

Systematic Theology Lectures - Preface by the Author

Charles G. Finney

Excerpts from Charles G. Finney's Lectures on Systematic Theology - Preface by the Author

1. To a great extent, the truths of the blessed gospel have been hidden under a false philosophy. In my early inquiries on the subject of religion, I found myself wholly unable to understand either the oral or written instructions of uninspired religious teachers. They seemed to me to resolve all religion into states either of the intellect or of the sensibility, which my consciousness assured me were wholly passive or involuntary. When I sought for definitions and explanations, I felt assured that they did not well understand themselves. I was struck with the fact that they so seldom defined, even to themselves, their own positions. Among the words of most frequent use, I could find scarcely a single term intelligibly defined. I inquired in what sense the terms "regeneration," "faith," "repentance," "love," etc., were used, but could obtain no answer, at which it did not appear to me that both reason and revelation revolted. The doctrines of a nature, sinful per se, of a necessitated will, of inability, and of physical regeneration, and physical Divine influence in regeneration, with their kindred and resulting dogmas, embarrassed and even confounded me at every step. I often said to myself, "If these things are really taught in the Bible, I must be an infidel." But the more I read the Bible, the more clearly I saw that these things were not found there upon any fair principles of interpretation, such as would be admitted in a court of justice. I could not but perceive that the true idea of moral government had no place in the theology of the church; and, on the contrary, that underlying the whole system were the assumptions that all government was physical, as opposed to moral, and that sin and holiness are rather natural attributes, than moral, voluntary acts. These errors were not stated in words, but I could not fail to see that they were assumed. The distinction between original and actual sin, and the utter absence of a distinction between physical and moral depravity, embarrassed me. Indeed, I was satisfied either that I must be an infidel, or that these were errors that had no place in the Bible. I was often warned against reasoning and leaning to my own understanding. I found that the discriminating teachers of religion were driven to confess that they could not establish the logical consistency of their system, and that they were obliged to shut their eyes and believe, when revelation seemed to conflict with the affirmations of reason. But this course I could not take. I found, or thought I found, nearly all the doctrines of Christianity embarrassed by the assumptions above-named. But the Spirit of God conducted me through the darkness, and delivered me from the labyrinth and fog of a false philosophy, and set my feet upon the rock of truth, as I trust. But to this day I meet with those who seem to me to be in much confusion upon most of the practical doctrines of Christianity. They will admit, that sin and holiness must be voluntary, and yet speak of regeneration as consisting in anything but a voluntary change, and of Divine influence in regeneration, as anything but moral or persuasive. They seem not at all aware of what must follow from, and be implied in, the admission of the existence of moral government, and that sin and holiness must be free and voluntary acts and states of mind. In this work I have endeavored to define the terms used by Christian divines, and the doctrines of

Christianity, as I understand them, and to push to their logical consequences the cardinal admissions of the more recent and standard theological writers. Especially do I urge, to their logical consequences, the two admissions that the will is free, and that sin and holiness are voluntary acts of mind.