would give warning if his neighbor's house was on fire.

III. Ministers are as much bound to reprove their fellow-ministers as to reprove any class of persons whatever.

1. When Peter was to be blamed, Paul withstood him to his face. Here, we have the example of an Apostle reproving an Apostle.

2. Ministers are no where made an exception to the general law of Christ's kingdom--that all men are to be reprov'd for their sins.

3. There is nothing in the nature of the case demanding that they should be made an exception.

4. The sins of ministers are eminently injurious to the Church and to the world. There is, therefore, an especial reason why they should be dealt faithfully with for their sins.

5. As they are regarded as public examples to the people, their sins should be especially pointed out, as sins, and publicly reprov'd; lest their sinfulness should be overlooked by the people, and come to be imitated by them as virtues.

6. Their professions of piety are such, as to render them eminently deserving of reproof, if they do not walk uprightly.

7. Just in proportion to the importance of their calling, their public station, and their great influence, is it important that they should be faithfully dealt with by all classes of men, and especially by their brother ministers. Respect should always be had to their official character, and reproof should be administered to them especially, and indeed to all men, in great candor, kindness, compassion, and yet with great and searching faithfulness.

IV. To complain of this is evidence of a proud and turbulent spirit.

1. A disposition to resist or resent reproof, administered in a spirit of Christian faithfulness, is, on its face, wholly an anti-christian spirit. If persons cannot be reprov'd, or even buffeted, for their faults, and yet take it patiently, they are certainly far enough from being in a Christian temper. Peter says, "What glory is it, if, when ye are buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? But if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. For even hereunto were ye called; because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that we should follow his steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth; who, when He was reviled, reviled not again; when He suffered, He threatened not; but committed Himself to Him that judgeth righteously." Now the Apostle plainly teaches, in this passage, that even to suffer rebuke or buffeting patiently, when we are really in fault, is no evidence of a Christian spirit, but a refusal to do so, must of course be an evidence of a proud and turbulent spirit.

2. When any class of men think themselves so far above reproof, either from their exalted station or great influence, that others have no right to reprove them for their sins, they must be in any thing but a Christian temper of mind; and especially, when they refuse reproof from their brethren, who are not only naturally but ecclesiastically their equals.

3. In short, when any men, or set of men, are in such a state of mind as to be unwilling to be reproved for sin by the merest child or novice, they are in a proud and impenitent state of mind. And in that state of mind, God cannot and will not bless them.

#### REMARKS.

1. It is greatly to be wished, that there were much more of Christian faithfulness, in respect to administering reproof for every form and degree of sin, than there is, in the Church.

2. There must be a great deal more of this, or the Church cannot prosper.

3. It is greatly desirable, that ministers should be much more faithful than they are in reproofing each other, both in public and in private.

4. It is greatly to be desired, that this should be done in a much better spirit, than that in which it generally is done.

5. That it should be done very thoroughly, and in a manner that will reach the very seat of the difficulty.

5. It is of infinite importance, that such plain dealing should be received in a right spirit, and that ministers especially should consider well the example of David, who, although a king, when he was personally and pointedly rebuked by Nathan, instead of resenting it, and complaining of censoriousness and denunciation, exclaimed with all humility, like a man of God, "I have sinned against the Lord!"

7. As long as ministers are disposed to complain, and to treat all reproof, however kindly administered, as of course censoriousness and denunciation, they need not expect the blessing of the Lord.

8. When this compliant is made, we should examine carefully and prayerfully our spirit, motive, and manner of administering reproof; but should by no means be deterred from following up reproof, in a thorough, searching, benevolent, compassionate manner; either until there is reformation, or the case becomes so hopeless as to come within the principle laid down by Christ, when He commanded his disciples to let the religious teachers of his day alone, because, "they were blind leaders of the blind."

Now, brethren, I have written this letter in the kindness and affection of my heart, and I am not without my apprehensions, that even in this I shall be charged with censoriousness--and that what I know to be spoken in love, will be confounded with a spirit of censoriousness. But, my brethren, I cannot help it; I wish to call the attention of the Church and of the Ministry, to this plain distinction, and beg of them duly and prayerfully to consider it, whenever they find themselves reproved. "Let the righteous smite me, it shall do me good. It shall be an excellent oil."

Your brother in the love and fellowship of the blessed gospel,

C.G.FINNEY

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