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The Disturbing Legacy of Charles Finney

by [Dr. Michael Horton](#)

No single man is more responsible for the distortion of Christian truth in our age than Charles Grandison Finney. His "new measures" created a framework for modern decision theology and Evangelical Revivalism. In this excellent article, Dr. Mike Horton explains how Charles Finney distorted the important doctrine of salvation.

Jerry Falwell calls him "one of my heroes and a hero to many evangelicals, including Billy Graham." I recall wandering through the Billy Graham Center some years ago, observing the place of honor given to Charles Finney in the evangelical tradition, reinforced by the first class in theology I had at a Christian college, where Finney's work was required reading. The New York revivalist was the oft-quoted and celebrated champion of the Christian singer Keith Green and the Youth With A Mission organization. He is particularly esteemed among the leaders of the Christian Right and the Christian Left, by both Jerry Falwell and Jim Wallis (Sojourners' magazine), and his imprint can be seen in movements that appear to be diverse, but in reality are merely heirs to Finney's legacy. From the Vineyard movement and the Church Growth Movement to the political and social crusades, televangelism, and the Promise Keepers movement, as a former Wheaton College president rather glowingly cheered, "Finney, lives on!"

That is because Finney's moralistic impulse envisioned a church that was in large measure an agency of personal and social reform rather than the institution in which the means of grace, Word and Sacrament, are made available to believers who then take the Gospel to the world. In the nineteenth century, the evangelical movement became increasingly identified with political causes—from abolition of slavery and child labor legislation to women's rights and the prohibition of alcohol. In a desperate effort at regaining this institutional power and the glory of "Christian America" (a vision that is always powerful in the imagination, but, after the disintegration of Puritan New England, elusive), the turn-of-the-century Protestant establishment launched moral campaigns to "Americanize" immigrants, enforce moral instruction and "character education." Evangelists pitched their American gospel in terms of its practical usefulness to the individual and the nation.

That is why Finney is so popular. He is the tallest marker in the shift from Reformation orthodoxy, evident in the Great Awakening (under Edwards and Whitefield) to Arminian (indeed, even Pelagian) revivalism. evident from the Second Great Awakening to the present. To demonstrate the debt of modern evangelicalism to Finney, we must first notice his theological departures. From these departures, Finney became the father of the antecedents to some of today's greatest challenges within evangelical churches, namely, the church growth movement, Pentecostalism and political revivalism.

Who is Finney?

Reacting against the pervasive Calvinism of the Great Awakening, the successors of that great movement of God's Spirit turned from God to humans, from the preaching of objective content (namely, Christ and him crucified) to the emphasis on getting a person to "make a decision."

Charles Finney (1792-1875) ministered in the wake of the "Second Awakening," as it has been called. A Presbyterian layover, Finney one day experienced "a mighty baptism of the Holy Ghost" which "like a wave of electricity going through and through me ... seemed to come in waves of liquid love." The next morning, he informed his first client of the day, "I have a retainer from the Lord Jesus Christ to plead his cause and I cannot plead yours. Refusing to attend Princeton Seminary (or any seminary, for that matter). Finney began conducting revivals in upstate New York. One of his most popular sermons was "Sinners Bound to Change Their Own Hearts."

Finney's one question for any given teaching was, "Is it fit to convert sinners with?" One result of Finney's revivalism was the division of Presbyterians in Philadelphia and New York into Arminian and Calvinistic factions. His "New Measures" included the "anxious bench" (precursor to today's altar call), emotional tactics that led to fainting and weeping, and other "excitements," as Finney and his followers called them.

Finney's Theology?

One need go no further than the table of contents of his *Systematic Theology* to learn that Finney's entire theology revolved around human morality. Chapters one through five are on moral government, obligation, and the unity of moral action; chapters six and seven are "Obedience Entire," as chapters eight through fourteen discuss attributes of love, selfishness, and virtues and vice in general. Not until the twenty-first chapter does one read anything that is especially Christian in its interest, on the atonement. This is followed by a discussion of regeneration, repentance, and faith. There is one chapter on justification followed by six on sanctification. In other words, Finney did not really write a Systematic Theology, but a collection of essays on ethics.

But that is not to say that Finney's *Systematic Theology* does not contain some significant statements of theology.

First, in answer to the question, "Does a Christian cease to be a Christian, whenever he commits a sin?", Finney answers:

"Whenever he sins, he must, for the time being, cease to be holy. This is self-evident. Whenever he sins, he must be condemned; he must incur the penalty of the law of God ... If it be said that the precept is still binding upon him, but that with respect to the Christian, the penalty is forever set aside, or abrogated, I reply, that to abrogate the penalty is to repeal the precept, for a precept without penalty is no law. It is only counsel or advice. The Christian, therefore, is justified no longer than he obeys, and must be condemned when he disobeys or Antinomianism is true ... In these respects, then, the sinning Christian and the unconverted sinner are upon precisely the same ground (p. 46)."

Finney believed that God demanded absolute perfection, but instead of that leading him to seek his perfect righteousness in Christ, he concluded that "... full present obedience is a condition of justification. But again, to the question, can man be justified while sin remains in him? Surely he cannot, either upon legal or gospel principles, unless the law be repealed ... But can he be pardoned and accepted, and justified, in the gospel sense, while sin, any degree of sin, remains in him? Certainly not" (p. 57).

Finney declares of the Reformation's formula *simul justus et peccator* or "simultaneously justified and sinful," "This error has slain more souls, I fear, than all the Universalism that ever cursed the world." For, "Whenever a Christian sins he comes under condemnation, and must repent and do his first works, or be lost" (p.60).

Finney's doctrine of justification rests upon a denial of the doctrine of original sin. Held by both Roman Catholics and Protestants, this biblical teaching insists that we are all born into this world inheriting Adam's guilt and corruption. We are, therefore, in bondage to a sinful nature. As someone has said, "We sin because we're sinners": the condition of sin determines the acts of sin, rather than vice versa. But Finney followed Pelagius, the fifth-century heretic, who was condemned by more church councils than any other person in church history, in denying this doctrine.

Finney believed that human beings were capable of choosing whether they would be corrupt by nature or redeemed, referring to original sin as an "anti-scriptural and nonsensical dogma" (p.179). In clear terms, Finney denied the notion that human beings possess a sinful nature (*ibid.*). Therefore, if Adam leads us into sin, not by our inheriting his guilt and corruption, but by following his poor example, this leads logically to the view of Christ, the Second Adam, as saving by example. This is precisely where Finney takes it, in his explanation of the atonement.

The first thing we must note about the atonement, Finney says, is that Christ could not have died for anyone else's sins than his own. His obedience to the law and his perfect righteousness were sufficient to save him, but could not legally be accepted on behalf of others. That Finney's whole theology is driven by a passion for moral improvement is seen on this very point: "If he [Christ] had obeyed the Law as our substitute, then why should our own return to personal obedience be insisted upon as a *sine qua non* of our salvation" (p.206)? In other words, why would God insist that we save ourselves by our own obedience if Christ's work was sufficient? The reader should recall the words of St. Paul in this regard, "I do not nullify the grace of God", for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing." It would seem that Finney's reply is one of agreement. The difference is, he has no difficulty believing both of those premises.

That is not entirely fair, of course, because Finney did believe that Christ died for something—not for someone, but for something. In other words, he died for a purpose, but not for people. The purpose of that death was to reassert God's moral government and to lead us to eternal life by example, as Adam's example excited us to sin. Why did Christ die? God knew that "The atonement would present to creatures the highest possible motives to virtue. Example is the highest moral influence that can be exerted ... If the benevolence manifested in the atonement does not subdue the selfishness of sinners, their case is hopeless" (p.209). Therefore, we are not helpless sinners who need to, 'be redeemed, but wayward sinners who need a demonstration of selflessness so moving that we will be excited to leave off selfishness. Not only did Finney believe that the "moral influence" theory of the atonement was the chief way of understanding

the cross; he explicitly denied the substitutionary atonement, which

"assumes that the atonement was a literal payment of a debt, which we have seen does not consist with the nature of the atonement ... It is true, that the atonement, of itself, does not secure the salvation of any one" (p.217).

Then there is the matter of applying redemption. Throwing off Reformation orthodoxy, Finney argued strenuously against the belief that the new birth is a divine gift, insisting that "regeneration consists in the sinner changing his ultimate choice, intention, preference; or in changing from selfishness to love or benevolence," as moved by the moral influence of Christ's moving example (p.224). "Original sin, physical regeneration, and all their kindred and resulting dogmas, are alike subversive of the gospel, and repulsive to the human intelligence" (p.236).

Having nothing to do with original sin, a substitutionary atonement, and the supernatural character of the new birth, Finney proceeds to attack "the article by which the church stands or falls"— justification by grace alone through faith alone.

Distorting the Cardinal Doctrine of Justification

The Reformers insisted, on the basis of clear biblical texts, that justification (in the Greek, "to declare righteous," rather than "to make righteous") was a forensic (i.e., legal) verdict. In other words, whereas Rome maintained that justification was a process of making a bad person better, the Reformers argued that it was a declaration or pronouncement that had someone else's righteousness (i.e., Christ's) as its basis. Therefore, it was a perfect, once and-for-all verdict of right standing.

This declaration was to be pronounced at the beginning of the Christian life, not in the middle or at the end. The key words in the evangelical doctrine are "forensic" (legal) and "imputation" (crediting one's account, as opposed to the idea of "infusion" of a righteousness within a person's soul). Knowing all of this, Finney declares,

"But for sinners to be forensically pronounced just, is impossible and absurd... As we shall see, there are many conditions, while there is but one ground, of the justification of sinners ... As has already been said, there can be no justification in a legal or forensic sense, but upon the ground of universal, perfect, and uninterrupted obedience to law. This is of course denied by those who hold that gospel justification, or the justification of penitent sinners, is of the nature of a forensic or judicial justification. They hold to the legal maxim that what a man does by another he does by himself, and therefore the law regards Christ's obedience as ours, on the ground that he obeyed for us."

To this, Finney replies: "The doctrine of imputed righteousness, or that Christ's obedience to the law was accounted as our obedience, is founded on a most false and nonsensical assumption." After all, Christ's righteousness "could do no more than justify himself. It can never be imputed to us ... it was naturally impossible, then, for him to obey in our behalf " This "representing of the atonement as the ground of the sinner's justification has been a sad occasion of stumbling to many" (pp.320-2).

The view that faith is the sole condition of justification is "the antinomian view," Finney

asserts. "We shall see that perseverance in obedience to the end of life is also a condition of justification. Some theologians have made justification a condition of sanctification, instead of making sanctification a condition of justification. But this we shall see is an erroneous view of the subject." (pp.326-7).

Finney Today

As the noted Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield pointed out so eloquently, there are throughout history only two religions: heathenism, of which Pelagianism is a religious expression, and a supernatural redemption.

With Warfield and those who so seriously warned their brothers and sisters of these errors among Finney and his successors, we too must come to terms with the wildly heterodox strain in American Protestantism. With roots in Finney's revivalism, perhaps evangelical and liberal Protestantism are not that far apart after all. His "New Measures," like today's Church Growth Movement, made human choices and emotions the center of the church's ministry, ridiculed theology, and replaced the preaching of Christ with the preaching of conversion.

It is upon Finney's naturalistic moralism that the Christian political and social crusades build their faith in humanity and its resources in self-salvation. Sounding not a little like a deist, Finney declared, "There is nothing in religion beyond the ordinary powers of nature. It consists entirely in the right exercise of the powers of nature. It is just that, and nothing else. When mankind becomes truly religious, they are not enabled to put forth exertions which they were unable before to put forth. They only exert powers which they had before, in a different way, and use them for the glory of God." As the new birth is a natural phenomenon for Finney, so too a revival: "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."

The belief that the new birth and revival depend necessarily on divine activity is pernicious. "No doctrine," he says, "is more dangerous than this to the prosperity of the Church, and nothing more absurd" (Revivals of Religion [Revell], pp.4-5).

When the leaders of the Church Growth Movement claim that theology gets in the way of growth and insist that it does not matter what a particular church believes: growth is a matter of following the proper principles, they are displaying their debt to Finney.

When leaders of the Vineyard movement praise this sub-Christian enterprise and the barking, roaring, screaming, laughing, and other strange phenomena on the basis that "it works" and one must judge its truth by its fruit, they are following Finney as well as the father of American pragmatism, William James, who declared that truth must be judged on the basis of "its cash-value in experiential terms."

Thus, in Finney's theology, God is not sovereign, man is not a sinner by nature, the atonement is not a true payment for sin, justification by imputation is insulting to reason and morality, the new birth is simply the effect of successful techniques, and revival is a natural result of clever campaigns. In his fresh introduction to the bicentennial edition of Finney's *Systematic Theology*, Harry Conn commends Finney's pragmatism: "Many servants of our Lord should be diligently searching for a gospel that 'works', and I am

happy to state they can find it in this volume."

As Whitney R. Cross has carefully documented, the stretch of territory in which Finney's revivals were most frequent was also the cradle of the perfectionistic cults that plagued that century. A gospel that "works" for zealous perfectionists one moment merely creates tomorrow's disillusioned and spent supersaints. Needless to say, Finney's message is radically different from the evangelical faith, as is the basic orientation of the movements we see around us today that bear his imprint such as: revivalism (or its modern label, the Church Growth Movement), or Pentecostal perfectionism and emotionalism, or political triumphalism based on the ideal of "Christian America," or the anti-intellectual, and antidoctrinal tendencies of many American evangelicals and fundamentalists.

Not only did the revivalist abandon the doctrine of justification, making him a renegade against evangelical Christianity; he repudiated doctrines, such as original sin and the substitutionary atonement, that have been embraced by Roman Catholics and Protestants alike. Therefore, Finney is not merely an Arminian, but a Pelagian. He is not only an enemy of evangelical Protestantism, but of historic Christianity of the broadest sort.

Of one thing Finney was absolutely correct: The Gospel held by the Reformers whom he attacked directly, and indeed held by the whole company of evangelicals, is "another gospel" in distinction from the one proclaimed by Charles Finney. The question of our moment is, With which gospel will we side?

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Unless otherwise specified, all quotes are from Charles G. Finney, *Finney's Systematic Theology* (Bethany, 1976).

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