



When Finney was Right

Jim Elliff

I have no real love for the methods or doctrine of Charles Grandison Finney who lived in the early 1800s. He was a watershed figure whose ways have caused modern evangelicalism much trouble. To use a word that is not common to most, he was a Pelagian, that is, he was of the beliefs of Pelagius, the man

censured by more councils of religion than any other ancient religious person. I will not go into detail except to say that if reading Finney's life makes you admire him, reading his theology should surely cause you to doubt him.

However, I've finally found a point of agreement with Finney. In 1843 he told his Oberlin College men (according to Robert Fletcher of Oberlin in 1941), the following wise counsel for preachers of the gospel: that "they should not blow their noses with their fingers; they should not use a dirty handkerchief; they must not spit on the carpet; they must not put their feet and muddy boots on the sofa or on the door jambs, nor pull off their stockings before a family!" I fully concur.

He continues with "the story of a young clergyman who 'called on some ladies after walking some distance, took off his boots and hung his socks on the andirons the first thing,' and told of another ministerial acquaintance who 'put his feet up in a window in a lady's parlor to enjoy the cool air!'"

Finney "advised the embryo preachers to keep their nails cleaned and pared and their teeth clean. It was disgusting, he said, 'in anxious meetings to be obliged to smell the breath of a filthy mouth.' At table, he reminded them, they were not supposed to cut their meat with their pocket knives nor wipe their mouth on the table cloth!"

I will not go further except to say, once again, that I'm in total agreement with Finney on the issue of decorum for ministers, though he is a man with whom I have the most aggravated disagreement otherwise. He was dead right. Manners are essential in the ministry.

But, manners are essential for the church member as well. In fact, it is becoming of a Christian to act with manners for the simple fact that they are tangible ways of respecting and loving others. And love is at the top of God's list for believers.

Granted, there are lots of ministers and pew-sitters who are polite and mannerly who don't have the truth or the Spirit. Manners are no substitute for Life from God.

It is also true that the customs of people are subject to change in each generation and are varied according to each culture, but there is something "preached" by manners, whatever they are—something we all need to expound.

If we cannot get every jot and tittle of respectful behavior down pat, we can at least try to keep this one charge from the apostle Paul uppermost in our minds: "In lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others" (Phil. 2:3-4). Love drives manners.

It is our love for others that makes manners reasonable. And good manners, in some small but noticeable way, make love demonstrable.

So, please, for my sake and Finney's, don't spit on the carpet!

Love does not behave rudely (1 Cor. 13:5)

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