

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

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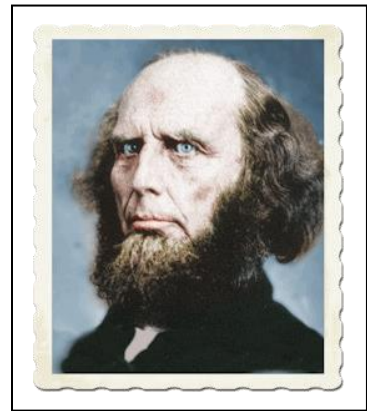
How Charles Finney's Theology Ravaged the Evangelical Movement

1

IT IS IRONIC that Charles Grandison Finney has become a poster boy for so many modern evangelicals. His theology was far from evangelical. As a Christian leader, he was hardly the model of humility or spirituality. Even Finney's autobiography paints a questionable character. In his own retelling of his life's story, Finney comes across as stubborn, arrogant—and sometimes even a bit devious.

Playing with Fraud from the Outset

Finney's ministry was founded on duplicity from the beginning. He obtained his license to preach as a Presbyterian minister by professing adherence to [the Westminster Confession of Faith](#). But he later admitted that he was almost totally ignorant of what the document taught. Here, in Finney's own words, is a description of what occurred when he went before the council whose task it was to determine if he was spiritually qualified and doctrinally sound:



Unexpectedly to myself they asked me if I received the Confession of faith of the Presbyterian church. I had not examined it;—that is, the large work, containing the Catechisms and Presbyterian Confession. This had made no part of my study. I replied that I received it for substance of doctrine, so far as I understood it. But I spoke in a way that plainly implied, I think, that I did not pretend to know much about it. However, I answered honestly, as I understood it at the time [Charles Finney, *The Memoirs of Charles Finney: The Complete Restored Text* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1989), 53-54].

Despite his Clintonesque insistence that he "answered honestly," it is clear that Finney deliberately misled his examiners. (His ability to parse legal terms would have served him well had he been a politician in the late Twentieth Century. But he betrays an appalling brashness for a clergyman in his own era.) Rather than plainly admitting he was utterly ignorant of his denomination's doctrinal standards, he says he "spoke in a way" that *implied* ("I think") that he did not know "much" about those documents. The truth is that he had never even examined the Confession of Faith and knew *nothing at*

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

all about it. He was woefully unprepared for ordination, and he had no business seeking a license to preach under the presbytery's auspices. "I was not aware that the rules of the presbytery required them to ask a candidate if he accepted the Presbyterian Confession of faith," Finney wrote. "Hence I had never read it" [*Memoirs*, 60.] So when he told his ordination council that he received the Confession "for substance of doctrine," *nothing could have been further from the truth!* Nonetheless, the council naively (and all too willingly) took Finney at his word and licensed him to preach.

Finney's credibility is further marred by the fact that when he later read the Westminster Standards and realized he disagreed on almost every crucial point, he did not resign the commission he had received under false pretenses. Instead, he accepted the platform he had duped those men into giving him—then used it for the rest of his life to attack their doctrinal convictions. "As soon as I learned what were the unambiguous teachings of the Confession of faith upon these points, I did not hesitate at all on all suitable occasions to declare my dissent from them," he boasted. "I repudiated and exposed them. Wherever I found that any class of persons were hidden behind these dogmas, I did not hesitate to demolish them, to the best of my ability" [*Memoirs*, 60]. The fact that Finney had obtained his own preaching credentials by professing adherence to the Confession did not faze him at all. "When I came to read the Confession of faith, and saw the passages that were quoted to sustain these peculiar positions, I was absolutely ashamed of it," he frankly stated. "I could not feel any respect for a document that would undertake to impose on mankind such dogmas as those" [*Memoirs*, 61].

Baggage from the Years of Unbelief

Finney's disagreements with his denomination's doctrinal standards clearly were not opinions he formed *after* his examination by the council. By his own admission, he had consciously rejected the basic theological framework of the Presbyterian confession long before he stood before those men. He writes of doctrinal debates he had provoked with his pastor, George W. Gale: "I could not receive his views on the subject of atonement, regeneration, faith, repentance, the slavery of the Will, or any of their kindred doctrines" [*Memoirs*, 46].

Even prior to his conversion, Finney had raised many of the very same issues and objected strongly to Gale's teaching on such points. He wrote,

I now think that I sometimes criticised his sermons unmercifully. I raised such objections against his positions as forced themselves upon my attention. . . . What did he mean by *repentance*? Was it a mere feeling of sorrow for sin? Was it altogether a *passive* state of mind? or did it involve a *voluntary* element? If it was a change of mind, in what respect was it a change of mind? What did he mean by

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

the term *regeneration*? What did such language mean when spoken of as a spiritual change? What did he mean by *faith*? Was it merely an *intellectual* state? Was it merely a conviction, or persuasion, that the things stated in the Gospel were true? [*Memoirs*, 10-12.]

Finney's "conversion" does not seem to have altered his skepticism about his denomination's stance on any of these crucial evangelical doctrines. After his experiential crisis, those were the very issues on which he dissented from the Presbyterian Confession—only now with more vigor than ever. The intense emotional experience Finney regarded as his new birth seems merely to have confirmed his feeling that he was right about Christianity and Scripture—and that most of the leaders of his denomination were either stupid or deluded.

In fact, in his own account of his conversion and theological "training," Finney comes across as utterly unteachable. He meticulously recounts the issues on which he and Pastor Gale disagreed. They are for the most part the same points Finney says he objected to before his conversion. Never once does Finney acknowledge conceding any point to Gale (or to anyone else, for that matter). He obviously believed that his intuitive grasp of spiritual truth, combined with his legal training, automatically made him more doctrinally adept than all the seminary-trained Presbyterian preachers combined. He consistently portrays church leaders who adhered to the Confession of Faith as dupes and dullards. He was convinced they had nothing to teach him, and from the point of his conversion on, he casts himself in the superior role, as a reformer of their outdated and indefensible doctrines. He writes,

The fact is that Brother Gale's education for the ministry had been entirely defective. He had imbibed a set of opinions, both theological and practical, that were a strait jacket to him. He could accomplish very little or nothing if he carried out his own principles. I had the use of his library, and ransacked it thoroughly on all the questions of theology which came up for examination; and the more I examined the books, the more I was dissatisfied. [*Memoirs*, 55.]

Now convinced that his tutor (Pastor Gale) and all the Reformed and Puritan books in Gale's library were utterly worthless, Finney set out to devise a theological system more to his own liking.

At first, being no theologian, my attitude in respect to [Gale's] peculiar views was rather that of negation or denial, than that of opposing any positive view to his. I said, your positions are not proved." I often said, "They are insusceptible of proof." *So I thought then, and so I think now.* ... I had nowhere to go but directly to the Bible, and to the philosophy or workings of my own mind as they were

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

revealed in consciousness. My views took on a *positive* type but slowly. I at first found myself unable to receive his peculiar views; and secondly, gradually formed views of my own in opposition to them, which appeared to me to be unequivocally taught in the Bible. [*Memoirs*, 55, emphasis added.]

In other words, Finney's earliest opinions on "the subject[s] of atonement, regeneration, faith, repentance, the slavery of the will, [and] kindred doctrines" became baggage he dragged along into his own peculiar systematic theology. Having objected to Pastor Gale's doctrinal stance on these issues since before his conversion—and especially now that Finney realized these ideas came from the Confession itself—he grew to despise "Old School" doctrinal standards. He was not about to study books that defended such doctrines.

Without any "positive view" of his own (other than his obvious contempt for Reformed doctrine), he was content for a while to rebuff Gale's tutoring with "negation or denial." But Finney soon realized he needed something more than denial to answer the doctrines of the Presbyterian Confession. So he set to work scouring the pages of Scripture in search of arguments against the doctrines he despised, while devising new doctrines more suited to "the philosophy or workings of [his] own mind." Ideas Finney had toyed with since his pre-conversion days thus became the heart of the theology he espoused until the end of his life. In other words, as a new "convert," Finney simply devised a theology that fit his already-established prejudices.

In his *Memoirs*, his *Lectures on Revival*, and his *Systematic Theology*, what comes through, frankly, is *not* a man with a high regard for Scripture, but a man with an inflated view of himself. Where Scripture does not suit him, Finney resorts to sophistry to explain it away. Whole sections of his *Systematic Theology* contain paragraph after paragraph of philosophizing and moralizing—sometimes without a single reference to Scripture for many pages.¹

¹ See, for example, Lecture 16, "Moral Depravity." Finney rambles on about "physical" vs. "moral" depravity for several pages (nearly 5 in the Bethany edition) before he ever cites a single verse of Scripture. All his polemic about "physical depravity" is wasted anyway, because not one of Finney's theological opponents ever argued that human depravity is a *physical* issue. Again, in the whole of Lecture 10 ("What Constitutes Disobedience to Moral Law?") Finney cites snippets of only two verses of Scripture—a total of eleven words quoted from the Bible in the entire lecture. Many—perhaps most—pages contain no Scripture references at all. By contrast, the typical evangelical systematic theology textbook contains dozens of references per page. The whole point of "systematic theology" is to *start* with Scripture and systematize a point-by-point comprehensive theology. A sound systematic theology is therefore *biblical* to begin with. By contrast, Finney constructed a *philosophical* system based on legal and logical arguments and relying more on his own instinct and speculation than he did on the Bible.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Finney vs. Hyper-Calvinism

Finney is often portrayed as a moderate who fought against hyper-Calvinist influences. It's true that [hyper-Calvinism](#) (a corruption of Calvinist doctrine that nullifies or minimizes human responsibility) was on the rise in New England, and Finney had probably been exposed to it. In fact, it is fair to say that hyper-Calvinism had a major hand in creating the cold spiritual climate in which Finney's errors flourished. The popular reception of Finney's teaching was certainly in large part an overreaction against the errors of hyper-Calvinism.

Finney regarded his own theology as a necessary antidote to hyper-Calvinism. He wrote,

I have everywhere found that the peculiarities of hyper-Calvinism have been the stumbling block both of the church and of the world. A nature sinful in itself, a total inability to accept Christ and to obey God, condemnation to eternal death for the sin of Adam and for a sinful nature, — and all the kindred and resultant dogmas of that peculiar school, have been the stumbling block of believers and the ruin of sinners." [*Memoirs*, 444].

But Finney was too much of a novice to distinguish between biblical, orthodox Calvinism and hyper-Calvinism. He lumped them together and ended up rejecting much sound doctrine along with what he thought was "hyper-Calvinism." Far from being a "moderate," Finney answered hyper-Calvinism by shifting to the opposite extreme—Pelagianism.

Notice that under the guise of condemning "hyper-Calvinism," Finney expressly attacked the idea that people are fallen and depraved because of a sinful nature inherited from Adam. That is the doctrine of original sin, not a hyper-Calvinist dogma, but a standard tenet of Christian doctrine—and recognized as such by all mainstream Christians since the Pelagian heresy of the Fifth Century. Note, too, that Finney rejected the idea that sinners are totally unable to please God (*contra* Rom. 8:7-8). Again, total inability is no hyper-Calvinist notion, but a biblical truth defended by Augustine and the Protestant Reformers alike.

Many of the doctrines Finney rejected were central to the gospel itself. Remember his comments about his own pastor's views? (*"I could not receive his views on the subject of atonement, regeneration, faith, repentance, the slavery of the Will, or any of their kindred doctrines."*) Again, not one of the issues he lists deals with any error that arises out of hyper-Calvinism. Instead, what Finney was rejecting were basic biblical doctrines and long-standing tenets of Christian orthodoxy. He jettisoned several *essential* aspects of Protestant and Reformed doctrine related to "the atonement, regeneration, faith,

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

repentance, the slavery of the will." Many of the doctrines he argued most vehemently against are, in fact, core biblical truths.

In other words, it was not merely hyper-Calvinism—or even simple Calvinism—that Finney rejected, but the biblical essentials of *sola fide* and *sola gratia* (justification by faith alone through grace alone). In effect, Finney also abandoned *sola scriptura* (the authority and sufficiency of Scripture), as shown by his constant appeal to rationalism in support of his new theology. The movement he led therefore represents the wholesale abandonment of historic Protestant principles.

6

Finney vs. Justification by Faith

Specifically, what were Finney's most serious errors? At the top of the list stands his rejection of the doctrine of justification by faith. Finney denied that the righteousness of Christ is the sole ground of our justification, teaching instead that sinners must reform their own hearts in order to be acceptable to God. (His emphasis on self-reformation apart from divine enablement is again a strong echo of Pelagianism.)

Finney spends a considerable amount of time in several of his works arguing against "that theological fiction of imputation" [*Memoirs*, 58]. Those who have any grasp of Protestant doctrine will see immediately that his attack at this point is a blatant rejection of the doctrine of justification by faith alone (*sola fide*). It places him outside the pale of true evangelical Protestantism. The doctrine of imputed righteousness is the very heart of the historic difference between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. The whole doctrine of justification by faith hinges on this concept. But Finney flatly rejected it. He derided the concept of imputation as unjust: "I could not but regard and treat this whole question of imputation as a theological fiction, somewhat related to our legal fiction of John Doe and Richard Roe" [*Memoirs*, 60]. Dismissing the many biblical texts that expressly say righteousness is imputed to believers for their justification, he wrote,

These and similar passages are relied upon, as teaching the doctrine of an imputed righteousness; and such as these: "The Lord our righteousness" (Phil. 3:9). ... "Christ our righteousness" is Christ the author or procurer of our justification. But this does not imply that He procures our justification by imputing His obedience to us... [Charles Finney, *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany), 372-73].

Here Finney offers no cogent explanation of what he imagines Scripture *does* mean when it speaks repeatedly of the imputation of righteousness to believers (e.g., Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:4-6). But throughout all his discussions of imputation Finney repeatedly insists that neither merit nor guilt can righteously be imputed from one person to

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

another. Therefore, Finney argues, the righteousness of Christ can provide no ground for the justification of sinners. Furthermore, he continues:

[Subhead:] *Foundation of the justification of penitent believers in Christ. What is the ultimate ground or reason of their justification?*

1. It is not founded in Christ's literally suffering the exact penalty of the law for them, and in this sense literally purchasing their justification and eternal salvation [*Systematic Theology*, 373].

By employing terms such as "exact" and "literal," Finney caricatured the position he was opposing. (The immediate context of this quotation makes clear that he was arguing against the position outlined in the Westminster Confession, which accords with all major Protestant creeds and theologians on the matter of justification.) But Finney could not obscure his own position: Having decided that the doctrine of imputation was a "theological fiction," he was forced to deny not only the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers, but also the imputation of the sinner's guilt to Christ on the cross. Under Finney's system, Christ could not have actually borne anyone else's sin or suffered sin's full penalty in their place and in their stead (*contra* Isaiah 53:6; 1 Peter 2:24; 1 John 2:2). Finney therefore rejected the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. (We shall deal with this in more detail [below](#)).

Finney's position on these matters also caused him to define justification in subjective, rather than objective, terms. Protestants have historically insisted that justification is a purely forensic declaration, giving the penitent sinner an immediate right standing before God on the merit of Christ's righteousness, not their own (cf. Rom. 10:3; Phil. 3:9). By *forensic*, we mean that it is a legal declaration, like a courtroom verdict or a marriage pronouncement ("I now pronounce you husband and wife"). It changes the person's external status rather than affecting some kind of internal change; it is a wholly *objective* reality.

The *subjective* transformation of the believer that conforms us to Christ's image is *sanctification*—a subsequent and separate reality, distinct from justification. Since the dawn of the Protestant Reformation, the virtually unanimous Protestant consensus has been that justification is in no sense grounded in or conditioned on our sanctification. Catholicism, on the other hand, mingles justification and sanctification, making sanctification a prerequisite to final justification.

Finney sided with Rome on this point. His rejection of the doctrine of imputation left him with no alternative: "Gospel justification is not to be regarded as a forensic or judicial proceeding" [*Systematic Theology*, 360].

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Finney departed further from historic Protestantism by expressly denying that Christ's righteousness is the sole ground of the believer's justification, arguing instead that justification is grounded only in the benevolence of God. (This position is identical to that of Socinians and theological liberals.)

Obfuscating the issue further, Finney listed several "necessary conditions" (insisting these are not, technically, *grounds*) of justification. These "necessary conditions" included Christ's atoning death, the Christian's own faith, repentance, sanctification, and —most ominously— the believer's ongoing obedience to the law. Finney wrote,

There can be no justification in a legal or forensic sense, but upon the ground² of universal, perfect, and uninterrupted obedience to law. This is of course denied by those who hold that gospel justification, or the justification of penitent sinners, is of the nature of a forensic or judicial justification. They hold to the legal maxim, that what a man does by another he does by himself, and therefore the law regards Christ's obedience as ours, on the ground that He obeyed for us [*Systematic Theology*, 362].

Of course, Finney denied that Christ "obeyed for us," claiming that since Christ was Himself obligated to render full obedience to the law, His obedience could justify Himself alone. "It can never be imputed to us," Finney intoned [*Systematic Theology*, 362].

The clear implication of Finney's view is that justification ultimately hinges on the believer's own obedience, and God will not truly and finally pardon the repentant sinner until *after* that penitent one completes a lifetime of faithful obedience. Finney himself said as much, employing the undiluted language of perfectionism. He wrote,

By sanctification being a condition of justification, the following things are intended:

(1.) That present, full, and entire consecration of heart and life to God and His service, is an unalterable condition of present pardon of past sin, and of present acceptance with God. (2.) That the penitent soul remains justified no longer than this full-hearted consecration continues. If he falls from his first love into the spirit of self-pleasing, he falls again into bondage to sin and to the law, is condemned, and must repent and do his "first work," must turn to Christ, and renew his faith and love, as a condition of his salvation. ...

² Notice that Finney confused the very terms he was ostensibly keeping distinct, essentially admitting that he regarded the believer's obedience as a *ground* of justification.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Perseverance in faith and obedience, or in consecration to God, is also an unalterable condition of justification, or of pardon and acceptance with God. By this language in this connection, you will of course understand me to mean, that perseverance in faith and obedience is a condition, not of present, but of final or ultimate acceptance and salvation [*Systematic Theology*, 368-69].

9

Thus, Finney insisted that justification ultimately hinges on the believer's own performance, not Christ's. Here Finney once more turns his guns against the doctrine of imputation:

Those who hold that justification by imputed righteousness is a forensic proceeding, take a view of final or ultimate justification, according with their view of the nature of the transaction. With them, faith receives an imputed righteousness, and a judicial justification. The first act of faith, according to them, introduces the sinner into this relation, and obtains for him a perpetual justification. They maintain that after this first act of faith it is impossible for the sinner to come into condemnation; [*Systematic Theology*, 369].

But isn't that precisely what Scripture teaches? John 3:18: "He that believeth on him is not condemned." John 5:24: "He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life." Galatians 3:13: "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us." It was immediately following his great discourse on justification by faith that the apostle Paul wrote, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). But Charles Finney was unwilling to let Christians rest in the promise of "no condemnation," and he ridiculed the idea of security in Christ as a notion that would lead to licentious living. He continues, again caricaturing the position he opposes:

that, being once justified, he is always thereafter justified, whatever he may do; indeed that he is never justified by grace, as to sins that are past, upon condition that he ceases to sin; that Christ's righteousness is the ground, and that his own present obedience is not even a condition of his justification, so that, in fact, his own present or future obedience to the law of God is, in no case, and in no sense, a *sine qua non* of his justification, present or ultimate.

Now this is certainly another gospel from the one I am inculcating. It is not a difference merely upon some speculative or theoretic point. It is a point fundamental to the gospel and to salvation, if any one can be [*Systematic Theology*, 369.]

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

As the final paragraph of that excerpt makes clear, Finney himself clearly understood that what he proclaimed was a different gospel from that of historic Protestantism. By denying the forensic nature of justification, Finney was left with no option but to regard justification as a subjective thing grounded not in Christ's redemptive work but in the believer's own obedience—and therefore a matter of works, not faith alone.

Finney vs. Original Sin

10

As noted above, Finney rejected the notion that Adam's guilty, sinful nature is inherited by all his offspring. In doing so, he was repudiating the clear teaching of Scripture:

The judgment arose from one transgression [Adam's sin] resulting in condemnation By the transgression of the one [Adam], death reigned. . . . Through one transgression [Adam's sin] there resulted condemnation to all men. . . . Through the one man's disobedience [Adam's sin] the many were made sinners (Rom. 5:16-19).

Predictably, Finney appealed to human wisdom to justify his rejection of clear biblical teaching: "What law have we violated in inheriting this [sin] nature? What law requires us to have a different nature from that which we possess? Does reason affirm that we are deserving of the wrath and curse of God for ever, for inheriting from Adam a sinful nature?" [*Systematic Theology*, 320].

Naturally, Finney's denial of original sin also led him to reject the doctrine of human depravity. He flatly denied that fallen humanity suffers from any "constitutional sinfulness" or sinful corruption of human nature:

"Moral depravity cannot consist in any attribute of nature or constitution, nor in any lapsed or fallen state of nature. . . . Moral depravity, as I use the term, does not consist in, nor imply a sinful nature, in the sense that the human soul is sinful in itself. It is not a constitutional sinfulness" [*Systematic Theology*, 245].

Instead, Finney insisted, "depravity" is a purely voluntary condition, and therefore, sinners have the power simply to will otherwise. In other words, Finney was insisting that all men and women have a natural ability to obey God. Sin results from wrong choices, not from a fallen nature. According to Finney, sinners can freely reform their own hearts, and must do so themselves if they are to be redeemed. Once again, this is sheer Pelagianism:

"[Sinners] are under the necessity of first changing their hearts, or their choice of an end, before they can put forth any volitions to secure any other than a selfish

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

end. And this is plainly the everywhere assumed philosophy of the Bible. That uniformly represents the unregenerate as totally depraved,³ and calls upon them to repent, to make themselves a new heart" [*Systematic Theology*, 249].

Finney was therefore not ashamed to take credit for his own conversion. Having rejected *sola gratia*, Finney had destroyed the gospel's safeguard against boasting (Eph. 2:9). As John MacArthur points out,

In Finney's telling of [his conversion] story, it becomes clear that he believed his own will was the determinative factor that brought about his salvation: "On a Sabbath evening [in the autumn of 1821,] *I made up my mind that I would settle the question of my soul's salvation at-once, that if it were possible I would make my peace with God*" [*Memoirs*, 16, emphasis added]. Evidently under intense conviction, Finney went into the woods, where he made a promise "that *I would give my heart to God [that day] or die in the attempt*" [*Memoirs*, 16]. [John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1993), 236.]

Finney vs. Substitutionary Atonement

What seemed to chafe Finney most about evangelical Christianity was the belief that Christ's atonement is a penal satisfaction offered to God. Finney wrote, "I had read nothing on the subject [of the atonement] except my Bible, & what I had there found on the subject I had interpreted as I would have understood the same or like passages in a law book" [*Memoirs*, 42].

Thus applying nineteenth-century American legal standards to the biblical doctrine of atonement, he concluded that it would be legally unjust to impute the sinner's guilt to Christ or to impute Christ's righteousness to the sinner. As noted above, Finney labeled imputation a "theological fiction" [*Memoirs*, 58-61]. In essence, this was a denial of the core of evangelical theology, repudiating the heart of Paul's argument about justification by faith in Romans 3-5 (see especially Rom. 4:5)—in effect nullifying the whole gospel!

Further, by ruling out the imputation of guilt and righteousness, Finney was forced to argue that Christ's death should not be regarded as an actual atonement for others' sins. Finney replaced the doctrine of substitutionary atonement with a version of Grotius's "governmental theory" (the same view being revived by those today who tout "[moral government theology](#)").

³ Although Finney employs the expression *totally depraved*, he makes clear that he speaks of a purely voluntary condition, not a constitutional depravity.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The Grotian view of the atonement is laden with strong Pelagian tendencies. By cutting the sinner off from the imputation of Christ's righteousness, this view automatically requires sinners to attain a righteousness of their own (*contra* Rom. 10:3). When he embraced such a view of the atonement, Finney had no choice but to adopt a theology that magnifies human ability and minimizes God's role in changing human hearts. He wrote, for example,

There is nothing in religion beyond the ordinary powers of nature. A revival is not a miracle, nor 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. ... A revival is as naturally a result of the use of means as a crop is of the use of its appropriate means" [Charles Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, n.d.), 4-5].

Thus, Finney constantly downplayed God's work in our salvation, understated the hopelessness of the sinner's condition, and overestimated the power of sinners to change their own hearts. When those errors are traced to their source, what we find is a deficient view of the atonement. Indeed, Finney's denial of vicarious atonement underlies and explains virtually all his theological aberrations.

The Fallout from Finney's Doctrines

Predictably, most of Finney's spiritual heirs lapsed into apostasy, Socinianism, mere moralism, cultlike perfectionism, and other related errors. In short, Finney's chief legacy was confusion and doctrinal compromise. Evangelical Christianity virtually disappeared from western New York in Finney's own lifetime. Despite Finney's accounts of glorious "revivals," most of the vast region of New England where he held his revival campaigns fell into a permanent spiritual coldness during Finney's lifetime and more than a hundred years later still has not emerged from that malaise. This is directly owing to the influence of Finney and others who were simultaneously promoting similar ideas.

The Western half of New York became known as "the burnt-over district," because of the negative effects of the revivalist movement that culminated in Finney's work there. These facts are often obscured in the popular lore about Finney. But even Finney himself spoke of "a burnt district" [*Memoirs*, 78], and he lamented the absence of any lasting fruit from his evangelistic efforts. He wrote,

I was often instrumental in bringing Christians under great conviction, and into a state of temporary repentance and faith. ... [But] falling short of urging them up to a point, where they would become so acquainted with Christ as to abide in Him,

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

they would of course soon relapse into their former state [cited in B. B. Warfield, *Studies in Perfectionism*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford, 1932), 2:24].

One of Finney's contemporaries registered a similar assessment, but more bluntly:

During ten years, hundreds, and perhaps thousands, were annually reported to be converted on all hands; but now it is admitted, that real converts are comparatively few. It is declared, even by [Finney] himself, that "the great body of them are a disgrace to religion" [cited in Warfield, 2:23].

B. B. Warfield cited the testimony of Asa Mahan, one of Finney's close associates,

... who tells us—to put it briefly—that everyone who was concerned in these revivals suffered a sad subsequent lapse: the people were left like a dead coal which could not be reignited; the pastors were shorn of all their spiritual power; and the evangelists—"among them all," he says, "and I was personally acquainted with nearly every one of them—I cannot recall a single man, brother Finney and father Nash excepted, who did not after a few years lose his unction, and become equally disqualified for the office of evangelist and that of pastor."

Thus the great "Western Revivals" ran out into disaster. ... Over and over again, when he proposed to revisit one of the churches, delegations were sent him or other means used, to prevent what was thought of as an affliction. ... Even after a generation had passed by, these burnt children had no liking for the fire [Warfield, 2:26-28].

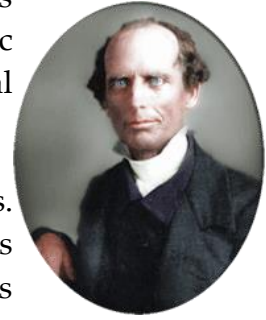
Finney grew discouraged with the revival campaigns and tried his hand at pastoring in New York City before accepting the presidency of Oberlin College. During those post-revivalist years, [he turned his attention to devising a doctrine of Christian perfectionism](#). Perfectionist ideas, in vogue at the time, were a whole new playground for serious heresy on the fringes of evangelicalism—and Finney became one of the best-known advocates of perfectionism. The evil legacy of the perfectionism touted by Finney and friends in the mid-nineteenth century has been thoroughly critiqued by B. B. Warfield in his important work *Studies in Perfectionism*. Perfectionism was the logical consequence of Finney's Pelagianism, and its predictable result was spiritual disaster.

A Fire Not To Be Played With

Charles Grandison Finney was a heretic. That language is not too strong. Though he excelled at cloaking his opinions in ambiguous language and biblical-sounding

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

expressions, his views were almost pure Pelagianism. The arguments he employed to sustain those views were nearly always rationalistic and philosophical, not biblical. To canonize this man as an evangelical hero is to ignore the facts of what he stood for.



Don't be duped by sanitized 20th-century editions of Finney's works. Read the "Complete and Newly Expanded" 1878 edition of Finney's *Systematic Theology*, recently published by Bethany house Publishers (the unabridged [1878 version](#) with a couple of Finney's later lectures added). This volume shows the real character of Finney's doctrine. ([The unabridged 1851 version](#) is now online, and it also exposes Finney's errors in language not toned down by later redactors.) By no stretch of the imagination does Finney deserve to be regarded as an evangelical. By corrupting the doctrine of justification by faith; by denying the doctrines of original sin and total depravity; by minimizing the sovereignty of God while enthroning the power of the human will; and above all, by undermining the doctrine of substitutionary atonement, Finney filled the bloodstream of American evangelicalism with poisons that have kept the movement maimed even to this day.

That's why you'll find Finney listed in the "[Really Bad Theology](#)" category of [my bookmarks](#), and in the "[Unorthodox](#)" wing of [The Hall of Church History](#).

Other Resources

- "[Assessing the Influence of Religious Ideas: Charles Finney's Perfectionism](#)," by Leo P. Hirrel.
- "[C.F.W. Walther Versus Charles Grandison Finney](#)," by Dr. Tom Baker.
- "[Charles Finney and the Disappearance of Revival](#)" by Clive Taylor.
- "[Charles Finney vs. The Westminster Confession](#)," by Michael Horton.
- "[Charles Finney's Doctrine of Justification](#)," by David H. Linden
- "[Finney: The Aftermath](#)," by Monte E. Wilson.
- "[The Legacy of Charles Finney](#)," by Michael Horton.
- [On Revivals of Religion: A Review of Charles G. Finney, by Albert Dod](#). (Be sure to see also [Part 2](#) of this fine article, a critique of Finney by one of his contemporaries.)

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<http://www.romans45.org/articles/finney.htm>