

Professor Finney's Letters. --No. 30.

by Charles Finney

Professor Finney argues that present natural ability is not a sine qua non of moral obligation, and that actual knowledge is indispensable to moral obligation.

Scripture: Proverbs 1:7, Hosea 4:6, Matthew 22:37-39, Luke 12:48, John 8:32, Romans 7:18, 1 Corinthians 2:14, Galatians 5:13, James 4:17, 1 John 1:5-7

Topics: "Moral Obligation", "Ignorance and Knowledge"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the complexities of moral obligation in relation to ignorance and natural ability, challenging the notion that the law of God requires more from individuals than they are capable of fulfilling given their circumstances. He argues that ignorance, often a result of moral failure, constitutes a natural inability to obey God's commands, and that the law's demands are aligned with one's current capacity. Finney emphasizes that true sanctification can only occur as ignorance is dispelled through the truth and the Spirit of God, and he critiques the inconsistency of those who claim that God requires perfect obedience while denying the impact of human depravity on moral agency. He calls for a deeper understanding of the relationship between knowledge, moral obligation, and the law of God, urging his brethren to reconsider their positions on these critical theological issues.

Transcript

Dear Brother:

I will now quote the remaining paragraph from the esteemed brother's letter, mentioned in my last, and make a few remarks upon it.

"One point is what you say of the claims of the law, in the Oberlin Evangelist, Vol. 2, p. 50: -- 'The question is, what does the law of God require of Christians of the present generation, in all respects in our circumstances, with all the ignorance and debility of body and mind which have resulted from the intemperance and abuse of the human constitution through so many generations?' But if this be so, then the more ignorant and debilitated a person is in body and mind, in consequence of his own or ancestors' sins and follies, the less the law would require of him, and the less would it be for him to become perfectly holy --and, the nearer this ignorance and debility came to being perfect, the nearer would he be to being perfectly holy, for the less would be required of him to make him so. But is this so? Can a person be perfectly sanctified while particularly that 'ignorance of mind,' which is the effect of the intemperance and abuse of the human constitution, remains? Yea, can he be sanctified at all, only as this ignorance is

removed by the truth and Spirit of God; it being a moral and not a physical effect of sinning? I say it kindly; here appears to me at least, a very serious entering wedge of error. Were the effect of human depravity upon man simply physically to disable him, like taking from the body a limb, or destroying in part or in whole, a faculty of the mind, I would not object; but to say, this effect is ignorance, a moral effect wholly, and then say, having this ignorance, the law levels its claims according to it, and that with it, a man can be entirely sanctified, looks not to me like the teachings of the Bible."

1. I have seen the passage from my lecture here alluded to, quoted and commented upon, in different periodicals, and uniformly with entire disapprobation.

2. It has always been separated entirely from the exposition which I have given of the law of God, in the same lectures; with which exposition, no one, so far as I know, has seen fit to grapple.

3. I believe, in every instance, the objections that have been made to this paragraph, were by those who profess to believe in the present natural ability of sinners to do all their duty.

4. I would most earnestly and respectfully inquire, what consistency there is, in denominating this paragraph a dangerous heresy, and still maintaining that men are at present naturally able to do all that God requires of them?

5. I put the inquiry back to those brethren, by what authority do you affirm, that God requires any more of any moral agent in the universe, and of man in his present condition, than he is at present able to perform?

6. I inquire, does not the very language of the law of God prove to a demonstration, that God requires no more of man than, in his present state, he is able to perform? Let us hear its language: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Now here, God so completely levels his claims, by the very wording of these commandments, to the present capacity of every human being, however young or old, however maimed, debilitated, or idiotic, as, to use the language or sentiment of Prof. Hickock, of Western Reserve College, uttered in my hearing, that "if it were possible to conceive of a moral pigmy, the law requires of him nothing more, than to use whatever strength he has, in the service and for the glory of God."

7. I most respectfully but earnestly inquire of my brethren, if they believe that God requires as much of men as of angels, of a child as a man, of a half-idiot as of a Newton? I mean not to ask whether God requires an equally perfect consecration of all the powers actually possessed by each of these classes; but whether in degree, He really requires the same, irrespective of their present natural ability?

8. I wish to inquire, whether my brethren do not admit that the brain is the organ of the mind, and that every abuse of the physical system has abridged the capacity of the mind, while it remains connected with this tenement of clay? And I would also ask, whether my brethren mean to maintain, at the same breath, the doctrine of present natural ability to comply with all the requirements of God, and also the fact that God now requires of man just the same degree of service that He might have rendered if he had never sinned, or in any way violated the laws of his being? And if they maintain these two positions at the same time, I farther inquire, whether they believe that man has natural ability at the present moment to bring all his faculties and powers, together with his knowledge, on to as high ground and into the same state in which they might have been, had he never sinned? My brethren, is there not some inconsistency here?

9. In the paragraph from the letter above quoted, the brother admits, that if a man by his own act had deprived himself of any of his corporeal faculties, he would not thenceforth be under an obligation to use those faculties. But he thinks this principle does not hold true, in respect to the ignorance of man; because he esteems his ignorance a moral, and not a natural defect. Here I beg leave to make a few inquires:

(1 .) Should a man wickedly deprive himself of the use of a hand, would not this act be a moral act? No doubt it would.

(2.) Suppose a man by his own act, should make himself an idiot, would not this act be a moral act?

(3.) Would he not in both these cases render himself naturally unable, in the one case, to use his hand, and in the other, his reason? Undoubtedly he would. But how can it be affirmed, with any show of reason, that in the one case his natural inability discharges him from the obligation to use his hand, and that in the other case, his natural inability does not affect his obligation--that he is still bound to use his reason, of which he has voluntarily deprived himself, but not his hand? Now the fact is, that in both these cases the inability is a natural one, and the act that occasioned this inability in both cases, involves the guilt of all the moral default of which it is the cause.

(4.) I ask, if a man has willingly remained in ignorance of God, whether his ignorance is a moral or natural inability? If it is a moral inability, he can instantly overcome it, by the right exercise of his own will. And nothing can be a moral inability that cannot be instantaneously removed by our own volition. Do my brethren believe, that the present ignorance of mankind can be instantaneously removed, and their knowledge become as perfect as it might have been had they never sinned, by an act of volition on the part of men? If they do not, why do they call this a moral inability, or ignorance a moral effect? The fact is, that ignorance is the natural effect of moral delinquency. Neglect of duty occasions ignorance; and this ignorance constitutes a natural inability to do that of which a man is utterly ignorant--just as the loss of a hand, in the case supposed, is the natural effect of a moral act, but in itself constitutes a natural inability to perform those duties that might have been performed, but for the loss of this hand. The fact is, that this ignorance does constitute, while it remains, a natural inability to perform those duties of which the mind is ignorant; and all that can be required is, that from the present moment, the mind should be diligently and perfectly engaged in acquiring what knowledge it can, and in perfectly obeying, as fast as it can obtain the light. If this is not true, it is utter nonsense to talk about natural ability as being a sine qua non of moral obligation. And I would kindly, but most earnestly ask my brethren, by what rule of consistency they maintain, at the same breath, the doctrine of a natural ability to do whatever God requires, and also insist that He requires men to know as much, and in all respects to render Him the same kind and degree of service as if they never had sinned, or rendered themselves in any respect naturally incapable of doing and being, at the present moment, all that they might have done and been, had they never in any instance neglected their duty?

10. The brother, in the above paragraph, seems to feel pressed with the consideration, that if it be true that a man's ignorance can be any excuse for his not at present doing what he might have done, but for this ignorance, it will follow, that the less he knows the less is required of him, and should he become a perfect idiot, he would be entirely discharged from moral obligation. To this I answer: Yes, or the doctrine of natural ability, and the entire government of God, is a mere farce. If a man should annihilate himself, would he not thereby set aside his moral obligation to obey God? Yes, truly. Should he make himself an idiot, has he not thereby annihilated his moral agency; and of course his natural ability to obey God? And will my New School brethren adopt the position of Dr. Wilson of Cincinnati, as maintained on the trial of Dr.

Beecher, that "moral obligation does not imply ability of any kind?" The truth is, that for the time being, a man may destroy his moral agency, by rendering himself a lunatic or an idiot; and while this lunacy or idiocy continues, obedience to God is naturally impossible, and therefore not required. The guilt of this act is equivalent to all the default of which it is the cause.

But it is also true, that no human being and no moral agent can deprive himself of reason and moral agency, but for a limited time. There is no reason to believe, that the soul can be deranged, or idiotic, when separated from the body. And therefore moral agency will in all cases be renewed in a future, if not in the present state of existence, when God will hold men fully responsible, for having deprived themselves of power to render Him all that service which they might otherwise have rendered. But do let me inquire again, can my dear brethren maintain, that an idiot or lunatic can be a moral agent? Can they maintain, that any but a moral agent is the subject of moral obligation? Can they maintain, that a man can be the subject of moral obligation, any farther than he is in a state of sanity? Can they maintain, that an infant is the subject of moral obligation, previous to all knowledge? And can they maintain, that moral obligation can, in any case, exceed knowledge? If they can and do--then, to be consistent, they must flatly deny that natural ability is a sine qua non of moral obligation, and adopt the absurd dogma of Dr. Wilson, that 'moral obligation does not imply any ability whatever.' When my brethren will take this ground, I shall then understand and know where to meet them. But I beseech you, brethren, not to complain of inconsistency in me, nor accuse me of teaching dangerous heresy, while I teach nothing more than you must admit to be true, or unequivocally admit, in extenso, the very dogma of Dr. Wilson, as above.

I wish to be distinctly understood. I maintain, that present ignorance is present natural inability, as absolutely as the present want of a hand is present natural inability to use it. And I also maintain, that the law of God requires nothing more of any human being, than that which he is at present naturally able to perform, under the present circumstances of his being. Do my brethren deny this? If they do, then they have gone back to Dr. Wilson's ground. If they do not, why am I accounted a heretic by them, for teaching what themselves maintain.

11. In my treatise upon the subject of entire sanctification, I have shown from the Bible, that actual knowledge is indispensable to moral obligation, and that the legal maxim, "ignorance of the law excuses no one," is not good in morals.

12. Professor Stuart, in a recent number of the Biblical Repository, takes precisely the same ground I have taken, and fully maintains, that sin is the voluntary transgression of a known law. And he further abundantly shows, that this is no new or heterodox opinion. Now Prof. Stuart, in the article alluded to, takes exactly the same position in regard to what constitutes sin that I have done in the paragraph upon which so much has been said. And may I be permitted to inquire, why the same sentiment is orthodox at Andover, and sound theology in the Biblical Repository, but highly heterodox and dangerous at Oberlin?

13. Will my brethren in the New School, to avoid the conclusiveness of my reasoning in respect to the requirements of the law of God, go back to Old School-ism, physical depravity, and accountability, based upon natural inability, and all the host of absurdities belonging to their particular views of orthodoxy? I recollect that Dr. Beecher expressed his surprise at the position taken by Dr. Wilson, to which I have alluded, and said he did not believe that "many men could be found, who could march up without winking, to the maintenance of such a proposition as that." But to be consistent, I do not see but that my brethren, with or "without winking," are driven to the necessity, either of "marching up" to maintaining the same proposition, or they must admit, that this objectionable paragraph in my lecture is the truth of God.

14. I have made these remarks in compliance with an intimation when I published those lectures, that I might notice any thing that appeared to my brethren to be of serious importance in relation to their orthodoxy. But I did not then, nor do I now intend, either to fill the pages of the Evangelist, or occupy my own time, with any thing like a controversial discussion of this subject. I hate controversy. I have something else to do, besides engaging in it. But thus much I must say, that after all I have heard and read upon the subject, I am more and more surprised at the amount of misapprehension and error that have been, and still are prevalent in the Church of God on this subject.

15. I have made extracts from, and remarks upon the letter alluded to, not from any want of fraternal regard for the brother from whom I received it, but because it brought these two objectionable points so fully up, and laid so legitimate a foundation for these remarks.

Your brother in the bonds of the gospel,

C.G. FINNEY

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