

Charles G. Finney:

A LITTLE way from the village of Evans' Mills, was a settlement of Germans, where there was a German church with several elders, and a considerable membership, but no minister, and no regular religious meetings. Once each year they were in the habit of having a minister come up from the Mohawk Valley, to administer the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper. He would catechise their children, and receive such of them as had made the required attainments in knowledge. This was the way in which they were made Christians. They were required to commit to memory the catechism, and to be able to answer certain doctrinal questions; whereupon they were admitted to full communion in the church. After receiving the communion they took it for granted that they were Christians, and that all was safe. This is the way in which that church had been organized and continued.

But mingling, as they did more or less, in the scenes that passed in the village, they requested me to go out there and preach. I consented; and the first time I preached I took this text: "Without holiness no man shall see the Lord."

The settlement turned out en masse; and the schoolhouse where they worshipped was filled to its utmost capacity. They could understand English well. I began by showing, what holiness is not. Under this head I took everything that they considered to be religion, and showed that it was not holiness at all. In the second place I showed what holiness is. I then showed, thirdly, what is intended by seeing the Lord; and then, why those that had no holiness could never see the Lord--why they could never be admitted to His presence, and be accepted of Him. I then concluded with such pointed remarks as were intended to make the subject go home. And it did go home by the power of the Holy Ghost. The sword of the Lord slew them on the right hand and on the left.

In a very few days it was found that the whole settlement was under conviction; elders of the church and all were in the greatest consternation, feeling that they had no holiness. At their request I appointed a meeting for inquiry, to give instruction to inquirers. This was in their harvest time. I held the meeting at one o'clock in the afternoon, and found the house literally packed. People had thrown down the implements with which they were gathering their harvest, and had come into the meeting. As many were assembled as could be packed in the house.

I took a position in the center of the house, as I could not move around among them; and asked them questions, and encouraged them to ask questions. They became very much interested, and were very free in asking questions, and in answering the questions which I asked them. I seldom ever attended a more interesting or profitable meeting than that.

I recollect that one woman came in late, and sat near the door. When I came to speak to her, I said, "You look unwell." "Yes," she replied, "I am very sick. I have been in bed until I came to meeting. But I cannot read; and I wanted to hear God's word so much that I got up and came to meeting." "How did you come?" I inquired. She replied, "I came on foot." "How far is it?" was the next inquiry. "We call it three miles," she said. On inquiry I found that she was under conviction of sin, and had a most remarkably clear apprehension of her character and position before God. She was soon after converted, and a remarkable convert she was. My wife said that she was one of the most remarkable women in prayer that she ever heard pray; and that she repeated more Scripture in her prayers than any person she ever heard.

I addressed another, a tall dignified looking woman, and asked her what was the state of her mind. She replied immediately that she had given her heart to God; and went on to say that the Lord had taught her to read, since she had learned how to pray. I asked her what she meant. She said she never could read, and never had known her letters. But when she gave her heart to God, she was greatly distressed that she could not read God's Word. "But I thought," she said, "that Jesus could teach me to read; and I asked Him if He would not please to teach me to read His Word." Said she, "I thought when I had prayed that I could read. The children have a Testament, and I went and got it; and I thought I could read what I had heard them read. But," said she, "I went over to the school madam, and asked her if I read right; and she said I did; and since then," said she, "I can read the Word of God for myself."

I said no more; but thought there must be some mistake about this, as the woman appeared to be quite in earnest, and quite intelligent in what she said. I took pains, afterwards to inquire of her neighbors about her. They gave her an excellent character; and they all affirmed that it had been notorious that she could not read a syllable until after she was converted. I leave this to speak for itself; there is no use in theorizing about it. Such, I think, were the undoubted facts.

But the revival among the Germans resulted in the conversion of the whole church, I believe, and of nearly the whole community of Germans. It was one of the most interesting revivals that I ever witnessed.

While I was laboring at this place, the presbytery were called together to ordain me, which they did. Both churches were so strengthened, and their numbers so greatly increased, that they soon went forward and built each of them a commodious stone meeting house, and I believe have had a healthy state of religion there since that time. I have not been there for many years.

I have only narrated some of the principal facts that I remember as connected with this revival. But I would farther say respecting it, that a wonderful spirit of prayer prevailed among Christians, and great unity of feeling. The little Congregational church, as soon as they saw the results of the next evening's preaching, recovered themselves; for they had been scattered, discouraged, and confounded the night before. They rallied and took hold of the work as best they could; and though a feeble and inefficient band, with one or two exceptions, still they grew in grace, and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, during that revival.

The German woman of whom I have spoken as being sick when she came to the meeting of inquiry, united with the Congregational church. I was present and received her to the church. A very affecting incident, I recollect, occurred at the time she gave a relation of her Christian experience. There was a mother in Israel belonging to that church, by the name of S, a very godly woman, of ripe age, and piety. We had been sitting for a long time, and, hearing the narration of the experience of one after another who came forward as candidates for admission to the church. At length this German woman arose and related her experience. It was one of the most touching, childlike, interesting Christian experiences that I ever listened to. As she was going on with her narrative, I observed that old Mrs. S rose up from her place, and as the house was filled, crowded her way around as best she could. At first I supposed she was going out of doors. I was so occupied myself with the woman's narrative, that I was barely conscious of Mrs. S's moving in that direction. As soon as she came near to where the woman stood relating her experience, she stepped forward, and threw her arms around her neck and burst into tears, and said, "God bless you, my dear sister! God bless you!" The woman responded with all her heart; and such a scene as followed, so unpremeditated, so natural, so childlike, so overflowing with love--it melted the congregation on every side to tears. They wept on each other's necks. It was too moving a scene to be described in words.

The Baptist minister and I seldom met each other, though sometimes we were enabled to attend meeting together. He preached there but one half of the time, and I the other half; consequently I was generally away when he was there, and he was generally absent when I was there. He was a good man, and worked as best he could to promote the revival.

The doctrines preached were those which I have always preached as the Gospel of Christ. I insisted upon the voluntary total moral depravity of the unregenerate; and the unalterable necessity of a radical change of heart by the Holy Ghost, and by means of the truth.

I laid great stress upon prayer as an indispensable condition of promoting the revival. The atonement of Jesus Christ, His divinity, His divine mission, His perfect life, His vicarious death, His resurrection, repentance, faith, justification by faith, and all the kindred doctrines, were discussed as thoroughly as I was able, and pressed home, and were manifestly made efficacious by the power of the Holy Ghost.

The means used were simply preaching, prayer and conference meetings, much private prayer, much personal conversation, and meetings for the instruction of earnest inquirers. These, and no other means, were used for the promotion of that work. There was no appearance of fanaticism, no bad spirit, no divisions, no heresies, no schisms. Neither at that time, nor certainly so long as I was acquainted at that place, was there any result of that revival to be lamented, nor any feature of it that was of questionable effect.

I have spoken of cases of intensified opposition to this revival. One circumstance, I found, had prepared the people for this opposition, and had greatly embittered it. I found that region of country what, in the western phrase, would be called, a "burnt district." There had been, a few years previously, a wild excitement passing through that region, which they called a revival of religion, but which turned out to be spurious. I can give no account of it except what I heard from Christian people and others. It was reported as having been a very extravagant excitement; and resulted in a reaction so extensive and profound, as to leave the impression on many minds that religion was a mere delusion. A great many men seemed to be settled in that conviction. Taking what they had seen as a specimen of a revival of religion, they felt justified in opposing anything looking toward the promoting of a revival.

I found that it had left among Christian people some practices that were offensive, and calculated rather to excite ridicule than any serious conviction of the truth of religion. For example, in all their prayer meetings I found a custom prevailing like this: Every professor of religion felt it a duty to testify for Christ. They must "take up the cross," and say something in meeting. One would rise and say in substance: "I have a duty to perform which no one can perform for me. I arise to testify that religion is good; though I must confess that I do not enjoy it at present. I have nothing in particular to say, only to bear my testimony; and I hope you will all pray for me." This concluded, that person would sit down and another would rise and say, about to the same effect: "Religion is good; I do not enjoy it; I have nothing else to say, but I must do my duty. I hope you will all pray for me." Thus the time would be occupied, and the meeting would pass off with very little that was more interesting than such remarks as these. Of course the ungodly would make sport of this.

It was in fact ridiculous and repulsive. But the impression was so rooted in the public mind that this was the way to hold a prayer and conference meeting, and that it was the duty of every professor of religion, whenever an opportunity was afforded, to give such testimony for God, that I was obliged, for the purpose of getting rid of it, to hold no such meetings. I appointed every meeting, consequently, for preaching. When we were assembled, I would begin by singing, and then would pray myself. I would then call on one or two others to pray, naming them. Then I would name a text, and talk for awhile. Then, when I saw that an impression was made, I would stop and ask one or two to pray that the Lord might fasten that on their minds. I would then proceed with my talk, and after a little, stop again and ask some one or two to pray. Thus I would proceed, not throwing the meeting open at all for remarks on the part of the brethren and sisters. Then they would go away without being in bondage, feeling that they had neglected their duty in not bearing testimony for God. Thus most of our prayer meetings were not so in name. As they were appointed for preaching, it was not expected that they would be thrown open for everyone to speak; and in this way I was enabled to overcome that silly method of holding meetings, that created so much mirth and ridicule on the part of the ungodly.

After the revival took thorough hold in this place, and those things occurred that I have named, opposition entirely ceased so far as I could learn. I spent more than six months at this place and at Antwerp, laboring between the two places; and for the latter part of the time I heard nothing of open opposition.

I have spoken of the doctrines preached. I should add, that I was obliged to take much pains in giving instruction to inquirers. The practice had been, I believe, universal, to set anxious sinners to praying for a new heart, and to using means for their own conversion. The directions they received either assumed or implied that they were very willing to be Christians, and were taking much pains to persuade God to convert them. I tried to make them understand that God was using the means with them, and not they with Him; that God was willing, and they were unwilling; that God was ready, and they were not ready. In short, I tried to shut them up to present faith and repentance, as the thing which God required of them, present and instant submission to His will, present and instant acceptance of Christ. I tried to show them that all delay was only an evasion of present duty; that all praying for a new heart, was only trying to throw the responsibility of their conversion upon God; and that all efforts to do duty, while they did not give their hearts to God, were hypocritical and delusive.

During the whole six months that I labored in that region, I rode on horseback from town to town, and from settlement to settlement, in various directions, and preached the Gospel as I had opportunity. When I left Adams my health had run down a good deal. I had coughed blood; and at the time I was licensed, my friends thought that I could live but a short time. Mr. Gale charged me, when I left Adams, not to attempt to preach more than once a week, and then to be sure not to speak more than half an hour at a time. But instead of this, I visited from house to house, attended prayer meetings, and preached and labored every day, and almost every night, through the whole season. Before the six months were completed my health was entirely restored, my lungs were sound, and I could preach two hours, and two hours and a half, and longer, without feeling the least fatigue. I think my sermons generally averaged nearly or quite two hours. I preached out of doors; I preached in barns; I preached in schoolhouses; and a glorious revival spread all over that new region of country.

All through the earlier part of my ministry especially, I used to meet from ministers a great many rebuffs and reproofs, particularly in respect to my manner of preaching. I have said that Mr. Gale, when I preached for him immediately after I was licensed, told me that, he should be ashamed to have anyone know that I was a pupil of his. The fact is, their education had been so entirely different from mine, that they disapproved of my manner of preaching, very much. They would reprove me for illustrating my ideas by reference to the common affairs of men of different pursuits around me, as I was in the habit of doing. Among farmers and mechanics, and other classes of men, I borrowed my illustrations from their various occupations. I tried also to use such language as they would understand. I addressed them in the language of the common people. I sought to express all my ideas in few words, and in words that were in common use.

Before I was converted I had a different tendency. In writing and speaking, I had sometimes allowed myself to use ornate language. But when I came to preach the Gospel, my mind was so anxious to be thoroughly understood, that I studied in the most earnest manner, on the one hand to avoid what was vulgar, and on the other to express my thoughts with the greatest simplicity of language.

This was extremely contrary to the notions which at that time prevailed among ministers, and even yet prevail to a very great extent. In reference to my illustrations they would say, "Why don't you illustrate from events of ancient history, and take a more dignified way of illustrating your ideas?" To this, of course, I replied, that if my illustrations brought forward anything that was new and striking, the illustration itself would rather occupy the minds of the people, than the truth which I wished to illustrate. And in respect to the simplicity of my language, I defended myself by saying, that my object was not to cultivate a style of oratory that should soar above the heads of the people, but to make myself understood; and that therefore I would use any language adapted to this end, and that did not involve coarseness or vulgarity.

About the time that I left Evans' Mills our presbytery met, and I attended the meeting. I left the revival work at the particular request of some brethren, and went over to the presbytery. The brethren had heard of my manner of preaching, those of them who had not heard me preach. The presbytery met in the morning, and went on with the transaction of business; and after our recess for dinner, as we assembled in the afternoon, the mass of the people came together and filled the house. I had not the remotest thought of what was in the minds of the brethren of the presbytery. I therefore took my seat in the crowd, and waited for the meeting of the presbytery to be opened.

As soon as the congregation was fairly assembled, one of the brethren arose and said: "The people have come together manifestly to hear preaching; and I move that Mr. Finney preach a sermon." This was seconded, and unanimously carried. I saw in a moment that it was the design of the brethren of the presbytery to put me on trial, that they might see if I could do as they had heard that I did--get up and preach on the spur of the moment, without any previous preparation. I made no apology or objection to preaching; for I must say that my heart was full of it, and that I wanted to preach. I arose and stepped into the aisle; and looking up to the pulpit, I saw that it was a high, small pulpit, up against the wall. I therefore stood in the aisle and named my text: "Without holiness no man shall see the Lord." The Lord helped me to preach. I walked up and down the broad aisle; and the people were evidently interested and much moved.

But after the meeting one of the brethren stepped up to me and said: "Brother Finney, if you come up our way, I should like to have you preach in some of our school districts. I should not like to have you preach in our church. But we have got schoolhouses in some of the districts, away from the village. I should like to have you preach in some of those." I mention this to show what their ideas were of my method of preaching. But how completely they were in the dark in regard to the results of that method of addressing people! They used to complain that I let down the dignity of the pulpit; that I was a disgrace to the ministerial profession; that I talked like a lawyer at the bar; that I talked to the people in a colloquial manner; that I said "you," instead of preaching about sin and sinners, and saying "they;" that I said "hell," and with such an emphasis as often to shock the people; furthermore, that I urged the people with such vehemence, as if they might not have a moment to live; and sometimes they complained that I blamed the people too much. One doctor of divinity told me that he felt a great deal more like weeping over sinners, than blaming them. I replied to him that I did not wonder, if he believed that they had a sinful nature, and that sin was entailed upon them, and they could not help it.

After I had preached some time, and the Lord had everywhere added His blessing, I used to say to ministers, whenever they contended with me about my manner of preaching, and desired me to adopt their ideas and preach as they did, that I dared not make the change they desired. I said, "Show me a more excellent way. Show me the fruits of your ministry; and if they so far exceed mine as to give me evidence that you have found a more excellent way, I will adopt your views. But do you expect me to abandon my own views and practices, and adopt yours, when you yourselves cannot deny that, whatever errors I may have fallen into, or whatever imperfections there may be in my preaching, in style, and in everything else, yet the results justify my methods?" I would say to them: "I intend to improve all I can; but I never can adopt your manner of preaching the Gospel, until I have higher evidence that you are right and I am wrong."

They used to complain, oftentimes, that I was guilty of repetition in my preaching. I would take the same thought and turn it over and over, and illustrate it in various ways. I assured them that I thought it was necessary to do so, to make myself understood; and that I could not be persuaded to relinquish this practice by any of their arguments. Then they would say, you will not interest the educated part of your congregation. But facts soon silenced them on this point. They found that, under my preaching, judges, and lawyers, and

Revival at Evan's Mill

educated men were converted by scores; whereas, under their methods, such a thing seldom occurred.