

To Ministers of the Gospel of All Denominations [#3]

by Charles Finney

Ministers must take a more active role in promoting holiness and sanctification in the Church, rather than emphasizing sectarianism and justification by faith.

Scripture: 1 Peter 1:15

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

Description

Charles Finney addresses ministers of the gospel, urging them to reflect on their role in fostering sectarianism within the Church. He emphasizes that ministers often prioritize denominational differences over promoting holiness and sanctification, leading to spiritual bondage among believers. Finney calls for a shift in focus towards total abstinence from sin and entire consecration to God, arguing that true revival requires ministers to lead by example and insist on the renunciation of all ungodliness. He warns that without this commitment, the Church will continue to experience decline and backsliding. Finney implores ministers to preach with urgency and clarity about the attainability of sanctification, encouraging a deeper relationship with Christ as the source of true freedom from sin.

Transcript

BELOVED BRETHREN:

In pursuing this subject, permit me to inquire,

8. Whether the sectarianism of the ministry is not the cause of the sectarianism of the Church? Is it not a fact, that the spirit and bearing of ministers of different denominations towards each other, their preaching, and much of their influence, tend to promote sectarianism in the Church? Is it not a common thing, in revivals of religion, for ministers to feel and manifest a jealousy of the influence of other denominations, and do they not often take pains to indoctrinate the converts more with a design to guard them against the influence of other denominations, than to promote holy living? Is it not common for ministers to take more pains to put the Church and the young converts on their guard in reference to denominational peculiarities, than to break them off from "all ungodliness and every worldly lust?" And is it not true of ministers of every denomination, that they are, to an alarming extent, more zealous in promoting denominations peculiarities and sustaining church order, in reference to their own peculiar sect, than they are to promote the sanctification of the body of Christ? Is it not a fact, that doctrinal knowledge, especially on sectarian points,

is more insisted upon by ministers than holiness of heart and life, and more than Christians love? Are not ministers more alarmed at the encroachments of other denominations, than they are at the overflowing of sin, lukewarmness, pride, and worldly-mindedness in the Church? Will they not take the alarm sooner at the influence of other denominations,--will they not manifest more zeal and promptness in exposing their supposed errors, than they will to expose and denounce the ungodliness and worldly lusts that are disgracing Christ and ruining the souls of the people?

9. Again suffer me to inquire, my brethren, whether the censoriousness of the ministers may not in a great measure account for the censoriousness of the Church? Can it be denied that there is a fearful amount of transgression in this respect, among ministers of all denominations? Has not a spirit of distrust and evil speaking overspread the land and appeared very conspicuously of late among ministers of the gospel, until much of what passes in the business of ecclesiastical bodies and in newspaper articles, savors strongly of slander and vituperation?

10. Are not the legality and spiritual bondage of the Church owing in a great measure to the legal spirit of the ministers? Christ is exhibited as a Savior from hell, but not sufficiently and fully as a Savior from sin; as our justification, but not prominently as our sanctification. Justification by faith is abundantly, as it should be, insisted upon. But so far as my knowledge extends, sanctification by faith, has not held a prominent place in the preaching of the present day. Hence, when Christians are brought under conviction of sin, they set themselves to war against it in their own strength. Like the case described in the seventh of Romans, they feel themselves condemned and struggling against temptation, but are swept away as with a flood. Those that are accounted as the most spiritual in the Church seem to be in a state of almost perpetual bondage, complaining, and grieving, and struggling, because they do not apprehend Christ as an all-sufficient and present sanctification.--They hope Christ will save them from hell, but they do not understand that He is a present Savior from all sin.

11. Beloved brethren, is there not even in the ministry a lamentable ignorance in respect to the practical truth, "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin?" For one, I must say, that I mourn and am deeply ashamed before God, that for so many years, I was so little acquainted with Him who was called JESUS, because he should save His people from their sins. O how little of what the gospel says about the Savior did I understand and receive. A great many of the most precious and sin subduing truths of the Bible were entirely a dead letter to me. And I began to find, some years since, that many spiritual Christians knew something about Christ that I did not know, but greatly needed to know. The fact was, I could not lead inquiring Christians to a sanctifying Christ. And now, beloved brethren, let me ask you, I pray without offence, is it not a matter of fact that there is among us comparatively little deep experimental acquaintance with the sanctifying power of Christ? Are not many of us in such a state of almost continual spiritual bondage, and condemnation, that we know but little of the great peace those have who love the law of God? Is it not also true, that nearly all our sermons are upon texts that have a legal, rather than a gospel bearing upon the heart?

12. Is it not a matter of fact, beloved brethren, that the declension of religion after revivals, and the backslidings of the Church that so deeply disgrace the gospel, are owing to the fact that ministers do not sufficiently insist upon the renunciation and entire annihilation of the certain causes of decline and backsliding? A revival of religion implies reformation. There is no real revival of religion any further than there is actual outward reformation of life and habits. And certainly there is but one possible way in which permanency in religion can be secured; and that is by making reformation universal and entire, extending to all our habits of life, business transactions, and every thing else that pertains to us. Total abstinence

from all sin is naturally as indispensable, and even more so, to stability in religion, as total abstinence from alcohol is to stability and permanence in the temperance reformation. Now unless ministers set themselves in earnest to remove every form of sin from the Church, to hunt out and expose all the "fleshly indulgences that war against the soul"--all the erroneous principles and practices in business, and every thing of every name or nature, that is inconsistent with walking with God, and with the self-denial of the gospel--except they expose the evils and hold up the remedy, carrying reformation thoroughly to the very bottom of every heart, and into the habits and whole life, of every convert, spiritual declension, backsliding, and virtual if not open apostasy, will be the certain and inevitable result. If any form of sin is indulged, and not hunted out and reproved by the minister, no matter what or how trivial it may appear in the eyes of those who indulge it, it will grieve the Holy Spirit. It will bring certain darkness and leanness to the soul. It will be an inlet to a thousand lusts, and like the letting in of waters, it will cover the whole soul with darkness, and bring the mind into bondage to sin.

It often appears amazing to me, that with the present experience of the Church in regard to adopting the principle of total abstinence, as of indispensable necessity in the temperance reformation, that so little stress should be laid upon adopting and carrying out the same principle in religion.

13. Ministers say they do adopt this principle, and preach entire consecration to God and total abstinence from sin. But, brethren, suffer me to inquire, in what way do you preach it? Do you as a matter of fact so insist upon it as to beget the ripe conviction in their minds, that they are expected at once to abandon every form and degree of sin?

There are three classes of ministers. One class preach that sinners ought to repent; but they so preach repentance as to leave the sinner under the impression that he cannot repent, and must wait God's time. Consequently the sinner slumbers on, under such preaching, till the knell of eternal death breaks up his slumber, and he finds himself in the depths of hell. A second class preach repentance in such a way as to make the impression and beget the conviction, that men can, and must, and are expected immediately to repent. This preaching arouses and alarms the sinner. He sees that the minister is in earnest, and expects him to repent, and the anxious inquiry will soon be made, "What must I do to be saved?" The sinner is alarmed, and makes the inquiry, because he sees the minister in earnest, that he really believes he can and ought to repent. This class of ministers really do expect sinners to repent. They are not surprised when sinners become alarmed and make the inquiry, "What shall we do?" And when sinners profess that they have repented, they are willing to believe that they have, and do not unbelievably reject their pretensions as fanaticism and spiritual pride. This same class of minister claim also to preach total abstinence from sin to the Church. They do not tell the Church that they may and must live in sin, and who does? They preach entire consecration; but after all, as a matter of fact, they fail to produce the conviction that they are really in earnest, and expect them to live in a state of entire consecration to God. They no more bring Christians around them to inquire on the subject of entire consecration, or sanctification, than the first class bring sinners to inquire after repentance. This class of minister will have inquiry meetings for sinners, and many sinners will ask, "What shall we do to be saved?" But as a matter of fact, they do not so preach entire consecration as to arouse the inquiry after entire sanctification. Consequently if any should inquire after this blessing, they would be as much at a loss to know what to say to them as the other class of minister would be to know what to say to a sinner who should inquire after salvation. And if any one should profess to have entered into a state of entire consecration, or sanctification, they would treat such professions with entire incredulity, and show that they never expected any such results from their preaching.

A third class not only so preach that sinners must repent, as to awaken the inquiry after repentance and eternal life, and bring them around the preacher, trembling in tears and agony for their souls; but they also preach the doctrine of total abstinence from sin, entire consecration to God, and so exhibit the blood of Christ as cleansing from all sin, as to bring around them throngs of anxious Christians earnestly and agonizingly inquiring after so great a salvation. The meetings appointed for the purpose of giving special instruction upon this subject are thronged with multitudes, whose bosoms are heaving with emotion, and whose hearts are panting after universal holiness. This class of ministers make the same impression and produce the same conviction upon the minds of Christians that they are expected to be entirely sanctified, that they do upon the minds of sinners that they are expected to repent. And the results are the same in both cases. Sinners, by the grace of God, actually do repent; and Christians, by the same grace, take hold on full salvation and enter into the rest of faith.

Now, brother, to which of these classes do you belong? Do you preach repentance to sinners? If so, I humbly inquire how do you preach it? Do you make the impression that you are in earnest--that you expect it--that God expects it--and that in all reason and conscience, the sinner is bound at once to lay down his weapons and submit to God? Or do you preach in such a way as to leave sinners quietly slumbering in their sins; and would you feel disappointed should any number of sinners profess to have repented under your ministrations?

Do you preach that Christians should entirely abandon all sin, enter upon a state of immediate, entire, and eternal consecration to God, and never, in any instance, again take up arms and make war upon Jehovah? Certainly you do not, dare not preach the reverse of this. You do not, dare not tell the Church that they must of necessity and are expected to rebel against God, and serve the devil as long as they live. Should you tell them this, the common sense of all mankind would revolt at it. But, beloved brethren, do you say nothing that really implies this? Do you say nothing that after all leaves the impression, that you really expect them to indulge in sin as long as they live? Do you lay aside in your own practice "every weight and the sin that so easily beset you," and set them such an example as to inspire the hope that they may even in this life, get entirely above their sins? Bear with me, my beloved brethren, I speak in behalf of Christ. As on my knees at your feet, would I address you. Nay, I would implore you to inquire whether, as a matter of fact you either preach or expect that Christians should give up all their sins? Do they so understand you? Do they inquire earnestly of you, how they may get hold of this salvation? Do you know how to direct them? Do you so direct them that as a matter of fact they find deliverance from sin? Do you really succeed in causing them immediately to renounce "all ungodliness and every worldly lust?" Do you crowd this subject upon Christians as you do the doctrine of repentance upon sinners, and with the same earnestness, and faith, and expectation of success?

Let me inquire, I pray you, what would be the certain result of preaching repentance in such a manner as to leave the impression that sinners cannot repent? Why, under such preaching they would not repent of course. And do let me ask, my brethren, if you preach to Christians in such a manner as to create the impression that they cannot, or will not as a matter of fact, live without sin, will they not as certainly go on in sin? If you preach to sinners that they cannot repent, or say what plainly implies that they cannot, either with or without the grace of God, will they not virtually justify their impenitence, and show that they are not shocked and agonized at the fact that they are impenitent? Just so, if you preach what implies that Christians cannot, or as matter of fact never will live without sin, they will not only live in sin, but will virtually justify their sins, and show that they are not shocked and astonished at themselves for living in sin.

And now, brethren, do we not charge the impenitence and want of revivals in many congregations to a want of practically preaching the doctrines of repentance and faith? We do, and no doubt justly.

And now, let me get down at your feet and inquire whether the state of religion in the church to which you minister is not owing to the fact that you neither so preach nor practice entire consecration as to beget among christians the conviction of its attainability? And let me ask again, were you to preach repentance to sinners as you preach entire consecration to christians, do you believe there would ever be a revival among them, under your preaching, till the day of Judgment? Should I ask the professors of religion who hear you preach, and who witness your life and spirit, whether they think you expect them to break off entirely from their rebellion and consecrate themselves wholly to God, and indulge in sin no more, would they testify that they believe you do expect this of them?

Dear brethren, take it not amiss that I speak thus plainly, I speak in love. My heart is pained, my soul is sick that the Church are allowed to live in sin, and not so much as to be possessed with the idea that any thing else is to be expected of them till they die.

14. Let me inquire again, my brethren, do not every one of you require of the members of your church the solemn pledge contained in your church covenant, that he will deny all ungodliness and every worldly lust, and live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world? Does not your church covenant bind your members as with a solemn oath to live in a state of entire consecration or sanctification to God? Now if this is so, and every one knows it is, can ministers innocently let their churches live in the constant and open violation of this covenant, and still encourage them with the hope that they are in the way to heaven? Can you require such a promise, and consent that your members should make such a covenant, and then preach as if you did not expect them to keep it; and even treat the very profession of keeping it, as an evidence of spiritual pride and fanaticism? Do you require such a covenant and then insist upon the dangerous tendency of preaching that this covenant should be fully kept? And do you, dare you, preach that to profess to live agreeably to this covenant is the result of gross delusion and fanaticism? My brethren, what consistency is there in this, nay, what is it less than great impiety to exact or allow such covenant engagements as these, and then not only not insist upon their fulfillment, but maintain expressly or impliedly the dangerous tendency of insisting upon or even expecting to live in accordance with such a solemn vow? Is it not the solemn duty of every minister to expunge that clause from the church covenant, or to admit and insist upon the practicability of keeping it?

How immensely injurious is it to the cause of Christ to bring Christians into a solemn covenant, entered into in the house of God, over the elements of the broken body and shed blood of the blessed Jesus, on the holy Sabbath, renewed and sworn over and over again as often as the communion season occurs, and then treat all insisting upon the keeping of this covenant, and even the profession of keeping it, as gross delusion, fanaticism, and spiritual pride?

15. Is it not most manifest that a want of thoroughly taking up and pressing this subject of entire consecration upon christians in revivals of religion, is the very reason why they decline and react to the great dishonor of the Savior? The very laws of the human constitution forbid that the great excitement that prevails at the commencement of revivals of religion should continue for a long time. This is neither possible nor desirable. But in proportion as the excitement dies away, the unconverted are apt to become careless and return to their former courses. Now what is wanting to keep the revival from declining among the real converts? It is manifest that something must be done that will set them in pursuit of the highest attainments in piety. Unless they are immediately cut off from their indulgences in sin, they will quench the

Spirit and soon lose their ardor in working for the conversion of sinners. Unless every form of improper indulgence is pointed out and wholly abandoned by them, they will of course soon return to the world. Now beloved brethren is there any other way to secure them from this result than to set ourselves right at work to bring about their entire and perpetual consecration to God, laying down and insisting upon entire conformity to the great principles of God's government in every respect--in making restitution where they have done wrong, to the extent of their ability,--in practicing all those degrees of self-denial, and carrying the law of love through all the transactions of life, as fully, and thoroughly, and perpetually, as the gospel demands--holding up the cross as the foundation of all true reformation, and exhibiting Christ in all his relations and offices in such a manner as to make the saints partakers of His holiness and divine nature? This course of preaching would open to the convert a new world of immensely interesting light--would fill him with pantings and longings after complete deliverance from sin, and would open to both minister and people the most enchanting fields of truth and usefulness conceivable. And Christians instead of attempting to sit down upon the side of a slippery precipice from which they would surely slide to the bottom, would not think of resting or looking back until their reformation was so thorough and universal as to be able to say, "Blessed be God, we are free." Unless this course be taken, I am as well convinced as I am of my own existence, that revivals will always, and certainly, and necessarily decline as they have done, to the great reproach of the cause of Christ.

Now I beseech my brethren to look at this subject, and see if it is not a matter of fact, that revivals do decline in the Church, for want of proper instruction and right example on the part of ministers?

One word in answer to an objection, and I will close. It is said that the Methodist brethren preach entire consecration or sanctification, and yet that their revivals soon decline. To this I wish to reply without offense to them.

1. That this doctrine is not insisted upon as universally among them, if my information is correct, as it was in the days of Wesley.
2. That much of the instruction which awakened sinners receive among them, is not sufficiently discriminating to insure sound conversions; and consequently many of their professed converts do not want to be holy.
3. Is it not true, that in multitudes of instances the sanctification upon which they insist is rather a legal sanctification, and from the manner in which it is exhibited, is calculated to beget a self-righteous spirit and thus work decline in the Church?
4. When they enjoy discriminating, thorough instruction, and have ministers, that practically understand the subject, who live, and preach, and insist upon entire consecration, their revivals do not decline as is commonly supposed by other denominations. But under such instruction their prayer meetings, and the lives and influence of their members, prove the efficacy and excellence of the glorious and blessed doctrine of entire consecration to God in this life. As a body, I have long feared, and for some time believed that religion was on the decline among them. In the days of Wesley, and for a long time after, insisting upon this doctrine was the very life and power of that church; and precisely as this doctrine has fallen into disrepute among them, vital piety has declined. If these things are not true, I am wholly misinformed upon the subject.

Your brother in the bonds of the gospel,

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