

Charles G. Finney (1792-1875) American Evangelist

Charles Grandison Finney was an evangelist and president of Oberlin College. He developed an urban evangelical style of preaching that was based on the experience of making a personal decision for Christ. Finney believed in evangelicalism's link to social reform: temperance, women's rights, and abolitionism. Resigning his New York City parish in 1837 he went to teach theology at Oberlin College. In 1851 he became the college president, but he was president largely in name alone, as he continued to make his lengthy revival tours throughout the U.S. and Great Britain.

FAMILY GOVERNMENT

A Sermon

DELIVERED ON MONDAY EVENING, DEC. 23, 1850,

BY THE REV. C.G. FINNEY,

At the Tabernacle, Moorfields.

I SHALL not detain you long this evening, as I am anxious to recover from the hoarseness, under which I am at present laboring, but I shall confine my remarks to the connection of family government, with the early conversion of children. For a long time it has been impressed on my mind--and the impression is a growing one--that parents do not sufficiently appreciate the importance of family government or the potency of its influence on the spiritual well being of their children. It is one of the most efficient means of grace. Family government, I say, when properly managed, is one of the most efficient means of grace mankind possesses, if parents will only understand and weigh well the great object to be secured by it.

The family should be the nursery of piety; the family is the place where it ought to begin, and where its earliest development ought to take place. I do not mean by this that the pulpit is by any means, to be excluded; but that everything done in the pulpit must be seconded in the family, so that what is brought before the vast congregation in public, shall be supported by paternal influence in the family and there concentrated to a focal point. With respect to family government, it is very important that parents should have a proper idea of the nature of their powers and responsibilities. With reference to the case I mentioned in my last, I may add that the story got abroad, and finally into the papers, that the lady had whipped the child to compel it to submit to the Almighty. Now I need not say, that there is not the least foundation for this, but it is true that she used her parental authority kindly, and brought its whole force to induce the child to yield its immediate and unqualified submission to God. God said of Abraham, "I know him that

he will command his household after him to follow me;" and God blamed Eli for not exercising a religious authority over his children.

The end of parental government--the great object to be secured, is, self-government. Children need to be taught to govern themselves, and to do so by the revealed will of God. The great object to be attained is to teach the child to lay restraints upon himself--in other words to take upon himself the observance of God's law, and then to teach the child. The great object of family government is to secure this; and in order to do so it is indispensable that parents should govern themselves and thus afford an example to their children. Precept will never effect this object;--parents must be what they would desire to have their children be. They are not likely to secure their end if they contradict by example, what they teach by precept; for the instruction of the former, is far more powerful and effective than that of the latter: if persons give good instructions and themselves neglect to follow them, they are sure to fall to the ground; and the parent cannot think it strange, if he does not govern himself,--if he does not obey his own rules of morality and propriety--that his children are not better than they are. It would be ridiculous for him to complain and say he had taught them better. How did he teach them? both by precept and example? No, but neglecting the stronger power of example, he trusted almost wholly to the weaker power of precept.

I have had ample opportunities, from the nature of my employment--perhaps no man living more so--of forming an acquaintance with multitudes of families. Before I was of age I left my father's house, and ever since, in various ways, I have had unusual means of acquainting myself with the state of things in this respect in multitudes of families; and in all my experience, I may say, I have seldom, if ever known a family turn out badly, in which, when I searched out the matter, I could not trace, it directly or indirectly to the manner in which they had brought the children up--to some fundamental defect in family government. One member of a family, perhaps, has not had sufficient care taken of his temper, another has experienced some other defect of management.

Parents should be exceedingly careful over their own tempers. Never address your children in a loud, angry, scolding tone, but affectionately exercise your governmental power over them. Let the children see by all means, that you are not in a passion with them; for if you speak in a surly, scolding tone of voice, it only rouses the temper of the child, and almost always fails in securing permanently the object sought; such commands are given with a bad grace, and when obeyed, are obeyed in a bad temper.

Parents should be sure to govern their own tongues in this respect. Be careful to avoid censoriousness, and not allow yourselves or them to dwell upon the faults of others; apply this principle moreover to everything else that may seem objectionable; for whatever you are, your children, to a large extent, will reflect your image, and breathe your spirit. Parents must also learn to govern their appetites; if you do not do this your children are almost sure to be misgoverned. Your language, manners, and habits of life must be such as you wish your children's to be.

Parents should always make the impression on their families that their government is not despotic and arbitrary, but that it is for the child's own good. Let this impression be secured--let the children understand that you exercise your authority not arbitrarily but simply with a view to accomplish the good of the family compact. This was God's design in establishing it, and this is his end in the government of the universe. The good of the governed, ought to be the end of all governments. Where this is not the case all pretended government is nothing less than a continual warfare; the governed obey as far as they are absolutely compelled to obey and no further. They regard the government as a tyranny. But let it be understood that the end and object of the government was the highest good of the governed, and then you secure their consciences on your side,--then you have effected a footing and will attain your object. Let your child see that the object of your government is not your pleasure, merely, but his own benefit--that in punishing and restraining him your object is to teach him to govern and restrain himself--in short, endeavour to keep before his mind the fact, that the end at which you are aiming is to promote his own interest. Do this, and you will always keep his conscience on your side, and ten to one if you do not secure your object.

Ungoverned wills can never dwell in any family without quarreling. No community can exist where there are independent wills, acting without reference to any one will whose decisions are law. Let me explain this:--government is a necessity of human nature. Communities of persons living together must agree in some way to act in concert; but, inasmuch as in such communities all persons are not equally well informed--in fact they have not all the means of obtaining the same degree of knowledge--in order to have peace, there must always be some will supreme: for if there be several independent wills, each acting on its own responsibility in his own way, of course, such a body of persons is no community at all; and if a family is made up of a number of persons whose wills are unsubdued, all attempts at government are utterly useless and must be abandoned, or else there must be a quarrel.

I know a family, for instance, in the United States, which had been brought up in this manner: in the first place the husband himself was a remarkably unreasonable man, and the wife was unfortunately just as bad. Both were remarkably self-willed, and neither would acknowledge the will of the other; as law, so that between them, of course, there was incessant strife. They have three children, not one of which ever had its will subdued, for the plain reason that one of the parents would never suffer the other to attempt it without interfering, and thereby nullifying the effect. I am well acquainted with the family. Neither endeavoured to govern them unless when angry, and they had all been foolishly petted while very young: so that when their wills became developed they were unreasonable and capricious. One parent at a time would fly into a passion and attempt to punish them, and the other, on such occasions, invariably interposed, and thus they went on. These young persons grew up to manhood and womanhood, in such a state of mind towards each other, that they found it wholly impossible for them to live together. The father came to me time after time to know what he could do. He was a man of property sufficient to make the whole of his family comfortable, and was perfectly willing to do so, but they were incessantly quarrelling, child with child and

parent with parent, or parents and children together. Said I, "The 'difficulty' is that you yourself are an unreasonable man and your family know it. You are a very self-willed man, and your family know that. Your wife is just like you, and your children are the very image of you both, and there's the 'difficulty'. There you are--a family of independent wills, no one of which is willing to submit to another. You did not teach them to obey you, till they became so old that to attempt to govern them was to quarrel with them." 'I have ruined my family I see,' said he, 'and must give up keeping house' and he absolutely did so. For a time he even separated from his wife, for they could no longer live together.

Now I admit that this is a strong case, but I have known multitudes like it, and from similar causes. Sometimes the wife is unwilling to respect the position of the husband; he may be an unreasonable man, or he may not. But I cannot enlarge.

Let me relate another striking circumstance: some twenty years ago I was labouring with a minister in one of the cities of the United States who had a family of young children. The eldest son was a boy about fifteen years of age, and there were three or four girls and boys along below. There was this peculiarity in that family--the wife would take occasion at the table to criticize her husband's preaching, and dispute with him on points of theology. In short she carried those things to such an extent as really to break the power of the father over the children. She was a good natured pleasant woman, but after all she never allowed her husband to maintain his proper position; instead of teaching the children to respect whatever their father said, she almost invariably took some exceptions to it, so that he never could get hold of the children. I saw this at the time; and some years after I had seen the family, a lady came to Oberlin to live, who had spent two or three years in that family. Said she, "Mr. Finney, I have made up my mind that, I will never dispute with my husband, especially when there are young persons in the family." "Why," said I; "I lived in such and such a family and I always observed such and such things: (just what I have described.) Now mark the result of this conduct: "The eldest son" she continued, "died a miserable wretch, and the rest of the family are going in the same direction. The father was never allowed to govern in his proper position, and there was always a want, on the part of the wife, of giving him the place assigned to him by the Almighty and the result has been a great lesson to me."

Where there is any fault of this kind--any neglect or opposition with regard to putting things in their natural place,--any want of letting families be governed--wherever there is a want of proper concord between parents, in bringing both their influences to bear on the same point, it will almost always ruin that family. Both parents should understand this; the mother should second the authority of the father, while the father should always support the power of the mother. And parents should remember that, if they would subdue the little wills of their children, they must begin very early; for if you permit those wills, to develop themselves, then your efforts to subdue them will only make them angry, and therefore, not only prove abortive, but drive them from home, or to some abominable course to deceive their parents.

With respect to the conversion of children let me ask, my brethren, what do you think is the reason, that so many families with pious parents grow up unconverted? It is a remarkable fact, that this is a very common occurrence. Ought it to be so? Ought so many families, with professing Christian parents, to grow up unconverted? One great reason is, that parents do not make it their business, soon enough, and steadily enough, to use the proper means to secure it, at the earliest possible moment, that the children are able to understand their duty to God. The longer a child goes on in sin, by so much the more difficult is he to get at. Once more, parents often do not understand, believe, and use the promises of the Almighty; they do not take hold of God in relation to their children; they do not feel their duties and responsibilities and throw themselves on God for assistance and direction, as he has required them to do. He has furnished them with promises suited to the relation they sustain, and the peculiar responsibilities devolving upon them; and if parents will but understand, take hold upon, and make use of these promises for which they were designed, they will undoubtedly find in early life that God will convert the children.

There is another error which parents oft times fall into: some parents are not aware of the pernicious influence of a fastidiously critical spirit in relation to preaching and the means of grace. Look around in any circle you please, and observe a family where, on coming home from worship on the Sabbath, the parents are in the habit of criticizing the preacher, and calling the attention of the family to any thing they may think out of good taste. "The sermon, on the whole, was well enough," say they, for instance, "but there were such and such things," and they proceed to quibble on certain points either of manner or matter. Perhaps it was "too personal," perhaps "not personal enough." This is the species of conversation which they freely indulge before the children. Now all men of prudence, who give such a conduct a moment's reflection, will see at once what influence it must have on unconverted children. Go into families where this is the case, and in ninety nine cases out of a hundred they will be found to be unconverted. Some parents do this, without appearing to be aware of it, and never hear a sermon without finding some fault with it in the presence of the children.

A few years since, there was a person of this kind in my own household; and whenever a certain individual preached for me--as he often did, for I frequently put someone into my pulpit once on the Sabbath--this person would take occasion to criticize him. In fact, he dealt thus with them all, but particularly with the minister in question, who was, by the way, the very best amongst them, and the one from whose preaching I hoped the most, both with respect to my own children and other persons; yet this individual was always in the habit of speaking against this man. But I could not bear it long. I would not endure it. I would not have such an individual in my family. His criticisms were oft times just enough; and it was natural enough for a critical mind to make them; but mark--instead of being impressed by the numerous excellencies his sermons always had, almost always the things objected to were the only theme of his discourse. I told him, at length, that I could not have it; I had also noticed the few defects, but they were so completely overbalanced by the good that I completely overlooked them, and should never think of them again.

Another family in the place was in a similar condition in this respect. It was a gentleman who had a number of young persons boarding with him, and who was in the habit, I was told, of speaking at the table severely of the preaching from time to time. Let who would preach, he went home and criticized them, and hence such was his influence on the family, that it was just as plain to everybody as possible, that the young people in that family were out of the way; in this case it was so plain that it was impossible that it could be mistaken or overlooked; and it was the natural result of such a state of things.

The fact is, that to mention even actual faults in those who preach the Gospel to persons, who are not prepared to appreciate their excellencies, is a dangerous thing in a family of children. The thing needed to be done is to feel and use himself, and carry home everything that is good, and bring it to bear in a focal blaze on the minds of his children. But if he does not feel it himself--if he is critical and fault-finding, he will ruin his family. Go where you will, and you will find these fastidious parents with unconverted children. Now, if there are fastidious parents here in this congregation, you mark their families, and you will see they are not converted. Your minister may labor and labor with them, but the effect of his ministry is broken by this fastidious, censorious spirit, the attention being directed to the exceptional things in manner or matter, while the good points are largely or wholly unheeded.

But let me say once more that families, who would have a blessing during a revival of religion, must set their house in order. Parents must take the matter up, and if they have laid stumbling blocks before their families, confess their existence and betake themselves to remove them. Parents often fancy, that as they have been going on wrongly, it will lessen their influence over their family, to call them round the family altar and confess it; but the fact is that such is by no means the case; the effect is quite the contrary. The house must be set in order so that God may come in and be honoured in abiding there, and not dishonoured. Those who do not get blessed in their family during the times of revival, you will find, as a general rule, are those who have not done this; and if you search into the matter you will find some one or more of the hindrances I have specified. I could mention a very large number of cases, in which I have myself actually made such enquiries, as to what the stumbling block really was. Sometimes I have seen the children deeply impressed and yet not converted, and so they have passed along from day to day. In a great many instances I have found on enquiry that family prayer was neglected, and the spirit grieved in various ways in that household, both by sins of omission and sins of commission.

But let me state a case.--In one of the towns of the United States a few years since, I was labouring in a revival of religion, when a young lady came to me for inquiry. I saw she was deeply convicted of sin. Her parents, she told me, were professedly pious, and accordingly I expected her soon to be converted. But she came again and again without getting fully through, till at length her excitement was such, that I feared lest she became deranged from the power of her convictions. I thought there must be some stumbling block. The next time she came the following conversation took place:--"Is there family prayer in your household?" I asked, "There used to be," she replied, "but for some time it has been wholly discontinued," "Oh! indeed," said I, "well what time in the

day now do you think I could see your father?" She stated a time and I searched him out the very next morning. I found the young lady in a melancholy state of despondency. The mother was within and the father some little way from the house. I began to converse with the mother and soon made the discovery that she was in a backsliding state. I asked her to call in her husband which she immediately did, and he was in a similar condition. I then set before them the state of their daughter: God had convicted her right before them, and with such force that she was on the verge of despair and destruction. "Why she tells me," said I, "that you don't pray in your family. How's that? Do you not see that you are standing right in the way of her conversion? Now until you confess your sins and break your hearts, and set up again your family altar, I don't mean to leave your house! What? Is this child to be allowed to remain under conviction right before your eyes! Don't you see what a countenance she has already, while you are going about here and there grieving the Holy Spirit?" They both began to weep, knelt down and made a confession of their sins before the Lord, and it was but a very short time before their hearts were broken, as the Spirit had previously broken their daughters.

This I have found in all my experience, that if the Spirit of God does not work in a family there is some such stumbling block in the way. Sometimes the elder children in the family, though professors of religion, are right in the way. They oft times set a bad example, where the elder children are backsliding professors, and the younger unconverted, the former often exercise a most pernicious influence over the latter. They are worldly minded, and if any of the younger children become serious, they laugh and talk it all away. Why? They are looked up to as Christians by their younger brethren; but instead of praying for them, and watching over them, they conduct themselves in such a lightminded outrageous manner as to stand right in their way. I have often had occasion to expostulate with such--"What[!] your younger brothers and sisters impressed by the Spirit of God, and instead of praying for them your prayerlessness is one of the greatest obstacles in the way!" In fact enquirers have often let this out in their conversations with me; they have said, "my eldest brother" does this or "my eldest sister" says that; indeed much observation has satisfied me, that it is one of the most fearful things in the world for a family to be passed by, whether from this or any other cause; and this I believe to be often one of the most powerful obstacles. If you see a family thus passed by unblessed, you may expect that it will be marked as was the village of Meroz. "Curse ye Meroz," says the angel, "curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof, because they came not up to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty." It seems to be a great and guiding principle of the government of God, that whenever a church is called into a conflict with the enemies of the Lord of Hosts--to make an onslaught on the powers of darkness--it is an awful thing for any family of that church to withhold its influence. Look at the whole history of the Jewish nation; how it reveals the great principles of God's government! He will act on the same principles now, if he is the same God now as he was then. The spirit of God's government is the same under the present as under the former dispensations. God always would have rebuked a family for withholding its influence at such times, and he always will do it.

Sometimes the ministers of the same locality stand out and will have no connection with revivals, but mark! in my own experience, I have uniformly seen that the curse of God follows such men. Were it necessary, I could substantiate this assertion by the names of persons and places. I could tell you some very striking facts, both with regard to ministers of various denominations as well as presbyterian elders, and the deacons of congregational churches. This is a great principle of God's government, who can deny it? No man who knows his Bible, and understands the dealings of God. When God calls upon the sacramental hosts to rally at the sound of his coming--when his voice is heard in the tops of the mulberry trees--if any family neglects to invite the Saviour to become its guest, what will become of that family? I suppose I have been reminded of the curse on Meroz, thousands of times; it is a fearful thing that the Spirit of God should breathe over a community, and here and there a family shall go unblest? [!] Such families may expect their children to go unconverted; for it is remarkable that in this respect God sometimes visits the iniquities of the fathers upon the children; and upon the children's children; a son turns out perhaps a gambler; a daughter runs away and marries without her parent's consent, or some thing of that kind. The fact is, Brethren, God is a jealous God, and when he comes, he expects to be received. Now, Brethren, have your families been blessed? Some of you have, I know. But do not let any child in your families, who has come to the age of intelligence, escape. Be sure also to remember your servants; for if they are neglected, God's spirit is grieved. Where they are not cared for,--where pains are not taken to get them to meeting and converted, there is not the Spirit of Christ. I have often observed that servants sustain to families a relation that God acknowledges. Abraham, for example, was commanded to circumcise every one belonging to his household. This is a principle of God's government and has always been so; God always looks upon every member of your household as a member of your family for the time being; and God has given you a certain relation to them which binds you to secure their conversion to God. I have always felt a great responsibility concerning those who come to live in my family. I aim and expect to aim at promoting the conversion of these souls a thousand times more than anything else. I have often said to my wife: "Is that girl converted? Let us arrange everything with respect to that girl being converted, and see whether we cannot secure it."

Now is not this right? Yes. If parents and masters would rightly use the promises of influence God has given them, rely upon it, religion would spread in a manner which it by no means does now. Let there be no fault on your part, Brethren; let your children see that you aim at doing all the good to each other you can. You should understand how great a part of religion consists in the relative duties we owe to each other. Let no child forget the relation in which God has placed him with regard to his parents, and the same with parents in regard to their children. Let every member of every family be what he ought to be, and you will see what hold religion takes of the community.

*The second of two Addresses to Christian Parents on their duties and responsibilities in relation to the early conversion of their children.

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