

Charles Finney

Among the many 'revivalists' that shaped nations is the name of Charles Finney. To many it appears Finney was the father of some modern teaching and methods, methods which many believe have adversely affected the Evangelical faith. Modern methods of evangelism, Church growth movements, Pentecostal traits, political revivalism are all said to have originated from Finney.

Evangelism:

Finney's preaching was passionate, clear, urgent and he stressed immediate conversion, unlike many of the preachers of his day. He called sinners to repent and believe. It has been written that He was also a faithful preacher of the law and used it well to convict sinners.

He was ordained in 1824 near the end of the second Great Awakening which had seen men like George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards instrumental in bringing millions into the kingdom of Heaven and literally shaking the moral fabric of towns, cities and nations. For a time Finney seemed to be able to fan the flames of revival wherever he went but believed in looking for techniques to bring this about.

In discussions on revivals the names Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and Charles Finney are often spoken of in one sweeping sentence. However, the history shows vast differences between Finney and such men in the methods used, as well as the results. Finney's lectures on revival in the 1830's represent a viewpoint that is quite distant from Edwards or Whitefield.

The question is asked: how much did Finney mix techniques and man made methods with the Gospel and how did this affect the results? Martyn Lloyd Jones wrote: *'Finney was a man who taught quite definitely that, if one applied a given technique, one could have a revival at any time. This is the essence of Finney's teaching in his book on revivals. But history has surely proved that Finney was quite wrong. Many have tried to plan revivals by using his techniques and have done so honestly, sincerely, and thoroughly, but the desired revival has not come. One of Finney's cardinal errors was to confuse an 'evangelistic campaign' and a 'revival' and to forget that the latter is always given in the sovereignty of God.'* (1)

Certainly Finney put an emphasis on having a person make 'a decision'. He was the first evangelist to ask people to come forward to indicate acceptance of Christ. He first applied the term 'revival' to evangelistic campaigns, (the concept of 'revivalism' having come from the Unitarians beforehand). He also initiated 'enquiry rooms' for after-meetings. His *'anxious bench'* was a precedent to the *'altar call'* of today. Emotionalism at his meetings led to faintings, weeping and other manifestations.

Finney's new revivalism methods caused a split amongst the Presbyterians into two groups - Arminian and Calvinistic. Finney's theology frequently challenged conventional and historic doctrine. He would not accept the Westminster Confession of Faith. Many believe he went to the extreme in not being able to discern between Calvinism, the standard theology of the day, and hyper-Calvinism. Hyper-Calvinism includes the belief that the Gospel invitation is for the elect only. Perhaps he threw the baby out with the bathwater and *'jettisoned them all - and thus repudiated the heart of biblical theology'*. (2) Finney concluded that his own Presbyterian pastor George W. Gale's belief in human depravity and divine sovereignty were incompatible with evangelism. (3)

Iain Murray who wrote about the history of these times, said: *'Finney certainly had a theology, and it was hostile to historic Christianity in its whole assessment of human nature. Finney's position was that the will decides everything. There isn't a fallen nature in man; there is no need for a man's nature to be changed. All that is needed for a person to become a Christian is for his will to take action. He has got to make a decision, and if he makes that decision, he becomes a Christian. To which the older preachers responded, it's true that to become a Christian, we all have to commit ourselves and receive Christ, but there's a much more serious problem. By nature we are at enmity to God, and we need to be regenerated, and that regeneration isn't in our own hands or power. We can't accomplish it ourselves. Whereas Finney said that this view was heresy; any man who makes the right decision becomes a new creature.'* (4)

There is no doubt that Finney believed in the power of the Holy Spirit, but his methods and theology historically can be shown to have birthed a new generation of ‘man centred’ evangelism. Murray continues: *‘The main theme after Finney was that we have to ‘influence’ people, and it is justifiable for us to do that in any way we can to bring them to salvation. And bringing people to salvation became identified with getting people to do things publicly that presumably committed them. Whereas the older preaching was that man is in a desperate, lost condition. We are utterly dependent upon God; we must go to our knees and pray. We must preach and pray, because God has given us no other means. The church in a former day would have been looking to God much more than we are today. We are so taken up with the problems of communication and being relevant, and making sure we are understood. We are so absorbed with all of that, that we seem to have lost the emphasis that went before’.* (5)

Finney initially believed the proof of the fruit of his revivals was in the great numbers being ‘converted’. However, many historians have noted the large ‘backsliding’ rates in communities after Finney left an area. Warfield wrote, *‘No more powerful testimony is borne...than that of Asa Mahan, [Finney’s longtime friend and fellow worker], who tells us - to put it briefly - that ‘everyone who was concerned in these revivals suffered a sad subsequent lapse: the people were left like a dead coal which could not be re-ignited; the pastors were shorn of all their spiritual power; the evangelists...I cannot recall a single man, brother Finney and father Nash excepted, who did not after a few years lose his unction, and become equally disqualified for the office of evangelist and that of pastor’.* (6)

A contemporary of Finney said, *‘During ten years, hundreds, and perhaps thousands, were annually reported to be converted on all hands; but now it is admitted, that [Finney’s] real converts are comparatively few’.* (7) Finney himself became discouraged when his methods ultimately failed and later he accepted a presidency of Oberlin College.

He was to later say: *‘I was often instrumental in bringing Christians under great conviction, and into a state of temporary repentance and faith... [but] falling short of urging them up to a point, where they would become so acquainted with Christ as to abide in Him, they would of course soon relapse into their former state’.* (8)

Today we see this same effect with statistics of an 80% failure rate with so called ‘conversions’. Many of these come from ecumenical ‘crusades’ where the gospel is mixed with worldly ‘techniques’ to produce thousands of ‘decisions’.

Murray again summarises in reference to Finney: *‘Our Lord talks about stony ground hearers, who receive the Word with joy, but it simply doesn’t last. When the altar calls came in, simultaneously came in that method of announcing that we had 500 conversions last night. And that is so remote from biblical Christianity. That brought great disrepute upon the church, because everybody knew that many of these supposed converts didn’t stand...The church in former times was, to a much greater degree, light and salt. And it was that because great care was taken in admitting members into the church, so that the church was different than the world. Part of our problem today is that the church in its way of living is so like the world that it is no longer convicting. Think of Paul saying to the Corinthians that if a stranger comes in, he is convicted by God’s presence and he falls down. We don’t see that now. The church is so close to the world. And that’s come about, (the older divines would have said), because we’ve taken such a superficial view of what it means to be a Christian. Conversion has become demeaned in its significance’.* (9)

Doctrine:

Finney claimed a desire to preach almost immediately after his conversion. At this point he was relatively ignorant of scripture and devoid of any theological training. However, because of his legal training, he had a sharp mind and could debate convincingly with anyone. Refusing to attend Princeton Seminary he began conducting his own revival meetings in New York. One of his most famous sermons was titled *‘Sinners Bound To Change Their Own Hearts’*. Finney believed it was his own will that determined his salvation.

Much of Finney’s theology did not always show in his evangelism but developed over a period of many years. It increasingly revolved around human morality. Finney basically followed teachings similar to Pelagius, a fifth century heretic who was severely condemned by numerous church councils.

Finney believed that original sin was *'anti-scriptural and nonsensical dogma'*. (10) He believed God would not condemn people for being sinners by nature. His logic overrode scripture when he wrote: *'The Bible defines sin to be the transgression of the law. What law have we violated in inheriting this [sin] nature? What law requires us to have a different nature? Does reason affirm that we are deserving of the wrath and curse of God forever, for inheriting from Adam a sinful nature?'* (11)

His understanding of righteousness, guilt, transgression, forgiveness and other terms, were very often drawn from his legal studies and not from scripture. He applied 19th century legal standards to biblical doctrines. He wrote: *'...I have interpreted as I would have understood the same or like passages in a law book'*. (12) From this quote we see that Finney disregarded clear scriptural orthodoxy as in Romans 5:16-19. He put a form of logic, human reasoning and Arminianism in its place.

Pentecostals often refer to Finney and his writings. Finney one day experienced a 'Baptism of the Holy Ghost': *'like a wave of electricity going through and through'*. (13) However, even after this experience, Finney wrote years later: *'Notwithstanding the baptism I had received...I went to bed without feeling sure my peace was made with God.'* (14)

He believed in **entire sanctification** or as some people describe it, *'sinless perfection'*. (15) Finney wrote: *'Now as entire sanctification exists in perfect obedience to the law of God, and as the law requires nothing more than the right use of whatever strength we have, a state of entire sanctification is attainable in this life on the ground of natural ability'*. This teaching ran counter to the teaching of progressive sanctification as taught throughout the centuries and greatly influenced the Holiness movement and thus the later Pentecostal movement. In the stream of this new teaching Charles Wesley also wrote a book *'A Plain Account of Christian Perfection'*; yet on his deathbed he admitted he had not achieved it.

When Finney grew discouraged by his results in Evangelism he accepted the position of principal of Oberlin College and there developed his perfectionist doctrines further. With other Holiness leaders such as Phoebe Palmer, he paved the way for what was called by some, 'Oberlin Perfectionism'. This view incorporated a *second* consecration by the Holy Spirit. (16) B.B. Warfield wrote a thorough and devastating critique of Finney's theology on this and other matters. (17)

Finney also attacked **justification** by grace alone through faith alone which the Reformers upheld so strongly. He wrote: *'The doctrine of an imputed righteousness, or that Christ's obedience to the law was accounted as our obedience, is founded on a most false and nonsensical assumption'*. (18) He classified the teaching of imputed righteousness (Romans Chapters 3,4,5), as *'theological fiction'*. (19)

Conclusion

Did Finney introduce *leaven* into methods of evangelism that are now evident in modern Gospel presentation? Author, Michael Horton believes so. He writes: *'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. 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'*. (20)

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(1) *'Conversations, Psychological and spiritual'* by Lloyd Jones (2) *'Ashamed of the Gospel'* by MacArthur, Appendix 2 (3) *Autobiography*, 59-60 (4) Published interview with Iain Murray concerning his book *'Revival and Revivalism/The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1858'* (5) Ibid above (6) *'Ashamed of the Gospel'* by MacArthur – citing Warfield 2:26. (7) Cited in Warfield, 24 *'Perfectionism'* by B. Warfield, (2 volumes, 1932) (8) Cited in Warfield, 24 (9) Published interview with Iain Murray concerning his book *'Revival and Revivalism/The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1858'* (10) Finney's *'systematic Theology'* (1851) P.179, see also P.249,250,236,245 (11) *Autobiography*, 42 P.339, (12) *Autobiography*, 42 (13) *'Charles Finney: An Autobiography'*, P.78 (14) Ibid, P.22. (15) Finney's *'Systematic Theology'*, P. 407, 405-8 (16) For more on The Foundation and History of the Pentecostal Movement, see P.3 of this Article in the Pentecostalism &or Charismatism section on our website. (17) *'Perfectionism'* 2:1-215 (18) Ibid. P.179 (19) Ibid. P.56-58 (20) Michael Horton, *'Modern Reformation'*, (Article adapted from *'Publisher Abroad'*, Aug. 1996 *'The Legacy of Charles Finney'*)