LECTURES ON REVIVIAL OF RELIGION

Charles G. Finney 1835

It is altogether improbable that religion will ever make progress among heathen nations except through the influence of revivals. The attempt is now in 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 land approximates to heathenism, it is impossible for God or man to promote religion in such a state of things but by powerful excitements. This is evident from the fact that this has always been the way in which God has done it. God does not create these excitements, and choose this method to promote religion, for nothing, or without reason. Men being so reluctant to obey God, will not act until they are excited. For instance, how many there are who know that they ought to be religious, but they are afraid that if they become pious they will be laughed at by their companions. Many are wedded to idols; others are procrastinating repentance until they are settled in life, or until they have secured some favorite worldly interest. Such persons never will give up their false shame, or relinquish their ambitious schemes, till they are so excited by a sense of quiet and danger they cannot hold back any longer.

These remarks are designated only as an introduction. I shall now proceed with the main design, to show:

I. What a revival of religion is not.

II. What it is.

I. A REVIVAL IS NOT A MIRACLE.

1. A miracle has been generally defined to be a Divine interference, setting aside, or suspending, the laws of nature. A revival is not a miracle in this sense. All the laws of matter and mind remain in force. They are neither suspended nor set aside in a revival.

2. A revival is not a miracle according to another definition of the term "miracle" - something above the powers of nature. There is nothing in religion beyond the ordinary powers of nature. It consists entirely in the right exercise of the powers of nature. It is just that, and nothing else. When mankind become religious, they are not enabled to put forth exertions which they were unable before to put forth. They only exert powers which they had before, in a different way, and use them for the glory of God.

3. A revival is not a miracle, nor dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means - as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means. There may be a miracle among its antecedent causes, or there may not. The apostles employed miracles simply as a means by which they arrested attention to their message, and established its Divine authority. But the miracle was not the revival. The miracle was one thing; the revival that followed it was quite another thing. The revivals in the apostles' days were connected with miracles, but they were not miracles. I said that a revival is the result of the right use of the appropriate means. The means which God has enjoined for the production of a revival, doubtless have a natural tendency to produce a revival. Otherwise God would not have enjoined them. But means will not produce a revival, we all know, without the blessing of God. No more will grain, when it is sown, produce a crop without the blessing of God. It is impossible for us to say that there is not as direct an influence or agency from God, to produce a crop of grain, as there is to produce a revival. What are the laws of nature according to which it is supposed that grain yields a crop? They are nothing but the constituted manner of the operations of God. In the Bible, the Word of God is compared to grain, and preaching is compared to sowing the seed, and the results to the springing up and growth of the crop. A revival is as naturally a result of the use of the appropriate means as a crop is of the use of its appropriate means.

I wish this idea to be impressed on your minds, for there has long been an idea prevalent that promoting religion has something very peculiar in it, not to be judged of by the ordinary rules of cause and effect; in short, that there is no connection of the means with the result, and no tendency in the means to produce the effect. No doctrine is more dangerous than this to the prosperity of the Church, and nothing more absurd.

Suppose a man were to go and preach this doctrine among farmers, regarding their sowing of grain. Let him tell them that God is a Sovereign, and will give them a crop only when it pleases Him, and that for them to plow, and plant, and labor, as if they expected to raise a crop, is very wrong, that it amounts to taking the work out of the hands of God, that it is an interference with His Sovereignty, and that there is no connection between the means and the result on which they can depend. Suppose the farmers should believe such a doctrine? Why, they would starve the world to death. Just such results would follow on the Church being persuaded that promoting religion is somehow so mysteriously a subject of Divine Sovereignty, that there is no natural connection between the means and the end. In fact, what are the results? Why, generation after generation has gone to hell, while the Church has been dreaming and waiting for God to save them without the use of the means. It has been the devil's most successful means of destroying souls! The connection is as clear in religion as it is when the farmer sows his grain.

There is one fact under the government of God worthy of universal notice and of everlasting remembrance; which is, that the most useful and important things are most easily and certainly obtained by the use of the appropriate means. This is evidently a principle in the Divine administration. Hence, all the necessaries of life are obtained with great certainty by the use of the simplest means. The luxuries are more difficult to obtain; the means to procure them are more intricate, and less certain in their results; while things absolutely hurtful and poisonous, such as alcohol and the like, are often obtained only by torturing nature and making use of a kind of infernal sorcery to procure death-dealing abominations.

This principle holds true in moral government, and as spiritual blessings are of surpassing importance, we should expect their attainment to be connected with great certainly with the use of the appropriate means; and such we find to be the fact. And I fully believe that, could facts be known, it would be found that when the appointed means have been rightly used, spiritual blessings have been obtained with greater uniformity than temporal ones.

II. WHAT A REVIVAL IS.

4. A revival breaks the power of the world and of sin over Christians. It brings them to such vantage ground that they get a fresh impulse towards heaven; they have a new foretaste of heaven, and new desires after union with God; thus the charm of the world is broken, and the power of sin overcome.

5. When the Churches are thus awakened and reformed, the reformation and salvation of sinners will follow. Their hearts will be broken down and changed. Very often the most abandoned profligates are among the subjects. Harlots, and drunkards, and infidels, and all sorts of abandoned characters, are awakened and converted. The worst of human beings are softened and reclaimed, and made to appear as lovely specimens of the beauty of holiness.