

To Ministers of the Gospel of All Denominations [#5]

by Charles Finney

Charles Finney argues that bodily prostrations and agitations are natural effects of a highly excited state of mind and should not be seen as objections to a work of grace.

Scripture: Daniel 10:8

Topics: "Revival", "The Work of the Holy Spirit"

Description

Charles Finney addresses ministers of the Gospel, urging them to reconsider the prejudices against bodily prostrations and agitations that occur during religious experiences. He emphasizes that such physical responses can be natural reactions to profound spiritual truths and should not be dismissed as mere fanaticism or disorder. Finney calls for a deeper understanding of the connection between the mind and body, advocating for a more open acceptance of the Holy Spirit's work, which may manifest in various ways during revivals. He expresses concern that the church's resistance to these phenomena may hinder deeper and more transformative revivals. Ultimately, he encourages ministers to prepare the church for a powerful outpouring of the Spirit without fear of the physical manifestations that may accompany it.

Transcript

BELOVED BRETHREN:

I am afraid in my letters to you, that I shall appear dictatorial, and as if I took too much upon me, and have often been on the point of resolving to say no more, lest I should appear assuming and upon the whole do more hurt than good. In continuing to write to you, if I am at all acquainted with my own heart, I would not assume any authority or occupy at all the place of a censor or a dictator. All I ask is to be allowed to speak to my beloved brethren as a little child, and to beseech my fathers and brethren in the ministry to hear the few things I have to suggest, although they are spoken in great simplicity and weakness. I think I may say, that I speak upon these subjects only because I feel that they are of great importance, and because no body else seems to open his mouth or use his pen to call the attention of ministers particularly to these subjects. I do not mean by this, that the things I am saying and design to say are things upon which nothing has been said or written; but that it appears to me of special importance that these things should be more prominently before the minds of ministers at the present time than they are.

The particular object of this letter is to call the attention of my brethren and fathers in the ministry to the unreasonable prejudice, that does and long has existed in the Church, against what are called bodily prostrations and agitations in view of religious truth. By many this seems to be an insurmountable stumbling block. If the bodily strength is taken away, if swoonings and faintings occur--if persons fall prostrate in the public assembly, in the family circle, or in their closets--if they are seized with bodily agitations, or trembling--multitudes take the alarm at this, and infer as a thing of course that it is either the workings of a disordered imagination or the result of infernal agency. Now there are few more unreasonable or ridiculous prejudices among mankind than this, or few things that set in a more painful light the ignorance and thoughtlessness of the Church and the world, on some of the most important branches of human knowledge. A very moderate acquaintance with human anatomy and physiology, and a consideration of the compound nature of man, and that the mind always manifests itself through the nervous system, would for ever put to silence "the ignorance of foolish men" upon this subject. And it does seem to me to be high time that ministers should take pains to inform the people in relation to the very natural connection there is between a highly excited state of mind upon any subject and bodily prostrations and agitations.

It is very plain that bodily prostrations and agitations are no part of religion. But it is just as plain that these may be the natural effect of discoveries of religious truth. Several instances of bodily prostrations and agitations are recorded in the Bible, as the result of such discoveries. Daniel fainted and was unable to stand, being overcome by the presence of the divine glory. Saul of Tarsus fell to the ground on a discovery of the glory of Christ. The Psalmist speaks of his flesh trembling. Now it certainly is not at all wonderful, when we consider the compound nature of man, that his frail body should be overcome by clear manifestations of the glory of God. I never read or heard of any bodily effects that might not be most naturally and easily accounted for upon some of the plainest principles of physiology. Instances have not unfrequently occurred, when great and sudden excitement of mind has been produced by other than religious intelligence, in which persons have instantly fallen down dead. Now this is not at all strange, when we consider the nervous system of man, its connection with the mind on the one hand and with the organs of organic life on the other.

Now such cases sometimes occur when sudden and great manifestations of the divine glory are made to the human mind. Nor is it at all wonderful that this should be so. Some have objected to the bodily prostrations, agitations, and faintings of Mrs. Pres. Edwards, of the Rev. William Tennant, and of multitudes of others both in ancient and modern times. The great Kentucky revival, as it was called, was notorious for the bodily prostrations and agitations, that were common in that great work of the Lord. Now it certainly is a matter of extreme mortification, that so many minds, in many other respects enlightened, should stumble at such things, and feel as if no such results were to be expected as connected with the work of the Spirit of God. But, beloved brethren, it seems to me that such things under some form may always be expected, as a thing of course, in proportion to the clearness and extent with which the Spirit of God makes known His truth to the minds of men. Why, is it at all wonderful that the infinitely solemn, important, and awful things of eternity, when clearly brought home to the minds of men, should produce great tremblings and quakings, and agitations, and prostrations of body, with 'groanings that cannot be uttered?' Nay, verily, it is not at all strange. But the only wonder is, that mankind are not a hundred or a thousand times more affected in this way than they really are.

There can be no doubt, that Satan can produce the same results by suggesting lies, and produce a great excitement of mind in view of things that are utterly false; for it matters not whether the things in

themselves be true or false, while the mind regards them as truth, they will produce their effects and that in proportion to the vividness with which the mind perceives them, and the high import which the mind ascribes to them. It does appear to me therefore that bodily agitations, swoonings, faintings, or any thing of this kind, are not to be regarded at all as objections to a work of grace.

As I have said they are no part of religion, but they are very natural effects of a very high degree of religious affections and emotions. Nor is it true as some seem to suppose, that none but what are called nervous people are affected in this way. It is true that all persons are more or less subject to bodily agitations on any exciting topic, in proportion to the delicacy of their nervous system. But it is also true that there is enough in religious truth if clearly discovered to the mind by the Holy Spirit to wilt down the bodily frame to the strongest man on earth. It is not likely that Daniel was regarded as of so nervous a temperament as to be easily overcome by excitement. And Saul of Tarsus appears not to have been wanting in firmness of nerves. And in both ancient and modern times, great multitudes of the most sedate and orderly, men of the soundest minds and bodies, have been overcome by discoveries of the divine glory--by the infinitely great and overpowering considerations of religion. When, therefore, I hear it objected to bodily prostrations and agitations, as they are called, as something wrong of course, and to be denounced and opposed as fanaticism and the works of the devil, I find it difficult to express the mingled emotions of shame, grief, and indignation which I feel--shame that professedly enlightened minds should know so little of human anatomy and physiology, so little of their own constitution and of the overpowering truth of God as to think of making this an objection to a revival of religion--grief that the Holy Spirit should be so resisted in making such discoveries as He is endeavoring to make of eternal truths to the minds of men--and indignation that so many of the Church of God should turn round and take sides with the ignorant and opposing multitudes, against that which of all things is to be expected, and might exist and often does exist, on any and every other subject that greatly and overwhelmingly interests the human mind. I have known a woman frightened to death, because a building in the neighborhood was on fire, though no lives were endangered. I have known persons to go into almost instant derangement, on account of events both greatly joyous and greatly grievous. I have known a woman fall down dead on learning the conversion of a near relative. Indeed who has not known multitudes of such things? And why should it be thought strange, that sometimes these bodily effects should be witnessed in revivals of religion? I must say, that so far from feeling alarmed at such things as these, for the sake of the good, I could willingly see whole communities overcome, and lie prostrate, if need be, for hours or for days, under the revelations of the divine glory.

I should abhor aiming to get up an excitement for the purpose of producing such results as bodily agitations and prostrations. But while I would use all the means in my power to enlighten mankind, in regard to the infinitely interesting things of eternity, in whatever degree bodily effects were produced, I should not on that account stay my hand, or take it for granted that any thing was wrong.

I have not brought forward this subject now, because any thing of this kind exists at present in the Church, to any considerable extent, either in this region or any where else, so far as my knowledge extends. But for precisely the opposite reason--because it does not exist. When such things do exist, have already excited alarm, awakened prejudice, and the spirit of controversy in the Church, it is, as a general thing, too late to call public attention to an examination of the subject, as then the public mind is in no state to give it a candid and impartial investigation. It is of the highest importance therefore that the public mind should be prepared for a great and overpowering revival of religion, and for such a copious outpouring of the Spirit and manifestation of the power of God and the gospel, as can never take place, without resulting in great

resistance and divisions in the Church, unless the public mind is prepared to let the Spirit come in His overpowering influences without alarm. I have supposed and do still suppose, that the great reason why revivals of religion have not been more deep, permanent and sin-subduing is that the Spirit has been unable to proceed beyond a certain limit in His work without meeting with a stern resistance, on the part of multitudes of professors of religion and ministers. They seem, in their unbelief, to have prescribed certain limits within which revival should be kept--forming certain notions of order and endeavored to confine the Spirit down to a stereotyped mode of operation--ready to make common cause & unite their hands in opposing the Spirit whenever He should step over into what they suppose to be the regions of disorder. For myself, I am expecting, as soon as the Church will consent to it, and the ministry are prepared to lead the way, much deeper, more permanent, and sin-subduing revivals of religion than the world has ever seen. This must be if the world is ever to be converted. The thing greatly to be desired is, that the ministry, especially, should set themselves to prepare for this great work, take up the stumbling blocks out of the way of God's people, and cast up a highway, and, in the shortest possible time, prepare the way of the Lord.

Your brother in the bonds of the gospel,

C.G.FINNEY

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