

# Directions to Sinners

Lecture 18 of Charles G. Finney's *Lectures on Revival*

"What must I do to be saved?"

Acts 16:30

These are the words of the jailer at Philippi - the question which he put to Paul and Silas, who were then under his care as prisoners. Satan had, in many ways, opposed these servants of God in their work of preaching the Gospel, and had been as often defeated and disgraced. But here he devised a new and peculiar project for frustrating their labors. There was a certain woman at Philippi, who was possessed with a spirit of divination, or, in other words, the spirit of the devil, and brought her masters much gain by her soothsaying. The devil set this woman to follow Paul and Silas about the streets, and as soon as they had begun to gain the attention of the people, she would come in and cry: "These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation" (v. 17). That is, she undertook to second the exhortations of the preachers, and added her testimony, as if to give additional weight to their instructions.

The effect of it was just what Satan desired. The people all knew that this was a wicked, base woman; and when they heard her attempting to recommend this new preaching, they were disgusted, and concluded that it was all of a piece. The devil knew that it would not do him any good to set such a person to oppose the preaching of the apostles, or to speak against it. The time had gone by for that to succeed. And, therefore, he takes the opposite ground, and by setting her to praise them as the servants of God, and to bear her polluted testimony in favor of their instructions, he led people to suppose the apostles were of the same character with her, and had the same spirit that she had. Paul saw that if things went on so, he would be totally baffled, and could never succeed in establishing a Church at Philippi. So he turns round upon her, and commands the foul spirit, in the name of Jesus Christ, to come out of her. "When her masters saw that the hope of their gains was gone" they raised a great persecution, and "caught Paul and Silas," and made a great ado, and brought them before the magistrates, and raised such a clamor that the magistrates shut up the messengers of the Gospel in prison, and the jailer "made their feet fast in the stocks."

Thus, the enemy thought they had put down the excitement. But "at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them" (v. 25). This old prison, that had so long echoed to the voice of blasphemy and oaths, now resounded with the praises of God; and these walls, that had stood so firm, now trembled under the power of prayer. The stocks were unloosed, the gates thrown open, and every one's bands broken. The jailer was aroused from his sleep, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword, knowing that if the prisoners had escaped he must pay for it with his life, and was about to kill himself. But Paul, who had no notion of escaping clandestinely, cried out to him instantly: "Do thyself no harm: for we are all here." And the jailer "called for a light, and sprang in, and came trembling, and fell down before his prisoners, Paul and Silas, and brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

In my last Lecture, I dwelt at some length on the false instructions given to sinners under conviction, and the false comforts too often administered, and the erroneous instructions which such persons receive. It is my design now, to show what are the instructions that should be given to anxious sinners in order to their speedy and effectual conversion; or, in other words, to explain to you, what answer should be given to those who make the inquiry: "What must I do to be saved?" I propose:

- I. To show what is not a proper direction to be given to sinners, when they make the inquiry in the text.
- II. To show what is a proper answer to the inquiry.
- III. To specify several errors into which anxious sinners are apt to fall.

## **I. What Are Not Proper Directions**

No more important inquiry was ever made than this: "What must I do to be saved?" Mankind are apt enough to inquire: "What shall I eat, and what shall I drink?" and the question may be answered in various ways, with little danger. But when a sinner asks in earnest: "What must I do to be saved?" it is of infinite importance that he should receive the right answer.

1. No direction should be given to a sinner that will leave him still "in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity" (Acts 8:23). No answer is proper to be given, by complying with which he would not go to heaven, if he should die the next moment.

2. No direction should be given that does not include a change of heart, or a right heart, or hearty obedience to Christ. In other words, nothing is proper which does not imply actually becoming a Christian. Any other direction that falls short of this, is of no use. It will not bring him any nearer to the Kingdom, it will do no good, but will lead him to defer the very thing which he must do in order to be saved. The sinner should be told plainly, at once, what he must do if he would not be lost; and he should be told nothing that does not include a right state of heart.

Whatever you may do, sinner, that does not include a right heart, is sin.

Whether you read the Bible or not, you are in sin, so long as you remain in rebellion. Whether you go to religious services or stay away; whether you pray or not, it is nothing but rebellion, every moment. It is surprising that a sinner should suppose himself to be doing service to God when he prays, and reads his Bible. Should a rebel against the Government read the statute-book while he continues in rebellion, and has no design to obey; should he ask for pardon while he holds on to his weapons of resistance and warfare; would you think him doing his country a service, and lay it under obligation to show him favor? No; you would say that all his reading and praying were only an insult to the majesty both of the lawgiver and the law. So you, sinner, while you remain in impenitence, are insulting God, and setting him at defiance, whether you read His Word, and pray, or let it alone. No matter what place or what attitude your body is in, on your knees or in the house of God; so long as your heart is not right, so long as you resist the Holy Ghost, and reject Christ, you are a rebel against your Maker.

## **II. What is a Proper Answer**

Generally, you may give the sinner any direction, or tell him to do anything, that includes a right heart; and if you make him understand, and he follows the directions, he will be saved. The Spirit of God, in striving with sinners, suits His strivings to the state of mind in which He finds them. His great object in striving with them is, to dislodge them from their hiding-places, and bring them to submit to God at once. These objections, difficulties, and states of mind, are as various as the circumstances of mankind - as many as there are individuals. The characters of individuals afford an endless diversity. What is to be done with each one, and how he is to be converted, depends on his particular errors. It is necessary to ascertain his errors; to find out what he understands, and what he needs to be taught more perfectly; to see what points the Spirit of God is pressing upon his conscience, and to press the same things, and thus bring him to Christ.

The most common directions are the following:

1. It is generally in point, and a safe and suitable direction, to tell a sinner to repent. I say, generally. For sometimes the Spirit of God seems not so much to direct the sinner's attention to his own sins as to some other thing. In the days of the apostles, the minds of the people seem to have been agitated mainly on the question, whether Jesus was the true Messiah.

And so the apostles directed much of their instruction to this point, to prove that he was the Christ. And whenever anxious sinners asked them what they must do, they most commonly exhorted them to "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ." They bore down on this point, because here was where the Spirit of God was striving, and this was the subject that especially agitated the minds of the people, and, consequently, this would probably be the first thing a person would do on submitting to God. It was the grand point at issue between God and the Jew and Gentile of those days, whether Jesus Christ was the Son of God. It was the point in dispute. To bring the sinner to yield this controverted question was the way the most effectually to humble him.

At other times, it will be found that the Spirit of God is dealing with sinners chiefly in reference to their own sins. Sometimes He deals with them in regard to a particular duty, as prayer - perhaps family prayer.

The sinner will be found to be contesting that point with God, whether it is right for him to pray, or whether he ought to pray in his family. I have known striking cases of this kind, where the individual was struggling on this point, and as soon as he fell on his knees to pray, he yielded his heart, showing that this was the very point which the Spirit of God was contesting, and the hinge on which his controversy with God all turned.

That was conversion.

The direction to repent is always proper, but will not always be effectual, for there may be some other thing that the sinner needs to be told also.

And where it is the pertinent direction, sinners need not only to be told to repent, but to have it explained to them what repentance is. Since there has been so much mysticism, and false philosophy, and false theology, thrown round the subject, it has become necessary to tell sinners not only what you mean by repentance, but also to tell them what you do not mean.

Words that used to be plain, and easily understood, have now become so perverted that they need to be explained to sinners, or they will often convey a wrong impression to their minds. This is the case with the word "repentance." Many suppose that remorse, or a sense of guilt, is repentance. Then, hell is full of repentance, for it is full of remorse, unutterable and eternal. Others feel regret that they have done such a thing, and they call that repenting. But they only regret that they have sinned, because of the consequences, and not because they abhor sin. This is not repentance. Others suppose that convictions of sin and strong fears of hell are repentance. Others consider the remonstrances of conscience as repentance; they say: "I never do anything wrong without repenting and feeling sorry I did it." Sinners must be shown that all these things are not repentance. They are not only consistent with the utmost wickedness, but the devil might have them all and yet remain a devil. Repentance is a change of mind, as regards God and towards sin. It is not only a change of views, but a change of the ultimate preference or choice of the soul. It is a voluntary change, and by consequence involves a change of feeling and of action toward God and toward sin. It is what is naturally understood by a change of mind on any subject

of interest and importance. We hear that a man has changed his mind in politics; everybody understands that he has undergone a change in his views, his feelings, and his conduct. This is repentance, on that subject: it is a change of mind, but not toward God.

Evangelical repentance is a change of willing, of feeling, and of life, in respect to God.

Repentance always implies abhorrence of sin. It of course involves the love of God and the forsaking of sin. The sinner who truly repents does not feel as impenitent sinners think they should feel at giving up their sins, if they should become religious. Impenitent sinners look upon religion in this way: that if they become pious, they should be obliged to stay away from balls and parties, and obliged to give up theatres, or gambling, or other things that they now take delight in. And they see not however they could enjoy themselves, if they should break off from all those things. But this is very far from being a correct view of the matter, Religion does not make them unhappy, by shutting them out from things in which they delight, because the first step in it, is, to repent, to change their mind in regard to all these things. They do not seem to realize, that the person who has repented has no disposition for these things; he has given them up, and turned his mind away from them. Sinners feel as if they should want to go to such places, and want to mingle in such scenes, just as much as they do now, and that it will be such a continual sacrifice as to make them unhappy. This is a great mistake.

I know there are some professors, who would be very glad to betake themselves to their former practices, were it not that they feel constrained, by fear of losing their character, or the like. But, mark me: if they feel so, it is because they have no religion; they do not hate sin. If they desire their former ways, they have no religion, they have never repented; for repentance always consists in a change of views and feelings. If they were really converted, instead of choosing such things, they would turn away from them with loathing. Instead of lusting after the flesh-pots of Egypt, and desiring to go into their former circles, parties, balls, and the like, they would find their highest pleasure in obeying God.

2. Sinners should be told to believe the Gospel. Here, also, they need to have it explained to them, and to be told what is not faith, and what is.

Nothing is more common, than for a sinner, when told to believe the Gospel, to say: "I do believe it." The fact is, he has been brought up to admit the fact that the Gospel is true, but he does not believe it: he knows nothing about the evidence of it, and all his faith is a mere admission without evidence. He holds it to be true, in a kind of loose, indefinite sense, so that he is always ready to say: "I do believe the Bible." It is strange that they do not see that they are deceived in thinking that they believe, for they must see that they have never acted upon these truths, as they do upon those things which they do believe. Yet it is often quite difficult to convince them that they do not believe.

But the fact is, that the careless sinner does not believe the Gospel at all.

The idea that the careless sinner is an intellectual believer, is absurd. The devil is an intellectual believer, and that is what makes him tremble. What makes a sinner anxious is, that he begins to be an intellectual believer, and that makes him feel. No being in heaven, earth, or hell, can intellectually believe the truths of the Gospel, and not feel on the subject. The anxious sinner has faith of the same kind with devils, but he has not so much of it, and, therefore, he does not feel so much. The man who does not feel or act at all, on the subject of religion, is an infidel, let his

professions be what they may. He who feels nothing, and does nothing, believes nothing. This is a philosophical fact.

Faith does not consist in an intellectual conviction that Christ died for you in particular, or in a belief that you are a Christian, or that you ever shall be, or that your sins are forgiven. But faith is that trust or confidence in God, and in Christ, which commits the whole soul to Him in all His relations to us. It is a voluntary trust in His person, His veracity, His word. This was the faith of Abraham: he had that confidence in what God said, which led him to act as accepting its truth. This is the way the apostle illustrates it in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews. "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (v. 1). And he goes on to illustrate it by various examples. "Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed" (v. 3); that is, we believe this, and act accordingly.

Take the case of Noah. Noah was warned of God of things not seen as yet, that is, he was assured that God was going to drown the world, and he believed it, and acted accordingly; he prepared an ark to save his family, and by so doing, he condemned the world that would not believe; his actions gave evidence that he was sincere. Abraham, too, was called of God to leave his country, with the promise that he should be the gainer by it; and he obeyed and went out, without knowing whither he went. Read the whole chapter, and you will find many instances of the same kind. The whole design of the chapter is to illustrate the nature of faith, and to show that it invariably results in action. The sinner should have it explained to him, and be made to see that the faith which the Gospel requires, is just that confidence in Christ which leads him to act on what He say as being a certain fact. This is believing in Christ.

3. Another direction, proper to be given to the sinner, is, that he should give his heart to God. God says: "My son, give Me thine heart" (Proverbs 23:26). But here also there needs to be explanation, to make him understand what it is. It is amazing that there should be any darkness here.

It is the language of common life, in everybody's mouth, and everybody understands just what it means, when we use it in regard to anything else.

But when it comes to religion, they seem to be all in the dark. Ask a sinner, no matter what may be his age, or education, what it means to give the heart to God, and, strange as it may appear, he is at a loss for an answer. Ask a woman, what it is to give her heart to her husband; or a man, what it is to give his heart to his wife; and they understand it. But then they are totally blind as to giving their hearts to God. I suppose I have asked more than a thousand anxious sinners this question. When I have told them, they must give their hearts to God, they have always said that they were willing to do it, and sometimes, that they were anxious to do it, and they have even seemed to be in an agony of desire about it. Then I have asked them, what they understood to be meant by giving their hearts to God, since they were so willing to do it. And very seldom have I received a correct or rational answer from a sinner of any age. I have sometimes had the strangest answers that could be imagined.

Now, to give your heart to God is the same thing as to give your heart to anybody else; the same as for a woman to give her heart to her husband.

Ask that woman if she understands this. "Oh, yes, that is plain enough; it is to place my affections with him, and strive to please him in everything."

Very well, place your affections on God, and strive to please Him in everything. But when they come to the subject of religion, people suppose there is some wonderful mystery about it. Some talk as if they suppose it means taking out this bundle of muscles, or fleshy organ, in their bosom, and giving it to God. Sinner, what God asks of you, is, that you should love Him supremely.

4. "Submit to God," is also a proper direction to anxious sinners. And oh, how dark sinners are here, too! Scarcely a sinner can be found who will not tell you that he is willing to submit to God. But they do not understand.

They need to be told what true submission is. Sometimes they think it means that they should be willing to be sent to perdition. Sometimes they place themselves in this attitude, and call it submission; they say that, if they are elected they will be saved; and if not, they will be lost. This is not submission. True submission is yielding obedience to God. Suppose a rebel, in arms against the Government, is called on to submit, what would he understand by it? Why, that he should yield the point, and lay down his arms, and obey the laws. That is just what it means for a sinner to submit to God. He must cease his strife and conflict against his Maker, and take the attitude of a willing and obedient child, willing to be and do whatever God requires. "Here am I" (1 Samuel 3:8); "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" (Acts 9:6.)

Suppose a company of soldiers had rebelled, and the Government had raised an army to put them down, and had driven them into a stronghold, where they were out of provisions, and had no way to escape. Suppose the rebels to have met, in this extremity, to consider what should be done; and one rises up, saying: "Well, comrades, I am convinced we are all wrong from the beginning, and now the reward of our deeds is likely to overtake us, and we cannot escape; and as for remaining here to die, I am resolved not to do it; I am going to throw myself on the mercy of the commander in chief." That man submits. He ceases from that moment to be a rebel in his heart, just as soon as he comes to this conclusion. So it is with the sinner when he yields the point, and consents in his heart to do, and be, whatever God shall require. The sinner may be in doubt what to do, and may feel afraid to put himself in God's hands, thinking that if he does, perhaps God will send him down to hell, as he deserves. But it is his business to leave all that question with God, to resist his Maker no longer, to make no conditions, but to trust wholly to God's benevolence and wisdom to appoint his future condition. Until he has done this, he has done nothing to the purpose.

5. Another proper direction to be given to sinners, is to confess and forsake their sins. They must confess to God their sins against God, and confess to men their sins against men; and forsake them all. A man does not forsake his sins till he has made all the reparation in his power. If he has stolen money, or defrauded his neighbor out of property, he does not forsake his sins by merely resolving not to steal any more, not to cheat again; he must make reparation to the extent of his power. <sup>73</sup> So, if he has slandered any one, he does not forsake his sin by merely saying he will not do so again; he must make reparation. So, in like manner, if he has robbed God, as all sinners have, he must make reparation, as far as he has power.

Suppose a man has made money in rebellion against God, and has withheld from Him his time, talents, and service, has lived and rioted upon the bounties of His providence, and refused to lay himself out for the salvation of the world; he has robbed God. Now, if he should die, feeling this money to be his own, and should he leave it to his heirs without consulting the will of God - why, he is just as certain to go to hell as a highway robber. He has never made any satisfaction to God. With all his whining and pious talk, he has never confessed HIS SIN to God, nor forsaken his sin, for he has neither felt nor acknowledged himself to be the steward of God. If he refuses to hold the property in his possession as the steward of God; if he accounts it his own, and as such gives

it to his children, he says in effect, to God: "That property is not Thine, it is mine, and I will give it to my children." He has continued to persevere in his sin, for he does not relinquish the ownership of that of which he has robbed God.

What would a merchant think if his clerk should take all the capital and set up a store of his own, and die with it in his hands? Will such a man go to heaven? "No," you say. God would prove Himself unjust, to let such a character go unpunished. What, then, shall we say of the man who has robbed God all his life? God sent him to be His clerk, to manage some of His affairs, but he has stolen all the money, and says it is his: he keeps it, and, dying, leaves it to his children, as if it were all his own lawful property. Has that man forsaken sin? I tell you, No. If he has not surrendered himself and all he has to God, he has not taken the first step in the way to heaven.

6. Another proper direction to be given to sinners is: "Choose you this day whom ye will serve" (Joshua 24:15). Under the Old Testament dispensation, this, or something equivalent to it, was the most common direction given. It was not common to call on men to believe in Christ until the days of John the Baptist. He baptized those who came to him, with the baptism of repentance, and directed them to believe on Him who should come after him. Under Joshua, the text was something which the people all understood more easily than they would a call to believe on the distant Messiah; it was: "Choose you this day whom ye will serve." On another occasion, Moses said to them: "I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live"

(Deuteronomy 30:19). The direction was accommodated to the people's knowledge. And it is as good now as it was then. Sinners are called upon to choose - what? Whether they will serve God or the world; whether they will follow holiness or sin. Let them be made to understand what is meant by choosing, and what is to be chosen, and then if the thing be done from the heart, they will be saved.

Any of these directions, if complied with, will constitute true conversion.

The particular exercises may vary in different cases. Sometimes the first exercise in conversion is submission to God, sometimes repentance, sometimes faith, sometimes the choice of God and His service; in short, whatever their thoughts are taken up with at the time. If their thoughts are directed to Christ at the moment, the first exercise will be faith. If to sin, the first exercise will be repentance. If to their future course of life, it is choosing the service of God. If to the Divine government, it is submission.

It is important to find out just where the Holy Spirit is pressing the sinner at the time, and then take care to push that point. If it is in regard to Christ, press that; if it is in regard to his future course of life, push him right up to an immediate choice of obedience to God.

It is a great error to suppose that any one particular exercise is always foremost in conversion, or that every sinner must have faith first, or submission first. It is not true, either in philosophy or in fact. There is a great variety in people's exercises. Whatever point is taken hold of between God and the sinner, when the sinner YIELDS that, he is converted. Whatever the particular exercise may be, if it includes obedience of heart to God on any point, it is true conversion. When he yields one point to God's authority, he is ready to yield all. When he changes his mind, and obeys in one thing, because it is God's will, he will obey in other things, so far as he sees it to be God's will. Where there is right choice, then, whenever the mind is directed to any one point of duty, he is ready to follow. It matters very little which of these directions be given, if it is only made plain,

and if it is to the point, so as to serve as a test of obedience to God. If it is to the point that the Spirit of God is debating with the sinner's mind, so as to fall in with the Spirit's work, and not to divert the sinner's attention from the very point in controversy, let it be made perfectly clear, and then pressed till the sinner yields, and he will be saved.

### **III. Errors Into Which Anxious Sinners Are Apt to Fall**

1. The first error is, in supposing that they must make themselves better, or prepare themselves, so as in some way to recommend themselves to the mercy of God. It is marvelous that sinners will not understand that all they have to do is to accept salvation, all prepared to their hands, from God. But they all, learned or unlearned, at first betake themselves to a legal course to get relief. This is one principal reason why they will not become Christians at once. They imagine that they must be, in some way or other, prepared to come. They must change their dress, and make themselves look a little better; they are not willing to come just as they are, in their rags and poverty. They must have something more on, before they can approach God. They should be shown, at once, that it is impossible they should be any better until they do what God requires. Every pulse that beats, every breath they draw, they are growing worse, because they are standing out in rebellion against God, so long as they do not do the very thing which God requires of them as the first thing to be done.

2. Another error is, in supposing that they must suffer a considerable time under conviction, as a kind of punishment, before they are properly ready to come to Christ. So they will pray for conviction; and they think that if they are ground down to the earth with distress, for a sufficient time, then God will pity them, and be more ready to help them when He sees them so very miserable! They should be made to understand clearly that they are thus unhappy and miserable, merely because they refuse to accept the relief which God offers.

3. Sometimes sinners imagine they must wait for different feelings before they submit to God. They say: "I do not think I feel right yet, to accept Christ; I do not think I am prepared to be converted yet." They ought to be made to see that what God requires of them is to will right. If they obey and submit with the will, the feelings will adjust themselves in due time. It is not a question of feeling, but of willing and acting.

The feelings are involuntary, and have no moral character except what they derive from the action of the will, with which action they sympathize.

Before the will is right, the feelings will not be, of course. The sinner should come to Christ by accepting Him at once; and this he must do, not in obedience to his feelings, but in obedience to his conscience. Obey, submit, trust. Give up all instantly, and your feelings will come right. Do not wait for better feelings, but commit your whole being to God at once, and this will soon result in the feelings for which you are waiting. What God requires of you is the present act of your mind, in turning from sin to holiness, and from the service of Satan to the service of the living God.

4. Another error of sinners is to suppose that they must wait till their hearts are changed. "What?" say they, "am I to believe in Christ before my heart is changed? Do you mean that I am to repent before my heart is changed?" Now, the simple answer to all this is that the change of heart is the very thing in question. God requires sinners to love Him: that is to change their hearts. God requires the sinner to believe the Gospel. That is to change his heart. God requires him to repent. That is to change his heart. God does not tell him to wait till his heart is changed, and then repent



and believe, and love God. The very word itself, repent, signifies a change of mind or heart. To do either of these things is to change your heart, and to "make you a new heart" (Ezekiel 18:31), just as God requires.

5. Sinners often get the idea that they are perfectly willing to do what God requires. Tell them to do this thing, or that, to repent, or believe, or give God their hearts, and they say: "Oh, yes, I am perfectly willing to do that; I wish I could do it, I would give anything if I could do it." They ought to understand that being truly willing is doing it, but there is a difference between willing and desiring. People often desire to be Christians, when they are wholly unwilling to be so. When we see anything which appears to be a good, we are so constituted that we desire it. We necessarily desire it when it is before our minds. We cannot help desiring it in proportion as its goodness is presented to our minds. But yet we may not be willing to have it, under all the circumstances. A man may desire on many accounts to go to Philadelphia, while, for still more weighty reasons, he chooses not to go there. So the sinner may desire to be a Christian. He may see that if he were a Christian he would be a deal more happy, and that he should go to heaven when he dies; but yet he is not willing to be a Christian.

*Willing* to obey Christ is to be a Christian. When an individual actually chooses to obey God, he is a Christian. But all such desires as do not terminate in actual choice, are nothing.

6. The sinner will sometimes say that he offers to give God his heart, but he intimates that God is unwilling. But this is absurd. What does God ask?

Why, that you should love Him. Now for you to say that you are willing to give God your heart, but that God is unwilling, is the same as saying that you are willing to love God, but God is not willing to be loved by you, and will not suffer you to love Him. It is important to clear up all these points in the sinner's mind, that he may have no dark and mysterious corner to rest in, where the truth will not reach him.

7. Sinners sometimes get the idea that they repent, when they are only convicted. Whenever the sinner is found resting in any *lie* let the truth sweep it away, however much it may pain and distress him. If he has any error of this kind, you must tear it away from him.

8. Sinners are often wholly taken up with looking at themselves, to see if they cannot find something there, some kind of feeling or other, that will recommend them to God. Evidently for want of proper instruction, David Brainerd was a long time taken up with his state of mind, looking for some feelings that would recommend him to God. Sometimes he imagined that he had such feelings, and would tell God, in prayer, that now he felt as he should, in order to receive His mercy; and then he would see that he had been all wrong. Thus the poor man, for want of correct instruction, was <sup>74</sup> driven almost to despair, and it is easy to see that his Christian exercises through life were greatly modified, and his comfort and usefulness much impaired, by the false philosophy he had adopted on this point. <sup>75</sup> You must turn the sinner away from himself.

### **Remarks**

1. The labor of ministers is greatly increased, and the difficulties in the way of salvation are greatly multiplied, by the false instructions that have been given to sinners. The consequence has been that directions which used to be plain are now obscure. People have been taught so long that there is something awfully mysterious and unintelligible about conversion, that they do not try to understand it.

It was once sufficient, as we learn from the Bible, to tell sinners to repent, or to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ; but now, faith has been talked about as a principle, instead of an act; and repentance as some thing put into the mind, instead of an exercise of the mind; and sinners are perplexed.

Ministers are charged with preaching heresy, because they presume to teach that faith is an exercise, and not a principle; and that sin is an act, and not a part of the constitution of man. And sinners have become so sophisticated, that you have to be at great pains in explaining, not only what you do mean, but what you do not mean, otherwise they will be almost sure to misunderstand you, and either gain a false relief from their anxiety, by throwing their duty off upon God, or else run into despair from the supposed impracticability of doing what is requisite for their salvation. It is often a matter of the greatest difficulty to lead sinners out of the theological labyrinths and mazes into which they have been deluded, and to lead them along the straight and simple way of the Gospel. It seems as if the greatest ingenuity had been employed to mystify the minds of the people, and to weave a most subtle web of false philosophy, calculated to involve a sinner in endless darkness. It is necessary to be as plain as A B C, and the best educated have to be talked to like children. Tell a sinner to believe, and he stares, saying: "Why, how you talk! Is not faith a principle? And how am I to believe till I get this principle?" So, if a minister tells a sinner, in the very words that the apostle used in the great revival on the Day of Pentecost: "Repent, every one of you" (Acts 2:38), he is answered: "Oh, I guess you are an Arminian; I do not want any of your Arminian teaching; do you not deny the Spirit's influences?" It is enough to make humanity weep, to see the fog and darkness that have been thrown around the plain directions of the Gospel.

2. These false instructions to sinners are infinitely worse than none. The Lord Jesus Christ found it more difficult to get the people to yield up their false notions of theology than anything else. This has been the great difficulty with the Jews to this day, that they have received false notions in theology, have perverted the truth on certain points, and you cannot make them understand the plainest points in the Gospel. So it is with sinners: the most difficult thing to be done is to get them away from these "refuges of lies," which they have found in false theology. They are so fond of holding on to these refuges (because they excuse the sinner, and condemn God), that it is found to be the most perplexing, and difficult, and discouraging part of a minister's labor, to drive them out.

3. No wonder the Gospel has taken so little effect, encumbered as it has been with these strange dogmas. The truth is, that very little of the Gospel has come out upon the world, for these hundreds of years, without being clogged and obscured by false theology. People have been told that they must repent, and, in the same breath, told that they could not repent, until the truth itself has been all mixed up with error, so as to produce the same practical effect with error. The Gospel that was preached has been another gospel, or no gospel at all.

4. You can understand what is meant by "healing slightly the hurt of the daughter of God's people" (Jeremiah 6:14; 8:11), and the danger of doing it. It is very easy, when sinners are under conviction, to say something that shall smooth over the case, and relieve their anxiety, so that they will either get a false hope, or will be converted with their views so obscure, that they will always be poor, feeble, wavering, doubting, inefficient Christians.

5. Much depends on the manner in which a person is dealt with, when under conviction. Much of his future comfort and usefulness depends on the clearness, strength, and firmness with which the directions of the Gospel are given, when he is under conviction. If those who deal with him are

afraid to use the probe thoroughly, he will always be a poor, sickly, doubting Christian. The true mode is to deal thoroughly and plainly with the sinner, to tear away every excuse he can offer, and to show him plainly what he is and what he ought to be; then he will bless God to all eternity that he fell in with those who would be so faithful with his soul. For the want of this thorough and searching management, many are converted who seem to be stillborn; and the reason is, they never were faithfully dealt with. We may charitably hope they are Christians, but still it is uncertain and doubtful: their conversion seems rather a change of opinion than a change of heart. But if, when sinners are under conviction, you pour in the truth, put in the probe, break up the old foundations, sweep away their "refuges of lies," and use the Word of God like fire and like a hammer, you will find that they will come out with clear views, and strong faith, and firm principles - not doubting, halting, irresolute Christians, but such as follow the Lord wholly. That is the way to make strong Christians. This has been eminently the case in many revivals of modern days.

I have heard old Christians say of the converts: "These converts have, at the very outset, all the clearness of view, and strength of faith, of old Christians. They seem to understand the doctrines of religion, and to know what to do, and how to promote revivals, better than one in a hundred of the old members in the Church."

I once knew a young man who was converted away from home. The place where he lived had no minister, and no preaching, and no religion. He went home three days after he was converted, and immediately set himself to work to labor for a revival. He set up meetings in his neighborhood, and prayed and labored, and a revival broke out - of which he had the principal management throughout a powerful work, in which most of the principal men of the place were converted. The truth was, he had been so dealt with that he knew what he was about. He understood the subject and knew where he stood himself. He was not all the while troubled with doubts, whether he was himself a Christian. He knew that he was serving God, and that God was with him, and so he went boldly and resolutely forward to his object. But if you undertake to make converts, without clearing up all their errors and tearing away their false hopes, you may make a host of hypocrites, or of puny, dwarfish Christians, always doubting and easily turned back from a revival spirit, and worth nothing.

The way is, to bring them right out to the light. When a man is converted in this way, you can depend on him, and will know where to find him.

6. Protracted seasons of conviction are generally owing to defective instruction. Wherever clear and faithful instructions are given to sinners, there you will generally find that convictions are deep and pungent, but short.

7. Where clear and discriminating instructions are given to convicted sinners, if they do not soon submit, their convictions will generally leave them. Convictions in such cases are generally short. Where the truth is brought to bear upon the sinner's mind, and he directly resists the very truth that must convert him, there is nothing more to be done. The Spirit will soon leave him, for the very weapons He uses are resisted. Where instructions are not clear, but are mixed up with errors, the Spirit may strive, even for years, in great mercy, to get sinners through the fog of false instruction; but not so where their duty is clearly explained to them, and they are brought right up to the single point of immediate submission, all their false pretenses being exposed, and the path of duty made perfectly plain. Then, if they do not submit, the Spirit of God forsakes them, and their state is well-nigh hopeless.

If there be sinners in this house, and you see your duty clearly, TAKE CARE how you delay. If you do not submit, you may expect the Spirit of God will forsake you, and you are LOST.

8. A vast deal of the direction given to anxious sinners amounts to little less than the popish doctrine of indulgences. The Pope used to sell indulgences to sin, and this led to the Reformation under Luther.

Sometimes people would purchase an indulgence to sin for a certain time, or to commit some particular sin, or a number of sins. Now, there is a vast deal in Protestant Churches which is little less than the same thing. What does it differ from this, to tell a sinner to wait? It amounts to telling him to continue in sin for a while longer, while he is waiting for God to convert him. And what is that but an indulgence to commit sin? Any direction given to sinners that does not require them immediately to obey God is an indulgence to sin. It is in effect giving them liberty to continue in sin against God. Such directions are not only wicked, but ruinous and cruel. If they do not destroy the soul, as no doubt they often do, they defer, at all events, the sinner's enjoyment of God and of Christ, and he stands a great chance of being lost for ever, while listening to such instructions. Oh, how dangerous it is to give a sinner reason to think he may wait a moment, before giving his heart to God!

9. So far as I have had opportunity to observe, those persons with whom conversion was most sudden have commonly turned out to be the best Christians. I know the reverse of this has often been held and maintained.

But I am satisfied there is no reason for it, although multitudes, even now, regard it as a suspicious circumstance, if a man has been converted very suddenly. But the Bible gives no warrant for this supposition. There is not a case of protracted conviction recorded in the whole Bible. All the conversions recorded there are sudden conversions. And I am persuaded there never would be such multitudes of tedious convictions which often end in nothing, after all, if it were not for those theological perversions which have filled the world with Cannot-ism. In Bible days, sinners were told to repent, and they did it then. Cannot-ism had not been broached in that day. It is this speculation about the inability of sinners to obey God, that lays the foundation for all the protracted anguish and distress, and perhaps ruin, into which so many are led. Where a sinner is brought to see what he has to do, and he takes his stand at once, AND DOES IT, you generally find that such a person proves a decided character. You will not find him one of those that you always have to warp up to duty, like a ship, against wind and tide. Look at those professors who always have to be dragged forward in duty, and you will generally find that they had not clear and consistent directions when they were converted. Most likely, too, they will be very much "afraid of these sudden conversions."

Afraid of sudden conversions! Some of the best Christians of my acquaintance were convicted and converted in the space of a few minutes.

In one-quarter of the time that I have been speaking, many of them were awakened, and came right out on the Lord's side, and have been shining lights in the Church ever since, and have generally manifested the same decision of character in religion that they did when they first came out and took a stand on His side.