

## CHARLES FINNEY'S THEOLOGY OF REVIVAL: MORAL DEPRAVITY

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*Charles G. Finney is famous for his career in revival ministries, but he patterned his theology to fit his revivalistic practices. His unique view of original sin included a distinction between physical and moral depravity, the universal nature of moral depravity, and a rejection of the doctrine of imputation. Three possible reasons for his alteration of the theology in which he received training include the influences of Jacksonian democracy, an inclination toward favoring his legal training, and pragmatism. Finney has had a lasting influence on the church, including those who tend toward pragmatic methodology in ministry. Today's church must beware of such pragmatism and of being dragged into Finney's Pelagianistic theology.*

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In the study of American evangelicalism, it is important to recognize key contributors to the evangelical mind, individuals whose influence is still apparent. One such key individual is Charles Grandison Finney.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps Finney's ability to popularize is one

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<sup>2</sup>Mark Noll believes that Finney "may have had a greater impact on the public life of antebellum America than any of the nation's politicians" (*A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992] 170). Sydney Ahlstrom calls Finney "an immensely important man in American history by any standard of measure" (*A Religious History of the American People* [New Haven: Yale University, 1972] 461). Others also call Finney a giant on the evangelical landscape (Paul K. Conkin, *The Uneasy Center: Reformed Christianity in Antebellum America* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1995] 262; Donald W. Dayton, *Discovering*

reason he is such an important figure in history. He popularized the "New Measures" methodology, which he borrowed from the Methodists and perfected for his ends.<sup>3</sup> From the Methodist "mourner's bench" to Wesleyan perfectionism, Finney adapted various parts of Methodism into a New School Presbyterian framework.

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*an Evangelical Heritage* [1988 rpt., Peabody, MA: Hendricksen, 1976] 15-24; Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* [1980 rpt., Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1957]).

<sup>3</sup>Conkin, *Uneasy Center* 122, 262-63.

In addition, he popularized the New Haven theology. This new mutation of the New Haven theology has been called "Oberlin Theology" by historians because it includes the addition of Christian perfectionism.<sup>4</sup> Finney popularized this new brand of theology around the country, arguing that his success as a revivalist justified his theological positions.<sup>5</sup>

James Johnson, in a seminal journal article, suggests that Finney consciously sought to develop a theology which would be "patterned to fit his career as a revivalist. . . . Since his theological system was designed to complement his career as an evangelist, his theology often assumed strange shapes in order to accommodate to the revivalistic milieu."<sup>6</sup> Johnson, in the rest of his essay, sketches Finney's modifications in each area of theology. Johnson argues that it was necessary for Finney to set aside the Calvinistic developments on depravity, regeneration, and natural ability so that he could "construct a consistent system of free will and moral responsibility, and thus project an all-inclusive invitation into his revival meetings."<sup>7</sup> By

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<sup>4</sup>Frank Hugh Foster states that "among the great leaders of New England" Finney was "Taylor's true successor" (*A Genetic History of the New England Theology* [rpt., New York: Garland, 1987] 453). Keith Hardman, the recent biographer of Finney, argues that Finney's theology was essentially Pelagianistic and that he was the "most prominent exponent of the New Haven theology" in the United States (*Charles Grandison Finney 1792-1875: Revivalist and Reformer* [Syracuse: Syracuse University, 1987] 46-48, 100, 226, 289).

<sup>5</sup>Finney, in his *Memoirs*, seems desirous to stress this point. In comparing his own ministry to that of his first theological teacher, George Gale (who at first was Old School in his views), Finney writes, "He [Gale] followed out his views with very little practical result. I pursued mine, and by the blessing of God the results were the opposite of those which he predicted. When this fact came out clearly in my labors, it completely upset his theological and practical education as a minister. This result . . . annihilated his hope as a Christian, and finally made him quite another man as a minister" (*The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text* [hereafter *Memoirs*], Garth M. Rosell and Richard A. G. Dupuis, eds. [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989] 57, cf. 154, where Finney records that Gale changes his theological position strictly on pragmatic grounds).

<sup>6</sup>J. E. Johnson, "Charles G. Finney and a Theology of Revivalism," *CH* 38 (1969):338.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 344.

insisting that depravity resides in the free moral decision of an individual, Finney tried to persuade the individual to change his pattern of decision from self-gratification to glorifying God. Thus, he could record "conversions."

This essay will develop Johnson's suggestive thesis, that Finney actively and consciously molded his theology to fit his revivalistic purposes. Finney recognized that the positions which he held were vastly different from the moderately Calvinistic milieu which still characterized evangelicalism at that time.<sup>8</sup> One question which has puzzled scholars is which came first, Finney's theology or revivalistic success. The question is problematic because Finney makes it appear in his *Memoirs* that he had always held the New Haven theology which he articulated in later life. However, that he always held the New Haven theology is unlikely. It is far more likely that he did not form his positions during the revivalistic struggles, but in the quiet reflection of the Ohio wilderness at Oberlin.<sup>9</sup> To substantiate this thesis, the following discussion will develop a case study, examining the area of moral depravity. How did Finney modify his doctrine of original sin to promote his revivalistic career?

## **HOW FINNEY MODIFIED HIS THEOLOGY**

Though a minister in the Presbyterian church, and though he

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<sup>8</sup>For example, Finney opens his *Memoirs* by stating that his purpose was to defend the revivals which he conducted. Here he acknowledges that "this movement involved, to a considerable extent, the development of some modified views of Christian doctrine which had not been common, and was brought about by some changes in the means of carrying forward the work of evangelization" (*Memoirs*, 1). He also acknowledges that "many have looked upon me as rather prominent, especially in assailing some of the old forms of theological thought and expression and in stating the doctrines of the Gospel in many respects in new language, and introducing other forms of thought" (*ibid.*, 2).

<sup>9</sup>Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney* 384. In all probability, for Finney the new measures came first and then the theology. Finney began his missionary service in 1824, three years after his conversion. In just three years he was the rage of New York revivalism, leading up to the famous New Lebanon Conference with Ashael Nettleton and Lyman Beecher in 1827. Considering this sequence, the strong implication is that Finney sought to justify his revivalistic practice with his theology.

subscribed to the Westminster standards as part of his ordination vows, Finney's attitude toward the evangelical theology of his fellow churchmen was less than charitable. Finney was particularly vehement in his attitude toward the Old School theology which he admits was the theology of "most of the Presbyterian ministers of that day."<sup>10</sup> Finney felt the Old School theology was "utterly erroneous" and feared "that it has been instrumental in ruining hundreds of thousands of souls."<sup>11</sup> In his theological *magnum opus*—*Lectures on Systematic Theology*, written when he was the professor of Systematic Theology at Oberlin Collegiate Institute (later Oberlin College)—Finney says he was "embarrassed" by the Old School position on man's moral depravity:

The doctrines of a nature, sinful *per se*, of a necessitated will, of inability, and of physical regeneration, and a physical Divine influence in regeneration, with their resulting and kindred dogmas, embarrassed and even confounded me at every step.<sup>12</sup>

At another point, the Old School teaching on moral depravity appears to make him very upset when he writes,

This doctrine is a stumbling block both to the church and to the world, infinitely dishonorable to God, and an abomination alike to God and to the human intellect, and should be banished from every pulpit and from every formula of doctrine, and from the world. It is the relic of heathen philosophy, and was foisted in among the

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<sup>10</sup>*Memoirs* 152. "Old School" theology is that theological position which held strictly to the Westminster Standards. It opposed to the "New School" theology, which modified doctrines of the will, moral depravity, and regeneration. This theological battle eventually led to the division of the Presbyterian church in 1837. For a recent discussion of the issues involved, see George Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience* (New Haven: Yale University, 1970).

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 274.

<sup>12</sup>C. G. Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology* (reprint of 1878 ed., Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1994) 1 [hereafter referred to as *FST*]. Finney says later in the paragraph, "The distinction between original and actual sin, and the utter absence of a distinction between physical and moral depravity, embarrassed me."

doctrines of Christianity by Augustine, as everyone may know who will take the trouble to examine for himself.<sup>13</sup>

Finney also calls Old School formulation of the doctrine of moral depravity "absurd," "anti-Scriptural and non-sensical dogma," and claims that it makes the gospel "a farce". At one point, Finney mocks his opponents with sarcasm when he writes, "Sin an attribute of nature! A sinful substance! Sin a substance! Is it a solid, a fluid, a material or a spiritual substance?"<sup>14</sup> Finney demonstrates clear opposition to the Old School theology.

How did Finney mold his theology of revival in relation to the doctrine of moral depravity? He did it first by postulating a distinction between moral and physical depravity. This distinction limited sin to the act of sinning and postulated an option to the historical position of constitutional depravity. However, Finney was careful not to allow anyone to believe that he was free from sin; rather, he argued extensively for the universal moral depravity of every individual. He had to argue thus so that he could justify preaching regeneration and conversion to the masses. Finally, Finney denied the idea of imputation of Adam's sin. He set forth a key theological axiom that it was impossible for one man to do something in the place of another. However, according to Finney, Adam's sin did have an effect on his posterity; it exposed man to aggravated temptation as a result of physical depravity, which had no moral character in itself because it was involuntary. Thus, Finney secured his theology of revival by building a case for sin's residing solely in the individual's will, bringing deserved guilt upon the individual, and offering the possibility of the sinner "making himself a new heart" in conversion.

### ***A Distinction Between Physical and Moral Depravity***

The first innovation that Finney proposed in developing his theology of revival was a unique distinction between physical and moral depravity. In Finney's system, "physical depravity is the depravity of the constitution, or substance, as distinguished from

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 263.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 261-62.

depravity of free moral action. It may be predicated of the body or mind."<sup>15</sup> What Finney meant by physical depravity was the deterioration of the body and of the mind, whether through debilitating disease or through old age. It may be or is a result of moral depravity; however, it is important to note that for Finney this physical depravity "can have no moral character in itself, for the plain reason that it is involuntary, and in its nature is disease and not sin."<sup>16</sup> This distinction becomes important later in his argument, for Finney will declare that the sensibilities are physically deprived and therefore provide a powerful, almost irresistible temptation to the will to sin.

Contrasted to physical depravity is moral depravity:

Moral depravity is depravity of free will, not of the faculty itself, but of its free action. It consists in the violation of moral law. . . . Moral depravity is depravity of choice. It is a choice at variance with moral law, moral right. It is synonymous with sin and sinfulness.<sup>17</sup>

Notice that it is not depravity of the will, for that would be physical depravity. Rather, moral depravity is a choice in violation of the moral law. What was a choice in violation of the moral law for Finney? A choice in violation of the moral law consisted in "the choice of self-indulgence or self-gratification as an end."<sup>18</sup> Simply stated, for Charles Finney, moral depravity equals sin, sin equals selfishness, and sin can only happen where there is sinning. He writes,

Moral depravity, as I use the term, does not consist in nor imply a sinful nature in the sense that the substance of the human soul is sinful in itself. It is not a constitutional sinfulness. It is not an involuntary sinfulness.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 243.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid. 243-44. Finney also argued this when he wrote, "It should be distinctly remember that physical depravity has no moral character in itself" (265).

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 245.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

Sin must be voluntary to have moral character.

Through this rationale Finney provided himself an opportunity to construct a theology of revival; he argues for a distinction between moral depravity and physical depravity, only the former having a moral character. A sin nature is nonexistent; rather sin consists solely in sinning, the decisions of the will to satisfy self rather than glorify God. Therefore, in order to have a conversion, it is necessary to convince an individual to cease making decisions to satisfy self and to begin making decisions to glorify God. This was conversion, the warp and woof of Finney's revivalism.

### ***The Universal Nature Of Depravity***

Having developed a distinction between physical and moral depravity and argued that moral depravity resides solely in the decisions of the will, Finney had to prove for the sake of his revivalistic instincts that sin is universal. He had to demonstrate this in order for listeners to feel the necessity of conversion. So he sought to demonstrate that "subsequent to the commencement of moral agency, and previous to regeneration, the moral depravity of mankind is universal."<sup>20</sup>

In arguing this point, Finney offered several supporting reasons. First, Finney contended that it is universally true that man has a wicked heart.<sup>21</sup> What did he mean by "heart"? He equated heart with character and wrote, "The very idea of moral character implies, and suggests the idea of, a free action or intention."<sup>22</sup> That is, the heart

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 247.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 245. Elsewhere Finney writes, "The heart is often spoken of in the Bible, not only as possessing moral character, but as being the source of moral action, or as the fountain, from which good and evil actions flow, and of course as constituting the fountain of holiness or of sin, or, in other words still, as comprehending, strictly speaking, the whole of moral character. . . . Our own consciousness, then, must inform us that the heart of the mind that possesses these characteristics, can be nothing else than the supreme ultimate intention of the soul. . . . Now we have seen abundantly, that moral character belongs to, or is an attribute of, the ultimate choice or intention of the soul" (ibid., 272-273).



really equates to the will, in biblical usage; the understanding and the affections are in the category of physical depravity, which has no moral character. Therefore, Finney's first argument to support the notion of the universal nature of moral depravity was the declaration that men everywhere consistently make corrupt decisions because the will is depraved. Next, Finney argued that the universal need of regeneration proves that humankind is universally depraved. Third, universal observation proves that all are morally depraved. Finally, Finney argued that the universal consciousness of the unregenerate proves that all are depraved.<sup>23</sup>

Not only did Finney believe moral depravity to be universal, he also saw moral depravity as total and complete. He argued this by demanding that "the moral depravity of the unregenerate is without any mixture of moral goodness or virtue, that while they remain unregenerate, they never in any instance or in any degree, exercise true love to God and to man."<sup>24</sup> Yet Finney held that man was born innocent. How then can Finney argue that unregenerate individuals can "never, in any instance or in any degree" exercise genuine love to God or man? He can do so because of his definition of sin. To Finney, sin is selfishness: "sin consists in the spirit of self-seeking."<sup>25</sup>

Though born innocent, man can only have one end at a time; it is plain to Finney that "the will cannot embrace at the same time two opposite ends; and that while one end is chosen, the will cannot put forth volitions to secure some other end."<sup>26</sup> Thus, man cannot have the

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<sup>23</sup>Finney stated these points much the same way; he simply offered the propositions with a Scripture passage and no other support (cf. *FST*, 247-48).

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 248. It is this negative portrayal of unregenerate man that leads L. Sweet to comment, "Notwithstanding Finney's disavowal of the mechanistic limitations imposed upon human nature by the Old School Calvinists, Finney's moral model which stressed human freedom, responsibility, and ability commensurate with duty resulted in the same practical view of man: all men were inevitably sinners, unwilling but not unable to perform all that God required. . . . Moral depravity replaced physical depravity. But it was depravity nonetheless, a depravity made worse by being of man's own making" (L. I. Sweet, "The View of Man Inherent In New Measures Revivalism," *CH* 45 [1976]:207).

<sup>25</sup>*FST* 178.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 248-49.

mutually exclusive ends of self-love and love toward God, of self-gratification and glorification of God. It is an impossibility. Men must "change their hearts, or their choice of an end" before they can possibly choose an end other than self-love.<sup>27</sup> This simplified the revivalist's task. All that is necessary for the revivalist to do is to persuade the individual to "make a decision" to choose to glorify God (a decision couched in language such as "make a decision for Jesus"); if the sinner chooses God, this is conversion.

In order to avoid postulating an inherited (or as Finney would say, "necessitated") corrupt nature for mankind, Finney sketched out an alternative. He worked from the basic presupposition that "moral depravity consists, remember, in the committal of the will to the gratification or indulgence of self—in the will's following, or submitting itself to be governed by, the impulses and desires of the sensibility, instead of submitting itself to the law of God revealed by reason."<sup>28</sup> Notice the latter part of the explanation—Finney saw sin occurring whenever the will submits itself to sense-based desires. Therefore, the actual body is the enemy. He wrote, "It is plain that by the term flesh they [i.e. the Scripture writers] mean what we understand by the sensibility, as distinguished from intellect, and that they represent sin, as consisting in obeying, minding, the impulses of the sensibility. . . . The body is the occasion of sin."<sup>29</sup> If the body is the occasion of sin, how does it gain the upper hand on the will, so that in every case, the will chooses the end of self-gratification? Finney answers by arguing,

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 249. This change of one's heart for Finney is "regeneration": "Regeneration then is the radical change of the ultimate intention, and, of course, of the end or object of life. . . . Regeneration to have the characteristics ascribed to it in the Bible, must consist in a change in the attitude of the will, or a change in its ultimate choice, intention or preference."

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 264-65.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 264. That Finney understood flesh to be the same as the body man inhabits is proven by the fact that he was a strong advocate of the Graham diet. By placing his body under the regimen of the Graham diet, he felt he could minimize the effects of physical depravity upon the will. See Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney* 362-63; Dayton, *Evangelical Heritage* 42.

The sensibility acts as a powerful impulse to the will, from the moment of birth, and secures the consent and activity of the will to procure its gratification, before the reason is at all developed. The will is thus committed to the gratification of feeling and appetite, when first the idea of moral obligation is developed. This committed state of the will is not moral depravity, and has no moral character, until the idea of moral obligation is developed. The moment this idea is developed, this committal of the will to self-indulgence must be abandoned, or it becomes selfishness or moral depravity. But, as the will is already in a state of committal, and has to some extent already formed the habit of seeking to gratify feeling, and as the idea of moral obligation is at first but feebly developed, unless the Holy Spirit interferes to shed light on the soul, the will, as might be expected, retains its hold on gratification.<sup>30</sup>

Notice two things about this statement. First, Finney's attitude toward the body was to call it "feeling and appetite." At first glance his statements parallel ancient Gnostic sentiments concerning the duality of matter and spirit. To Finney as to the Gnostics, the flesh—feelings and appetites which reside in the sensibility—is evil; the goal is to gain dominance over the will so that the will may consistently and infallibly choose to gratify the senses. On the other hand, the spirit, which for Finney consisted in a desire to do God's will as revealed in his moral laws, is righteous and seeks dominance of the will as well. However, the flesh has the upper hand, for from birth it teaches the infant to choose self-gratification continually.

A second aspect in the above explanation is Finney's attitude toward infants. He felt that children can sin, but because infants do not have moral obligation, what they do is not truly sin. Infants cannot be "moral agents" since they cannot understand what they have done. Since they are not moral agents, they do not have "moral obligation"; and without moral obligation, sin cannot happen. Besides, "Previous to moral agency, infants are no more subjects of moral government than brutes are; therefore, their sufferings and death are to be accounted for as are those of brutes, namely, by ascribing them to

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<sup>30</sup> *FST* 265.

physical interference to the laws of life and health."<sup>31</sup> Infants, then, are not under God's moral government; they have no moral obligation because they are not moral agents. They are simply amoral brutes, until that point in time the reason develops to the degree that it activates moral agency.

What happens to the infant that dies before reaching the point in time of becoming a "moral agent"? Finney argues that "if infants are saved at all, as I suppose they are, they are rescued by the benevolence of God from circumstances that would result in certain and eternal death, and are by grace made heirs of life."<sup>32</sup> So then the basis of infants' salvation is the benevolence of God. This means it cannot be truly of grace, though Finney claims it is, for how can God show unmerited favor to one who is innocent? In the end, however, "it is useless to speculate about the character and destiny of those who are not confessedly moral agents."<sup>33</sup>

"Moral depravity is then universally owing to temptation. That is, the soul is tempted to self-indulgence, and yields to the temptation, and this yielding, and not the temptation, is sin or moral depravity."<sup>34</sup> Just as with humankind's first parents, who yielded to temptation in the Garden, so with humankind; each individual will inevitably choose to yield to the temptation offered by the flesh at the beginning of life as infants. As this habit continues, the flesh soon gains ascendancy over the will so as to enslave the will to bodily appetites. By the time the infant realizes its moral obligation to forsake sin and chose righteousness, it cannot; it has become morally depraved, locked by the chains of self-indulgence.

In the light of the fact that the flesh overpowers the will before an individual becomes a moral agent, so that properly it is not truly "free," how does Finney argue this position consonant with his demand for a truly free will? He did not answer this question; he simply stated, "Free, responsible will is an adequate cause in the face of

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 259.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 261.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 265.

temptation" to account for moral depravity.<sup>35</sup> He said nothing more to explain this seeming contradiction. Thus, in maintaining his theology of revivalism with its emphasis on immediate conversion and regeneration, Finney had to demonstrate that all individuals need to be saved from their moral depravity.

He offered supporting arguments to prove that moral depravity is universal and total. However, in order to avoid postulating a necessitated corrupt nature, he speculated concerning the methodology which sees humankind as universally depraved, starting at birth to develop a pattern of habitually capitulating to the sense-based desires of the flesh. By the time the infant acquires the moral obligation to leave off self-gratification, he finds it impossible and has become moral depraved. Therefore, it is necessary for the individual to choose to satisfy self no longer, and to change his habitual choice so that he consistently chooses to obey God's law. When the individual changes his own will, Finney deemed this conversion. This process of conversion is the essence of revivalism.

### ***The Question of Imputation***

After a look at Finney's distinction between moral and physical depravity and the way he accounts for universal moral depravity, an examination of Finney's view of how Adam's sin relates to his posterity is next in order. Finney, in seeking to maintain the individual's responsibility for his own sin, denied the idea of imputation altogether. He did not address directly the idea of the imputation of Adam's sin, but he denied the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers. Writing on justification, Finney said,

*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; to wit, that Christ owed no obedience to the law in His own person, and that therefore his obedience was altogether a work of supererogation, and might be made a substitute for our own obedience; that it might be set down to our credit, because he did not need to obey for Himself. . . . If Christ owed personal obedience to the moral law, then his obedience could no*

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 258.

more justify himself. *It can never be imputed to us.* He was bound for Himself to love God with all his heart, and soul, and mind, and strength, and his neighbor as Himself. He did no more than this. He could do no more. *It was naturally impossible, then, for Him to obey in our behalf.*<sup>36</sup>

Obviously for Finney, *it is impossible for one man to do something in the place of another.* This axiom was a controlling principle in his theology. This accounts for why he indirectly denied the imputation of Adam's sin, why he defended the governmental view of the atonement, and why he demanded that sinners change their own hearts. In dealing with the key passage for the imputation of Adam's sin, Rom 5:12-21, Finney simply gave it a passing notice:

The Bible once, and only once, incidentally intimates that Adam's first sin has in one way been the occasion, not necessarily physical cause of all the sins of men [Rom 5:12-19]. It neither says nor intimates anything in relation to the manner in which Adam's sin has occasioned this result. It only incidentally recognizes the fact, and then leaves it, just as if the *quo modo* was too obvious to need explanation.<sup>37</sup>

In Finney's understanding, Paul does not go into detail in this passage. He simply assumed that his readers would understand how Adam's sin effected his posterity. Indeed, Paul used Adam's sin as a type of rhetorical device in his letter. Thus, Finney dismissed in three sentences the passage which is the central text in the debate over imputation.

However, Finney did view Adam's sin has having some kind of effect upon his posterity. Adam's sin exposed humankind to

aggravated temptation. Not only the physical constitution of all men, but all the influences under which they first form their moral character, are widely different from what they would have been, if

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 362-63 (emphasis added).

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 264.

sin had never been introduced.<sup>38</sup>

In other words, Adam's sin started the pattern of physical depravity. Because of Adam's sin, human beings now experience physical degeneracy, which brings much stronger temptations than would have been the case if Adam had not sinned. That is the extent of the influence of Adam's sin on his posterity in Finney's development.

The above discussion has developed a full understanding of Finney's teaching on moral depravity and noticed how this teaching contributed to his theology of revival. Finney postulated a distinction between moral and physical depravity so that he could advocate that sin resides solely in the sinning, for voluntary actions alone are considered to have moral character. However, people are unable to go through life without sinning; sin is universal because it starts from infancy to gain the upper hand over the slowly developing reason. By the time the infant reaches the age of moral obligation, his will inclines toward sin; this is moral depravity, and it is the infant's own fault. God does not impute Adam's sin (or for that matter, Christ's righteousness) to anyone. It is impossible for one person to do something in the place of another; rather Adam's sin simply contributes by aggravating temptation for everyone.

Thus, the revivalist can preach, persuade, and invite individuals to make a voluntary decision to choose to sin no longer and to glorify God. Not only can the revivalist invite an individual to do this, but he can invite a sinner to be converted immediately and instantaneously. If salvation resides simply in the choice of the individual, then the steps of preparation, which were common in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, are unneeded; indeed it would be blasphemous to wait for divine preparation when one can be converted immediately. If salvation resides simply in the choice of the individual, then to desire electing grace is the height of blasphemy against God, who has made people capable of choosing to be saved. This teaching gives confidence to the revivalist to press the claims of the Gospel upon his hearers in order to see them "converted."

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 266.

## WHY FINNEY MODIFIED HIS THEOLOGY

Having observed thus far the *how* Finney modified his theology, another question is *why*—what motivated Finney to modify his theology? Among suggested motivations leading the revivalist to modify theological positions in order to gain converts, three are primary. First was the spirit of the times, a spirit summed up with the label "Jacksonian Democracy." Next was the influence of Finney's legal training which happened to coincide with the common sense philosophy of the age. Finally came the pragmatic desire for large numbers of conversions as a motivation.

### *Jacksonian Democracy*

Many historians believe that a key factor which motivated Finney's adaptation of theology is sociological, associated with the rise of Jacksonian democracy. For example, Perry Miller argues that Finney summed up the tone of Jacksonian America:

In the 1820s and 1830s much depended, for the health and future development of the revival, upon what sort of man Finney was, and on what vision of the nation he possessed. Again the analogy with Jackson forces itself upon us. With it comes an urgent reflection: a revival in Connecticut, under the sober control of settled pastors could suit with a Federalist temper in politics, could bridge the transition to the Whig Party. But the kind of revival stimulated by Finney in upstate New York, though it refrained from politics and was not necessarily confined to Democrats, was a mass uprising, a release of energy, a sweep of the people which made it an explosion of energy we call Jacksonian America.<sup>39</sup>

To Miller and those who follow his interpretation, the revivals which Finney led in the 1820s and 1830s were nothing more than an affirmation of the common man. Finney in leading these revivals was affirming the potential and dignity of the common man. Individuals

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<sup>39</sup>Perry Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1965) 30.



when freed from the oppressive "Old School" theology of the past generation could "change their own hearts."

Keith Hardman believed that Finney sought to "democratize" Christianity so that anyone could participate in it. In this way Finney and Jackson parallel each other. Hardman writes,

There is his determination to democratize American Protestantism, and the relationship between this force embodied in his career and the democratizing influence of President Andrew Jackson's political thought, who was elected to the nation's highest office in 1828. Just as Jackson railed against privilege, monopoly and property qualification for voting, Finney railed against the social conservatism of the Presbyterian church structure. Increasingly, Finney came to regard the Old School Theology as disastrous to the cause of evangelism at a time when multitudes needed to be reached and brought into the churches, and the Old School hierarchy of the Presbyterians as a top-heavy bureaucracy with entrenched power. His calling, as he came to view it, was to overthrow its stifling theology of election, and do what he could to redistribute its power in a more democratic fashion among the laity itself. So, Jacksonian democracy and Finney's desires complemented each other.<sup>40</sup>

This view holds that the spirit of the times—namely, the democratization of all facets of life—caused Finney to view the common man as essentially good, at least good enough to exercise his "vote" for God correctly. Finney thus modified the Old School theology which was at fault because it failed to produce any "results," a modification conditioned by Finney's desire to "redistribute power in a more democratic fashion among the laity itself." Yet does this view of Finney account for all the facts? This writer submits that Finney was not nearly as liberal and progressive as some would like to believe; rather, Finney was essentially conservative, a stance that impacted his theological stance.

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<sup>40</sup>Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney* 151. Hardman also proposes that the Jacksonian democracy hypothesis accounts for Finney's emphasis on activism and voluntarism (99, 256), individual freedom (38), and the primacy of the laity over the clergy (281). See also Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University, 1989) 196-201.

Leonard I. Sweet rightly critiques Hardman's view when he writes, "Far from expressing a simple confidence in humanity, the basic thrust of Finney's thought was conservative, status-conscious, and pessimistic about human nature."<sup>41</sup> This statement is a paradigm that makes possible a critique of the Jacksonian democracy hypothesis as a motivation for Finney's theological innovation. First, Finney's thought was basically conservative. By "conservative," Sweet understands that Finney's intent was not to arouse enthusiasm and emotionalism as an end in themselves, but rather to use that emotionalism as a means to the end of assaulting the reason. He writes,

Far from emotions being the most positively virtuous of man's capabilities, natural affections or what Finney pejoratively termed 'animal feelings' were not to be appreciated: they were to be manipulated for the advancement of revivals. Accused by his adversaries of arousing human passions and anti-intellectual sentiments, Finney justified his appeals to the emotions as a means to the end of appealing to the intellect.<sup>42</sup>

By his appeals to the reason, Finney sought to avoid the charge that he was a reincarnated James Davenport, that is, that he was preaching enthusiasm. In this sense, he was seeking to be truly conservative. As a conservative, Finney was not seeking to unleash an explosion of enthusiasm among the common populace.

Second, Finney was also status conscious. It cannot be accurate to construe Finney as a "revivalist of the people" in light of the people who backed and bankrolled his endeavors. Indeed, the strong implication is that if it were not for the Tappan brothers and "the Association of Gentlemen," Finney would have not achieved the level of notoriety that he did. Wealthy New York businessmen paid for both of his New York pastorates—at the Chatham Street Chapel and at the Broadway Tabernacle. The Tappans also endowed Finney's theological professorship at Oberlin and subsidized his moving

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<sup>41</sup>Sweet, "View of Man" 206.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 214.

expenses. Another item which shows that Finney was not a "revivalist democrat" was his attitude toward African-Americans at Chatham Street. African-Americans were invited to the services, but "were segregated in a place reserved for them to the side of the sanctuary." Though personally opposed to slavery, Finney was against "amalgamation," the term used for the social mingling of whites and blacks. This opposition to amalgamation within the Chapel services eventually led Lewis Tappan to leave the church.<sup>43</sup> Thus, the company Finney did, and did not, keep reflected his status-consciousness.

Third, Finney was ultimately pessimistic, not optimistic, about human nature. Although Finney postulated that human beings are born innocent, he also held that man universally and infallibly chooses to sin. This belief marks his essentially pessimistic view of man. Finney still held that all have sinned. Sweet argues that Finney and the Old School Calvinists shared "the same practical view of man: all men were inevitably sinners, unwilling but not unable to perform all that God required."<sup>44</sup> Thus, the sinner's depravity was even worse in Finney's system than in the Old School system because it rested solely on that individual's choice. This is not the language of a Jacksonian democrat. Rather, it is the language of a revivalist who had motivations beyond that of an inspirational belief in the worth, potential, and dignity of mankind. Thus, Jacksonian democracy alone was not an adequate motivation to account for Finney's theological modifications, because the hypothesis runs counter to Finney's basic thought which was conservative, status-conscious, and pessimistic about human nature.

### ***The Influence of Legal Studies***

A second important possible influence in Finney's development of a theology of revival was the influence of his legal studies. In this connection David Weddle notes, "Finney developed his system of theology through the application of legal reasoning to the text of the Bible."<sup>45</sup> This in particular is what Finney wanted people to think. He

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<sup>43</sup>Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney* 262, 274-75.

<sup>44</sup>Sweet, "View of Man" 207.

<sup>45</sup>David L. Weddle, *The Law as Gospel: Revival and Reform in the Theology of Charles*

studied theology under his pastor, George Gale. As he read the books in Gale's study, he found that

the more I examined the books, the more I was dissatisfied. *I had been used to the close and logical reasonings of the judges, as I found reported in our law books.* But when I went to Brother Gale's Old School library, I found almost nothing proved to my satisfaction.<sup>46</sup>

The reason nothing proved the theological propositions to Finney's satisfaction was that Gale's "rules of interpretation did not meet my views. They were much less definite & intelligible than those to which I had been accustomed in my law studies."<sup>47</sup> Throughout his *Memoirs*, Finney criticized the Old School theology because it did not match up to the system of logic and reasoning he knew as a lawyer.

However, were the Old School theologians illogical, or did Finney approach theology with a different philosophical paradigm than the "Old School" theologians? This writer argues that the latter is the case. Previously noted is the fact that Finney set down at the beginning of his *Systematic Theology* that the one chief axiom of his theology was "that the will is free, and that sin and holiness are voluntary acts of the mind."<sup>48</sup> If one were to trace this axiom back past the influence of the New Haven theology, it is this writer's opinion that one would find its source in the Enlightenment philosophy of the day, Scottish Common Sense. Starting from the common sense proposition that the mind can know actual objects, not simply ideas or images, Finney rejected out of hand the idea of inherent depravity, because it is not a knowable object. Hence his ridicule—"Sin an attribute of nature! A sinful substance! Sin a substance! Is it a solid, a fluid, a material or a spiritual substance?"—takes on new meaning. Sin must be a knowable object for the mind to understand it. If one

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*G. Finney* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1985) 6. Weddle focuses on the influence of Finney's legal training upon his theology.

<sup>46</sup>*Memoirs*, 55 (emphasis added).

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>48</sup>*FST* 2.

relegates sin to the "idea" of nature, which is essentially imperceivable, then sin loses its force. Thus, sin is solely the wrong action of the will, for one sees the results of the will's acts; one does not necessarily see the results of the appetites of the body or of the passions.<sup>49</sup>

Yet even more important than actual teachings of Scottish Common Sense inculcated by Finney, is the tone which he adopted. The common sense of the common man characterized that tone: "I had read nothing on the subject except my Bible, & what I had there found upon the subject I had interpreted as I would have understood the same or like passages in a law book."<sup>50</sup> Finney understood the Bible as a common man would, as a lawyer would, using his common sense to take the words at face value. He could not recognize that the common sense philosophy which he had imbibed might possibly affect and skew his own interpretations of Scripture. Hence, the influence of Finney's legal studies coupled with the philosophy of the day caused his theological development to differ significantly from his Old School opponents.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Sydney Ahlstrom, "The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology," *CH* (1955):257-72; see also Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University, 1976) 341-50.

<sup>50</sup>*Memoirs*, 44 [emphasis added].

<sup>51</sup>It must be noted that the Princetonians were influenced by the Scottish philosophy as well. However, though Finney battled them regularly, particularly in the pages of his Oberlin Evangelist, it appears that his main opponent in his *Systematic Theology* is Jonathan Edwards, and in connection with him, the New Divinity men such as Leonard Woods (cf. *FST*, 250-54 and especially 303-18, 333). Edwards, as has been noted by Mark Noll, was a difficult figure for both the nineteenth-century New England men and the Princetonians to adopt, because Edwards was explicitly an idealist, while both Andover and Princeton were committed to the Scottish Philosophy (Mark A. Noll, "The Contested Legacy of Jonathan Edwards in Antebellum Calvinism," in *Reckoning with the Past*, ed. D.G. Hart [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995] 200-17; for the Princeton commitment to the Scottish philosophy, see Mark A. Noll, *Princeton and the Republic, 1768-1822* [Princeton: Princeton University, 1989]). Thus, Edwardsean idealism conflicted with Finney's common sense realism which caused an inability in the latter to understand the former.

**Pragmatism**

A final factor which was part of the motivation for Finney's theological modifications is pragmatism. The word comes up frequently in studies about Finney. For instance, Leonard Sweet writes,

If new measures revivalism had any idolatry, it was success. Truth was measured not in terms of faithful exposition of doctrinal heirlooms, but in terms of numerical success in saving souls. The test of veracity and validity of a measure of message was its performance. If it worked, God was behind it, for God was a sanctifier of success. . . . Finney's democratic simplification of theology which reduced theological complexities to catchy slogans was grounded in a concern to be understood and make an impression, not in the conviction that doctrines could be democratized without distortion. Doctrinal disputes were to be avoided because they created diversions interfering with revival labors and thus impeding conversions. A derivative and simplistic thinker best characterized as a 'pulpit theologian,' Finney casually manipulated his theology and methods to achieve immediate goals.<sup>52</sup>

In Sweet's view, Charles Finney based everything on results. Theology was modified to achieve the goals. As long as "it worked," as long as people were being "converted," this satisfied Finney that he had divine approval. James Johnson concurs with Sweet's assessment: "He [Finney] wanted a system that worked, one that produced results, and consequently employed the pragmatic approach that the New England theology had spawned."<sup>53</sup> The characteristic of pragmatism comes not only from the critic; it also comes from Charles Finney's own writings. At one point Finney judges ministers based solely on pragmatic criteria: "Those are the best educated ministers, who win the most souls."<sup>54</sup> His biographer writes that "as to his new measures,

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<sup>52</sup>Sweet, "View of Man" 212-13.

<sup>53</sup>Johnson, "Finney and Revivalism" 357.

<sup>54</sup>Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on the Revival of Religion*, ed. William L. McLoughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1960) 185-87.

the blessing of God has certainly been upon them, if success in conversions be any criterion."<sup>55</sup>

Finney's motivation mixed these three forces—the spirit of the age, the common sense philosophy which Finney imbibed through his legal studies, and the pragmatism of gaining numerous converts. One could say that all three were motivating factors, though not any one of them alone could account for the furious activity of Finney's career or the vehemence with which he sometimes attacked his theological opponents. Finney employed all of the new measures in order to see men "converted." Conversions were the bottom line. Finney was not about to give up his success as an evangelist in order that he might adopt the Calvinism presented to him by the Old School theologians. For Finney, a man with a "retainer from the Lord," conversion was the bottom line and the only line, both in revival and in theology.

### LESSONS FOR TODAY

Charles G. Finney consciously and purposefully molded his theology in order to justify his revivalistic practices. In proof of this thesis, the above discussion has investigated one particular area of Finney's theology, the area of "moral depravity." Finney introduced teaching on moral depravity in three areas: first, he made a unique distinction between physical and moral depravity. This enabled him to regard only choices of the will as having moral character. Sin is in acts of the sin only, Finney would say. Next, Finney sought to maintain the universal nature of sin. Though he argued that infants are born innocent, he also contended that before they reach the age of understanding—thereby gaining moral obligation—their wills become accustomed to choosing self-gratification. Thus, by the time of moral obligation, this habitual action is sin, or "moral depravity." Finally, he argued that Adam's sin only has relation to his posterity by aggravating the temptations they experience, for it is impossible for one man to do something in the place of another. These innovations allowed Finney to claim that individuals can choose to stop sinning, just as they chose to sin in the first place. This choice to stop sinning

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<sup>55</sup>Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney* 283.

and to glorify God is "conversion," and conversions are the "stuff" of revival.

After a description of Finney's innovations, it was in order to account for the motivation behind these theological innovations. Possible motivations were three in number. First, Finney's theological modifications could have resulted from the sociological influence of Jacksonian democracy. Next, the influence of his legal studies founded upon the widespread common sense philosophy of the day was vast and colored Finney's reading of Scripture and theology. And finally, sheer pragmatism was a strong motivation for Finney to adapt his theology to his revivalistic practices. These three combined in Finney to provide a paradigm by which he interpreted the Scriptures and engaged opposition to his theological positions. Finney's emphasis upon "the philosophy or the workings of my own mind as they were revealed in consciousness" in his hermeneutic allowed him to modify Old School positions in order to maximize his evangelistic appeal.

As we look at our own day, it is readily apparent that Charles G. Finney has exercised a massive influence upon the evangelical mind. This influence has resulted from the fact that Finney was a popularizer of both the New Measures methodology and the New Haven theology. Finney influenced the crowds to whom he preached in a number of ways—as the regenerate saw the unregenerate converted, they gave the credit to the efficacy of Finney's methodology. The newly converted felt that they owed their very salvation to this preacher who had come to persuade them to turn their wills from selfishness to the opposite end, that of the glory of God. As a result, his listeners became his best public relations machine. They publicly defended and justified the new measures based on the fact that individuals were being "converted." Our day likewise sees great emphasis on all types of "new measures"—such as seeker-sensitive services and high level church marketing. Like Finney, the practitioners of these modern measures justify their techniques by virtue of their "success." Could it be that the modern new measures, which mirror those of Finney, reflect the same Pelagianistic theology which was part and parcel of his ministry? May the Lord give the church discernment and wisdom from her study of the past as she seeks to understand the movements of the present.