

CHARLES FINNEY: HIS THEOLOGY, HIS PRACTICE,  
AND HIS CRITICS

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by  
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## INTRODUCTION

The theology of Charles Finney has been at the center of controversy since the very beginning of his revival ministry. It is no surprise that “the world’s greatest preacher,”<sup>1</sup> as he was called, who espoused a theology that flew in the face of what many considered orthodoxy, would create such tensions in the church. Indeed, many of these same issues and tensions are present among us today as we have witnessed a resurgence of interest in Finney’s theology. This renewal has not quite been one where Finney’s theology is respected or even necessarily driving discussion about how one should do theology, but rather the subject of fierce criticism. Essentially, history has repeated itself as charges of Pelagianism and heresy have come against Finney’s theology from Reformed critics in our era just as they did in Finney’s.

Perhaps the most popular and widely read criticism has come in the form of Michael Horton’s article “The Legacy of Charles Finney” that first appeared in the Reformed magazine *Modern Reformation*.<sup>2</sup> It was later distributed on the internet as a blog article being, as of the present, one of the first websites to appear when one searches the name Charles Finney on the Google search engine. In the article, besides criticizing Finney’s theology, Horton seeks to point out that modern movements he would repudiate, such as the church growth movement, owe a debt to Charles Finney and his “new measures” whereby he would employ practical measures so long as they produced revival, which he also believed to be a natural occurrence that flowed from the implementation of such measures. What makes Horton’s and other Reformed theologians’ criticism so pertinent is that they recognize that Finney’s theology has had a lasting impact on Evangelicalism. Those not of the Reformed tradition may be willing to recognize this

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<sup>1</sup> It would be impossible to measure such a position, but Finney’s biographer A. M. Hills had no problem using the title, and, no doubt, many shared his sentiment [A. M. Hills, *Life of Charles G. Finney* (Cincinnati: Office of God’s Revivalist, 1902), 128].

<sup>2</sup> Michael Horton, “The Legacy of Charles Finney,” *Modern Reformation* Jan./Feb. 1995 Vol. 4 Num:1, 5-9.

fact as well, but they are not quite as concerned with studying the theology of the man in depth, choosing rather to remember the good things about his legacy, like the mass revival movement that he led. Regardless of these pleasant memories, the fact remains that Finney's theology was controversial, and we should seek to explore historically why that is.

In this paper, I will begin by surveying Finney's theology on issues of moral obligation, moral depravity, and regeneration. I will also explore the revivalistic means that resulted from Finney's theological conclusions. In conclusion, we will examine Finney in light of the criticism his contemporaries had for him.

## THE THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE OF THE REVIVALIST

### *Historical Background to Finney's Theological Training*

Before surveying the theology of Charles Finney, we need to understand the context in which he received his theological training. Contrary to popular assumption, Finney did receive a theological training that was acceptable to his Presbytery although he rejected the notion of enrolling in Princeton Seminary, the logical choice for most Presbyterians at the time. This choice of Finney's did not seem to be one of necessity because of economic hardship in that someone had offered to pay his way, nor did he have any other extenuating circumstances that would keep him from seminary training. Finney's explanation was that he felt the Princeton graduates he knew personally had been "wrongly educated" and that he did not wish to place himself under the same influence.<sup>3</sup> Thus, in the Spring of 1822, Finney and his Presbytery agreed that he would complete his theological study under his pastor, George Gale.

From the time Finney was converted, his theological formation had been one wrapped up in his relationship with George Gale. Under the Princeton "old school Presbyterian" form of theology, Mr. Gale held to limited atonement and original sin, both doctrines that Finney simply

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Finney, *Memoirs of Rev. Charles G. Finney* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1876), 45-46.

could not abide.<sup>4</sup> Their relationship, although Finney would one day reflect on it with fondness, was one of debate and, at times, contention. According to Finney's recollection, Gale would often argue against Finney's view simply on the basis of it causing him greater hardship in ministry in the future, or that God would not bless such preaching.<sup>5</sup> This rocky relationship caused Finney no small amount of heartache and depression,<sup>6</sup> but it did not seem to encourage Finney to examine his theology more critically. When one reads the memoirs of Finney, one is left with the impression that Finney was quite certain of his views, and that George Gale failed to offer real and exegetical challenges to them. Rather, his arguments would be reduced to ad hominem attacks (once telling Finney that he would be ashamed for anyone to know that he had studied theology under him<sup>7</sup>) or threats of failure if the views were maintained. Most students of theological debate recognize this type of fallacious argument as one of a person who is left without a real and rational answer. Finney, a former law student<sup>8</sup>, was nothing if not logical, so a strong mind like his could not have possibly accepted such ill rebuke. One can only wonder, then, if Finney would have held the same unorthodox views on doctrines like original sin had he come into contact earlier with stronger, perhaps intellectually humbler minds, than that of Gale.

Finney's theology did not develop in a vacuum and one is left to wonder how he came to such complex conclusions if his only mentor was his thoroughly Calvinist pastor. Many scholars and theologians have noticed and commented extensively on Finney's close affinity to the theology of Nathaniel Taylor. Although Finney never credited Taylor for his theological development, the idea that there was no relation between the two is untenable. The connections

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 47.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>8</sup> No doubt, this was another aspect that had an incredible impact on Finney's theological and philosophical approach, namely, persons having a moral obligation to submit to the moral government of God.

were so close, in fact, that Foster, in his work *A Genetic History of the New England Theology*, concluded, “It will be the less important for us to dwell further upon Finney’s system because it may be dismissed in the one word, ‘Taylorism,’ independent as it was, and vigorously as its author had impressed upon it the marks of his own pronounced individuality.”<sup>9</sup> None of this is to claim that Finney was lying about his theological influences, but it is clear that there was a common strand of development in a New England theology that had been moving closer and closer toward an “anthropocentric system of moral philosophy,”<sup>10</sup> namely, the rejection of original sin and the affirmation that moral depravity results from a person’s choice to sin.

In spite of Finney’s strong objections to classical Reformed doctrine, he went forward with his ordination in the Presbyterian Church. One of the more troubling parts of Finney’s recollection, although quite honest of him to admit it, is his report of the meeting with the Presbytery and their questioning him on his acceptance of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Finney replied that he “received it for substance of doctrine” although he claims he “did not pretend to know much about it.”<sup>11</sup> Now, of course, we know based on his harsh rejection of Calvinism, that had Finney known the content of the document, he could not possibly have claimed to accept it. Unfortunately, one would have to conclude that Finney cannot be held innocent of dishonesty by way of ignorance, and it begs the question as to why, in all of Finney’s theological training, he did not study the very catechism of the denomination through which he was being ordained. We will see that Finney was as far as one could be from Westminster in his theology as we examine below certain theological points that were part of his development of systematic theology as a professor at Oberlin College.

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<sup>9</sup> Frank Hugh Foster, *A Genetic History of the New England Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1907), 467.

<sup>10</sup> Jay E. Smith, “The Theology of Charles Finney: A System of Self-Reformation,” *Trinity Journal* ns 13 no 1 Spr 1992, 68.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 51.

*Finney's Developed Theology*

Had Finney's theology been produced only from the halls of academia to be read mainly by academicians, it is unlikely that it would have had the lasting impact on the world that it did. However, Finney's theology was being developed and practiced in his many revivals and his subsequent pastorates. The methods and measures resulting from his theology will be examined in the next section, but first we will look at his developed theology as it appears in his lectures which he composed and delivered during his tenure as president (1851-1866) and subsequently as lecturer until his death in 1875.<sup>12</sup> These grant us an accurate picture of the theology that gave shape to his revivalistic approach. So while they are not chronologically prior to his revivals, their content is logically prior.<sup>13</sup>

**Moral Law and Obligation**

For Finney, theology and ethics all derive from the moral government of God. Every single individual is accountable to a "rule of duty, prescribed by the supreme Lawgiver, and external to self."<sup>14</sup> This moral law will always include the "highest good of the universe," thus making a sense of pragmatic "expediency" and "right" essentially one and the same.<sup>15</sup> It is to be distinguished from a physical law which is set to govern physical states of "involuntary states and changes."<sup>16</sup> God himself is not above the moral law and only has the right to govern based on it. Finney claims that it is God's "natural attributes," which he assumes to be in accordance

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 476.

<sup>13</sup> Johnson argues otherwise stating, "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 [James E. Johnson, "Charles G. Finney and a Theology of Revivalism," *Church History*, 38 no 3 S 1969, 338-358]. However, it would not be possible to demonstrate this historically in that Finney claims to have had these objections from his earliest days as a convert to Christianity as well as developing his views against imputation and original sin during his theological training. Further, this line of thinking denigrates into mere psychologizing rather than historiographical study.

<sup>14</sup> Charles G. Finney, *Systematic Theology* (Oberlin, OH: E. J. Goodrich, 1899), 2.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 4-5.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 6.

with the moral law (i.e. the highest good of the universe qualify him to be the moral governor).<sup>17</sup> This is philosophically problematic in that it assumes that there is an objective standard outside of God whereby to judge God's qualifications to be moral governor. Who could objectively say that they know the highest good of the universe in order to judge God credible by those criteria? Unless the moral law itself is based in God's essence (which could be described as the ultimate good), we have no epistemology of objective morality. Thus, God himself is our only sure source of knowledge in determining morality in that the standard rests entirely in his tri-personal nature. Any set of starting presuppositions to determine moral law would be without foundation.

Since it is our purpose to focus on the more controversial aspects of Finney's theology, we now move to his views on the limitations of moral obligation. Finney held that if there were any right ends that required efforts "impossible to us...there can be no obligation to make them."<sup>18</sup> Clearly, in Finney's mind, moral obligation and ability were inseparable. This placed him invariably at odds with those who held to a classical position of original sin whereby the sin nature so affects the moral faculties of man that it renders them incapable of good apart from a gracious act of God.

### **Moral Depravity**

The only effects of Adam on our constitution, according to Finney, are those of our physical depravity. But this depravity can have "no moral character" in that it is not a matter of the will. This problem of morality, he claims, has entirely to do with the choice to violate the moral law. From this, he infers that it is a depravity of a person's "free action" based on their free will and not of the faculty of the free will itself. Thus, what actually makes it appropriate to

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 8.

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

call it “moral depravity” is the fact that “it consists in a violation of moral law, and because it has no moral character.”<sup>19</sup>

Finney’s main objection to a total depravity of humanity that affects each human being’s will appears to be the fact that it affects a person’s willful constitution, thus making it a physical defect that is passed on similar to a disease. In this sense, man would not be able to make a moral choice, therefore not culpable. Finney is also aware of scriptural data that seems to suggest the contrary notion. He remarks on the most common passage used to support the notion of original sin and total depravity:

“The Bible once, and only once, incidentally intimates that Adam’s first sin has in some way been the occasion, not the necessary physical cause, of all the sins of men. Rom. v. 12-19. It neither says nor intimates anything in relation to the manner in which Adam’s sin has occasioned this result.”<sup>20</sup>

What Finney’s intends to convey is that there is a sense in which Adam’s sin has affected our moral depravity. But he limits this to the idea that, “His sin in many ways exposed his posterity to aggravated temptation. Not only the physical constitution of all men, but all the influence under which they first form their moral character are widely different... if sin had never been introduced.”<sup>21</sup> So, Adam’s sin brought about deficiency in our physical constitution therefore increasing the occasion for temptation, but our will is not so affected.

In testing Finney’s theology on this issue, the question must be asked, “Is there a sense in which our very constitution down to our will was made sinful?” Finney’s lack of exegesis on this verse leaves many questions unanswered and leads one to wonder if the aforementioned question should not be answered in the affirmative. Verse 19 is particularly convincing for the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 229.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 253.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 255.

side of total depravity. It is stated that “through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners” (NASB). With Paul’s use of *διὰ τῆς παρακοῆς τοῦ ἑνὸς ἀνθρώπου*, he intends through the agency of Adam, this act of making the others sinners was carried out. But what sort of action was carried out? Paul describes the action as *ἁμαρτωλοὶ κατεστάθησαν οἱ πολλοί*. Essentially his subjects were constituted or rendered (*καθίστημι*) sinners through the action of Adam. It would follow that Finney is thus incorrect to conclude that our very constitution was not made that of a sinner through Adam’s disobedience.

### **Regeneration**

In his *Systematic Theology*, Finney takes on the Calvinistic concept of regeneration, which posits that a person must first be regenerated and subsequently be converted through belief.<sup>22</sup> This type of human passivity in regeneration, he rejects. Although, there is a sense in which the individual is passive before they are regenerated, and that includes the Holy Spirit’s deliverance of the truth to them. However, their regeneration is not complete until they have made the active choice to bring this about through obeying the truth of the Gospel.<sup>23</sup> The most conspicuous difference here between Finney and the Calvinistic thought he chastises is that he holds that the sinner has the ability to obey the Gospel without having his will freed from bondage to do so.

The Wesleyan Arminian framework is quite different from Calvinism although it clearly has Reformed influence. In this school of the thought is the concept of prevenient grace. It has essentially the same starting point of Calvinism in that all humanity is totally depraved, but God has graciously restored human faculties enabling them to choose good over evil, where their sinful nature would otherwise choose only evil. Even still, beyond prevenient grace, an

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 282.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 290.

individual must be granted what John Wesley calls “convincing grace” in order to repent and believe—prevenient grace not being salvific in itself.<sup>24</sup> After the person has been granted this grace, they are enabled with a choice to follow Christ or reject the Holy Spirit’s intentions for them. Even though this may effectively solve the issue of pure passivity in the mind of most, it does not for Finney. As Jay Smith states, “Finney’s rejection of a doctrine of gracious ability goes beyond a simple repudiation of traditional Calvinism—with its view of irresistible grace extended only to the elect—to include a rejection of the Arminian doctrine of prevenient grace given to all members of the race.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Finney claims that such an idea is an absurdity.<sup>26</sup> It is interesting that, when one examines the arguments that ensue against this idea of “gracious ability,” he does very little work in demonstrating that such a notion is unscriptural. Rather, he simply chooses to say essentially, “If this is true what I have already demonstrated is untrue. Therefore this is untrue.” An example of this type of argumentation would be the following:

“That but for the atonement of Christ, and the consequent bestowment of a gracious ability, no one of Adam’s race could ever have been capable of sinning. For in this case the whole race would have been wholly destitute of any kind or degree of ability to obey God. Consequently they could not have been subjects of moral government, and of course their actions could have had no moral character.”<sup>27</sup>

The obvious problem with such argumentation is that if one does not accept Finney’s foundation for sinfulness, he lacks a good argument against the necessity of gracious enablement. I would conclude, based on the discussion on Rom 5 above, that humanity was constituted sinful through Adam’s transgression. Therefore, the concept of sin extends beyond Finney’s definition of a

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<sup>24</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of the Reverend John Wesley* vol 2 (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1856), 236.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, 83.

<sup>26</sup> Finney, *Systematic Theology*, 342.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 342.

voluntary transgression of the moral law. In that case, sin could be an issue of one's nature thus necessitating a gracious enablement that stalls the power of sin in one's life.

### MEANS OF THE REVIVALIST

Finney's theology was made public primarily because of his revival meetings. And while the "new measures" of his revival were certainly based on his theology, they must be explained separately. This is illustrated by the fact that even supporters of his New School theology, like Lyman Beecher, did not support him in the new revivalistic practices he was employing.<sup>28</sup> Again, we cannot be certain about whether Finney developed a "natural ability" theology based on his revival practices or not, but we are certain that the latter is predicated upon the former.

First, Finney's definition of revival differed significantly from his contemporaries. It was not a miracle sent from God. It was simply using the natural means that were already available.<sup>29</sup> Even though natural means were to be employed, Finney did not deny that the special agency of the Holy Spirit was involved. In Finney's framework of revival theology, the Holy Spirit would affect the sinner only in his influence over them toward obedience.<sup>30</sup> However, there is no enablement as in historic orthodoxy, but rather mere persuasion. Lastly, a revival is not a sovereign act of God. No one should wait on God to send a revival but should rather use the natural means God has already given to promote such a revival.<sup>31</sup>

Finney's concern, in revival, was that he remove every obstacle to repentance that he saw in the sinner's way. For him, this included the notion that a sinner cannot repent without the Holy Spirit.<sup>32</sup> As Johnson puts it, "Sin was to be counted as a crime, not as a misfortune. Finney did not rebuke men for the sins of Adam, but rather challenged them to do something about their

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<sup>28</sup> See fuller discussion on Beecher below as well as that in Johnson, 346.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Finney, *Revivals of Religion* (Virginia Beach: CBN University Press, 1978), 4-5.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 12-13.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 106.

own sins. He left no room for excuses and interpreted a *can not* as being a *will not*” (emphasis his).<sup>33</sup> One of Finney’s most popular and controversial sermons implored sinners to “change their own hearts.” Rather than requiring a gracious act of God, sinners could change their moral disposition by their own free choice.<sup>34</sup> While such statements have little biblical veracity to them, one can certainly see how they might affect the mind of someone who has no assurance of salvation. Simply make the decision to reform yourself toward obedience to God.

To aid in employing the natural means to bring about revival, Finney employed “new measures.” He suggested that three particular measures would bring about a response from the sinners hearing the Gospel. First, he suggested “anxious meetings.” This would be accomplished by talking personally with the people in his meeting in order to gain an understanding of their spiritual condition.<sup>35</sup> In doing so, Finney would be able to pray for them by name and address them directly during the course of the meeting. Second, Finney emphasized “protracted meetings.” He certainly was not the first to do so, but he found such special meetings, beyond the weekly worship gatherings to be most effective, especially when there could be one or two officiating ministers throughout the duration of the meeting.<sup>36</sup> Lastly, in Finney’s meetings, one would find an anxious seat. This would be a particular seating area where an “anxious” sinner would come forward during the meeting and be made the subject of prayer as well as personal consultation with hopes that the end would be conversion.<sup>37</sup> One can see how the modern day “altar call” with many of its spectacular elements derived from this method of Finney’s. In response to criticism that the anxious seat brings about “false hopes,” Finney argued that it accomplished just the opposite. In his estimation, if one were called to

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<sup>33</sup> Johnson, 352.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Finney, *Sermons on Important Subjects* (New York: John S. Taylor, 1836), 8.

<sup>35</sup> Finney, *Revivals*, 274-75.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 275, 278-79.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 280-81.

repent and become a Christian, they might make some sort of resolution in their mind and it may not necessarily be in sincere fervency. However, if they are called upon to answer the call to repentance by coming forward, this would bring about greater likelihood that those who come forward were committed to repent.<sup>38</sup>

While there is certainly some level of truth to Finney's estimation of the value of the anxious seat, it fails to take into account several points. First, Finney all too quickly dismisses his critics. It is very possible that someone may get caught away with the emotion and spectacle of the anxious seat, therefore truly giving false hope. They go away feeling justified because, in their mind, they did what was required of them. Second, does a moment of bashfulness make someone disqualified for the kingdom? Now, of course, the retort might be that Christ calls us to take up our cross and follow him, and that if we deny him before men, he will deny us before the Father in heaven. However, there are other means of doing so besides walking an aisle to an anxious seat. If such an emphasis is placed in the meeting on this being the primary place to profess Christ, this may be an unnecessary distraction. Lastly, the issue comes down to authority. Neither Charles Finney, nor any other revivalist, has the authority to suggest that this is the place set up to meet with God. Therefore, someone could reject Finney's anxious seat, but this would not necessarily mean they are refusing to repent. With that, it is not hard to see why Finney's new measures were met with criticism and disdain by many in both the Old School Reformed camp as well as those who were of the New School. In the next section, we hear from Finney's critics.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 282.

## THE REVIVALIST AND HIS CRITICS

*Lyman Beecher*

Lyman Beecher was a revivalist that would have experienced close affinity with Charles Finney in matters of theology. However, there were many aspects of the new measures that he found to be unbecoming for the ministry. In no way did he deny that good had come from the ministry of Finney including great revival, but he saw this as taking place in spite of the irregular practices as opposed to being caused by them.

First, Beecher had problems with the seemingly quick manner in which people who had professed Christ were counted as genuine converts. He did not see their confession accompanied by any effort to ascertain their sincerity in order to see if their repentance and conversion were truly efficacious.<sup>39</sup> Second, Beecher saw a tendency for “naked terror” to be preached in these meetings which he felt was ineffective if not accompanied by an emphasis on the justice of God.<sup>40</sup> Third, he took exception with the manner in which certain individuals were assumed to be unconverted when there was no sufficient evidence to prove such a thing.<sup>41</sup> Fourth, he found epithets that were railed against sinners in the meeting to be beyond the bounds of Christian courtesy.<sup>42</sup> Fifth, he believed the scriptural evidence stood against women praying in the meetings, yet this seemed to be common practice among those who practiced the new measures.<sup>43</sup> Sixth, Beecher was concerned about the manner of speech that prevailed. To him, it seemed that there was too little reverence when addressing God in prayer. He referred to it as “a language of unbecoming familiarity with God.” This also extended to what he termed “vulgar

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<sup>39</sup> Lyman Beecher and Asahel Nettleton, *Letters of Dr. Beecher and Dr. Nettleton* (Shropshire, England: Quinta Press, 2009), 83-4. This letter was addressed to Mr. Beman and dated Dec. 15, 1827.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 84.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 84.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 85.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 89.

expressions” used while preaching. He was certainly someone who had a high regard for the pulpit and held it to be a place that should be characterized by excellence in oration, not common talk.<sup>44</sup> Seventh, he argued against the evidences that apparently proved the new measures to be a work of God. The first was the notion that because adversity always comes to those who do God’s work, Finney and the new measures crowd must be true reformers.<sup>45</sup> The second was a matter of success being an evidence of sanctioning by God.<sup>46</sup> There was no question that Beecher found the new measures to be destructive to the extent that they could be the scourge of American civilization.<sup>47</sup> Yet, he still had a great love for Finney and believed that, with the proper counsel, he could be a great blessing in his labors.<sup>48</sup>

#### *Asahel Nettleton*

As an Old School revivalist, Nettleton was opposed to Finney on two fronts— theologically and methodologically. However, the main concern that shined through in his criticism of the new measures was the divisive attitude that he saw continually expressed by whom he called “the friends of Mr. Finney.” In the first place, he considered them to be spreading untruths about Finney’s methodology in order to justify their own. This included their going into certain areas and having dealings with certain congregations with no regard for the pastor. Any opposition that would be presented was labeled an enemy of revival. He speaks of other improprieties where an itinerate minister would come in to “interfere or dictate” when certain “settled pastors” chose not to espouse or employ new measure. He saw this as being a matter of overstepping one’s authority, and while he is careful never to accuse Finney of such

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 92.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 94.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 99.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 100.

things directly, one gets the impression that he implies Finney may be guilty of that which is ascribed to his “friends.”<sup>49</sup>

### *John Nevin*

An extremely potent work against the new measures of Finney’s revivals was written by John Nevin entitled *The Anxious Bench*.<sup>50</sup> Nevin was German Reformed and part of the Old School Presbyterianism that Finney opposed.<sup>51</sup> Specifically, in his work he takes on the subject that bears its name. At the time of Nevin’s work, the practice of the anxious bench was so common that criticism of it was seemingly taboo.<sup>52</sup> According to Nevin, one of the primary arguments used to protect the practice was its effectiveness. While he certainly recognized that there had been results produced from the practice, he pointed out that such pragmatic arguments were not viable in that ends do not justify means.<sup>53</sup> In a warning that was no doubt surprising to some, he states:

“It is sometimes said indeed, that if only *some* souls are saved by the use of new measures, we ought thankfully to own their power, and give them our countenance since even one soul is worth more than a world. But it should be remembered, that the salvation of a sinner may notwithstanding cost *too much!*...And if for one thus gained, ten should be virtually destroyed, by the very process employed to reach the point, who will say that such a method of promoting Christianity would deserve to be approved?”<sup>54</sup>

What caused Nevin to use such strong language when it came to the new measures?

First, Nevin, like so many others, saw a propensity within the “new measures” movement to

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 6-20. This letter was addressed to Rev. Mr. Aiken and dated Jan. 13, 1827.

<sup>50</sup> John Nevin, *The Anxious Bench* (Chambersburg, PA: Office of the Weekly Messenger, 1843).

<sup>51</sup> For more background on Nevin as well as a copious treatment of his differences with Finney, see Derek Nelson, “Charles Finney and John Nevin on Selfhood and Sin: Reformed Anthropologies in Nineteenth Century American Religion,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 45 no 2 N 2010, 280-303.

<sup>52</sup> Nevin, *Anxious Bench*, 7.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 12-13.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 13.

move away from the personal duty of the minister to care for the spiritual growth of those under their care after conversion.<sup>55</sup> Second, he found the practices like the anxious bench to be utterly contrived in the sense that someone may be able to learn the method of the “new measures” and be effective with those methods, yet having no ability to exposit Scripture, no pastoral skills, and generally lacking in spiritual substance.<sup>56</sup> Third, the action of going to the anxious bench was being falsely equated with repentance. In other words, one was not being forced to think enough about the decision to repent but more about the decision to come forward. Along this line, Nevin laid out what he felt to be the psychology behind the anxious bench. Among his many observations, he saw the people coming forward to the anxious bench as those who were striving to “feel faith” while the workers around them were trying alongside them to facilitate this.<sup>57</sup> This created the impression that faith was something to be conjured up in the individual rather than a gift from God or gracious enablement. The sum of Nevin’s concerns was that the anxious bench supplanted spiritual substance and especially that which found its depth in God’s Word. As he states, “The spirit of the Anxious Bench is at war with the spirit of the Catechism.”<sup>58</sup>

### *Albert Dod*

As an Old School Presbyterian, Dod was concerned over Finney’s criticism of the Westminster Confession in his *Lectures on Revival*. In his assessment, Finney’s remaining in the Presbyterian Church in open defiance of its core confession was inconsistent and counterproductive. Dod claimed that Finney’s “plain duty” was to leave the Presbyterian Church in that this would be the best service he could render her.<sup>59</sup> Among these criticisms, and besides the fact that he found his theology to be heretical, Dod, like Lyman Beecher, complained that the

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 24-26.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>59</sup> Albert Dod, “Finney’s Lectures,” *The Biblical Repertory and Theological Review*, vol 8 (1835), 526-527.

results of Finney's revivals did not bear lasting fruits. He claimed, "It is now generally understood that the numerous converts of the new measures have been, in most cases, like the morning cloud and the early dew. In some places, not a half, a fifth, or even a tenth part of them remain."<sup>60</sup> This concern about follow up with the converts of the "new measures" revivals seems to come up frequently and underlie much of the criticism railed against Finney. The spectacle and sensationalism that were often associated with the anxious seat led to a concern that such converts were receiving little more than this experience. In other words, the claim is that they were not being disciplined into the faith, thus not remaining in the faith.

### *Charles Hodge*

The eminent and erudite Charles Hodge of Princeton Seminary gave a detailed treatment of Finney's *Systematic Theology* in 1847 for *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*. Hodge's criticism came at a time after Finney had revealed the theological foundation for his revival practices. Although his sermons and *Lectures on Revival* had served this end to an extent, they could not compare to the lofty, abstract magisterial work of his *Systematic Theology*. Hodge was himself, a systematic theologian, and one who was and is known worldwide, as Finney, for his work.

A comparison of the two approaches of these two men not only reveals their differences theologically, but also methodologically. Hodge touches on this saying, "It is altogether a misnomer to call such a book 'Lectures on Systematic Theology.' It would give a far more definite idea of its character, to call it, 'Lectures on Moral Law and Philosophy.'"<sup>61</sup> Hodge makes no attempts at denying that Finney's work "exhibits singular ability for analysis and deduction." But he questioned the first truths Finney assumed as axioms upon which to reason,

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 482.

<sup>61</sup> Charles Hodge, "Finney's Lectures on Theology," *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* vol 19 (1847), 241.

wherein a great deal were found to be unscriptural.<sup>62</sup> Hodge seeks to take what he sees as one of Finney's fundamental principles: "that obligation is limited by ability."<sup>63</sup> He demonstrates that such a principle will not work if taken to its logical conclusion. He argues, "If the principle that obligation is limited by ability, leads to the conclusion, that moral character is confined to intention, and that again to the conclusion that where the intention is right nothing can be morally wrong, then the principle is false."<sup>64</sup> It may be helpful to take Hodge's reasoning backwards in order to see where he is coming from. To Hodge, the text of Scripture is primary and all founding principles must be based thereon. So he essentially says: Because we know, biblically speaking, that some things are morally wrong regardless of one's intentions, moral character cannot simply be confined to intention. Since moral character cannot simply be confined to intention, obligation is not necessarily limited by ability. Such an example helps us to understand the grounds on which Hodge rejected Finney's theology. From one's starting principle, one may reason impeccably, but if there is any sense in which a principle or its conclusion is unscriptural, it must be rejected.<sup>65</sup>

### *B. B. Warfield*

Warfield was much younger than Finney and actually began his career as a theologian and professor after the death of Finney but there was overlap in the times of their life.<sup>66</sup> In his two volume work on *Perfectionism*, Warfield includes a critique of Finney's theology in his broader discussion on Oberlinian perfectionism.<sup>67</sup> He stands in the tradition of Charles Hodge in his critique of Finney's work from a distinctly theological point of view.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 249.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 250.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 263.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 277.

<sup>66</sup> Charles Finney (1792-1875); B. B. Warfield (1851-1921).

<sup>67</sup> B. B. Warfield, *Perfectionism* vol 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931), 166-215.

Warfield picks up more on the anthropological issue of depravity than other critiques up to this point. As we have already noted in our examination of Finney's theology above, he rejected any notion that God had either to regenerate the sinner or graciously enable the sinner before he or she had the ability to repent. So what role does God play in the sinner's act of repentance? Warfield summarizes Finney's position, "The ultimate reason why the entire action of God in salvation is confined by Finney to persuasion lies in his conviction that nothing more is needed—or, indeed, is possible."<sup>68</sup> This appears to be an accurate representation of Finney in that he only viewed the Holy Spirit as bringing the truth to the individual, and then the individual being the one who changed their own heart by appropriating that truth. However, if Finney maintains that it is the Holy Spirit who persuades in salvation, according to Warfield, this creates some problems for his framework. How is it that Finney holds to the natural ability of individuals to obey God, yet he would readily admit that such obedience never takes place without the persuasion of the Holy Spirit? If the natural ability were there, would it be wrong to expect examples in which the persuasive power of the Spirit was not necessary, and would it not certainly be incorrect to maintain that this would always have to be the Spirit's role in salvation even if no such examples could be produced. Warfield ably takes such views to task:

"A universal will-not, like this, has a very strong appearance of a can-not. A condition in which a particular effect follows with absolute certainty, at least suggests the existence of a causal relation; and the assertion of the equal possibility of a contrary effect, unsupported by a single example, bears the appearance of lacking foundation."<sup>69</sup>

Essentially, to be consistent, Finney would have to maintain the position of the contrary effect (that one may believe without the aid of the Holy Spirit), yet, being unable to support this by

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 173.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 177.

evidence. Further, he would also be forced to say the necessary condition (the Holy Spirit's persuasion) for a particular effect (obedience to God) actually stands in direct contrast to the contrary effect. In true Hodge-like fashion, Warfield produces cogent objections to Finney's theology—obstacles one must be willing to face before any attempt at vindicating the controversial revivalist.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have sought to give fair and extensive treatment to Finney's theology and practices, and the interaction of his critics with those theology and practices. Toward that goal, we examined the early theological training of Finney where, very early on, he challenged the Old School Presbyterian theology of original sin, limited atonement, and the inability of man. We then turned our attention to his developed theology that served as the logical foundation for his revival practices. His conclusions on moral obligation, moral depravity, and regeneration all deeply affect the manner in which he proclaimed the gospel and called sinners to repentance. Since sinners were "bound to change their own hearts," Finney applied "new measures" that would take every obstacle to repentance out of the sinner's way, and so he implemented measures like the "anxious seat" and "anxious meetings." These practices provoked criticism from his contemporaries who were concerned that such measures gave false hopes, discouraged discipleship and follow through after initial conversion, and empowered ministers who would otherwise lack spiritual qualifications to be effective with little spiritual or scriptural depth. The controversy in Finney's theology is still ongoing in that many practices of the church find their root in his "new measures" of revival. No matter if one view such influence as helpful or hurtful to the church, Finney remains an intellectual giant and worthy of careful study. His *Systematic Theology* is as heavy a philosophical work that has ever been produced by the church. Because

of such a wealth of reading where opposing sides are represented by such able individuals (i. e. Finney, Hodge, Warfield, etc.), very few periods of debate and discourse in church history exist that are more enjoyable and enriching.

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