

Ultimate Choices:

A Look at the Concept of Charles Finney

by Jonathan Duttweiler

When discussing the sanctification of the believer, many people recognize the Biblical imperative of sanctification by deny the practicality of it. Usually they use pseudo-biblical arguments to bolster their opinions. They quote Paul from Romans 7 and hold this passage up as the sine qua non of the Christian life, all the while ignoring the far more numerous passages imploring, commanding, sanctification of the believer as the purpose of God's work of grace in the believer's life.

The most basic exposition of God's expectation for human living is Jesus declaration, in answer to the question "what is the greatest commandment," that we are to "love the Lord thy God with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our soul and with all our strength," defining our obligation to our Creator, and then commanded us to "love your neighbor as you love yourself," defining our obligation to our fellow human beings. While many, who deny the practicability of sanctification, will state these are goals we cannot reach in this life, few can actually define what this goal really is. What does it mean to "love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength?"

One of Charles Finney's greatest contributions to Christian theology concerns just this discussion. Finney, in his *Lectures on Theology*, presented a lecture on the unity of moral action. Finney states that moral character ultimately stems out of one over riding supreme choice for one's life. This choice affects all other subordinate choices, defining their moral character. In the final analysis there are only two possible ultimate choices. One is to live to please self, however that works out in subordinate choices, whether in profligate living or in an ostensibly moral life, the ultimate concern is the self. The other is to live to please God, in obedience to His moral law.

Finney declares that obedience to the moral law may be summed up in the phrase "disinterested benevolence." This should not be confused with "un-interested" benevolence. Finney states that "disinterested benevolence" is "the love which [the law] requires to God and our neighbor" and that it is "good willing, willing the highest good or well-being of God...for its own sake." In other words, the love which constitutes obedience to Christ's command is an unselfish commitment to promote the highest good of God and His moral universe. It is not founded in what one gets out of it, but rather as an end in and of itself. Love for God (as His moral universe) is to be the believer's Ultimate Choice!

The significance of Finney's contribution comes from his exposition on the question as to whether there can be partial adherence to an ultimate choice at any one time. That is, can there be an admixture of motives in back of any one decision or choice of will? Can a person choose to do something with both right and wrong motives at the same time?

Finney writes:

That is, consecration, to be real, must be, for the time being, entire and universal. It will be seen that this discussion respects the simplicity of moral action, that is whether the choices of the will that have any degree of conformity to moral law, are always and necessarily wholly conformed or wholly disconformed to it...Can [the will] choose the highest good of being as an ultimate end, and at the same time choose any other ultimate end, or make any choices whatever inconsistent with this ultimate choice?

Can the will at the same time choose opposite and conflicting ultimate ends? While one ultimate end is chosen, can the will choose anything inconsistent with this end? In reply to...this inquiry I observe:

(a) That the choice of an ultimate end is, and must be, the supreme preference of the mind. Sin is the supreme preference of self-gratification. Holiness is the supreme preference of the good of being. Can then two supreme preferences coexist in the same mind? It is plainly impossible to make opposite choices at the same time, that is, to choose opposite and conflicting ultimate ends.

(b) all intelligent choice, as has been formerly shown, must respect ends or means. Choice is synonymous with intention. If there is a choice or intention, of necessity something must be chosen or intended. This something must be chosen for its own sake, or as an end, or, for the sake of something else to which it sustains the relation of a means. To deny this we deny that the choice is intelligent. But we are speaking of no other than intelligent choice, or the choice of a moral agent.

(c) This conducts us to the inevitable conclusions - that no choice whatever can be made, inconsistent with the present choice of an ultimate end. The mind cannot choose one ultimate end, and choose at the same time another ultimate end. But if this cannot be, it is plain that it cannot choose one ultimate end, and at the same time, while in the exercise of that choice, choose the means to secure some other ultimate end, which other end is not chosen. But if all choice must necessarily respect ends or means, and if the mind can choose but one ultimate end at a time, it follows that, while in the exercise of one choice, or while in the choice of one ultimate end, the mind cannot choose, for the time being, anything inconsistent with that choice. The mind, in the choice of an ultimate end, is shut up to the necessity of willing the means to accomplish that end; and before it can possibly will means to secure any other ultimate end, it must change its choice of any end. If, for example, the soul chooses the highest well-being of God and the universe as an ultimate end, it cannot while it continues to choose that end, use or choose the means to effect any other end. It cannot, while this choice continues, choose self-gratification, or anything else as an ultimate end, nor can it put forth any volition whatever known to be inconsistent with this end. Nay, it can put forth no intelligent volition whatever that is not designed to secure this end. The only possible choice inconsistent with this end is the choice of another ultimate end. when this is done, other means can be used or chosen, and not before. This, then, is plain, to wit, that obedience to moral law cannot be partial, in the sense either that the mind can choose two opposite ultimate ends at the same time, or

that it can choose one ultimate end, and at the same time use or choose means to secure any other ultimate end. It "cannot serve God and mammon" (Matt. 6:24) It cannot will the good of being as an ultimate end, and at the same time will self-gratification as an ultimate end. In other words, it cannot be selfish and benevolent at the same time. It cannot choose as an ultimate end the highest good of being, and at the same time choose to gratify self as an ultimate end. Until self-gratification is chosen as an end, the mind cannot will the means of self gratification.

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