

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Charles G. Finney: How Theology Affects Understanding of Revival

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*'For a long time it was supposed by the Church that a revival was a miracle, an interposition of Divine power. It is only within a few years that ministers generally have supposed revivals were to be promoted by the use of means . . . God has overthrown, generally, the theory that revivals are miracles.'*¹ — C. G. Finney

There is no question that it is the name of Charles Grandison Finney which chiefly deserves to be connected with what has become the most popular understanding of revival. William McLoughlin goes too far when he writes: 'The difference between [Jonathan] Edwards and Finney is essentially the difference between the medieval and the modern temper. One saw God as the centre of the universe, the other saw man. One believed that revivals were "prayed down" and the other that they were "worked up".' But his words are not an overstatement when he goes on: 'Finney's revivalism broke the dam maintained by "The Tradition of the Elders" (the title of one of his most pungent sermons) and transformed "the new system" from a minority to a majority religion.'²

If we are to understand how one man came to command such influence on subsequent history we need to take a closer view of his life and teaching.

A visit to Andover College, Massachusetts, in the year 1831 will introduce Finney to us at the height of his powers. It was the eve of keenly awaited Anniversary meetings at this theological seminary and for the last evening of those special days the speaker anticipated was Dr Justin Edwards. Although Justin Edwards was one of the favourite preachers of New England, the College authorities had reason to be apprehensive; for the local village church had engaged another visitor to preach at the same hour on that same Wednesday evening. Their fears proved justified: a mere thirty persons attended the College chapel to hear the distinguished guest, while the village church was packed with students, alumni and others to hear Charles G. Finney, aged thirty-nine, fair-haired and an impressive six-foot-two in height. One of the absentee theological students who chose the alternative to the College proceedings was E. A. Park. More than fifty-eight years later, when Park wrote of the occasion, he declared he could recall the impression made upon

¹ Finney, *Revivals of Religion*, pp. 12-13.

² *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham*, pp. 11, 66.

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him as distinctly as on the night itself. Finney's sermon, he reported, was on the text, 'One Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus' (1 Tim. 2:5). Although an hour and three-quarters in length, it commanded the attention of all, even of those who had gone critically. Park recalled: 'It abounded with sterling argument and startling transitions. It was too earnest to be called theatrical, but in the best sense of the word it was *dramatic*. Some of his rhetorical utterances are indescribable.' As every seat was full, Park sat with five other men on a plank which had been put across chairs in an aisle. Such was the impression of the sermon, he says, that 'The board actually shook beneath us. Every one of the men was trembling with excitement.'³

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It was not only that night that Finney was exciting. He has remained so almost ever since. His *Memoirs* was first published in 1876 and (apart from Augustine's *Confessions*) it is probably the only Christian autobiography which has remained in print for over one hundred and twenty years. It is possible that no man has had such a far-reaching influence on evangelical Christianity in these years as Finney, the 'Father of Modern Revivalism'. His book, *Lectures on Revivals*, has by far outsold every other book on the subject. Dr Billy Graham summarises the general opinion of Finney when he writes: 'Through his Spirit-filled ministry, uncounted thousands came to know Christ in the nineteenth century, resulting in one of the greatest periods of revival in the history of America.'⁴

Life and Teaching

Finney was born in New England in 1792. While he was still a child, his parents moved to the shores of Lake Ontario, in western New York state, and it was here, in the little town of Adams, that Finney was converted to Christ in 1821. He had previously been an unconcerned and frivolous attender at the Presbyterian church in Adams and it was to the surprise of his minister, George W. Gale, that he appeared one Monday evening at an inquiry meeting under strong conviction of sin and wanting to become a Christian. The same week Finney came to peace and assurance. Soon he was helping Gale in the work of the Adams church and, when the local presbytery accepted him as a candidate for the Presbyterian ministry, it was Gale who became his tutor. Finney was ordained in 1824 and almost immediately, it appears, he was used in a series of revivals in parts of Jefferson and St Lawrence Counties. In the October of 1825 he met his former pastor, George Gale, who had now moved to Western in Oneida County. Gale urged Finney to stay with him and it was at this time that Finney first became well known on account of the part he was

³ Quoted in C. F. Wright, *Charles Grandison Finney* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1891), pp. 72–4.

⁴ Quoted in my [Revival and Revivalism](#) (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1998), p. 298.

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to play in what became known as the 'Western revivals'. The majority of those converted under his ministry, wrote Gale:

were not women and children but strong men, educated men . . . Lawyers and judges, men of all professions and conditions of life . . . The great secret of his success was that he was a powerful reasoner. Though he was a bold and fearless preacher of the Gospel he was a man of much prayer, and singleness of purpose. It was to win souls to Christ that he labored. His own reputation, or interest, came in for no share of his aims, any further than the cause of Christ was to be effected. Like Barnabas, he was full of the Holy Spirit, as well as a good man, and much people were added to the Lord.⁵

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Soon Finney was preaching in the great centres of population on the east coast. Five thousand were said to be converted in a meeting in Philadelphia in 1828, and in 1829 and 1830 his meetings continued to be attended by large crowds in New York City. In the latter place he undertook his first pastorate in 1832 and it was here in 1834 and 1835 that he delivered the twenty-two lectures on revival which became his famous book. In published form they immediately commanded widespread sales. Twelve thousand copies were printed in New York by 1837 and by 1840 a 'thirteenth printing' was published in Britain. A translation into Welsh was published in 1839.⁶ Several reasons combined to attract such interest:

1. The subject of revival was then of very general interest throughout the English-speaking world.
2. Word had spread that Finney was himself an experienced preacher in revivals.
3. Finney was saying something which had never been effectively said in print before and which seemed to have great importance for the advance of the kingdom of Christ. He argued that 'very few' had previously rightly understood the theology of revival and that 'vast ignorance' persisted among ministers on the subject.⁷ People had formerly believed that revivals were like the rain; they could not be produced or organised by any human arrangements. But here was a teacher who believed that it was the church's duty to obtain

⁵ *Autobiography of George Washington Gale* (Published Privately, New York, 1964), p. 273.

⁶ G. M. Rosell & R. A. G. Dupuis, *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), p. 375n. This is the only unabridged edition of the *Memoirs*; all other printings reproduced the original manuscript in which J. H. Fairchild had omitted or changed about twenty per cent of the text. Because the abridged (Revell) edition is more widely available I generally quote from it in these pages unless otherwise indicated.

⁷ *Revivals of Religion*, p. 371.

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revivals. If you are a Christian, he said, God 'has placed His Spirit at your disposal'.⁸ 'You see why you do not have a revival. It is only because you do not want one. Because you are neither praying for it, nor feeling anxious about it, nor putting forth efforts for it.'⁹ 'If the Church will do *all her duty*, the millennium may come in this country in three years . . . If the Church would do all her duty, she would soon complete the triumph of religion in the world.'¹⁰

Or again, in a reference to the men who had supported him in introducing new measures, Finney wrote: 'If the whole church as a body had gone to work ten years ago, and continued it, as a few individuals, whom I could name, have done, there would not now be an impenitent sinner in the land.'¹¹

This teaching caused widespread interest not simply because it was new, and delivered with much authority, but also because it was backed up by the author's repeated appeal to the evidence of success which he had seen in his own ministry. But Finney knew that what he was saying would meet criticism and in *Revivals of Religion* he forewarned his readers of the kind of people who would oppose it:

They are ancient men, men of another age and stamp from what is needed in these days, when the Church and world are rising to new thought and action . . . It is dangerous and ridiculous for our theological professors, who are withdrawn from the field of conflict, to be allowed to dictate, in regard to the measures and movements of the Church, as it would be for a general to sit in his bedchamber and attempt to order a battle.¹²

Finney was right in believing there would be controversy, but it did not last many years and, as already observed, significant parts of his teaching came to be accepted as standard evangelical belief. In 1834 he left the Presbyterian Church and became a Congregationalist. The next year he became the Professor of Theology at Oberlin. For a while he combined this post with his New York pastorate but from 1838 his time was divided between Oberlin — where, it is said, he trained some 20,000 students in the course of his life — and itinerant ministry. In 1849–50, and again in 1858, he was in

⁸ Ibid., p. 134.

⁹ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 346.

¹¹ Quoted by Albert Dod, reviewing Finney's *Revivals of Religion*, in *Princeton Theological Essays*, Second Series (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1847), p. 146. The fact that this quotation does not seem to appear in current editions of Finney's lectures confirms that some revision of the original publication was undertaken after 1835.

¹² *Revivals of Religion*, pp. 214–5.

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Britain. 'Both these visits,' Frank G. Beardsley asserts, 'were the occasion of extensive revivals.'¹³ Another writer adds: 'He was the first man to introduce American revivalistic methods into England and Scotland.'¹⁴ By the time that this 'king of American evangelists' died at the ripe age of eighty-three years it was said that five hundred thousand persons had been converted through his instrumentality.

Possibly the most influential thing which Finney ever did was begun when he had turned seventy years of age. This was the preparation of his autobiography. Edited and abridged by J. H. Fairchild, it was published almost immediately after his death and through its pages untold numbers around the world were to have their thoughts shaped on evangelism and revival.

By the time Finney's *Memoirs* was published in 1876 the controversy in which he had been engaged in earlier years was a thing of the distant past. Most people took the view that it was no longer of any relevance. The opinion of one New York minister was general: with reference to Finney, Theodore Cuyler believed that, by the 1870s, 'the once bitter controversies between "old school" and "new school" had become quite obsolete.'¹⁵ Yet Finney himself did not appear to think so, for the fact is that a large part of his *Memoirs* is taken up with a defence of the new thinking which he had done so much to introduce in the 1820s and 1830s. Over and over again he tells us of the opposition which he encountered to evangelism and revival, and who was responsible for it. The main culprits were ministers of the Presbyterian Church who still believed what was taught in the Westminster Confession of Faith and the main centre of resistance to change he identified as Princeton Theological Seminary where some of the principal 'ancient men' taught.¹⁶

It was impossible, Finney believed, to hold what he called 'Princeton theology' and be a supporter of evangelism and revival and he tells us why at great length. In brief, the reason was this. Following the Westminster Confession, Princeton believed that man is so fallen that he cannot do anything to make himself a Christian. While holding that it is the duty of preachers to call upon sinners to repent and believe, this old-school teaching taught that for such responses to be saving there needed to be the interposition of the Spirit of God in regeneration. Man is unable of himself to forsake sin and to receive Christ. Finney claimed that this teaching was entirely unscriptural. Instead he held that human depravity is a 'voluntary' condition, that is to say, its continuance depends upon the choice of the human will. Let a man once decide for Christ and he will become a new

¹³ F. G. Beardsley, *History of American Revivals* (New York: American Tract Society, 1904), p. 146.

¹⁴ T. Cuyler, *Recollections of a Long Life, An Autobiography* (New York: Baker and Taylor, 1902), p. 218.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

¹⁶ *Revivals of Religion*, pp. 214–5, 309. Finney does not actually name Princeton in these references but the identification is unmistakable.

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man. So the evangelist is not simply to preach Christ and to tell men of their duty to believe; he has to help *make* that believing a reality by appointing some outward action to *assist* a change of will. So we read repeatedly in Finney's *Memoirs* of the 'new measures' with which he directed people 'to make themselves a new heart':

I called upon any who would give their hearts to God, to come forward and take a front seat ['the anxious seat'].¹⁷

We insisted on immediate submission.¹⁸

I called upon them to kneel down and then and there commit themselves forever to the Lord.¹⁹

I called on those only to kneel down who were willing to do what God required of them, and what I presented to them.²⁰

I called for those whose minds were made up, to come forward, publicly renounce their sins, and give themselves to Christ.²¹

There were some who regarded controversy on such matters as simply a disagreement over methods but Finney rightly understood that something much more was involved. The fundamental question has to do with whether or not the sin of Adam has ruined *the nature* of all his posterity. The teaching which Finney was consciously opposing asserted that it had; man has inherited a sinful nature from Adam. All the Reformed Confessions taught that sin is not simply a matter of actions which we repeat because we learn them from the example of others. It is rather the result of an evil principle which lies at the centre of a nature which is fallen. Actual sins are only the surface proof of a deeper corruption beneath. Our choices and actions are wrong because our very hearts are wrong. So, on this understanding, for God to deal with our sins would not be enough. It is our *sinfulness* which is the fundamental problem. Finney denied this. He did not believe that men since the Fall are born with a sinful nature. He complained of the Presbyterians that 'they held the doctrine that moral depravity was constitutional, and belonged to the very nature; that the will, though free to do evil, was utterly impotent to all good.'²² To illustrate what he considered to be the injurious effects of such teaching on unbelievers

¹⁷ *Memoirs of Charles G. Finney* (New York: Revell, n.d.), p. 116.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 154. He claimed that 'the foundation of the error' propagated by Princeton was 'the dogma that human nature is sinful of itself (p. 256).

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Finney records a conversation which he had on one occasion. A non-Christian, apparently of Presbyterian background, told him:

‘The Bible teaches us that God created us with a sinful nature.’ I replied, ‘Mr. S—, have you a Bible? Will you not turn to a passage that teaches this?’ ‘Why, there is no need of that,’ he says; ‘you admit that the Bible teaches it.’ ‘No,’ I said, ‘I do not believe that the Bible teaches any such thing.’ ‘Then,’ he continued, ‘the Bible teaches that God has imputed Adam’s sin to all his posterity; that we inherit the guilt of that sin by nature . . . This is a direct contradiction of my irresistible convictions of right and justice.’ ‘Yes,’ I replied, ‘and so it is directly in contradiction of my own.’ He began to quote the catechism, as he had done before. ‘But,’ I replied, ‘that is the catechism, not the Bible.’ ‘Why,’ said he, ‘you are a Presbyterian minister, are you not? I thought the catechism was good authority for you.’ ‘No,’ I said; ‘we are talking about the Bible now — whether the Bible is true.’ ‘Oh,’ said he, ‘if you are going to deny that it is taught in the Bible why, that is taking such ground as I never knew a Presbyterian minister to take.’²³

Finney’s great argument was that if men have to experience a change of *nature* before they can become Christians, and such a change as only God can effect, then no sinner can be responsible for his unbelief and lack of repentance. The Bible, he asserted, teaches plainly our duty to come to Christ. How can God command us to do what we cannot do? So from the fact of human responsibility — as he understood it — he deduced that men must possess the *ability* to obey. The deduction sounds rational and logical, but it is not scriptural. Finney’s opponents did not deny human responsibility. They were even ready to emphasise it. They claimed, however, that the Bible shows that sin has destroyed man’s ability to obey God from his heart: ‘The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God’ (1 Cor. 2:14). ‘The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be’ (Rom. 8:7). Further they pointed to the ministry of Christ himself for evidence of the need to hold both human responsibility and inability. Jesus said: ‘Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden’ (Matt. 11:28). ‘You are not willing to come to Me, that you may have life’ (John 5:40). ‘While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light’ (John 12:36). Such words show the

²³ Ibid., p. 125. The catechism to which he referred was of course that of the Westminster Assembly; but here, as elsewhere, Finney presents a misstatement of the teaching of the catechism. It does not teach that ‘God created’ anyone with a sinful nature but rather that original sin is the result of man’s rebellion against God. Mr S— had reason to be surprised that Finney would not own a statement of doctrine which he had accepted at his ordination in the Presbyterian ministry. Finney does not offer a biblical argument for human ability: his whole case rests on his assertion that God would be ‘an infinite tyrant’ if he commanded men to do what they cannot do. For a fuller statement of Presbyterian teaching see Appendix 3 of this volume.

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unbeliever's duty and responsibility. But Jesus also said, 'No one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father' (*John* 6:65). Again, he said that no man can rise above his nature, 'a bad tree bears bad fruit' (*Matt.* 7:17). We bear the nature of our birth: 'That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, "You must be born again"' (*John* 3:6–7).

There was a great deal said and written on this subject in the 1830s but Finney stuck to his position and it would be fair to say that his arguments were not so much biblical as practical. He believed that evangelism has to involve telling gospel hearers that they are *able* to become Christians at once: they have to be presented with an immediate choice, and to show the sincerity and reality of their choosing Christ let them *do something* to prove it. Hence what became known as the 'altar call', that is, the practice of calling those who would be converted to take some visible action which would clinch the matter. The fact that such novel public actions were calculated to create natural excitement was the opposite. in Finney's mind, to being a drawback: 'God has found it *necessary to take advantage* of the excitability there is in mankind to produce powerful excitements among them before he can lead them to obey.'²⁴

To oppose this, Finney argued, is to destroy evangelistic preaching. The ministers who disagreed with him, he constantly tells his readers, were useless as evangelists. He carried the practical argument significantly further. If preachers will only do the right thing they will not only secure the conversion of individuals but they will secure revivals. As already said, this was the great message of his *Lectures on Revivals*. Hitherto, he claimed, the churches had supposed that revivals are simply in the hands of God to give or withhold. No wonder revivals are not constant, if we believe that, said Finney! The truth, he claimed, was that the absence of revival is due solely to the church failing to do her duty.

Finney's Case Examined

Finney used two main lines of argument to prove the correctness of his assertions:

1. THE ARGUMENT FROM HIS EXPERIENCE.

Finney constantly offset the newness of his ideas with assertions that he was sure that they were not his own:

I say that God taught me; and I know it must have been so; for surely I never had obtained these notions from man. And I have often thought that I could say with

²⁴ Quoted by Dod. *Princeton Essays*, p. 83.

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perfect truth, as Paul said, that I was not taught the Gospel by man, but by the Spirit of Christ himself.²⁵

I had no doubt then, nor have I ever had, that God led me by His Spirit, to take the course I did . . . I was divinely directed.²⁶

More common than such words is the appeal to the success of his ministry as proof that God owned what he was preaching.

The narrative given in his autobiography is very clearly constructed to impress the reader with this fact. 'God,' he writes, 'set his seal to the doctrines that were preached, and to the means that were used to carry forward that great work.'²⁷ 'After I had preached some time, and the Lord had everywhere added his blessing, I used to say to ministers, whenever they contended with me... "Show me the fruits of your ministry".'²⁸ He frequently follows such statements with reports of how ministers who held Calvinistic beliefs gave them up when they saw how 'the Spirit of God did accompany my labours.'²⁹

In this connection Finney omits to say that he had a considerable advantage if immediate visible results were to be made the test of what was scriptural. Under the former preaching the success of the gospel was only judged as people gave steady evidence of changed lives and were subsequently examined for membership of the churches. With Finney's teaching and methods there was now a much quicker and public way of telling converts. If a convert is one who submits and comes to the front, then just how many converts there are on any particular occasion will be apparent for all to see. So the numbers 'converted' made immediate news and figures proving success were now quoted in a way which was new to the evangelical churches.³⁰ This was not all. If large crowds attended preaching services and, for whatever reason, many responded to the evangelist's appeal, then the very numbers responding could be regarded as proof of 'revival'. So there was a visual demonstration, it seemed, of the truth of Finney's teaching

²⁵ *Memoirs*, pp. 87-8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 157, 237-8, 259-62.

³⁰ Speaking of the new type of evangelist, William Mitchell complained: 'He has his own measures, proclaims the number of converts, accomplishes their speedy admission to the church.' 'An Inquiry into the Utility of Modern Evangelists', *Literary and Theological Review*, II (Andover, September, 1835); quoted by McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, p. 126. R. L. Dabney, reflecting on the sensational appeal of the new evangelism, wrote of its promoters: 'They are anxious to exchange strict integrity of conviction and purity of doctrine, and the secret but mighty power of the Holy Spirit through his words, for human *eclat*, numbers, wealth, combination and power. They expect and prepare to convert the world as they built the Pacific railroad, by money and numbers.' *Discussions*, vol.2 (repr. London: Banner of Truth, 1967), p. 442.

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and a justification of his claim that revivals could indeed be promoted by the right use of means.

2. THE BARRENNESS OF THE PREVAILING ORTHODOXY

This again is another argument from alleged experience. The teaching which Finney was concerned to see overturned could not be of God because it was so useless in obtaining the conversion of souls. So he claimed. This theme runs right through his *Memoirs*. He raised it first in connection with his own conversion at Adams. His narrative gives us the impression that George Gale, the minister of the Presbyterian church, had nothing to do with his conversion and indeed would have been little or no use in aiding anyone's conversion because, holding to the Westminster Confession and being Princeton trained, his theological views were 'such as to cripple his usefulness';³¹ 'he did not understand the gospel'.³² 'The education he had received at Princeton had totally unfitted him for the work of winning souls to Christ.'³³ Under the preachers of that school, Finney asserted, unbelievers are 'almost never converted'.³⁴ Far from helping in revivals, the prevailing orthodoxy, which he called 'hyper-Calvinism', did the very opposite and created 'the greatest difficulty'.³⁵ 'I have everywhere found, that the peculiarities of hyper-Calvinism have been a great stumbling-block, both of the church and of the world.'³⁶ Albert Dod was not going too far when he wrote of Finney: 'He claims, in no guarded terms, the exclusive approbation of God for his doctrines and measures. "They (the church) see that the *blessing of God* is with those that are accused of new measures and innovation."³⁷

What shall we say to these two great arguments upon which Finney rested his case? On the first, that is the claimed success of his ministry, there is need to say little. That many people may have come to a saving knowledge of Christ under his ministry need not be disputed although the number may have been considerably less than he sometimes supposed. I say 'sometimes' because there were occasions when, in a less-controversial mood, Finney himself conceded that there had been a large fall-away rate from those who had professed to be converts.³⁸ But whatever the number, we can rejoice that there were

³¹ *Memoirs: Complete Text*, p. 57.

³² *Memoirs*, p. 157.

³³ *Memoirs: Complete Text*, p. 510.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 322. In Finney's abridged *Memoirs* the editor thought it wiser to omit both this statement and the one on Princeton in the previous reference.

³⁵ *Memoirs*, p. 256.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.368.

³⁷ *Princeton Essays*, p. 146.

³⁸ See my *Revival and Revivalism*, pp. 288–9. Writing in 1835, Dod said: 'Appearances were somewhat in favour of the new measures. At least wherever they were carried, converts were multiplied. But it is now generally understood that the numerous converts of the new measures have been, in most cases, like the

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true conversions without accepting his claim that it proves the rightness of everything which he said and did. No man ought to appeal to his work as the ground for others to accept his teaching. The best of men may err and build with 'wood, hay, straw' as well as 'gold, silver, precious stones' (1 Cor. 3:12). It was a very serious error on the part of Finney to point people to himself rather than to Scripture to justify what he believed was true.

One has to say that Finney's second argument is no less seriously wrong, and here it is an easier matter to prove it to be so. His claim was that the teaching he opposed was a hindrance both to evangelism and to revivals. The facts are against him. Take the case of his allegedly useless pastor at Adams, George Gale. When, in the late 1860s, Finney wrote the manuscript which became his *Memoirs*, Gale was dead. What Finney did not know was that back in 1853 Gale had written his own autobiography. Finney necessarily remained ignorant of its existence for it was over a century later that it was published, in 1964. Gale's narrative, which runs to 309 pages in its printed form, is at many points in marked disagreement with what is alleged by Finney. Far from being useless and perhaps unconverted, Gale was clearly in the midst of a revival in his church at Adams at the time Finney was converted. The idea that Gale did not understand the gospel in 1821 is absurd. Nor is this simply a case of Gale's memory versus Finney's for the success of the gospel under the ministry of Gale, and others in the same area, is fully corroborated by other sources.

The truth is that when Finney was working on his own autobiography (more than forty-five years after the early 1820s), to have accepted at the outset Gale's usefulness as a preacher would have been to jeopardise the whole case which he was going to present, namely, that Calvinistic belief only promotes barrenness.³⁹ But there is a more cogent refutation of Finney's appeal to history. It is that the period of the Second Great Awakening, which was a time of many powerful revivals, did not begin when Finney began his ministry in 1824. It began twenty-five years before, in the late 1790s. The readers of Finney's *Memoirs* are told that his ministry constituted the start of a 'new era', and they are led to suppose, as Dr Graham has supposed, that Finney's was the new voice which led to revival times. The truth is that the remarkable age of the Second Great Awakening was drawing near to its close when Finney began and that, despite all his teaching about

morning cloud and the early dew. In some places, not a half, a fifth, or even a tenth part of them remain.' *Princeton Essays*, p. 140.

³⁹ The fact that Gale writes of Finney with esteem and as a one-time friend makes his record the more convincing. Gale says that Finney was far from being an opponent of Calvinism at the outset of his ministry: 'When he was licensed and first labored as a missionary, he was very firm and faithful in bringing out this doctrine' (i.e., of the grace of God)... 'His peculiar views, adopted since he went to Oberlin, were no part of his theology at that time, and for a number of years afterward.' *Autobiography of G. W. Gale*, pp. 274, 186.

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continuous revival, such an age was not seen again in his lifetime.⁴⁰ The reason why Finney did not disclose this to his readers of a much later generation was that most of the preaching which had been so used of God, in the years prior to his ministry, was of the very sort that he wished to represent as barren!

The very Seminary at Princeton which he constantly characterised as disabling preachers had been prominently identified with revival since its outset in 1812. Its magazine, the *Biblical Repertory*, gave the common opinion of its professors and students, when looking back on some thirty years, it noted in 1832: 'It has pleased God to make America the theatre of the most glorious revivals that the world has ever witnessed.'⁴¹ Princeton men were leaders in many revivals; a third of the Seminary's students of the first fifty years were to go to mission fields; and there can hardly be a more serious misrepresentation of history than the idea which Finney sought to promote about the institution which thought it necessary to oppose him. Far too much biographical material is currently available on the fragrant and useful ministries of the men on the other side to Finney to make his case even remotely credible.⁴²

Why the Old School Opposed Finney

1. Finney's so-called 'new measures' were opposed because they confused two different things: an outward act and the new birth. An individual can fall on his knees, raise his hand or walk to the front, but there is nothing in the Bible to say that such actions make, or even contribute to making, a person a Christian. The older evangelical preaching taught the instant responsibility of sinners to obey the gospel in repentance and faith; it did not pass over such texts as, 'God now commands all men everywhere to repent' (*Acts* 17:30), but, at the same time, it knew that the time when hearers of the gospel get

⁴⁰ Finney himself accepted this fact. I am not overlooking the awakening of 1857–8 which was powerful but of much shorter duration, and one of the most striking things about its origins is that while revivalism had already become popular in North America it had no part in the beginning of the movement in New York City. See Samuel I. Prime, *The Power of Prayer: the New York Revival of 1858* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), pp. 27–30, 36: 'There were no revivalists; no revival machinery... the "anxious seat" and the labor of peregrinating revival-makers were unknown.' Careless assertions about Finney's work in some 'revival' literature convey misleading impressions. Goforth, for instance, links the 1857 revival in New York with Finney and says: 'By 1857, Finney was seeing fifty thousand a week turning to God' (*By My Spirit*, p. 183). This statement is very inaccurate. For Finney in 1857, see *Memoirs of Finney: Complete Text*, p. 562.

⁴¹ 'Sprague on Revivals', *The Biblical Repertory and Theological Review* (Philadelphia: Russell & Martien, 1832), p. 456.

⁴² See, for instance, J. W. Alexander, *Life of Archibald Alexander* (1854, repr. Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle, 1991); B. Tyler and Andrew Bonar, *The Life and Labours of Asahel Nettleton*, 1854, (repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975); W. B. Sprague, 'Memoir of Dr Griffin' in *Life and Sermons of Edward D. Griffin*, 1837 (repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987).

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grace to obey is not in the hands of men.⁴³ The new measures, by by-passing that fact, and appointing a physical duty which the unregenerate can perform, represented conversion as something less than it is made in the New Testament. Under old-school preaching it was expected that conviction of sin would show hearers their the need of change at the centre of their being — a work of new creation securing a new life and a new moral existence. If no such regeneration is supposed to be necessary then conversion becomes a very much easier matter.

2. This new teaching was thus popularising a dangerously superficial view of conversion, arising out of a superficial view of sin. Man's plight is a great deal more serious than the representation implied by the new measures. Men, said Finney, are not converted 'by a change wrought in their nature by creative power' but by 'yielding to the truth'.⁴⁴ In his view, the Holy Spirit does no more than present the truth, along with the preacher, and thus regeneration is effected 'by argument' in which the sinner's will is 'broken down'.⁴⁵ The public appeal for decision was seen as playing an important part in gaining this end.⁴⁶ It was on the basis of this new view of conversion that Finney told his New York hearers in 1834: 'For many centuries but little of the real gospel has been preached.'⁴⁷ Princeton's reply was to say with Charles Hodge: 'No more soul-destroying doctrine could well be

⁴³ 'Regeneration differs from conversion. Regeneration is a spiritual change, conversion is a spiritual motion. In regeneration there is a power conferred, conversion is the exercise of that power. In regeneration there is given us a principle to turn, conversion is an actual turning. Conversion is related to regeneration as the effect to the cause... In regeneration man is wholly passive; in conversion he is active. Regeneration is the motion of God in the creature; conversion is the motion of the creature to God, by virtue of that first principle.' *Works of Stephen Charnock*, vol. 3 (repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986), pp. 88–9. But because regeneration is a secret work of God in the soul no one is called upon to ascertain its existence before exercising faith and repentance. It is only by the believing acceptance of Christ that the prior work of God can come to be recognised (see, for instance, *1 Thess.* 1:3–5). Election is first in point of time but not in the believer's conscious experience (*Acts* 13:48). One of the most helpful books ever published in this area is Archibald Alexander's *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, 1844 (repr. London: Banner of Truth, 1967).

⁴⁴ *Revivals of Religion*, p. 377.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 195. He makes this further extraordinary statement: 'If a person does not believe that sinners are able to obey their Maker, and really believes that the Spirit's influences are necessary to make them able, it is impossible, with these views, to offer acceptable prayer.' For, he alleged, such prayer would 'insult God' because God would be bound to give his Spirit as 'a mere matter of common justice' if such was man's condition (pp. 356–70).

⁴⁶ The old school, of course, had no objection to enquirers being counselled after evangelistic preaching as they sometimes did themselves, but the primary purpose of the 'altar call', as Dod said, was different: 'Its object is not simply to collect in one place those who are in a particular state of mind, that they may be suitably instructed and advised. No, there is supposed to be some wonder-working power in the person's rising before the congregation and taking the assigned place.' *Princeton Essays*, p. 122.

⁴⁷ Quoted by Dod. *Princeton Essays*, p. 78.

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devised than the doctrine that sinners can regenerate themselves, and repent and believe just when they please.'⁴⁸

3. Because the new measures told people that obedience to the preacher's directions was necessary to becoming a Christian, compliance with such directions inevitably came to be treated as a means of assurance that one was now in a state of grace. If accepting Christ is the same as walking to the front, then all who have done the latter must be Christians. This was putting assurance of salvation on an entirely new basis, for the older evangelism, in both its Calvinistic and Arminian forms, had insisted that it is the Holy Spirit himself who gives assurance and that no one should assume they have passed from death to life without his witness and a corresponding change of life.

To this it was replied that, supposing a degree of harm was done, was not the fact that some were truly converted sufficient justification for the new measures? The old-school answer was simply to point out that those who were converted in such circumstances did not owe it to the wrong measures but to the grace of God and the truth they heard preached. These converts would have suffered no loss had no new measures been used, but the many who responded to the measures *without being converted* were in a far worse position for in coming forward they did what they were told to do without any result. With some justification they could come to regard conversion as an illusion.

4. The new teaching, by putting its emphasis on the instant action taken by an individual following the evangelist's appeal and not upon a changed life, inevitably lowered standards of membership in evangelical churches and so encouraged an acceptance of worldliness among professing Christians.⁴⁹ Speaking of the wrong measures which had been popularised, R. L. Dabney wrote: 'We believe that they are the chief cause, under the prime source, original sin, which has deteriorated the average standard of holy living,

⁴⁸ C. Hodge. *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (London: Nelson. 1874). p. 277.

⁴⁹ A. W. Tozer was one of the few twentieth-century evangelical leaders who spoke out against the danger. Earl Swanson has recorded how as a young minister he heard Tozer preach in Long Beach, California: 'As he came to the conclusion of his message the air was totally electrified. I was accustomed to altar calls and was fully expecting to see a mass movement forward. That surely would have been the case had he chosen to do so. Rather, in his inimitable style and brusque manner he announced "Don't come down here to the altar and cry about it — go home and live it". With that comment he dismissed the meeting.' James L. Snyder. *In Pursuit of God, The Life of A. W. Tozer* (Camp Hill, Pa.: Christian Publications, 1991), p. 154. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, when asked to be chairman for the Berlin Congress of the Billy Graham Organization in 1966, declined to do so unless the practice of the public appeal was given up by Dr Graham.

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principles, and morality, and the church discipline of our religion, until it has nearly lost its practical power over the public conscience.⁵⁰

The New Testament teaches that the change resulting from the new birth is so great that wherever it occurs a continued living of the old life is impossible: 'whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him' (1 John 3:6). 'Whatever is born of God overcomes the world' (1 John 5:4). Where there is no alienation from sin there is no re-birth. Under the new evangelism this ceased to be recognised and so there grew up many forms of holiness teaching meant to help the numbers of 'unsanctified Christians' now in the churches. Meanwhile the fundamental reason for the existence of so many 'carnal Christians' was largely unrecognised.

5. Finney's teaching that revival should be normal and continuous, not extraordinary and occasional, depended for its success on a change in the *content* of revival, The same word now came to stand for any evangelistic campaign which gathered people together in numbers, and both Finney and his followers encouraged the switch.⁵¹ Finney had charged his opponents with being 'enemies to revivals'. In reply they asserted that the opposite was the case and that it was for the very cause of revivals that they were speaking.⁵² They feared that the new teaching was taking the work of the Spirit out of his own hands. 'The influence of the Holy Spirit comes in only by the way,' wrote Dod in his review of Finney's lectures on *Revivals of Religion*.⁵³ In Wales, John Elias, the Calvinistic Methodist leader, who had preached in many revivals, put his finger on the same point. When the new teaching first crossed the Atlantic, his question was: 'Is there not a want of perceiving the corruption, obstinacy, and spiritual deadness of man, and the consequent necessity of the Almighty Spirit to enlighten and overcome him?'⁵⁴ As with brethren in the States, Elias dreaded lest 'the legitimate results of erroneous principles shall be visited upon the ruined churches of our land.'⁵⁵

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<https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2007/charles-g-finney-how-theology-affects-understanding-of-revival/>

⁵⁰ R. L. Dabney, *Discussions*, vol. 3 (repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), p. 19. See also. vol. 2, 'An Exposition of 1 Corinthians 3:10—15', pp. 551—74.

⁵¹ The Beardsley quotation given above on Finney's 'extensive revivals' in Britain are a case in point. Finney's visits to Britain saw evangelistic campaigns, not revivals.

⁵² See, for instance. *The Life and Labours of Asahel Nettleton*. pp. 348—51.

⁵³ *Princeton Essays*, p. 82.

⁵⁴ Letter to Rev. Henry Rees, 2 March 1838: *John Elias, Life, Letters and Essays* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973), p. 259.

⁵⁵ The words are those of the author of the Preface to *Letters of the Rev. Dr. Beecher and Rev. Mr. Nettleton on the 'New Measures' in Conducting Revivals of Religion* (New York, 1828), p. 103.