

Critical Issues Commentary

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Charles Finney's Influence on American Evangelicalism by Bob DeWaay

Nineteenth Century evangelist Charles Finney is often credited with being a major force in the so-called "second great awakening" in America. The converted lawyer is well known for making shocking statements that upset the commonly held beliefs of most evangelicals. The following statement about the millennium is illustrative: "If the Church will do all her duty, the millennium may come in this country in three years."¹ He also believed that if the church had cooperated fully with the type of revivalism he espoused it would have already brought about the millennium: "If the whole Church, as a body, had gone to work ten years ago, and continued it as a few individuals, whom I could name, have done, there might not now have been an impenitent sinner in the land. The millennium would have fully come into the United States before this day."²

Finney believed that a golden age of Christianity, in which Christ is honored, God's moral law obeyed, and the need for further revivals ended could be brought about by the activities of the church.³ There are several problems with this, the greatest of which is that the Bible does not teach it. As we will see, Finney felt free to depart from Biblical orthodoxy in order to promote his ideals.

Charles Finney had a series of beliefs that are akin to the Pelagian heresy of the 5th century.⁴ These beliefs, and a basic philosophical premise that led Finney to them, help explain his post-millennialism and views on revival. My thesis is that Charles Finney's theology and legacy has had a strong and adverse influence on American evangelicalism.

Pelagianism

In order to understand the issues that arise from Charles Finney's teachings, it is helpful to outline the basic ideas of Pelagius. The following are the key teachings of Pelagianism:

[A]n insistence of the adequacy of created human nature, essentially unimpaired by Adam's fall, to fulfill the will of God; the denial of original sin as either guilt or corruption transmitted from Adam to all mankind; the highest moral and spiritual expectations of the baptized Christian who must be capable of a life of perfect holiness, because God commands him thereto; and an understanding of the gifts of grace that excludes, or at best drastically minimizes, that enabling power without whose inner working we can do nothing acceptable to God.⁵

Augustine's writings against Pelagius serve as our primary source for understanding him. Augustine wrote:

For that grace and help of God, by which we are assisted in avoiding sin, he [Pelagius] places either in nature and free will, or else in the gift of the law and teaching; the result of which of course is this, that whenever God helps a man, He must be supposed to help him to turn away from evil and do good, by revealing to him and teaching him what he ought to do, but not with the additional assistance of His co-operation and inspiration of love, that he may accomplish that which he had discovered it to be his duty to do.⁶

Pelagius' error was to emphasize the ability of man and de-emphasize the need for special grace so as to make salvation and the Christian life more of a moral exercise energized by human choices than a radical, transforming work of God's grace. Due to space limitations, these descriptions will suffice as an accurate outline of Pelagius' teachings. Finney's own writings, as examined below, will show that Finney agreed with some of Pelagius's key teachings, whether or not he was dependant upon Pelagius for them.

Finney on Human Ability

A key principle that controlled Charles Finney's approach to theology was the axiom that God never commands that

which humans are unable to obey. For example: "The command itself implies ability to obey it. Every command of God implies this in the strongest manner. It should be remembered that God is perfect in both love and wisdom: therefore He cannot be so unjust as to demand of us an impossibility, nor so ignorant as not to know the real limits of our powers."⁷ Finney repeats this principle often. It is clear that he considers this a natural ability that has not been destroyed by Adam's sin. Finney did not deny human sinfulness, but denied constitutional depravity inherited from Adam. According to Finney, the human will is capable of obeying all of God's commands aside from any work of grace other than the Holy Spirit's work in convincing the human mind of the truth of the Gospel. Finney thought that sin would be even more reprehensible if humans were considered capable of overcoming it simply by acts of the will.

Finney held his teaching on human ability as a "first truth." It controlled both his theology and hermeneutics. Any verses that might seem to say something different cannot be allowed to contradict this basic philosophical and legal axiom. For example, in his *Systematic Theology*,

We have seen that the ability of all men of sane mind to obey God, is necessarily assumed as a first truth, and that this assumption is from the very laws of mind, the indispensable condition of the affirmation, or even the conception, that they are subjects of moral obligation; that, but for this assumption, men could not so much as conceive the possibility of moral responsibility, and of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness.⁸

Charles Finney allowed such assumptions to control his Biblical interpretation. This is seen in his "well-settled rule" of Biblical interpretation: "Language is to be so interpreted, if it can be, as not to conflict with sound philosophy, matters of fact, the nature of things, or immutable justice."⁹

However, there is a serious problem when one compares Finney's principle of "sound philosophy" with the Bible. It does not stand up to Biblical scrutiny. Does the Bible teach that God can only command what humans (as they are apart from special grace) can obey? For example, consider Paul's argument in **Galatians 3:10**: "For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all

things written in the book of the law, to perform them.” Clearly, Paul believed that abiding by all things written in the law was impossible, or else he would not conclude that all who sought to be justified by keeping the law were cursed. John MacArthur comments on this passage: “In other words, the fact that those who trust in the **works of the Law** are obligated to keep **all things** in the law, without exception, places them inevitably **under a curse**, because no one had the ability to **abide** by everything the divine and perfect law of God demands.”¹⁰ Paul’s use of the passage from Deuteronomy shows that he did not believe Finney’s logical axiom.

God’s holy nature is such that He does command what is fully compatible with his holiness and righteousness, even if human sinfulness means we cannot perfectly obey God’s moral law. The whole idea of the substitutionary atonement (which Finney basically rejected) is that the sinless and perfect Son of God fulfilled the righteous requirements of God that we did not nor could not fulfill. Yet Finney’s position is that for God to command anything, humans must actually be able to fully obey God’s commands, lest God be unjust in giving them.

Finney, though believing that the millennium could come soon, was disgusted that it had not already. If man is capable, this side of the resurrection, of consistently and perfectly obeying God, why should not the church be able to establish a millennial kingdom without Christ? The moral powers were there but they needed to be roused to obedience to Christ: “There must be excitement sufficient to wake up the dormant moral powers, and roll back the tide of degradation and sin.”¹¹ His confidence in natural human ability was firm and often reiterated:

From what has been said, we may learn what the true doctrine of natural ability is, namely, that every moral agent is really able to do whatever God requires of him; that when God requires us to believe in Christ He gives us so much light as renders us able to believe; that when He requires us to repent, He gives us so much light that we are able to repent; but that we are not able to work out that which is good by virtue of possessing the powers of a moral being, independently of divine light. Again, we may see what I meant by the assertion that Christ is the true light that lighteth

every man that cometh into the world. Every moral agent, in just so far as he is a moral agent, is enlightened by Christ.¹²

Though we need Christ’s light to repent and believe, we already have it by virtue of being human beings. This teaching on natural ability is clearly Pelagian. Every human, as he or she is now, already has everything necessary to fully obey God. In Finney’s theology, enlightenment by Christ is not a special work of grace, but a natural endowment to all humans. That Finney and before him Pelagius were wrong on this point is shown by this passage: “*But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised*” (1Corinthians 2:14). If all humans were already enlightened by Christ, prior any work of grace through the gospel, then who are these “natural” men who cannot fully grasp the things of God?

Finney on Original Sin

An important issue in the Pelagian controversy that resurfaces in Finney is the manner in which Adam’s sin influences the Adamic race. Finney’s Calvinistic background, that apparently had little influence on his theology, held that Adam sinned on behalf of the human race, that original sin included a “sin nature,” and that all are “by nature children of wrath” (Ephesians 2:3).¹³ Finney rejected that notion and taught that depravity is moral and not physical. He meant by this that the will, though strongly influenced by “sensibilities” and temptations, commits itself to selfish gratification.¹⁴ Since there is no physical depravity¹⁵ and “moral depravity can only be predicated of violations of moral law,”¹⁶ sinfulness is an act of each individual’s will and not a “sin nature” that can be predicated of the whole Adamic race. Thus Adamic guilt and corruption of nature, the historical doctrine of original sin, is denied by Finney as it was by Pelagius.

Studying Finney’s *Systematic Theology* shows that this is not a caricature of his position. For example:

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. Moral depravity, as I use the term, consists in selfishness; in a state of voluntary

committal of the will to self-gratification.¹⁷

The reason this is significant in relationship to Finney’s millennial teaching, is that it implies that if enough influence is exerted on the minds and hearts of humans, they could be persuaded to commit to a different principle. This principle, according to Finney, was to be “disinterested benevolence.”

The Holy Spirit is necessary to convince the mind of the need to repent of selfishness and turn to the principle of divine love, but the human will is innately capable of choosing to obey God’s moral law. This would make a millennial kingdom without a bodily resurrection of the saints and the return of Christ seem feasible.

James H. Moorhead comments on Finney’s hopes for society:

The reform of society was equally certain if Christians had the determination to attain it, and Finney expected nearly Utopian results to flow from evangelical enterprise. “Let Christians,” he said, “do business one year on gospel principles,” and the Christian spirit will “go over the world like the waves of the sea.” Every goal Finney wished for society — among others, the abolition of slavery, the promotion of temperance, and an end to Sabbath violation — would, he believed, speedily be achieved if Christians united to promote these reforms.¹⁸

If the sin nature is non-existent and the human will capable of being persuaded, what stands in the way of reforming society? Finney’s answer was merely the lack of Christians getting on board his process of “new measures” revivalism.

Finney on Christian Perfection

That brings us to the final tenet of Pelagianism that has its counterpart in Finney’s teaching — Christian perfection. After showing what it is not, he states his definition of Christian perfection in its simple form: “It is perfect obedience to the law of God.”¹⁹ That such obedience is remotely possible can only be appreciated by his concept of the simplicity of moral action. Humans are only actuated by one principle at any given time: either that of selfishness or “disinterested benevolence.”²⁰ If it is possible for the later to be true, what logic would prevent it from continually being the case?

Finney's biographers indicate that Finney came to this teaching out of his disappointment that converts of his revivals had not made the progress he expected and that the church had not prevailed in the world as he hoped. For example, G. Frederick Wright, who wrote as a professor at Oberlin in 1891 (where Finney was previously a professor of theology), comments on Finney's motives to write *Lectures to Professing Christians*, which express his views on perfection: "At the same time, his mind felt with increasing keenness the necessity of a higher state of consecration on the part of the church, if Christianity was ultimately to prevail in the world."²¹ Charles Hambrick-Stowe recounts the fact that controversy attended this teaching, but that one supporter thought that it would usher in the millennium.²²

Finney and Theological Innovation

In many ways Charles Finney led a wave of theological and practical innovation that has become the bane and the hallmark of American evangelicalism. That a person whose teachings were heretical by classical Christian standards is somewhat of a hero to popular evangelicalism says much about the problems in the contemporary church. This is at least partly due to the fact that American evangelicals are so impressed with success and results. Finney is credited as being the developer of planned mass evangelism.²³ As is the case today, if a mass evangelist is highly successful, it is considered inappropriate to question his teaching. Finney's successful revival meetings created credence for his teachings.

In a sense, one could say that Finney was the fore-runner of the modern "Word of Faith" movement. I say that because of the similar emphasis on the ability of man to cause his own spiritual effects by the right use of means. The "Faith" movement, as characterized by Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland is well known for claiming that there are "laws" built into the universe that can be tapped into by those who have the right "revelation knowledge" and put it to use to create the desired spiritual effects. The similarity with Finney is the unbridled optimism that humans with the right spiritual knowledge can solve every important problem and create their own desired results by the right use of means.

Finney had a slightly different emphasis

in that he desired to create revivals of religion, a millennial age before the return of Christ, and a Christianized society, (rather than health and wealth); but his approach was similar. Consider his teaching on producing revivals:

A revival is not a miracle according to another definition of the term "miracle" — something above the powers of nature. There is nothing in religion beyond the ordinary powers of nature. It consists entirely in the right exercise of the powers of nature. It is just that, and nothing else. When mankind become religious, they are not enabled to put forth exertions which they were unable before to put forth. They only exert powers which they had before, in a different way, and use them for the glory of God. A revival is not a miracle, nor dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means — as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means.²⁴

The power to produce the desired results are in the hands of humans whose minds are enlightened by the right spiritual principles. This "can do" attitude, which is so American, has permeated modern evangelicalism. Finney certainly deserves some "credit" for first articulating and popularizing it, but it is also American evangelicalism's worse shame. The errors and excesses of revivalists and evangelists whose "success" in finding followers has served as cover for their false teachings has roots that go all the way back to Charles Finney.

R. C. Sproul included a chapter on Charles Finney in a recent book and questions whether Finney deserves the term "evangelical" if it is defined in its classical sense as a believer in *sola fide* (justification by faith alone).²⁵ Sproul shows that Finney denies "forensic" (legal) justification, a key teaching of the reformers in their dispute with Roman Catholicism.²⁶ Finney denied both the imputation of Adam's sin to the human race and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer. Finney wrote:

The doctrine of a literal imputation of Adam's sin to all his posterity, of the literal imputation of all the sins of the elect to Christ, and of His suffering for them the exact amount

due to the transgressors, of the literal imputation of Christ's righteousness or obedience to the elect, and the consequent perpetual justification of all that are converted from the first exercise of faith, whatever their subsequent life may be I say I regard these dogmas as fabulous, and better befitting a romance than a system of theology.²⁷

The Roman Catholic Council of Trent in its condemnation of the Reformation, called forensic justification "legal fiction." Finney evidently agreed.

Another one of Charles Finney's famous deviations from Christian orthodoxy concerned the substitutionary atonement. He rejected the definitions of the Westminster Confession on the topic of the substitutionary atonement,²⁸ though as an ordained Presbyterian minister he was supposed to believe it.²⁹ Finney reasoned that Christ could not have satisfied "exact justice" in that the penalty for sin was eternal damnation, and Jesus did not suffer eternal damnation. Therefore, he could not have satisfied the demands of the law in this regard.³⁰ Finney, holding to a moral government theory, reasoned that Christ's death satisfied "public justice" by showing God's hatred toward sin and providing for the "well-being of the universe."³¹ R. C. Sproul provides an insightful and accurate description of Finney's unorthodox view of the atonement.³² Sproul answers Finney's charge that Christ's sufferings were insufficient to satisfy the legal demands of "retributive justice" as follows:

The satisfaction view of the atonement does not see the law, in and of itself, as being satisfied, but rather the Father whose law it is that is satisfied. It is God who is both Just and Justifier. His justice is propitiated by Christ, and his demands are satisfied.³³

Finney, trained as a lawyer, used legal theory as he understood it to produce his own version of Christian theology. No important Christian doctrine seemed immune from his tampering.

Charles Finney's Legacy

The greatest damage Finney did to American evangelicalism, in my opinion, was his legacy of pragmatism. Ideas of what ought to be achieved and the necessary means to that end take priority over everything else. Finney was known for "new measures" revivalism. The new

measures, viewed in their practical aspect, are rather tame by modern standards:

The “new measures” included praying for persons by name, allowing women to pray and testify, encouraging persons to come forward to the “anxious seat” (a front pew for those under conviction), mobilizing groups of workers to visit all the homes of the community, and displacing the regular services with “protracted meetings” (lengthy services held each night for several weeks).³⁴

Though these were the issues raised at the time, the real legacy of Finney was the willingness to sacrifice Biblical truth for the sake of teachings that were deemed to work better to achieve the desired ends.

For example, if Christians were deemed lax, perfectionism was taught; if respect for law was needed, the moral government theory was the answer; if revival seemed to tarry, the problem was the belief that the conversion of sinners was an act of God rather than human use of means. Likewise, if the millennium had not come, it was simply because people were not getting with the plan. Finney exalted human ability to its highest level and made the whole of religious conversion a matter of human decision that required no change in the sinner’s basic nature, but an act of the will: “The Holy Spirit reveals God and the spiritual world, and all that class of objects that are correlated to our higher nature, so as to give reason the control of the will. This is regeneration and sanctification, as we shall see in its proper place.”³⁵

Finney rejected the teaching that regeneration is a supernatural changing of heart affected by the Holy Spirit.³⁶ He realized that this teaching is based on the doctrine of “constitutional moral depravity,” which he has rejected.³⁷ Finney claims we can make new hearts for our selves and that: “Regeneration is ascribed to man in the gospel, which it could not be, if the term were designed to express only the agency of the Holy Spirit.”³⁸ For Finney, regeneration is a choice of the will of man: “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; a change from selfishness to benevolence; from choosing self-gratification as the supreme and ultimate end of life, to the supreme and ultimate choice of the highest well-being of God and of the universe. . . .”³⁹

For Finney, the will of man reigns supreme. The right choices, in response to God’s moral government of the universe, not only will cause regeneration, but Christian perfection, and ultimately a blissful, millennial kingdom before the return of Christ. R. C. Sproul contends that Finney’s theology, in its emphasis on human decision, has had “a massive influence on modern evangelicalism.”⁴⁰ Sadly, this “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” approach resonates with evangelicals who may not realize how strongly they have been influenced by pagan American culture.

Conclusion

The next time you hear about the latest innovation that promises to “win the world for Christ in our generation,” think about the legacy of Charles Finney. For all his talents and persuasive abilities, and working in a mid nineteenth century culture that was far less pagan than ours, he was unable to deliver a millennial kingdom as he hoped. **1 Corinthians 1:21:** “For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.” One cannot “improve” on the message of the cross by adding a mixture of distorted teachings to new techniques that “cannot fail.”

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1. Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revival, Lecture 15 “Hindrances to Revival”* 301, from *Books For The Ages, AGES Software, version 2.0* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: The Master Christian Library Series, 1997).

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid. Lecture 1, 9.* Finney explains his view of why “excitements” are needed in the mean time: “As the millennium advances, it is probable that these periodical excitements will be unknown. Then the Church will be enlightened, and the counteracting causes removed, and the entire Church will be in a state of habitual

and steady obedience to God. Children will be trained up in the way they should go, and there will be no such torrents of worldliness, and fashion, and covetousness, to bear away the piety of the Church, as soon as the excitement of a revival is withdrawn.”

4. I am not asserting that Finney obtained his teaching directly from Pelagius, but that his teachings were in essential agreement.

5. *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair Ferguson and David F. Wright, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1988), s.v. “Pelagianism,” 499, 500.

6. Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, “*Retractions: A Treatise on The Grace of Christ and on Original Sin*” Chapter 3, 574, from *Books For The Ages, AGES Software, version 2.0* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: The Master Christian Library Series, 1997).

7. Charles G. Finney, *Sermon Collection Vol. 1 — “The Church Bound to Convert the World”* 167, from *Books For The Ages, AGES Software, version 2.0* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: The Master Christian Library Series, 1997).

8. Charles G. Finney *Systematic Theology*, 1878 edition, *Lecture 32* 444, from *Books For The Ages, AGES Software, version 2.0* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: The Master Christian Library Series, 1997).

9. Finney, *Lectures on Revival, Lecture 23*, 309.

10. John MacArthur, Jr., *Galatians* (Chicago: Moody, 1987) 77.

11. Finney, *Revival. . . , Lecture 1* 10.

12. Finney, *Sermon . . . Vol. 1* 2;13.

13. See David L. Weddle, *The Law as Gospel: Revival and Reform in the Theology of Charles G Finney* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1985) 161 - 168, for a discussion of Finney’s rejection of “constitutional depravity.”

14. Finney, *Systematic Theology, Lecture 22*, 293 - 297.

15. Finney is the one who made the distinction between “physical” and “moral” depravity. I do not believe it works or makes sense. Romans chapters 1 through 3 teach that the whole person and the whole race is sinful. Romans 5 teaches that the whole race is sinful “in Adam” as does 1 Corinthians 15:22. Finney’s needless distinction, in my opinion, is simply a semantic game to cover up his complete rejection of the doctrine of original sin and the sin nature. That we are subject to “sensibilities” and “temptations” is no more that could be said about Adam and Eve before the Fall.

16. Finney, *Systematic Theology*. 295.
17. Ibid. 296.
18. James H Moorhead, "Charles Finney and the Modernization of America," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 62, no. 2 (Summer 1984): 105.
19. Charles G. Finney, *Lectures to Professing Christians, Lecture 19 — Christian Perfection part 1* 297, from *Books For The Ages*, AGES Software, version 2.0 [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: The Master Christian Library Series, 1997).
20. Ibid. Finney: "The law of God requires perfect, disinterested, impartial benevolence, love to God and love to our neighbor. It requires that we should be actuated by the same feeling, and to act on the same principles that God acts upon; to leave self out of the question as uniformly as he does, to be as much separated from selfishness as he is; in a word, to be in our measure as perfect as God is. Christianity requires that we should do neither more nor less than the law of God prescribes. Nothing short of this is Christian perfection. This is being, morally, just as perfect as God. Every thing is here included, to feel as he feels, to love what he loves and hate what he hates, and for the same reasons that he loves and hates."
21. G. Frederick Wright, *Charles Grandison Finney* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1891), 203.
22. Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 186.
23. Keith J. Hardman, *Seasons of Refreshing — Evangelism and Revivals in America*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 142-167.
24. Finney, *Lectures ... Revival, Lecture 1*, 11.
25. R. C. Sproul, *Willing to Believe*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 171, 172.
26. Ibid, 172-174.
27. Finney, *Systematic Theology, Lecture 36*, 508,509.
28. Ibid. 510-512.
29. Hardman, *Seasons*, 149. Hardman, a Finney biographer, says that Finney was asked if he received the Westminster Confession, and said that he did as far as he understood it, but at that time (1823) he had never actually read it. He was nevertheless ordained. In his later writings he disagreed with the Calvinistic Westminster Confession every time he interacted with it.
30. Finney, *Systematic Theology, Lecture 25*, 348.
31. Ibid. 339.
32. Sproul, *Willing*, 174-178.
33. Ibid. 175.
34. Hardman, *Seasons*, 152.
35. Finney, *Systematic Theology, Lecture 24*, 330.
36. Ibid. *Lecture 27*, 363. R. C. Sproul interacts with Finney on this point: Sproul, *Willing*, 185.
37. Ibid. *Finney*
38. Ibid. 366.
39. Ibid. 370.
40. Sproul, *Willing*, 185.