

THE THEOLOGICAL METHOD OF CHARLES G. FINNEY
by Dan Fabricatore

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	p. 2
I. THE LIFE, MINISTRY, AND TIMES OF CHARLES G. FINNEY	p. 3
Personal Background of Charles G. Finney	
Political and Social Background of Finney's Life and Ministry	
II. FINNEY'S HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH TO BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION	p. 6
Finney's Hermeneutic	
Finney's Biblical Theology	
III. INTEGRATION OF BIBLICAL PASSAGES	p. 9
Church	
Atonement	
Repentance	
Justification	
Sanctification	
IV. INTEGRATION OF BIBLICAL TRUTH FROM OUTSIDE ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES	p. 13
Reason	
Common Law	
V. FINNEY'S THEOLOGY	p. 15
Theological System	
Theological Beliefs	
Central Interpretive Motif	
VI. THE METHODOLOGY OF CHARLES G. FINNEY'S MINISTRY	p. 39
The Background to his Ministry	
Revival versus Revivalism	
Methodology	
VII. CONCLUSION	p. 46
BIBLIOGRAPHY	p. 48

THE THEOLOGICAL METHOD OF CHARLES G. FINNEY
“being dead, he speaketh”

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to summarize the theological method of Charles Finney. It will attempt to show how the life and times in which he lived shaped his theology and, as a result, his ministry and methodology. It will trace his theological beliefs, stressing those aspects of his theology that he stressed. In the process, Finney’s theology will be shown to revolve around his central interpretive motif. It will be demonstrated that his theology was a reflection of the *New England Theology*, a modified form of Calvinism and Arminianism that placed an emphasis on human free will. As a result, it will be shown that Finney rejected many classical conservative beliefs such as the imputation of Adam’s sin as well as the imputation of Christ’s righteousness in reference to justification. These kinds of peculiar views led to strong criticism by well known conservative theologians of his day.

The need for this paper is based on the effect that Finney’s theology and ministry had on the church of his day and the effect that his theology and ministry continue to have some one hundred and fifty years later. His far reaching emphasis in the areas of theology and ministry cannot be overstated.

I came away with a different perspective on Finney as a person than I had when I began the study. I see in him a man who was more warm and tenderhearted than I had first thought. I believe that he loved the Lord very much and had a burden for souls, whether or not we agree with his theology or his methodology.

I. THE LIFE, MINISTRY, AND TIMES OF CHARLES G. FINNEY

A. Personal Background of Charles G. Finney

Charles Grandison Finney was born in Warwick, Connecticut in 1792 into an old New England family. In 1794 at the age of two his family moved to New York State, where he spent his childhood living in the central and northern sections of New York. His family ended up near Lake Ontario where he spent his adolescent years, becoming a lawyer in Adams, NY in 1820, at the age of 28. His law training would play an integral part of both his theology and his ministry. His theology depended heavily on arguments from law and reason, and his preaching, it was said, was noted for its courtroom-like lectures. As a matter of fact, each section of his theology is called a lecture and not a chapter.

Finney was saved the very next year (1821) in what he described as a very emotional conversion experience.¹ He soon began studies for the ministry under the local Presbyterian pastor in Adams, NY, and by December 1823 was ordained by the St. Lawrence Presbytery.

For eight years, from 1824-1832 he led revival meetings in upper New York State. From 1832-36 he was pastor of Chatham Street Chapel (Presbyterian) in New York City where he began his famous lawyer-like lectures. In 1836 he became professor of Oberlin College in Ohio, where he developed his doctrine of Christian perfectionism. He served

¹ *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text*. G.M. Rosell and R.A.G. Dupuis, (eds.), (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 16-26; James E. Johnson, "Father of American Revivalism" *Christian History* Vol. VII, Number 4, Issue 20 (1988): 6.

as president of the college from 1851-1866. He was married three times, with his first two wives dying. He died in 1875 at Oberlin at the age of 82.

Much of the details of Finney's early years come from his memoirs, which were obviously written many years after the events of his storied life. B.B. Warfield, whose book on Christian perfectionism deals extensively with Finney and the Oberlin theology, is a bit critical of Finney as an historian. He writes of the early events of Finney's ministry,

The details of Finney's early life which are current seem to rest altogether on his own recollections. He does not profess that these were complete, and there is some reason to suspect that they were not always accurate.²

Speaking of how the details of Finney's life for the first year and a half as a believer are as much a mystery as that of the apostle Paul's, Warfield notes,

The comparison, to be sure, is not very apt; but it is true that although we know many details of Finney's activities during this period and its general character is clear, our knowledge of it remains confused.³

Warfield is also highly critical of how Finney seemed to run roughhouse as a young convert to Christianity. He states,

Here is this young man, but two years a minister, but four a Christian, with no traditions of refinement behind him, and no experience of preaching save as frontier missionary, suddenly leading an assault upon the churches. He was naturally extravagant in his assertions, imperious and harsh in bearing, relying more on harrowing men's feelings than on melting them with tender appeal.⁴

² Benjamin B. Warfield, *Perfectionism*, vol. II, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932), 9. For a similar evaluation of Finney as an historian, see Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1858*, (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1994), 256-259.

³ B. B. Warfield, *Perfectionism*, vol. II, 17.

While such criticism may seem a bit excessive, Warfield does seem to have captured the spirit of the young preacher. A closer reading of Finney's later years would show that he had in fact mellowed quite a bit.

This introductory section has only surveyed the ministry of Charles Finney. While it may sometimes be helpful to deal with a theologian's ministry in total at this point so as to comment on how it impacted his theological method, it seems to this writer that with Finney, it is best to see how his theological method influenced his ministry. For example, as we will see, it was his theological views of man as a free moral agent that heavily influenced his methodology in ministry.

B. Political and Social Background of Finney's Life and Ministry

Finney's ministry began during an exciting time in United States history. America had started its march west, and a spirit of rugged individualism was sweeping the country.

With the war of 1812 over, and Andrew Jackson winning the battle of New Orleans in 1815, America set out to settle the west. It was ripe for a man-centered theology. In a sense, America needed a theology to watch over her as she "took the bulls by the horn" and Finney offered her just that. Gresham notes,

The emphasis of Finney's theology upon human ability and responsibility reflected the political discussions of the day concerning the common person's ability to govern himself...Finney's religious views expressed the individualism, freedom, self-reliance, and optimism experienced in the American western frontiers.⁵

⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁵ John L. Gresham, *Charles Finney's Doctrine of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987), 2,3.

In reality, Finney's theology was a means of insuring that America not fall into lawlessness. It is this idea of self-governing and man as a free moral agent that would be the basis for so much of the criticism against Finney's theology.

The two-term presidency of Andrew Jackson (1829-1837) coincided with the great Rochester Revival that gave Finney national recognition. Finney found himself right in the middle of the "Second Great Awakening" experiencing great success in ministry. It has been said that if Jackson was America's national folk hero, then Finney was her religious one.⁶

II. FINNEY'S HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH TO BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

A. Finney's Hermeneutic

Finney held to what might loosely be called a literal hermeneutic. His post-millennial theology would indicate that even in areas of prophecy, he employed a literal hermeneutic, seeing that he took the 1000 years of Revelation 20 in a literal manner, though we might disagree with the chronology of his eschatological timeline. It is acknowledged that some postmillennialists of his day, while holding that the return of Christ would follow the kingdom age, didn't necessarily hold that the kingdom would be a thousand years in duration.

In one of the few places where he describes his hermeneutical method, he states that there are five "well-settled rules of biblical interpretation."⁷ They are as follows:

⁶ James E. Johnson, "Father of American Revivalism" *Christian History* Vol. VII, Number 4, Issue 20 (1988): 9.

- (1) Different passages must be so interpreted, if they can be, as not to contradict each other.
- (2) Language is to be interpreted according to the subject matter of discourse.
- (3) Respect is always to be had to the general scope and design of the speaker or writer.
- (4) Texts that are consistent with either theory, prove neither.
- (5) Language is to be so interpreted, if it can be, as not to conflict with sound philosophy, matter of fact, the nature of things, or immutable justice.⁸

It would seem from his fourth principle that Finney may have found a way to reject one of the steps of doing theology, namely the integration or synthesis of authors and history. When such an apparent conflict arises, Finney felt free to look for his own interpretation and use reason as the determining factor. In that way Turner is correct when he states that Finney's methodology regulated Scripture to a "secondary importance."⁹

The last principle of Finney's five principles, at least to this observer, is Finney's governing principle in his approach to the Scriptures. He states that when interpreting biblical language, it should not "conflict with sound philosophy, matter of fact, nature of things or sound justice." Finney is so heavily influenced by reason and law that one cannot help but see this as his major flaw. For Finney, if a doctrine seems out of character with reason and established law or justice, it is dismissed out of hand. For Finney, if a doctrine seems inconsistent with common sense, it must be rejected for God operates on the premise of common sense and reason. For instance, in his rejection of the doctrine of original sin, he comments on Psalm 51:5, a passage used by most theologians to

⁷ *Finney's Systematic Theology: The Complete and Newly Expanded 1878 Edition*, (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1994), 254.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *A Critique of Charles G. Finney's Theology*, p. 34.

demonstrate that man is born with a sin nature. He quotes the passage and makes the following comment.

“Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me”
(Psalms 51:5)

Upon this I remark, that it would seem, if this text is to be understood literally, that the Psalmist intended to affirm the sinful state of his mother, at the time of his conception, and during gestation. But, to interpret these passages as teaching the constitutional sinfulness of man, is to contradict God’s own definition of sin, and the only definition that human reason or common sense can receive, to wit, that ‘sin is a transgression of the law.’ This is, no doubt, the only correct definition of sin. But we have seen that the law does not legislate over substance, requiring men to have a certain nature, but over voluntary action only. If the Psalmist really intended to affirm, that the substance of his body was sinful from its conception, then he not only arrays himself against God’s own definition of sin, but he also affirms sheer nonsense. The substance of an unborn child sinful! It is impossible!¹⁰

As mentioned above, Finney’s heavy dependence upon reason was in fact the weakness of his theological methodology. Hodge, commenting on Finney’s emphasis on reason in doing theology writes,

The system of Professor Finney is a remarkable product of relentless logic. It is valuable as a warning. It shows to what extremes the human mind may be carried when abandoned to its own guidance. He begins with certain axioms, or, as he calls them, truths of the reason, and from these he draws conclusions which are indeed deductions, but which shock the moral sense, and prove nothing but that his premises are false.¹¹

More will be said of his theological system. The point here has to do with his hermeneutic. Reason, as well as principles of law and justice, govern his hermeneutic.

¹⁰ *Finney’s Systematic Theology: The Complete and Newly Expanded 1878 Edition*, 255.

¹¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. III (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981 reprint), 8,9.

B. Finney's Biblical Theology

As far as this writer can tell from the reading of Finney's *Systematic Theology* as well as what other have written of him, Finney did not do theology in a traditional manner. Finney does in fact have a hermeneutical approach as we will soon see, and from that scheme he leads out a meaning of the text, but that meaning is dumped right into his systematic theology after it has been run through the final grid of reason. So in that manner his hermeneutical approach is not really exegetical but eisegetical, since he is using the Scriptures for the purpose of validating his interpretation.¹² Finney is not doing biblical theology as he develops his systematic theology.

III. INTEGRATION OF BIBLICAL PASSAGES

Finney's theology is not a treatment of the biblical text so much as it is a defense of God from a rationalistic approach.¹³ Finney does use the Scriptures, but unfortunately he is guilty of the same proof-texting for which he chides others. There is little or no exegesis going on, but his citing of Scriptures does show how he integrated Scriptures from both the Old and New Testaments. I've chosen five areas of Finney's theology in order to illustrate how he integrated passages from both testaments.

¹² David Turner, *A Critique of Charles G. Finney's Theology*, (unpublished paper presented at Theology Night, Baptist Bible College, 1977), 34.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 25-36. Turner lays out the five basic principles that are key to understanding Finney's theological method.

A. Church

In discussing the fact that believers arrive at entire or complete sanctification in their earthly lives, he alluded to the Jewish church of the Old Testament and the Christian church of the New Testament.¹⁴ My point here is simply to say that he seemed to see the church as the body of believers or saints in any dispensation. In this example, he would clearly be more at home in his Presbyterian roots.

B. Atonement

In regards to the atonement, Finney referred to classical Old Testament passages as having a direct bearing on clear New Testament truth. For instance, He cites Isaiah 53:10-12 as demonstrating that the sending of the Son into the world to die on behalf of sinners as an arrangement between the Father and the Son.¹⁵ In arguing that without the atonement no sinner could be saved, he quotes Hebrews 9:22,23, which, as we know is a commentary on the Old Testament sacrificial system found in Leviticus:

22 And according to the Law, *one may almost say*, all things are cleansed with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

23 Therefore it was necessary for the copies of the things in the heavens to be cleansed with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these.

Finney used classical Old Testament passages together with New Testament passages to, as he states, “establish the fact of the vicarious death of Christ, and redemption through His blood.”¹⁶ These passages included Isaiah 53:5,6 along with Matthew 20:28 and

¹⁴ *Finney's Systematic Theology: The Complete and Newly Expanded 1878 Edition*, 386.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 215.

26:28 as well as New Testament epistles such as Romans 3:24-26; 5:9-11,18,19.

However, as we will see in his treatment of the atonement in his theological views, he held to the governmental theory that God made it possible for sinners to be saved if they would repent and believe the gospel and be saved. The imputation of Christ's righteousness was denied. In other words, we might say that while he integrated passages in a classical evangelical manner, he interpreted them a bit differently, allowing, I believe, reason to govern his interpretation. As we will see, this same truth applies to other branches of his theology.

C. Repentance

Finney held that repentance was “a change in moral character”¹⁷ while also being “a condition of our justification.”¹⁸ Repentance is not something brought about by God in the heart of the sinner, but is the volitional response of the sinner. He rejected that repentance was a work of God in a spiritually dead sinner, since God calls him to repent and therefore he must be able to do so. In his systematic theology, Finney only deals with about four pages on the topic of repentance before he goes on to discuss impenitence. He addresses only two verses of Scripture in his discussion on repentance and neither one actually deal with the doctrine of repentance as it relates to salvation (Proverbs 28:13; James 5:16). Repentance plays a larger part in Finney's ministry than it does his theology. The reason for this is obvious in that his ministry was entirely focused on man

¹⁶ Ibid., 216.

¹⁷ Ibid., 343.

¹⁸ Ibid., 366.

being able to move towards God by his own natural ability.

D. Justification

Finney integrated Old Testament passages with New Testament truth without regard to what we might call a dispensational hermeneutic. He quotes Old Testament passages where God is speaking to His people Israel and uses these passages for the purpose of demonstrating that a believer who sins can be condemned. He mixes Old Testament “life” (physical, tied to land) with New Testament “life” (being eternal).

²⁴But when the righteous turneth away from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, *and* doeth according to all the abominations that the wicked *man* doeth, shall he live? All his righteousness that he hath done shall not be mentioned: in his trespass that he hath trespassed, and in his sin that he hath sinned, in them shall he die.
(Ezekiel 18:24)

His point in integrating this passage with, for instance, 2 Corinthians 6:1 which states, “We then, *as* workers together *with him*, beseech *you* also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain”, is that obedience is a condition for ultimate justification. In integrating these passages, he himself says, “The Bible, in almost every variety or manner, represents perseverance in faith, and obedience to the end, as a condition of ultimate justification.”¹⁹ The point is that Finney would not look at such promises from a dispensational point of view. In other words, he would not view such promises of blessing and life in the Old Testament to be tied primarily to Israel’s obedience and possession and blessing of the land. He uses these kinds of passages in the Old Testament to validate his uses of certain New Testament passages in demonstrating his doctrine.

¹⁹ Ibid., 370.

Nowhere in his systematic theology does Finney interact with Genesis 15:6 and the imparting of righteousness to Abraham upon faith. In addition, he does not cite Romans 4:3, 9, 22 or Galatians 3:6 where Paul cites Genesis 15:6 in making his point about imputed righteousness. He does quote James 2:17-26, which contains a quote of Genesis 15:6 but he does not comment on the verse.

E. Sanctification

In reference to sanctification, Finney saw the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31 as being able to be fulfilled by individual New Testament believers as they lived by faith. He believed that the New Covenant spoke of entire or complete sanctification for individuals, stating “this is undeniably a promise of entire sanctification.”²⁰ The quoting of the New Covenant in Hebrews 8:8-12 supported his view, he believed, since it was quoted at the first coming of Christ and is therefore “applicable to the gospel day.”²¹ As we will see in his theology of sanctification, Finney tended to mix passages that speak of spiritual maturity with those that speak of our future sanctification. In other words, the transformation that awaits us is available in the present age.

IV. INTEGRATION OF BIBLICAL TRUTH FROM OUTSIDE ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES

A. Reason

Finney believed that reason was a God-given gift to man for both the understanding

²⁰ Ibid., 385.

²¹ Ibid.

of theology and the communicating of biblical truth to man. Finney's emphasis on reason, based upon clear "first truths," as well as his idea of philosophy and psychology, is woven throughout his entire systematic theology. Finney bought into the Scottish Common Sense Philosophy developed by Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart. This philosophy held that the basic beliefs of reason, intuition, and observation that were commonly held by all should be relied upon. One cannot overestimate the influence that such disciplines played in his systematic theology, especially in the area of man being a free moral agent. As Finney lays the basis for his theology, namely moral government, he writes,

Theology is so related to psychology that the successful study of the former without knowledge of the latter is impossible. Every theological system and every theological opinion assumes something as true in psychology. Theology is, to a great extent, the science of mind in relations to moral law. God is a mind or spirit: all moral agents are in his image. Theology is the doctrine of God, comprehending His existence, attributes, relations, character, works, word, government (providential and moral), and of course, it must embrace the facts of human nature and the science of moral agency. All theologians do and must assume the truth of some system of psychology and mental philosophy, and those who exclaim most loudly against metaphysics no less than others.²²

Finney calls reason "that function of the intellect which immediately holds or intuits a class of truths which, from their nature, are not cognizable either by the understanding or the sense."²³ In other words, these "truths" are those which are common to all of man and are to be accepted.

²² Ibid., 12.

²³ Ibid., 13.

B. Common Law

As noted in the first chapter, Finney was a trained lawyer and this academic discipline clearly influenced his theology. As a matter of fact, Weddle notes that,

It is clear that that Finney's abbreviated legal career made an impression on him entirely out of proportion to the quantity and quality of his apprenticeship. Indeed, besides his fondness for parallels between the style of the preacher and that of the lawyer, Finney claims to draw the very organizing principles of his theology from those 'old authors' he read as clerk in the office of Judge Benjamin Wright.²⁴

Finney took the "science of law" and incorporated it into his theology. Therefore, Common Law, with its emphasis on good will and common sense, was a perfect marriage with reason. It created for Finney his ideal worldview.

Much more can be said about his dependence upon reason, Common Law, and other academic disciplines in the forming of his theology. However, I believe that as we look at his actual theological views, the role of such disciplines will become even more evident.

V. FINNEY'S THEOLOGY

Finney's Systematic Theology is not what one would call a classical treatment of systematic theology. His theology is made up of a series of lectures on topics that are important to Finney. As lectures, one finds Finney's theology containing questions and objections that are more common in a debate or court of law.²⁵ He often raises these

²⁴ David L. Weddle, *The Law as Gospel: Revival and Reform in the theology of Charles G. Finney*, (Metuchen, NJ: 1985), 46.

²⁵ *Finney's Systematic Theology: The Complete and Newly Expanded 1878 Edition*. Excellent examples of these may be found in pages 26,27; 67; 109-120; 232-235.

objections and questions in anticipation from his detractors. There are, for instance, no sections or lectures on theology proper, bibliology, Christology, pneumatology, anthropology, hamartiology, ecclesiology, or eschatology. He touches on these topics but not in a traditional manner in which systematic theology is done. As a result, there is no real stratification taking place. Most theologians stress the need for such stratification in doing theology.²⁶

A. Theological System

The basis of Finney's theological system was God's moral government. Drawing upon his legal training, Finney argues that moral law "is a pure and simple idea of the reason. It is the idea of perfect, universal, and constant consecration of the whole being to the highest good of being."²⁷

Finney's system of theology held to the premise that human beings were moral agents capable of choosing to be holy. Individuals are either holy or sinful; their free will determines which they will be. As a result, it is a short jump to what is sometimes called perfectionism.

B. Theological Beliefs

1. God's moral government

a. Defined

To understand Finney's theology and ministry, it is imperative that one understands

²⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 78,79.

²⁷ *Finney's Systematic Theology: The Complete and Newly Expanded 1878 Edition*, 22.

his view of moral government. He states,

The primary idea of government, is that of direction, guidance, control by, or in accordance with, rule or law.

All government is, and must be, either moral or physical: that is, all guidance and control must be exercised in accordance with either moral or physical law; for there can be no laws that are neither moral nor physical.

Physical government is control, exercised by a law of necessity or force, as distinguished from the law of free will, or liberty. It is the control of substance, as opposed to free will. The only government of which substance, as distinguished from free will, is capable, is and must be physical. This is true, whether the substance is material or immaterial, whether matter or mind. States and changes, whether of matter or mind, that are not actions of free will, must be subject to the law of necessity. They must therefore belong to the department of physical government. Physical government, then, is the administration of physical law, or the law of force.

Moral government consists in the declaration and administration of physical law. It is the government of free will by motives as distinguished from the government of substance by force. Physical government presides over and controls physical states and changes. Moral government presides over and controls, or seeks to control the actions of free will: it presides over intelligent and voluntary states of changes and mind. It is a government of motive, as opposed to a government of force - control exercised, or sought to be exercised, in accordance with the law of liberty, as opposed to the law of necessity. It is the administration of moral as opposed to physical law.

Moral government includes the dispensation of rewards and punishments; and is administered by means as complicated and vast as the whole of the works, and providence, and ways, and grace of God.²⁸

In other words, God governs His creation, but not by force. Instead, he influences man through gentle persuasion. Through commands and consequences, God appeals to man's free will in order to direct them, and these commands are in line with reason and nature.

One cannot emphasize enough how much influence Finney's understanding of moral government has in all his other views of theology. It affects his doctrine of sin, man, and salvation. Ultimately, a theology that is so influenced, will manifest itself in one's

²⁸ Ibid., 25.

ministry as well.

b. Human responsibility to moral government

The moral law or obligation of this government is simple: to love God (and neighbor) as prescribed in the Law of Moses (Deut. 6:5). Finney states,

Moral law invariably holds one language. It never changes its requirement. 'Thou shalt love' (Deut. 6:5), or be perfectly benevolent, is its uniform and its only demand. This demand it never varies, and never can vary.²⁹

The basis for this moral law is not because of the will of God, or because it is the right thing to do, but because of God's intrinsic value; it promotes His "well-being."³⁰ As stated, Finney's view of the moral responsibility of man to God affects all his other theological views. As we will now see, man is able to carry out such an obligation.

2. *Free will*

a. Finney's two major presuppositions

Finney's theology of moral government and its moral obligation or law to love God for His intrinsic value alone, assumes that man is free to do just that. In his preface to his systematic theology, Finney declares his two major presuppositions. He states,

In this work I have endeavored to define the terms used by Christian divines, and the doctrines of Christianity, as I understand them, and to push to their logical consequences the cardinal admissions of the more recent and standard theological writers. Especially do I urge, to their logical consequences, the two admissions that the will is free, and that sin and holiness are voluntary acts of mind.³¹

²⁹ Ibid., 22.

³⁰ Ibid., 44-89. Finney argues over and over that it is solely God's intrinsic value that is the basis for loving Him; cf. pp. 44,46, 49, 50, 55,56,57,71,73,79, 81,88.

³¹ Ibid., 2.

b. The influence of Jonathan Edwards and the New England Theology

Finney's views on free will were no doubt heavily influenced by the *New School Theology* championed by Jonathan Edwards a hundred years earlier in what is referred to as the *New England Theology*. This modified Calvinism set the tone for the view that God's deals with men as rational, moral beings, capable of action and choice.

We know Jonathan Edwards best, perhaps, for his sermon "Sinners in the hands of an angry God" and one's impression might be that he was some kind of hell, fire, and brimstone preacher. Those who have read Edwards know that just the opposite was true. He was a man whose interests were much broader than this, and whose writings were heavily philosophical and ethical in nature. One can say that Edward's writings were an "attempt to justify Calvinism in the midst of the moral and intellectual Enlightenment of the 1700s."³² His writings were in fact an attempt to explain the Great Awakening as a work of God alone, not something that was initiated by man. Edwards promoted governmental effects of Christ's atonement, and the need for man to repent. In his book, *Freedom of the Will*, Edwards argued from a heavily philosophical point of view that man had the natural ability to repent, but not the moral ability to do so. In other words, he could stop sinning, but he wouldn't stop sinning.³³ Finney completely rejects Edwards on this point. He writes,

It is amazing to see how so great and good a man could involve himself in a metaphysical fog, and bewilder himself and his readers to such a degree, that an

³² Allen C. Guelzo, "The Making of a Revivalist" *Christian History* Vol. VII, Number 4, Issue 20 (1988): 29.

³³ *Ibid.*

absolutely senseless distinction should pass into current phraseology, philosophy, and theology of the church, and a score of theological dogmas be built upon the assumption of its truths...Edwards I revere; his blunders I deplore.³⁴

He added,

I know it is trying to you, as it is to me, to connect anything ridiculous with so great and so revered a name as that of President Edwards. But if a blunder as his has entailed perplexity and error on the church, surely his great and good soul would now thank the hand that should blot out the error from under heaven.³⁵

Warfield is a bit sympathetic to Finney on this point, given the confusion of terminology coming from the New England theology. He writes,

The ultimate ground of this confusion cannot, however, be laid at the door of the manner in which the Oberlin men preferred to frame their argument... This language is founded on the current New England distinction between “natural” and “moral” ability; and is intended to assert that we are commanded to be perfect, that full provision for our perfection is made, that it is our duty to be perfect, and that there is no reason why we are not perfect except that we will not strive to be perfect with the energy requisite to attain it. This is supposed to be justly expressed by saying that perfection is attainable, but will never actually be attained.³⁶

Warfield however quickly comes to the defense of Edwards and the New England

Theology by clarifying what they meant. He states,

What they were interested in affirming was that God in His grace had made provision in the Gospel of His Son and the baptism of the Spirit to transmute that natural “will not” which, despite to so-called “natural ability” results every child of man in a real “can not,” into a glorious “can.” What they were concerned to assert was real practicable “attainability” due to the provisions of God’s grace which placed within the reach of every believer at his option an actualized perfection.³⁷

³⁴ *Finney’s Systematic Theology: The Complete and Newly Expanded 1878 Edition*, 314.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 315.

³⁶ *Perfectionism*, vol. II, 73.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

The result of Edward's legacy of the *New England Theology* was the *New Divinity*, championed by Joseph Bellamy (1719-90) and Samuel Hopkins (1721-1803). Hopkins moved away from Edwards on the imputation of Adam's sin to all mankind, and held that the human sin nature resulted from sinful acts.

The final outgrowth of the *New England Theology* was the *New Haven Theology*, championed by Edwards's grandson, Timothy Dwight who served as president of Yale. His desire for revival led him to place more emphasis on human effort than his grandfather. This new theology still maintained the traditional Calvinistic doctrines such as predestination, election, and God's saving grace in converting the sinner, but it also stressed the natural obligation of the sinner to repent.³⁸ The sinner was able to do this in and of himself, since his nature was not effected by the sin of Adam, but he had the free will to choose to obey as did Adam in the garden. Dwight's best pupil was Nathaniel Taylor, who went on to propose a theology of moral government. This became the basis for Finney's theology. As a matter of fact, Warfield, as well as others, calls Finney's theology "Taylorism."³⁹ There are those who argue that Finney did arrive at his theology independently of Taylor⁴⁰ while others saw it as a mix, being derived "both from the New

³⁸ cf. Timothy L. Smith in "The Doctrine of the Sanctifying Spirit: Charles G. Finney's Synthesis of Wesleyan and Covenant Theology." *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 13 (Spring, 1978): 93. Smith writes that the result of the New England Theology was that it "transformed Calvinist dogma into practical Arminianism, without having to jettison Calvinist verbiage."

³⁹ Ibid., 19. cf. also fn. 47. Also, see Frank Hugh Foster, *A Genetic History of the New England Theology*, (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963), 467.

⁴⁰ Albert T. Swing, "President Finney and an Oberlin Theology," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 57 (July 1900): 465.

England group and from his own independent reflection.”⁴¹ It was ultimately the aspect of the *New Haven Theology*, which led to the Old School/New School controversy in the Presbyterian churches, and at Princeton.⁴²

The result of this shift for revival and the emphasis on human ability to repent and believe the gospel, was a strong code of ethics and preaching that contained a heavy dose of emotional intensity. Enter Charles G. Finney.

3. *Imputed sin/Moral depravity*

a. Rejection of the imputation of Adam’s sin

As to the doctrine of imputed sin, Finney denied its teaching. He believed that individuals were only responsible for their own sinful actions. This would have made perfect sense given his legal grid. The actions of one are logically not imputed to another. It isn’t that way in the legal world, which is a world built on reason and common sense, therefore God would not operate on such a level. Since such a doctrine is irrational, not based on reason, God could never hold to it, since God is rational and would never violate the laws of reason. For Finney, therefore, man is responsible for his own actions. He stated that he “could not receive that theological fiction of imputation.”⁴³

b. Finney’s definition of the depravity of man

He defined moral depravity as a “depravity of free will, not the faculty itself, but of

⁴¹ James E. Johnson, “Charles Finney and a Theology of Revivalism,” *Church History* 38 (1969): 342.

⁴² W.A. Hoffecker, “New School Theology,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), p. 767.

⁴³ *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text*, 58.

free action. It consists in a violation of moral law.”⁴⁴ He called moral depravity “a depravity of choice.”⁴⁵ In other words, for Finney, “moral depravity is sin itself and not the cause of sin.”⁴⁶

As we noted under Finney’s hermeneutical approach, he did not believe that infants were guilty before God, since they committed no act of sin for which God could condemn them. They were moral agents who had not reached the age when they were guilty as sinners. Finney states,

We are unable to say precisely at what age infants become moral agents, and of course how early they become sinners. Doubtless there is much difference among children in this respect.⁴⁷

Finney believed that the doctrine of imputed sin logically led to the doctrine of Universalism, since God would be obligated to save all men, since He couldn’t condemn them to hell for something for which they were not responsible!⁴⁸ Again, Finney’s reason is governing his theology.

c. Finney’s treatment of passages that seem to support the imputation of Adam’s sin to man

In alluding to Finney’s *hermeneutical approach to biblical interpretation* we looked

⁴⁴ *Finney’s Systematic Theology: The Complete and Newly Expanded 1878 Edition*, p. 243.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 267.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 263,264.

at the example of Psalm 51:5. As we stated, he rejected the doctrine of original sin and stated that it was impossible for the passage to be talking of the sinful nature of a child in the womb. How then does Finney interpret the passage? What does Psalm 51:5 mean? Finney believed that David was using the “strong language of poetry” to make the point that he was a sinner as far back as he could remember. He writes of David,

He remembered sins among the earliest acts of his recollected life. He broke out in the language of this text to express, not the anti-scriptural and nonsensical dogma of a sinful constitution, but to affirm in his strong, poetic language, that he had been a sinner from the commencement of his moral existence, or from the earliest moment of his capability of being a sinner. This is the strong language of poetry.⁴⁹

Finney interpreted similar passages in a similar manner. He quotes Psalm 58:3 as a passage that is often used to infer that man has a sinful nature from birth because of the imputation of Adam’s sin. The passage reads,

“The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies.”

Again, he denies that the passage is in any way referring to the transmission of the sin of Adam to all men. He simply denies its teaching because it is contrary to reason. He writes,

It does not affirm anything of a sinful nature, but this has been inferred from what it does affirm, that the wicked are estranged from their birth. But does this mean, that they are really and literally estranged from the day and hour of their birth, and that they really go astray the very day they are born, speaking lies? This everyone knows to be contrary to fact.⁵⁰

The bottom line for Finney regarding the sin nature is very simple. He states regarding

⁴⁹ Ibid., 256.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

these two passages as well as John 3:6 and Ephesians 2:3,

The subject matter of discourse in these texts is such as to demand that we should understand them as not implying, or asserting, that sin is an essential part of our nature.⁵¹

d. Finney's understanding of why man sins

Finney saw all of mankind sort of like Adam, not after the fall, but before it. Man is somewhat neutral; he sins only when tempted. When man isn't sinning, he is holy. As a matter of fact, Finney argues that it is not a sin nature that stimulates us to sin, since Adam and Eve sinned prior to receiving their sin nature! He states, "But if sin necessarily implies a sinful nature, how did Adam and Eve sin? Had they a sinful nature to account for, and to cause their first sin?"⁵² Finney simply denied that "Adam's nature became in itself sinful by the fall."⁵³ Why? Because it defies reason. He is perfectly clear about this point when he states his basis for rejecting the imputation of Adam's sin. He writes of the doctrine of imputed sin,

This doctrine is a stumbling block both to the church and the world, infinitely dishonorable to God, and an abomination alike to God and the human intellect, and should be banished from every pulpit, and every formula of doctrine, and from the world. It is a relic of heathen philosophy, and was foisted in among the doctrines of Christianity by Augustine, as every one may know who will take the trouble to examine for himself. This view of moral depravity that I am opposing, has long been the stronghold of Universalism. From it, the Universalists inveigh with resistless force against the idea that sinners should be sent to hell. Assuming the long-defended doctrine of original or constitutional sinfulness, they proceeded to show, that it would be infinitely unreasonable and unjust in God to send them to hell. What! Create them with a sinful nature, from which they proceed, by a law of necessity, actual

⁵¹ Ibid., 257.

⁵² Ibid., 257,258.

⁵³ Ibid., 261.

transgressions, and then send them to an eternal hell for having this nature, and for transgressions that are unavoidable! Impossible! They say; and the human intellect responds, Amen.⁵⁴

He believed that just as sin with Adam was the result of a simple temptation, so too we sin simply because we are tempted.⁵⁵ Finney summed up his view of man's sin by asking and answering his own question. He writes,

Why is sin so natural to mankind? Not because their nature is itself sinful, but because their appetites and passions tend so strongly to self-indulgence. These are temptations to sin, but sin itself consists not in these appetites and propensities, but in the voluntary committal of the will to their indulgence. This committal of the will is selfishness, and when the will is once given up to sin, it is very natural to sin. The will once committed to self-indulgence as its end, selfish actions are in a sense spontaneous.⁵⁶

Finney never really adequately defines why man's appetites and passions tend so strongly to self-indulgence. Apparently, God made him that way, just as he made Adam that way and placed him in the garden. The logical deduction is that Finney seems to blame God for the original state of man that included such a propensity to sin. Warfield notes,

We have here of course only the familiar construction of the old *Rationalismus Vulgaris*; and no more here than in the implication of God in bringing the human race into a condition of universal depravity escaped. It was God, no doubt, who made the human race after such a fashion that its selfish impulses should get the start of its reason in the development of the child, who should therefore be hopelessly committed to sin before it knew any better.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Ibid., 263.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 264.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 268.

⁵⁷ *Perfectionism*, vol. II, 183.

e. Finney and Romans 5:12

An interesting footnote to Finney's theology of the imputation of Adam's sin to mankind. Finney, as we know, based most of his theology on reason, yet he did interact with the Scriptures somewhat. Yet in the Scripture index of his systematic theology, there is no reference to Romans 5:12. Nowhere in his lecture on moral depravity does he interact with this passage, nor anywhere in his entire theology does he comment on the passage. It is an odd omission, since he never seems afraid to take on any view contrary to his positions.

Finney's understanding of the effects of Adam's sin on man will obviously affect his view of the atonement and Christ's substitutional death for sinners.

f. Conclusion

To say that Finney's doctrine of sin is defective may be an understatement. Turner has completed an extensive exegetical evaluation of Finney's doctrine of sin and has come to the conclusion that it is erroneous. While one aspect of sin is volitional and a similar aspect of depravity is voluntary, Turner notes

neither of these aspects supply a complete picture of Biblical doctrine. The Bible clearly teaches an inherited sin nature which is the basis of sinful activities. In denying this, the basal and causal aspect of sin, Finney's system of salvation merely cuts at the branches and leaves the roots untouched.⁵⁸

4. *Atonement*

a. Governmental view

Finney held to the governmental theory of the atonement. The imputation of Christ's

⁵⁸ *The Law as Gospel: Revival and Reform in the theology of Charles G. Finney*, 122.

righteousness to the sinner was denied. He believed that in the governmental theory of the Atonement that Christ's death made it allowable for God to forgive sinners if they made themselves righteous by faith.⁵⁹ He described it as "a covering of their sins by His sufferings"⁶⁰ and "a satisfaction of public justice for our sins."⁶¹ Finney called the atonement and redemption through Christ the "great theme of the Bible."⁶²

b. God naturally inclined to provide atonement

Finney believed that God was inclined to provide atonement. He believed that natural theology taught that God "was sufficiently and infinitely disposed to extend pardon to the penitent."⁶³ He states,

Natural theology is abundantly competent to show, that God could not be just to His own intelligence, just to His character, and just to the universe, in dispensing with the execution of divine law, except upon the condition of providing a substitute of such a nature as to reveal fully, and impress as deeply, the lessons that would be taught by the execution, as the execution itself would do...Public justice, by which every executive magistrate in the universe is bound, sternly and peremptorily forbids that mercy shall be extended to any culprit, without some equivalent being rendered to the government.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Allen C. Guelzo, "The Making of a Revivalist" *Christian History* Vol. VII, Number 4, Issue 20 (1988): 28.

⁶⁰ *Finney's Systematic Theology: The Complete and Newly Expanded 1878 Edition*, p. 211.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 215. For an excellent treatment of Finney's doctrine of the Atonement, see David L. Weddle, *The Law as Gospel: Revival and Reform in the theology of Charles G. Finney*, 192-209.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 218.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 213.

Finney's opposition to the imputation of sin and/or righteousness is clearly reflected in his memoirs.

c. Finney's clear rejection of the imputation of Adam's sin and guilt to all men

Finney was "discipled" under his first pastor, George Gale. They would spend hours talking about the imputation of Adam's sin to man as well as the imputation of Christ's righteousness to all who believe. Finney recounts how Gale had argued that the guilt of Adam's sin was imputed to all his posterity, and how that man received from Adam "a nature wholly sinful and morally corrupt in every faculty of soul and body; so that we are totally unable to perform any act acceptable to God."⁶⁵ Finney argued that the "wonderful theological fiction"⁶⁶ of imputation was applied by others who held to the Westminster Confession to the one act of Christ as well. He writes,

As soon as I learned what were the unambiguous teachings of the Confession of faith on these points, I did not hesitate at all on all suitable occasions to declare my dissent from them. I repudiated and exposed them. Wherever I found that any class of persons were hidden behind these dogmas, I did not hesitate to demolish them to the best of my ability.⁶⁷

d. The extent of the atonement in Finney's theology

As to the extent of the atonement, it is no surprise that he held it to be unlimited in scope.⁶⁸ Finney's disagreement with Gale over the extent of the atonement is well

⁶⁵ *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text*, 59.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁶⁸ *Finney's Systematic Theology: The Complete and Newly Expanded 1878 Edition*, 223-229.

documented in his *Memoirs* as well.⁶⁹ Obviously, a call or invitation for sinners to be saved with provision made only for the elect would have been irrational for Finney.

5. *Justification*

a. Finney's rejection of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer

Finney denied that righteousness was imputed, but argued that it was imparted. He stated "gospel justification is not to be regarded as a forensic or judicial proceeding."⁷⁰ Justification was based upon "the ground of universal, perfect, and uninterrupted obedience to law."⁷¹ In other words, sanctification is a "means"⁷² of salvation or justification. He stated that some theologians "have made justification a condition of sanctification, instead of making sanctification a condition of justification."⁷³ He rejected the belief that once a believer is justified, he can never again come under the condemnation of God. In commenting on those who held to this view, he stated,

They maintain that after this first act of faith it is impossible for the sinner to come into condemnation; that, once being justified, he is always thereafter justified, whatever he may do.⁷⁴

He called such a view "antinomianism."⁷⁵ Warfield commented on Finney's view that

⁶⁹ *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text*, 45.

⁷⁰ *Finney's Systematic Theology*, 360.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 362.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 449.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 368.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 369.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

sanctification is a basis of justification by calling his soteriology a “work-salvation”⁷⁶ since it replaced the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith to justification by man’s own righteousness.

b. Justification for Finney dealt with only past sins

Therefore it should not be a surprise given Finney’s evaluation of the traditional view of justification, that his own view of it dealt only with past sins, and not present and future sins. He defines justification as follows:

“God does, upon the further conditions of a repentance and faith that imply a renunciation of their rebellion and a return to obedience to His laws, freely pardon past sin, and restore the penitent and believing sinner to favor, as if he had not sinned, while he remains penitent and believing, subject however to condemnation and eternal death, unless he holds the beginning of his confidence steadfast unto the end.”⁷⁷

In case we have misinterpreted his view of the doctrines of imputation, in regard to both Adam’s sin and Christ’s righteousness, I end this section with his own evaluation of these doctrines from his systematic theology.

The doctrine of a literal imputation of Adam’s sin to all his posterity, of the literal imputation of all the sins of the elect to Christ, and of His suffering for them the exact amount due to the transgressors, of the literal imputation of Christ’s righteousness or obedience to the elect, and the consequent perpetual justification of all that are converted from the first exercise of faith, whatever their subsequent life may be- I say I regard these dogmas as fabulous, and better befitting a romance than a system of theology.⁷⁸

A justified sinner in Finney’s eyes was always on thin ice with God. His salvation was

⁷⁶ *Perfectionism*, vol. II, 154.

⁷⁷ *Finney’s Systematic Theology: The Complete and Newly Expanded 1878 Edition*, 372.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

tenuous, based upon his state at any given time.

6. *Sanctification (“entire” or “complete,” i.e. Perfectionism)*

By *entire* or *complete sanctification*, Finney does not mean perfectionism or sinless perfection. In his glossary to his theology, “sinless perfection” is defined this way:

SINLESS PERFECTION: [also called PERFECTIONISM] a theological view that holds that a believer can “arrive” at a state in which (1.) his walk in obedience and holiness is not dependant on the grace of God, and that (2.) he no longer has the ability to sin.⁷⁹

Finney rejected this view of perfectionism, at least, as far as I can tell. However he has been forever linked with the perfectionism of the Oberlin theology, and at times his language seems to imply that he did hold to it. Many today still are not sure exactly what his view was, perhaps because his writings covered so many years and his views seemed to shift a bit. Finney was clearly influenced by John Wesley’s influential book titled “Plain Account of Christian Perfection.”⁸⁰

a. Entire sanctification defined

For Finney, sanctification “is nothing more nor less than entire obedience, for the time being, to the moral law.”⁸¹ He goes on to say that he uses the expression *entire sanctification* to “designate a state of confirmed, and entire consecration of body, soul, and spirit, or of the whole being to God”⁸² as well as being “identical with entire and

⁷⁹ *Finney’s Systematic Theology: The Complete and Newly Expanded 1878 Edition*, 589.

⁸⁰ cf. Warfield, *Perfectionism*, vol. II, 55-63.

⁸¹ *Finney’s Systematic Theology: The Complete and Newly Expanded 1878 Edition* 380.

continued obedience to the law of God.”⁸³ Finney makes it very clear that he uses the expressions “perfectionism,” “entire sanctification,” and “entire consecration” interchangeably.⁸⁴ Perhaps Gresham summed up best the essence of Finney’s view of complete or entire sanctification. He wrote,

God demands what we are able to give. He does not require perfect performance, infinite knowledge, or supernatural strength. He does require a perfect heart, that is, that all of our strength and wisdom, however limited, be devoted supremely to love God and humanity as our ultimate intent.⁸⁵

Finney held that reason itself argued that entire sanctification is possible for the believer.

He wrote,

It is self-evident, that entire obedience to God’s law is possible on the ground of natural ability. To deny this, is to deny that a man is able to do as well as he can. The very language of the law is such as to level its claims to the capacity of the subject, however great or small that capacity may be. ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength’ (Deut. 6:5). Here then it is plain, that all the law demands, is the exercise of whatever strength we have, in the service of God. Now, as entire sanctification consists in perfect obedience to the law of God, and as the law requires nothing more than the right use of whatever strength we have, it is, of course, forever settled, that a state of entire sanctification is attainable in this life, on the ground of natural ability.⁸⁶

- b. The power for living a sanctified life: Baptism of the Holy Spirit subsequent to salvation

The power for this kind of living, as far as Finney was concerned, was the Baptism of

⁸² Ibid., 380,381.

⁸³ Ibid., 381.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 441.

⁸⁵ *Charles Finney’s Doctrine of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit*, 29.

⁸⁶ *Finney’s Systematic Theology: The Complete and Newly Expanded 1878 Edition*, 382.

the Holy Spirit that was subsequent to conversion.⁸⁷ This area of Finney's theology is so massive that it goes beyond the scope of this presentation. However, the baptism of the Holy Spirit in Finney's theology is crucial to his ministry, in that the means for bringing more sinners into the kingdom is having more ministers preaching the gospel who have been baptized with the Holy Spirit. He believed that the Spirit baptized evangelist was an integral part of gospel ministry. Speaking of Finney's view of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, Warfield writes,

And then he still further teaches that the power was not conferred at Pentecost alone, and not on the Apostles alone. It is still conferred: he himself has received it. He has often converted men by so chance a word that he had no remembrance of having spoken it, or even by a mere look...It is a sufficiently odd doctrine which here he enunciates, a kind of new Lutheranism with the evangelist substituted for the Word...As the Lutheran says God in the Word works a saving impression, Finney says God in the preacher works a saving impression. Not the Word, but the preacher is the power of God unto salvation. The evangelist has become the Sacrament.⁸⁸

Finney believed that this Baptism of the Holy Spirit was tied to the "Blessing of Abraham," Paul's reference in Galatians 3:14 to the fact of the coming Holy Spirit to Gentiles.

c. A mixing of spiritual maturity with entire sanctification

Finney seemed to mix spiritual maturity with entire sanctification. For instance, the purpose statement of Paul in Ephesians 4:13 that believers "grow up to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" is not seen by Finney as speaking of a believer, who

⁸⁷ cf. Gresham's book, *Charles Finney's Doctrine of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit*, chapters 3 and 4. Gresham details Finney's view of the importance of this work of God for accomplishing gospel ministry. Finney held to the possibility of multiple baptisms of the Holy Spirit; cf. also Finney's *Memoirs*, 23-25.

⁸⁸ *Perfectionism*, vol. II, 134,135.

although he still sins, grows into spiritual maturity. He interprets it to be referring to a command “to be perfect.”⁸⁹ The expression “unto a perfect man” (εἰς ἄνδρα τέλειον) is taken by Finney as referring to complete or entire sanctification, and not spiritual maturity. In this sense he felt Paul was “sinless.”⁹⁰

Finney believed in entire sanctification because God has called us to holiness and He has given us every provision to say no to sin. In this area, he perhaps makes his strongest point. Most believers would acknowledge that God has provided us the power through the Holy Spirit to say no to sin and yes to righteousness. He states,

Men sin only when they are tempted, either by the world, the flesh, or the devil. And it is expressly asserted, that, in every temptation, provision is made for our escape. Certainly, if it is possible for us to escape without sin, under every temptation, then a state of entire and permanent sanctification is attainable.⁹¹

Passages that seem to indicate that believers still sin, such as 1 John 1:9 with the promise of forgiveness to those who confess their sins, were seen by Finney as referring to justification and not sanctification.⁹² Warfield summarizes Finney’s teaching on sanctification as “self-wrought.”⁹³

d. Some strange teaching of Finney

Finney made a point in his teaching on sanctification that is hard to understand,

⁸⁹ *Finney’s Systematic Theology: The Complete and Newly Expanded 1878 Edition*, 384.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 403.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 389.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 424.

⁹³ *Perfectionism*, vol. II, 93

and quite frankly, seems bizarre. He argues that the death of a believer is not the end of sin for them; that they can still sin even after they leave this world. He writes,

It has been the custom of the church for a long time, to console individuals, in view of death, by the consideration, that it would be the termination of all their sin...But nowhere in the Bible is it intimated, that the death of a saint is the termination of his serving the devil.⁹⁴

It seems that what he is saying is that death should never been seen as a means to sanctification, because the Bible sees death as an enemy. However one still wonders what exactly he means about the possibility of sinning after we are freed from this body of sin.

e. Finney's major theological deficiency

There are many things lacking in Finney's theology, but if one deficiency stands out above all else, it is his lack of emphasis on the holiness of God. God, as far as He appears to me from Finney's point of view, is too much like us since it seems so easy for us to be like Him. For Finney, being holy like God is just a matter of personal choice through natural ability. It is a theology of personal reformation. All man has to do is choose to be holy. Warfield notes,

It is quite clear that what Finney gives us is less a theology than a system of morals. God might be eliminated from its entirety without essentially changing its character. All virtue, all holiness, is made to consist in an ethical determination of the will.⁹⁵

Though he seems a bit harsh, Warfield has quite accurately summed up Finney at this point.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 390.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 193

7. *Eschatology*

Finney, like many of the Christians of his day, and many of the Puritans before him, was post-millennial.⁹⁶ This no doubt was a driving force in his efforts at social change. Oberlin College, where Finney served as professor and president for 30 years, was known for its progressive attitudes regarding integration and women's rights. Finney also was a strong abolitionist and defender of prohibition. He believed that America was on the brink of God's kingdom, and that with repentance and obedience, the millennium would come.⁹⁷ This optimism for gospel ministry was rooted in his theology, specifically on the human ability to repent and live the holy life expected of him by God. Perhaps Weddle has best summed up Finney on this point when he states,

Yet it is precisely Finney's belief in the evangelistic enterprise that led him, logically he would add, to millennial optimism. For if the individual is capable of repentance, then is it not possible for groups of individuals to agree to govern their common life by that same law? If so, then universal obedience, elicited by the persuasive power of reason and love, is the final goal of history, the fulfillment of the promise of salvation in the Christian gospel.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Finney's systematic theology, unless I missed it, didn't comment on his millennial views. I looked at his memoirs, and several books about him, but could find no specific statements by Finney. I consulted two websites and was unable to find anything that he wrote which testified to this view. But everyone is in agreement that he was post-millennial. I e-mailed the man who manages the web-site Fires of Revival. He informed me that in some sermons of Finney, his post-millennial views are demonstrated.

⁹⁷ Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revival of Religion*, Fires of Revival [on-line]. Available: <http://www.cris.com/~Fires/>; Finney said "If the church will do all her duty, the millennium may come in this country in three years."

⁹⁸ David L. Weddle, *The Law as Gospel: Revival and Reform in the theology of Charles G. Finney*, 7.

In concluding the section of Finney's theology, it is now possible to determine his central interpretive motif.

C. Central Interpretive Motif

There are several possible central interpretive motifs in the theology of Charles Finney. Almost all theologians and commentators reduce Finney's theology to moral government,⁹⁹ but while he clearly places the greatest emphasis in his *Systematic Theology*¹⁰⁰ on this topic, a central interpretive motif of moral government may be a bit too broad. Finney's theology included several major aspects. His theology placed a great emphasis on man's ability to be holy and his moral freedom to move towards God. This could only be possible because of God's moral government. God was gently exerting persuasion in the world for man to conform to His standard. Man could do as God asked because he was able in and of himself. Therefore, Finney's central interpretive motif can be stated as follows:

God's moral government in the affairs of men, with its emphasis on the moral law that God (and neighbor) are to be loved because of their intrinsic value alone, allows man as a free moral agent to be holy like God (entire sanctification) since man has been called to be holy and God would not call man to be holy like Himself if it were not possible.

This central interpretive motif dominates Finney's theology. Man is a free moral agent and has the capacity in and of himself to obey God. He sins, not because of the effects of

⁹⁹ Vulgamore, Melvin, *Social Reform in the Theology of Charles Grandison Finney*. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilm, Inc., 1963), 76; John L. Gresham, *Charles Finney's Doctrine of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit*, 5; Frank Hugh Foster, *A Genetic History of the New England Theology*, 465-470.

¹⁰⁰ With few exceptions, the first 15 chapters (242 pages) or approximately 40% of his *Systematic Theology* is dedicated to government in one form or another.

Adam's sin which have been imputed to him, but because he is tempted by selfishness. Since he is free to obey the law of God, he can arrive at *entire or complete sanctification* should he so choose. Finney would have accepted this central interpretive motif as completely rational.

Theology affects ministry. We will now briefly look at how this was true in the methodology of Charles Finney's ministry.

VI. THE METHODOLOGY OF CHARLES FINNEY'S MINISTRY

A. The Background to his Ministry

Finney entered the ministry under what can best be described as a cloud of fatalism. He felt that the Calvinism of his day was doing little to promote evangelism. He saw the established church of his day as simply waiting on God to save those whom He desired, apart from any means whatsoever. He writes,

When I entered the ministry, I found a persuasion of an absolute inability on the part of sinners to repent and believe the gospel, almost universal. When I urged sinners and professors of religion to do their duty without delay, I frequently met with stern opposition from sinners, professors of religion and ministers. They desired me to say to sinners, that they could not repent, and that they must wait God's time, that is, for God to help them. It was common for the classes of persons just named to ask me, if I thought sinners could be Christians whenever they pleased, and whether I thought any class of persons could repent, believe, and obey God without the strivings and new creating power of the Holy Spirit. The church was almost universally settled down in the belief of a physical moral depravity, and, of course, in a belief in the necessity of physical regeneration, and also of course in the belief, that sinners must wait to be regenerated by divine power while they were passive. Professors also must wait to be revived, until God, in mysterious sovereignty came and revived them. As to revivals of religion they were settled down in the belief to a great extent, that man had no more agency in producing them than in producing showers of rain. To attempt to effect the conversion of a sinner, or to promote a revival, was an attempt to take the work out of the hands of God, to go to work in your own strength, and to set sinners

and professors to do the same. The vigorous use of means and measures to promote a work of grace, was regarded by many as impious. It was getting up an excitement of animal feeling, and wickedly interfering with the prerogative of God. The abominable dogmas of physical moral depravity or a sinful constitution, with a consequent natural, falsely called moral, inability, and the necessity of a physical and passive regeneration, had chilled the heart of the church, and lulled sinners into a fatal sleep. This is the natural tendency of such doctrines.¹⁰¹

One can understand how such fatalism may have led him to go to the other extreme with his placing such a high on human ability. It was this overreaction that led to the harshest criticism of both Finney's theology and his ministry.

B. Revival versus Revivalism

Because of this fatalism, Finney wrestled with the means of revival. In his book titled *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1858*, Iain Murray chronicles the movement away from *Revival*, the work of God alone in saving sinners based purely on the grace of God, to *Revivalism*, the work of man in bringing salvation based on means or methodology. Murray sees Finney as a major influence upon the change that was taking place in American Protestantism of the 1820s and 1830s.

Finney did not believe that revival was a miracle, but the result of proper means or methodology. In his book, *Lectures on Revival of Religion*, he makes this point very clear. He writes,

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. There may be a miracle among its antecedent causes, or there may not. The apostles employed miracles simply as a

¹⁰¹ *Finney's Systematic Theology: The Complete and Newly Expanded 1878 Edition*, 330,331.

means by which they arrested attention to their message, and established its Divine authority. But the miracle was not the revival. The miracle was one thing; the revival that followed it was quite another thing. The revivals in the apostles' days were connected with miracles, but they were not miracles.

I said that a revival is the result of the right use of the appropriate means. The means which God has enjoined for the production of a revival, doubtless have a natural tendency to produce a revival. Otherwise God would not have enjoined them. But means will not produce a revival, we all know, without the blessing of God. No more will grain, when it is sown, produce a crop without the blessing of God. It is impossible for us to say that there is not as direct an influence or agency from God, to produce a crop of grain, as there is to produce a revival. What are the laws of nature according to which it is supposed that grain yields a crop? They are nothing but the constituted manner of the operations of God. In the Bible, the Word of God is compared to grain, and preaching is compared to sowing the seed, and the results to the springing up and growth of the crop. A revival is as naturally a result of the use of the appropriate means as a crop is of the use of its appropriate means.¹⁰²

One can picture the Princeton professors cringing as they read Finney at this point, since they placed such a high emphasis on revival being a sudden, unexpected work of God in the hearts of sinners that He brought about for reasons known only to Him.

In his book, *Revivals of Religion*, Finney seeks to answer the questions of how revival is brought about.¹⁰³ Therefore, at this point it would seem wise to discuss the methods he employed in bringing about revival.

C. Methodology (“New Measures”)

1. Protracted meetings

Finney advocated revival meetings that would sometimes last for months. Many felt

¹⁰² Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revival of Religion*, Fires of Revival [on-line]. Available: <http://www.cris.com/~Fires/>

¹⁰³ *Revivals of Religion* seeks to answer questions regarding the means to revival. Examples of chapters titles are: *When a Revival is to be expected*, *How to Promote a Revival*, and *Measures to Promote Revivals*.

that this practice undermined the local church and its pastor. Finney mentions the first of these protracted meetings or as he defined them, a “series of meetings” in his *Memoirs*.

He writes,

Early in the Autumn of 1831 I accepted an invitation to hold what was then called a ‘protracted meeting,’ or a series of meetings, in Providence, R.I. I labored mostly in the church of which the Rev. Dr Wilson was at that time pastor. I think I remained there about three weeks, holding meetings every evening, and preaching three times on the Sabbath. The Lord poured out His Spirit immediately upon the people, and the work of grace commenced and progressed in a most interesting manner for the short time that I at that time spent in that city. However my stay was too short to secure so general a work of grace in that place as occurred afterwards in 1842, when I spent some two months there.¹⁰⁴

The interesting point here is that Finney makes the assertion that the extent of God’s work of grace was tied to the amount of time that he was able to spend in the city. In other words, if he would have been able to labor longer with the same fervor, the results would have been greater. It is this emphasis that human ability can bring about the grace of God that many found so revolting.

2. *Altar call*

Finney used altar calls because they were in line with his prepositional apologetics of the ability of choice. He noted in the preface to his theology that human faculties assume certain truths, and that these should be used in communicating facts that needed to be believed. He wrote,

All human investigations proceed upon the assumption of the existence and validity of our faculties, and that their unequivocal testimony may be relied upon. To deny this is to set aside at once the possibility of knowledge or rational belief, and to give up the mind to universal skepticism. The classes of truths to which we shall be called upon to attend in our investigations may be divided, with sufficient accuracy for our

¹⁰⁴ *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text*, 340.

purpose, into *truths that need to proof*, and *truths that need proof*. The human mind is so constituted that by virtue of its own laws it necessarily perceives, recognizes, or knows some truths without testimony from without. It takes direct cognizance of them, and cannot but do so.¹⁰⁵

Reason, therefore, not only played a large part in Finney's theology, but it also played a large part in his ministry. Salvation is simply a matter of using the right convincing proofs in sharing Christ. For Finney, this is a logical conclusion given his anthropology. Man is a rational, moral agent capable of choosing to be saved. The weight of responsibility is with man and not God. Warfield notes,

The ultimate reason why the entire action of God in salvation is confined by Finney to persuasion lies in his conviction that nothing more is needed - or, indeed, is possible. For the most deeply lying of all the assumptions which govern his thinking is that of the plenary ability of man.¹⁰⁶

To Finney, such a view was perfectly consistent with common sense. If it was rational, it was true.

3. *Anxious bench*

These were pews in the front of the church used for singling out those under special conviction. Here the "serious seeker" publicly stated their intentions to be saved.

Opposition to this practice was immediate, but in time subsided and was accepted.

The critics were especially wary of the public platform given to the laity and especially women as they prayed and testified in the revival services. After the dramatic Fulton Street or Laymen's Revival of 1858, however, most of the critics were silenced, and revitalized Calvinism joined with the revitalized Arminianism

¹⁰⁵ *Finney's Systematic Theology: The Complete and Newly Expanded 1878 Edition*, 5.

¹⁰⁶ *Perfectionism*, vol. II, 173.

of burgeoning America Methodism to set the predominant pattern of American Protestantism for the remainder of the century.¹⁰⁷

It would seem that pragmatism won out in Finney's day.

4. *Burned-over district*

This expression was a “reference to the fact that the area had experience so much religious enthusiasm – from revivals and new religions, to cults and spiritualism- that the district had been scorched.”¹⁰⁸ The area in upstate New York from Buffalo to Rome has been called a “burned-over district.” Warfield describes how Finney revisited Rome, NY in 1855, some thirty years after one of his greatest evangelistic crusades in 1826. He states that while the message and method was the same, the results clearly were not. He writes,

Finney preached, he says, just as he did in 1826, with the same ability, earnestness, force. But this kind of preaching was *passé* - and ‘his old friends in Utica, where considerable religious interest existed, deemed it unwise to invite him there.’ This kind of preaching was not *passé*, however, in other regions. It was still capable of oppressing men's souls elsewhere. But not again here – even after a generation had passed by these burnt children had no liking for the fire.¹⁰⁹

This reality would seem to vindicate the earlier premise that Finney came on the scene at just the right time and with the right means when he first began his ministry. Finney's theology and methodology can be described as a perfect marriage for the times in which he lived.

¹⁰⁷ M.E. Dieter, “Revivalism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 950.

¹⁰⁸ James E. Johnson, “Father of American Revivalism” *Christian History* Vol. VII, Number 4, Issue 20 (1988): 7.

¹⁰⁹ *Perfectionism*, vol. II, 28.

5. Rochester significance

It was Finney's work in Rochester that made him a household name. Rochester afforded Finney the ideal opportunity for his revival ministry.

The city contained more than enough New England-rooted Yorker men and women of the sort that typically responded to his evangelism so readily, and there was enough social stress to ignite an explosive revival. Rochester was the fastest growing city in the United States during the 1820's...¹¹⁰

The work in Rochester was a kind of microcosm of his entire revival ministry, effecting religious and social institutions.¹¹¹ However, as noted above, the success once enjoyed in upstate New York in the 1820's was foreign to Finney when he revisited the area some thirty years later.

6. Social effects

Finney's ministry also encompassed social issues such as prohibition, antislavery, and women's rights. For Finney, social activism flowed out of his view of moral government and the responsibility of moral law, namely that God and neighbor are to be loved for their intrinsic value alone. One practical manifestation of this progressive attitude was the fact that Oberlin became one of the stops on the Underground Railroad. Another example of this was the fact that the first black woman in America to receive a bachelor's degree graduated from Oberlin College.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 103.

¹¹¹ Keith J. Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney, 1792-1875: Revivalist and Reformer*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 192-211.

¹¹² Her name was Mary Jane Patterson.

It was Finney's eschatology that provided him the mechanism to carry out his responsibility to fulfill the moral law, since he believed that once the gospel had infiltrated society through Spirit baptized preachers, the kingdom could be ushered in.

VII. CONCLUSION

Finney's theology is difficult to get a handle on. His terminology at times seems both Arminian and Calvinistic,¹¹³ while his methodology was clearly Arminian. Finney's theology has been called a modified form of Calvinism, and perhaps rightly so. But so many of his views have no resemblance whatsoever of traditional Calvinism. Finney's rejection of the imputation of Adam's sin, the imputation of Christ's righteousness to all who believe, and the fact that justification only deals with past sins, are just a view of his views that stand in contrast to Calvinism. Surely the Princeton theologians of his day would not have seen him as Calvinistic in his theology.

As we have also seen, theology effects ministry, and this was surely the case with Finney. In his book, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, Finney summed up the methodology of his ministry when he wrote,

The object of the ministry is to get all the people to feel that the devil has no right to rule this world, but that they ought all to give themselves to God, and 'vote in' the Lord Jesus Christ as the Governor of the universe. Now, what shall be done? What measures shall we take? Says one: 'Be sure and have nothing that is new.' Strange! The object of our measure is to gain attention, and you must have something new.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ cf. glossary in his *Systematic Theology*

¹¹⁴ Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revival of Religion*, Fires of Revival [on-line]. Available: <http://www.cris.com/~Fires/>

Finney has stated that in order to “gain attention,” one must “have something new.” His pragmatic approach to gospel ministry seems right at home in the church today, with its emphasis on methodology as the catalyst for growth. I believe Finney’s legacy is still being felt in the church today: “being dead, he speaketh.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Dieter, Melvin E. "Revivalism." In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Edited by Walter A. Elwell, 948-951. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984.
- Erickson, Millard J. *Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985.
- Finney, Charles G. *Finney's Systematic Theology: The Complete and Newly Expanded 1878 Edition*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1994.
- _____. *Lectures on Revival of Religion, Fires of Revival* [on-line]. Available: <http://www.cris.com/~Fires/>
- _____. *Revivals of Religion*. Virginia Beach: CBN University Press, reprinted 1978.
- Foster, Frank Hugh. *A Genetic History of the New England Theology*. New York: Russell and Russell, reissued 1963, first published in 1907.
- Gresham John L. *Charles Finney's Doctrine of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987.
- Guelzo, Allen C. "The Making of a Revivalist" *Christian History* Vol. VII, Number 4, Issue 20, (1988): 28-30.
- Hambrick-Stowe, Charles E. *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.
- Hardman, Keith J. *Charles Grandison Finney, 1792-1875: Revivalist and Reformer*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987.
- Hodge, Charles. *Systematic Theology*, 3 Vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981 reprint.
- Hoffecker, W. Andrew. "New School Theology." In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Edited by Walter A. Elwell, 767-768. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984.
- Johnson, James E. "Father of American Revivalism." *Christian History* Vol. VII, Number 4, Issue 20 (1988): 6-9.
- _____. "Charles G. Finney and a Theology of Revivalism." *Church History* 38 (1969): 338-358.
- Murray, Iain H. *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1858*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1994.

- Rosell G.M. and Dupuis R.A.G., (eds.). *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989.
- Smith, Timothy L. "The Doctrine of the Sanctifying Spirit: Charles G. Finney's Synthesis of Wesleyan and Covenant Theology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 13 (Spring 1978): 92-113.
- Swing, Albert T. "President Finney and an Oberlin Theology," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 57 (July 1900): 465-482.
- Turner, David. "A Critique of Charles G. Finney's Theology," unpublished paper presented at *Theology Night Baptist Bible College*, October 18, 1977.
- Vulgamore, Melvin L. *Social Reform in the Theology of Charles Grandison Finney*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilm, Inc., 1963.
- Warfield, Benjamin B. *Perfectionism*, Vol. II. New York: Oxford University Press, 1932.
- Weddle, David L. *The Law as Gospel: Revival and Reform in the Theology of Charles G. Finney*. Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1985.