



Charles Grandison Finney

1792-1875

Charles Grandison Finney's life began in 1792 in the town of Warren, Connecticut. When he was two years old, Finney's parents, like many New Englanders of their day, heeded the call of the frontier and moved to Oneida County in the wilderness of western New York. Although the community had a common school which Finney attended, he and his neighbors had little access to religious services or books. According to his memoirs, written while he was president of Oberlin College, Finney's domestic life did no more to promote religious feeling:

"My parents were neither of them professors of religion, and, I believe, among our neighbors there were very few religious people. I seldom heard a sermon, unless it was an occasional one from some travelling minister, or some miserable holding forth of an ignorant preacher who would sometimes be found in that country. I recollect very well that the ignorance of the preachers that I heard was such, that the people would return from meeting and spend a considerable time in irrepressible laughter at the strange mistakes which had been made and the absurdities which had been advanced."

All changed, however, in the autumn of 1821. At age twenty-nine, a student of the law in Adams, New York, Finney was saved. One Wednesday morning Charles Finney woke up a questioning and sometimes scornful observer of the religious life around him. The following day, when asked by a client if he were ready to try the case scheduled for that day, Finney was able to reply, "I have a retainer from the Lord Jesus Christ to plead his cause, I cannot plead yours." (*Memoirs*, 24)

The ministry which began that day would change the face of American evangelism. Before and after his conversion, Finney rejected the Calvinist doctrine of passive salvation available only to the elect. He believed that God offered Himself to everyone and, most importantly, that one could be saved only through an active acceptance of God's invitation to grace. The sinner chooses to sin just as the penitent chooses to repent.

To reach as many souls as possible, Finney employed what came to be called "new measures", although many had been used by earlier preachers. These new measures triggered alarm among conservative clergy. Opponents such as Asahel Nettleton were able to list as many as twenty-nine objectionable practices, but the most controversial were: public praying of women in mixed-sex audiences, daily services over a series of

days, use of colloquial language by the preacher, the "anxious bench", praying for people by name, and immediate church membership for converts.

To a student of American culture, Finney is a crucial figure of the Jacksonian era. Finney's influence rose in tandem with that of Andrew Jackson; both addressed the issues of equality of men, and free will and self governance. In his *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, delivered to his New York congregation in 1834 and published in book form the following year, Charles Finney takes pains to define a revival. Above all, it is not a miracle in the sense of a physical change brought on solely by God, but a change of mind which, though influenced by the Holy Spirit, is ultimately a matter of the individual's free will.

Ordained a Presbyterian minister in 1824, Finney was soon at odds with conservative clergy. The new measures used by Finney and his followers caused enough alarm among their more orthodox colleagues to be the subject of a convention held at New Lebanon, NY in July, 1827. Motions were made to restrict the New School revivalists, but no definitive anti-new measures resolution was effected. The victory for Finney and his fellows was in emerging relatively unscathed from a confrontation with powerful clergymen like Lyman Beecher.

In the years following New Lebanon, Finney's ministry moved from small town to big city; he went on to preach in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York. In 1835 he began work in Oberlin College and Theological Seminary. He was President of Oberlin College from 1851 to 1866 and although he retired in 1872, Finney kept up his involvement with Oberlin's students until his death in August of 1875.