

To Ministers of the Gospel of All Denominations [#2]

by Charles Finney

Charles Finney emphasizes the critical connection between physical health and spiritual vitality for ministers of the Gospel.

Scripture: Romans 8:6, Romans 12:1, 1 Corinthians 9:27, 1 Corinthians 10:31, 2 Corinthians 5:10, Galatians 5:24, Philippians 3:19, 1 Timothy 4:8, James 4:7, 1 Peter 2:11

Topics: "Spiritual Health", "Physical Well-being"

Description

Charles Finney addresses ministers of the Gospel, urging them to recognize the detrimental influence of sensuality and poor physical habits on their spiritual lives and the Church. He emphasizes the connection between physical health and spiritual vitality, warning that neglecting this relationship leads to backsliding and a lack of spirituality among ministers. Finney calls for a reformation in dietetic habits and a deeper understanding of the body's influence on the mind, asserting that true spirituality cannot flourish without addressing these issues. He laments the silence of the ministry on these matters and encourages ministers to lead by example in their personal and family lives. Ultimately, he stresses the need for ministers to be aware of their influence and to uphold the principles of the Gospel in all aspects of life.

Transcript

BELOVED BRETHREN:

In my last letter to you, I glanced very briefly at the present state of the Church, and promised in this letter to notice some of the reasons for this state of things, as they present themselves to my own mind.

1. I would humbly inquire whether ministers themselves, are not in a great measure under the influence of sensuality? Is it not true, my brethren, that we are given up very much to the influence of our appetites--that many of us indulge ourselves freely in the use of those things that give the flesh dominion over the soul? Are not ministers, as a general thing, so far sunk in sensuality, as to be in a great measure blind to the influence of the body over the mind, both with respect to themselves and also with respect to the Church of God?

2. Are not many of us exceedingly ignorant, in regard to the physiology of our own bodies, and of those dietetic habits which are most congenial to bodily health? Are we not exceedingly ignorant or utterly

unmindful of the necessary connection between health of body and health of mind? Is it not true, my brethren, that the mind is, in this state of existence, dependent upon the physical organization for all its developments--and that every transgression of physical law tends strongly to a violation of moral law? This is known to be true as it respects the use of alcohol. But is it considered, even by ministers, that it is equally true, in regard to every other abuse of the physical system? Are ministers aware of the immense number of causes of spiritual declension and backsliding which are at work in their congregations? Almost every one knows, at the present time, that what used to be considered the moderate or temperate use of alcohol, renders spirituality impossible. But is it understood and believed, even by ministers themselves, that the same is true to a greater or less extent of gluttony, of the use of narcotic substances, and of innutricious substances in general? The same general law prevails in reference to them all, that the use of any and every one of them, is a violation of the laws of the physical system, an injury to the nervous tissues of the whole body, and always and necessarily abridges the capability of the mind in proportion to the extent of the abuse. These causes of backsliding are almost innumerable, producing their results with just as much certainty as alcohol, though the connection between the abuse and the result is not so palpable in the one case as in the other.

3. Is it not true, that the ignorance and silence of the ministry in respect to the influence of the flesh, and the means of keeping the body under and bringing it into subjection, are leaving the Church quietly to slumber over these inevitable causes of backsliding, without knowing what is the matter? For myself, I must say that my ignorance and silence of these subjects were a great hindrance to my own spirituality, the cause of frequent temporary declensions and spiritual bondage. I never made, as I can now see, any perceptible advance in real piety until my health and other circumstances, turned my mind to look these causes of backsliding fully in the face and put them away.

I am frequently amazed, that I so far overlooked all those passages in the Bible, which speak of the influence of the flesh upon the mind. The three great enemies of the soul are represented in the Bible as the world, the flesh, and the devil. I used to preach against the world and against the devil, and warn Christians against their influence; but I must say with shame, that I knew but very little of what was meant by those warnings in the Bible against the influence of the flesh. Such passages as these were not deeply pondered and well considered by me:--"The fleshly mind is enmity against God." "To be carnally" or fleshly "minded is death." "If ye live after the flesh ye shall die." "Therefore mortify your members which are upon the earth." "He that is Christ's hath crucified the flesh, with its affections and lusts." "I keep under my body and bring it into subjection." "Be ye not deceived, God is not mocked, whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap." "He that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption." "They that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh." "For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ; whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is their shame, who mind earthly things."

These and multitudes of other passages of scripture, I must confess with shame, have been till recently very much overlooked by me; i.e. I did not ponder and well understand their meaning. And I can now see that I confounded the influence of the world and the devil with that of the flesh. I am now fully convinced, however, that the flesh has more to do with the backsliding of the Church than either the world or the devil. Every man has a body, and every man's body, in this age of the world, is more or less impaired by intemperance of one kind or another. Almost every person, whether he is aware of it or not, is in a greater or less degree of dyspeptic, and suffering under some form of disease arising out of intemperance. And I would humbly ask, is it understood and proclaimed by ministers, that a person can no more expect healthy

manifestations of mind in a fit of dyspepsia than in a fit of intoxication? Is it understood and preached to the Church, that every violation of the physical laws of the body as certainly and as necessarily prevents healthy and holy developments, in proportion to the extent of the infraction of physical law, as does the use of alcohol? In short, my brethren, do we understand, sufficiently consider, and proclaim the fact, that man is a compound being; that his soul is entirely dependent upon the physical system for all its manifestations, and that, therefore, unless we eat and drink for the glory of God, or in such a manner as to promote our highest physical perfection, unless we render our "bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable," it is naturally impossible that our souls should prosper? I am convinced, that the temperance reformation has but just begun, and that the total abstinence principle, in regard to a great many other subjects besides alcohol, must prevail, before the Church can prosper to any considerable extent. I regard it as a settled and unalterable truth, that until the physiological and dietetic habits of men are corrected, spiritual declensions and backslidings are inevitable. The laws of the physical system are the laws of God. They must be searched out and proclaimed by ministers, and obeyed by all men who expect to have their souls prosper.

I want to recommend to my dear brethren, the careful, and prayerful, and repeated perusal of Graham's Lectures on "The Science of Human Life." I have been greatly edified by a careful perusal of those lectures. My health and the providence of God had, before their publication, led me to read whatever came within my reach upon these subjects. But still I felt the want of much instruction which has been in a great measure supplied by this work. In recommending this book, I do not mean to say, that I regard every thing said in it as exactly correct. Yet as a whole, I consider it invaluable. I thank God for it. It should be read in every family, and persons of every age should as far as possible be made acquainted with its contents.

One thing more, in relation to this point, my brethren. Let me recommend to you to adopt and practice principles just as fast as you are convinced of their truth--and that in your families, pulpits, and in all your ways, you hold up the light upon physical and dietetic reform. O, my brethren, I beseech you, turn not away from this subject as of little importance. I greatly sinned in this respect. I might have been instructed much earlier than I was, and saved much of strength and life for the service of God, and I have been prepared to search out, embrace, and practice the truth, in every department of temperance.

It is manifest that Paul regarded dietetic reform as essential to thorough and permanent moral reform, and was in the habit of preaching and insisting much upon this subject. In writing to the Philippian Church he says, "For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ; whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is their shame, who mind earthly things." Now it is worthy of all observation here,

(1.) That he had often warned them on the subject of making a God of their belly, before; and now, finding them so obstinately persevering in their sensuality, he told them again, even weeping, that they were the enemies of the cross of Christ, and that the evidence of this was that they made a God of their belly, and gloried in those habits of living, that were a shame to them. Now if Paul, nearly eighteen hundred years ago, warned the Christian Church often upon this subject, and wept over the sensuality of Christians, certainly it should be thought by ministers of some importance at the present time.

I beseech you, let no one say this is legal, and has nothing to do with christian liberty. This is a sad and ruinous mistake. The fact is, there is a necessity founded in the very constitution and laws of our compound nature, for our knowing and doing the truth in regard to all our bodily as well as intellectual habits. And the gospel can no more save us from the necessity of correct physiological and dietetic habits,

than it can save us from the necessity of abstaining from the use of alcohol. It is only through a proper knowledge of and obedience to the laws of our being as we are constituted, body and soul, that the gospel has any power, and I may add, any tendency to save us.

4. Is not another cause of the state of the Church owing to a lamentable want of spirituality in the ministry? I will not here enter into the discussion of the causes of this want of spirituality. But, brethren, is it not true--do not our closets attest it--do not our own consciences attest it--that we live in a great measure in a state of spiritual bondage, and altogether too far from God? Do not the most spiritual members of our churches perceive, and, in secret, grieve and weep over the manifest want of spirituality in our prayers, preaching, and daily conversation? Do they not perceive that our conversation is not in heaven--that we do not daily walk with God--that we have not that deep spiritual experience and acquaintance with Christ, that enables us to feed the lambs and sheep of the flock with that spiritual food and heavenly manna which they so much need? Beloved brethren, is it not true, that the most spiritual members of our churches are sighing and crying over the great want of spirituality in the ministry, and that while they treat us with respect, they look upon us with compassion, and in reality have very little confidence in our ability to guide them? They respect our station--they love us as men. They perhaps regard us as Christians. But, beloved, I have good reason to know that great multitudes of the most spiritual members of the Church regard their ministers as exceedingly in the way of the advancement of the cause of true religion, through a lamentable want of spirituality. I am ashamed to say this; I mourn when I think of it; I am almost afraid to say it--lest blustering and hypocritical professors of religion should make it an occasion of censoriousness. And yet, beloved, somebody ought to say it. Our most spiritual members dislike to say it to us. They fear that it will not be well received--that it will be taking too much upon themselves to reprove their minister--that it will be regarded as an evidence and an instance of spiritual pride--and they fear, perhaps, that it will do more hurt than good. They, therefore, pass along in silence, but with sorrowful hearts. As often as the Sabbath comes, they go to and from the house of God, with mourning. They see us through the week. Our spirit, and temper, and deportment, often shock and grieve them, and they fear that we have mistaken our calling. O brethren, be not offended at what I say;--I say it in love, and in grief. How long shall this be so?

5. Are there not classes of passages of the most spiritual and important character, upon which we cannot preach, dare not preach, and should be regarded as hypocritical if we did preach, until we reform our lives and habits? Are not our own lusts, and lives, and habits, virtually leading us to temporize on the subject of self-denial, bearing the cross, contempt of the world, and many of the most important subjects, upon which the Church of God need to be instructed?

6. Is there not a great error among ministers, and in their families, in respect to conformity to the world? Are not their wives, and sons and daughters, as well as ministers themselves, in many instances shockingly conformed to the world? Is not this the case so much that we cannot preach against conformity to the world, without being turned upon by our hearers and churches, with the just retort, "Physician, heal thyself!"

Now I know that when there is in reality no fault in this respect, the wicked heart is apt thus to retort and to shield itself, under any thing and every thing, and nothing, rather than abandon sin. I have often observed, that when ministers preach against conformity to the world in things that are useless and even pernicious, professors and worldlings are disposed to complain of them for allowing themselves to possess even the necessities and little conveniences of life. They refuse to make any distinction between things really useful and necessary, and things useless, unnecessary, and even pernicious. In one instance, a professor of religion, who was reproved for squandering Christ's money, and injuring his health in the use of tea,

replied that if he gave up his tea, the minister, on the same principle, ought to give up his chair and use of a stool.

But, brethren, there is a broad distinction, and one, after all, that commends itself to the conscience and common sense of mankind, and which we can compel them to see, between things useless and pernicious, and things really necessary or important to our happiness or usefulness. I would be as far as possible from suggesting that ministers have not a right to the necessities and comforts of life as well as other men. But in regard to extravagance in dress, tight lacing, injurious dietetic and physiological habits, conformity to the fashions of the world, and many other things, are not some of us and our families greatly in fault? Do not understand me, dear brethren, as excusing myself in these respects, for by the grace of God, I intend to look well at home on these subjects.

Now brethren, is there not altogether too much silence among ministers in regard to conformity to the world, and is not this silence, in a great measure owing to conscious fault on our part, or on the part of our families, in these respects? Do not ministers connive at the extravagance of the Church, and, in a great many instances, allow them unreprieved to squander Christ's money upon their lusts, lest, as I have said, if they reprove them, they should meet the just retort, "Physician, heal thyself." Beloved brethren, do we take pains enough to be "examples to the flock," in every respect? Do we see to it, that not only in our own, but in the spirit, deportment, habits, and lives of our families, there is such a conformity to the principles of the gospel as "to commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God?" I must say, that for myself, I am grieved, when I see the wife or the daughter of a minister follow on in the wake of fashion, and when the families of the ministers of Christ, instead of firmly resisting the tide of desolation that is inundating the world, fall in with, if not take the lead, in the extravagancies and worldly mindedness of the Church. Beloved brethren, are we aware how much we and our families are watched, and our spirit imbibed by the Church and the world? Do our wives, and sons, and daughters, understand how much they abridge our influence and tie up our hands, if they set an example of worldly mindedness? How can we preach against abuses and things we practice ourselves, and freely admit in our families? I have not said this, because I do not suppose there are many Godly ministers, who are in a good measure alive to all these things. Nor do I say them because I have not been in many respects guilty myself; but on the contrary, because I have, and because I have witnessed them in such numerous instances, and because I regard them as a great hindrance and a great grievance to the Church of God.

I cannot pursue this subject further at present. I hope to be able to write you again in the next number of the Evangelist.

Your brother in the bonds of the gospel,

C.G.FINNEY.

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