

Why the Converts of the Great Revivals Have Not Grown More in Grace # 1

by Charles Finney

The sermon highlights the reasons why converts do not grow in grace, including the influence of older members, antinomian notions, undue reliance on human efforts, lack of proper food for the soul, spiritual pride, and other factors.

Scripture: Hebrews 5:12, 1 Peter 2:2

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Misconceptions in Faith"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the reasons why converts from the great revivals have not grown more in grace, emphasizing that older church members often discourage young believers by suggesting a decline in religious fervor is normal. He critiques the misconceptions surrounding God's sovereignty and human effort, which can hinder true piety. Finney also highlights the detrimental effects of poor spiritual nourishment, spiritual pride, and negative influences from literature and church controversies on the growth of converts. He calls for a deeper understanding of Christ's roles and warns against distractions that can poison spiritual growth. Ultimately, he urges believers to seek genuine communion with God and to be vigilant against influences that lead to spiritual stagnation.

Transcript

For The Oberlin Evangelist.

Beloved--In the present letter, I design to give a few only of the reasons, why the converts of the great revivals have not grown more in grace.

1. The older members of the Church, that were professors before their conversion, have been a stumbling block to them. In many instances, old professors have told young converts, that they need not always expect to enjoy religion--that they cannot always be upon the mount; but must descend into the valley of humiliation. By this, and similar language and instruction, converts have been prepared to expect a decline in religion; and consequently have not been alarmed, and shocked at the beginnings of declension, in their soul. Scarcely any thing can be more destructive to the piety of young converts, than such language from old professors. It is exactly the reverse of the truth. And if old professors have declined in religion, they should confess their sins to young converts, and warn them against a like declension, in themselves--assuring them, on the authority of the word of God, that no such declension is

necessary, but in the highest degree criminal.

2. They have been taught such notions of the sovereignty with which God bestows his grace, as to conclude, that for them to maintain communion with God, is entirely out of the question--not even to be expected, unless God, in a manner so sovereign, as to leave them in a state of mere passivity, bestows on them the graces of his Spirit. All ideas of passivity in religion are a death blow to a life of piety, in the soul. And all such antinomian notions of the sovereignty of God, are sure to overthrow the piety of converts.

3. Right over against this, is an error not less destructive to real piety, though leaving much of bustle, and apparent zeal, and the form of godliness in the absence of its power. It is the opposite extreme from antinomianism, to which I allude. Instead of taking the attitude of passivity in the reception of sovereign grace, it places an undue reliance upon human efforts--lays so much stress on human agency, and ability, as practically to exclude the necessity of sovereign grace. Such persons will almost always confess their dependence on the Spirit, and I believe very generally think they exercise a right dependence. And yet they are almost as far from feeling their helplessness as possible. They keep up much of the outward works, and bustle, and what they call working for God. But the deep communion of the heart with God, as that of which they know but very little, and on which they lay but little stress.

4. Another reason is, as I intimated in my last letter, that they have not had the right kind of food to nourish and strengthen their souls, in the divine life. The preaching, perhaps, which they have heard, has been upon such abstruse subjects, or so legal, or so sectarian, or perhaps so exclusively to the impenitent--as that they have not, in reality, grown in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and consequently have not grown in grace. For, as I said, in substance, in my last, I do not believe it possible, for persons to grow in grace, whose minds are engrossed mainly with the first principles of the doctrine of Christ. They must be fed "with the sincere milk of the word," if they would "grow thereby." They must be led to consider, and understand all that Christ is to the souls of his people, in all the relations he sustains to them.[.] I had been in the ministry several years before I really undertook the thorough examination of the Bible, with the design to understand all the relations that Christ sustained to me, and all that I might expect from him.

And now, beloved, let me ask you, have you ever searched the Bible, from end to end, with the design to understand all the offices, and relations, and titles of Christ--all that he is--all that he offers to be to you, and to the Church--and all that you, and the Church may expect from him? If you have never undertaken this, and pursued it upon your knees, or in some other attitude, with the Bible before you, and such helps as you can get--with mighty prayer for the enlightening influences of the Spirit of God, there is no probability that you have grown much in grace. You may have, what is often very deceptive, a great deal of talk, and bustle, and activity in promoting, as you suppose, the conversion of sinners, while your heart is, after all, like an unweeded garden. And in searching after the sins of others, you overlook your own.

5. Spiritual pride has been suffered to eat up the piety of many converts. Not discriminating between real piety, and the outward bustle of which I have spoken, they have been led to believe that they have vastly more grace than they really have, from the fact that God has appeared to bless their labors for the conversion of sinners.

6. Many converts have been prevented from growth in grace, by reading too much about the ecclesiastical controversies, and bickerings, that have existed in the Church for several years. That is miserable food for converts; and I would quite as soon expect them to grow in grace under the influence of novel reading.

7. Their piety has been poisoned, by reading much of the bitter and caustic language with which religious newspapers for several years have abounded. Persons cannot suffer themselves to read such things, without the greatest danger of drinking in the same spirit; and becoming themselves censorious and sarcastic. And I should recommend to Christians to exclude all such papers from their house.

8. Many converts have not been enough on their guard against evil speaking. It is impossible to enjoy the presence of Christ, and grow in grace, without the utmost caution on this point. "Speak evil of no man, but be gentle, showing all meekness unto all men," is the command of God. And you can no more enjoy his presence, and grow in grace, in disobedience to this command, than if you lived in adultery, drunkenness, or profanity.

9. Many have not been sufficiently on their guard, in respect to their choice of books. There are many books, at the present day, of a very seductive character; and among these are religious romances. Books of this character may excite strong emotions; but I believe they universally weaken the power of religion, in the heart.

Some perhaps who have been really converted, though I cannot but think their number is very small, have been seduced into novel reading. I say, I believe the number of these is small, because I cannot believe that a person who has ever known the love of God, can relish in secular novel. As wicked as I have been, since my conversion, although very fond of romances, and especially of plays, before--I have never been able to read a play, or a novel since. A page or two of the best of them, that I have seen, has filled me with loathing. Now knowing, as I do, the low state of piety in which I have been, almost from my conversion, I cannot believe, with my experience on this subject, and with my Bible in my hands, that a novel reader can have any religion at all. But still, as I said, temptation may have prevailed upon some converts, to dip more or less into these pools of filth. Now, beloved, do not expect to grow in grace, while you hold communion with the spirit of novel writers. It is the very opposite of piety. It "is earthly, sensual, devilish."

10. Others, again, have erred, by mingling in party politics; and have suffered themselves to go with a party, instead of voting universally for good men, or refusing to vote altogether.

12. [11.] Others, and I fear many, have been prevented from growing in grace, by the shipwreck which so many Perfectionists have made of the faith. Failing to make some of the most important discriminations, the perfectionists have connected sundry most pernicious errors, with one of the most important truths of the Bible, (viz.) the necessity, and practicability of entire sanctification, in this life. So many, that have embraced the doctrine of entire sanctification, have coupled with it the errors of the perfectionists--that multitudes have come to the conclusion, that in some way this doctrine is naturally and necessarily connected with those errors. And I have been amazed to see how many minds, that ought certainly to have known better, have expressed this sentiment. Now there is no more necessary or natural connection between the doctrine of entire sanctification, and the peculiarities of modern perfectionism, than there is between the doctrine of the new birth, and the most loathsome form of fanaticism that ever existed. This I design to show, in due time, the Lord willing. But still the fact, that this doctrine has been held by modern perfectionists, has been a great stumbling block to many Christians. With about the same propriety might their belief in the Divinity of Christ give an encouragement to Unitarians, and be a stumbling block to the orthodox Church. It was a stumbling block to me for a short time, until I gave sufficient attention to the subject to see, that there was no sort of natural connection between this truth, and those errors. It has been asserted again, and again, that the doctrine of entire sanctification naturally tends to the monstrous absurdities of modern perfectionism. It is much easier to say this, than to show it. And that man assumes a

fearful responsibility who dares to assert this without proving it. I hold such a course, as bringing up an evil report against one of the most important and gracious truths of the Bible. I am confident that such persons have not well considered what they say, nor the tendency of what they do.

I must stop here, and reserve what I have further to say upon this subject, till another time.

C.G. FINNEY,

A Servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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