

Professor Finney's Letters. --No. 29.

by Charles Finney

Professor Finney addresses objections to the concept of entire sanctification, emphasizing the role of consciousness in understanding one's spiritual state.

Scripture: Psalm 19:12, Jeremiah 17:9, Romans 7:15, 1 Corinthians 11:28, 2 Corinthians 13:5, Galatians 5:22-23, Philippians 2:12, Hebrews 4:12, James 1:22-25, 1 John 1:8-10

Topics: "Self-Examination", "Consciousness and Sanctification"

Description

Charles Finney addresses objections to his teachings on entire sanctification, emphasizing that consciousness is the primary means by which individuals can understand their spiritual state. He argues that if God requires self-knowledge, then humans must possess the ability to know their own character, despite the challenges posed by ignorance and sin. Finney clarifies that consciousness is essential for recognizing one's thoughts and actions, and that it is through this awareness that one can discern their relationship with God's law. He acknowledges the potential for self-deception but insists that the truth of consciousness should not be suppressed due to fear of misuse.

Transcript

Dear Brother:

In my lectures on entire sanctification, in the last volume of your paper, I gave an intimation, that I might notice and reply to any objection that might be seriously felt by myself or others, to the view I then presented. There are two objections that seem to have been felt by a number of minds to some things which I adduced, upon which I beg leave to make a few remarks; not by way of controversy, but for the purpose of calling the attention of the brethren to what seems to me to be a full answer to the objections that have been stated.

I have recently received, from a very esteemed brother, a communication in respect to two positions taken by me in my lectures upon the above subject, from which I quote the following:

"What you teach about consciousness as evidence of a state of entire sanctification, I consider as leading to serious error. The sum of what you say is, That consciousness, with the law of God before us as the standard, is the highest and best evidence of a state of entire sanctification, whose testimony we cannot doubt. This I admit, supposing the mind not ignorant, but perfectly acquainted with the claims of the law upon it and with perfect accuracy to recognize its own states and operations. But, my dear brother, how

can this be, 'with all the ignorance and debility of body and mind caused by intemperance and abuse of the human constitution, through so many generations?' Can we, in these circumstances, have a consciousness so perfectly enlightened and accurate? Is it not a contradiction? See what our consciousness, with all our ignorance and debility of body and mind, must do. First, it must determine, with unerring accuracy, what all the ignorance and debility which belong to the particular person amounts to, that it may decide how much the law requires of him; for this it must exactly determine, or it cannot tell when he will be conformed to the standard; and then it must know, with the most perfect accuracy, every state of the mind, every feeling, motive and volition, or it cannot testify to the entire sanctification of the person. And I ask, if this is not the work rather of a mind perfect in its powers, and infallible in its knowledge of its own operations, than of a mind ignorant and debilitated in consequence of folly and sin."

I will make a few brief remarks upon this extract, for the purpose, not merely of answering the esteemed writer, but also with a design to obviate the difficulties to which he alludes, as they seem to lie in other minds besides his. In the volume I have published upon this subject, which is just through the press, I trust I have made this subject sufficiently plain. But as it is not yet bound, and will not be in circulation for some weeks, I will in the mean time make the following remarks:

1. The difficulties felt by my brother, upon this subject, seem to be founded--

(1 .) In the assumption, that man can by no possibility know his own present character; or,

(2.) That if he can know it, he can only know it in some other way than by his own consciousness.

Upon the first of these assumptions, I remark:

1. That if man is not naturally able to know his own character, he is not bound to know it.

2. That if a man, through his own fault, had become delirious, or an idiot, his blame lies altogether in that act, or those acts that deprived him of the use of his reason. And that, being an idiot or lunatic, he is no longer a moral agent, and is no longer under moral obligation, while his idiocy or lunacy remains.

3. That if man is not naturally able to know himself, God has no right to require him to know himself. But since God does require him to know himself, as in 2 Cor. 13:5, the presumption is inevitable, that man has natural ability to know himself. "Examine yourselves whether ye be in the faith; prove your ownelves. Know ye not your ownelves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?"

4. Ps. 19:12: "Who can understand his errors?" Jer. 17:9: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" These passages do not teach, that men are naturally unable to know their personal characters; but that the deceitfulness of the heart is so great as to render such knowledge extremely difficult.

Upon the second assumption, viz: that if men are able to know their present character, they can acquire this knowledge from some other source than their own consciousness, I remark:

1. There appear to be confused notions among most persons, in respect to what consciousness is. I must, therefore define what I mean by consciousness.

Consciousness is sometimes spoken of as a power or capacity of the mind, and sometimes as an act or effect of that power. It is commonly used in this latter sense, and may be defined to be--the mind's

cognizance of its own existence and states, or actions. If this is a correct definition, and I believe it cannot be doubted, we get our whole knowledge, on all subjects, from consciousness. We know absolutely nothing, upon any subject, only as it is revealed to us by consciousness. Every sensation, every thought, every volition, every impression upon the sensibility, every perception, every conception, every act of the imagination or fancy, every act of memory, every act of judgment, every affirmation of the reason, and every other possible or conceivable mental state, or act, is given to us by consciousness, and by consciousness alone. Whatever, then, a man knows, upon any subject, he knows by his own consciousness, and in no other possible way. But it should be understood, that consciousness never reasons, never forms a judgment, never feels. It consists simply in the mind's recognition of its own existence, actions, and whatever impressions are made upon it.

2. In the above extract, it appears to me, that the brother confounds consciousness with those powers of the mind, that action of which is revealed to us by consciousness. Other brethren have supposed, that we are indebted, not to consciousness for a knowledge of our present characters, but that the appeal must be made to the word and Spirit of God. But to this I answer:

3. That to be sure, our opinions in respect to the law of God, and in respect to our own character, are to be formed under the light, and in accordance with the word and Spirit of God. But the question is, how are we to know what we think of the law of God, or what our opinions are in respect to its requirements? How do we gain the knowledge, that we have any perception at all of the law of God, or any understanding of what it means? How do we know that we exist--that we think--that we read the Bible--that we have certain thoughts and emotions, certain judgments and affirmations of our reason, respecting the law of God, and our own course of feeling and conduct in view of it? To all this I answer, we know these things only by our consciousness. In no other possible way can we know them.

4. Again, I remark--that I have felt not a little surprised, that New School Divines, men who profess to believe the doctrine of the natural ability of men to do all their duty, should reason upon this subject, as if they denied man's natural ability to know his own present character.

5. I should like to inquire of my brethren who take this ground, whether they mean to deny man's ability to know his own present character, or whether they maintain his obligation, and still deny his natural ability? If they deny his obligation to know his own character, then, of course, they must admit, that his ignorance of his own present character is not sinful, and that it is, therefore, in no sense inconsistent with his being in a state of entire sanctification. And if they admit his obligation, but deny his ability to know his present character, then they must give up the doctrine of man's natural ability to do whatever is required of him.

6. Should they admit man's natural ability to know his own present character, or any thing else whatever, I should esteem it a favor to be informed by them, in what other way they are to get this information, but by the testimony of consciousness?

7. I would inquire if a man is to have no opinion in respect to his present character; and if he is, on what this opinion is to be based? Is he to form the judgment that he is a converted, or an unconverted man? On what ground does he form this opinion? If it be answered that he is to receive the testimony of scripture, I ask, if the scripture affirms any where that A B by name, is a converted or unconverted man? and even if it did, how are we to become acquainted with this fact, but by being conscious of the perception of this truth taught in the Bible?

8. I suppose it will be universally admitted that so far as we are capable of knowing our own characters, we come at this knowledge, by a comparison of ourselves with the law of God. But how does this comparison of all those acts of the mind that make up our character, with the law of God, and induce a final judgment in the case, come to be known by us. I answer simply and only by our own consciousness. I cannot therefore but express surprise, that my brethren should stumble as they do, at the assertion that Christians may know when they are in a state of sanctification, by the testimony of their own consciousness.

9. But it is apprehended, that this assertion will lead individuals to deceive themselves, appealing to their own consciousness, instead of the word of God. To this I answer:

The same objection might hold true in respect to the question whether a man has been converted or not; whether he loves God at all or not; whether he believes, or whether he reads his Bible at all, or not. To this it has been said, that he is not to judge from his own consciousness, whether he is converted or not, but by his life and fruits. But to this I answer--it is indeed by his life and fruits that he is to be known, and know himself; but how does he know what his life is, and what his fruits are, but by his own consciousness? How does he know that he has such an affection, puts forth such an action, goes to such a place, does or omits any thing whatever? I answer--he knows it only by his consciousness.

In my Treatise just through the press, I have made the following remarks, in relations to those states of mind, of which we have but slight consciousness:

"While I say that consciousness is the only evidence we have or can have of our spiritual state, and of the exercises of our own minds, it should be distinctly kept in mind, that many thoughts, emotions, and affections pass in our minds, which we do not so distinctly recognize at the time as to remember them for an hour, or perhaps for a moment. We must be indeed slightly conscious of their existence at the time; but our minds being occupied so much with other things, prevent our so distinctly marking them, as to lodge them in our memories. Now of these thoughts, emotions, and affections, which thus often pass through our minds in a great measure unnoticed, the following things should be said, deeply pondered, well understood, and always remembered:

1. Many of them, to say the least, must be sinful or holy.
2. If they are not distinctly noticed by consciousness, their moral character, whether sinful or holy, may be at the time overlooked by us.
3. As we have no distinct recollection of them, we may affirm that we are not conscious of sin, when as a matter of fact we may have been guilty of it in the exercise of these unnoticed thoughts and affections.
4. So that all that a man in this state of existence may ever be able to affirm in respect to his moral character is, that he is not conscious of sin, without being able to say absolutely that he does not, and has not within a given time, had any exercise of mind that is sinful. When his mind is strongly exercised, and his consciousness therefore very clear and distinct, he may be able to affirm, with a good degree of confidence, if not with certainty, that he has had no sinful exercise perhaps for a given time, but yet of the general tenor of his life I do not see how he can affirm any thing more with certainty, than that he does not remember to have been conscious of any sin.

5. This view of the subject will account for the fact to which I have already alluded, that the way in which the Spirit of God often, nay always, convinces of sin, is by awakening in our memories the recollection of past consciousness, and often in this way revealing to us distinctly former states of mind of which we were but very slightly conscious at the time; thus making us to see that we have been guilty of sin, of the commission of which we were not before at all aware.

When therefore I say that by consciousness a man may know whether he is in a state of entire sanctification, I mean that consciousness is the real and only evidence that we can have of being in this state, and that when our minds are exercised strongly, and our consciousness therefore distinct, the testimony of consciousness is clear and explicit, and so satisfactory that we cannot doubt it. But under other circumstances, and in other states of mind, when the exercises of the mind are such as to render consciousness less distinct and vivid, affections may be exercised by us, whether sinful or holy, that are not so distinctly noticed by consciousness, or so fully remembered by us that we can affirm absolutely of them, that they are not sinful.

This, then, is the sum of the whole matter. A man is able to understand the law of God aright, or he is not. If he is not, he is under no obligation to do so. If he has formed as correct a judgment in respect to what the claims of the law of God are, as in the present circumstances of his being, availing himself of such aids as God has vouchsafed to him, he is able to do, he has thus far done his duty, and knows the meaning of the law of God, so far as he is at present bound to know it.

He is able to know whether he is at present in a state of obedience or disobedience to that law, or he is not able to know it. If he is not able to know he is not under any obligation to know. If he has formed the most correct judgment of which he is naturally capable in the present circumstances of his being, with respect to his conformity or non-conformity to the law of God, he knows all upon that subject that he is at present bound to know. And if under these circumstances, he cannot know whether he is or is not in a state of entire sanctification, then he cannot tell whether he is at present in rebellion against God, or whether he is rendering Him an acceptable service. He cannot tell whether he ought to repent of his present state of mind, or whether he ought to regard it as acceptable to God. Now I inquire, if, under these supposed circumstances, of absolute inability to know whether we are or are not obeying God, we can possibly be required to know, or be condemned for not knowing; and might we not just as well be condemned for not flying through the air, or for not having been present at the foundation of the world?

With respect to the liability of this sentiment to abuse, and to foster spiritual pride and self-delusion, I have at present only to say, it is the truth of God, and to be sure, like every other truth, is liable to perversion and abuse; but have ministers of the gospel yet to learn, that this is no good reason why it should not be proclaimed upon the house-tops?

The remaining topic is reserved for the next number.

Your brother in the bonds of the gospel,

C.G. Finney

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