

Prof. Finney's Letters.--No. 33.

by Charles Finney

The sermon discusses the importance of understanding moral obligation and the relationship between natural ability and moral obligation, with a focus on the attainability of entire sanctification in this life.

Scripture: Matthew 5:48, Romans 6:22, 2 Corinthians 7:1, Ephesians 4:24, Philippians 3:14, Colossians 3:10, 1 Thessalonians 4:3, Hebrews 12:14, 1 Peter 1:15-16, 1 John 1:7

Topics: "Moral Obligation", "Entire Sanctification"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the complexities surrounding the doctrine of entire sanctification, emphasizing that misunderstandings often stem from fundamental philosophical questions rather than biblical clarity. He outlines key positions that need exploration, including the nature of moral obligation, the essence of holiness, and the attainability of entire sanctification in this life. Finney argues that moral obligation is intrinsically linked to natural ability and knowledge, and he critiques opposing views that deny this connection. He aims to present a non-controversial examination of the subject to foster understanding within the Church. Ultimately, he asserts that entire sanctification is both a duty and a privilege for all believers.

Transcript

Dear Brother:

As I have continued to read what has been said in various publications, on the subject of entire sanctification, I have been more and more struck with the fact, that the difficulties in the way of a right understanding of the subject in most minds, and especially in the minds of ministers, are more fundamental than might have been expected on so plain a subject. In preparing my course of lectures for the press, I aimed mostly at placing the subject before the public simply as a Bible question, and avoiding, so far as I consistently could, the discussion of the metaphysical matters pertaining thereto. This, to the minds of common readers, I then supposed, and now suppose, to be the most acceptable and profitable method of presenting this great truth. But there is still a large class of minds who need to have their attention called to the consideration of certain metaphysical questions, which belong rather to the philosophy of the subject, than to the plain Bible announcement of it.

As the subject is continually up for investigation, and the interest of the Church in it perpetually increasing, I purpose, through your columns, to present still another view of this subject to the churches, not inconsistent with what I have before said, but in some respects a more fundamental and philosophical

view of the subject. I have been considering the best method of presenting it, and have sometimes thought I would write a review of the leading articles that have been published in opposition to this doctrine. But I have ever been afraid even of the form of controversy, and greatly prefer to take up an original investigation of it, in my own way, without either the form or the spirit of controversy. In doing this I of course intend so to present the subject as to meet the principal objections and difficulties I have seen stated; but in a way that shall avoid any such collision with my brethren as might produce controversy. I shall endeavor to condense my articles as much as I can, and still have them perspicuous. I design to write for thinkers, and for those who are willing to take the trouble to give the subject a somewhat fundamental examination.

That your readers may be apprised of something like the outline of what I intend to present, I will in this article state the main positions I design to discuss, reserving to myself, however, the privilege of making any addition to, or alteration of the prescribed train of thought which may seem to be called for, from any new light that may dawn from any quarter upon the subject. The outline I shall give will contain a summary of the principal positions that seem at present to require investigation.

I. What is implied in moral obligation.

II. Wherein moral character consists.

III. What constitutes right character, or holiness.

IV. What constitutes wrong character, or sinfulness.

V. That moral character is always wholly right or wholly wrong, and never partly right and partly wrong at the same time.

VI. What entire sanctification is.

VII. That regeneration is entire sanctification.

VIII. The difference between entire sanctification, considered as an act, and entire sanctification, considered as a state; or, the difference between entire present sanctification and continued sanctification.

IX. That faith is entire sanctification, considered as an act, but as a state faith is a condition of entire sanctification.

X. Entire sanctification, as a state, is attainable in this life.

XI. It has been attained.

XII. In the Millenium this state will be the common attainment of Christians.

XIII. It is the duty and privilege of all persons to enter at once into this state.

XIV. Why they do not.

XV. Make some inferences and remarks.

Before I begin the discussion, perhaps it may be well to remark, that some of your readers may inquire why we dwell so much upon the subject of entire sanctification? To this I answer:

1. The subject needs to be and must be discussed, till it is understood by the Church.
2. There is now sufficient excitement in the Church upon the subject, to induce them to read what is written.
3. I have myself said comparatively little, directly upon the subject, except in the course of lectures which appeared in the last volume of your paper.
4. As a general thing, it is at present the most interesting and important subject of consideration and discussion, that is before the Church.
5. Although the minds of some may be so well settled as not to need farther investigation, yet I am persuaded, that, as a general thing, no subject could be more acceptable and important to the general class of readers than this.

I will proceed with the investigation and show:

I. What things are implied in moral obligation:

1. Moral obligation implies that possession of the powers of moral agency; namely, Understanding, Reason, Conscience, Free-will, and Sensibility. Some of these powers may be possessed by mere animals. Reason, Free-will, and Conscience, are the characteristics that distinguish moral agents from mere animals. It is, however, believed, at least by me, that a being would not be a moral agent, who did not possess all the above named powers and susceptibilities.

But here, for the benefit of many of my readers, it will be important to go a little into explanation, as it respects the meaning of these words.

(1.) By Understanding, I mean that power or faculty of the mind that receives the perceptions of the senses with respect to the existence and qualities of sensible objects, forms notions of them, combines, and classifies them, &c. This faculty is employed solely about sensible objects.

(2.) By Reason, I intend that power of the mind that is employed solely about absolute, eternal, infinite, and necessary truths. The reason takes knowledge of absolute and necessary truths, by a direct perception of them, just as the perceiving faculty takes knowledge of sensible objects by direct perceptions.

(3.) By Conscience, I mean that function of the reason that perceives and enforces moral obligation--that pronounces the sentence of condemnation or approbation, upon disobedience or obedience.

(4.) By Free-will, I intend the power which a moral agent possesses, of choosing in any direction, in view of motives.

(5.) By the Sensibility, I mean the susceptibility to pleasure and pain, or the faculty of feeling.

2. Moral obligation implies moral liberty, or natural ability. By this it is intended, that a moral agent must not only possess the faculties of a moral agent, but the power and ability to use them, according to his sovereign election, in acts of obedience or disobedience; being always responsible for the manner in which he uses his natural ability or moral liberty.

3. Moral obligation implies, so much light or knowledge, as to enable the agent to affirm oughtness of any action or occupation: that is--law, in order to be obligatory, must be prescribed, or published; and the agent, before he can be under a moral obligation to obey, must have sufficient light to perceive, that he ought or ought not, to do or omit the thing in question. If the powers of moral agency exist, it is of no use, unless the agent possess sufficient light to perceive obligation. And when obligation is perceived, the very perception of a thing as obligatory, implies that there is natural ability to obey or disobey. It should always, then, be understood, that moral obligation implies the possession of the powers of moral agency, natural power or ability to use them in the prescribed or required manner, together with so much light or knowledge as to produce the conviction of obligation; or, in other words, so much knowledge as to enable the conscience to affirm moral obligation.

4. And here it should be distinctly understood, that moral obligation can only be commensurate with natural ability, including in the idea of natural ability that degree of knowledge I have just mentioned. I know it has been denied by a certain class of philosophers, that moral obligation implies natural ability in the sense I have explained it. With this class of philosophers I have, at present, nothing to do, as I write to those and for those who have long professed to embrace the doctrine of natural ability, as indispensable to moral obligation.

Please to observe, now, and bear it always in mind, that those who are called New School Divines have all along, for many years, admitted the doctrine of natural ability as here explained, and have based their exhortations to sinners upon the fact, that men really possess natural faculties and powers to obey God; or, in other words, to do all their duty, and that, in every case, human responsibility and moral obligation are commensurate, and only commensurate with natural ability, including a knowledge of duty. And here let me say, that from this ground they can never be driven, so long as the law of God remains the rule of human action; for the very letter and spirit of the law of God requires of men, just the use of all, and no more than all the strength that each moral agent possesses.

5. I have been surprised that some of the principal New School writers and reviewers, in their controversy with the doctrine of entire sanctification, should not only depart from and overlook the doctrine of natural ability, but make assumptions as the very foundation of their opposition, that are as far as possible from the New School admissions and views upon the subject of natural ability, and from their own well known former views upon this subject. For example, in opposition to the doctrine of entire sanctification, it has been urged that men must be sure that they understand the law of God in all its applications to human action, or they cannot be entirely sanctified, or know that they were, even if they were. Now who does not see that this objection assumes that men can be under moral obligation where they have no knowledge or light? In other words that something can be their duty of which they have no knowledge. But this is the same thing as to deny that moral obligation implies the possession of the powers of moral agency, together with sufficient light or knowledge to produce the affirmation of oughtness before obligation can in any case attach.

6. Again, it has been assumed in opposition to this doctrine, that a man must know the exact measure of his own ability, before he can know whether he fully obeys God. But this again assumes that he may be under obligation beyond what he is able to know to be his duty. As if an individual could be under a moral obligation to exert a greater measure of ability in the service of God than he knows himself to possess. In other words, that moral obligation can exceed that degree of light which produces the affirmation of oughtness. But this is a flat denial of the doctrine of natural ability as universally held by New School divines.

7. Again, it has been assumed that a man must be sure that his judgment is in every case infallible, before he can perfectly obey God, or know that he obeys Him, if he does. Now this again is not only a denial of the doctrine of natural ability as indispensable to moral obligation, but is an assumption of the direct opposite as truth; that is, it assumes that a man may be under obligation to do that, which according to the best light he has, he judges not to be his duty; in other words still, that his obligation may far exceed his light, which is a direct denial of natural ability.

8. Again, it has been assumed, that men are under obligation to render to God just as high and perfect a service as if they had all the knowledge which they might have had, had they never sinned, and all the perfection of powers which they might have had, had they been fully developed, by the exercise of universal and perfect holiness. This too assumes the direct opposite of the doctrine of natural ability as true; for no one in his senses will pretend, that men have natural ability to render any such degree of service.

Now these, and several other objections of precisely a kindred character, are, strange as it may seem, brought forward by New School Divines, as an unanswerable refutation of the doctrine of entire sanctification of this life: asserting and avowing as they do, that it is absurd to suppose that any human being can do these things. Now observe, these brethren maintain, that these things are really obligatory, notwithstanding it is absurd to suppose that any man has power to comply with these obligations. They insist on these things being essential to entire sanctification--that men are bound to be entirely sanctified--and yet, maintain the absurdity of their being able to yield this measure of obedience. Will the dear brethren look at the inconsistency of this. All such objections as these take it for granted, that a man is bound to know what he cannot know--that he may be under moral obligation, without any knowledge of such obligation--that he may sin, when he cannot know that he sins--which is the same thing as to affirm, that a law can be binding when it cannot be known; which is again to deny the doctrine, that natural ability, including a knowledge of duty, is indispensable to moral obligation.

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

C.G. FINNEY

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