

Professor Finney's Letters--No. 28.

by Charles Finney

The importance of maintaining a covenant with the church, even in the face of disagreement or controversy, and the need for patience, love, and honesty in the pursuit of truth.

Scripture: Hebrews 10:24

Topics: "Patience in Faith", "Covenant Commitment"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the issue of church members considering withdrawal from their congregations due to perceived violations of covenant obligations by the church. He emphasizes that individual members must remain committed to their covenant with God and each other, regardless of others' failures. Finney encourages patience, love, and forbearance towards those who misunderstand or misrepresent the doctrine of entire sanctification, urging believers to reflect on their own past misconceptions. He warns against becoming defensive about personal beliefs and stresses the importance of seeking truth over consistency. Ultimately, he calls for a thorough and honest examination of scripture regarding this vital issue facing the Church.

Transcript

Beloved in the Lord:

Since my last it has been suggested to me, that some of you have thought yourselves warranted in withdrawing from the particular churches to which you belong, because they lived in the open violation of their covenant engagements; and even account it a heresy in you, to profess to live in accordance with your covenant engagements, or even to believe, that any one ever did or will live up to their covenant engagements in this life.

Now, beloved, permit me to say, that although the churches to which you belong may have violated their covenant engagements every day of their lives, in neglecting to watch over you, to promote your purity, peace, and edification, or in any thing else, that falls short of a rejection of the fundamental truths of religion; yet this cannot justify a disregard of the covenant on your part. The covenant was made by you all, with God, and with each other. If any of your brethren have violated the terms of the covenant, your business is to labor with them, patiently and perseveringly, in order to bring them to repentance; but not to consider yourselves at liberty to abandon or break the covenant, because they do. You ought not to suppose yourselves discharged from your covenant obligations to them, because they neglect to fulfill their covenant obligations to you. Can it be that a breach of a church covenant, on the part of any of its

members, can discharge the other members from their covenant obligations, and thus set the covenant aside, as it respects all obligation to him who has violated it? If so, there is probably not a church in the land, whose covenant is not, long since, nullified, and no longer binding upon its members. The truth is, church covenants can never be disposed of in this manner. If your brethren have neglected to fulfill their covenant obligations to you, this is no good reason why you should do the same to them. Remember, the covenant was primarily made with God. With Him you covenanted to watch over your brethren, to seek the purity, peace, and edification of the church. And shall sin, on the part of the church, render this covenant null and void, and discharge you from obligation to fulfill it? Certainly not.

Permit me, beloved, to beseech you, in these days of rebuke, misunderstanding, and misrepresentation, to beware of controversy, and remember, that you will find it very difficult to indulge in the form, without imbibing the spirit of controversy. The Lord is undoubtedly designing an appropriate trial of your faith, and to bring your patience into perfect exercise. If those religious papers fall into your hands, which are professedly opposing the doctrine of entire sanctification in this life, you will need great patience, love, forbearance, and candor, to possess your souls in such a sweet and heavenly frame, as not to quench the Holy Spirit, and fall into bondage. The amazing amount of misapprehension, misstatement, false logic, false philosophy, and erroneous interpretations of scripture; together with so much apparent want of candor, as you will witness in some instances, at least, will greatly try your feelings. And let me advise you, often to recur to the states of mind through which, probably, most of you passed, in respect to this doctrine, before you embraced it. You will do well to reflect upon your great misapprehension of it at first--the prejudices of education that so long surrounded and enslaved you--the amount of influence which a regard to your reputation had for some time in keeping you back from either seeing or embracing the truth--what erroneous definitions you gave of Christian Perfection, or entire sanctification-- and how inappropriate many of the proof-texts and arguments in favor of this doctrine appeared to you, while under the influence of your erroneous definitions. In short, I beg of you to reflect upon the whole process through which your mind was led, and the exceedingly patience and forbearance of God, in conducting you to your present conclusions. You are no doubt now often tempted to be impatient with your brethren, and to accuse them, either of great stupidity or dishonesty, in treating this subject as they do. Now it is true that many of them may be guilty of both. But you would do well to reflect, that you have also, in all probability, been as stupid, and dishonest, and blind, and hateful, as most of them. Now copy the example of God. Be as patient with them, as He was with you. Be as persevering and kind in endeavoring to guide and instruct them, as He was with you. Do not rail, nor fret, nor be discouraged, in your efforts to do them good. But in these respects copy the example of God.

Remember, that the excitement upon this subject must form a crisis. It is a great and solemn question. It deeply concerns the vital interests of the Church. It is one over which the Calvinistic churches have long and wickedly slumbered, and which has been, as yet, but very imperfectly agitated, discussed, and understood, by any branch of the Christian Church, at least for centuries. The light is now dawning upon this question. For some time, it was looked upon by the great mass of the Church, as a kind of weakness, if I may so express it, in our Methodist brethren, and worthy of, and likely to excite but very little attention. But God is evidently, by his providence and his Spirit, pressing the subject upon the general attention of Christians of all denominations, and to a great or less extent in all truly Christian countries. The question is now likely to undergo a thorough investigation; and the truth upon this subject must and will be known. That any of us have yet exactly arrived at the whole truth upon this subject, may be questionable. At least, some or many of the statements of our views, as well as our views themselves, may be seen, in the course of the discussion, to need correction and amendment. And one thing is of the greatest importance;

and that is, that we should everyone be sure to gain and maintain an entirely honest, candid, firm state of mind in relation to the whole question, holding our minds continually open to the influence of new light, and be willing to candidly weigh the arguments on all sides of this question, and make up our minds, and frankly and meekly avow our sentiments, as we have opportunity, without disguise and without the fear of man.

Let us, my brethren, be especially on our guard against feeling ourselves so committed to any opinion upon this subject, as to feel called upon to defend our opinion for consistency-sake. Let our love of consistency be entirely subordinate to our love of truth; and let us come to a critical and honest examination of the Bible, with the fixed determination, to follow its teachings, lead where they may.

Beloved, we must expect, that there will be a great deal of excitement upon this question; a vast deal of misapprehension, misstatement, want of candor, and multitudes of grievous things. For the state of the Christian Church is such, that it were entirely unreasonable, to expect any other result; when the entire, and universal, and eternal abandonment of all sin, and lust, and selfishness, is pressed upon them, as their immediate and practicable duty. It will not surprise me, if this question should produce a greater amount of excitement, and a greater commotion in the theological world, than has been witnessed upon any one subject, since the days of the Reformation. As I said, upon this subject, there must be a crisis formed, a rallying of all the powers and elements of mind, and a coming up from one motive or another, to an examination of this question. No doubt many grievous and unreasonable things will be said and done; but, "possess ye your souls in patience," and "fret not yourselves because of evil doers:" but, "let us patiently gird up the loins of our minds," and meekly address ourselves, with all perseverance and love, to the thorough investigation of this glorious truth of the blessed gospel of God.

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

C.G.FINNEY

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