

The History of the Doctrine of Justification...



How
Christ
preserved
the good
news in
history

The Work of Christ Finney: The Church Revolutionized...

What we have concerned ourselves with these past ten weeks, is an examination of some of the great conflicts that have challenged the church of Christ. In that study, we have tried to focus on two specific issues. Those two issues are:

- (1) Who was Christ?
- (2) What did He accomplish on behalf of His people?

Our study has involved a great deal of history. We did not engage in this study primarily to acquaint you with some of the great figures of church history. What I wanted you to see is that there has always been a battle for the gospel. Occasionally, it seemed like the truth of the gospel might actually be snuffed out. But we have also seen that God in His providential kindness has been faithful to raise up defenders of the faith at the most crucial times. To sum up, what we have seen is that the gospel of Christ has been under continuous siege. The minions of Satan have never failed to take opportunity to do damage. There have

always been those who either purposely or through ignorance have denigrated the Person and work of Christ and that is why the church must constantly renew its heart and mind to placard the gospel. If it stops contending for the faith once delivered to the saints, if the purity of the gospel becomes something it takes for granted, the church may simply drift away. With no biblical tethers to keep us attached to that which is important, we may transform the church of Christ to something that drives men away from rather than toward the cross. When social reform, or political reform or anything other than the proclamation of the gospel becomes our agenda, we are, in fact, no longer a biblical church.

We live in an age when there is more religious literature than ever before. Through the miracle of modern electronic media, you can watch and listen to religious programming 24 hours a day. We are getting out a message. The question remains, however, as to whether we are getting out the message. According to George Barna, roughly 78% of the evangelical Christian church holds to the idea that "God helps those, who help themselves. Recently at one evangelical convention, only two people out of one hundred had the ability to give any credible definition of the doctrine of justification. Which is extraordinary, considering that both Luther and Calvin viewed it as the principle doctrine of Christianity.

Still, we are consumed with being heard. We want to be heard even though we no longer have anything to say. One church growth advocate recently said that people are no longer interested in things like justification and sanctification. I want to know, seriously, what difference does that make? Our Lord commanded us to go into all the world and preach the gospel, which I am certain implies that

we will at least have to have some idea of what the gospel is. But, we are trying to engage the culture. We are trying to impact the culture. What you are seeing today, is the church of Christ looking for something to say that will attract an audience. Among church growth advocates there is a desire, a strong desire, to contextualize the message to the culture. But invariably, when we spend our time looking for hot buttons or relevant topics, we will wind up changing the message. It can happen; it has happened before.

The Puritans enjoyed a measure of success in North America. They founded the great institutions of learning in America, not for the advance of learning by itself, but primarily to train ministers for the advance of the gospel. But the same old cycles repeated themselves. Harvard grew lax in it's love of the gospel, so Yale was founded to counter its apostasy. It was at this newly founded Yale, that a young Puritan divine began studying while just a teenager. His name was Jonathan Edwards.

Jonathan Edwards received an appointment from his grandfather's church in Northampton, Massachusetts. He served in that capacity until his grandfather died and he was appointed pastor. He was concerned about the laxity that had invaded the church. Large portions of the community were openly hostile to the gospel. This was in the community that was openly Puritan. Edwards prayed for revival. He wanted his people to see the glory of God in redemption and as a result in 1740 AD, he began to preach a series of sermons on justification by faith alone. At the same time, the Anglican evangelist Geroqe Whitefield was traveling across the colonies preaching the same message. God used that tremendous tandem of preachers to bring revival. The Great Awakening rocked New

England for a period of over ten years. Thousands upon thousands of people were converted. Missionary societies were formed. New England was transformed.

But the effects of the revival were faded by the time the American Revolution occurred in 1776. French philosophy and the Age of the Enlightenment had scoffed at the notion of original sin. Man was viewed as the master of the world, able to shake off the bands of all tyrants including God. The Calvinism of New England faded into Deism. All the ideas of the sovereignty of God were being erased. Those elements that men disliked, they simply did removed. Thomas Jefferson, for example, created the Jefferson Bible, in which he removed from the text, all those things that he found contrary to reason. He removed things like the Virgin Birth, the sacrificial atonement of Christ, and the deity of Christ. The Bible was still a great book, one among many, if it were studied from the perspective of producing moral excellence.

It was into this world that Charles Grandison Finney was born. He was born in the western frontier of New York. He was a talented boy, able to educate himself by hard work and sweat. But it was the time of Andrew Jackson. It was time of pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. Any man setting his mind to it could better himself. Jackson had proved it, Lincoln was about to prove it, and Charles Finney was about to apply the principle of American democracy to Christianity. There are many parallels between Lincoln and Finney. Both were raised on the frontier. Both men were self-educated. Both men were lawyers. Both men were imposing in their appearance. Listen to the way one of Finney's students described him during a period in which he taught a frontier school.

There was nothing which anyone else knew, that Mr. Finney didn't know, and there was nothing which anyone else could do that Mr. Finney could not do -and do a great deal better. He was the idol of his pupils. He joined in their sports before and after school, and although at first there were older and larger boys than he in the school, he could beat them at everything. He would lie down on the ground and let as many as could pile on top of him and try to hold him down. He would say, 'Are you ready?' Then he would make a quick turn, rise up and shake them all off, just as a lion might shake off a lot of puppies. In school, all was different. He was very dignified and kept perfect order. Should any boy attempt to create a disturbance, one flash of Mr. Finney's eye (Finney had enormous, devastatingly pale blue eyes) would quell the sinner at once. Oh, I tell you, they all loved and worshipped him, and all felt that some day he would be a great man. (Cochran pp. 17-8)

Finney had grown up on the frontier, and it was a wild godless place. There were in western New York about the same time so many religious cults and deviations from orthodox Christianity that it became known as the "burned-over district". At that time, New York produced the Mormons, the Jehovah's witnesses, the Christian Scientists and a huge number of other spiritualist cults. Some people called western New York the "Psychic Highway". But for all that was going on around him, Finney was unaffected. His only revealed memory of attending church occurred when he was a teenager visiting his uncle's church. His uncle was a Reformed minister and Finney remembered his enthusiastic Calvinism and his unenthusiastic preaching. Finney, in his autobiography goes to pains to point out that his uncle read his sermons and that they were boring, intensely boring. He developed there an intense hatred of sermons that were read. He wanted to be moved.

Later, when Finney began to study law and work in a law office, he became involved with a local Presbyterian church. There he listened to the orthodox sermons of Reverend George Gale and he criticized Gale relentlessly. It is

amazing that gale put up with him so long. But gale tried to evangelize Finney. He spent long hours in conversation with him trying to bring him to faith and catechize him. But listen to how Finney summarizes it:

But my studies, so far as he was concerned as my teacher, were little else than controversy. He held to the Presbyterian doctrine of original sin, or that the human constitution was morally depraved. He held also, that men were utterly unable to comply with the terms of the Gospel, to repent, to believe, or to do anything that God required them to do. That while they were free to all evil, in the sense of being able to commit any amount of sin, yet they were not free in regard to all that was good. That God had condemned men for their sinful nature; and for this, as well as for their transgressions, they deserved eternal death, and were under condemnation. He held also that the influences of the Spirit of God on the minds of men were physical acting directly upon the substance of the soul. That men were passive in regeneration; and in short he held all those doctrines that logically flow from the fact of a nature sinful in itself. These doctrines I could not receive. I could receive his views on the subject of atonement, regeneration, faith, repentance, the slavery of the will, or any of their kindred doctrines (p. 48).

Nevertheless, Gale found things for Finney to do. He had him lead the choir and he continued working on him. About that time, Finney came under conviction of sin. Finney decided to seek Christ.

On a Sabbath evening in the autumn of 1821, I made up my mind that I would settle the question of my soul's salvation at once, that if it were possible I would make my peace with God. But as I was very busy in the affairs of the office, I knew that without great firmness of purpose, I should never effectually attend to the subject. I therefore, then and there resolved, as far as possible, to avoid all business, and everything that would divert my attention, and to give myself wholly to the work of securing the salvation of my soul.

I used these two quotes because they help give insight into Finney's views. Finney spent time in solitude in the woods outside of town and finally returned to his law office. There he reflected on all that happened.

There was no fire and no light in this back room; nevertheless it appeared to me as if it were perfectly light. As I went in and shut the door after me, it seemed as if I met the Lord Jesus Christ face to face. It seemed to me that I saw him as I would see any other man. He said nothing, but looked at me in such a manner as to break me right down at his feet. It seemed to me a reality that he stood before me, and I fell down at his feet and poured out my soul to him. I wept aloud like a child and made such confessions as I could with my choked words. It seemed to me that I bathed his feet with my tears, and yet I had no distinct impression that I touched him.

As soon as my mind became calm enough I returned to the front office and found that the fire I had made of large wood was nearly burned out. But as I turned and was about to take a seat by the fire, I received a mighty baptism of the Holy Spirit. Without any expectation of it, without ever having the thought in my mind that there was any such thing for me, without any memory of ever hearing the thing mentioned by any person in the world, the Holy Spirit descended upon me in a manner that seemed to go through me, body and soul. I could feel the impression, like a wave of electricity, going through and through me. Indeed it seemed to come in waves of liquid love, for I could not express it in any other way.

No words can express the wonderful love that was spread abroad in my heart. I wept aloud with joy and love. I literally bellowed out the unspeakable overflow of my heart. These waves came over me, and over me, and over me, one after the other, until I remember crying out. "I shall die if these waves continue to pass over me." I said. "Lord, I cannot bear any more," yet I had no fear of death.

Gale and the others of the town were thrilled to have such a convert. He was so able, so articulate, so confident. He was what every pastor dreamed of. They tried to train him but he resisted. It is hard to tell from the historic record

whether any seminaries would accept him. Late in his life Finney remembered it this way:

In the Spring of this year, 1822, I put myself under the care of the Presbytery as a candidate for the Gospel ministry. Some of the ministers urged me to go to Princeton to study theology, but I declined. When they asked me why I would not go to Princeton, I told them that my pecuniary circumstances forbade it. This was true; but they said they would see that my expenses were paid. Still I refused to go; and when urged to give them my reasons, I plainly told them that I would not put myself under such an influence as they had been under; that I was confident they had been wrongly educated, and they were not ministers that met my ideal of what a minister of Christ should be. I told them this reluctantly, but I could not honestly withhold it. They appointed my pastor to superintend my studies. He offered me the use of his library, and said he would give what attention I needed to my theological studies. But my studies, so far as he was concerned as my teacher, were little else than controversy.

In spite of what happened, they decided to license Finney to preach. They asked him if he agreed with the Westminster Confession. Finney replied:

I had not examined it. This had made no part of my study. I replied that I received it for substance of doctrine, so far as I understood it.

That should have been warning enough for Gale, but he wanted Finney as a convert. Later Finney would call the Westminster Confession a “paper pope”.

No Christian, therefore, and no theologian should be afraid to change his views, his language, or his practices in conformity with increasing light. The prevalence of such a fear would keep the world, at best, at a perpetual standstill, on all subjects of science, and consequently all improvements would be precluded. Every uninspired attempt to frame for the church an authoritative standard of opinion which shall be regarded as an unquestionable exposition of the word of God, is not only impious in itself, but it is also a tacit assumption of the fundamental dogma of Papacy. The Assembly of Divines did more than to

assume the necessity of a Pope to give law to the opinions of men; they assumed to create an immortal one, or rather to embalm their own creed, and preserve it as the Pope of all generations; or it is more just to say, that those who have adopted that confession of faith and catechism as an authoritative standard of doctrine, have absurdly adopted the most obnoxious principle of Popery, and elevated their confession and catechism to the Papal throne and into the place of the Holy Ghost. That the instrument framed by that assembly should in the nineteenth century be recognized as the standard of the church, or of an intelligent branch of it, is not only amazing, but I must say that it is most ridiculous. It is as absurd in theology as it would be in any other branch of science, and as injurious and stultifying as it is absurd and ridiculous. It is better to have a living than a dead Pope. If we must have an authoritative expounder of the word of God, let us have a living one, so as not to preclude the hope of improvement.

But Gale gave Finney opportunities to preach, and when Gale became sick, he gave Finney the chance to take over the pulpit. Finney was a rip-roaring success. It really is no wonder, he had a theology that fit perfectly the rugged individualism of the American frontier.

He lit a meteoric trail across the New England sky. He ushered in the Second Great Awakening. It was different in character from the First Great Awakening, it was based on a completely different theology. Finney introduced many new measures that he believed were necessary to induce men to repentance. He championed the "altar call". He used extended "song services" and played upon people's emotions. But it is not about Finney's methods that I want to speak. He championed anew and vital revivalism that dominates even our modern evangelical culture. The thing I want you to see, is that Finney's theology produced Finney's methods. Let look at a few of his doctrines and then compare them to the doctrines of someone else that we have already studied.

Natural Ability

The sinner has all the faculties and natural abilities requisite to render perfect obedience to God. All he needs is to be induced to use these powers and attributes as he ought.

The Bible expressly limits obligation by ability...with strict propriety, it cannot be said that God requires anymore than we are able to do.

Original Sin

This, in substance, is sometimes affirmed by the defenders of the doctrine of original sin. This doctrine is a stumbling-block both to the church and the world, infinitely dishonorable to God, and an abomination alike to God and the human intellect, and should be banished from every pulpit, and from every formula of doctrine, and from the world. It is a relic of heathen philosophy, and was foisted in among the doctrines of Christianity by Augustine, as everyone may know who will take the trouble to examine for himself.

The Bible once, and only once, incidentally intimates that Adam's first Sin has in some way been the occasion, not the necessary physical cause of all the sins of men (Rom. 5:12-19). It neither says nor intimates anything in relation to the manner in which Adam's sin has occasioned this result. It only incidentally recognizes the fact, and then leaves it, just as if the reason why was too obvious to need explanation.

The relations of the old school view of justification to their view of depravity is obvious. They hold, as we have seen, that the constitution in every faculty and part is sinful. Of course, a return to personal, present holiness, in the sense of entire conformity to the law, cannot with them be a condition of justification. They must have a justification while yet at least in some degree of sin. This must be brought about by imputed righteousness. So a scheme is devised to divert the eye of the law and of the lawgiver from the sinner to his Substitute, who has perfectly obeyed the law. But in order to make out the possibility of his obedience being imputed to them, it must be assumed, that he owed no obedience for himself; than which a greater absurdity cannot be conceived. Constitutional depravity or sinfulness being once assumed, physical regeneration, physical sanctification, physical divine influence, imputed

righteousness, and justification, while personally in the commission of sin, follow of course.

Imputation

The doctrine of a literal imputation of Adam's sin to all his posterity, of the literal imputation of all the sins of the elect to Christ, and of his suffering for them the exact amount due to the transgressors, of the literal imputation of Christ's righteousness or obedience to the elect, and the consequent perpetual justification of all that are converted...I say I regard these dogmas as fabulous, and better befitting a romance than a system of theology. (Revival Lectures)

The doctrine of an imputed righteousness, or that Christ's obedience to the law was accounted as our obedience, is founded on a most false and nonsensical assumption." After all, Christ's righteousness "could do no more than justify himself. It can never be imputed to us...It was naturally impossible, then, for him to obey in our behalf." This "representing of the atonement as the ground of the sinner's justification has been a sad occasion of stumbling to many (pp.320-2)

Justification is an act of God's free grace, which takes immediate effect in this mortal life, and by which the relation of the sinner who believes on Jesus Christ...is accepted as righteous, only for the righteousness of Christ, is adopted into the family of God's children. It is one act of God, once done and for ever, and begins immediately to produce its fruits...

Now this is certainly another gospel from the one I am inculcating. It is not a difference merely upon some speculative or theoretic point. It is a point fundamental to the gospel and to salvation, if any one can be.

But for sinners to be forensically pronounced just, is impossible and absurd....As we shall see, there are many conditions, while there is but one ground, of the justification of sinners....As has already been said, there can be no justification in a legal or forensic sense, but upon the ground of universal, perfect, and uninterrupted obedience to law. This is of course denied by those who hold that gospel justification, or the justification of penitent sinners, is of the nature of a forensic or judicial justification. They hold to the legal maxim that what a man does by another he does by himself, and therefore the law regards Christ's obedience as ours, on the ground that he obeyed for us.

Perseverance

Whenever he sins, he must, for the time being, cease to be holy. This is self-evident. Whenever he sins, he must be condemned; he must incur the penalty of the law of God....If it be said that the precept is still binding upon him, but that with respect to the Christian, the penalty is forever set aside, or abrogated, I reply, that to abrogate the penalty is to repeal the precept; for a precept without a penalty is no law. It is only counsel or advice. The Christian, therefore, is justified no longer than he obeys, and must be condemned when he disobeys; or Antinomianism is true....In these respects, then, the sinning Christian and the unconverted sinner are upon precisely the same ground.