

To Ministers of the Gospel of All Denominations [#4]

by Charles Finney

The Church's approach to spirituality has been hindered by a lack of piety and self-denial, leading to a decline in the effectiveness of revivals and a need for a renewed focus on prayer and the Holy Spirit.

Scripture: Matthew 6:24, Romans 12:1, 1 Timothy 4:16, James 4:8

Topics: "The Power of Prayer", "Spiritual Leadership"

Description

Charles Finney addresses ministers of the Gospel, urging them to recognize the vital connection between true piety and spirituality within the Church. He emphasizes that ministers must lead by example, practicing self-denial and godliness to inspire their congregations. Finney warns against the dangers of prioritizing creature comforts over spiritual growth and highlights the decline of the spirit of prayer in the Church, which he believes has hindered true revivals. He calls for a return to fervent prayer and a rejection of superficiality in religious practice, asserting that without this, genuine revival cannot occur. Finney's passionate plea is for ministers to align their lives with their teachings to effectively guide their congregations toward a deeper relationship with God.

Transcript

BELOVED BRETHREN:

Permit me to inquire:

16. Whether another great difficulty with the Church is not, that ministers have been endeavoring to promote spirituality in the Church without true piety? Has it not been too much overlooked, that spirituality and communion with God are impossible any further than godliness is practiced in all our lives and ways? Have not attempts often been made, and are they not almost continually made, to keep religion alive and active in the hearts of Christians, while they are suffered, without reproof, to indulge selfishness in many forms, to transact business and practice self-indulgences that are entirely inconsistent with loving their neighbor as themselves? Has it been sufficiently considered by ministers, that a life conformed to the law of love in all respects is indispensable to spirituality and heavenly mindedness in religion?

Do not Christians in your own church live in a manner at their tables, in equipage, and transact business, and do many things that must grieve the Spirit of God, when we consider the present state of the world,

the calls for benevolent effort, and the deep feeling which Christians must experience in view of the fact that eighteen hundred years have already gone, and but a small portion of the world have yet received the gospel? Are churches called, by ministers, to those degrees of self-denial demanded by the law of love, in view of the state of the world and of the Church?

17. Again, are Christians called by the ministry, to give up all attempts and all desire to surround themselves with creature comforts; and are they suitably instructed in regard to the fact, that the more happiness they seek from the creature, the less they must necessarily find in the Creator; and the more they multiply earthly goods and sensual objects, and worldly attachments, the less of course will they enjoy of God--and that a life of self-denial, cutting off right hand and plucking out right eye sins, "laying aside every weight and the sin which doth so easily beset" them, are naturally and for ever essential to the enjoyment of God?

18. Is there enough of the testimony of example on the part of ministers? Example is the highest moral influence that can be exerted. And is it not true, my brethren, to a great extent, that while Christians hear our preaching, profess to believe it, and even praise it as excellent, their conduct is very little influenced by it, because they do not believe that we expect them to live in accordance with it? And is it not true, to a great extent, that the reason why they do not believe us to expect this, is that they do not see that we ourselves conform to the standard which we set up? Do they not see that in many instances we preach one thing and practice another? Now, when this is so, our example is the highest influence, and of course they will follow our example and not our precept. And is it not also true, that to avoid this inconsistency, some ministers do not preach self-denial, or insist much upon heavenly-mindedness? They do not preach entire consecration, so as to make it tell upon the hearts and consciences of Christians, for fear of the retort, "Physician, heal thyself." Now is it not true, that ministers and their families should take the lead, both by example and precept, in all those degrees of Christian retrenchment, economy and self-denial that the state of the world, and an enlightened benevolence would dictate? Of what use is it for ministers to preach against serving God and Mammon, while they themselves are engaged in the speculations of the day? How shall they preach self-denial, while they are living in supineness and effeminacy themselves? How shall they preach against conformity to the world, when they are attending parties, filling their tables with novels and light reading, and when in almost every respect, they are as much conformed to the world as their circumstances will possibly admit?

19. But there is one subject to which I wish especially to call the attention of my brethren, that I must not any longer delay. It is the fact that the spirit of prayer has greatly declined in the Church within the few last years, and the Holy Spirit has no doubt been greatly grieved by the course which the Church have pursued on this subject. The spirit of revivals is eminently a spirit of prayer; and so far as my information extends there was much more power and prevalence in the prayers of the Church ten years ago than there is at the present time.

I would humbly inquire whether there has not been a fault in ministers in relation to this subject, whether they have not been afraid of the spirit of unutterable groaning and agonizing in prayer that pervades the hearts of those who are wrestling for a revival? I can say my own spirit has been more deeply wounded and shocked, at the manner in which the spirit of prayer has been treated in the Church, than at almost any thing else since I became a Christian. So much has been said about order and against confusion, that in many instances it is to be feared that even ministers have gone to the opposite extreme, and not properly considering what in reality are order and disorder, they have grieved the Spirit of God, and quenched the spirit of prayer, by attempting to guard against what might, by some, be termed confusion.

I have had occasion to know, that in many instances ministers have feared and resisted what I have always supposed and now suppose to be the spirit of prayer. And if I am not mistaken they have frequently crushed revivals in their very outset, by causing Christians to restrain and resist the spirit of prayer. I have feared, that there were very few congregations in the land, and very few ministers, who would not resist the spirit of prayer, if it should be poured out upon them.

If Christians should be seized with the pains of travail, their bodily strength taken away, and be exercised with such strong crying and tears as to wrestle with unutterable groanings, day and night, as they did in the days of President Edwards, as they once did in Scotland, and in various parts of Europe and America,--if the Holy Spirit should come with such power that multitudes should be unable to stand or even to sit upon their seats, and be thrown upon their faces in the greatest agony of soul, and groaning out with such great pain as to arrest the ordinary proceedings of religious meetings, and fill whole assemblies with crying out, as have often been the case where He has not been resisted, and where revivals have been very deep and powerful--I say I have feared that such things would now be so resisted as to be arrested in the very outset--and that with the present views and feelings of ministers no such great revivals can bless the Church.

The resistance which has been made to the spirit of prayer since about 1825, is, in my view, one of the most dreadful sins of the Church. One very prominent minister, about that time, published, that the spirit of prayer had "run mad." There was so general an opposition to the spirit of prayer, as either to put revivals down altogether or render them exceedingly superficial in comparison with what they otherwise would have been. Indeed, from some things that have occurred is it not to be feared that ministers are so much afraid of the real spirit of prayer that, should it prevail in the Church to any considerable extent, they would consider it an objectionable thing, and instead of publishing it to the world as an illustration of the grace of God, would as far as possible conceal it from the world; and if any public notice were taken of it, they would feel called upon to apologize for it as a thing of very rare occurrence, and as something which they took great pains to counteract and control.

A few years ago there was so much of a spirit of prayer, that in some instances Christians have been known to retire for secret prayer, and to be so exercised with great agony in view of the state of the Church and of the world, as to become insensible to the length of time they were engaged in prayer, and continue their wrestlings for many hours together, covered with the most profuse perspiration, occasioned by the depth of their agony. And in some instances, when their strength was completely exhausted and their burden not removed, others would be obliged to lead them in prayer for the objects for which they were burdened for hours together, before they would get relieved; and in many instances their agony and travail of soul have been so deep, that the men of strong nerves have fallen prostrate, and writhed and groaned as in the agonies of death. In those days there were such wonderful answers to prayer, such repeated and almost miraculous interpositions on the part of God to answer prayer, as to astound whole communities, and make it perfectly manifest, even to the ungodly, that the saints were prevailing with God. But things of this kind seemed to be considered as disorderly. Opposition was made to them in high and low places. Much was said and written against such things, till the Spirit of God was grieved, and there have been a great casting off of fear and restraining prayer before God. Since that time, revivals have been growing more and more superficial in their character, as I doubt not many of those ministers who have witnessed most of the spirit of prayer can testify., Churches have been less permanently benefitted, and indeed the whole aspect of religious affairs has deteriorated in proportion as the spirit of prayer has been withdrawn.

And now, beloved brethren, I say not these things to rail. I could mention a great many facts which ought to cause the Church to blush; but at present, suffice it to say, that unless a different course is taken in regard to prayer, I do not believe that revivals of religion can extensively prevail. I have found for the few last years, such a great fearfulness on the subject of admitting the spirit of prayer to pervade the churches as to forbid the hope of the Church being deeply and permanently revived, until their views upon this subject are corrected.

Your brother in the bonds of the gospel,

C.G.FINNEY

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