

Finney's Doctrinal Education

Charles G. Finney

Excerpts from Charles G. Finney's "Autobiography" - Finney's Doctrinal Education

I have spoken at considerable length of my protracted controversy with my theological teacher, Mr. Gale. Upon reflection I think that I should state a little more definitely some of the points upon which we had so much discussion. I could not receive that theological fiction of imputation. I will state, as nearly as I can, the exact ground that he maintained and insisted upon. First, he maintained that the guilt of Adam's first transgression is literally imputed to all his posterity; so that they are justly sentenced and exposed to eternal damnation for Adam's sin. Secondly, he maintained that we received from Adam, by natural generation, a nature wholly sinful, and morally corrupt in every faculty of soul and body; so that we are totally unable to perform any act acceptable to God, and are necessitated by our sinful nature to transgress his law, in every action of our lives. And this, he insisted, is the estate into which all men fell by the first sin of Adam. For this sinful nature, thus received from Adam by natural generation, all mankind are also sentenced to, and are deserving of eternal damnation. Then, thirdly, in addition to this, he maintained that we are all justly condemned and sentenced to eternal damnation for our own unavoidable transgression of the law. Thus we find ourselves justly subject to a triple eternal damnation.

Then the second branch of this wonderful imputation is as follows: The sin of all the elect, both original and actual--that is, the guilt of Adam's sin, together with the guilt of their sinful nature, and also guilt of their personal transgressions, are all literally imputed to Christ; and therefore the divine government regarded him as an embodiment of all the sins and guilt of the elect, and treated him accordingly; that is, the Father punished the Son precisely as much as all the elect deserved. Hence their debt being thus fully discharged by the punishment of Christ, they are saved upon principles of "exact justice."

The third branch of this wonderful theological fiction is as follows: First--The obedience of Christ to the divine law is literally imputed to the elect; so that in him they are regarded as having always perfectly obeyed the law. Secondly--His death for them is also imputed to the elect; so that in him they are regarded as having fully suffered all that they deserve on account of the guilt of Adam's sin imputed to them, and on account of their sinful nature, and also on account of all their personal transgressions. Thirdly--Thus by their surety the elect have first perfectly obeyed the law; and then they have by and in their surety suffered the full penalty to which they were subject in consequence of the guilt of Adam's sin imputed to them, and also the guilt of their sinful nature, with all their blameworthiness for their personal transgressions. Thus they have suffered in Christ, just as if they had not obeyed in him. He, first, perfectly obeys for them, which obedience is strictly imputed to them, so that they are regarded by the government of God as having fully obeyed in their surety; secondly, he has suffered for them the penalty of the law, just as if no obedience had been rendered; thirdly, after the law has been doubly satisfied, the elect are required to repent as if no satisfaction had been rendered; fourthly, payment in

full having been rendered twice over, the discharge of the elect is claimed to be an act of infinite grace. Thus the elect are saved by grace on principles of justice, so that there is strictly no grace or mercy in our forgiveness, but the whole grace of our salvation is found in the obedience and sufferings of Christ.

It follows that the elect may demand their discharge on the score of strict justice. They need not pray for pardon or forgiveness; it is all a mistake to do so. This inference is my own; but it follows, as every one can see, irresistibly, from what the confession of faith itself asserts, that the elect are saved on principles of exact and perfect justice.

I found it impossible to agree with Mr. Gale on these points. I could not but regard and treat this whole question of imputation as a theological fiction. Upon these points we had constant discussion, in some shape, during the whole course of my study.

I do not recollect that Mr. Gale ever insisted that the confession of faith taught these principles, as I learned that it did when I came to study it. I was not aware that the rules of the presbytery required them to ask a candidate if he accepted the Presbyterian confession of faith. As soon as I learned what were the unambiguous teachings of the confession of faith upon these points, I did not hesitate on all suitable occasions to declare my dissent from them. I repudiated and exposed them. Wherever I found that any class of persons were hidden behind these dogmas, I did not hesitate to demolish them, to the best of my ability.

I have not caricatured these positions of Mr. Gale, but have stated them, as nearly as I can, in the very language in which he would defend them, when I presented them to him in controversy. He did not pretend that they were rational, or that they would bear reasoning upon. Hence he insisted that my reasoning would lead me into infidelity. But I insisted that our reason was given us for the very purpose of enabling us to justify the ways of God; and that no such fiction of imputation could by any possibility be true.

Of course there were many other points that were so related to these as necessarily to come under discussion, upon which we had a good deal of controversy, but our controversy always turned upon this as the foundation. If man had a sinful nature, then regeneration must consist in a change of nature. If man's nature was sinful, the influence of the Holy Spirit that must regenerate him, must be physical and not moral. If man had a sinful nature, there was no adaptation in the gospel to change his nature, and consequently no connection, in religion, between means and end.

This brother Gale sternly held; and consequently in his preaching he never seemed to expect, nor even to aim at converting anybody, by any sermon that I ever heard him preach. And yet he was an able preacher as preaching was then estimated. The fact is, these dogmas were a perfect strait-jacket to him. If he preached repentance, he must be sure before he sat down, to leave the impression on his people that they could not repent. If he called them to believe he must be sure to inform them that, until their nature was changed by the Holy Spirit, faith was impossible to them. And so his orthodoxy was a

perfect snare to himself and to his hearers. I could not receive it. I did not so understand my Bible; nor could he make me see that it was taught in the Bible.

When I came to read the confession of faith, and saw the passages that were quoted to sustain these peculiar positions, I was absolutely ashamed of it. I could not feel any respect for a document that would undertake to impose on mankind such dogmas as those, sustained, for the most part, by passages of Scripture that were totally irrelevant; and not in a single instance sustained by passages which, in a court of law, would have been considered at all conclusive. But the presbytery, so far as I know, were all of one way of thinking at that time. They subsequently, however, I believe, all gave in; and when Mr. Gale changed his views. I heard no more from any of the members of the presbytery in defence of those views.

REVIVAL AT GOUVERNEUR

There was a merchant living in the village by the name of S-----. He was a very amiable man, a gentleman, but a deist. His wife was the daughter of a Presbyterian minister. She was his second wife; and his first had also been the daughter of a Presbyterian minister. He had thus married into two ministers' families. His fathers-in-law had taken the greatest pains to secure his conversion to Christ. He was a reading, reflecting man. Both of his fathers-in-law were old school Presbyterians, and had put into his hands the class of books that presented their peculiar views. This had greatly stumbled him; and the more he had read, the more he was fixed in his convictions that the Bible was a fable.

His wife urgently entreated me to come and converse with her husband. She informed me of his views, and of the pains that had been taken to lead him to embrace the Christian religion. But she said he was so firmly settled in his views, she did not know that any conversation could meet the case. Nevertheless, I promised to call and see him, and did so. His store was in the front part of the building in which they resided. She went into the store, and requested him to come in. He declined. He said it would do no good; that he had talked with ministers enough; that he knew just what I would say, beforehand, and he could not spend the time; beside, it was very repulsive to his feelings. She replied to him, "Mr. S-----, you have never been in the habit of treating ministers, who called to see you, in this way. I have invited Mr. Finney to call and see you, to have a conversation on the subject of religion; and I shall be greatly grieved and mortified, if you decline to see him.

He greatly respected and loved his wife; and she was indeed a gem of a woman. To oblige her, he consented to come in. Mrs. S----- introduced me to him, and left the room. I then said to him, "Mr. S-----, I have not come in here to have any dispute with you at all; but if you are willing to converse, it is possible that I may suggest something that may help you over some of your difficulties, in regard to the Christian religion, as I probably have felt them all myself." As I addressed him in great kindness, he immediately seemed to feel at home with me, and sat down near me and said, "Now, Mr. Finney, there is no need of our having a long conversation on this point. We are both of us so familiar with the arguments, on both sides, that I can state to you, in a very few minutes, just the objections to the Christian religion on which I rest, and which I find myself utterly unable

to overcome. I suppose I know beforehand how you will answer them, and that the answer will be utterly unsatisfactory to me. But if you desire it, I will state them."

I begged him to do so; and he began, as nearly as I can recollect, in this way: "You and I agree in believing in the existence of God." "Yes." "Well, we agree that he is infinitely wise, and good, and powerful." "Yes." "We agree that he has, in our very creation, given us certain irresistible convictions of right and wrong, of justice and injustice." "Yes." "Well, we agree, then, that whatever contravenes our irresistible convictions of justice, cannot be from God." "Yes," I said. "What, according to our irresistible convictions, is neither wise nor good, cannot be from God." "Yes," I said, "we agree in that." "Well now," said he, "the Bible teaches us that God has created us with a sinful nature, or that we come into existence totally sinful and incapable of any good, and this in accordance with certain preestablished laws of which God is the author; that notwithstanding this sinful nature, which is utterly incapable of any good, God commands us to obey him, and to be good, when to do so is utterly impossible to us; and he commands this on pain of eternal death."

I replied, "Mr. S-----, have you a Bible? Will you not turn to the passage that teaches this?" "Why, there is no need of that," he says; "you admit that the Bible teaches it." "No," I said, "I do not believe any such thing." "Then," he continued, "the Bible teaches that God has imputed Adam's sin to all his posterity; that we inherit the guilt of that sin by nature, and are exposed to eternal damnation for the guilt of Adam's sin. Now," said he, "I do not care who says it, or what book teaches such a thing, I know that such teaching cannot be from God. This is a direct contradiction of my irresistible convictions of right and justice." "Yes," I replied, "and so it is directly in contradiction of my own. But now," said I, "where is this taught in the Bible?"

He began to quote the catechism, as he had done before. "But," I replied, "that is catechism, not Bible." "Why," said he, "you are a Presbyterian minister, are you not? I thought the catechism was good authority for you." "No," I said; "we are talking about the Bible now--whether the Bible is true. Can you say that this is the doctrine of the Bible?" "Oh," he said, "if you are going to deny that it is taught in the Bible--why, that is taking such ground as I never knew a Presbyterian minister to take." He then proceeded to say that the Bible commanded men to repent, but at the same time taught them that they could not repent; it commanded them to obey and believe, and yet at the same time taught them that this is impossible. I of course closed with him again, and asked him where these things were taught in the Bible. He quoted catechism; but I would not receive it.

He went on to say that the Bible taught also, that Christ died only for the elect; and yet it commanded all men every where, whether elect or non-elect, to believe, on pain of eternal death. "The fact is," said he, "the Bible, in its commands and teachings contravenes my innate sense of justice at every step. I cannot, I will not receive it!" He became very positive and warm. But I said to him: "Mr. S-----, there is a mistake in this. These are not the teachings of the Bible. They are the traditions of men rather than the teachings of the Bible." "Well then," said he, "Mr. Finney, do tell me what you do

believe!" This he said with a considerable degree of impatience. I said to him, "If you will give me a hearing for a few moments, I will tell you what I do believe." I then began and told him what my views of both the law and the gospel were. He was intelligent enough to understand me easily and quickly. In the course of an hour, I should think, I took him over the whole ground of his objections. He became intensely interested; and I saw that the views that I was presenting, were new to him.

When I came to dwell upon the atonement, and showed that it was made for all men--dwelt upon its nature, its design, its extent, and the freeness of salvation through Christ, I saw his feelings rise, till at last he put both hands over his face, threw his head forward upon his knees, and trembled all over with emotion. I saw that the blood rushed to his head, and that the tears began to flow freely. I rose quickly and left the room without saying another word. I saw that an arrow had transfixed him, and I expected him to be converted immediately. It turned out that he was converted before he left the room.

REVIVALS AT WILMINGTON AND AT PHILADELPHIA

While I was laboring at New Lebanon, the preceding summer, Rev. Mr. Gilbert of Wilmington, Delaware, whose father resided in New Lebanon, came there on a visit. Mr. Gilbert was very old-school in his theological views, but a good and earnest man. His love of souls overruled all difficulty on nice questions of theological difference, between him and myself. He heard me preach in New Lebanon, and saw the results; and he was very earnest that I should come, and aid him in Wilmington.

As soon as I could see my way clear to leave Stephentown, therefore, I went to Wilmington, and engaged in labors with Mr. Gilbert. I soon found that his teaching had placed the church in a position that rendered it impossible to promote a revival among them, till their views could be corrected. They seemed to be afraid to make any effort, lest they should take the work out of the hands of God. They had the oldest of the old-school views of doctrine; and consequently their theory was that God would convert sinners in his own time; and that therefore to urge them to immediate repentance, and in short to attempt to promote a revival, was to attempt to make men Christians by human agency, and human strength, and thus to dishonor God by taking the work out of his hands. I observed also, that in their prayers there was no urgency for an immediate outpouring of the Spirit, and that this was all in accordance with the views in which they had been educated.

It was plain that nothing could be done, unless Mr. Gilbert's view could be changed upon this subject. I therefore spent hours each day in conversing with him on his peculiar views. We talked the subject all over in a brotherly manner; and after laboring with him in this way for two or three weeks, I saw that his mind was prepared to have my own views brought before his people. The next Sabbath, I took for my text: "Make to yourselves a new heart and a new spirit; for why will ye die?" I went thoroughly into the subject of the sinner's responsibility; and showed what a new heart is not, and what it is. I preached about two hours; and did not sit down till I had gone as thoroughly over the whole subject, as very rapid speaking would enable me to do, in that length of time.

The congregation became intensely interested, and great numbers rose and stood on their feet, in every part of the house. The house was completely filled, and there were strange looks in the assembly. Some looked distressed and offended, others intensely interested. Not infrequently, when I brought out strongly the contrast between my own views, and the views in which they had been instructed, some laughed, some wept, some were manifestly angry; but I do not recollect that any one left the house. It was a strange excitement.

In the meantime, Mr. Gilbert moved himself from one end of the sofa to the other, in the pulpit behind me. I could hear him breathe and sigh, and could not help observing that he was himself in the greatest anxiety. However, I knew I had him, in his convictions, fast; but whether he would make up his mind to withstand what would be said by his people, I did not know. But I was preaching to please the Lord, and not man. I thought that it might be the last time I should ever preach there; but purposed, at all events, to tell them the truth, and the whole truth, on that subject, whatever the result might be.

I endeavored to show that if man were as helpless as their views represented him to be, he was not to blame for his sins. If he had lost in Adam all power of obedience, so that obedience had become impossible to him, and that not by his own act or consent, but by the act of Adam, it was mere nonsense to say that he could be blamed for what he could not help. I had endeavored also to show that, in that case, the atonement was no grace, but really a debt due to mankind, on the part of God, for having placed them in a condition so deplorable and so unfortunate. Indeed, the Lord helped me to show up, I think, with irresistible clearness the peculiar dogmas of old-schoolism and their inevitable results.

When I was through, I did not call upon Mr. Gilbert to pray, for I dared not; but prayed myself that the Lord would set home the word, make it understood, and give a candid mind to weigh what had been said, and to receive the truth, and to reject what might be erroneous. I then dismissed the assembly, and went down the pulpit stairs, Mr. Gilbert following me. The congregation withdrew very slowly, and many seemed to be standing and waiting for something, in almost every part of the house. The aisles were cleared pretty nearly; and the rest of the congregation seemed to remain in a waiting position, as if they supposed they should hear from Mr. Gilbert, upon what had been said. Mrs. Gilbert, however, went immediately out.

As I came down the pulpit stairs, I observed two ladies sitting on the left hand of the aisle through which we must pass, to whom I had been introduced, and who, I knew, were particular friends and supporters of Mr. Gilbert. I saw that they looked partly grieved, and partly offended, and greatly astonished. The first we reached, who was near the pulpit stairs, took hold of Mr. Gilbert as he was following behind me, and said to him, "Mr. Gilbert, what do you think of that?" She spoke in a loud whisper. He replied in the same manner, "It is worth five hundred dollars." That greatly gratified me, and affected me very much. She replied, "Then you have never preached the Gospel." "Well," said he, "I am sorry to say I never have." We passed along, and then the other lady said to him about

the same things, and received a similar reply. That was enough for me; I made my way to the door and went out. Those that had gone out were standing, many of them, in front of the house, discussing vehemently the things that had been said. As I passed along the streets going to Mr. Gilbert's, where I lodged, I found the streets full of excitement and discussion. The people were comparing views; and from the few words that escaped from those that did not observe me as I passed along, I saw that the impression was decidedly in favor of what had been said.

When I arrived at Mr. Gilbert's, his wife accosted me as soon as I entered, by saying, "Mr. Finney, how dared you preach any such thing in our pulpit?" I replied, "Mrs. Gilbert, I did not dare to preach anything else; it is the truth of God." She replied, "Well, it is true that God was in justice bound to make atonement for mankind. I have always felt it, though I never dared say it. I believed that if the doctrine preached by Mr. Gilbert was true, God was under obligation, as a matter of justice, to make an atonement, and to save me from those circumstances in which it is impossible for me to help myself, and from a condemnation which I did not deserve."

Just at this moment Mr. Gilbert entered. "There," said I, "Brother Gilbert, you see the results of your preaching, here in your own family;" and then repeated to him what his wife had just said. He replied, "I have sometimes thought that my wife was one of the most pious women that I ever knew; and at other times I have thought that she had no religion at all." "Why!" I exclaimed, "she has always thought that God owed her, as a matter of justice, the salvation provided in Christ; how can she be a Christian?" This was all said, by each of us, with the greatest solemnity and earnestness. Upon making the last remark, she got up and left the room. The house was very solemn; and for two days, I believe, I did not see her. She then came out clear, not only in the truth, but in the state of her own mind; having passed through a complete revolution of views and experience.

From this point the work went forward. The truth was worked out admirably by the Holy Spirit. Mr. Gilbert's views became greatly changed; and also his style of preaching, and manner of presenting the Gospel. So far as I know, until the day of his death, his views remained corrected, new school as opposed to the old school views which he had before maintained.

The effect of this sermon upon many of Mr. Gilbert's church members was very peculiar. I have spoken of the lady who asked him what he thought of it. She afterwards told me that she was so offended, to think that all her views of religion were so overthrown, that she promised herself she never would pray again. She had been in the habit of so far justifying herself because of her sinful nature, and had taken, in her own mind, such a position as Mrs. Gilbert had held, that my preaching on that subject had completely subverted her views, her religion, and all. She remained in this state of rebellion, if I recollect right, for some six weeks, before she would pray again. She then broke down, and became thoroughly changed in her views and religious experience. And this, I believe, was the case with a large number of that church.