

CHARLES G. FINNEY: AMERICA'S GREATEST REVIVALIST

ROBERT E. COLEMAN

Few men have had a more pervasive influence for holiness and revival in America than Charles Grandison Finney. His anointed ministry, spanning half the nineteenth century, is said to have brought no less than 500,000 persons into the Kingdom of God¹ and introduced multiplied thousands more into what he called an experience of "perfect love."

He was born in Warren, Connecticut in 1792, the seventh child of a revolutionary war soldier. The family moved to the frontier in western New York, where Finney attended school and later did some teaching. In 1818 he became an apprentice in the law office of Judge Benjamin Wright in Adams.

Up to this time Finney had never given much attention to religious matters, but now finding frequent references to the Mosaic institutions in his study of jurisprudence, he began to read the Bible. He also started attending the Presbyterian Church. Though not impressed by the hyper Calvinism of the pastor, his own searching of the Scripture brought conviction to his restless soul.

On Sunday night, October 7, 1821, Finney made up his mind to "settle the question,"² but it was not until Wednesday that he found peace. That morning he went out into a nearby woods and made a Bethel for himself under some trees that had fallen against each other. "I will give my heart to God," he resolved, "or I will never come down from here."³ As he sought the Lord on his knees, finally the realization came that "faith was a voluntary trust instead of an intellectual state,"⁴ and without more argumentation, like a little child, he took God and His Word.

The sun was setting when Finney returned to his office, and there, alone, a sense of the presence of Christ overwhelmed him. As he described it: "The Holy Spirit descended upon me in a manner that seemed to go through me, body and soul... Indeed, it seemed to come in waves of liquid love."⁵ A member of the church later

Robert Coleman is the Distinguished Professor of Evangelism and Discipleship at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, MA. He is the author of hundreds of articles and 21 books.

THE ASBURY THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

SPRING 2005
VOL 60 • NO 1

happened to come by, and finding the lawyer praising God, asked, "Are you in pain?" To which he replied, "No, but so happy I cannot live."⁶

With his new found faith came an irresistible desire to preach. When asked by a client to take his case to court, he told him, "I have a retainer from the Lord Jesus Christ to plead His cause, and I cannot plead yours."⁷

Finney offered himself as a candidate for the Gospel ministry. Not having any formal seminary training, some Presbyterians urged him to go to Princeton, but he declined, saying that the graduates he had seen from that school did not meet his "ideal of what a minister of Christ should be."⁸ Quite a rebuke to those who pressed him for a reason, but it shows something of the forthright, independent spirit of this young preacher.

Grudgingly the St. Lawrence Presbytery placed Finney under the care of his pastor for the study of theology. Their views always conflicted, but the differences did not prevent them from recognizing his call to preach. When called upon to speak at his ordination service, the text he chose clearly reflected the focus of his ministry: "Without holiness no man shall see the Lord."⁹

Not long after being appointed as a missionary to a rural area in upstate New York, in October of 1924, Finney married Lydia Andrews, a young lady who had prayed for him during his law days at Adams. A couple of days after the wedding he set out for Evans Mills to make arrangements for moving their goods. On the way he was met by a man who begged him to preach in the community, which Finney agreed to do. So great was the response to his preaching that he stayed on for another day, then another, and finally gave up returning that week to get his wife.

Revival spread to neighboring towns, and continued through the winter. Finney wrote his wife that such were the circumstances he would have to delay his coming for her. When at last he started to get her in the Spring, his horse lost a shoe and he had to stop to have it reset. When people learned who he was, they entreated him to preach that afternoon in the schoolhouse. The Spirit of God fell in such power upon the audience that he consented to their pleas to spend the night and preach the next day. Again it was the same story. Constrained not to leave the harvest, he finally sent a man to take his horse and go to get his wife.

On first reading, six months separation during a honeymoon might suggest an indifference of feeling, even lack of affection. Such was not the case, however. Those who have followed Finney most closely say that "throughout his life he was passionately devoted to his family" (which eventually included eight children).¹⁰ What happened following his marriage is but another insight into his passion for souls.

Finney's wife shared the burden for revival with her husband, and for several years accompanied him in his meetings as an intercessor and co-worker. Another companion was "Father" David Nash, an old Presbyterian minister who went along to pray while the evangelist preached. Finney, too, spent hours each day on his knees.

Bathed in prayer and the Scripture, Finney preached with power, addressing people much as he would speak to a jury. With relentless logic and simplicity, it was said, "Such a view of the holiness of God was presented" that resistance to the Gospel was "swept away."¹¹

His very appearance seemed to convey a solemnity. On one occasion, while visiting a

cotton mill during a revival meeting, some girls who had laughed at Finney burst into tears when he looked at them, and soon the feeling moved through the whole factory. "Stop the mill," cried the owner, "and let the people attend to religion."¹² It was not long before nearly everyone was crying out to God for mercy.

Revival spread from rural towns to urban centers like Philadelphia, Boston, and New York City. During six months of protracted meetings in Rochester, from September 1830 to March 1831, the city was shaken to its foundations, and most of the leading lawyers, doctors, and businessmen of the city were converted. One hundred thousand people, it is reported by Lyman Beecher, connected themselves with churches as a result of the revival,¹³ an effect in so short a time probably unparalleled in American church history.

Finney's itinerant ministry of evangelism continued throughout his life, even occasioning two trips to England. But a recurrent respiratory illness forced him to curtail his travels in 1832. He accepted the Presbyterian pastorate of the Chatham Street Chapel, a renovated theater in New York City. Two years later he went to the newly built Broadway Tabernacle and became a Congregationalist.

While pastoring the church, he was asked by the editor of *The New York Evangelist* to give some lectures on revival. The publication of these Friday evening discourses in 1835 probably has impacted serious believers more than any other book ever written on this subject.

Revival is seen as "the return of the church from her backslidings," resulting in "a new beginning of obedience to God."¹⁴ This renewed faith finds expression in "a longing desire for the salvation of the whole world," even as it "breaks the power of sin over Christians."¹⁵ Such a state, he believed, was "not a miracle, nor dependent on a miracle," but purely "the result of the right use of the appropriate means."¹⁶ Finney was not minimizing divine sovereignty in sending revival, but simply asserting our human responsibility to respond fully to God's Word. He believed in the depravity of mankind, and a consequent natural inclination to sin, but insisted that God's grace enabled every person through the Holy Spirit to lay hold upon the provisions of salvation.

In the same year his *Lectures on Revival* were released, Finney accepted a professorship at Oberlin College, a small abolitionist school in Ohio. There he taught theology for the next 40 years, while still going out from time to time in revival meetings. He served as pastor of the Congregational Church in town from 1836 to 1872, and during part of this period, President of the College.

Under his leadership and that of a colleague, Asa Mahan, Oberlin became the nation's center of evangelical revival theology, emphasizing especially the perfectibility of the Christian life. This concern for sanctification, always present in his holiness ethic, increasingly captivated Finney's attention. An obsession for godliness dominates his *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, published in 1846, as well as many other printed lectures and sermons. Probably the most widely read are his *Lectures to Professing Christians*, a series of sermons preached in New York during 1836 and 1837.¹⁷

These messages come after observing that many believers "were making very little progress in grace" and "would fall back from a revival state."¹⁸ He was led to inquire from the Scripture whether there was something better, and came to the conclusion that "an altogether higher and more stable form of Christian life was attainable, and was the

privilege of all Christians."¹⁹ Though phrased more in terms of obedience to the law of God's love, his view corresponded essentially to that of the Wesleyan experience of perfect love.²⁰

Early on Monday morning, August 16, 1875, Finney died at his home in Oberlin. The evening before, hearing the church choir lifting their voices in the distance, he and his wife quietly joined in the singing, "Jesus, lover of my soul, let me to Thy bosom fly." A few hours later he fell asleep, and when he awoke it was in the arms of Jesus.²¹

Today in the church where he preached one can read this inscription: "From this pulpit for many years Charles G. Finney presented to this community and to the world the unsearchable riches of Christ."

Though what he taught is no longer heard on that campus, persons who yearn for revival in our time wish that we could hear his preaching again and learn more of those "unsearchable riches."

NOTES

1. This estimate is commonly mentioned by reputable historians, e.g. Earle E. Cairns, *An Endless Line of Splendor* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1986), p. 135; John Mark Terry, *Evangelism: A Concise History* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), p. 146.

2. Charles G. Finney, *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney, The Complete Restored Text*, edited by Garth M. Rosell and Richard A. G. Dupuis (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), p. 16. This edition with its extensive footnotes and supplementary information is by far the best printed resource on the life and work of Finney. The first edition of the *Memoirs*, edited by James Harris Fairchild, was published in 1876 under the title, *Memoirs of Rev. Charles G. Finney*, written by himself (New York: A.S. Barnes & Co.), but considerable portions of the original manuscript were edited out of the published text. All references to the *Memoirs* in this paper are from the Rosell and Dupuis edition.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 47 This comment interested me since I am a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary.

9. Hebrews 12:14, *Ibid.*, p. 83.

10. Prof. G. Fredrick Wright, quoted by Basil Miller, *Charles G. Finney* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1912), p. 46. Similarly, Garth Rosell, eminent Finney authority, calls him a "devoted father and husband," *Great Leaders of the Christian Church*, John Woodbridge, Gen. Ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), p. 319.

11. *Memoirs*, op.cit., p. 67

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 182-183.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 325-326. This figure may have been too high, unless allowance is made for the revival outreach in other areas. However, some estimates of the converted at Rochester reach 200,000. A discussion of this number is in footnote 115. *Ibid.* p. 326.

14. Charles G. Finney, *Revivals of Religion* (Westwood, N. J., Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), p. 7

15. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

17. Charles G. Finney, *Lectures to Professing Christians* (New York: John S. Taylor, 1837). They were also published in London by E. Wightman and Thomas Tegg in 1839. A number of other edi-

tions appeared, including one in 1878 prepared by E. J. Goodrich, which was reprinted by Fleming H. Revell (New York).

18. *Memoirs*, op. cit. p. 390

19. *Ibid.*, p. 392. See notes in *Ibid.*, pp. 390-393.

20. Among the various comparisons of Finney's and Wesley's view of holiness, the best that I have read is by Paul A. Rader, his B.D. thesis at Asbury Theological Seminary in 1959, "A Study of the Doctrine of Sanctification in the Life and Thought of Charles G. Finney." Other than disagreement on interpreting the cleansing of human depravity, Rader concludes that "in regard to the attainability of the experience of entire sanctification, the prerequisites of attainment, the condition of attainment, and the results of entering into this experience, both the Wesleyans and Finney are in substantial, if not absolute agreement," p. 103.

21. For a beautiful account of Finney's last hours, see Lewis A. Drummond, *Charles Grandison Finney and the Birth of Modern Evangelism* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983), pp. 258-261.