

MAKING A NEW HEART

by Charles G. Finney

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PREFACE

The following is an abstract of a sermon preached by Charles Finney. This abstract originally was part of a pamphlet titled *The New Divinity Tried*, by Asa Rand, and was a critical response to the theological positions expressed in the sermon. Finney states of this pamphlet, “I preached that the divine agency was that of teaching and persuasion, that the influence was a moral and not a physical one. President Edwards had held the reverse of this, and Mr. Rand held with President Edwards that the Divine agency exercised in regeneration was a physical one, that it was a change of the nature instead of a change in the voluntary attitude and preference of the soul. Mr. Rand regarded my views on this subject as quite out of the way, and wrote and published a pretty severe article at the time I was there in opposition to this view. There were some other points of doctrine upon which he dwelt in a critical manner, such, for example, as my views of the voluntary nature of moral depravity, and the sinner’s activity in regeneration.” According to G. Rosell and A. G. Dupuis, “Finney became concerned about the ‘garbled extracts’ that had been given to the public ‘by note-takers and reviewers,’ who he felt had ‘entirely misrepresented’ the doctrine of the sermon. So in 1834 he wrote a new version entitle ‘Sinners bound to change their own hearts.’” (Rosell & Dupuis, *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney*, annotated critical edition, page 350) I do not have Finney’s on version available at present, and so offer this with the caveat that Finney believed it did not precisely convey his true intent.

REV. CHARLES G. FINNEY,

ON

MAKING A NEW HEART.

Ezekiel 18:31 — Make you a new heart and a new spirit; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?

The word heart has various significations in the scriptures. In a few instances it appears to be synonymous with soul or spirit; sometimes it means the whole mind, and sometimes the understanding, and sometimes the conscience; in some places it seems to mean the constitutional propensities which belong to human nature, whether holy or sinful; sometimes it seems to refer to the social or relative affections; often it expresses all the affections or exercises of the mind; and in many instances it is spoken of as the fountain of our exercises; as “the good man, out of the good treasure of his heart,” etc. In such cases, as the heart is spoken of as the fountain of our moral exercises, it must mean the ruling choice or governing purpose of the mind. This I take to be the meaning of the term in all those passages where it is spoken of as comprehending the whole of divine requirement and human duty. And this is its meaning in the text; and the passage requires sinners to change their governing purpose, or make their leading object of life a new one, such as they have never indulged before.

I. I will show what is not meant by this command.

It is not intended that a sinner is to make a new soul or spirit; although the word spirit is employed in the text, and although even the word heart sometimes means the soul. Every man has just such a soul as he needs, to love and serve God; and Christians did not receive any new soul when they were converted; therefore a new soul is not necessary, and is not required in the text or in the bible.

It is not intended that a sinner is to make any new faculty of soul or mind. He needs no new faculty; and the Christian has received none, but only consecrates to God those he had from the commencement of his being.

Neither is he required to make any new moral principle of a permanent character; it, by principle, is meant any thing distinct from and prior to moral exercises; any thing behind the will, and necessary and giving character to volitions. It is not required to make a new taste or disposition; if by those terms is meant any thing distinct from and prior to moral exercises, and necessary and giving character to volitions. This would be, like the other cases mentioned, something pertaining to his nature, which is impossible. A nature cannot be holy. The nature of Adam at his creation was not holy. What is holiness? It is virtue, the moral action of an intelligent being, directed to a right object. It is absurd then to speak of holiness or virtue as pertaining to his nature.

II. I will show what is intended in the command of the text.

It is, that the sinner should change the governing purpose of his life. A man resolves to be a lawyer. Then he directs all his plans and efforts to effect that object, and passes by or resists every thing which would hinder its attainment; and that, for the time, is his governing purpose. Afterward, he may alter his determination and resolve to be a merchant. Now he directs all his efforts to that object, and so has changed his heart, or governing purpose, in regard to his secular affairs. Sinners, in like manner, have made it their governing purpose to seek their own interest or happiness, and have lived without God in the world. They are required to turn about, and choose the serve of God: and when they do so, they make themselves new hearts in the sense intended in the scriptures. God is infinitely holy; not because his nature is holy, but because his governing purpose is infinitely holy or virtuous. He is immutably holy because his holy governing purpose is infinitely strong. He also knows all things from eternity. He can therefore have no new ideas, and consequently no new motive; from which it follows, that he can never be induced to change his governing purpose. Adam was made with a nature neither sinful nor holy. When he began to act, he made it his governing purpose to serve God. He was afterwards induced to change his purpose, through the suggestions of Satan, who told him he would become like God. Wishing to enjoy that

distinction, he chose to gratify himself; and in doing this he transgressed a divine command, and became a selfish being or a sinner. Thus we easily solve those knotty questions which have long puzzled theologians “How could Adam, being holy, become a sinner? How could sin enter the universe, in heaven or on earth, when God made all rational creatures in his own likeness?”

Adam changed his heart, or governing purpose, from good to evil. Now suppose that God, when he came to reprove him for his transgression, had bid him repent and make him a new heart, and Adam should say, “I cannot make a new heart.” God might reply, “Why not? You have just done it. You have changed your heart, or governing purpose, from my service to your own selfish objects. Now change it back again and turn to me.”

Our not varying from a governing purpose depends on the strength and permanency of that purpose. Angels do not transgress and revolt, because of the amazing strength of their purpose to love and serve God. The new purpose of the young convert is a governing purpose, but feeble. He would soon be perfect, if he adhered to his purpose fully, and went on decidedly in the Christian life. But though he never gives up his governing purpose, he pursues it inconsistently; and this accounts for the instability of Christians.

It is apparent that the change now described, effected by the simple volition of the sinner through the influence of motives, is a sufficient change; all that the bible requires. It is all that is necessary to make a sinner a Christian. It is, moreover, all the change that can possibly have a moral character. I grant that it is very different from the change which sinners have been accustomed to expect, according to the instructions they have received. They have waited in perfect stillness, forgetting that they are required to change their own hearts, and expecting God to come suddenly and perform some wonderful work upon their souls, like the man who is going to take for the first time an electric shock. He takes hold of the chain, and waits trembling for a sudden and indescribable shock, to affect him he knows not how. A sinner may wait thus till doom’s day, and never be converted. The sentiment that teaches this waiting, is calculated to send souls to death and hell.

III. This is a reasonable command.

- 1.** Because it requires man to use his powers in a reasonable manner. If it is right for God to require men obey, then it is right he should require them to purpose it.
- 2.** Because man actually have the control of their mental and moral powers.
- 3.** Because they are constantly in the habit of controlling their powers, and of changing their purposes and designs every day. And it is strange, that when the motives for a change are infinite, they should have no power to make it.
- 4.** Because it is as easy to purpose right, as to purpose wrong; and one would think, infinitely more so. How comes it then, that men cannot purpose right? The fact is, it would be infinitely impossible not to do it, if men did not resist all the infinite motives to purpose right.
- 5.** Because it is indispensable to their good; it is only, in other words, commanding them to be happy.

REMARKS.

- 1.** As Adam did, so have all sinners made themselves wicked hearts, without the concurrence of a divine influence. Children, when they begin to act, make their hearts wicked, by setting out with a purpose of self-gratification. Seeking their own happiness, they soon violate the commands of God and become sinful.
- 2.** The idea of a sinner's being passive in regeneration, is calculated to destroy souls. It involves the absurdity of his having a passive volition.
- 3.** Every impenitent sinner is infinitely guilty, for not making himself a new heart; for not going the whole length of performing the work himself.
- 4.** To say "I can't love God and repent," is to plead one sin for the commission of another.
- 5.** This view illustrates the nature of the sinner's dependence on the Spirit of God. The only necessity for his aid or influence, lies in the sinner's

pertinacious obstinacy; and when he converts the sinner, he only overcomes that obstinacy.

6. The Spirit uses means in producing conversion. He does not come and take right hold of the heart and perform an operation upon it; but he presents motives by means of the truth; he persuades, and the sinner yields to his persuasion. Many have supposed that he moves, by a direct and immediate act, either upon the motive to give it efficiency, or upon the mind to make it willing. But there is no mystery about it. Every Christian knows how he was induced to change his governing purpose or his heart. He was convinced and persuaded, and freely gave his own heart to God without compulsion. And I know not which is the greater infidel, he that denies the agency of the Spirit in conversion; or he that believes God has provided means which are not adapted to the end for which they are employed.

7. There is a sense in which a sinner does make a new heart. There is also a sense in which God does it; another, in which a preacher does it; and another, in which the truth or the word of God does it. The bible employs expressions regarding conversion, in these four different ways. It is ascribed to the subject, the sinner himself; he changes his own heart. It is ascribed to the instrument, or the preacher; he converts sinners and saves souls from death. It is ascribed to the means, or the word; men are begotten by the word of truth. It is ascribed to God, or the Spirit; they are born again by the Spirit. A person is walking near Niagara Falls, and sees a man approaching from the opposite direction towards the precipice, who seems to be lost in a reverie. He is advancing directly to the verge of the precipice, unconscious of danger, and heedless of his footsteps. He has just raised his foot to step off, when the other spies his danger and cries out, Stop! He is roused, turns at the critical moment and is saved. People gather round, and the rescued man in great agitation relates the occurrence. "That man," says he, "has saved my life." "But how?" "O he called to me at the very moment I was stepping off, and that word, stop, snatched me from destruction. O if I had not turned that instant, I should have been dashed to pieces. O it was the mercy of God that kept me from a horrid death." This illustrates the use of those four kinds of expression in the bible, in reference to the conversion of a sinner, with one exception. In the case supposed, there was only the voice of the man who gave the alarm;

but in conversion, there is both the voice of the preacher, and the voice of the Spirit; the preacher cries, “Stop,” and the Spirit cries, “Stop,” also.

8. If sinners will not yield to truth, they will inevitably be lost.

9. We see the consistency of using means for the conversion of sinners.

10. It is more probable that sinners will be converted under the voice of the living minister, than afterwards. Some have supposed it will hardly do to urge sinners to repent right on the spot, lest they should some how get a false hope. Better to exhibit the truth, and let them go home to reflect and pray, and there give their hearts to God more deliberately. But how does, the lawyer do, when he resolves to change the hearts of the jury and gain his cause? Does he say, I will make a speech of half an hour or three quarters, state the law, and the facts, and the arguments and dismiss them to their room for calm deliberation? No; he plies all his efforts to change their hearts while he is speaking; and so should ministers, when pleading with sinners.

11. When ministers do not understand this subject, they use means for the conversion of sinners to little or no purpose.

12. If you are expecting any other agency, than that which accompanies the means, you will wait in vain.

13. As you are able to change your own hearts, the great point of responsibility lies right there. To change your own hearts will save you; nothing else can; and on that point is suspended your eternal destiny.