

The Church Bound to Convert the World

by Charles Finney

The church is bound to convert the world through consecration, union, realization of individual responsibility, and extension of the colporteur system.

Scripture: Matthew 28:18

Topics: "Unity in the Church", "Evangelism"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the church's obligation to convert the world, interpreting Jesus' command to 'make disciples of all nations' as a call for all Christians to actively participate in this mission. He outlines the conditions for obedience, including individual responsibility, unity among believers, and the necessity of self-denial and perseverance in prayer. Finney stresses that the church must not rely solely on learned ministers but must engage all members in the work of evangelism, demonstrating brotherly love and confidence in Christ's power. He warns of the great guilt associated with failing to fulfill this command and calls for a collective effort to glorify God through the conversion of the world.

Transcript

"And Jesus came, and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.

Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen." Matthew 28:18-20.

In discussing this subject I shall endeavor to show;

I. WHAT THE COMMAND TO TEACH ALL NATIONS, MEANS.

II. ON WHOM IT IS OBLIGATORY.

III. WHAT IS IMPLIED IN IT.

IV. CONDITIONS OF OBEDIENCE.

V. THE CAUSES OF FAILURE.

VI. THE GREAT GUILT OF FAILURE.

I. What does the command, "Go and teach all nations," mean?

In the margin of your bibles, you will read, go and disciple or make disciples of all nations. This is undoubtedly the real meaning of the original. The word teach in the nineteenth verse, is not the same word which is rendered teach in the twentieth verse. The true meaning of the command is, Go and make disciples or christians of all nations.

II. On whom is this command obligatory?

1. It was addressed by Christ to those of his disciples who were then present, but doubtless was intended for all christians, for it is not at all likely that Christ expected the disciples then present to do all this work. He doubtless meant to devolve the responsibility upon all christians, to rest upon their consciences in all coming time until the work should be done.

III. The third inquiry is, What is implied in this command?

1. The command itself implies ability to obey it. Every command of God implies this in the strongest manner. It should be remembered that God is perfect in both love and wisdom: therefore he cannot be so unjust as to demand of us an impossibility, nor so ignorant as not to know the real limits of our powers.

2. But again let it be observed that Christ assumes our ability to obey this command on the ground that he has all power in heaven and in earth and has promised to be with the church in this work. In the eighteenth verse he says, "All power is given to me in heaven and in earth." The command follows; "Go ye, therefore, that is for this reason, because I have all power in heaven and in earth, go and make christians of all nations; and lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the world." We see then that Christ assumes our ability on the ground that he has all power in heaven and earth, and promises to be with us always even unto the end of the world; pledging his divine agency to work within us to will and to do, and without us to open the way providentially for our labor, and withal, to work by his Spirit in those to whom we publish the gospel. Thus Christ exerts his divine power in heaven and on earth so far as it is needed in accomplishing this great work.

3. The command implies that the great work of the church militant is, to make disciples of all nations; in other words, to convert the world to God.

4. It implies that this is their only work, that the only business they have on the earth is to glorify God in the world's conversion. They are to do or say nothing, and be nothing, more or less than is conducive to this end. To this their whole being, time, influence, and possessions are to be consecrated. In that solemn parting hour, Christ doubtless meant to give them his whole mind in these few last words; Go, apply yourselves directly to the conversion of the world, and finish the great work which I have begun. I have given you the example; let your eye too be single, and your devotion unwearied and entire.

IV. I am in the next place to consider the conditions of obedience to this command.

1. The first condition which I mention is, hearty and entire consecration to this work. The church will never accomplish it, until they go forth in the true spirit of the requirement, being devoted with a single eye to this work as Christ was. By this it is not intended that every christian should be a preacher of the gospel, for there are a great many kinds of work to be done. Preaching is but a small part of the labor. Printing, and writing, the mechanic arts, agriculture, commerce, merchandise, and in short all the useful employments of this world are to be employed by the church as parts of this great work. But they are all to be pursued

with the same end, that is, to convert the world.

Again, not only must ministers be consecrated to this work, but lay-men and women also. Whatever the immediate occupation of each individual is, let him pursue it with the same singleness of eye, and entire consecration to the great end of the world's conversion that ministers are bound to have in preaching the gospel. Every body understands that ministers ought to preach for the glory of God, and ought to consecrate themselves to the work of the world's conversion, that this is their great business, and that they really apostatize in heart from their work whenever they fail of giving themselves up heart and soul to it. Now this is true of ministers; and it is equally true of all christians. That Christian who tills his ground, or stands behind his counter, or writes, or prints, or does any thing else, is bound to be as entirely consecrated to the glory of God and the world's conversion, as the minister ought to be, and unless he is he can never be saved. Lay-men and women judge right in respect to what is required of ministers in this matter, but they should understand that precisely the same is required of them. Until this is recognized by the church at large, and until the followers of Christ in every sect consecrate themselves to this work, with as single an eye as that which ministers are bound to have, the work can never be performed.

2. Another condition is, union of effort. By united effort I mean the opposite of sectarian effort. By union among christians I do not mean that they must all be in all respect of one opinion, but that they should be one in heart, and in respect to doctrinal opinions be agreed in all the fundamental points, also be agreed in tolerating each other, and allowing each other the most perfect liberty of opinion in respect to all points not fundamental. They must agree to differ on minor points without controversy or jangling. They must love each other so intensely and labor for the world's conversion so sincerely as not at all to stick on any of the minor points of christian doctrine. If the church waits till all her members think alike on minor points, the world will never be converted; or if she expects to convert the world while cut up into sects and jangling parties, she is entirely deceived. A sectarian church can never convert the world to God, any more than so many Bramins could. If they convert them to their respective parties, this is by no means converting them to God; it only makes them sectarians. I am humbly of opinion, that until union prevails in the church in the sense above described, the world can never be converted. But more of this in another place.

3. Another condition of obedience to this command is, the realization of individual responsibility. The fact is that there is a strange shrinking away in this matter. Christians do not seem to realize that every man and woman of them is pledged on the solemnity of an oath to do his and her utmost to convert the world to God. In making a profession of religion they pledge implicit obedience to Christ. Now this is his last, and I may say, his great command. This is, as it were, a summary of all his requirements. It is the condensation of the whole of gospel duty, to convert the world. Now to the accomplishment of this end, every christian of every age stands pledged. His whole being, influence, time, property, talents, resources, every thing he has or is or can control, are pledged to this work on the solemnity of an oath. Nothing less than this is implied in pledging obedience to Christ and in making a public profession of religion. Now how is it that so few professors of religion have this idea standing out in strong development before them as the great idea which they are to aim constantly at realizing? Until this comes to be the omnipresent idea of the church, the great thing at which not only the whole but every individual aims, and which all endeavor constantly to accomplish, the world will never be converted. Every christian man, woman, and child, must address himself and herself decidedly and exclusively to this work, or it will not be done.

4. The church must not expect to effect this wholly, or even principally through the instrumentality of a learned ministry. It is perfectly absurd for the church to expect ever to send forth a sufficient number of men, learned in the common acceptation of the term, to convert the world, Some learned men are

indispensable to the accomplishment of this work. We need learned men to translate the Bible, to write books, and critical commentaries, to bring forth every thing that belongs to the literature and philology of the Bible. These men have their places and their use, and are very important, and indeed indispensable to the accomplishment of this work. Yet really but little more than this can be expected of that part of the ministry which is devoted to the literature of the Bible. They have not time nor are they the men to go right forth and reap the harvest. They are as it were engaged in manufacturing the tools and preparing them for the work. They are stationed here and there to do a multitude of things which the less learned cannot do. But it should not be for a moment supposed that colleges and theological seminaries are going to provide men enough for the world's conversion. The fact is that lay-men and women must come up to this work and make personal and direct effort, and really preach the gospel; or to use a less objectionable phrase, they must in every way suited to their circumstance, tell the story of the cross, and press the truth upon the consideration of men. The colleges and theological institutions have their places, and in their place they are very important. They are designed to furnish the indispensable number of learned men for the accomplishment of this work. But these men of learning after all, if the world is converted, will be found only as one to a thousand or ten thousand of the laborers that are to be employed in this field.

5. Nor need the church expect to accomplish this work wholly or perhaps even mainly through the instrumentality of any ministry whatever either learned or unlearned. There are no doubt hundreds and thousands of men who are not learned in the common acceptance of the term who are men of sound minds, ardent piety, good judgment, great discretion, who may be safely put into the ministry, who ought to be put in and who must be put in before this world can be converted. But even these will not be enough. The colporteur system needs to be extended a hundred or a thousand fold. Indeed laborers should be sent forth and shed over the world like the leaves of autumn until the church, men and women, go everywhere, as in the early ages, proclaiming the word of life. Every one who has read the Gospels and Acts of Apostles attentively, knows that the Apostles all labored for a considerable number of years in and about Jerusalem, while the lay-men and women went every where preaching the gospel. There had to be a great struggle at Jerusalem to prevent the light being put out altogether in Judea. The whole influence of the Apostles was needed there for several years. But when the persecution arose about Stephen, the infant church, except the Apostles, were scattered abroad. These under God were the means of diffusing the knowledge of Christ and the savor of his name in all directions.

6. Another condition of obedience to this command is, the exhibition of brotherly love and christian confidence. Christ in his last prayer made this the condition of the world's conversion, and it manifestly is so. "Neither pray I, says he, for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word, that they may all be one as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." Where christians manifest no mutual attachment and little mutual confidence, all their theorising will only pass among mankind for mere theory. The gospel in their hands will never get hold of the mass of men until the world are compelled to say, "See how these brethren love one another." Christians will neither have nor deserve the confidence of the world till they both have and deserve the confidence of each other. If they will not confide in one another who shall confide in them? This question is natural and inevitable, so that I regard it as an indispensable condition of the world's conversion, that the church manifest every where intense brotherly love and perfect christian confidence. This is so in every community. You will find the wicked every where impressed with a sense of the importance of the gospel in proportion to the union, affection, and confidence of christians among themselves. If professors of religion manifest but little attachment to each other, but little confidence in each other, the great mass of the unconverted are little or not at all impressed with the importance of

religion; but if christians are united, love each other with pure love, fervently, and show that they have the greatest confidence in each other, this impression arouses the world, and they begin immediately to enquire, What shall I do to be saved?

7. Another condition of success in this work and obedience to the spirit of this requirement is, confidence in the presence, power, and readiness of Christ to go right forward with the church to the accomplishment of this work. The Apostles and early christians seemed to realize that Christ was in earnest in saying, "All power is given to me in heaven and in earth; Go ye, therefore, and disciple all nations, and lo, I am with you even to the end of the world." They seemed to understand that Christ was really in earnest in this matter, and that he really was ready, able, and willing, and that his whole heart was set upon the work, and that he was indeed with them, giving efficiency to what they did. When they were persecuted and commanded not to preach or to teach in the name of Christ, hear what they say; "And being let go, they went to their own company, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said unto them. And when they heard that, they lifted up their voices to God with one accord, and said, Lord, thou art God which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that is in them. Who, by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against his Christ. For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate with the gentiles and the people of Israel were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done. And now, Lord, behold their threat[e]nings; and grant unto thy servants that with all boldness they may speak thy word, by stretching forth thy hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus. And when they had prayed the place was shaken where they were assembled together, and they were filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness. And with great power gave the Apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all." Here is a specimen of the manner in which they regarded and treated opposition, and of their faith in Christ in respect to the performance of this great work. How could they fail of success?

8. Another condition of success is the practice of all needed self-denial. This is requisite in order to furnish the means and the devoted men and women to go forth to every nook and corner of the world where human beings are, and proclaim to them the gospel of salvation. We want men who are willing to take their lives in their hands, who have health and strength and heart to the work, and who can labor as some of our missionaries are laboring among the Indians, and as some of the African missionaries do, and as some others do in various parts of the world. We need hundreds and thousands of these men, men like minded, or rather men possessing a hundred fold more if possible of faith, patience and power than these already in the field. I would not find fault in general with the men that are engaged in this work, nor say any thing that should imply a want of consecration in them, but they are laboring almost single handed, greatly straitened for want of means, and their calls for help are unutterably agonizing. What do they tell us they could do under God in converting the world if they had the men and the means? But recently I saw an account of an address delivered by a British missionary from India, in which he affirmed that the obstacles throughout India to the spread of the Gospel were fewer than they were in England, that if twenty thousand missionaries could at once be set down in India they might go every where preaching the gospel to large and attentive congregations, in which not a man could be found that had ever heard the gospel before; that the land is all open, the fields are white and waving for the harvest, and nothing needed but men and means, and faith in Christ to fire the train and spring the mind, and as it were blow up the very kingdom of the devil. O what a call is this! O what a door is here opened for the church to enter and

achieve the world's conversion!

9. Another condition is patience in the performance of this work. No man ever accomplishes any thing in the kingdom of God only as he suffers patience to have its perfect work. It is predicted of Christ that he should neither fail nor be discouraged till he had set judgment in the earth. Whoever gets out of patience and begins to scold and find fault, or become discouraged, will immediately grieve the Spirit of God and altogether defeat his own success. Many revivals have been prevented in this way. The laborers have not sufficient patience. They suffered themselves to get out of patience and to fret, perhaps to scold, complain, and find fault because things did not go as they would have them. This grieved the Spirit, and if there was a revival it was a revival of fault-finding and not of love.

10. Another condition is perseverance. They must learn to hold on and be of good courage till God strengthens their hands and their hearts in the work. Let me recommend to you Moffatt's account of the labors of the missionaries in Africa. That is certainly an admirable book, and the patience of Moffatt and his associates is worthy of all imitation. I don't know when I have been so instructed, so affected, and so rebuked as by reading that book. The admirable patience and perseverance of the missionaries is worthy of the churches' most attentive consideration. Often times on reading it I was ready to wonder that they did not abandon the field and conclude that God had not called them to that work. But no, they persevered against discouragements and embarrassments that would have overcome any but men filled with the spirit which they had, and consecrated as they were to the great work of saving souls. May God bless them forever and prosper them until all Africa shall know the blessed gospel, and Ethiopia stretch forth her hands to God.

11. There must be constant and prevailing prayer. Did God promise to enlarge his church and convert the world? He has annexed this condition; "Nevertheless for this will I yet be inquired of by the house of Israel to do it for them." There must be constant prayer. It must be the prayer of faith, of sympathy with God. It must be the effectual, fervent prayer--that wrestling agonizing travail of soul that has power with God. This must extend through the church. It must be universally diffused abroad, and prayer for the world's conversion instead of being confined almost entirely to the monthly concert, must be the labor and burden of every day. The church must take the world on her hands and upon her heart. The minister and the laymen and women, all classes and ages of christians must really travail in birth for the world's conversion. It must absorb their whole attention; it must engross their thoughts, rouse up and set on fire their feelings, and pour itself out before God in a flood of agony before the world can be converted. Such prayer as is not commonly heard must be offered before this work can be done. We must have praying men and women, nay, the whole church must become a praying church, and be gathered around the mercy seat and lie on her face, and pour out her prayers with strong cryings and tears. This must be persevered in until they have come up to the full spirit and meaning of what God says, "Ye that make mention of the Lord, keep not silence, and give him no rest until he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth." They must besiege the throne of grace with the promises in their hand. There must be a great lifting up of heart and soul and a thousand times ten thousand hearts must echo and echo, "Thy kingdom come, thy kingdom come," until this comes to be the universal cry of the church, until the heart of the church militant heaves like a volcano, and the gospel is like a burning fire shut up in her bones, and the promises are to them stable as the everlasting mountains; until she can plant her feet on them and stand and never retreat a hand's-breadth till the work is done.

(To be Continued)

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