

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 20: Charles Finney: American Revivalism

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## From the Editor: Father of Modern Revivalism

America has not been the same since the likes of Charles Grandison Finney. He is *the* giant of American revivalism between Jonathan Edwards and D. L. Moody. He was a powerful preacher and a commanding presence, even his enemies conceded as much. And what no doubt especially miffed his critics—and he had quite a few, and in high places—was the great popularity of the man. He has been called one of the most important figures in American history, and it would be impossible to understand the American religious experience without trying to understand him.

Finney has been likened to an Andrew Jackson of the pulpit. Comparisons between Jackson and Finney are understandable. James Johnson, in his biographical article **Father of American Revivalism**, tells us that if Jackson was America's political folk hero, Finney was her religious one. And to many evangelicals today, Finney is still a hero ("imagine ... 500,000 conversions!"). We have always been told (with some exaggeration) how Jackson was "for the common man." Likewise, Finney did seem to grab the Gospel from the dry, stuffy practitioners of his day and take it to the common folk so they could scrape their boots, come in, and cast their own votes for heaven or hell. Yet Finney, interestingly, emphasized his impact on the professionals of his day, and liked to mention how he had converted scores of doctors, businessmen, and lawyers.

He was not a frontier ranter, but a child of the intellectual New England tradition, as it had moved west into upstate New York. He was described by his contemporaries as "frank, open, giving his opinion without solicitation, somewhat dictatorial." "... the great actor of the American pulpit," with "glittering eyes, shaggy brows, beak-like nose, and expressive mouth." One person is said to have remarked that for Finney's stare to fall on you while he preached was to be lifted up and turned slowly over the fire. When Finney said hell, which he often did, the crowds it seems could smell smoke. He wanted them to. For, much to the anger of many in the "old establishment," he called upon people to face the future options and decide for themselves their eternal bliss or torment.

It was inevitable that this law student-turned evangelist would set not only revival fires, but fires of controversy as well. The arguments flared up in his day and they still smolder. Many were deeply offended that he would reduce conversion to a mere human choice and thereby dismiss God's sovereign grace in predestination. Arminians and Calvinists still square off on the matter. (Whether you shrink from such labels or not, they have important historical value. If this is a mystery to you, our **glossary** in this issue might help you see the important distinctions.) Finney represents great tensions in American religion after Jonathan Edwards. Issues of the nature of sin, human choice and predestination, holiness, and social change, all swirl around this: magnetic character. If, as has been said, American theological thought is a series of footnotes to Jonathan Edwards, American evangelistic practice could be called a series of footnotes to Finney.

This makes Finney a fascinating character, also a complex one. Just where he falls is no easy question. And as you will see from a few of our articles, historians have worked to understand the source of his ideas. Timothy Smith's article **The Blessing of Abraham**, deals with Finney's famous and controversial position on Christian perfection. Dr. Smith is one of this country's finest historians and he has done extensive work on the 18th and 19th centuries. The influence of Wesleyan ideas on Finney and Finney's influence on Holiness are of particular interest in his thought. Allen Guelzo is a historian with expertise in the area of Edward's thought and its subsequent influence in American theology. In his article **The Making of a Revivalist**, he describes Finney's connections within the Edwards tradition. He explains a

continuity between Edwards and Finney that may make some Edwards enthusiasts pause a bit.

Garth Rosell's article **Sailing for the Kingdom of God** will help you see how Finney took his revivals and ideas beyond America and had a large influence in the British Isles. Rosell and Johnson did doctoral dissertations on Finney and are known for their activity and expertise in the area.

It is hard to capture a character like Finney in a few pages, for his influence and importance touch many areas. For example, critics of modern revival methods consider him the great granddaddy of many modern pressure tactics. The manipulative methods some revival preachers have used to get folks to "decide *now*" in a fit of emotional instability are often said to have grown from the methods Finney used to confront his hearers with the ultimate choice. Though it is not accurate to credit him with inventing these methods, it is fair to ask if he should be held responsible for emphasizing debatable practices that are common in modern evangelicalism. He did deliberately scorn old ideas by his practice of calling for decisions on the spot, but it was not his style to whip crowds up into panic before popping the big question. Those who heard him preach reported he spoke calmly, persuasively—the lawyer logically arguing the case. Some followers were not so careful; one minister said, Finney had "imitators, who, as usual in such cases, [found] it easier to exaggerate his defects than equal his excellencies."

Finney's role in social change, especially in the areas of the antislavery movement and in women's rights deserve special notice. We can only regret having limited space to devote to the subject. Any discussions of the role of evangelicals in opposing slavery and in fighting for women's rights must give important credit to Finney and Oberlin College, where he taught. We must all admit, whether we agree with Finney's ideas or not: He deserves credit for his influential stand on the dignity of all human beings. He was amazingly balanced amidst, on the one hand, radicals like William Lloyd Garrison, who were willing to blatantly twist Christian religion to their ends, and on the other hand, Christians who, tragically, used the Bible to defend slavery and to subordinate women. It's hard for us to imagine: In Finney's day most women were not allowed to even pray aloud in meetings with men present.

Rev. Lyman Beecher, a famous contemporary of Finney's, said this when comparing Finney and Asahel Nettleton, the man whom Finney upstaged as America's favorite revivalist: "The latter set snares for sinners, the former rode them down in a calvary charge. The one, being crafty, took them with guile; the other, being violent, took them by force." Mainstream Jacksonian America was more a place for stampedes and fist fights than for subtle twists of cunning. When President Andrew "Old Hickory" Jackson died, it was said he still carried in his leathery hide eight bullets from duels (apparently they had been able to remove the others!). Finney was a tough customer too, but of a different sort. A man of spiritual fiber who dared grasp the moment, he may seem to many a maverick, brash, and even careless, in doctrine and in deeds. Maybe at times he was. But the winds of change were blowing hard, and he dared to roll up his sleeves and, regardless of the scoffing of many in ivory towers, enter the fight down on main street for the souls of men and women.

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### Charles Grandison Finney: Did You Know?

Charles Grandison Finney is considered America's greatest past revivalist. Church rolls swelled in the wake of Finney's revivals. Though it is hard to gather accurate statistics, he is often directly, or indirectly credited with the conversions of around 500,000 people.

Rochester, New York, was dramatically transformed by his work there in 1830–31 in what has been called the greatest year of spiritual awakening in American history. Shops were closed so people could attend his meetings, and as a result of the changed hearts, the town taverns went out of business. Finney soon won international fame.

George Williams, an English worker, was converted by reading Finney's writings. In London in 1844, inspired by Finney's social reform stand, Williams founded the YMCA.

Finney, like most Christians in his day, and his Puritan forebears, was a postmillennialist; he believed that Christ would return *after* the millennium had come to earth. This was the reason for his efforts at social reform. He believed, like Jonathan Edwards before him, that America was on the threshold of God's kingdom, and said on various occasions that if only Americans would repent and obey the Lord, the millennium would soon come.

Finney had little formal religious training. He studied in a law office, but left that field before becoming a licensed lawyer. His preaching reflected his legal training and relied on reasoning: He said his task was to present the case for Christ as if a jury would then make a decision.

Early in his career, Finney made it a point to criticize seminary education and scoffed at theology, but later he spent many years as a professor at Oberlin College and wrote two weighty volumes on systematic theology!

Finney was a "Grahamite"—a follower of the popular health advocate Sylvester Graham, who taught that bad eating habits were as "sinful as drinking alcohol." Oberlin adopted Graham's ideas, which forbade coffee, tea, tobacco, gravy, most sweets, pepper, oil, vinegar and mustard, and advocated a meatless diet of vegetables, fruits, and grains.

Once when Finney was preaching, a loud *crack* was heard in the church and a beam fell through the roof. The crowd panicked and amid screaming, many jumped out of a window into a canal. Finney was picked up and carried out—barely able to refrain from laughing.

Years after his revivals, after reflecting on the many who had then claimed conversion but had since fallen away, Finney had mixed thoughts on the genuine results of his work.

Finney devoted great energy in his later years to attacking Freemasonry.

## Charles Grandison Finney: Father of American Revivalism

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***The career of Charles Finney was nothing short of remarkable. From international fame as a revivalist, to professor at and president of a unique educational institution, to advocate and defender of a controversial doctrine of Christian perfection, Finney has left a major imprint on American religion. He challenged common ideas about conversion, evangelism, and personal holiness, and helped reshape American Christian thought. No matter what your opinion of the controversial Charles Finney, this magnetic Christian leader was genuinely remarkable.***

Charles Finney was born in Warren, Connecticut, in 1792 into an old New England family. In 1794 his family moved to New York State, where, in the central and northern sections, he spent his childhood. Eventually, his family settled in Henderson, near Lake Ontario, where Charles spent most of his adolescent years.

As a young man he decided to study law, and he began that study in the office of lawyer Benjamin Wright in Adams, New York. Charles was also an amateur musician who played the cello, and apparently led the choir at the local Presbyterian church, which was pastored by the Rev. George W. Gale.

According to the account in his *Memoirs*, around this time he decided that he must settle the question of his soul's salvation. Having gone alone into the woods, he knelt by a log and wrestled with God in prayer, and was instantaneously converted. The event was so dramatic that Finney later recalled that he experienced what seemed like waves of liquid love throughout his body; it so affected him that he explained it in intimate detail when he was at an advanced age. The drama of the event may have made him impatient in later years with those who could not testify to a similar experience.

The next morning at the law office a client came in to inquire about the status of his case. No doubt to the client's consternation, Finney replied that the man would have to find someone else to help him, for he was no longer going to pursue a law career so that he might become a preacher of the gospel. The St. Lawrence Presbytery took him under their care and he was licensed to preach in December 1823. The Female Missionary Society of Western New York commissioned him as a missionary to Jefferson County in March of 1824. Thus Finney's revivalistic career was launched.

### Early Work and the Burned-over District

Finney's early meetings were held in the frontier communities of upper New York state, and he received, at best, a mixed reception. It was plain that his preaching was different than that of the local parish ministers, and his theology seemed a reaction against the prevailing Calvinism of the time. He married Lydia Andrews of Whitestown, New York, in October 1824, and appeared to be on a course for a normal and uneventful parish ministry of some sort in that area.

However, Finney's career took a turn in 1825, when while on a journey to Whitestown to visit Lydia's parents, he and his wife stayed over at the home of his former pastor, George Gale, in the town

of Western, NY. Gale asked Finney to preach and when the young evangelist complied, the results were immediate and dramatic. Crowds came to hear Finney and many asked him for help in obtaining assurance of conversion. The results were the same when he afterward preached in the towns of Utica and Rome, NY. (The whole area where Finney was then preaching has been referred to by historians as the "Burned-over district"; a reference to the fact that the area had experienced so much religious enthusiasm—from revivals and new religions, to cults and spiritualism—that the district had been scorched.) The revival meetings were described in detail by the Oneida Presbytery in a pamphlet referred to as the ***Narrative of Revival***. These meetings in the Burned-over District moved Finney up a notch and made him the subject of some notice in East Coast newspapers.

Finney began to gather friends and supporters who saw in him a figure of more than local importance. Among them were George W. Gale, his former pastor, Theodore D. Weld, a Utica revival convert and eventual national figure in the antislavery movement, Joshua Leavitt, a New York City newspaper editor, Lewis and Arthur Tappan, prominent lay merchants in New York City, and Nathan S. S. Beman, a pastor in Troy, NY.

### **Controversy and the New Measures**

Finney began to receive opposition from many people as well. The Old School Presbyterians, led by the New England revivalist Asahel Nettleton, resented Finney's modifications to Calvinist theology. Traditional Calvinists taught that a person would only come to believe the gospel if God had elected them to salvation. Hence, a person might hear the gospel in church, go home to meditate on the preacher's message, and pray and wait for assurance from on high. Finney stated that unbelief was a "will not," instead of a "cannot," and could be remedied if a person willed to become a Christian. The revivalistic Congregationalists, led by Lyman Beecher, feared that Finney was opening the door to fanaticism within the ranks by allowing too much expression of human emotion. On the other side, the Unitarians and Universalists opposed Finney on the general grounds that he was using scare tactics in his messages in order to gain converts. They were particularly offended by his references to Hell as the destination of those who refused to believe the gospel.

There was also a growing controversy over the ***New Measures*** being used by Finney in conducting his evangelistic meetings. Particularly offensive were his allowing women to pray in mixed public meetings; the use of an ***anxious bench*** at the front of the church—special seats for singling out persons who felt a special urgency about their salvation; the adoption of protracted meetings—daily meetings, as opposed to regular weekly meetings only; informal, instead of reverential, language, especially in prayer; and the hasty admission of new converts to church membership. A meeting was held at New Lebanon, NY, beginning on 18 July 1827, to examine the use of these so-called New Measures. The clergy present was mixed in their opposition and support of Finney, but the New Measures passed the test and Finney became nationally known as a result of the publicity surrounding these meetings.

The zenith of Finney's evangelistic career was reached at Rochester, NY, where he held meetings during 1830–1831. The whole city was involved as shopkeepers closed down their businesses and urged people to attend Finney's meetings. The frontier crudeness once criticized was now gone and witnesses described Finney's approach as that of a lawyer making his case before a jury. People from all walks of life attended the meetings and the entire region was affected by Finney's presence. He still was convinced that persons could will to be saved. A person visiting Finney told him that he had no feeling regarding the condition of his soul. At this Finney picked up a fire poker and threatened to strike the man. The defensive reaction from the man caused Finney to remark that he was demonstrating feeling and should have feeling about his salvation also.

Not long after the Rochester campaign, Finney accepted the pastorate of the Chatham Street Chapel in New York City. Whether his wife was weary of caring for a family on the itinerant trail and influenced his decision can only be guessed, but they settled in at their new home. After a bout with illness and a trip abroad to recover his health, Finney gave a series of lectures that were transcribed and published as

***Lectures on Revivals of Religion.*** This book made Finney more famous and added to the controversy surrounding him, for he stressed at the beginning of the book that a revival was not a miracle, but the right use of proper means. Professor Charles Hodge of Princeton Seminary, a famous Old School Presbyterian theologian, condemned the book; soon thereafter Finney left that denomination. He was now an acknowledged leader of the New School Presbyterians (progressive Presbyterians, many of whom had abandoned traditional Calvinistic teachings) and an important leader in the **free church** movement. Free churches were congregations that rejected the concept of **pew rent** in favor of free seating for anyone who wanted to enter the church. Friends of Finney built the Broadway Tabernacle in 1835 for him to pastor, and the emphasis there was on wide-open doors as an invitation for all to enter.

## **Oberlin and Social Reform**

Finney's life took another turn when he left New York City in 1835 to become a professor at Oberlin College in Ohio. (He was going to divide his time between Oberlin and the Broadway Tabernacle, but before long devoted himself to Oberlin.) This offer was made to him as a result of a group of students at Lane Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio, who were mostly his converts from the Burned-over District revivals. These students insisted that slave-owning was a sin; they were opposed by Lane Seminary trustees, many of whom owned slaves themselves. The students left Lane and traveled to Oberlin on the condition that Finney become their professor. Arthur and Lewis Tappan—wealthy abolition leaders—agreed to underwrite the costs, so Finney and his family moved to Oberlin. There he taught a class in pastoral theology, went East each year after classes were over to conduct revival meetings, and began to write for the **Oberlin Evangelist**. The more his writings appeared, the more he irritated members of the Old School who sensed that he was distorting Calvinism in order to give a free and open invitation for all to be converted in his revival meetings.

Finney succeeded in involving Oberlin in the leading social reforms of the Jacksonian era. One historian said that he unleashed a mighty impulse to social reform by insisting that new converts make their lives count for the Kingdom of God. The result was an optimistic, postmillennial theological thrust and the revitalization of a "benevolent empire" of Protestant organizations determined to make the world a better place by hastening the coming of the Kingdom. The reform movements involved were: the temperance movement, Sabbath keeping, manual labor schools, and abolitionism. Oberlin even became a station on the Underground Railroad (a network of locations used to help slaves escape to Canada), and the scene of a dramatic slave rescue. Indeed, Finney was successful in linking evangelical circles to antislavery crusades. On the other hand, he cautioned Theodore Weld and others not to allow reform efforts to replace revivalism. Charles Finney was, first and foremost, a revivalist.

## **Perfectionism and British Revivals**

Finney began to ponder the problem raised by the number of his revival converts who became backsliders. The result was the formulation of a doctrine on Christian perfectionism by himself and Oberlin College president Asa Mahan. [**see Timothy Smith's article on Finney's perfectionism in this issue**] Perfectionist ideas earned for Finney many more criticisms and placed a stigma on Oberlin College.

Later revivals Finney conducted in Rochester and Boston—scenes of earlier triumphs—were not as successful, perhaps because his listeners did not understand his new perfectionist emphasis. He was the pastor of the First Congregational Church at Oberlin, and now did most of his preaching there, instead of on the itinerant trail. His first wife, Lydia, died at Oberlin on December 18, 1847, leaving five children from ages three to 19; Finney was profoundly affected by the loss. She had not only been the mother of his children, but also a devoted helper in his revival meetings as well. Soon after Lydia's death, Finney married Elizabeth Ford Atkins, a widow from Rochester. The degree to which Finney allowed Lydia and, later, Elizabeth to be involved in his campaigns demonstrates the impact of Finney on the changing roles of women in Jacksonian America.

The Finneys journeyed to England twice during the decade of the 1850s. Charles preached throughout

the British Isles and was generally successful with the same methods he had used in America. Elizabeth began holding meetings for women, starting a trend that would become an accepted practice in some Christian circles. Finney's impact in England shows his effectiveness as a religious bridge across the Atlantic. His last trip to England, on the eve of the American Civil War, seems to have worn him out physically; he was never well after that time.

Finney's later years were spent at Oberlin College teaching theology, serving for 15 years as its president, and writing rather extensively in opposition to Freemasonry. His wife Elizabeth died in 1864, when he was 71; a year later he married Rebecca Rayl, assistant principal of Oberlin's ladies department. He was encouraged by friends to write down a narrative of the revivals he conducted; he began this work in 1868. Published after his death as his *Memoirs*, they are still popular today. Charles Finney died at Oberlin on the dawn of Monday 16 August 1875, two weeks before his 83rd birthday.

## Finney's Legacy

Charles Finney made a significant impression upon the religious life of 19th century America, and his influence is still evident today. Called the "father of modern revivalism" by some historians, he paved the way for later revivalists like Dwight L. Moody, Billy Sunday, and Billy Graham. He constructed a theology that harmonized with the ideals of the Jacksonian era; if President Andrew Jackson was the political folk-hero of early 19th-century America, Charles Grandison Finney was its religious folk-hero. Just as the American frontier was being widened and common folk were getting the vote, Finney gave the public an opportunity to cast their votes on the matter of salvation.

This democratization of Calvinism worked and no doubt caused some jealousy among his rivals in the field of revivalism. In fact, his New Measures opened up the field so that lay-witnessing became the order of the day, including contingents of women who made house visits and held special prayer meetings. The measures worked and Finney was in demand because of the successful results obtained in his meetings. He also personalized religion so that individuals attending his meetings were forced to make a choice. Indeed, the choice of a destiny in Heaven or in Hell was entirely up to the individual.

Finney did not rebuke his hearers for the sin of Adam (what theologians call *imputed sin*), but rather challenged them to do something about their own sins. He left no room for excuses and interpreted a "cannot" as a "will not." Rejecting Calvinism's *total depravity*, he taught that the only bondage a person was under was a voluntary bondage to their own selfishness and love of the world. Hence, he argued that the revivalist could demand immediate repentance and submission to God. Indeed, he insisted that ministers should expect results before the potential converts left the meetings.

His impression on Oberlin was also significant; in fact, from 1835 to his death in 1875, Oberlin and Finney were synonymous. Alumni later recalled "Father Finney" as he prayed during the class, preached from the pulpit, walked the paths of the campus, or tended his raspberry patch at home. His mark was made on the reform movements during the Jacksonian years, especially in the areas of women's rights and the antislavery movement. His ideas about Christian perfectionism and sanctification caused the Oberlin community some distress, but the idea of holiness has endured and flourished in parts of the Christian community. His trips to England were successful, even when judged by the remarks of his critics. [*see Garth Rosell's article on Trans-Atlantic revivalism in this issue*]

Finney's writings were numerous and influential. The *Lectures on Revivals* have been translated into several languages and are still being published and sold today. They are used as texts in colleges and seminary classes, and remain the starting point for discussions on modern revivalism. His writings on Christian perfectionism have endured as well, and are in favor today among many charismatic Christians. Although systematic theologians generally do not accept the premises outlined in his large works on that subject, these works too have stood the test of time. Finney's writings persist, in spite of the critics, and seem to be increasing in popularity.

Some critics have referred to a "Finney cult" in America. Finney still has his serious opponents, and is blamed for, among other things, some of the more controversial techniques of modern mass evangelism. We might imagine Finney replying to his critics that he did what he had to do to get people out of what he saw as a valley of Calvinist apathy and into the path of active soul-winning. History leaves to our opinions whether he was right or wrong. Nevertheless, it seems fitting that even today, more than a century after his long and remarkable career, Charles Grandison Finney still arouses our feelings, and presses us with a decision.

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## Another Winter in Boston

Personal reflections, in Finney's own words, about, among other things, his relationship with God, his baptism in the Holy Ghost, Heaven & Hell, perfect peace & blessedness, and his inward struggles with the death of his first wife.

REV CHARLES G. FINNEY

*The winter of 1843–1844, which Finney spent preaching in Boston at Marlborough Chapel, was a decisive one for him. His experience of the second blessing, or baptism of the Holy Ghost, occurred at this time, and is related here in this excerpt from his Memoirs (also called his Autobiography). In a way, Finney's description of his experience seems unremarkable, if we are looking for anything exotic—he mentions no miraculous or mystical experience. Here is the real man, in intimate words that recall similar personal reflections by Edwards and others. Here is the inner man, who all that follow Christ—whether they agree with Finney or not—can relate to.*

### **In the fall of 1843, I was called again to Boston ...**

The mass of the people in Boston are more unsettled in their religious convictions than in any other place that I have ever labored in, notwithstanding their intelligence; for they are surely a very intelligent people, on all questions but that of religion. It is extremely difficult to make religious truths lodge in their minds, because the influence of Unitarian teaching has been, to lead them to call in question all the principle doctrines of the Bible.... They deny almost everything, and affirm almost nothing.

During this winter, the Lord gave my own soul a very thorough overhauling, and a fresh baptism of his Spirit. I boarded at the Marlborough hotel, and my study and bedroom were at one corner of the chapel building. My mind was greatly drawn out in prayer, for a long time; as indeed it always has been, when I have labored in Boston. I have been favored there, uniformly, with a great deal of the spirit of prayer. But this winter, in particular, my mind was exceedingly exercised on the question of personal holiness; and in respect to the state of the church, their want of the power of God ....

I gave myself to a great deal of prayer. After my evening services, I would retire as early as I could; but rose at four o'clock in the morning, because I could sleep no longer, and immediately went to the study, and engaged in prayer. And so deeply was my mind exercised, and so absorbed in prayer, that I frequently continued from the time I arose at four o'clock, till the gong called for breakfast, at eight o'clock. My days were spent, so long as I could get time, in searching the Scriptures. I read nothing else, all that winter, but my Bible; and a great deal of it seemed new to me ... the whole Scriptures seemed to me all ablaze with light ....

After praying in this way for weeks and months, one morning while I was engaged in prayer, the thought occurred to me, what if, after all this divine teaching, my will is not carried, and this teaching takes effect only in my sensibility? May it not be that my sensibility is affected, by these revelations from the reading of the Bible, and that my heart is not really subdued by them? ... The thought that I might be deceiving myself, when it first occurred to me, stung me almost like an adder. It created a pang that I cannot describe. The passages of Scripture that occurred to me, in that direction, for a few moments greatly increased my distress. But directly I was enabled to fall back upon the perfect will of God. I said to the Lord, that if he saw it was wise and best, and that his honor demanded that I should be left to be

deluded, and go down to hell, I accepted his will, and I said to him, "Do with me as seemeth thee good."

Just before this occurrence, I had a great struggle to consecrate myself to God, in a higher sense than I had ever before seen to be my duty, or conceived as possible. I had often before laid my family all upon the altar of God, and left them to be disposed of at his discretion. But at this time that I now speak of, I had had a great struggle about giving up my wife to the will of God. She was in very feeble health, and it was very evident that she could not live long. I had never before seen so clearly what was implied in laying her, and all that I possessed, upon the altar of God; and for hours I struggled upon my knees, to give her up unqualifiedly to the will of God. But I found myself unable to do it. I was so shocked and surprised at this, that I perspired profusely with agony....

But as I said, I [later] was enabled, after struggling with ... discouragement and bitterness, which I have since attributed to a fiery dart of Satan, to fall back, in a deeper sense than I had ever done before upon the infinitely blessed and perfect will of God. I then told the Lord that I had such confidence in him, that I felt perfectly willing, to give myself, my wife and my family, all to be disposed of according to his wisdom.

I then had a deeper view of what was implied in consecration to God, than ever before. I spent a long time upon my knees, in considering the matter all over, and giving up everything to the will of God: the interests of the church, the progress of religion, the conversion of the world, and the salvation or damnation of my own soul, as the will of God might decide.... I felt a kind of holy boldness, in telling him to do with me just as seemed good to him; that he could not do anything that was not perfectly wise and good; and therefore, I had the best grounds for accepting whatever he could consent to, in respect to me and mine. So deep and perfect a resting in the will of God, I had never before known.

This was early in the morning; and through the whole of that day I seemed to be in a state of perfect rest, body and soul. The question frequently arose in my mind, during the day, "Do you still adhere to your consecration, and abide in the will of God?" I said without hesitation, "Yes, I take nothing back." ... The thought that I might be lost did not distress me. Indeed, think as I might, during that whole day, I could not find in my mind the least fear, the least disturbing emotion. Nothing troubled me. I was neither elated nor depressed; I was neither, as I could see, joyful or sorrowful. My confidence in God was perfect, my acceptance of his will was perfect, and my mind was as calm as heaven.

Just at evening, the question arose in my mind, "What if God should send me to hell, what then?" "Why, I would not object to it." "But can he send a person to hell," was the next inquiry, "who accepts his will, in the sense in which you do?" This inquiry was no sooner raised in my mind than settled. I said, "No, it is impossible. Hell could be no hell to me, if I accepted God's perfect will." This sprung a vein of joy in my mind, that kept developing more and more, for weeks and months, and indeed, I may say, for years. For years my mind was too full of joy to feel exercised with anxiety on any subject. My prayer that had been so fervent, and protracted during so long a period, seemed all to run out into, "Thy will be done." It seemed as if my desires were all met. What I had been praying for, for myself, I had received in a way that I least expected. Holiness to the Lord seemed to be inscribed on all the exercises of my mind ....

At this time it seemed as if my soul were wedded to Christ, in a sense in which I had never had any thought or conception before.... Indeed the Lord lifted me up so much above anything I had experienced before, and taught me so much of the meaning of the Bible, of Christ's relations, and power, and willingness, that I often found myself saying to him, "I had not known or conceived that any such thing was true." ... I had had no conception of the length and breadth, and height and depth, and efficiency of his grace.

I labored that winter mostly for a revival of religion among Christians. The Lord prepared me to do so, by the great work he wrought in my soul. Although I had had much of the divine life working within me; yet, as I said, so far did what I experienced that winter, exceed all that I had before experienced, that at times I could not realize that I had ever before been truly in communion with God.

To be sure I had been, often and for a long time; and this I knew when I reflected upon it, and remembered through what I had so often passed. It appeared to me, that winter, that probably when we get to heaven, our views and joys, and holy exercises, will so far surpass anything that we have ever experienced in this life, that we shall be hardly able to recognize the fact that we had any religion, while in this world ....

As the great excitement of that season subsided, and my mind became more calm, I saw more clearly the different steps of my Christian experience, and came to recognize the connection of things, as all wrought by God from beginning to end. But since then I have never had those great struggles, and long protracted seasons of agonizing prayer, that I had often experienced.... He enables me now to rest in him, and let everything sink into his perfect will, with much more readiness, than ever before the experience of that winter.

I have felt since then a religious freedom, a religious buoyancy and delight in God, and in his word, a steadiness of faith, a Christian liberty and overflowing love, that I had only experienced, I may say, only occasionally before.... My bondage seemed to be, at that time, entirely broken; and since then, I have had the freedom of a child with a loving parent. It seems to me that I can find God within me, in such a sense, that I can rest upon him and be quiet, lay my heart in his hand, and nestle down in his perfect will, and have no carefulness or anxiety.

I speak of these exercises as habitual, since that period, but I cannot affirm that they have been altogether unbroken; for in 1860, during a period of sickness, I had a season of great depression, and wonderful humiliation. But the Lord brought me out of it, into an established peace and rest.

A few years after this season of refreshing, that beloved wife, of whom I have spoken, died. This was to me a great affliction. However, I did not feel any murmuring, or the least resistance to the will of God. I gave her up to God, without any resistance whatever, that I can recollect. But it was to me a great sorrow. The night after she died, I was lying in my room alone, and some Christian friends were sitting up in the parlor, and watching out the night. [***This is a reference to the common practice of family members or friends staying, "sitting up," with the body of a dead loved one, around the clock, "watching out the night," in the parlor, where the coffin would be set up for some days before burial.***] I had been asleep for a little while, and as I awoke, the thought of my bereavement flashed over my mind with such power! My wife was gone! I should never hear her speak again, nor see her face! Her children were motherless! What should I do? My brain seemed to reel, as if my mind would swing from its pivot. I rose instantly from my bed, exclaiming, "I shall be deranged if I cannot rest in God!" The Lord soon calmed my mind, for that night; but still, at times, seasons of sorrow would come over me, that were almost overwhelming.

One day I was upon my knees, communing with God on the subject, and all at once he seemed to say to me, "You loved your wife?" "Yes," I said. "Well, did you love her for her own sake, or for your sake? Did you love her, or yourself? If you loved her for your own sake, why do you sorrow that she is with me? Should not her happiness with me make you rejoice instead of mourn, if you loved her for her own sake? Did you love her," he seemed to say to me, "for my sake? If you loved her for my sake, surely you would not grieve that she is with me. Why do you think of your loss, and lay so much stress upon that, instead of thinking of her gain? Can you be sorrowful, when she is so joyful and happy? ..."

I can never describe the feelings that came over me, when I seemed to be thus addressed. It produced an instantaneous change in the whole state of my mind. From that moment, sorrow, on account of my loss, was gone forever. I no longer thought of my wife as dead, but as alive, and in the midst of the glories of heaven. My faith was, at this time, so strong and my mind so enlightened, that it seemed that I could enter into the very state of mind in which she was, in heaven; and if there is any such thing as communing with an absent spirit, or with one who is in heaven, I seemed to commune with her. Not that I ever supposed she was present in such a sense that I communed personally with her. But it seems as if I knew what her state of mind was there, what profound, unbroken rest, in the perfect will of God. I

could see that that was heaven, and I experienced it in my own soul. I have never, to this day, lost the blessing of these views. They frequently recur to me, as the very state of mind in which the inhabitants of heaven are, and I can see why they are in such a state of blessedness.

from:

Memoirs of Rev. Charles G. Finney

Written by Himself

A.S. Barnes & Co., New York

1876

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 20: Charles Finney: American Revivalism

## Pastoral Guidance for Far-from-Perfect Young Ministers

As the outstanding preacher and pastor on the Oberlin faculty, Finney gave numerous pastoral lectures on the proper manners of ministers. Much of his advice was on relating to the opposite sex, but he also directed those young men under his care on personal conduct and cleanliness. Fortunately for us some notes by his students remain to inform us of these priceless lessons—laughter was, no doubt, not unknown in Mr. Finney's classrooms. This excerpt is from Fletcher's History of Oberlin College.

Ministers, he said, should always avoid levity and "all winking and roguishness," should be grave but not morose, dignified but not sanctimonious. "Where ministers hold out the idea that they are the great ones of the earth they create a false impression of religion." "A minister should be polite and considerate, should observe unusual personal kindness." "Good manners [are] benevolence acted out, bad manners, selfishness acted out." Ministers, of all people, he insisted, must avoid slovenliness, affectation, effeminacy, coarseness and vulgarity, selfishness, impertinence, and a spirit of contradiction. They should beware of "band box manners" and of anything "foppish." They should not wear ruffles, rings, breast pins, beards and whiskers (This was in 1843, before he took to wearing them himself.), and they should not carry gaudy pocket handkerchiefs. Evidently much more needed and occupying much more time in his talks were warnings against vulgarity and coarseness. 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 jams, nor pull off their stockings before a family! He related 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 he told of another ministerial acquaintance who "put his feet up in a window in a ladies parlor to enjoy the cool air!" He 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 mouths on the table cloth!

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Some Places and Dates of Finney's Revivals & Travels

### EARLY NEW YORK REVIVALS

1824–1825

Evans Mills, LeRay Antwerp, Gouverneur Dekalb, Western

1826–1827

Rome (Jan 1826)

Utica (Feb.–May, Nov. 1826, Jan. 1827)

Auburn (June–Aug. 1826)

Troy (October 1826)

New Lebanon (April 1827)

*New Lebanon Conference and national recognition*

Little Falls, (July 1827)

Stephentown (July–Oct. 1827)

### LEAVES NEW YORK STATE

Wilmington, Delaware  
(Dec. 1827)

1828–1829

Philadelphia, PA (Jan. 1828)

Wilmington, DE -Jan. 1829)

Reading, PA (Jan.–May 1829)

Lancaster, PA (May–June 1829)

New York City

(Oct. 1829–May 1830)

1830-1831

Rochester, NY

(Sept. 1830–Mar. 1831)

*Great Rochester Revival*

1831–1837

Auburn, NY (May–Apr. 1831)

Buffalo, NY (April–June 1831)

Providence, RI (Aug. 1831)

Boston, MA (Aug. 1831–Apr. 1832)

New York, City  
**Chatham St Chapel**  
pastor, May 1832–Mar. 1836

*(Jan.–July 1834: Finney took a Mediterranean cruise to recuperate from cholera contracted in a NY epidemic)*

**Broadway Tabernacle**  
pastor, 1836–1837

*(For one year Finney combined responsibilities at the Broadway Tabernacle and Oberlin College, then left permanently for Oberlin)*

**Oberlin College**  
Oberlin, OH  
*Becomes professor of theology,  
Fall 1887; remains until death*

## LATER REVIVALS

**1842**

Boston, MA  
Providence, RI  
Rochester, NY

**1843–1844**

Boston, MA  
*(This winter, Finney claims the "baptism of the Spirit.")*

**Nov. 1849–Mar. 1851**

**ENGLAND**  
*Houghton, Birmingham, Worcester, London*  
*(visits France)*

*(1851 August: Becomes president of Oberlin College; serves until 1866)*

**Fall 1851:** New York City  
**Spring 1852:** Hartford, CT  
**Fall 1855:** Rochester, NY  
**Fall 1856:** Boston, MA  
**Fall 1857:** Boston, MA

**Dec. 1858–Aug. 1860**

**ENGLAND**  
*Houghton, St. Ives, London, Huntington, Bolton, Manchester*  
**SCOTLAND**  
*Edinburgh, Aberdeen*

***(Finney spent the remainder of his life teaching and writing, and preaching and pastoring at First Church, Oberlin, OH, where he was pastor from 1844 to 1872)***

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 20: Charles Finney: American Revivalism

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## Charles Grandison Finney: A Gallery of Critics, Friends, Sweethearts, and Acquaintances

John Morgan (1803–1884)

John Morgan and Finney were colleagues at Oberlin College and both embraced the doctrine of perfectionism. After graduating valedictorian from Williams College in 1826, Morgan became an instructor in Latin at Lane Theological School in Cincinnati, Ohio. During his time at Lane, the students formed an antislavery society. Morgan was the sole faculty member to support the student movement.

The trustees of the school—some of them slave-owners—were appalled at the student's actions. In spite of opposition from the school's president, Lyman Beecher, and from benefactors Arthur and Lewis Tappan, the trustees took action against the society. Among their actions were the banning of all extra-curricular student societies and the dismissal of John Morgan. The students, infuriated by this response, withdrew from Lane. Soon afterward, John Jay Shipherd met with these students to persuade them to enroll at a new school he hoped to establish at Oberlin.

The students agreed to come if several conditions were met; among them: John Morgan must be given a professorship. Shipherd agreed to all the student's demands. Morgan accepted the invitation and in June 1835 began teaching New Testament exegesis and literature. At the same time Charles Finney became Oberlin's professor of theology.

In the fall of 1836, several of the faculty members, including Morgan and Finney, began to stress the doctrine of perfection. Many prominent Christian leaders severely criticized Oberlin's position. Morgan answered these attacks in the *Oberlin Quarterly Review*.

Throughout his 32 years at Oberlin, John Morgan, a versatile scholar, taught in every branch of the school. He corresponded with the traveling Finney several times seeking to influence him to return to his responsibilities at Oberlin.

John Humphrey Noyes (1811–1886)

Charles Finney was interested in the perfectionist ideas of J.H. Noyes. Noyes began to develop his unique theology while a student at Andover and Yale Divinity Schools. His theology contained two foundational ideas: first, Christ's second coming had occurred in 70 A.D. when Jerusalem fell; the return was spiritual, and at this point in history, Noyes believed, the Christian Church had become "spiritualized."

Secondly, based upon his interpretation of Romans 7, Noyes believed that at conversion *all* sin was cleansed from the believer; therefore, believers could reach a state of perfection in this life. Because of Finney's increased interest in perfectionism, Noyes—who was receiving much public attention—hoped to include the famous evangelist in his cause. Finney wrote to Noyes, "I have often heard of you and your extravagances ... I have learned not to be frightened if it is rumored that anyone has received any light which I have not myself." After a meeting, Noyes was pleased that Finney did not consider him insane.

However, Finney changed his assessment of Noyes and his ideas. Followers of Noyes were often inclined to fanaticism. Then, in 1843, Noyes declared himself to be filled with the Holy Spirit and therefore entirely sinless. The result of his declaration was expulsion from Yale, alienation from professors and

friends, and rejection by his sweetheart, Abigail Merwin.

Though discouraged, Noyes persevered, and in 1841 organized his followers into the Society of Inquiry, a utopian commune in Putney, Vermont. The goal was to usher in the Kingdom of God; among the means to accomplish this were: biblical communism, "theocratic democracy," divine healing, male continence (sexual discipline) and complex marriage—whereby all members were married to each other. Six years after its inception, the Putney group proclaimed that the millennial kingdom had come to their community—they had achieved perfection.

The outside world concluded otherwise, however, and amidst angry charges of adultery the members of Putney were forced to remove to another community at Oneida, New York. The Oneida community reached its peak membership in 1857 at 250 people. Though only an average of less than two children were born per year at Oneida in its first 20 years, in 1869 Noyes oversaw a large voluntary experiment in selective human breeding to create a perfect spiritual generation.

Public outcry forced the Oneida group—including Noyes' nine offspring—to disband in 1881. Noyes removed to Canada. Oneida, grown affluent from planned selection of wealthy members and animal trap and luggage manufacturing, was the longest-lived and most radical American communal experiment.

### **Lydia Andrews Finney (1804–1847)**

Charles met Lydia Andrews in 1820 during his legal training in Adams, NY. Lydia realized that Charles was not a Christian and began praying for his conversion. In 1821, he was converted. On October 5, 1824, Charles and Lydia were married. Three days after their wedding Charles left Lydia with her parents and traveled to Evans Mills, NY, to find a house. However, on the way he became involved in several revival meetings. He returned for Lydia six months later.

Lydia, though, did not always stay at home; she and their children traveled extensively with the itinerant Charles. She did not enjoy public duties or speaking and preferred to work behind the scenes. During Charles' revivals, Lydia would conduct women's prayer meetings; Charles viewed these as essential to his revivals. Lydia was also instrumental in the formation of many infant schools and maternal associations in the towns where revivals were held.

At Oberlin College, Lydia actively participated in the women's department. She was viewed by many students as a "mother confessor" and a spiritual advisor, instructing the female students in educational, spiritual, and vocational matters.

Lydia was described as reserved and humble. Her spiritual life was marked by highs and lows. She struggled with a poor self-image, depression, and nervousness. Yet she is noted for her achievements in forming women's networks to promote missions, and activism in the antislavery movement. She became a new model for minister's wives. On 17 December 1847 Lydia died, leaving five children: Helen, Charles, Frederic, Julia, and Delia. Her death has been called Charles Finney's darkest hour.

### **Elizabeth Ford Atkinson Finney (1799–1863)**

Elizabeth Atkinson, who became Charles' second wife on Nov. 13, 1848, was a woman of strong character and great influence in her husband's ministry. When they married she was a widow of 49 and Charles was 56. They had known each other for 18 years, but the details surrounding their marriage are not known.

Like Charles' first wife Lydia, Elizabeth was directly involved in her husband's work. Unlike Lydia, Elizabeth enjoyed opportunities to work and speak publicly. She was confident, poised, witty in speech, and had an iron resolve. She also held prayer meetings, and addressed the gatherings as well as leading

them.

Finney's revivals became known as The *Finneys'* revivals. Elizabeth recruited women to help in the campaigns. Charles referred to her meetings as "one of the most important instrumentalities in the promotion of a revival." One of her major achievements was elevating public tolerance for women's participation in ministry, and she and Charles popularized the concept of *team ministry*. The public recognized her labors by its monetary support of her work.

Elizabeth gained the reputation as the one who ran the Finney ministry. It was said that a sure way to get Charles Finney to come and hold a revival was to favorably mention his wife's labors. Her influence was evident in the controversy over Charles' second trip to England. When Charles agreed at her prompting to go to England, the Oberlin community expressed their strong disapproval. Charles changed his mind and Elizabeth was upset. She became angry when a Mr. Clark made the remark to Charles, "Everybody thinks you are so under the influence of your wife that if she says to go to England you go, if she says to go to Boston you go."

Elizabeth, confident that God was calling them to England, took on the entire Oberlin community. Charles eventually did go to England, but Elizabeth's popularity waned at Oberlin. In the incident Charles seemed to show indecisiveness and dependence upon Elizabeth's judgement ... or respect for his wife by following her feeling of calling to England. The second trip to England was the crowning event of the Finney's ministry. The success of the trip endorsed Elizabeth's ministry among women, and helped her regain respect in the Oberlin community.

After returning from England in 1860, the Finneys continued their labors at Oberlin. In 1861 Charles, 68, suffered a collapse from stress and exhaustion. While Elizabeth was nursing him back to health, her own health failed. She died on 27 November 1863 while on a trip to Clifton, NY.

### **Rebecca Allen Rayl Finney (1824–1907)**

Finney's third marriage was to the widowed Rebecca Rayl in the fall of 1865. She taught at Oberlin and was an assistant principal in the female department. Charles was 73, she was 41.

Rebecca was a strong-minded and independent woman. While Charles would preach against the evils of frivolous adornment, Rebecca would sit listening in a blossom-adorned bonnet. She was articulate in speech and skilled as a writer. In Charles' final years, as his strength to preach was failing him, he began to do more writing. During this period of his life, Finney devoted himself to attacking the Masonic movement. Rebecca assisted regularly in his writing endeavors.

Rebecca and Charles enjoyed a quiet Sunday afternoon and evening together with two of his children and their families before his death on the morning of August 16. Suffering from pains around his heart after going to bed, doctors were summoned. Though Rebecca insisted he was not, Charles quietly told her, "I am dying."

### **George W. Gale (1789–1861)**

Tutor, opponent, and friend, Rev. George Washington Gale was Finney's pastor in Adams, NY. Charles was choir director at Gale's Adams Street Presbyterian Church.

Friends though they were, they disagreed about theology. Gale, a past student of Princeton, preached a Calvinism that Finney would not accept. Charles stated in his *Memoirs* that in discussions he "criticized [Gale's] sermons unmercifully." Their discussions ultimately resulted in Finney's conversion. Gale became Finney's sponsor and ministerial instructor.

Because of poor health, Gale left the pastorate in Adams and settled on a farm in Oneida County, NY. He began a practical education experiment, offering a home and teaching to young men preparing for the ministry in return for farm work; his work became the Oneida Institute. Later he and his followers traveled West and founded Knox Manual Labor College in Galesburg, IL (named for him) where Gale taught moral philosophy.

After Gale's recommendation of Finney as his pastoral replacement was rejected in Adams, he recommended he be commissioned in Jefferson County, NY. Finney's first marked success as a revivalist came when he preached in the Whitesboro Church during a stay at the Gale farm.

As Finney progressed in his ministry, Gale criticized his crude preaching style and confused theology, openly voicing embarrassment of his convert and former student. Finally, however, Gale softened on Finney's approach and became involved in the revivals.

### **Lyman Beecher (1775–1863)**

A famous clergyman Lyman Beecher was a minister of churches in Long Island, NY, Litchfield, CT, and Boston, MA, and a leader in the so-called **Second Great Awakening** and the New Divinity movement. He was also a leader in the early attack on Finney's **New Measures**.

Beecher considered Finney's new-style revivalism dangerous. He charged that the revivals tended too much toward emotionalism and said they would lead to "barbarism." He was displeased with Finney's methods of allowing women to pray in mixed groups, being from a tradition where women who did such things compromised their femininity. He was the leading spokesman against Finney at the famous New Lebanon Conference in 1827, where, after it became evident that Beecher and his associates had been misinformed about various things, Finney was cleared of bad practices. It was seen as a victory for Finney, and a defeat for Beecher and even more for his associate Asahel Nettleton.

Beecher claimed to have told Finney after the New Lebanon meeting that if Finney planned on bringing his revival to Boston, he would meet him at the Massachusetts border and fight him all the way there. Eventually, however, Beecher admitted the value of Finney's campaigns, and corresponded and met with him on several occasions. Finney did bring his revival to Boston. Beecher and Finney maintained a cordial, but distanced relationship.

Beecher was said to be the "father of more brains than any man in America," for among his children were Harriet Beecher Stowe, writer of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Henry Ward Beecher, the most famous American preacher of his day. Beecher was tried and acquitted in the Presbyterian Church for heresy in the 1830s for his modified views of some central Calvinistic doctrines.

### **Asahel Nettleton (1738–1844)**

At the time of Asahel Nettleton's conversion in 1801, he was considering opening up a dancing school. Later, after graduating from Yale in 1809, he was involved in successful evangelistic work in eastern Connecticut and was ordained as an evangelist in Litchfield County, CT in 1817. He never held a settled pastorate and never married.

Nettleton was a very astute and respected evangelist. He had an intellectual approach to preaching, like Jonathan Edwards, and was known for somber yet vivid, powerful sermons. He also had a highly developed approach to his meetings involving attention to maintaining a reverent, orderly atmosphere, careful coordination with local pastors, and a thorough visitation and follow-up instruction program for new converts.

He was among Finney's most severe critics and felt called to halt the influence of Finney and his unorthodox, innovative measures. With Lyman Beecher, he led the effort to clip Finney's wings at the New Lebanon Conference, but seeing early on that the meetings were not headed for the results he wanted, he remained absent from most of the sessions, due to "nervousness," returning on the last day noticeably irritated and suffering from dashed hopes.

Nettleton campaigned against Finney in his sermons, letters, and other publications. When it became clear that Finney was surpassing him in popularity as an evangelist he became increasingly incensed.

Lyman Beecher observed in 1827 that Nettleton was as far above Finney in his "talent, wisdom, and judgement, and experience," as was Napoleon Bonaparte above any average corporal in the French army. However, Nettleton's preaching fell out of favor with many of the more "progressive" ministers—Beecher included—because he persisted in emphasizing *original sin*, a doctrine Beecher and his kindred spirits dropped in their revision of Calvinism. Beecher eventually accommodated Finney more and more, but Nettleton never compromised his position, becoming in this and other matters an opponent of Beecher.

Nettleton never fully recovered from a bout with Typhus fever he contracted during his ministry and died in 1844, his significant work publicly eclipsed by the meteoric career of the man whose influence he opposed.

### **Arthur (1786–1865) and Lewis (1788–1873) Tappan**

Arthur and Lewis Tappan were the primary financial backers of Charles Finney and other social reformers. Wealthy New York merchants, they were active in the "Great Eight Benevolent Societies," which included the American Bible School Union and the American Temperance Society. The Tappans also strongly supported the antislavery movement, and through their support, kept Oberlin secure through its controversial involvement with the abolitionist movement.

The Tappan brothers had become wealthy as silk importers and merchants. (Arthur Tappan and Company at times grossed over \$1 million annually.) The Tappans also founded America's first credit-rating agency, which later became Dun and Bradstreet.

Lewis Tappan was instrumental in influencing Finney's acceptance of the pastorate at Chatham Street Chapel in New York City. Chatham Street Chapel was called the "cathedral of benevolence." The Tappans insisted that blacks be invited to the chapel and Finney did not object. Yet, throughout Finney's career there, blacks were segregated from whites. This policy eventually led Lewis to leave the church; he wanted color distinction abolished.

A disastrous fire in 1835 began a series of financial difficulties for the Tappans. In 1837 Arthur Tappan announced, to the shock of the public, that he was \$1.1 million in debt. During this crisis, Arthur's concern for financial responsibility toward his creditors won him great respect in the financial community.

Arthur Tappan was the first president of the American Anti-slavery society, and later president of the American and Foreign Slave Society. Lewis Tappan was a delegate to the World Antislavery Convention in London in 1843; he retired in 1849 and devoted his time to humanitarian work—primarily for the antislavery cause.

### **Asa Mahan (18??–1889)**

When angry students abandoned Lane Seminary because of their stand against slavery and decided to be part of the new school at Oberlin, they chose Asa Mahan as their first president. Mahan as a Lane

trustee, had been a defender of the students' position. He became Oberlin's first president—a unique school where black students would be invited to join the student body, and complete freedom of speech would be allowed on all reform issues.

Asa Mahan and Charles Finney brought attention—and scorn—to Oberlin by their perfectionist teachings. Mahan, in 1836, was the first of the two to receive the *second blessing*. He later recounted, "... The highway of holiness was now, for the first time rendered perfectly distinct to my mind." When Mahan had related to Finney the experience of being "baptized in the Holy Ghost," Finney sought and later, in 1843, found the blessing for himself. In 1836, Mahan and Finney held revival meetings at Oberlin, in which Mahan did most of the preaching. At the last of these meetings a student asked if "we may look to [Christ] to be sanctified wholly, or not?" Mahan recalled that he was shocked at the question, for he then realized the implications for the first time of his perfectionist teaching. At this point he and Finney cautiously responded that further thought would have to be given to this question. In 1839, when a student asked a similar question, Mahan's immediate response was "yes." Mahan and Finney came out forcefully on the side of Christian Perfection.

Finney went to lengths to dissociate their ideas from those of contemporary radicals like J.H. Noyes, and from Wesleyan perfectionism. Mahan, however, was not as cautious, and was reported to speak in such a way as to claim he was free from all consciousness of sin. Since God demanded perfect obedience, it therefore must be achievable. Finney stated his case in 1839, "Entire and permanent sanctification is attainable in this life ...."

Amidst fierce criticism, Oberlin perfectionism developed under Mahan, Finney, and others. The *Oberlin Evangelist* was established to promote the teachings. In 1839, Mahan published the book *Scripture Doctrine of Christian Perfection*, which was composed of articles first run in the *Oberlin Evangelist*. Through his convention lectures, articles, and books, Mahan became one of the major defenders and promoters of Christian perfectionism in America and England. In 1870 he published a popular book entitled *The Baptism of the Holy Ghost*. Mahan taught that Spirit baptism did not involve "any miraculous indowments."

At Oberlin, Mahan's leadership and ideas, which tended to extremes, eventually caused serious contention among the staff, supporters, and students. (Among other things, he led a fight to eliminate study of the "heathen classics" at Oberlin.) His behavior became offensive and harsh, and he was considered by most of the staff to be unfairly critical, and arrogant—a rotten example of the holy lifestyle he promoted. In 1850, after an extended and unpleasant ordeal in which Mahan refused to accept a graceful dismissal, and became permanently embittered toward Finney, he resigned and took some sympathetic staff and students to Cleveland to found a new school. Lewis Tappan wrote to him. "... you are so self-conceited—so sensitive to your reputation—so idolatrous of your influence that you have, I faintly believe, done immense injustice to Mr. F[inney] and to yourself."

Mahan spared little in his unkind feelings toward Oberlin and for years agitated unrest and fought them for back pay. He declared that his new school, originally to be called the National University, later named Cleveland University, would make Cleveland "the Athens of the ... West." A less-than-sympathetic critic stated that it would more aptly be named, "The Universal University for all creation wherein the Idea of the Infinite will be fully Elucidated and all who do not admit the fact will be sent to their proper place by its Pres., the greatest man who ever has or ever shall live...."

However, when news of Mahan's attitude at Oberlin had circulated, and he approached some Oberlin supporters for money, support for his new school dried up and the enterprise died. After Mahan left Oberlin, the school distanced itself from its past radicalism and was apologetic about its previous perfectionist extremism. Oberlin elected as its next president the famous and more controlled Charles Finney.

Mahan, who championed perfectionism to the end (and acted somewhat less than an achiever of it), later served two other colleges as president, and was a pastor for some time in Jackson, Michigan. He was all along regarded for his skills as a speaker and writer. He spent his last years in England, where he died in 1889.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 20: Charles Finney: American Revivalism

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## A Glossary of Terms

**ARMINIANISM** Within the European reformed Protestant tradition, two major viewpoints developed: Arminianism and Calvinism. Arminianism is the viewpoint, named after the Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius (1560–1609), that emphasizes that Jesus died for all mankind (a *universal* atonement), and that salvation depends upon a human decision to accept or reject God’s gift. In this system, since salvation depends on human choice, so does eternal security; that is, a person can lose his or her salvation. The theology of John Wesley and his followers is considered Arminian. Finney, though from the Calvinistic tradition, held ideas that are considered Arminian; therefore he was criticized by many of his fellow Presbyterians and Congregationalists, many of whom were staunch Calvinists. Many see Finney as an example of the trend in New England Calvinism toward Arminian ideas, and view his revival techniques (called the “new measures”) as evangelistic practices that emphasized human decision in salvation—an Arminian emphasis which is the norm in modern evangelistic revivals. Finney called for decisions on the spot and taught that salvation could be lost. Protestant doctrinal positions all fall within these two limits, or are attempts at finding a compromise between them. Both views claim to most accurately represent biblical teaching. Though many accusations have been made against Arminian theology by Calvinists, implying that it allows humans to overrule God, it can be seen as an attempt to protect the value of human responsibility.

**CALVINISM** This is the teaching that is based upon the theology of the Protestant reformer John Calvin. In this system, God’s sovereignty is foremost even in personal salvation. Jesus died on the cross for the salvation of only the elect—those whom God had predestined for eternal life (a *definite*, or *particular* atonement). Salvation depends upon predestination, not human decision, though human decision has its necessary place in the process. Since God ordained the salvation of individuals, they cannot fall from salvation. The so-called five points of Calvinism were actually responses drawn up in Holland at the Synod of Dort in 1618–1619 to oppose five points put forth first by Jacob Arminius (see above). Generally, those traditions called reformed, other than Lutherans, have been Calvinistic. The Huguenots from France and the English Puritans (and therefore the early settlers of New England) were Calvinists. Notable Calvinists have included the Baptist John Bunyan, the Anglican George Whitefield, the Congregationalist Jonathan Edwards, and the early 20th-century prime minister of the Netherlands, Abraham Kuyper. Finney was a descendent of the American Calvinist tradition, and was criticized for distorting it. He rejected the notion of personal predestination to salvation, and emphasized the role of the human will. Though Calvinism is often criticized for eliminating the place of human responsibility in salvation, making God out to be a tyrant, Calvinists have generally considered the relation between God’s predestination and human choice to be a mystery, and have not wanted to neglect the role of personal decision.

**NEW MEASURES** Methods used by Finney in his revivals that caused controversy. They included using “anxious benches” at the front of the church for singling out those under special conviction; informal public praying, which was considered disrespectful; protracted meetings, which were regular meetings, maybe for months, and which some felt disturbed the church order and undermined the local pastor; and allowing women to pray in public meetings in mixed company with men. It’s important to keep in mind that these were disturbing in Finney’s day because they were viewed as biblically unwarranted gimmicks and innovations. Certain of these techniques were seen as disruptive to dignified worship, and as emphasizing human choice and emotionalism.

**REVIVALISM** The practice of having planned times set aside in the year for special evangelistic and rededication services. Though the Church has always experienced revivals, many have argued that this

modern approach undermines local pastoral influence and the role of regular evangelism through weekly sermons, and confuses emotional responses with genuine conversion. It is, however, an accepted approach, especially since C. G. Finney.

**PERFECTIONISM** A theological teaching that states that perfect obedience to God is attainable in this life by faith. Since God demands of us to be holy, it is argued, it must be achievable. It does not mean (except in some extreme forms) that we can become sinless. Crucial in this teaching is that sanctification (holiness, obedience) is by faith, not by works. This means that we must overcome sin not by human effort and struggle, but by, in faith, submitting to God and allowing him to deliver us from sin. Finney was a promoter of perfection and was strongly criticized for it. (It is helpful to realize that Finney believed Romans 7:7–25 could not be about a believer, because a real believer, in his view, would not struggle with sin in that way, but would, by faith, be delivered from it. Traditionally, however, Romans 7 has been seen as dealing with the struggles of a believer.) This doctrine has found a place in the so-called “victorious life” teaching, and has been a major part of the Keswick Movement and fundamentalism.

**TOTAL DEPRAVITY** The Calvinistic teaching that mankind is corrupted by the Fall in every area of his being, including the will. Therefore, man is dead in sin and cannot, by his will, choose God.

**GOVERNMENTAL ATONEMENT** A view about the death of Jesus Christ that says that Christ, by his death on the cross, simply fulfilled God the Father’s requirement of punishment for sin, making it possible for people to save *themselves* by believing and becoming holy.

**NATURAL ABILITY** The teaching that humans have a natural ability to obey God. The reason that people reject God is not that they must, but that they want to. Sin is a moral problem. People are, therefore, without any excuse for rejecting God. They can believe, but they won’t. Previously, people were called upon to repent, but, it was believed, only by an act of God would they become converted. However, Finney, though emphasizing natural ability, did not accept the idea that conversion was a miraculous work of the Holy Spirit, and saw it as simply a rational human decision.

**IMPUTED, or ORIGINAL SIN** The teaching that all humans inherit, by descent, the actual original sin of Adam, and the punishment it deserves. Finney rejected this and taught that individual humans are only responsible for their own sinful actions.

**IMPUTED RIGHTEOUSNESS, or HOLINESS** The teaching that the righteousness of Jesus Christ, shown by his total obedience to the Law of God, is transferred (imputed) to the believer upon conversion. Therefore, Jesus’ perfect obedience makes up for the failure of humans to be perfectly obedient. Finney rejected this doctrine and argued that humans themselves attained holiness, or perfect obedience, by faith. For him, a person had to be holy to be saved; holiness was not achieved by obeying the Law, but by faith.

**POSTMILLENNIALISM** The position that the millennium will arrive on earth *before* the return of Christ. This view has been held by many in the Church, and was the dominant view in Finney’s day. This was Finney’s belief and motivation for his social reform ideas, for he felt that Christians were called to bring about the perfection of society.

**BAPTISM OF THE SPIRIT** A teaching, now associated with the Holiness Movement and modern Pentecostalism, that a second experience is to come to an individual after conversion—like Pentecost came to the Church after Calvary. Though later many saw speaking in tongues as proof of such an experience, for Finney and those around him, the baptism of the Spirit was more a second work of grace that elevated one to a higher relationship with God, that transformed one to a higher plane, to holiness of life, and greater effectiveness in God’s service; it was not believed to be attended by miraculous signs.

**THE NEW DIVINITY** The theology that was developed in New England by the followers of Jonathan Edwards, and which was based upon Edward's thought. The leader in this development was the minister Samuel Hopkins, who had been a student of Edwards. This movement came under attack by many because of its innovations and changes, and became associated with Yale College and the very influential Nathaniel Taylor, who made radical adjustments to some of Edward's stronger Calvinistic teachings. In the religious atmosphere of Finney's time, there were the older, and more traditional Calvinists, and there were the usually younger, more "progressive" New Divinity men. Finney's ideas borrowed much from the New Divinity, which some have argued was New England Calvinism being reshaped by the import of Arminian Wesleyan teaching and practices.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 20: Charles Finney: American Revivalism

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## Charles Grandison Finney: Christian History Timeline - Finney Against a Backdrop of 19th Century America & the World

Finney against a backdrop of the 19th Century America & the World

Charles Finney

**1792:** Born: Warren, CT, Aug. 29, 1792

**1808–1812:** Schoolteacher in Henderson, New York

**1812–1814:** Works on his uncle's farm in Warren, Connecticut

**1814–1815:** Schoolteacher in New Jersey

**1818–1821:** Works in the law office of B. Wright in Adams, NY

**1821:** Converted to Christ

**1824:** Ordained

**1824:** Marries Lydia Root

**1824–1825:** Beginning of *revivals* in small New York towns

**1826–1827:** Revivals in NY "Burned-over District"; *New Measures* arouse controversy

**1827:** April: *New Lebanon Conference*

**1828:** Helen Finney born

**1830–1831:** Great Rochester *revival*, national recognition, high point as a revivalist

**1830:** Charles Finney Jr. born

**1832:** Frederic Finney born

**1832–1836** Pastor, Chatham Street Chapel, NYC

**1834:** Julia Finney born

**1836–37:** Becomes pastor of Broadway Tabernacle, and professor of theology at Oberlin College

**1837:** Resigns Broadway Tabernacle pastorate

**1840–1848:** Preaching tours: Boston, New York City, etc; perfectionist message, growing criticism of Oberlin

**1843:** Delia Finney born

**1843–44 Winter:** Finds *second blessing* in Boston

**1846–47:** Publishes vols. 2 and 3 of *Systematic Theology*

**1847:** Lydia Finney dies

**1848:** Marries Elizabeth Atkinson

**1849–1851:** The Finneys travel to England for *revivals*

**1851:** Elected president of Oberlin College

**1851–1857:** Tours Boston, NY City, Hartford, Rochester

**1859–60:** Second trip of three to ENGLAND; work in SCOTLAND

**1860–75:** Teaching and preaching at Oberlin

**1863:** Elizabeth Finney dies

**1865:** Marries Rebecca Allen Rayl

**1866:** Resigns as Oberlin president; continues to teach theology

**16 August 1875:** Dies at Oberlin at 82 years

## **The United States**

**1787:** *Constitutional Convention* in Philadelphia

**1788:** Constitution ratified

**1789:** First Federal Congress

**1790:** Benjamin Franklin dies

**1794:** US Navy established

**1794:** Thomas Paine writes *The Age of Reason*

**1796:** Tennessee becomes a state

**1799:** George Washington dies

**1800:** US capitol moves from Philadelphia to Washington DC

**1801-1805:** *Triopolitan War: War with Tripoli*

**1803:** Louisiana Purchase by Jefferson ends French rule in N America

**1804:** Alexander Hamilton killed by Aaron Burr in a duel

**1805:** US and British relations broken over trade with West Indies

**1807:** US Embargo Act against England and France

**1808:** US prohibition against importation of slaves from Africa

**1811:** Wm. Henry Harrison defeats Chief Tecumsah at Tippecanoe, IN

**1812:** *Louisiana statehood*

**1812-1814:** *War of 1812* with England

**1814:** British burn Washington DC

**1815:** War of 1812 ends with Treaty of Ghent

**1815:** Battle of New Orleans won by Andrew Jackson: "Old Hickory"

**1816:** American Bible Society founded

**1816:** *Indiana statehood*

**1817:** *Mississippi statehood*

**1818:** *Illinois statehood*

**1817–1818:** *Seminole Wars*

**1819:** First steamship crossing of the Atlantic

**1819:** *Alabama statehood*

**1820:** Missouri Compromise:

**1820:** *Maine statehood—free state*

**1821:** *Missouri statehood—slave state*

**1822:** Boston gets gas lights

**1823:** The Monroe Doctrine ends colonial settlement in US

**1825:** Erie Canal opens

**1828:** Baltimore and Ohio Railroad begun

**1828:** Noah *Webster's Dictionary*

**1830:** Joseph Smith founds Mormon Church

**1831:** Virginia slave revolt—55 whites massacred

**1832:** New England Antislavery Society founded

**1833–1837:** Financial panic

**1834:** McCormick Reaper

**1835:** Colt revolver

**1836:** Samuel Morse's telegraph

**1836:** Battle of the Alamo

**1836:** *Arkansas statehood*

**1837:** *Michigan statehood*

**1838:** Underground Railroad starts

**1845:** *Texas and Florida statehood*

**1846–1848:** *Mexican-American War*

**1846:** *Iowa statehood*

**1848:** California gold rush

**1848:** *Wisconsin statehood*

**1850:** The "Great Compromise" over issue of slavery in new states

**1850:** *California statehood*

**1851–1863:** US Capitol built

**1851:** Melville's *Moby Dick*

**1852:** Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

**1853:** New York-Chicago rail link

**1854:** Gadsden Purchase: S. New Mexico and Arizona

**1854:** "War for bleeding Kansas" over state slavery rights

**1856:** John Brown massacres pro-slavery supporters in Kansas

**1858:** *Minnesota statehood*

**1858:** The Lincoln-Douglas debates

**1858:** Nationwide prayer meeting **revivals**

**1859:** *Oregon statehood*

**1861:** *Kansas statehood*

**1861-1865:** *The Civil War*

**1863:** *W. Virginia statehood*

**1863:** *Emancipation Proclamation*

**1864:** *Nevada statehood*

**1865:** Lincoln assassinated

**1866:** Transatlantic telegraph

**1867:** *Nebraska statehood*

### **American Presidency**

**1789–1796:** George Washington

**1796–1800:** John Adams

**1800–1809:** (2 terms) Thomas Jefferson

**1809–1817:** (2 terms) James Madison

**1817–1825:** (2 terms) James Monroe

**1825–1829:** John Quincy Adams

**1829–1837:** (2 terms) Andrew Jackson

**1837–1841:** Martin Van Buren

**1841:** William Henry Harrison *Harrison dies in office*

**1841–1845:** John Tyler

**1845–1849:** James K. Polk

**1849-1853:** Zachary Taylor

**1851–1853:** Millard Fillmore

**1853–1857:** Franklin Pierce

**1857–1861:** James Buchanan

**1861–1865:** Abraham Lincoln

**1865–1869:** Andrew Johnson

**1869-1877:** (2 terms) US Grant

### **World Events**

**1794:** Slavery ended in French colonies

**1796:** Spain declares war on Britain

**1796:** English smallpox vaccination

**1797:** Admiral Nelson defeats Spanish fleet

**1798:** French capture Rome

**1798:** Nelson defeats French fleet

**1799:** Discovery of Rosetta stone

**1800:** Volta invents electric battery

**1800:** Napoleon conquers Italy

**1802:** Peace of Amiens between England and France

**1804:** Napoleon crowned emperor

**1805:** Battle of Trafalgar

**1807:** English abolish slave trade

**1809:** Composer Franz J. Haydn dies

**1810:** Napoleon's zenith of power

**1812:** French invade Russia

**1814:** First Anglican bishop in India

**1815:** Napoleon defeated at Waterloo

**1815:** Brazilian independence

**1816:** Argentinian independence

**1821:** Napoleon dies

**1821:** Champollion deciphers hieroglyphics using the Rosetta stone

**1824:** Bolivar becomes emperor, Peru

**1825:** First English passenger railroad

**1825:** Nicholas I--Russian czar

**1827:** Ludwig Beethoven dies

**1829:** Slavery abolished in Mexico

**1830:** Polish uprising against Russia

**1830:** Revolution in Paris

**1831:** Belgian independence

**1831:** Darwin sails on expedition

**1831:** Faraday demonstrates electromagnetism

**1833:** Slavery abolished in Britain

**1837–1901:** Queen Victoria reigns

**1841:** Hypnosis discovered

**1841–1842:** The Opium War between England and China

**1844:** Wood-pulp paper invented

**1848:** Revolutions in France, Germany, Italy

**1848:** Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*

**1851:** Victoria, Australia, proclaimed a separate colony

**1851:** Cuba declares independence

**1853–1856:** Missionary William Livingston crosses Africa

**1856:** Anglo-Chinese War begins

**1857:** English Navy destroys Chinese fleet

**1858:** Ottawa becomes Canadian capitol

**1860:** Lenoir's internal-combustion engine

**1861:** Dickens' *Great Expectations*

**1862:** Bismarck becomes Prussian prime minister

**1863:** French capture Mexico City

**1867:** Russia sells Alaska to US

**1869:** Opening of Suez Canal

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Sailing for the Kingdom of God

Finney and 19th-Century Trans-atlantic Revivalism

Garth Rosell is professor of church history and director of the Ockenga Institute at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts. Dr Rosell has written numerous articles on Finney, and along with Richard A G Dupais, has prepared a new critical edition, with the complete restored text, of Finney's Memoirs (Academie/Zondervan, 1988, 704pp).

Charles Finney was already well known in England by the time he arrived for his first visit in 1849. News of his remarkable revival activities in America, now spanning some twenty-five years, was carried regularly in religious periodicals throughout the British Isles and was eagerly read by the Christian community there. His *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (the English edition of which was published in 1837) became an immediate best seller—gaining Finney thousands of new friends throughout those countries. In Wales, for example, its impact was so substantial that the great Welsh awakening of the early 1840s came to be known in some circles as “Finney’s revival.”

Close ties, of course, had long existed between Britain and America. Since the early Seventeenth century, when the English colonies were first planted in the New World, many Christians from both sides of the ocean considered themselves to be part of the same family. Literally thousands of letters—many carrying news of revival activity—flowed back and forth across the Atlantic. Individuals too, despite the enormous difficulties which were involved, made the lengthy and hazardous crossing aboard the relatively small ships which gave them passage.

Among these courageous travellers were many of the notable revival leaders of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. George Whitefield, the great Church of England minister, had been one of the first. Under his powerful preaching, the religious revivals which had broken out in the 1720s quickly spread throughout the American colonies—combining ultimately in what historians have come to call The Great Awakening.

In the century and a half between George Whitefield’s visit to America in 1737 and Dwight L. Moody’s visit to England in 1873, scores of preachers sought to carry the fires of revival across the Atlantic. Emerson Andrews, Robert Baird, Lyman Beecher, James Caughey, Calvin Colton, Samuel H. Cox, Asahel Nettleton, Phoebe and Walter Palmer, and William Buell Sprague were among the better-known figures who did so. Their efforts contributed to the peaks of transatlantic revival activity which marked the late 1820s and early 1830s, the late 1830s and early 1840s, and the late 1850s. The story of these remarkable seasons of spiritual refreshment is told by Richard Carwardine in his superb volume *Trans-Atlantic Revivalism: Popular Evangelicalism in Britain and America, 1790–1865*.

Perhaps the best-known figure to travel to England during these years, however, was Charles G. Finney. His two visits to the British Isles—from November 1849 to April 1851 and from December 1858 to August 1860—not only produced thousands of new converts but helped to bring renewed vitality to a number of churches in England and Scotland. Although he preached in small communities such as Houghton, where he was hosted by his generous friend Potto Brown, the bulk of Finney’s ministry was centered in larger cities such as London, Birmingham, Worcester, Edinburgh, Manchester and Liverpool. During his first visit, in fact, over eight months alone were spent preaching in the famous 3,000 seat Whitefield Tabernacle in London.

**New Measures in Britian**

In many respects, Finney's revival labors in Britain paralleled his practice in America. Proven measures such as prayer, protracted services, inquiry meetings, calls to public commitment, encouragement of lay leadership, and the like were used with success on both sides of the Atlantic. While he was at the Whitefield Tabernacle (built for George Whitefield in 1753), for example, Finney preached to crowded congregations not only twice on Sundays but on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday evenings as well. Monday evenings were given to general prayer meetings at the Tabernacle. "I preached a course of sermons designed to convict the people of sin as deeply and as universally as possible," Finney commented in his *Memoirs*. We are fortunate that twenty-two of these sermons are conveniently available to us in a collection which was published in 1851 under the title *Sermons on Important Subjects*.

The response to Finney's preaching was little short of remarkable. On the evening of his fourth Sunday at the Tabernacle, as described in the *Memoirs*, Finney suggested to the pastor, the Rev. Dr. John Campbell, that he would like to hold a special meeting for inquirers following the evening service. Expressing his doubts as to whether any would be interested in attending such a gathering, Dr. Campbell suggested that Finney might use a small Sunday school room seating approximately forty persons. "Have you not a larger room?" Finney asked, "I believe there are hundreds of inquirers in the congregation." Laughing, Campbell responded, "Mr. Finney, remember you are in England, and in London;—and that you are not acquainted with our people. You might get people to attend such a meeting, under such a call as you propose to make, in America; but you will not get people to attend here." Notwithstanding Campbell's comment, however, Finney persisted. Reluctantly, Campbell suggested that he might use the nearby British school room, which seated between fifteen and sixteen hundred. "Yes," responded Finney, "that is the very room." Dr. Campbell, "I know what the state of people is better than you do. The Gospel is as well adapted to the English people as to the American people; and I have no fears at all that the pride of the people will prevent their responding to such a call, any more than that of the people in America."

After preaching a short sermon that evening, Finney called upon "all who were anxious for their souls, and who were then disposed immediately to make their peace with God," to attend the inquiry meeting. After dismissing the congregation, Finney relates in his *Memoirs*, "Dr. Campbell nervously and anxiously looked out of the window" to see which way the congregation would go. To his "great astonishment," he discovered that no less than fifteen or sixteen hundred of them were heading directly for the assigned room. While Dr. Campbell looked on in "amazement," Finney pressed the inquirers to lay down "their weapons of rebellion" and "accept Jesus as their only Redeemer."

### **Difficulties and Disappointments**

Not all of Finney's meetings, of course, were marked by such spectacular success. In several locations, in fact, Finney's efforts were both difficult and disappointing. Not only was Finney confronted by the same kinds of theological questions which were raised regularly against him in America, but he was also thrown into an ecclesiastical situation which was quite new to him. Unlike America, Finney discovered, England had an established Church. Other religious bodies were considered part of the dissenting tradition. Even among the dissenting bodies, moreover, there were deep divisions and antagonisms. Consequently, as Finney learned, the style of interdenominational revivalism with which he had become comfortable in America did not seem to operate as fully in England. As a result, Finney's influence—like that of virtually all of the revival leaders who had preceded him—was largely confined not only to churches within the subculture of dissent but also to particular strands (such as the Methodist and Baptist) within the subculture itself.

Finney's ministry in Scotland, during the fall of 1859, illustrates the problem. By accepting John Kirk's invitation to preach to his large Edinburgh congregation, Finney soon discovered that he had effectively limited his ministry to those dissenting churches which were associated with the Evangelical Union. Founded in 1843 by James Morison, as a kind of offshoot of Presbyterianism, the Evangelical Union was opposed by many of the larger Christian bodies throughout the country on theological as well as

ecclesiastical grounds. As a result, Finney's work in Scotland was confined almost exclusively to one body—and a rather small one at that.

Related to this problem was the difficulty of space. Outside of the large cities, it was almost impossible to find buildings large enough to seat the crowds wanting to hear Finney preach. Potto Brown provided a temporary solution to the problem by securing a thousand-seat tent, which Finney used in 1849 when the Union Chapel in Houghton ran out of space. Several months later, a wealthy gentleman in Worcester offered to have a portable "tabernacle" built for Finney's use—one that could be disassembled and moved by train from place to place. Convinced that the ministers of England would "disapprove of a course so novel," however, Finney rejected the idea. The building of such a structure would have to wait until 1875, when enormous crowds gathered to hear Dwight L. Moody.

### **Preparing the Way**

Despite all of the difficulties, however, the years which Charles and Elizabeth Finney spent in the British Isles produced some important results. Several thousand individuals were converted. Church membership was increased. congregations were revitalized. Anglo-American ties were strengthened. Bridges were built between an older revival tradition and that which was yet to come. While it may be true that, in the long run, Finney's writings have had a more profound impact upon the British churches than did his actual ministry there, it is also possible that Finney's ministry in England and Scotland helped to prepare the way for the coming of the great Keswick Movement of the 1870s and the subsequent work of American evangelists from D. L. Moody to Billy Graham.

"There is always something due to the instruments of eminent usefulness in the cause of God," remarked Dr. John Campbell at a special farewell gathering for the Finneys at the Whitefield Tabernacle on March 31, 1851, shortly before their departure from England to return to America. "To honour the servant is, in effect, to honor the Master. Among such instruments a very high place is due to the Rev. C. G. Finney, who has left behind him, in England, an impression such as was never made by any other American among the British churches."

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 20: Charles Finney: American Revivalism

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## The Blessing of Abraham

Finney's Christian Perfection

TIMOTHY L. SMITH [Historians of American religion have been indebted to Timothy L. Smith since his important book, *Revivalism and Reform in 19th Century America* (Abington). Dr. Smith is professor of History at Johns Hopkins University and Director of Johns Hopkins' Program in American Religious History. His most recent book is *Whitefield & Wesley on the New Birth* (Zondervan, 1986).]

**Finney's Perfectionist teaching not only shook the establishment in his day, but it added fuel to the growing fires of the Holiness Movement.**

Reformed historians in America generally believe that Calvinism stabilizes biblical orthodoxy while Arminianism in all its forms, especially the Wesleyan one, tends toward modernism. This may be partly true for the twentieth century. During the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, the career of Charles G. Finney demonstrates that Puritan theology was the one on the move. Many scholars, including my own research associate Thomas Umbel, are now discovering that New England religious thought was rapidly pulling away from Calvinism during the early national period, when Methodism was spreading through that section.

Others have concluded that revivalists like George Whitefield, who helped set in motion the Boston phase of the awakening that preceded the American Revolution, were "practical Arminians," even though they were or became theoretical Calvinists. While enrolled in an academy at Litchfield, Connecticut, the youthful Finney's attention to the preaching of Peter Starr, Lyman Beecher's predecessor in the pastorate there, did not persuade him to believe in either predestination or imputed righteousness. The Presbyterian committee that examined Finney and licensed him to preach in 1824 was so lenient toward his rejection of major Calvinist points that many of them seem likely to have been Congregationalist migrants from New England. Certainly they shared the growing accommodation of Yankee Puritans to universal redemption, free will, and the conviction that all persons were equal before temporal laws because divine grace had made them equal heirs to eternal hopes.

### Entire Sanctification

Twentieth century historians of Finney, however, still play down his doctrine of Christian perfection, or *entire sanctification*, as he called it. I think this is partly because secular scholars have paid chief attention to his early preaching, few going past his *Lectures on Revival*, and fewer still considering the *Lectures to Professing Christians* that Finney published after two years in the pastorate of Broadway Tabernacle in New York City.

That second volume of his lectures marked a turning point in Finney's attitude toward the Methodist belief that all Christians should seek a "second blessing," called heart purity or perfect love. He spelled out his new view of the sanctification believers needed in lectures seventeen through twenty-four. Most students have not understood this; they have not read his lectures printed fortnightly in the first two years' issues of the *The Oberlin Evangelist*, in December 1839, after Finney had become Professor of Theology at Oberlin College and Seminary. Others have not understood it because they were personally inclined toward Calvinism and were, therefore, fascinated by the Pelagianism—the notion of salvation by good works—that seemed to lie just beneath the surface of Finney's earliest sermons, especially the one entitled *Sinners Bound to Change Their Own Hearts*.

Beginning in 1836, therefore, and with a conviction and clarity that increased until his death 40 years later, Finney's central preoccupation was Christ's promise to sanctify fully those who through regenerating grace had begun to love and obey him. To see this, let's look at Finney's major writings from 1836 on.

## Seeking the Blessing

In 1837, Finney began teaching at Oberlin College for half of each year and pastoring at Broadway Tabernacle in New York City for the other half. Oberlin president Asa Mahan, a graduate of Andover Seminary in Massachusetts and a famous abolitionist evangelist, and Lewis Tappan, a wealthy importer and a member of Finney's New York congregation, had recruited him. Mahan and Finney agreed upon the need of Christians for an experience of grace that would empower them to walk before God in righteousness. Later, they both recounted many times how, during a revival season in 1839, a student rose to ask whether a Christian might "expect to attain sanctification in the present life." President Mahan instantly answered "yes," and in the next few days sought and found what he believed was this blessing.

Finney had set forth his own "yes" to that question during the preceding three years. Late that fall, he began the famous lectures that the preachers of that time read avidly, but that later scholars have ignored. However, he did not receive what he seems to have thought was the experience of inward holiness until the winter of 1842–1843, which he spent in Boston, supplying the pulpit for the socially and spiritually radical congregation gathered at the Marlborough Street Chapel.

The preceding spring, Finney had published, in book form, a summary of the second year of his lectures, those of 1840–1841, under the title, *Views of Sanctification*. If an unidentified lay-woman's report was accurate, the volume provoked a tantalizing response from the famous Unitarian minister of Boston, William Ellery Channing. [Finney relates in his *Memoirs*, pp. 356–357, that this woman claimed to have spoken with Channing who told her of his personal interest in Finney's book and his desire to meet Finney. Unfortunately, the two men never met.]

Finney's first year's lectures, however, were not reported until I edited them in 1980 and titled them *Promise of the Spirit*. They show that Finney's intellectual and spiritual breakthrough revolved around what he, after St. Paul, called *the Blessing of Abraham*. That blessing was to "come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ," when they received by faith "the promise of the Spirit." Six climactic lectures on *the Promises* defined sanctifying faith as "that act of the mind that lays hold upon" these biblical promises and "yields up the whole being" to the "influence and control" of the Holy Spirit.

## Bridge to Holiness

Meanwhile, Oberlin president Asa Mahan was becoming a leader among non-Methodists who had made John Wesley's doctrine of heart purity—or *perfect love*—their own. Mahan's volume, *Scripture Doctrine of Christian Perfection*, appeared at Oberlin in 1839, at the high-water mark of the institution's dedication to such social concerns as the abolition of slavery, women's rights, public education for children of both free blacks and whites, temperance, and the American frontiersman's obsession with land speculation. The book reappeared in Boston a few months later, issued by the Methodist firm that published Timothy Merritt's new monthly *The Guide to Christian Perfection*, later named *The Guide to Christian Holiness*.

In January 1841 George Peck, editor of the *Methodist Quarterly Review*, printed a long essay that pronounced Mahan's volume virtually Wesleyan, and praised especially its emphasis on grace received by faith. Thereafter, during four decades spent among Congregationalists in America and Britain, Mahan made his doctrine and experience his main concern. In 1873 he called and conducted the famous Oxford Convention for the Promotion of Christian Holiness, from which the Keswick Movement emerged. This

annual summer conference, the majority of whose sponsors were Anglicans, spawned a number of satellite conferences, some of which met in cities throughout the year. No less than four monthly magazines, all independently published, were for the next 25 years nerve centers of the movement, helping to spread its influence throughout Britain and to Germany, Scandinavia, Holland, South Africa, Australia, and after 1890, to America.

## **Systematic Theology**

Finney visited England for the first time in 1849, while he and Mahan, despite minor disagreements, were still close associates. In 1851 George Redford, a scholarly Congregationalist pastor in Worcester, England, undertook the preparation of an English edition of Finney's two-volume *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, which had recently been published at Oberlin. At Redford's prompting, Finney made extensive changes in the work's language (to remove "objectionable phraseology") and style, and rewrote several sections. In a new preface, however, the evangelist insisted that the numerous critics of the original edition had not convinced him to alter his views "upon any point of doctrine." Far from being a retreat from the perfectionism Finney had adopted between 1836 and 1839, then, his *Systematic Theology* was an effort to sustain and extend it.

The work began with 22 trenchant lectures arguing that God's moral government consists in persuading human beings through his love, manifested in Christ, to make moral choices in real freedom. Regenerate persons must return to obedience to God's moral law, Finney wrote, inspired by "the indwelling spirit of Christ received by faith to reign in the heart," that is, in the will. In "every dispensation of the divine government," Finney said, such a return was "the unalterable condition of salvation." He called *imputed holiness* an absurdity that the impenitent seize upon to avoid submitting to "the righteousness of God wrought in them." Grace cannot save the soul except "upon condition of entire sanctification." Finney then quoted a litany of scriptural promises from both Old and New Testaments—a list almost identical to the one Wesley had drawn together in his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*.

Further discourses on the atonement, human depravity, moral ability, and six on the experience of regeneration, preceded Finney's climactic 17 lectures on the experience of entire sanctification. An early one of these expounded the scriptural promises of it, developing only slightly Finney's earlier articles in *The Oberlin Evangelist* of 1840, cited above. Another repeated, but did not refer to, John Fletcher's argument in his book *Portrait of St. Paul*, rejecting interpretations of the apostle's words that would suggest he did not profess or enjoy the experience of holiness of heart and life.

The disagreement between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark, recorded in Acts 15:36–41, Finney said, did not remotely imply sin or sinful anger in the behavior of the two men. Romans 7:7–25, he continued, could not refer to Paul's state in grace at the time he wrote the epistle; the apostle's object in that chapter was manifestly to describe not himself, but one who was "living in sin and every day condemned by the law," whereas in both the preceding and the following chapters, Finney argued, Paul depicted a believer over whom sin had no dominion and who in fact had been brought by grace into the experience of entire sanctification.

Three years later in America, in what must have been a triumphant assertion of the evangelistic character of Christian theology, Finney published a volume he called *Guide to the Savior*. It consisted of chapters taken from the section on entire sanctification in the English edition of his *Lectures on Systematic Theology*. Holiness preachers sold it for many years at Methodist and interdenominational camp meetings.

## **Equality, Morality, and Social Hope**

Here then in Finney's life and thought is a demonstration of how and why the Holiness Movement, which before the Civil War observers equated with earnest Methodism, grew so rapidly among American

Protestants—the Methodist Episcopal Church becoming the largest denomination in the country by 1850. The essentially evangelistic assertion that all persons could be saved, and the biblical assurance that a life of personal righteousness flowed from that salvation, were not simply dogmas Finney's generation increasingly accepted. They also underlay the political principles of equality, morality, and social hope that were central to American democracy.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 20: Charles Finney: American Revivalism

## **Finney on Romans 7:14-24**

You see the state of those who are encouraged by the seventh chapter of Romans, supposing that to be a Christian's experience. If they have gone no further than that, they are still under the law. I have been amazed how pertinaciously professors of religion will cling to a legal experience, and justify themselves in it by a reference to this chapter. I am fully convinced that... interpreting [verses 14 to 24] as a Christian experience, has done incalculable evil and has led thousands of souls there to rest and go no further, imagining that they are already as deeply versed in Christian experience as Paul was when he wrote that epistle. And there they have stayed, and hugged their delusion till they have found themselves in the depths of hell.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 20: Charles Finney: American Revivalism

## God's College and Radical Change

Oberlin College, where Finney taught for many years and served for a time as president, was in the 19th century a unique institution. Hated in the South because it symbolized abolition, allowing blacks to learn alongside whites, it was adored by abolitionists, and was a favorite project of the wealthy Tappans, who poured their financial support into it.

When Oberlin College opened its doors, it was not the only school in America to accept black students. However, inter-racial education was bitterly opposed by a great many in America, and not only from the South. Finney remarked about how even in Ohio where Oberlin was located, public support was low, and criticism was strong. Oberlin was considered a radical institution and was a symbol against which much hatred was directed. It was a busy station on the Underground Railroad, giving rest and protection to slaves being smuggled to freedom, and its friends, such as the Tappan brothers, and Theodore Weld, were renowned, or infamous (depending on where one stood) for their aggressive work for abolition. Oberlin provided a haven for the "oppressed race" and its dream was to allow an opportunity for black people to benefit from the blessings of education.

That Oberlin allowed women *to attend the same classes with men*, however, was another great shock, and even many who sympathized with the racial stand shuddered at the prospect of the two sexes mingling in a common classroom. And worse, mixed races *and* mixed sexes suggested the ghastly possibility of "amalgamation," the mixed marriage of the races.

Charles Finney and the other members at Oberlin believed that Christianity had a lot to do with questions of rights for black people and for females. Finney saw slaveholding as a sin—the denial to another human being of their freedom was to him irreconcilable with Christian religion, especially in the day and age in which he lived. He went so far, while pastor at the Chatham Street Chapel in New York, as to deny communion to slaveowners. He was a friend to the cause of abolition for his whole career, though later the Tappans criticized him for not taking a strong enough stand.

They were too caught up to realize that Finney knew he was an evangelist first, no matter how important certain social causes were. He believed a converted society was the basis for social transformation.

At Oberlin there was a women's department, and women also took classes with men. Women were not encouraged into higher education in those days, and especially not into mixed classrooms. But at Oberlin things were different. Finney had been criticized early on in his career for allowing women to participate in religious meetings with men. Now he was playing a part in the higher education of women. He knew that women were the main educators of children, and believed in their receiving excellent educations. He was not a promoter of women in church leadership, though Oberlin did educate women who went on to such work. The importance of the family seems to have been a major concern of Finneys, and the improvement of women, as well as men, would serve to strengthen the family and society. Oberlin was to be God's college to prepare those who would be instruments for converting and transforming society.

A fitting tribute and symbol for Oberlin, Finney, and others who dared to take a stand, is Mary Jane Patterson, who in 1862 became the first American black woman to receive a bachelor's degree in this country, probably in the world. A child of slaves, she went on to a career of teaching in Philadelphia and Washington. She taught until her death in 1894. Though Oberlin actually never had a large

proportion of black students (average around 4%–5%), its contribution to the cause of fighting for the dignity of all people as made in the image of God, female, male, no matter what race, should be admired by all of us.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 20: Charles Finney: American Revivalism

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## The Making of a Revivalist

Finney and the heritage of Edwards

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No other personality in 19th century American Christianity seems to represent so clearly or so dramatically the spirit of raw frontier democracy as Charles Grandison Finney. He appears to us in books and memoirs as the pre-eminent apostle of hell-fire revivalism, fearlessly unscrupulous about his methods of getting conversions, a sort of Andrew Jackson in the pulpit, preaching a gospel written on buckskin.

"They used to complain that I let down the dignity of the pulpit," Finney snorted contemptuously in his *Memoirs*, and compared with the staid dignity of a New England parson, that is precisely and deliberately what he did.

Manners were not the only way in which Finney looked like a bizarre departure from the hide-bound world of Yankee divines in wigs and shoebuckles. Finney liked to admire himself as a self-made theological man, and remarked that at the beginning of his career as a preacher he "had read nothing on the subject except my Bible." And like most American religious innovators, he produced and served up ideas that sent a shiver down the spine of many a frock-coated seminary professor.

Although ordained by the Presbyterians, he ignored the high Calvinism of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and declared that every "sinner, under the influence of the Spirit of God, is just as free as a jury under the arguments of an advocate." He dismissed *original sin* as a doctrine unworthy of God. He threw overboard the conventional understanding of Christ's atonement (in which the life and death of Jesus are *imputed* to the elect) in favor of a *governmental* theory of the atonement, which merely held that Jesus' death made it allowable for God to forgive sinners if they made themselves righteous by faith. Later in his career, when he had become a professor and college president himself, he taught the ability of Christians to achieve moral perfection and freedom from sin in their lives.

Finney, in fact, seems so much a departure from everything which had gone before him in American theology that many of his later biographers were content to take him at his word, and explain him as some sort of new, unprecedented phenomenon on the American scene, in a class with the Erie Canal and the McCormick reaper. He has been called an Arminian, even a Pelagian.

But was he? Although at first glance, nothing would seem to be further from the straight-laced, upright Calvinism of the Puritans than Charles Grandison Finney, the truth is that nothing in Finney's career makes any sense apart from his background in New England Calvinism, and especially in Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758). And the doctrines that made so many of Finney's hearers blanch were actually nothing more than his own extension of a century-long Calvinistic tradition in New England.

## The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards

The first thing we have to understand here is the significance for Finney of Jonathan Edwards and his legacy. Although Edwards is best known as something of a brimstone peddler himself, his overall interests were infinitely broader and philosophical. Taken together, Edward's philosophical and ethical writings

represent the most ambitious attempt ever to justify Calvinism in the midst of the moral and intellectual Enlightenment of the 1700s.

The critics of Christianity in the 18th century complained that the God of the Bible was an arbitrary, lawless autocrat; Edwards replied that God was a perfectly "Moral Governor." And to prove it, Edwards often espoused **governmental** notions of Christ's atonement in order to show that God never violated his own sense of law and order, never forgave sinners unless they actually deserved it, and never transferred (or **imputed**) Jesus' righteousness to anyone else.

This called forth a pretty severe code of ethics, but Edwards was a severe man, and most severe of all with himself. The problem this posed in theological terms was how a Calvinist like Edwards could logically expect sinful men, tainted by **original sin** inherited from Adam, ever to earn God's approval.

To that Edwards made two replies. First, in 1754, he published a lengthy inquiry into the **Freedom of the Will**, and came up with an elaborate philosophical formula which stated that no one actually had the **moral** ability to repent and turn to Christ on their own; however, everyone had a **natural** ability to repent (in other words, they **could** stop sinning, but they **wouldn't** stop sinning; they could make the number of their sins one less if they were indeed so inclined). Sin was strictly a moral quality, and it did nothing to excuse or prevent anyone from exercising his **natural ability** and obligation to turn to God.

Edward's second reply came in 1758, in a book on **Original Sin** published just after his death. There, Edwards suggested that original sin was not some mysterious quality that infected the human system and disabled anyone from repentance. He instead described it as an **identification** with Adam by which God regards all human beings as an organic unit with Adam for the purpose of judgement.

### The Heritage of the New Divinity

Edward's ideas found a steadily growing audience, but the most prominent of his followers were his theological pupils Samuel Hopkins of Massachusetts, and Joseph Bellamy of Connecticut. Hopkins and Bellamy helped to structure Edward's teachings into what became known as the **New Divinity**, and by 1800, the New Divinity had established itself as a force to be reckoned with in New England and elsewhere.

This brand of New England Calvinism still retained all the usual teachings of predestination, election, and the sovereignty of God. But, like Edwards, they preached the full natural obligation of the sinner to repent; they redefined original sin as simply God's **constitution** of the human race, and they demanded a moral rigor from their converts which would make them proper objects for a **governmental** atonement. In other words, they taught that, though God was the sole giver of salvation, all people were under obligation, out of **natural ability**, to live as though they deserved it.

And they demanded that it be done **immediately**; no sinner who had a full natural ability to repent ought to be let off the hook for a moment. Nathanael Emmons, one of the most colorful and terrifying of the New Divinity men, warned that sinners "have no excuse for neglecting to do their first work till a more convenient season. God now commands everyone who is in a state of nature to put away his native depravity and immediately comply with the terms of mercy which he has proposed in the gospel." Under preaching of such severe emotional intensity, it is no wonder that the New Divinity men became the hottest revival preachers of their day.

The New Divinity frightened most conventional Calvinists out of their wits. Many Congregational Calvinists in New England, and many more Presbyterian Calvinists in the Middle Atlantic states, looked upon the New Divinity as an apostasy from orthodox teaching and a threat to their own stability. Princeton Theological Seminary was founded, in large measure, by Presbyterians eager to protect their denomination from influence by the New Divinity.

But a collision between the two Calvinisms was unavoidable, and many of the early skirmishes between them were fought in upstate New York, where New Divinity preachers from New England and Presbyterian parsons from Princeton met and tangled in the flood of western emigration in the early 1800s.

It is just at this point—in upstate New York—that we meet Charles Finney. Understanding the dimensions of Edwards, and especially his New Divinity pupils, throws Finney's famous *Memoirs* into an entirely new light. For one thing, though Charles moved to New York as a child, he was a New Englander, born in Warren, Connecticut in 1792, smack in the middle of the New Divinity's heartland. And in 1812 he returned to Connecticut and spent time there working on his uncle's farm.

In 1823, he was put under the care of a Princeton graduate, George W. Gale, and as soon as the two sat down to talk theology, some very un-Princetonian ideas popped out of Finney's mouth. Gale "was a Princeton student, and of course held... that Jesus suffered for the elect the literal penalty of the Divine law," Finney recalled. "I objected that this was absurd ... on the contrary it seemed to me that Jesus only satisfied public justice, and that was all the government of God could require." That, of course, meant a *governmental* atonement—and endless nights arguing theology with Reverend Gale.

### **A New Measure of Old Ideas**

For the next 20 years, Finney continued to pour out a string of Edwardseanisms. He demanded the immediate use of *natural* ability from sinners. "Instead of telling sinners to use the means of grace and pray for a new heart," Finney wrote in his *Autobiography*, "we called on them to make themselves a new heart and a new spirit, and pressed the duty of instant surrender to God." He scorned any notion of original sin which implied it could excuse a sinner from repenting. "To represent the [human] constitution as sinful is to represent God, who is the author of that constitution, as the author of sin." And he unabashedly upped the ante of Edward's moral rigorism to a demand for moral *perfection*. "Nothing short of present entire conformity to the divine law is accepted of God," Finney wrote.

In none of this was Finney conscious of promoting anything remotely "Arminian" or "Pelagian." To the contrary, he considered himself a disciple of Edwards.

This judgement applies even to Finney's most heavily criticized innovation, the so-called *anxious bench*. Invited to preach in Rochester, New York, Finney "felt the necessity of some measure that would bring sinners to a stand ... to make the impression on them that they were expected at once to give up their hearts"—or, in New Divinity terms, to make them exercise their natural ability to repent. He hit first upon the idea of making those who had been moved by his preaching simply to stand up; but then he decided to have them "come forward to certain seats which I requested to be vacated and offer themselves up to God, while we made them objects of prayer." By these means, the sinner was shown that he had all the ability anyone would ever have to respond to God, and that there was no more to hinder him in coming to Christ than there was coming to the *anxious bench*.

In that sense, Finney's most sensational and enduring contribution to American revivalism was merely his way of proving Edward's axiom about natural ability. No wonder James Waddel Alexander, son of Princeton's first professor of theology and a teacher at Princeton himself, disgustedly concluded that one of Finney's sermons in New York City in 1837 was nothing but "an odious caricature of old Hopkinsianism divinity."

Finney's willingness to push Edward's legacy to its outer boundaries aroused the anger of Princeton Calvinism. Charles Hodge, the most outstanding champion of Calvinist orthodoxy in 19th-century America, made Finney the unceasing object of criticism and attack. John Williamson Nevin, the father of the so-called Mercersburg Theology, slammed Finney as a traitor to confessional Calvinism. Even other followers of the New Divinity, like the revivalist Asahel Nettleton, grew uneasy at Finney's tactics. [*see the Gallery*]

It is noteworthy that the minutes of the celebrated New Lebanon Conference reveal no criticisms of Finney for "apostatizing" from Calvinism; instead, he was rapped ever so gently on the knuckles for poor taste in his preaching. He went back to his evangelizing, little repentant even for that, without any suggestion that he was standing outside the New Divinity way of thinking.

### **The New New England Calvinist**

The hold that Edwards and the New Divinity had on the young revivalist's mind changed and blurred over the years that followed, as Finney met newer challenges and continued to invent newer measures (such as having women pray in public). Nathaniel William Taylor, whose "New Haven Theology" represents a significant attempt to wrench Edwards in some decidedly un-Edwardsean directions, had an unmistakable and not always helpful impact on Finney. But the overall shape of his thought retained its general Edwardsean outlines to the end.

In his most extended piece of theological writing, the *Systematic Theology* he composed at Oberlin College, Finney still clung to many of Edward's definitions of human psychology. Along with Edwards, he resisted the predominant swing toward utilitarian ethics in 19th-century American philosophy, and even attacked slavery in the 1850s on the same grounds that Hopkins and Bellamy had attacked it after the American Revolution.

Even his most provocative statement (in the *Lectures on Revivals*), that revivals of religion are "not a miracle, nor dependent on a miracle," was not really intended to sound *Arminian*. It was simply Finney's way of reinforcing the old New Divinity conviction that "sinners are not bound to repent because they have the Spirit's influence, or because they can obtain it, but because they are moral agents, and have the powers which God requires them to exercise."

### **Finney's Real Roots**

Much as Finney may strike us as the embodiment of the spirit of the frontier of the American Republic, the real roots of his thought reach back into the 18th-century questions that Jonathan Edwards struggled with. To be sure, his preaching and teaching would be influenced by other developments in the 19th-century, but we do Finney a sharp disservice to imagine that he dreamt up a form of Arminianism, which he then persuaded Jacksonian Americans to accept as the proper religion for a democracy. (There is, after all, nothing inherently democratic or Jacksonian about Arminianism—to the contrary, Arminianism has usually been a plaything of aristocrats.)

What Finney taught and preached was not Arminianism at all, but the peculiarly New England brand of Calvinism associated with Edwards and his followers; and if we have mistaken Finney for an Arminian, it is probably because we have assumed that old Princeton represented the only available brand of Calvinism, and that anything else must, by exclusion, be Arminian.

The predominant influence on Charles Grandison Finney would, in the long perspective, always be that of New England Calvinism, the New Divinity, and Jonathan Edwards. And it is through Finney, as much as anyone else, that the Edwardsean legacy has passed into the common currency of American evangelical thought.

## From the Archives: Lectures on Revivals of Religion (1835)

*Soon after its publication in America in 1835, Finney's Lectures on Revivals had sold around 12,000 copies. A London publisher printed 80,000 copies and it was translated into French and Welsh. Right after its publication in Wales, a great revival occurred there. Finney viewed his Lectures as his attack on the views of revival held by traditional Calvinists, and as his declaration of what he believed was the proper meaning of revival. For Finney, conversion is not miraculous—a mysterious work of the Holy Spirit—but is merely a proper use of the power to believe that men and women have by nature been given by God. Belief is merely a rational choice. For many, Finney's making salvation completely dependent upon human choice seemed to suggest that man's will was not entirely corrupted by the Fall; because of this many labeled Finney a "Pelagian" (after the ancient theologian, Pelagius, who taught that the will was not ruined by the Fall). However, the book was extremely popular, and has had a great influence on subsequent ideas and practices concerning evangelism, especially in its appeal to methods, and by its insistence on the necessity of personal evangelism—lay witnessing—by all Christians. For Finney, revival is as much a work of awakening backslidden Christians as one of saving souls.*

### I. A Revival of Religion is not a Miracle.

1. A miracle has been generally defined to be, a Divine interference, setting aside or suspending the laws of nature. It [revival] is not a miracle, in this sense. All the laws of matter and mind remain in force. They are neither suspended nor set aside in a revival.

2. It is not a miracle according to another definition of the term miracle—*something above the powers of nature*. There is nothing in religion beyond the ordinary powers of nature. It consists entirely in the *right exercise* of the powers of nature. It is just that, and nothing else. When mankind become religious, they are not enabled to put forth exertions which they were before unable to put forth. They only exert the powers they had before in a different way, and use them for the glory of God.

3. It is not a miracle, or dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means—as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means. There may be a miracle among its antecedent causes, or they may not. The apostles employed miracles, simply as a means by which they arrested attention to their message, and established its Divine authority. But the miracle was not the revival. The miracle was one thing; the revival that followed it was quite another thing. The revivals in the apostle's days were connected with miracles, but they were not miracles.

I said that a revival is the *right* use of the appropriate means. The means which God has enjoined for the production of a revival, doubtless have a natural tendency to produce a revival. Otherwise God would not have enjoined them. But means will not produce a revival, we all know, without the blessing of God. No more will grain, when it is sowed, produce a crop without the blessing of God. It is impossible for us to say that there is not as direct an influence or agency from God, to produce a crop of grain, as there is to produce a revival. What are the laws of nature, according to which, it is supposed, that grain yields a crop? They are nothing but the constituted manner of the operations of God. In the Bible, the word of God is compared to grain, and preaching is compared to sowing seed, and the results to the springing up and growth of the crop. And the result is just as philosophical in the one case, as in the other, and is naturally connected with the cause.

I wish this idea to be impressed on all your minds, for there has long been an idea prevalent that promoting religion has something very peculiar in it, not to be judged of by the ordinary rules of cause and effect; in short, that there is no connection of the means with the result, and no tendency in the means to produce the effect. No doctrine is more dangerous than this to the prosperity of the church, and nothing more absurd.

Suppose a man were to go and preach this doctrine among farmers, about their sowing grain. Let him tell them that God is a sovereign, and will give them a crop only when it pleases him, and that for them to plow and plant and labor as if they expected to raise a crop is very wrong, and taking the work out of the hands of God, that it interferes with his sovereignty, and is going on in their own strength; and that there is no connection between the means and the result on which they can depend. And now, suppose the farmers should believe such a doctrine. Why, they would starve the world to death.

Just such results will follow from the church's being persuaded that promoting religion is somehow so mysteriously a subject of Divine sovereignty, that there is no natural connection between the means and the end. What are the results? Why, generation after generation have gone down to hell, while the church has been dreaming, and waiting for God to save them without the use of means. It has been the devil's most successful means of destroying souls. The connection is as clear in religion as when a farmer sows his grain.

There is one fact under the government of God, worthy of universal notice, and of everlasting remembrance; which is, that the most useful and important things are most easily and certainly obtained by the use of the appropriate means. This is evidently a principle in the Divine administration. Hence, all the *necessaries* of life are obtained with great *certainty* by the use of the simplest means. The luxuries are more difficult to obtain; the means to procure them are more intricate and less certain in their results; while things absolutely hurtful and poisonous, such as alcohol and the like, are often obtained only by torturing nature, and making use of a kind of infernal sorcery to procure the death-dealing abomination. This principle holds true in moral government, and as spiritual blessings are of surpassing importance, we should expect their attainment to be connected with *great certainty* with the use of the appropriate means; and such we find to be the fact; and I fully believe that could facts be known it would be found that when the appointed means have been *rightly* used, spiritual blessings have been obtained with greater uniformity than temporal ones.

## **II. I Am to Show What a Revival Is.**

It presupposes that the church is sunk down in a backslidden state, and a revival consists in the return of the church from her backslidings, and in the conversion of sinners.

1. A revival always includes the conviction of sin on the part of the church. Backslidden professors cannot wake up and begin right away in the service of God, without deep searchings of the heart. The fountains of sin need to be broken up. In a true revival, Christians are always brought under such convictions; they see their sins in such a light, that often they find it impossible to maintain a hope of their acceptance with God. It does not always go to that extent; but there are always, in a genuine revival, deep convictions of sin, and often cases of abandoning all hope.

2. Backslidden Christians will be brought to repentance. A revival is nothing else than a new beginning of obedience to God. Just as in the case of a converted sinner, the first step is a deep repentance, a breaking down of the heart, a getting down into the dust before God, with deep humility, and forsaking of sin.

3. Christians will have their faith renewed. While they are in their backslidden state they are blind to the state of sinners. Their hearts are as hard as marble. The truths of the Bible only appear like a dream. They admit it to be all true; their conscience and their judgement assent to it; but their faith does not see it standing out in bold relief, in all the burning realities of eternity. But when they enter into a

revival, they no longer see men as trees walking [*Mark 8:22–26*], but they see things in that strong light which will renew the love of God in their hearts. This will lead them to labor zealously to bring others to him. They will feel grieved that others do not love God, when they love him so much. And they will set themselves feelingly to persuade their neighbors to give him their hearts. So their love to men will be renewed. They will be filled with a tender and burning love for souls. They will have a longing desire for the salvation of the whole world. They will be in agony for individuals whom they want to have saved; their friends, relations, enemies. They will not only be urging them to give their hearts to God, but they will carry them to God in the arms of faith, and with strong crying and tears beseech God to have mercy on them, and save their souls from endless burnings.

4. A revival breaks the power of the world and of sin over Christians. It brings them to such vantage ground that they get a fresh impulse towards heaven. They have a new foretaste of heaven, and new desire after union with God; and the charm of the world is broken, and the power of sin overcome.

5. When the churches are thus awakened and reformed, the reformation and salvation of sinners will follow, going through the same stages of conviction, repentance, and reformation. Their hearts will be broken down and changed. Very often the most abandoned profligates are among the subjects. Harlots, and drunkards, and infidels, and all sorts of abandoned characters, are awakened and converted. The worst part of human society are softened, and reclaimed, and made to appear as lovely specimens of the beauty of holiness.

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## From the Archives: The Oberlin Evangelist, 16 December 1840

*Though Finney was in the New England Calvinist tradition, he increasingly took positions considered Arminian. In this excerpt from the Oberlin Evangelist of 1840 Finney argues that Christians can fall from grace (i.e., lose their salvation); this was a direct contradiction of the Calvinist teaching of eternal security. Finney took certain statements of the apostle Paul to teach this, though those statements were traditionally considered statements about falling from obedience to the Lord. His stand on this added to the controversy surrounding his perfectionist ideas. Point 2 below has been a cause of confusion, for Finney seems to say that Christians do not receive new natures upon conversion—something the New Testament seems to clearly teach (e.g., in 2 Cor 5:17). Some have said that Finney seriously deviated from historical Protestant teaching; the statement has even been attributed to an unfortunate mental slip or confused thinking on Finney's part. Whatever the explanation, it is one of Finney's more controversial statements on 1 Corinthians 10:12 "Let him that thinks he stands take heed lest he fall."*

*This confidence, whatever may be its foundation, cannot of itself secure the soul against falling into sin and hell.*

1. Because, if it is founded in anything naturally good in us, it is ill-founded, of course.
2. If it is founded in what grace has already done for us, it is ill-founded; for however much grace may have done, it has not changed our nature. Our constitutional susceptibilities remain the same. It has not so changed our relations and circumstances as to exempt us from temptation; and consequently, nothing that grace has done, or ever will do for us, can render our perseverance in holiness unconditionally certain.
3. If this confidence is based upon our purposed watchfulness, prayerfulness, experience, or faith; these, independent of the sovereign grace of God, afford no foundation for our confidence, as to render it at all certain, or even probable, that we shall not sin again.
4. If this confidence is based upon the promises of God, it will not render our perseverance unconditionally certain; because the promises of God are all conditioned upon our faith, and the right exercise of our own agency ....
5. Any confidence in the promises of God, either for sanctification or final salvation, that does not recognize this universal principle in the government of God, is ill-founded and vain; because God has revealed this as a universal principle of his government; and whether expressed or not, in connection with each promise, it is always implied.

## From the Archives: Lectures on Systematic Theology

*Finney's Lectures on Systematic Theology was issued in two volumes in 1846 and 1847. Though it appears Finney planned a work of a number of volumes, only the two were finished: Volume 2 in 1846, and Volume 3 in 1847 (Volume 1 never appeared). In the Preface of the first volume, Finney states "What I have said on the 'Foundation of Moral Obligation' is the key to the whole subject." Finney's system was based upon the premise of the complete freedom of the human will and the moral responsibility that involves. Dr. Keith Hardman, Finney's recent biographer, points out that for Finney "... a person must be completely holy or totally sinful. There can be no gradation or degrees. Every person is therefore at any given instant perfectly sinful or perfectly holy. As Finney declared" Moral agents are at all times either as holy or as sinful as with their knowledge they can be." Dr. Hardman goes on, "It cannot be overemphasized that Finney makes these states mutually exclusive." He again quotes Finney, "Sin and holiness, then, both consist in supreme, ultimate, and opposite choices, or intentions, and cannot, by any possibility, coexist." These difficult concepts begin to explain Finney's emphasis on the need for perfection. Strong criticism followed the publication of the Systematic Theology, especially from Charles Hodge of Princeton, the renowned Calvinist theologian. Hodge argued that Finney's system was consistent, but that it was a total departure from the traditional Protestant teaching about justification by Faith, and was more a system of morals. Nevertheless, it is recognized that this work is one of a high degree of sophistication, and despite its difficult reasoning and use of terms, it has had a wide influence.*

### Righteousness Is Imparted

I have said that this state of mind implies conversion; for although the awakened sinner may have agonies and convictions, yet he has no clear conceptions of what this union with Christ is, nor does he clearly apprehend the need of a perfectly cleansed heart. He needs some experience of what holiness is, and often he seems also to need to have tasted some of the exceeding bitterness of sin as felt by one who has been near the Lord, before he shall fully apprehend this great spiritual want of being made a partaker indeed of Christ's own perfect righteousness. By righteousness here, we are not to understand something imputed, but something real. It is *imparted*, not *imputed*. Christ draws the souls of His people into such union with Himself, that they become "partakers of His holiness." For this the tried Christian pants. Having had a little taste of it, and then having the bitterness of a relapse into sin, his soul is roused to most intense struggles to realize this blessed union with Christ.

A few words should now be said on what is implied in being *filled* with this righteousness.

Worldly men incessantly hunger and thirst after worldly good. But attainment never outstrips desire. Hence, they are never filled. There is always a conscious want which no acquisition of this sort of good can satisfy. It is most remarkable that worldly men can never be filled with the things they seek. Well do the Scriptures say—This desire enlarges itself as hell, and is never satisfied. They really hunger and thirst the more by how much the more they obtain.

Let it be especially remarked that this being filled with righteousness is not *perfection* in the highest sense of this term. Men often use the term perfection, of that which is absolutely complete—a state which precludes improvement and beyond which there can be no progress. There can be no such perfection among Christians in any world—earth or heaven. It can pertain to no being but God. He, and

He alone, is perfect beyond possibility of progress. All else but God are making progress—the wicked from bad to worse, the righteous from good to better. Instead of making no more progress in heaven, as some suppose, probably the law of progress is in a geometrical ratio; the more they have, the farther they will advance. I have often queried whether this law which seems to prevail here will operate there, viz. [namely], of what I may call impulsive progression. Here we notice that the mind from time to time gives itself to most intense exertion to make attainments in holiness. The attainment having been made, the mind for a season reposes, as if it had taken its meal and awaited the natural return of appetite before it should put forth its next great effort. May it not be that the same law of progress obtains even in heaven?

Here we see the operations of this law in the usual Christian progress. Intense longing and desire beget great struggling and earnest prayer; at length the special blessing sought is found, and the soul seems to be filled to overflowing. It seems to be fully satisfied and to have received all it supposed possible and perhaps even more than was ever asked or thought. The soul cries out before the Lord, I did not know there was such fullness in store for Thy people. How wonderful that God should grant it to such an one as myself! The soul finds itself swallowed up and lost in the great depths and riches of such a blessing. Oh, how the heart pours itself out in the one most expressive petition: "Thy will be done on earth as in heaven!" All prayer is swallowed up in this. And then the *praise*, The FULLNESS OF PRAISE! All struggle and agony are suspended: the soul seems to demand a rest from prayer that it may pour itself out in one mighty tide of praise. Some suppose that persons in this state will never again experience those longings after a new baptism; but in this they mistake. The meal they have had may last them a considerable time—longer, perhaps, than Elijah's meal, on the strength of which he went 40 days; but the time of comparative hunger will come round again, and they will gird themselves for a new struggle.

This is what is sometimes expressed as a baptism, an anointing, an unction, an ensembling of the Spirit, an earnest of the Spirit. All these terms are pertinent and beautiful to denote this special work of the Divine Spirit in the heart. They who experience it, know how well and aptly it is described as eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Lord Jesus, so really does the soul seem to live on Christ. It is also the bread and the water of life which are promised freely to him that is athirst. These terms may seem very mystical and unmeaning to those who have had no experience, but they are plain to him who has known in his own soul what they mean.

## **Sanctification**

This state is to be attained by faith alone. Let it be forever remembered, that "without faith it is impossible to please God," and "whatsoever is not of faith, is sin." Both justification and sanctification are by faith alone. Romans 3:30: "Seeing it is one God who shall justify the circumcision by faith, and the uncircumcision through faith," and Romans 5:1: "Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Also, Romans 9:30, 31: "What shall we say then? that the Gentiles, who followed not after righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith. But Israel, who followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness. Wherefore? Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law."

But let me by no means be understood as teaching sanctification by faith, as distinct from and opposed to sanctification by the Holy Spirit, or Spirit of Christ, which is the same thing, by Christ our sanctification, living and reigning in the heart. Faith is rather the instrument or condition, than the efficient agent that induces a state of present and permanent sanctification. Faith simply receives Christ, as king, to live and reign in the soul. It is Christ, in the exercise of his different offices, and appropriated in his different relations to the wants of the soul, by faith, who secures our sanctification. This he does by Divine discoveries to the soul of his Divine perfections and fulness. The condition of these discoveries is faith and obedience. He says, John 14:21–23: "He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me; and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will

manifest myself to him. Judas saith unto him, (not Iscariot,) Lord, how is it that thou wilt manifest thyself unto us, and not unto the world? Jesus answered and said unto him, If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him." But I must call your attention to Christ as our sanctification more at large hereafter.

### **A Thirst for Righteousness**

This state of mind is not merely conviction; it is not remorse, nor sorrow, nor a struggle to obtain a hope or to get out of danger. All these feelings may have preceded, but the hungering after righteousness is none of these. It is a longing desire to realize the idea of spiritual and moral purity. He has in some measure appreciated the purity of heaven, and the necessity of being himself as pure as the holy there, in order to enjoy their bliss and breathe freely in their atmosphere.

This state of mind is not often developed by writers, and it seems rarely to have engaged the attention of the church as its importance demands.

When the mind gets a right view of the atmosphere of heaven, it sees plainly it cannot breathe there, but must be suffocated, unless its own spirit is congenial to the purity of that world. I remember the case of a man who, after living a Christian life for a season, relapsed into sin. At length God reclaimed His wandering child. When I next saw him, and heard him speak of his state of relapse, he turned away and burst into tears, saying, "I have been living in sin, almost choked to death in its atmosphere; it seemed as if I could not breathe in it. It almost choked the breath of spiritual life from my system."

Have not some of you known what this means? You could not bear the infernal atmosphere of sin—so like the very smoke of the pit! After you get out of it, you say, "Let me never be there again!" Your soul agonizes and struggles to find some refuge against this awful relapsing into sin. O. you long for a pure atmosphere and a pure heart, that will never hold fellowship with darkness or its works again.

The young convert, like the infant child, may not at first distinctly apprehend its own condition and wants; but such experience as I have been detailing develops the idea of perfect purity, and then the soul longs for it with longings irrepressible. I must, says the now enlightened convert, I must be drawn into living union with God as revealed in Jesus Christ. I cannot rest till I find God, and have Him revealed to me as my everlasting refuge and strength.

### **On Being Filled with the Spirit**

If you have much of the Spirit of God, you must make up your mind to have much opposition, both in the Church and in the world. Very likely the leading men of the Church will oppose you. There has always been opposition in the church. So it was when Christ was on earth. If you are far above their state of feeling, Church members will oppose you. If any man will live godly in Christ Jesus, he must expect persecution (2 Tim 3:12). Often the elders and even the minister will oppose you, if you are filled with the Spirit of God.

You must expect very frequent and agonizing conflicts with Satan. Satan has very little trouble with those Christians who are not spiritual, the lukewarm, and slothful, and worldly minded. And such do not understand what is said about spiritual conflicts. Perhaps they will smile when such things are mentioned. And so the devil lets them alone. They do not disturb him, nor he them. But spiritual Christians, he understands very well, are doing him a vast injury, and therefore he sets himself against them. Such Christians often have terrible conflicts. They have temptations that they never thought of before: blasphemous thoughts, atheism, suggestions to do deeds of wickedness, to destroy their own lives, and the like. And if you are spiritual you may expect these terrible conflicts.

You will have greater conflicts with yourself than you ever thought of. You will sometimes find your own

corruptions making strange headway against the Spirit." The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh" (Gal 5:17). Such a Christian is often thrown into consternation at the power of his own corruptions. One of the Commodores in the United States Navy was, as I have been told, a spiritual man; his pastor told me he had known that man to lie on the floor and groan a great part of the night, in conflict with his own corruptions, and to cry to God, in agony, that He would break the power of temptation. It seemed as if the devil was determined to ruin him, and his own heart, for the time being, was almost in league with the devil.

But, you will have peace with God. If the Church, and sinners, and the devil oppose you, there will be One with whom you will have peace. Let you who are called to these trials, and conflicts, and temptations, and who groan and pray, and weep, and break your hearts, remember this consideration: your peace, so far as your feelings towards God are concerned, will flow like a river.

You will likewise have peace of conscience if you are led by the Spirit. You will not be constantly goaded and kept on the rack by a guilty conscience. Your conscience will be calm and quiet, unruffled as the summer's lake.

### **The Religion of Law and Gospel**

The difference does not lie in the fact, that under the law men were justified by works, without faith. The method of salvation in both dispensations has been the same. Sinners were always justified by faith. The Jewish dispensation pointed to a Savior to come, and if men were saved at all, it was by faith in Christ. And sinners now are saved in the same way.

Not in the fact that the gospel has cancelled or set aside the obligations of the moral law. It is true, it has set aside the claims of the ceremonial law, or law of Moses. The ceremonial law was nothing but a set of types pointing to the Savior, and was set aside, of course, when the great antitype appeared. It is now generally admitted by all believers, that the gospel has not set aside the moral law. But that doctrine has been maintained in different ages of the church. Many have maintained that the gospel has set aside the moral law, so that believers are under no obligation to obey it. Such was the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, so severely reprobated by Christ. The Antinomians, in the days of the apostles and since, believed that they were without any obligation to obey the moral law; and held that Christ's righteousness was so imputed to believers, and that he had so fulfilled the law for them, that they were under no obligation to obey it themselves.

There have been many, in modern times, called Perfectionists, who held that they were not under obligation to obey the law. They suppose that Christ has delivered them from the law, and given them the Spirit, and that the leadings of the Spirit are now to be their rule of life, instead of the law of God. Where the Bible says, sin shall not have dominion over believers, these persons understand by it, that the same acts, which would be sin if done by an unconverted person, are not sin in them. The others, they say, are under the law, and so bound by its rules, but they themselves are sanctified, and are in Christ, and if they break the law it is no sin. But all such notions must be radically wrong. God has no right to give up the moral law. He cannot discharge us from the duty of love to God and love to man, for this is right in itself. And unless God will alter the whole moral constitution of the universe, so as to make that right which is wrong, he cannot give up the claims of the moral law. Besides, this doctrine represents Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost as having taken up arms openly against the government of God.

The distinction between law religion and gospel religion does not consist in the fact that the gospel is any less strict in its claims, or allows any greater latitude of self-indulgence than the law. Not only does the gospel not cancel the obligations of the moral law, but it does in no degree abate them. Some people talk about gospel liberty; as though they had got a new rule of life, less strict, and allowing more liberty than the law. I admit that it has provided a new method of justification, but it every where insists that the rule of life is the same with the law. The very first sentence of the gospel, the command to

repent, is in effect a reenactment of the law, for it is a command to return to obedience. The idea that the liberty of the gospel differs from the liberty of the law is erroneous.

Neither does the distinction consist in the fact that those called legalists, or who have a legal religion, do, either by profession or in fact, depend on their own works for justification. It is not often the case, at least in our day, that legalists do profess dependence on their own works, for there are few so ignorant as not to know that this is directly in the face of the gospel. Nor is it necessarily the case that they really depend on their own works. Often they really depend on Christ for salvation. But their dependence is false dependence, such as they have no right to have. They depend on him, but they make it manifest that their faith, or dependence, is not that which actually "worketh by love," or that "purifieth the heart," or that "overcometh the world."

It is a simple matter of fact that the faith which they have does not do what the faith does which men must have in order to be saved, and so it is not the faith of the gospel. They have a kind of faith, but not that kind that makes men real Christians, and brings them under the terms of the gospel.

I am to mention some to the particulars in which these two kinds of religion differ.

There are several different classes of persons who manifestly have a legal religion. There are some who really profess to depend on their own works for salvation. Such were the pharisees. The Hicksite Quakers formerly took this ground, and maintained that men were to be justified by works; setting aside entirely justification by faith. When I speak of works, I mean works of law. And here I want you to distinguish between works of law and works of faith. This is the grand distinction to be kept in view. It is between works produced by legal considerations, and those produced by faith. There are but two principles on which obedience to any government can turn: one is the principle of hope and fear, under the influence of conscience. Conscience points out what is right or wrong, and the individual is induced by hope and fear to obey. The other principle is confidence and love. You see this illustrated in families, where one child always obeys from hope and fear, and another from affectionate confidence. So in the government of God, the only thing that ever produces even the appearance of obedience, is one of these two principles.

There is a multitude of things that address our hopes and fears; such as character, interest, heaven, and hell, etc.. These may produce external obedience, or conformity to the law. But filial confidence leads men to obey God from love. This is the only obedience that is acceptable to God. God not only requires a certain course of conduct, but that this should spring from love. There never was and never can be, in the government of God, any acceptable obedience of faith. Some suppose that faith will be done away in heaven. This is a strange notion. As if there were no occasion to trust God in heaven, or no reason to exercise confidence in him. Here is the great distinction between the religion of law and gospel religion. Legal obedience is influenced by hope and fear, and it is hypercritical, selfish, outward, constrained. Gospel obedience is from love, and is sincere, free, cheerful, true.

There is another distinction here. The religion of law is the religion of purposes, or desires, founded on legal considerations, and not the religion of preference, or love to God. The individual intends to put off his sins; he purposes to obey God and be religious; but his purpose does not grow out of love to God, but out of hope and fear. It is easy to see that a purpose, founded on such considerations, is very different from a purpose growing out of love. But the religion of the gospel is not a purpose merely, but an actual preference consisting in love.

Again, there is a class of legalists that depend on Christ, but their dependence is not gospel dependence, because the works which it produces are works of law; that is, from hope and fear, not from love. Gospel dependence may produce, perhaps, the very same outward works, but the motives are radically different. The legalist drags on a painful, irksome, moral, and perhaps, outwardly, religious life. The gospel believer has an affectionate confidence in God, which leads him to obey out of love. His obedience is prompted by his own feelings. Instead of being dragged to duty, he goes to it cheerfully,

because he loves it ....

There is another point. The legalist expects to be justified by faith, but he has not learned that he must be sanctified by faith. I propose to examine this point another time in full. Modern legalists do not expect to be justified by works; they know these are inadequate—they know that the way to be saved is by Christ. But they have no practical belief that justification by faith is only true, as sanctification by faith is true, and that men are justified by faith only, as they are first sanctified by faith. And therefore, while they expect to be justified by faith, they set themselves to perform works that are works of law.

### **Justification by Faith**

Gospel justification is not the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Under the gospel, sinners are not justified by having the obedience of Jesus Christ set down to their account, as if he had obeyed the law for them, or in their stead. It is not an uncommon mistake to suppose, that when sinners are justified under the gospel, they are accounted righteous ... by having the obedience or righteousness of Christ imputed to them. I have not time to enter into an examination of this subject now. I can only say this idea is absurd and impossible, for this reason, that Jesus Christ was bound to obey the law for himself, and could no more perform works of supererogation [*performance of more than duty requires*], or obey on our account, than anyone else. Was it not his duty to love the Lord his God, with all his heart, and soul, and mind, and strength, and to love his neighbor as himself? Certainly, and if he had not done so, it would have been sin. The only work of supererogation he could perform was to submit to sufferings that were not deserved. This is called his obedience unto death, and this is set down to our account. But if his obedience of the law is set down to our account, why are we called on to repent and obey the law ourselves? Does God exact double service, yes, triple service—first to have the law obeyed by [Christ] for us, then that he must suffer the penalty for us, and then that we must repent and obey ourselves? No such thing is demanded. It is not required that the obedience of another should be imputed to us. All we owe is perpetual obedience to the law of benevolence. And for this there can be no substitute. If we fail of this, we must endure the penalty, or receive a free pardon.

Justification by faith does not mean that faith is accepted as a substitute for personal holiness, or that by an arbitrary constitution faith is imputed to us instead of personal obedience to the law.

Some suppose that justification is this, that the necessity of personal holiness is set aside, and that God arbitrarily dispenses with the requirement of the law, and imputes faith as a substitute. But this is not the way. Faith is accounted for just what it is, and not something else that it is not. Abraham's faith was imputed unto him for righteousness, because it was itself an act of righteousness, and because it worked by love, and thus produced holiness. Justifying faith is holiness, so far as it goes, and produces holiness of heart and life, and is imputed to the believer as holiness, not instead of holiness.

Nor does justification by faith imply that a sinner is justified by faith without good works, or personal holiness.

Some suppose that justification by faith only, is without any regard to good works, or holiness. They have understood this from what Paul has said, where he insists so largely on justification by faith. But it should be borne in mind that Paul was combating the error of the Jews, who expected to be justified by obeying the law. In opposition to this error, Paul insists on it that justification is by faith, without works of law. He does not mean that good works are unnecessary to justification, but that works of law are not good works, because they spring from legal considerations, from hope and fear, and not from faith that works by love. But inasmuch as a false theory had crept into the church on the other side, James took up the matter, and showed them that they had misunderstood Paul. And to show this, he takes the case of Abraham our father justified by works when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar. Seest thou

how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? "And the scripture was fulfilled, which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only." This epistle was supposed to contradict Paul, and some of the ancient churches rejected it on that account. But they overlooked the fact that Paul was speaking of one kind of works, and James of another. Paul was speaking of works performed from legal motives. But he has everywhere insisted on good works springing from faith, or the righteousness of faith, as indispensable to salvation. All that he denies is that works of law, or works grounded on legal motives, have anything to do in the matter of justification. And James teaches the same thing, when he teaches that men are justified, not by works nor by faith alone, but by faith together with the works of faith: or as Paul expresses it, faith that works by love. You will bear in mind that I am speaking of gospel justification, which is very different from legal justification.

Gospel justification, or justification by faith, consists in pardon and acceptance with God.

When we say that men are justified by faith and holiness, we do not mean that they are accepted on the ground of law, but that they are treated as if they were righteous, on account of their faith and works of faith. This is the method which God takes, in justifying a sinner. Not that faith is the foundation of justification. The foundation is in Christ. But this is the manner in which sinners are pardoned, and accepted, and justified, that if they repent, believe and become holy, their past sins shall be forgiven, for the sake of Christ.

Here it will be seen how justification under the gospel differs from justification under the law. Legal justification is a declaration of actual innocence and freedom from blame. Gospel justification is pardon and acceptance, as if he [were] righteous, but on other grounds than his own obedience. When the apostle says, "By deeds of Law shall no flesh be justified," he uses justification as a lawyer, in a strictly legal sense. But when he speaks of justification by faith, he speaks not of legal justification, but of a person's being treated as if he were righteous.

### **Christian Perfectionism**

It is perfect obedience to the law of God. The law of God requires perfect, disinterested, impartial benevolence, love to God and love to our neighbor. It requires that we should be actuated by the same feeling, and to act on the same principles that God acts upon; to leave self out of the question as uniformly as he does, to be as much separated from selfishness as he is, in a word, to be in our measure as perfect as God is. Christianity requires that we should do neither more nor less than the law of God prescribes. Nothing short of this is Christian perfection. This is being moral, just as perfect as God. Every thing is here included, to feel as he feels, to love what he loves, and hate what he hates, and for the same reasons that he loves and hates.

God regards every being in the universe according to its real value. He regards his own interests according to their real value in the scale of being, and no more. He exercises the same love towards himself that he requires of us, and for the same reason. He loves himself supremely, both with the love of benevolence and the love of complacency, because he is supremely excellent. And he requires us to love him just so, to love him as perfectly as he loves himself. He loves himself with the love of benevolence, or regards his own interest, and glory, and happiness, as the supreme good, because it is the supreme good. And he requires us to love him in the same way. He loves himself with infinite complacency, because he knows that he is infinitely worthy and excellent, and he requires the same of us. He also loves his neighbor as himself, not in the same degree that he loves himself, but in the same proportion, according to their real value. From the highest angel to the smallest worm, he regards their happiness with perfect love, according to their worth. It is his duty—to conform to these principles, as much as it is our duty. He can no more depart from this rule than we can, without committing sin; and for him to do it would be much worse than for us to do it, as he is greater than we. God is infinitely obligated to do this. His very nature, not depending on his own volition, but uncreated, binds him to this. And he has created us moral beings in his own image, capable of conforming to the same rule with

himself. This rule requires us to have the same character with him, to love as impartially, with as perfect love—to seek the good of others with as single an eye as he does. This, and nothing less than this, is Christian Perfection.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 20: Charles Finney: American Revivalism

## Charles Grandison Finney: Recommended Resources

Whitney R Cross, *The Burned-over District*, Cornell Univ Press, Ithaca NY, 1950. All about the upstate NY area and its revivals.

Keith J Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney, 1792–1875, Revivalist and Reformer*, Syracuse Univ Press, 1987. The most recent thorough biography of Finney.

George Frederick Wright, *Charles Grandison Finney*, Houghton-Mifflin Co, Boston, 1891. Until Hardman's book, the standard biography.

Lewis A Drummond, *Charles G Finney and the Birth of Modern Evangelism*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1983.

Leonard I Sweet, *The Evangelical Tradition in America*, Mercer Univ Press, Macon GA, 1984. Essays from a Finney conference, including one on Finney by Garth Rosell.

Robert S Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College: from its Foundation Through the Civil War*, 2 vols., Oberlin College, 1943.

David L Weddle, *The Law as Gospel: Revival and Reform in the Theology of Charles G Finney*, Scarecrow Press, Metuchen NJ, 1985.

Frank G Beardsley, *A Mighty Winner of Souls*, American Tract Society, NY, 1937.

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William G McLoughlin Jr, *Modern Revivalism from Charles G Finney to Billy Graham*, Ronald Press Co, NY, 1959.

William McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, Univ of Chicago Press, 1978.

Richard Carwardine, *Trans-Atlantic Revivalism: Popular evangelicalism in Britain and America 1790–1865*, Greenwood, Westport CT, 1978.

### Writings by Finney

Charles G Finney, *Autobiography of Finney, or Memoirs of Rev Charles G Finney*, AS Barnes & Co, New York, 1876.

CG Finney, edited by William G McLoughlin, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, Belknap-Harvard Univ Press, 1960.

CG Finney, critical edition by Garth Rosell and Richard AG Dupuis, *The Memoirs of Charles G Finney*, the complete restored text, annotated, Academie/Zondervan, to be released June 1989.

Finney's 1876 Autobiography had been edited and reworded; this edition is Finney's complete, unedited text.

CG Finney, compiled with an introduction by Timothy L Smith, *Promise of the Spirit*, Bethany House, Minneapolis, 1980. Important writings by Finney on perfectionism first published in the Oberlin Evangelist in 1839 and 1840.

CG Finney, compiled by Donald Dayton, *Reflections on Revival*, Bethany House, 1979. Essays first published in the Oberlin Evangelist in 1845 and 1846.

Bethany House Publishers has issued 11 volumes of Finney's writings, the "Principles of ..." series, edited [and updated] by Louis Parkhurst. The volumes are: Principles of— Devotion, Holiness, Liberty, Love, Prayer, Revival, Sanctification, Union with Christ, Victory; also Answers to Prayer. Bethany House has several other titles by or about Finney also.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 20: Charles Finney: American Revivalism

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## The Best Seats in the House

Finney was a social reformer, and did not shrink from fighting common practices of the church that he believed were hypocritical. Among the crusades he enlisted in was the issue of *pew rents*. In New York City, he became a force in what was called in his day the *free church* movement.

As hard as it is for us to conceive, in Finney's time, and before, in most churches many pews were rented, and a pew tax was charged. This was a way of covering expenses, but it discriminated against the poor. Wealthier families could purchase the privilege to sit where they wanted. Poor people were thereby restricted to back-of-the-church seats, or the balcony. Poor neighborhoods could not support a local church. Our example here is from 1833; the fee is \$26.05, no small amount in those days. Notice the penalty for late payment!

In other words, you could not just walk into a church to hear the good news and sit anywhere; for most seats were reserved. The system had the effect of making those more "significant" folk, who could afford the best seats in the house, the most influential and important in the congregation, and therefore, in the affairs of the church. Thus, poor people had little or no say in church matters or were simply unchurched. So much for the Bible's teaching that God does not respect one person above another.

Finney and others attacked this despicable practice, which was common in the more socially "elevated" Presbyterianism he ministered in. These reformers wanted to see the church a place free from prejudice, where differences of class, wealth, and race did not discredit equality in Christ. The rise of great cities like New York underlined the need for the poor and minorities to be warmly accepted on equal terms in the Church with the socially privileged; but human pride worked against this, and they were relegated to the cheap seats.

Surprisingly, many wealthy leaders, like the Tappan brothers, were instrumental in breaking down this discriminatory practice. The Broadway Tabernacle in New York City, which was built for Finney in 1836, was a free church; no one was allowed privileged seats at any cost. They wanted the message clear that all would be welcomed with open arms to hear of God's judgement and mercy.

"For if there come into your assembly a man with a gold ring, in fine apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment, and ye have respect to him that weareth the fine clothing and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say unto the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool, are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges with evil thoughts?"

**James, chapter 2**

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