

To the Readers: Four Classes of Professors in the Church

by Charles Finney

Charles Finney identifies four classes of professors in the Church and emphasizes the importance of experiencing and understanding the Bible in order to lead others in their spiritual journey.

Scripture: Hebrews 5:12

Topics: "Church Leadership", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the four classes of professors in the Church, emphasizing the reasons why many young converts fail to grow in grace. He identifies the first class as those with little conviction of sin, the second as those who have experienced conviction but lack true regeneration, the third as genuinely converted individuals who remain stagnant in their spiritual growth, and the fourth as those who have a deep understanding of Christ and are able to guide others. Finney warns that many Christians are unable to comfort or direct others due to their limited experience and understanding of spiritual matters. He calls for a deeper engagement with the truths of the gospel to foster growth and sanctification within the Church.

Transcript

TO THE CHRISTIAN READERS OF THE OBERLIN EVANGELIST.

Beloved--The object of this letter, is to state a little more definitely, than I have hitherto done, some of the reasons why young converts have not grown in grace, more; and why I have feared, as I said in a former letter, that revivals would become more and more superficial, till they would finally cease.

I have, from my earliest conversion, been led to notice, more and more particularly, the fact, that there are four classes of professors in the Church.

The first class seem to have had very little conviction of sin; and consequently, there is not light enough in their experience: (i.e.) they have not experience enough, so to understand the Bible, as to be able, under God, to convict others of sin. They pass along, and nearly their whole lives seem to be worse than useless, so far as the interests of religion are concerned.

A second class seem to have had frequent and deep conviction of sin; but appear never to have been truly regenerated. They understand the Bible measurably, on the subject of depravity, so as to be able, under God, to bring others under conviction and distress of mind; and here they stop. They rarely, if ever, are instrumental, in the regeneration of a sinner. Having no experience, on the subject of conversion themselves, they are all in the dark. And when the inquiry is made, by an anxious sinner, "what shall I do to be saved?"--although they may give him directions, in the language of scripture, yet, as a matter of fact, they cannot so answer his inquiries--and shape their directions--and remove his difficulties, as to bring him into the kingdom of God. This class is very numerous. And I have been astonished to find, how seldom it is, that professors of religion know what to say to anxious sinners. From long, and close observation, I am led to believe, that the difficulty lies in their total want of experience, on the subject of regeneration.

The third class have been really converted, and understand the way, through the gate of regeneration, well enough to direct others. Knowing themselves what it is to be converted, thus far they can go with sinners. They know measurably how to use the law, to produce conviction, and enough of the atonement, and of Christ as a justifying Savior, instrumentally to bring sinners fairly into the kingdom, for in this they have personal experience.

But they have gone no farther than this. Their time, and thoughts, and lives, have been employed with these two classes of truths--the law and so much of the gospel, as to produce conversion. They have, however, advanced no farther than "the first principles of the oracles of God." They continue to lay again, and again, "the foundation of repentance from dead works--and of faith toward God--of the doctrine of baptism--and the laying on of hands--the resurrection of the dead--and eternal judgment." They go round, and round, in the circle of these first principles of the doctrine of Christ, and never "go on to perfection," either in doctrine, or in practice.

Hence, having never given their attention to those higher, and more spiritual truths of the gospel, which are the more appropriate food of the Christian soul, and indispensable to his growth in grace, they make little, or no progress in holiness; and often, in a few years, become mechanical, in their efforts to convert sinners. Their spirit, not being sweetened by deep, and constant, and increasing intercourse with Christ, becomes bitter, and censorious. They know very little what to say to an anxious Christian, struggling against remaining sin. Let them be consulted by a Christian, who has made any considerable attainments in piety, and who understands measurably the plague of his own heart, and is panting after the utter annihilation of sin, in all its forms; and to be raised up "to the measure of the stature, of the fulness of Christ;" and they are in the dark. They will generally insist upon such persons going to work for the conversion of sinners--reproach them with not being at work for God--and for thinking so much about themselves, and their own sins. The fact is, they are in the dark, in regard to the real state, and necessities of such persons. This state of mind is entirely beyond their experience. They seem to be totally destitute of that to which Paul refers, in 2 Cor. 1:3-6, "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ. And whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: or whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation."

Here the Apostle found, that God gave him deep Christian experience, and comfort, that he might be able to understand the distresses, and administer comfort to those in like circumstances.

Now, as a general thing, I do not believe it is possible for a Christian to go much beyond his own experience, in administering the consolations of the gospel, or in removing the difficulties that obstruct the paths of others. Even Christ himself, was, in this respect, made perfect through suffering--"for in that he hath suffered, being tempted, he is able to succor those that are tempted." The New Testament, and especially the epistle to the Hebrews, seems plainly to recognize this truth, that Christ having been in the flesh, "and tempted in all points like as we are," is thereby qualified to sympathize with us; because he "can be touched with the feelings of our infirmities." It seems plain, from the very nature of mind, that, in order to lead others, we ourselves must be acquainted with the way; and it is alarming, and affecting to see how few Christians there are, in the Church, who have experienced enough to direct those who are struggling after high attainments in piety. Whenever a teacher attempts to go beyond his own experience, he becomes a blind leader of the blind.

This class of converted Christians, who are able, at least for a time, to labor successfully for the conversion of others, without ever having grown much in grace themselves, and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ--has been much increased, during the great revivals.

The fourth class, and I am constrained to say, that they are comparatively few, have learned so much of Christ, as a sanctifying, as well as a justifying Savior--have drank so deeply at the fountain head of love, and of the waters of the sanctuary, as to be able, not merely to direct an inquiring sinner, but an anxious Christian. I have always observed that this class of Christians feel peculiarly solicitous for the weak lambs of the Church. The weak, and stumbling, and God dishonoring state of the Church, is what most peculiarly afflicts them. Their compassions are greatly moved, when they behold the haltings, complainings, anxieties, and follies of the Church? [sic.]

Now it seems to me, that there is something in the history of Paul, that ought to be instructive to the Church on this subject. He seems to have spent a number of years, almost exclusively, in the conversion of sinners, and in the establishment of Churches. But during his confinement at Rome, and in the latter part of his ministry, he appears to have had his attention turned particularly to the subject of strengthening the Church; and it is very edifying to see, in all his epistles, this prominent feature of his character--a great solicitude to promote growth in grace among Christians. It is not to be supposed, that he omitted to labor for the conversion of sinners. But it is, I think, manifest, beyond all dispute, that his mind was mainly engrossed, with the sanctification of the Church. And it is evident, from his epistles, that he did not believe, that the Church would ever be sanctified, merely by pressing them to labor exclusively for the conversion of sinners, or by dwelling upon that particular class of subjects, that were denominated by him, "the beginning of the doctrine of Christ." His letters were, I think, undeniably designed to lead Christians into a fuller knowledge of Christ, in all his relations--to the necessity--means--and practicability of entire sanctification. The same seems to have been true of all the Apostles, whose epistles have come down to us.

But I have made so many preliminary remarks, that I must omit by main design, (i.e.) to notice some of the reasons, why converts have not grown more, in grace, till my next.

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A Servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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