

Charles G. Finney:

BELOVED BRETHREN:

The Lord is in great mercy visiting our churches again with precious revivals of religion, and will you permit me to make a few suggestions in respect to the course to be pursued to preserve the converts from backsliding? You are aware, that in the providence of God I have had an opportunity of being in some measure acquainted with the course of things in these blessed seasons of refreshing from the presence of the Lord. I have watched with the deepest interest the rise, and progress, and decline of these seasons, and have inquired, with the deepest solicitude, after the best means of promoting them, and into the causes of their decline. After much reflection, and observation upon the subject, there are a great many things that I would say to my beloved brethren, but for the present beg leave to drop a few suggestions in regard to the converts of these revivals. It has long appeared to me that errors in the management and training of young converts have been a principal cause of the decline of revivals of religion in the churches. I am very far from being of the opinion that revivals in this country have declined, for many years, so deeply and radically as many have seemed to suppose. It has been sometimes predicted that the revivals that have prevailed within the last twenty years, had so declined as that a long night of death and darkness would ensue like that which followed the revivals in the days of Whitefield and Edwards. I do not believe that any such thing has occurred or is likely to occur in this country, unless some revolutionary struggle, or great and absorbing political question, should, for a long time, divert the public mind. We have great reason for gratitude that the decline of revivals has, for the last twenty years or more, been but temporary. And I think the fact, that there have been but temporary seasons of declension, can be accounted for on the plainest principles of philosophy and common sense. But I pass over this part of the subject for the present, for the purpose of saying with respect to the converts:

1. That their future character and influence, must depend under God upon the instructions they receive in the early stages of their Christian course. The notions that they first form--the shape and direction given to their religious character at first, will, in a great measure, establish their future influence and destiny. They therefore need peculiar instruction suited to their mental capacities, the infancy of their religion, and the circumstances with which they are surrounded. I repeat it, their instructions need to be altogether peculiar. Infants should not be fed with strong meat, nor a child treated as a man. They ought to be made to see that they are children, that they are in a state of spiritual infancy, and have every thing to learn. Too much pains cannot be taken, therefore, to show them the perfection of their ignorance on spiritual subjects. They need, therefore, to begin with the A, B, C, of religious truth and duty, and be, at the outset, well grounded in the first principles of the doctrine of Christ.

2. Their instruction should be very thorough. It is no doubt a great error to suppose that young converts should not be instructed to make those discriminations that distinguish between true and false affections, between selfishness and religion. Unless these discriminations are made, and the convert rendered familiar with them, he will almost with certainty, for a time, imagine that he has much more religion than he really has, and afterwards come to be very doubtful whether he has any religion at all. If selfish affections and emotions, are allowed to be intermingled with holy ones, without discrimination, all will at first be taken as religion. But this process long indulged will soon root out and annihilate all holy affections, and leave the mind perpetually under the influence of selfishness. This selfish religion will soon so develop itself, as to lead its possessor so utterly away from the Bible, as to force upon him the conviction, that he is all wrong, and that he has probably never had any religion. But if he cannot be led to make the necessary discrimination, selfish affections, instead of being puffed up by them, will greatly humble him, put him on his guard to resist them, and the occasions of them. He should therefore be hunted from every form and degree of selfishness. He should have a clear idea of what selfishness is, and from week to week, the multitudinous forms in which it appears should be pointed out, and its deceitfulness exposed. When I have preached upon selfishness, the question has often been asked me by professors, "Why do not ministers preach more about selfishness? Why is not the fact, that all selfishness is sin, made more prominent in the instruction of religious teachers? And why is it not known, that selfishness and benevolence are eternal opposites, and that their existence in the same mind at the same time is utterly impossible?"

I confess that it has been to myself a matter of great wonder, that the distinction between selfishness and religion is not made more prominent in the instructions of the pulpit, and that selfishness in so many forms, and in such disgusting degrees, is suffered to remain unrebuked in the Church of God. If converts are suffered to indulge selfishness; if they are allowed to overlook its malignant character; if they are allowed to indulge it in any form, or in any degree; it will inevitably eat out all their piety. Nay, their piety is gone already; for the indulgence of any form of selfishness is a state of absolute rebellion against God. Hence,

3. They should be searched to the very quick. Their business principles, and habits, and transactions should be thoroughly scrutinized and weighed in the balance of the law of supreme love to God, and equal love to man. They should be made to see and feel that to pursue any employment or course of life for any selfish end, or in any selfish manner, is downright apostasy from God. It should be insisted upon that they adopt in heart and practice, the law of universal love, as their rule of life.

4. Young converts must be made acquainted with the nature and degree of their spiritual wants and dependence. They should be guarded with the utmost caution against a spirit of self-dependence on the one hand, and esteeming their dependence upon the grace of God as a calamity rather than a crime, on the other. They should be made to see and feel that their cannot is their will not; in other words, that their want of stability of disposition to do the will of God, is the only difficulty in the way. But that this instability of disposition is so great, that they are as really dependent upon the influence of divine grace, as if obedience to them were naturally impossible. I am aware, my brethren, that in churches where they have revivals, these truths are taught, or there would not be revivals; yet I have often thought, that pains enough were not taken, to make converts clearly apprehend the depth and the nature of their dependence.

5. I have found in my own experience that the greatest pains-taking is required to give young converts a just and sufficient affecting view of their necessities, and in the same connection to lead them to a just apprehension of the fulness and nature of the remedy. The law must for ever serve as a school-master to bring them to Christ. This as long as the world stands, will be the use of the law in a world of sinners. But when they are brought to Christ, they should be brought to Him not only as a justifying, but as a sanctifying Savior. No pains should be spared to make them understand, not only that Christ has power on earth to forgive sins, but that His blood cleanseth from the commission of all sin. The law, when properly exhibited, not only drives the sinner to Christ, for pardon, but for sanctification. And the convert should be made to see that the main business of Jesus is to save him from the commission, rather than the pardon of his sins.

6. I am fully convinced that pains enough are not taken, to lead the convert to seek earnestly the 'baptism of the Holy Ghost, after that he hath believed.' My own instruction to converts, in this respect, has formerly been very defective. The fact that the baptism of the Holy Ghost is a thing universally promised or proffered to Christians under this dispensation, and that this blessing is to be sought and received after conversion, was not so distinctly before my mind formerly, as it has been of late. I am satisfied that this truth is abundantly taught in the Bible, and that the baptism of the Holy Ghost is the secret to the stability of Christian character. It is that water of life which Christ has promised, that if they drink it, "they shall never thirst, but that it shall be in them a well of water springing up into everlasting life." Converts should therefore have their attention definitely directed to what this blessing is--its nature--how it is to be obtained--to what extent--and with what degree of permanency it may be expected. In short, they need to be baptized into the very death of Christ, and by this baptism to be slain, and buried, and planted, and crucified, and raised to a life of holiness in Christ. Any thing short of this will leave the convert to inevitable backsliding, and to this attainment I am persuaded he may be led, by suitable pains-taking on the part of his religious teachers.

7. In order to this it is indispensable that he should be cut off from every kind and degree of unholy self-indulgence. His appetites and passions must be restrained and subdued; his body kept thoroughly under, and his whole being must be honestly, fully, and sacredly set apart to the service of God.

8. Converts should be guarded with great caution, against a self-righteous use of means, on the one hand, and an Antinomian neglect of them on the other. Antinomianism and Arminianism are two extremes, between which they must learn to steer, or they will certainly make shipwreck of their faith.

9. Converts should by all means be kept awake. If they are allowed to fall asleep, you might as well attempt to preach to the tomb-stones as to them. We may as well preach to dead men as to sleeping ones.

And now, beloved brethren, many of us have been and still are blessed with revivals of religion under our ministrations, and I pray you, let me inquire without offence, do we feel as we ought to feel the immense responsibility that at this time devolves on us, in what an immensely important sense Christ has committed the keeping of His honor and the training of His little ones, to us? Shall these converts backslide, through any neglect of ours? Shall the blessed work subside, react, and disgrace religion, for want of a deep sympathy in us with the heart of Christ? Shall the converts be watched over as the apple of our eye, and shall our souls continue "to travail in birth for them, till Christ be fully formed in them the hope of glory?"

I wish to make some remarks on the treatment of particular classes of converts, but must defer them till my

next.

Your brother in the bonds of the gospel,

C.G.FINNEY