

Charles Grandison Finney: Lectures on Revivals of Religion (1835)

Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875) was the most celebrated revivalist of the Second Great Awakening. Born in Connecticut, he was raised in various frontier towns in central New York, an area known as the "Burned-Over District" for the revivals that had swept through it. In 1821 Finney experienced a soul-wrenching conversion during which God told him "to plead his cause" to others, so he abandoned his legal career and became a celebrated converter of souls in upstate New York and New England. A man of imposing height, forceful appearance, and vibrant rhetoric, he mesmerized the thousands who flocked to hear him preach his appealing theology of conversion and redemption. Although initially ordained as a Presbyterian minister, Finney was not a Calvinist; indeed, he contributed to the breakdown of Calvinism in American religion. He insisted that sin was a voluntary act rather than a foreordained certainty, and therefore people could choose to be saved and elect to embrace a life of holiness. This focus on the individual—a religious belief shared by most middle-class churchgoers—shows how Finney was both a product and representative of the Jacksonian era. So too did his belief in progress. According to Finney, revivalism and reform went hand in hand, and he inspired many people to take up such causes as abolition and temperance.

From Charles Grandison Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, ed. William G. McLoughlin, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 9-12, 293-305.

A "Revival of Religion" presupposes a declension. Almost all the religion in the world has been produced by revivals. God has found it necessary to take advantage of the excitability there is in mankind, to produce powerful excitements among them, before he can lead them to obey. Men are so spiritually sluggish, there are so many things to lead their minds off from religion, and to oppose the influence of the gospel, that it is necessary to raise an excitement among them, till the tide rises so high as to sweep away the opposing obstacles. They must be so excited that they will break over these counteracting influences, before they will obey God. Not that excited feeling is religion, for it is not; but it is excited desire, appetite, and feeling that prevents religion. The will is, in a sense, enslaved by the carnal and worldly desires. Hence it is necessary to awaken men to a sense of guilt and danger, and thus produce an excitement of counter-feeling and desire which will break the power of carnal and worldly desire and leave the will free to obey God.

* * *

There is so little principle in the church, so little firmness and stability of purpose, that unless the religious feelings are awakened and kept excited, counter worldly feelings and excitements will prevail, and men will not obey God. They have so little knowledge, and their principles are so weak, that unless they are excited, they will go back from the path of duty, and do nothing to promote the glory of God. The state of the world is still such, and probably will be till the millennium is fully come, that religion must be mainly promoted by these excitements. How long and how often has the experiment been tried, to bring the church to act steadily for God, without these periodical excitements! Many good men have supposed, and still suppose, that the best way to promote religion, is to go along uniformly, and gather in the ungodly gradually, and without excitement. But however such reasoning may appear in the abstract, facts demonstrate its futility. If the church were far enough advanced in knowledge, and had stability of principle enough to keep awake, such a course would do; but the church is so little

enlightened, and there are so many counteracting causes, that the church will not go steadily to work without a special excitement. . . .

. . . The great political, and other worldly excitements that agitate Christendom, are all unfriendly to religion, and divert the mind from the interests of the soul. Now these excitements can only be counteracted by religious excitements. And until there is religious principle in the world to put down irreligious excitements, it is in vain to try to promote religion, except by counteracting excitements. This is true in philosophy, and it is a historical fact.

It is altogether improbable that religion will ever make progress among heathen nations except through the influence of revivals. The attempt is now making to do it by education, and other cautious and gradual improvements. But so long as the laws of mind remain what they are, it cannot be done in this way. There must be excitement sufficient to wake up the dormant moral powers, and roll back the tide of degradation and sin. And precisely so far as our own land approximates to heathenism, it is impossible for God or man to promote religion in such a state of things but by powerful excitements. . . .

* * *

III. I proceed to mention some things which ought to be done, to continue this great and glorious revival of religion, which has been in progress for the last ten years.

1. There should be great and deep repentings on the part of ministers. WE, my brethren, must humble ourselves before God. It will not do for us to suppose that it is enough to call on the people to repent. We must repent, we must take the lead in repentance, and then call on the churches to follow.

* * *

4. The church must take right ground in regard to politics. Do not suppose, now, that I am going to preach a political sermon, or that I wish to have you join and get up a Christian party in politics. No, I do not believe in that. But the time has come that Christians must vote for honest men, and take consistent ground in politics, or the Lord will curse them. They must be honest men themselves, and instead of voting for a man because he belongs to their party, Bank or Anti-Bank, Jackson, or Anti-Jackson, they must find out whether he is honest and upright, and fit to be trusted. They must let the world see that the church will uphold no man in office, who is known to be a knave, or an adulterer, or a Sabbath-breaker, or a gambler. Such is the spread of intelligence and the facility of communication in our country, that every man can know for whom he gives his vote. And if he will give his vote only for honest men, the country will be obliged to have upright rulers. . . . As on the subject of slavery and temperance, so on this subject, the church must act right or the country will be ruined. God cannot sustain this free and blessed country, which we love and pray for, unless the church will take right ground. Politics are a part of religion in such a country as this, and Christians must do their duty to the country as a part of their duty to God. It seems sometimes as if the foundations of the nation were becoming rotten, and Christians seem to act as if they thought God did not see what they do in politics. But I tell you, he does see it, and he will bless or curse this nation, according to the course they take.

5. The churches must take right ground on the subject of slavery. And here the question arises, what is right ground? And FIRST I will state some things that should be avoided.

(1.) First of all, a bad spirit should be avoided. Nothing is more calculated to injure religion, and to injure the slaves themselves, than for Christians to get into an angry controversy on the subject. It is a subject upon which there needs to be no angry controversy among Christians. Slave-holding professors, like rum-selling professors, may endeavor to justify themselves, and may be angry with those who press their consciences, and call upon them to give up their sins. Those proud professors of religion who think a man to blame, or think it is a shame to have a black skin, may allow their prejudices so far to prevail, as to shut their ears, and be disposed to quarrel with those who urge

the subject upon them. But I repeat it, the subject of slavery is a subject upon which Christians, praying men, need not and must not differ.

(2.) Another thing to be avoided is an attempt to take neutral ground on this subject. Christians can no more take neutral ground on this subject, since it has come up for discussion, than they can take neutral ground on the subject of the sanctification of the Sabbath. It is a great national sin. It is a sin of the church. The churches by their silence, and by permitting slave-holders to belong to their communion, have been consenting to it. All denominations have been more or less guilty, although the Quakers have of late years washed their hands of it. It is in vain for the churches to pretend it is merely a political sin. I repeat it, it is the sin of the church, to which all denominations have consented. They have virtually declared that it is lawful. . . .

* * *

In the SECOND place, I will mention several things, that in my judgment the church are imperatively called upon to do, on this subject:

(1.) Christians of all denominations, should lay aside prejudice and inform themselves on this subject, without any delay. Vast multitudes of professors of religion have indulged prejudice to such a degree as to be unwilling to read and hear, and come to a right understanding of the subject. But Christians cannot pray in this state of mind. I defy any one to possess the spirit of prayer, while he is too prejudiced to examine this, or any other question of duty. . . .

(2.) Writings, containing temperate and judicious discussions on this subject, and such developments of facts as are before the public, should be quietly and extensively circulated, and should be carefully and prayerfully examined by the whole church. . . . [P]rayering men should act judiciously, and that, as soon as sufficient information can be diffused through the community, the churches should meekly, but FIRMLY take decided ground on the subject, and express before the whole nation and the world, their abhorrence of this sin.

* * *

I believe the time has come, and although I am no prophet, I believe it will be found to have come, that the revival in the United States will continue and prevail, no farther and faster than the church take right ground upon this subject. The church are God's witnesses. The fact is that slavery is, pre-eminently, the sin of the church. It is the very fact that ministers and professors of religion of different denominations hold slaves, which sanctifies the whole abomination, in the eyes of ungodly men. Who does not know that on the subject of temperance, every drunkard in the land, will skulk behind some rum-selling deacon, or wine-drinking minister? It is the most common objection and refuge of the intemperate, and of moderate drinkers, that it is practised by professors of religion. It is this that creates the imperious necessity for excluding traffickers in ardent spirit, and rum-drinkers from the communion. Let the churches of all denominations speak out on the subject of temperance, let them close their doors against all who have any thing to do with the death-dealing abomination, and the cause of temperance is triumphant. A few years would annihilate the traffic. Just so with slavery.

It is the church that mainly supports this sin. Her united testimony upon this subject would settle the question. Let Christians of all denominations meekly but firmly come forth, and pronounce their verdict, let them clear their communions, and wash their hands of this thing, let them give forth and write on the head and front of this great abomination, SIN! and in three years, a public sentiment would be formed that would carry all before it, and there would not be a shackled slave, nor a bristling, cruel slave-driver in this land.

* * *

6. If the church wishes to promote revivals, she must sanctify the Sabbath. There is a vast deal of Sabbath-breaking in the land. Merchants break it, travellers break it, the government breaks it. . . .

7. The church must take right ground on the subject of Temperance, and Moral Reform, and all the subject of practical morality which come up for decision from time to time.

There are those in the churches who are standing aloof from the subject of Moral Reform, and who are as much afraid to have any thing said in the pulpit against lewdness, as if a thousand devils had got up into the pulpit. On this subject, the church need not expect to be permitted to take neutral ground. In the providence of God, it is up for discussion. The evils have been exhibited, the call has been made for reform. . . .

Review Questions

1. How does Finney justify his efforts to provoke an emotional state in his listeners?
2. What does Finney mean by "so little principle in the church"? Is he referring to a particular church?
3. Why did Finney promote political and social activism instead of calling for a withdrawal from such worldly concerns?
4. According to Finney, what role should the churches play in the abolition of slavery? In what sense did he charge that they had "consented" to the practice of slavery?
5. Did Finney perhaps underestimate the entrenchment of slavery and overestimate the power of converted Christians to effect change?