

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Charles G. Finney: The Architect of Modern Evangelism

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When the fireworks associated with Charles Finney began to light up the skies of western New York in 1823, everyone noticed. Some noticed his appearance, which was understandable, for Finney cut a striking figure. He was tall, surprisingly tall for his times, a full six foot two inches. He was thin and unusually refined for a self-educated New York rustic. He had a pleasant, resonant voice and no early description of him ever failed to note his exquisite, almost hypnotic, steel blue eyes.

Still, most people focused less on the man and more on his innovative and often controversial methods. He tried methods no one else would and almost everything he tried worked. Those that admired him attempted to copy him. Those that disapproved of him pilloried him without quarter. But two things are certain; Finney was not a man that could be ignored and everyone, friend and foe, wanted to better understand the reasons for his extraordinary success in promoting revivals.

The issue of Finney's success has drawn scholars since the earliest days of his ascent. He has been posited as everything from an archetypal, Jacksonian-era, self-made American, in the tradition of Abraham Lincoln, to the fountainhead of all that is wrong with modern evangelicalism. The truth lies somewhere in the middle.

The fact is that Finney was an extraordinary man. But he was not extraordinary in the same sense as Luther or Calvin; he was extraordinary in the same sense as Henry Ford. His genius lay in his vision for the mass-production of revivals on command. But he was not, at first, driven by ideology; he was driven by results and his underlying ideas were pragmatically shaped, modified and altered to perpetuate his success. His underlying theological conclusions were not set down permanently until after the close of his itinerant, revivalist career and there is evidence that even he changed his positions from time to time. It was only when Finney became a settled educator and began to instruct others on how to promote revivals that his theological undergirding began to be fully exposed.

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In the beginning at least, Finney claimed he had been an open book. In his Memoirs, Finney recalled once that he had left off a revival he was conducting when he heard that Asahel Nettleton, a famous revivalist in his own right, was at nearby Albany) New York. Finney went down to see him.

"I had had the greatest confidence in Mr Nettleton, though I had never seen him. I had had the greatest desire to see him, so much so that I had frequently dreamed of visiting him and obtaining from him information in regard to the best means in regard to promoting a revival. I wanted exceedingly to see him, and felt like sitting at his feet, almost as I would at the feet of an apostle, from what I had heard of his success in promoting revivals. At that time my confidence in him was so great that I think he could have led me almost or quite at his discretion."

What is striking about Finney's recollection is that his focus was so specific. He was not primarily interested in learning theology or even in being spiritually mentored. He only wanted to learn from Nettleton the 'best means' of conducting a revival. He was willing to be led, or so he said, as long as the instruction was instrumental in further perfecting his craft. But Nettleton snubbed him; he refused to spend any significant time with Finney. He discouraged him from attending his services and he even insisted that they not be seen together in public. Clearly, Finney made Nettleton nervous. Most likely, Nettleton was either fearful that his name would somehow be connected with Finney or that being seen in his presence might somehow be taken as an approbation of all that Finney was doing.

In the end, it did not matter. Nettleton's actions clearly hurt Finney's pride, but they did not stop him. Finney recovered with a vengeance. Later, he even recounted his gratitude that Nettleton had not made himself readily available.

"He kept me at arm's length and although as I have said we conversed on some points of theology then much discussed, it was plain that he was unwilling to say any thing regarding revivals and would not allow me to accompany him to meetings. This was the only time I saw him until I met him in the convention at New Lebanon. At no time did Mr N. ever try to correct my views in relation to revivals. After I heard more of his views and practices in promoting revivals I was thankful to God that he never did influence me upon that subject."

But if Finney really had been amenable to instruction in the beginning, as he argued, subsequent success caused him to become more entrenched in his own views. Years of acclaim and hundreds if not thousands of converts, convinced him that he had taken the correct path. He would later justify his methodology and whatever theology was attached

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to it simply on the basis of its success. To Finney, the primary focus was always on measurable results.

"I used to say to ministers whenever they contended with me about my manner of preaching, and desired me to adopt their ideas and preach as they did, that I dared not make the change they desired. I said: 'Show me a more excellent way. Show me the fruits of your ministry; and if the fruits of your ministry so far exceed mine as to give me evidence that you have found out a more excellent way than I have, I will adopt your views. But do you expect me to abandon my own views and practices and adopt yours, when you yourselves cannot deny that, whatever errors I may have fallen into, or whatever imperfections there may be in my preaching style, and in everything else, – yet the results unspeakably surpass the results of yours?'"

Clearly then, Finney concentrated on results and so did his followers. Because of that, they were always concerned with acquiring newer and even more successful means. Some of his uneducated, less refined followers wound up going too far. They laughed like idiots or barked like dogs and in doing so became caricatures, much less like Finney and more like the fanatics of Cane Ridge or the notorious Davenport whose excesses had earlier harmed the work of God in the eighteenth century. It troubled Nettleton so much that he wrote:

"Whoever has made himself acquainted with the state of things in New England near the close of the revival days of Whitefield and Edwards cannot but weep over its likeness to the present."

Nevertheless, even the better-educated men emulated his methods in order to obtain his results. Nathaniel S. Beman, one of Finney's most ardent supporters, expressed a representative attitude in an invitation to Finney to come to his church in Troy. Beman pleaded with Finney to come over and help him, 'I hope we look to God, but we must have means.'

It was those 'means', of course, that drew the ire of Finney's critics. They focused on his methodology. Many were incensed by his use of radically 'new measures in the promotion of revivals. They focused on his use of protracted meetings, his use of a radical new style of preaching, his confrontational manner, his public condemnation of established ministers, his permitting women to pray publicly in open meetings and especially his use of the 'prayer of faith' and the 'anxious bench'. The extraordinary thing is that for five years his 'new measures were the only thing on which they focused. That can be partly explained by the fact that Finney was slow to get into print. In fact, some of his earliest sermons were transcribed and printed by his critics solely for the purpose of disparaging him, which meant that some of the earlier reports concerning him have to be

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taken with a large pinch of salt. But whether the criticisms levelled against him were always fair or not, it does seem clear that opposition toward both Finney and his methods sprang up right from the start.

Criticisms of Finney evolved as he himself evolved. At first, the criticisms were as wild and free as Finney himself. But as Finney became less enigmatic so did the criticisms. In the end they turned where they ought to have started; they turned toward his theology. Perhaps it is too much to expect that they could have actually started there; his theology was, after all, as fluid as his success required. But by 1827, the core of Finney's thought seemed to have been sufficiently in place that some inferences could have been made. But no such inferences were drawn. It was not until 1831 that the men at Princeton began to whisper aloud their early suspicions.

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