

Reformation
& Revival



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Whatever our experience or preference or our doctrinal emphasis, if we dig over the ground long enough we shall find a revival somewhere to support our cause.

Brian Edwards

Hence it is the solemn duty of each objector that he examine his own heart, and the grounds of his indifference or opposition to revivals. If they are the genuine work of God; if they accord with the statements of the Bible; if they are such results as he has a right to expect under the preaching of the gospel, he is bound, by all the love which he bears to his Saviour, and to the souls of men, to desire and pray for their increase and extension.

Henry C. Fish

There is in the minds of most men a tendency to extremes; and that tendency is never so likely to discover itself as in a season of general excitement. When men are greatly excited on any subject, we know that they are in far more danger of forming erroneous judgments, and adopting improper courses, than when they are in circumstances to yield themselves to sober reflection.

William B. Sprague

Charles G. Finney and the Second Great Awakening

Bob Pyke

Each week during the winter of 1834-35 a tall gaunt figure of stern countenance mounted the pulpit of Chatham Street Chapel, New York, to deliver a lecture on "Revivals of Religion." This young Presbyterian minister, whose steely blue eyes "swept his audience like searchlights," was Charles Grandison Finney. *The New York Evangelist* printed his lectures as they were delivered. Shortly after the series concluded they were published in April 1835 in book form. . . .

The publication of his *Lectures on Revival of Religion* swept Finney into international prominence and extended his influence and teaching far beyond the bounds of the English-speaking world. . . . His *Lectures* in whole and in part have been translated into many languages and published in countless editions, and have become the *raison d'être* of all new methods of evangelism ever since. Most of what has been written on the subject of revival during the last hundred years clearly reflects Finney's thought. . . . Missionary work has been influenced by his ideas and outstanding missionaries . . . have been captivated by his ideas. Evangelists from Moody to Graham are his offspring, and books such as R. A. Torrey's *How to Work for Christ* are, in the main, a rehash and development of Finney's thought.¹

Though he lived just in the last century, was eminently famous, and left voluminous writings, the historical Finney can be difficult to recover. This circumstance probably has several causes. One is the triumph of Arminian theology in American religion. Finney is the key figure in the great theological shift which took place in America in the nineteenth century. By the end of the century, American evangelicalism bore little resemblance to that of 1800. The theology of conversion was no longer theocentric, the focus

in evangelism now being on man and his responsibility, not on God, His holiness, and His saving mercy. Arminianism's man-centered theology had obscured much of the church's heritage. Former views of what constituted revival had been forgotten for decades, the new view being that revival was something initiated by man doing his duty. In this new theological climate, a climate which has largely prevailed in American evangelicalism to this day, the picture of Finney as a man embroiled in a lifelong controversy, trying to justify his own radical measures and at the same time to stamp out a theological tradition which he hated, has been obscured. The new views have prevailed, and Finney has emerged a great evangelist and revivalist folk hero.

A second reason for the difficulty of recovering the historical Finney is the nature of his writings. Finney is best known not by the results of his labors—which are of a questionable character—but by his own writings, which have wide circulation today. The three major works which he left as his theological legacy paint a decidedly sanguine portrait of his life as an evangelist, yet it is these writings by which his effectiveness as an evangelist has come to be known. The triad includes *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (1835), chiefly aimed at defending his methods of evangelism; his *Systematic Theology* (first published in 1846), which set forth his doctrines;² and his autobiography (1876), which presents the results of his evangelism.³

To be sure, there is much to be admired about Finney. His great boldness for the cause of Christ should inspire any Christian heart. His sincerity and zeal have never been questioned. The Christian perfectionism which he championed has chiefly been called to account on theological grounds; that it has not been held up to more probing scrutiny on the basis of Finney's own life and deficiencies is testament to the high moral character of his life.

When I first read his autobiography, I was deeply

impressed. Finney seems to jump from the pages as a full-blown apostle Paul, equipped and gifted to lead a great revival from the moment of his conversion. Like the apostle Paul, he speaks of having his doctrine and gospel from God, and not from men, implicitly claiming divine authority for his methodology. As Finney records it, conditions in his hometown and surrounding area were spiritually apathetic, but at the moment of his conversion, all seems to spring to life. Wherever he turns the Spirit of God marvelously blesses his preaching, and revival breaks out on all sides. From the day of his conversion it is Finney who is leading George Gale, his somewhat hapless Presbyterian minister, in the effective work of gospel service.

Yet the self-serving nature of his *Memoirs* becomes apparent when one begins to study the historical context in which they were written. Finney's desire in writing was to secure greater approval for his evangelistic methods, and consequently his life's work, by writing a book vindicating his use of those methods. It's not an autobiography at all (which Finney states at the outset), but a carefully constructed defense of his career. It starts with his conversion at age twenty-nine, and the entire book focuses on evangelistic activity. It is nearly devoid of information from his personal life, his years laboring as Oberlin College president, etc. Reading it, one would think that the whole of Finney's life was one glorious involvement in ongoing, supernatural, victorious revivals. The real picture is far different.

Early Years

Charles Grandison Finney was born in northwestern Connecticut in 1792, the seventh of nine children. Both father and mother were descended from old line Puritan New England families. As a teenager, his father had been a soldier in the Revolutionary War. When Charles was two, his family moved to Oneida County in Central New York, still

virtually a frontier wilderness. Here Finney grew up on the family farm. Both of Finney's parents were apathetic to spiritual concerns. Finney describes his youth as one with no exposure to godly influences.

Charles was talented, gifted, and headstrong. He was musical and loved to sing. His older brother, Zenas, described him as wild, "not worth much for work," always conjuring up mischief, "always full of his tunes." He would leave his brothers working in the field, perch on a nearby fencepost, and "cut up all sorts of antics."⁴ Finney received a rudimentary education in the common schools of the area. He was a quick learner, with a thirst for knowledge. Fond of argument, he became a champion debater in school. When he was sixteen, the family moved ninety miles northwest to Henderson, a small village on the eastern shore of Lake Ontario. Here Charles lived from 1808-12. Though modestly educated, Finney had enough education to begin teaching common school in this frontier village.

In 1812, desiring more education, Charles moved back to Connecticut to live with an uncle. He attended Warren Academy. Endowed with ample self-confidence and a richly musical disposition, he supported himself by working on his uncle's farm in the summer and by teaching singing lessons in the winter, where he was successful and popular. Two years later Finney began teaching school in New Jersey. He was on the verge of accepting an offer to both teach and study in the South when his mother's serious health problems, and her urgent requests for him to return home, changed his plans. He returned to Henderson in 1816. Inspired by the up-and-coming young lawyers he had seen in New York City, and no doubt encouraged by his native talents, Finney decided to leave teaching to become a lawyer. He entered the office of Benjamin Wright in nearby Adams in 1818. For the next three years he studied law under Wright. Before long Finney found himself Wright's junior

partner with a small practice of his own. He enjoyed law and appeared to have a promising legal career ahead of him.

Conversion

To this point in life Finney had exhibited little interest in religion. The religion he had seen left him thoroughly unimpressed. He writes of illiterate country preachers who caused mirth in their hearers and of spiritually impotent men straitjacketed by Calvinistic orthodoxy. His study of law, however, began to arouse in Finney an interest in biblical law. He soon found himself reading and studying the Bible more and more. At this point the new Presbyterian minister in town began to reach out to him.

George Gale arrived in Adams in 1819. He noticed in the young lawyer a man of great promise and marked leadership ability, and he cultivated Finney's friendship. Knowing of his musical talents, Gale made the unconverted Finney head of the choir. This put Finney under gospel preaching for the first time in his life. Finney was a leader of the young people in the church and a hardened skeptic. Parishioners saw his vocal unbelief as standing in the way of the conversion of the other young people. The church began to make him an object of prayer. Gale began dropping by Finney's law office, ostensibly to ask how he liked the sermons. Finney found himself increasingly contemplating the state of his soul. Meanwhile an awakening of spiritual interest began in Adams. In Gale's first year there, two years before Finney's conversion, a revival took place in which sixty-five converts were added to the church.⁵

Gale's success was part of a larger phenomenon. The Second Great Awakening had brought several tongues of revival fire flickering over New York at different times as far back as 1797. From 1815 on, Jefferson County saw repeated visitations of the Holy Spirit. Sackett's Harbor, ten miles north of Henderson, saw seventy converts added to their

church in 1820. In 1821 a tremendous move of the Holy Spirit stirred the entire county; from eight hundred to a thousand converts were reported from the region. Finney's small hometown of Henderson alone had from seventy to eighty conversions.⁶ Into this environment of an already existing, powerful revival, Charles Finney was converted in October 1821. Yet the picture he leaves us in his *Memoirs* obscures these conditions. One gets the impression that God spoke to Finney in an isolated fashion, despite the spiritual apathy and theological impotence of his pastor. There is not a word of the revival going on all around him. Nor does he mention the conversion of his younger brother some years before.

Finney's own conversion was powerful and dramatic. He speaks of the Holy Spirit going through him, body and soul, like a wave of electricity, seeming to come "in waves and waves of liquid love."⁷ The next day a deacon from his church came into Finney's office, reminding him that he was due to help plead his cause in a lawsuit. Finney's famous reply, "I have a retainer from the Lord Jesus Christ to plead His cause, and I cannot plead yours," seemed to launch his evangelistic career. The convicted deacon went out and settled his case without recourse to law; Finney went out into the streets to converse with people about their souls.

Finney began to spend his days in evangelistic activity. He apparently was very successful from the start. However, it is difficult to reconstruct his early history as a Christian. His *Memoirs* give a disconnected picture, with dates either lacking or erroneous, and the events of the two years that passed before his ordination in December 1823 are unclear.⁸ What is clear is that he gave himself to active Christian work from the outset. Before long he had the joy of leading his parents to Christ. In June 1823, he was taken under care by the presbytery of St. Lawrence. He began to pursue studies under Gale. From the start Finney reacted violently against

the Calvinistic teaching of Gale, only slowly constructing in its place a positive construction of his own. As one author has pointed out, "he used Gale merely as an anvil on which to beat his own views into shape."⁹

One incident from these days is revealing of the style that characterized his ministry. A few months after his conversion, zeal began to fall off in the church. Finney, who spent many early mornings praying in the meetinghouse, "finally succeeded in interesting a considerable number of brethren to meet me there in the morning for a prayer meeting." One of them was the Reverend Gale. Before long, zeal for the prayer meeting abated also. Finney began to go around to awaken those whom he felt would come to the prayer meeting. Even these, Finney found, "attended with greater and greater reluctance, which fact greatly tried me."¹⁰ The rough, compel-them-to-come-in, results-oriented style which marked Finney's ministry is evident from the outset. As was so characteristic of his career, after initial enthusiasm and superficial success (abetted, it would seem, by human effort and arm-twisting), results invariably fell off.

Six months after beginning his study under Gale, Finney was licensed to preach as a Presbyterian minister. He passed his ordination hearing before a board which wanted to avoid controversy with him. This was probably due to his zeal, boldness, and apparent success in propagating the Gospel. It also reveals that the Calvinistic orthodoxy of the East was probably already considerably weakened here in the West by its clash with the Arminianism of New York's frontier. The presbytery purposely avoided asking questions which would have created controversy. Finney himself was less than forthright. He professed ignorance of the *Westminster Confession*, saying that he agreed with it "so far as I understood it." Later in his *Memoirs* he says that he thinks he had never read it through.¹¹ Finney, who rejected their theology out of hand, would spend the next thirteen

years in the ministry as a Presbyterian minister, until he was publicly asked to withdraw membership after publication of *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* in 1835 gave his Pelagian views worldwide circulation.

After his ordination, Finney began his labors in northern Jefferson County as a missionary. In the midst of the powerful work of the Holy Spirit already underway in the region, Finney's labors were marked with unusual success. During this period the thirty-two-year-old Finney married Lydia Andrews. She was twenty at the time and had met Charles two years before. When she met him, Lydia had already been praying for Finney's conversion. A day or two after their marriage Finney returned from his wife's hometown near Utica to Evans Mills, where he had been laboring, to get conveyances with which to bring back her possessions. He told her he would return in a week. In Evans Mills such a powerful response to his preaching took hold that Finney day by day prolonged his visit, eventually sending Lydia word that he would have to spend the winter there! Six months later he returned for his wife.

The Western Revivals of 1825-32

In 1825, Gale, who had relocated to Western New York, persuaded Finney to come labor with him in that area. Gale, who himself had a long and distinguished pastoral career, was beginning to be won over, under Finney's influence, to a more Arminian theology.¹² Finney turned aside to labor with Gale for several weeks, and a great fervor of excitement took hold. Thus began the famous Western Revivals, the phase of Finney's career which launched him into national prominence. Over the next seven years, tens of thousands upon tens of thousands were converted as red-hot flames of religious fervor repeatedly swept Central and Western New York under the powerful preaching of Finney and his scores of imitators. Some estimate that in the great Rochester

revival of 1830-31 over 100,000 converts resulted.

Finney would beat people into submission to God, his traplike lawyer's mind destroying arguments for unbelief, his dominating personality refusing to take no for an answer. His *Memoirs*, especially the *Complete Text*, is full of passages and choice of words which leave little doubt that to Finney conversion was something which one stronger will, armed with truth, can force upon rebellious wills with such power and clarity that few can resist. To Finney, this was the working of the Holy Spirit. Christians who resisted him were standing in the way of God. His manner was imperious and harsh. Many thought he was irreverent. He would at times use denunciation—praying publicly for people present in his audience, whom he identified by name, to repent of specific sins, which he also named.¹³

Finney aimed to create an excited state of feelings. In these "revivals," Bible reading, Sunday school, charitable activities—all would be discouraged as getting in the way of the work of conversion. Normal church life was pushed aside as aroused religious fervor was substituted for Christian duties. In this environment that aimed to produce heightened feelings, enough emotional pressure could be brought to bear on hearers to produce conversions. One eyewitness reported, "Force was his factor, and 'breaking down' his process."¹⁴ Josephus Brockway, an eyewitness of the 1826-27 revival in Troy, related how all manifestations of Christian love in the church stopped once the Finney revival began. There was nothing, he said, but "a machine put in motion by violence, and carried by power."¹⁵

His manner was rough; his speech plain, forthright, and vivid. In one revival Finney speaks of a number of young men in attendance who had compacted together to resist the revival, whose "brazen-facedness and stiff-neckedness was apparent to everybody." Before the week was out, he writes of the conversion of nearly all these young men. An

article written in an Upstate New York paper many years later contained the following:

I suppose I was one of those young men to whom Mr. Finney referred. I was in those days, a very wild boy, and said, with others, that I did not want the religion Finney preached. He was such an overbearing man, such an egotistical man, that we determined not to have anything to do with him, or his meetings. In fact he did not know how to use people decently. He would go into our families, and if we did not happen to think alike, he would tell us that we were on the direct road to hell. But as for us young men banding together, there is no truth in it.¹⁶

The weakness that soon became apparent with Finney's revivals was that great numbers of the converts were spurious. No one denies that in his ministry numerous genuine conversions occurred, but the long-term results were often devastating. In 1835 A. B. Dod wrote, "It is now generally understood that the numerous converts of the new measures have been, in most cases, like the morning cloud and the early dew. In some places, not a fifth, or even a tenth part of them remain."¹⁷ This was the admitted critique not only of Finney's detractors but even of his fellow laborers. Asa Mahan, Finney's co-laborer for many years, speaks not only of converts not lasting, but of most of the revival leaders making shipwreck of their faith. "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 pastor."¹⁸ James Boyle, writing to Finney in 1834, said:

Let us look over the fields where you and others and myself have labored as revival ministers, and what is now their moral state? What was their state within three months after

we left them? I have visited and revisited many of these fields, and groaned in spirit to see the sad, frigid, carnal, contentious state into which the churches had fallen—and fallen very soon after our first departure from among them.¹⁹

And Joseph P. Ives, a Presbyterian minister, wrote in 1838:

During ten years, hundreds, and perhaps thousands, were annually reported to be converted on all hands; but now it is admitted, that his [Finney's] real converts are comparatively few. It is declared even by himself, that "the great body of them are a disgrace to religion."²⁰

After the excitement had passed, and the man-made pressure to "submit to God" had been withdrawn, often little was left. Without the convicting power of the Holy Spirit working in human hearts and changing them from within, inducements to live a new life evaporated. When these "converts" fell away, they were invariably left in a worse spiritual condition than at first. Once hardened by this process, they would be among the most cynical and apathetic of unbelievers. And the results in the churches were even more heart-breaking. Church after church was wracked with dissension by these revivals. The litany of pastors whose churches split, or who were forced out of office in Finney's scorching wake, is legion. Divisiveness, dissension, churches left cold and dead for *decades*—such was Finney's legacy in what came to be known as the "burnt over" district. For years after, Finney was repeatedly asked not to come back, even implored *not* to revisit on these churches the revival fires he had once lit.

The New Measures

The innovative evangelistic techniques which Finney championed were known as the New Measures. Actually

they were not new at all, but came from procedures Methodists had been popularizing since before 1800. The central innovation was the practice of asking people to make some kind of a physical movement—at first, standing up or kneeling down—to assist them in gaining salvation. Previously people had been taught that conversion was the work of God supernaturally changing the human heart. Human responsibility involved repenting of one's estrangement from God and calling out to Him for mercy. God's portion was to grant a new heart and give a new nature. The evidence of that conversion was a changed life lived out over time. Rather than looking to God to change the entire governing principles of one's very nature, people were now told that they could change their own heart, and provide proof of that choice by an external action. The external action, not the internal regeneration of the Holy Spirit granting a changed heart, now came to be seen as evidence of conversion.²¹

The *anxious seat* was an area of empty benches at the front of the church. Finney would ask those under special conviction after a message to come forward to this area. Here they were made the object of special prayer.

I had found also that something was needed, to make the impression on them that they were expected at once to give up their hearts; something that would call them to act, and act as publicly before the world, as they had in their sins; something that would commit them publicly to the service of Christ.²²

The anxious seat was also known as the *mourners bench*. It was not introduced until the Rochester revival in 1830; however, it was simply an extension of the principle of external action mentioned above.

Protracted meetings were introduced during the Western

revivals. Like other New Measures, they had a somewhat evolutionary history. The concept had its origins in the camp meetings of the Second Great Awakening. Building on this frontier phenomenon, church conferences of three to four days length for the purpose of revival began appearing in the 1820s. Finney's protracted meetings refined this concept to create a campaign involving long hours, many successive days, and a number of cooperating ministers—each scheduled for preaching, prayer, and inquiry meetings throughout the day. In an environment like this, it was easy to build up emotions and expectations and then press for people to make "decisions."

Another New Measure was the practice of allowing women to pray in public meetings with men present. This was more than a populist expression of the democratizing influence the frontier had on an expanding American nation. It was a conscious means of fostering a heightened emotional atmosphere wherein more conversions could be gained. The practice violated the biblical convictions of most Christians and showed insensitivity to the cultural mores of the day. It was just one of several ways Finney and his followers created an irreverent atmosphere as they labored.

Another method aimed at increasing responses was what has come to be termed denunciatory preaching and praying. This was often the humiliating singling out of those under special conviction, or those whom the preacher wanted to be under special conviction. We have already mentioned the practice of calling out individuals by name in "prayer," calling on God to help them repent. In addition to this, sins of individuals would be addressed in like manner during preaching so that everyone would know who was being referred to. These public denunciations of individuals present in the audience were designed to force them into changed behavior. Prayers like this, designed more to move

men than God, were another reason that Finney and his followers were accused of irreverence in their meetings. Those who opposed these new methods were often silenced by sermons preached against “enemies of revival.” Finney labeled those who opposed him as spiritually cold or dead.²³

Taken together, use of these New Measures created a sensational, carnival-like atmosphere of excitement. The new evangelism did draw people by the thousands. Churches were often packed to the breaking point night after night when Finney preached. Proponents of the New Measures also created strife and division wherever they went. The harsh, confrontive tactics naturally aroused strife and anger among those who felt their sting. The abuse and denunciation of those who dared speak against the revivalists only served to create more hard feelings. Finneyites were accused of forcing their way into parishes uninvited. Technically this may not have been true. But as Lyman Beecher said, when people expressed interest in having them come, New Measures preachers sent them back “like hounds” to compel the minister to call them.²⁴ More than one minister confessed to opposing the Finneyites, but letting them into his church because he had been browbeaten to exhaustion.

Finney charged that the New England churches were dead in Calvinistic orthodoxy. He passionately maintained that their view of God’s sovereignty rendered them inactive and ineffective in evangelism. Finney was wrong on two counts. For the past twenty-five years the revivals in the Second Great Awakening had been accomplished mainly through Old School believers, rendering his charge historically indefensible. It was also theologically untrue. The older Calvinism of New England

insisted both on the bondage of the unregenerate man and on his immediate responsibility to obey the gospel, holding

both truths to be scriptural and not believing that men are called to harmonize them.²⁵

Finney brought reason to this whole concept, insisting that the whole mystery of conversion *must* be a rational process. He caricatured his opponents in his *Memoirs*, saying that Calvinistic preachers were bound to tell men that they could not repent after preaching repentance, to tell them that they could not believe after preaching faith—until their nature was changed by the Holy Spirit—and all they could do was go home and pray for a changed nature. This was a distortion of orthodoxy. The leading Calvinistic ministers during the Second Great Awakening were all men who agreed that evangelism needed to insist on immediate faith and repentance, and that the older Calvinism had distorted accountability by emphasizing too much the sinner’s dependence on God.

New Lebanon Conference

In the 1820s the New Englander considered most qualified to speak on the subject of revivals was Asahel Nettleton. His amazing ministry of itinerant preaching had been transforming churches and communities since 1812.²⁶ In 1826 other Christians began coming to him with concerns about irregularities in the West. To this point Nettleton thought Finney a good man, but misguided; he hoped to be able to advise Finney, help him in his work, and even invite him to come labor with him. Interestingly Nettleton also feared Finney would find his ideas distasteful at first, appearing to yield less immediate fruit, and as a consequence would grow discouraged and drop them.

Nettleton and Finney had several meetings at the end of 1826, when Nettleton decided to go to the Albany area and investigate firsthand the reports he had received. Finney was at the time thirty-four years old and had been a

Christian only five years. Nettleton was forty-three, had been a Christian for twenty-five years, and was the acknowledged leader in the field of evangelism and revival in the Northeast. Nettleton's two private meetings with Finney were not constructive. Though Finney later wrote that at this time he would have sat at Nettleton's feet and received instruction from him as from the hand of God, Nettleton apparently did not think so. The meetings served to convince him Finney was not open to counsel, and so he did not make the attempt. His subsequent actions show that Nettleton felt the best approach was to alert the body of Christ to the dangers he saw, circle the wagons, and corporately bring enough pressure to bear to suppress the New Measures abuses. Given the course events took, his approach can be questioned. In all probability, there is little he could have done. Larger social and spiritual conditions were at work, causing an undiscerning church to gravitate toward the superficial.

At any rate, Nettleton next wrote a letter to a pastor friend in Utica critiquing the New Measures. He meant it for wider circulation; it soon was in Finney's hands. The letter was "restrained in tone, utterly devoid of rancour and invective . . . generous." It did not call into question the genuineness of the revival nor the purity of its leaders. Finney's response was to preach a sermon from Amos 3:3—"How can two walk together except they be agreed?" It was inflammatory, accusing all who opposed the work of God of being proud, lukewarm, and carnal, and thus unable to support revival as long as their hearts remained wrong.²⁷

Finney's response showed that he was not going to receive correction, and polarized the situation further, making accommodation more unlikely. Nettleton wrote another letter, this one to Gardiner Spring, of New York, pointing out where he thought Finney was in error. This letter was published in *The New York Observer*. Now the controversy was

thrown open to the public. The lines were being drawn between two opposing schools of thought on evangelism. At this point the division was mainly geographical, with Easterners following Nettleton's staid, orthodox evangelism and Westerners following Finney's fiery revivalism.²⁸

Nettleton also turned to Lyman Beecher, well-known Boston pastor and leader in the Second Great Awakening. The two had worked closely together in the past and were good friends. In turn Beecher wrote Finney and Nathan Beman, pastor of the church in Troy where Finney was preaching, suggesting ways for Finney to modify his style. Finney chose to simply keep preaching. Beman, however, thought an understanding might be worked out and, accordingly, went to Boston to meet with Beecher.²⁹ These two men arranged a meeting in New Lebanon, New York, near the Massachusetts border, where Finney was currently preaching. An equal number of supporters from either side of the New Measures controversy were invited. Nettleton was prevailed upon to attend the conference only with great reluctance. His health was poor, he felt he'd already done what he could, and he probably had premonitions that the New Measures movement had too much momentum to be stopped. Certainly his experiences with Finney to date had shown him that there existed no openness to change on the other side.

The New Lebanon Conference lasted July 18-26, 1827. Nineteen men attended, including Finney and Nettleton, the two reluctant leaders. It has come to be seen as a thorough vindication of Finney and the New Measures. Once again, much of the reason for that is because by far the best-known account of the conference has always been Finney's retelling. He completely vindicates himself, saying that the Eastern ministers were forced to see that they had been uninformed and that there was nothing to their charges. He presents himself as being unconcerned with the results of

the conference, being focused so wholly on the Lord's work that his sole intention was to carry that work forward, no matter what opposition the enemy might raise up in his way. Once again, the real story was quite different. Looking back on the event forty-five years later, Finney evidently wanted to portray himself as having no concern for the opinions of men. The length to which he goes to justify himself, however, while taking pains to portray Nettleton and Beecher in a poor light, shows the very opposite.

The conference was filled with a week full of dispute, charges being made by both sides and little resolved. Much has been made of Nettleton's curious behavior at New Lebanon. Throughout the week he said little, apparently sitting worn and wearied by the futility of it all. On the last day he stood, appearing sick and agitated, and read a long paper he had written. In it he said that the Old School ministers were still unconvinced by the defense the revivalists had made to their charges.

New Lebanon was, to all effects, a stalemate. It was certainly not a vindication of Finney, as he represented it; however, it *was* a telling victory for Finney. No official admonitions were given. The Westerners were not forced to back down on any practices. The truth is, the evangelical church was not united enough for one side to impose doctrinal restrictions on the other. The spiritual division evident at New Lebanon foreshadowed the physical division soon to come in American evangelicalism. The Eastern ministers, unable to secure any concessions by the Finneyites, were the big losers.

One reason New Lebanon failed was that Nettleton and Beecher attacked the symptoms, not the cause. Until now the dispute had been over evangelistic technique—the New Measures. Eastern ministers in these early stages were unable to see that the real difference between the two evangelistic schools was not a difference over methodology, but

a theological difference. Probably Nettleton's brooding silence at New Lebanon shows that he, with prescience, was beginning to realize during that week what lay ahead. It was not the New Measures, but an entire theology of salvation that was at issue. The Finneyites were operating out of a Pelagian view of man and of sin. After New Lebanon the theological contours of the controversy would come into focus.

Finney's Theology

Finney's views were a revival in American buckskin of the age-old doctrine of Pelagianism, which rejects the notion of original sin.³⁰ In denying the imputation of Adam's sin upon his posterity, Finney constructed a sophisticated concept of moral government to replace it. In his view, man's fundamental problem is not a nature at war with God, but rather a perverse will. Moral depravity does not inhere in man's physical being, but is voluntary. Man does not sin because he has to; he sins because he chooses to. The solution to this dilemma is not to receive a new nature, but rather to make a decision to stop sinning. Finney believed that the human will was self-determining. Man's choices were not predetermined by the ruling preferences or sinful disposition of his soul. In other words, man did not sin because he had a sin nature and had to sin; he sinned because, though free, he continuously chose to sin.

Finney agreed that men will never obey God without the influence of the Holy Spirit. He termed this influence regeneration, though by that term he meant an entirely different thing than Old School orthodoxy did. By his understanding, the Spirit's influences are those of teaching, persuading and convicting—a *moral* influence, or moral suasion. They are analogous to the influences which one human exerts over the mind of another. Finney likened this working of the Holy Spirit to the influences of a parent on his child making him willing to obey. Children *can* obey their parents; it's just that

they do not *want* to. In the same sense that “persuasion, entreaty, argument, or the rod” is needed to induce children to submit their will to their parents, so the work of the Holy Spirit is necessary to bring obstinate human wills to the point of surrender. He represented the Holy Spirit’s work as overcoming the sinner’s unwillingness to repent.

With Finney, man’s final authority was his own reason.

If the doctrine in question [natural man’s inability to obey the law of God] be true, it is from that moment absurd and unjust to require the performance of any duty of him. . . . It is nonsense to affirm that [acting contrary to the law of God] can be sinful in the sense of blameworthy. To affirm that it can is to contradict a first truth *of reason*.³¹ (Italics mine.)

Here we see Finney’s appeal to human reason as his *sine qua non*, the grounding for his entire philosophy. He approached the Bible as a child of Enlightenment rationalism and fit its teachings within the context of his own reasoning. Unable to make rational sense of a theology which taught that man was accountable to God, though given a nature bound over to sin, he rejected it out of hand. With his legal background influencing all that he thought, Finney subjected “traditional views on depravity and grace to the bar of human rationalism, and in that court they could not survive.”³²

Finney holds up human rationality as the ultimate arbiter of truth. To read his theology is to realize that he first defined justice through his own reasoning, then interpreted Scripture so as to conform it to that sense of justice. This approach was in polar opposition to Old School Calvinism, which understood sin to so distort the very workings and abilities of the mind itself that the natural man was unable to view his true spiritual condition in an objective light. In a

more fundamental sense, the question could be asked, who defines right and wrong—man or God? Finney’s rationalism moved man from periphery to center, thus answering this question in a new day. “We have seen that the ability of all men of sane mind to obey God, is necessarily assumed as a first truth, and that this assumption is from the very laws of mind. . . .”³³ Old School orthodoxy maintained that man subjects mind and reason to Scripture, for to do otherwise is to make Scripture bow to the dictates of corrupted reason.

Finney’s governmental theory of the Atonement was enough outside the pale of orthodoxy to have been considered heretical in previous centuries. He rejected the traditional understanding, where the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believer and the sin of the believer is imputed to Christ. “The doctrine of an imputed righteousness, or that Christ’s obedience to the law was accounted as our obedience, is founded on a most false and nonsensical assumption. . . .” Jesus’ death did not pay for the sins of believers, but rather made it *allowable* for God’s public justice to be satisfied. Believers made themselves righteous by their faith and their perfect obedience to God’s law. “There can be no justification in a legal or forensic sense, but upon the ground of universal, perfect, and uninterrupted obedience to law.”³⁵ This theology led naturally enough to development of perfectionism, or what Finney termed entire Sanctification.

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. It cannot be overemphasized that Finney makes these states mutually exclusive. “Sin and holiness, then, both consist in supreme, ultimate, and opposite choices, or intentions, and can not, by any possibility, co-exist.”³⁶

In later years Finney developed his belief in Christian perfectionism as a response to the failures of earlier revivals.

Perfectionism went along naturally enough with a superficial view of sin. Since man did not have a sin nature, but only chose repeatedly to sin, a life of external obedience would be a sinless life, and was theoretically possible. To be saved from sinning was to be saved from sin. Finney emphatically denied that Romans 7 was speaking of the struggle of the believer with indwelling sin. He taught that entire sanctification was not only possible, but expected by God. This was his explanation of why the converts from his early years fared so poorly. They had not been led into right belief about what God expected of them. In his writings Finney speaks a black-and-white language. There are no shades of gray, no sinful habits that still control the believer at times. If he believes, he will obey and do good.

Western Revivalism and the New Divinity

A year after New Lebanon a new teaching emerged from Yale Divinity School. Known as the New Divinity or the New Haven Theology, it was a result of the teaching of N. W. Taylor. Taylor, as Timothy Dwight's assistant at Yale, had begun to raise Dwight's concerns with his developing views back in the teens. By the early 1820s they were passing into general circulation. Though Finney portrays his own theology as springing directly into his own mind by revelation of the Holy Spirit, he almost certainly was exposed to Taylor's ideas from the first years of his conversion. The St. Lawrence presbytery's loose examination of Finney before his ordination seems to suggest an already developing assault on orthodoxy in the West by 1823.

Taylor's teaching can be boiled down to several simple propositions. He denied innate depravity and an imputed sin nature; and he asserted man's freedom of the will, placing man beyond the power of God to influence him. In attempting to defend one truth which had in the past been marginalized, Taylor denied another. He asserted human

responsibility at the expense of God's sovereignty. Publication of these views in 1828 led to a bitter fight among New England scholars on questions of sin, grace, and free will. Over the next decade both the Congregational and Presbyterian churches were racked with dissension. Doctrinal charges and countercharges flew in church courts. The debate raged in Christian periodicals. It immediately split New England's Congregational churches into two camps, and it finally led to the split in 1838 which divided the Presbyterian Church into Old School and New School camps.

After 1828 the division in evangelicalism was along theological, not geographical lines. Proponents of the New Measures and teachers of the New Divinity were drawn together from the start. Outwardly, they made strange bedfellows. The rough-hewn, plain-spoken, emotionally driven evangelism of the West seemed to have little in common with the urbane, sophisticated, theologically perspicacious thought of Yale's cultured darling, Taylor. Internally, it was not strange at all, however. Both were at heart man-centered systems. A new worldview was increasingly permeating society at all levels in the nineteenth century. Its rise involved consolidation of Enlightenment values throughout society on a practical level—values which had already gained ascendancy in the intellectual marketplace during the previous century. The new worldview involved a fundamental relocation of authority, shifting it from the transcendent to the self. Both Finney and Taylor's theologies were driven by rationalism, and found in rationalism an escape from biblical orthodoxy. Both found the prevailing winds of culture to be blowing strong; and rather than stand against, their views were accommodations to culture which reflected the day's thought currents.

In 1828, one year after he vowed at New Lebanon to never let Finney come to Boston, Beecher surprised everyone by

initiating a reconciliation with the New Measures proponents. He signed an agreement with Finney and others where they pledged to drop the debate. This paved the way for reconciliation with Finney. In 1831 Beecher brought Finney to Boston to labor with him for six months.³⁷ With this action Beecher effected his defection from Old School to New School, a crossover which resulted in his being a thorough supporter of Finney and the teachings of Taylor throughout the 1830s.

Finney: After the Second Great Awakening

In 1832 Finney's career took a marked shift. By this time he was exhausted and worn down by his evangelistic labors. He was invited by friends in New York City to come and work among them as their pastor. His move to New York at this time marked the end of the first phase of his career. From this point on Finney's time was increasingly spent as a pastor, writer, college professor and president. Though the fruit of his labor as a revivalist did not bear out his claims, Finney was at this point in a position where he did not have the answers to the failures of his revivals. Despite all the orthodox ministers, seminaries, books, pamphlets, and periodicals throughout the land which were aimed at upholding the Old School orthodoxy, the new theology and evangelism of Finney and Taylor continued to spread.

The spirit of the times was moving evangelicalism from its old moorings. In the nineteenth century the United States was a nation of unique opportunity and growth. This was an age of action, of unbounded faith in human ability, driven by success and growth as the country industrialized and grew westward. It was also an era of unparalleled human activity. As Murray says, "A nation awoke to what could be accomplished through human energy."³⁸ The church bought into the restless, churning spirit of the times, a spirit which treasured innovation, disdained the past with its constricting

traditions, had unbounded faith in human ability, and valued above all else action and growth. William Sprague, an Old School minister who lived through these times, believed that these beliefs manifested themselves in the church by its beginning to view man as "a mighty agent rather than a humble instrument."³⁹ These same sentiments spurred on a political level in nineteenth-century America the growth of populism and democracy. These forces, in turn, led to anti-intellectualism and a concomitant anti-theological bent. This anti-theological bias was one of the factors behind the loss of an historically objective view of these times by the next generation of Christians in this country.

The Spirit-filled revivals that resulted in profoundly changed lives and a sense of awe at God's majesty and holiness gradually faded from sight during the 1820s. That Finney was used of the Lord in a genuine work of the Spirit that brought about the conversion of many has not been debated. He caught the tail end of the Second Great Awakening and his early labors were used of God in that awakening. Yet the rise of the New Measures and their eventual triumph also coincided historically with the end of that era of awakening.

It is the thesis of a number of scholars that the triumph of Finney's evangelism in American evangelicalism brought an end to the Second Great Awakening.⁴⁰ Finney's famous assertion was that revivals could be brought about by Christians whenever they would do what God had commanded and given them the power to do. "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."⁴¹ In the early 1830s Finney claimed that if his ideas were followed in evangelism, there would be continuous revival.⁴² Yet the facts seem to prove just the opposite. Eventually both Finney's theology and New

Measures did triumph. “Many men did adopt them and the practices that went with them but the revival that ‘would never cease’ never came.”⁴³

By the 1830s people were recognizing that something had changed. In 1835 Sprague wrote,

Look then at the cause of Revivals—a cause which, a few years ago, moved forward in our land with constantly increasing triumph; and united the labors, the prayers, the hearts, of almost all evangelical Christians. And what is the state of that cause now? The Ultraists themselves being judges, it is greatly depressed.⁴⁴

Ten years later Finney himself wrote,

I have observed, and multitudes of others also I find have observed, that for the last ten years, revivals of religion have been gradually becoming more and more superficial. . . There is very much less deep conviction of sin and deep breaking up of the heart. . .⁴⁵

Finney overpowered people. He took no counsel but his own. He spent his life not only preaching the gospel, but in one long, concerted battle against Calvinistic orthodoxy. As far as man is concerned, Finney seems to have prevailed. During his ministry an evangelical sea-change occurred, and Arminianism has been the dominant impulse in American evangelicalism since Finney’s time. Nettleton never regained the prominence or influence he previously had after the New Lebanon conference, while Finney’s ministry went on in ever-increasing orbit. Nettleton’s years ended in eclipse. His health continued to decline after New Lebanon, and he died when only sixty-one years old. Yet it is interesting to note the difference between Finney and Nettleton at their deaths. For the last few months of his life Nettleton was an

invalid. He died in peace, cherishing and reliving memories from his earlier ministry. One of his students often sat with him through the sleepless nights in those last months, as Nettleton repeatedly spoke of the glorious scenes of former revivals that came before his mind. The memories deeply affected Henry Blake. He later said, “I have always cherished the impressions received from Dr. Nettleton during the months and years he lay dying in that hallowed chamber as among the most valued results of my theological course.”⁴⁶

Finney’s own death seems so different. He appeared to come to his end haunted by the controversy that he had fostered on the church wherever he went. His constant editing and re-editing of his *Memoirs* in his last years as he sought to vindicate the path he had taken, his uneasy doubts about the wisdom of publishing them as his life neared its end, and his final request not to have them published seem to bespeak an uneasy conscience. From beginning to end his *Memoirs* betray a tone that says, “I was right, and I don’t care who disagrees, I am going to fight them until I’ve silenced all opposition.” How fascinating that the one who had listened to no one, pursued his own course regardless of who was in his way, and had won, should struggle at the end to silence one final voice—his own conscience.

Author

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Endnotes

- 1 P. E. G. Cook, "Finney on Revival," *One Steadfast High Intent: 1966 Puritan Conference Papers* (Clonmel, Republic of Ireland: Clonmel Evangelical Bookroom, 1992 [1967]), 4.
- 2 Finney's *Systematic Theology* is not a systematic theology at all. Topics such as the existence of God, His attributes, Trinitarian doctrine, Christology, Ecclesiology, and Eschatology are nowhere to be found in this work. Rather, it is an extended polemic defending Finney's approach to evangelism, his notions of conversion, and his belief in perfectionism.
- 3 This work was originally titled *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney* and was published in 1876. Much revised and rewritten during his last years, as he lay dying Finney requested that his wife burn the manuscript. She did not do so. It was edited by James H. Fairchild, Finney's successor as president of Oberlin College, and published the following year. Fairchild excerpted controversial material, changed wording, and toned down language, doing what he could to soften the edges of the great theological debate which surrounded Finney's life and work. For over a century this "biography" was the chief lens through which the public came to view Finney. In 1969 *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text* was published by Zondervan. This annotated critical edition edited by Garth M. Rosell and

Richard A. G. Dupuis is twice as long as the original. It presents the unedited text and is fitted with scholarly footnotes, excerpts from letters of Finney's correspondents, and other historical material. A far different picture of the famous evangelist emerges in these pages.

An example of this comes from Finney's second preaching tour of England in 1859-60. Fairchild omits a section where Finney describes a marked disharmony between himself and a Manchester minister whose church he was preaching in. Finney describes the minister as lacking earnestness, saying that he was unwilling to commit himself to the work which the Holy Spirit was performing in his congregation. Finney then relates preaching a denunciatory sermon aimed at the minister. As happened so often in his career, soon after Finney's "revival" the minister was dismissed. Rosell and Dupuis' edition contains a footnote showing an excerpt from an article published shortly afterward in a London religious magazine:

His meetings were often crowded, and several times he preached in the Free Trade Hall. He was said to be very successful. . . . I went one evening to hear him preach on "The Constraining Love of Christ." I certainly did not expect to hear a written discourse, which varied little in character from a moral essay; and was still less prepared to find it in substance a mere tirade against Calvinism. I came away with a worse opinion of revivalists than ever. "Popular Preaching," *The Christian Bond of Brotherhood Magazine* (June 1861), 119. Quoted in *Memoirs: Complete Text* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1989), 612.

- 4 *Memoirs: Complete Text*, 30.
- 5 Finney not only does not mention this, he describes Gale as being so dead in Calvinistic orthodoxy that he is

- unable to lead people to Christ. "But not only were Mr. Gale's theological views such as to cripple his usefulness; his practical views were equally erroneous. . . . He followed out his views with very little practical result." *Memoirs*, 54-55.
- 6 B. B. Warfield, *Perfectionism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1958), 15.
 - 7 *Memoirs*, 20.
 - 8 Finney says at the outset that he is an old man, relying on his memory to relate things that occurred many years before. *Ibid.*, 2-3.
 - 9 Warfield, 18.
 - 10 *Memoirs*, 33-34.
 - 11 *Ibid.*, 51, 239.
 - 12 Gale later would found the city in frontier Illinois which bears his name today—Galesburg. He also founded Knox College there.
 - 13 Lyman Beecher, who like so many others opposed Finney at first before later changing his position, called these the "Oneida denunciatory revivals." *Autobiography*, ed. by Charles Beecher, II: 345.
 - 14 P. H. Fowler, "Historical Sketch of Presbyterianism within the Bounds of the Synod of Central New York" (1877), 258. Quoted in Warfield, 21.
 - 15 Warfield, 25.
 - 16 *Memoirs: Complete Text*, 119-20.
 - 17 A. B. Dod, *On Revivals of Religion*, in "Essays, Theological and Miscellaneous," from *Princeton Review* (1847), 141. Quoted in Cook, 13.
 - 18 Asa Mahan, *Autobiography* (London, 1882), 229. Quoted in Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism, 1750-1858* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 288.
 - 19 *The Literary and Theological Review* (March 1838), 66. Quoted in Warfield, 26.

- 20 *Ibid.*, 39. Quoted in Warfield, 23.
- 21 The emphasis on looking for external evidence for proof of conversion led increasingly to the practice of counting "conversions" at revival meetings. The older evangelists had been very cautious about claiming results. Writings from both the First and Second Great Awakening reflect this caution. Over and over people chronicling powerful moves of the Spirit of God would speak of the *hopeful conversion* of people. Whitefield always wrote this way. There was a hesitancy to call people saved without seeing the evidence of a changed life lived out over time. Methodist preachers had begun the practice of counting converts in the late 1700s. Once started, the practice grew, and as the New Measures took hold, it was increasingly abused.
- 22 *Memoirs*, 288.
- 23 Finney mentions a pamphlet written against himself at this time by the ministers of the Oneida Association. It was published in 1827. There are 29 subheadings in the pamphlet; a few of the subtitles give an idea of what forms denunciatory abuses took: 17) Trying to Make People Angry, 18) Talking Much About Opposition, 20) Language of Profaneness, 22) Censuring, as Unconverted, or as Cold, Stupid, and Dead, Those Who Are in Good Standing in the Visible Church, 23) Praying for Persons by Name in an Abusive Manner, 24) Imprecations in Prayer, 25) Denouncing as Enemies to Revivals Those Who Do Not Approve of Everything That Is Done. *Memoirs: Complete Text*, 142.
- 24 J. F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening* (Durham, England: Evangelical Press, 1977), 177.
- 25 Murray, 260.
- 26 The power of Asahel Nettleton's preaching lay in the fact that he brought men to a realization that they were

- undone, their spiritual condition hopelessly lost before a wrathful, holy God. The records of Nettleton's evangelistic style, as if the amazing results were not enough proof, do not bear out Finney's charge. A typical Sunday during one of Nettleton's revivals in December 1820 in the New Haven, Connecticut, area, shows that he preached three sermons that day. They were titled, "Being Ashamed of Christ"; "Causes of Alarm to Awakened Sinners"; and "Behold, I Stand at the Door and Knock." After the evening message Nettleton admonished his hearers to "go home immediately, not talk on the way, and as soon as they were home, 'retire to your closets, bow before God and give yourselves to Him this night.'"
- 27 Thornbury, 169-73.
 - 28 Ibid., 174.
 - 29 After Finney's "revival" there Beman's large church in Troy subsequently split over the New Measures controversy.
 - 30 "There is no proof that mankind ever lost their ability to obey, either by the first sin of Adam, or by their own sin. . . . The Bible everywhere, and in every way, assumes the freedom of the will." *Systematic Theology*, 347-48, 350.
 - 31 Ibid., 344-45.
 - 32 Thornbury, 191.
 - 33 *Systematic Theology*, 345.
 - 34 Ibid., 385.
 - 35 Ibid., 384.
 - 36 *Christian History* (Vol. VII: No. 4, Issue 20), 32.
 - 37 Finney was not well received by all in Boston. His *Memoirs* claim that a powerful work of God began under his ministry there. In actual fact, most of the Boston ministers ended up distancing themselves from both him and Beecher. Ann Rand, well-known editor, wrote of Finney's preaching: "He did indeed, while among us, aim to adapt his operations to the sober, considerate char-

acter of our people. But even in their mitigated form, the thoroughly evangelical churches and ministers of New England could not endure his preaching or his measures. They were disgusted with his philosophical speculations, his denunciatory spirit, his irreverence in worship, his vulgarity, his rashness, and his arrogance." (Rand, "Letter to Dr. Beecher") Quoted in *Memoirs: Complete Text*, 348.

- 38 Murray, 279.
- 39 William B. Sprague, *Religious Ultraism: A Sermon Delivered August 25, 1835, at the Installation of the Rev. John H. Hunter* (Albany, New York, 1835), 43. Quoted in Murray, 280.
- 40 For an excellent and thorough historical treatment of this thesis see Murray's *Revival and Revivalism*. See also Cook's "Finney on Revival," Warfield's *Perfectionism*, and William B. Sprague's *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1959).
- 41 Charles G. Finney, *Revivals of Religion*, Fleming H. Revell Company, 5.
- 42 It was this theology which undergirded Finney's post-millennial views. He said on a number of occasions that if Christians would only repent and obey the Lord, the millennium could be ushered in within months. Finney was not unrepresentative of his day. The great rush of progress was one of the reasons causing postmillennialism to become the dominant eschatological view of the nineteenth century.
- 43 Murray, 285.
- 44 William B. Sprague, *Religious Ultraism*, 31. Quoted in Murray, 285.
- 45 Charles G. Finney, *Reflections on Revival* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1979), 14.
- 46 Thornbury, 224.