

CHARLES G FINNEY

The writer is inclined to regard Charles G. Finney as the greatest evangelist and theologian since the days of the apostles. It is estimated that during the year 1857-58 over a hundred thousand persons were led to Christ as the direct or indirect result of Finney's labours, while five hundred thousand persons professed conversion to Christ in the great revival which began in his meetings. Another remarkable fact is that it was found by actual research that over eighty-five in every hundred persons professing

conversion to Christ in Finney's meetings remained true to God, whereas seventy per cent of those professing conversion in the meetings of even so great an evangelist as Moody afterwards became backsliders. Finney seems to have had the power of impressing the consciences of men with the necessity of holy living in such a manner as to procure the most lasting results. It is said that at Gouverneur, New York, not a dance or theatrical play could be held in the place for six years after Finney held meetings there.

The "Autobiography of Charles G. Finney" is perhaps the most remarkable account of the manifestations of the Holy Spirit's power since apostolic days. It is crowded with accounts of spiritual outpourings which remind one of the day of Pentecost. Finney's "Systematic Theology" is probably the greatest work on theology outside the Scriptures. The wonderful anointing of God's Spirit, combined with Finney's remarkable reasoning powers and his legal training, enabled him to present clearer views of Christian doctrine than has any other theologian since the days of early Christianity. His views with regard to the difference between physical and moral law and physical and moral depravity, on the reasonableness of the moral law and the atonement, and on the nature of regeneration and sanctification are the clearest of any the writer has had the privilege of reading or hearing. Finney's teachings probably did more than all other causes combined to bring the Old School Calvinists over to a belief in man's free agency and moral responsibility, or the views commonly known as New School Calvinism.

Charles Grandison Finney was a descendant of the New England Puritans, and was born in Connecticut in 1792. He removed with his parents to Western New York when two years of age. This part of New York was then a frontier wilderness, with few educational or religious privileges. Finney had a good common school education, however, and at twenty years of age he went to New England to attend high school, but soon afterward went to New Jersey to teach school and to continue his studies. He became quite proficient in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and in other college studies. In 1818 he commenced the study of law in the office of Squire Wright, of Adams, near his old home in Western New York.

At Adams Finney had the first religious privileges worthy of the name. During the three years he taught school in New Jersey, about the only preaching in his neighborhood was in German, and the preaching he heard while at high school in New England was not of a kind calculated to arrest his attention. The aged preacher he heard there read old manuscript sermons in a monotonous, humdrum way that made no serious impression on the mind of Finney. Finney's parents were not professing Christians, and in his childhood days in Western New York the only preaching he heard was during an occasional visit from some itinerant preacher. At Adams, while studying law, he attended the Presbyterian Church. The pastor George W. Gale, was an able and highly educated man. His preaching, though of the Old School Calvinistic type, arrested the attention of Finney, although to his keen and logical mind it seemed like a mass of absurdities and contradictions.

It was while studying law and attending church at Adams that Finney became interested in Bible study. He found so many references to the Scriptures in his law books, he decided to buy himself a Bible, and

he soon became deeply absorbed in studying it. He had many conversations with Mr. Gale, who frequently dropped into the office to talk with him, but they could scarcely agree on any point of doctrine. This fact probably led Finney to study the Scriptures much more diligently than though he had agreed with Mr. Gale in everything. The fact that the church members were constantly praying prayers which did not seem to be answered, and to which they hardly seemed to expect an answer, was a great drawback to Finney. But he became more and more concerned about his own soul. He felt that if there was a life beyond he was not prepared for it. Some of the church members wanted to pray for him, but he told them that he did not see that it would do any good because they were continually asking without receiving.

Finney remained in a skeptical yet troubled frame of mind for two or three years. At last he came to a decision that the Bible was the true Word of God, and that it was the fault of the people if their prayers were not answered. He was then brought face to face with the question as to whether or not he would accept Christ. "On a Sabbath evening, in the autumn of 1821" says he, "I made up my mind that I would settle the question of my soul's salvation at once, that if it were possible I would make my peace with God." He was obliged to be in the office, however, and could not devote the entire time to seeking his soul's salvation, although on the following Monday and Tuesday he spent most of his time in prayer and reading the Scriptures. Pride was the great obstacle which hindered him from accepting Christ as his Saviour. He found that he was unwilling that anyone should know that he was seeking salvation. Before praying he stopped the keyhole of the door, and then only prayed in a whisper for fear that someone should hear him. If he was reading the Bible when anyone came in, he would throw his law books on top of it to create the impression that he had been reading them instead of the Bible.

During Monday and Tuesday his conviction of sin increased, but his heart seemed to grow harder. Tuesday night he had become very nervous, and imagined that he was about to die, and sink into hell, but he quieted himself as best he could until morning. Next morning, on the way to the office, he had as dear a view of the atonement of Christ as he ever had afterwards. The Holy Spirit seemed to present Christ hanging on the cross for him. The vision was so clear that almost unconsciously he stopped in the middle of the street for several minutes when it came to him. North of the village and over a hill lay a piece of woods, or forest, and he decided to go there and pour out his heart in prayer. So great was his pride, he kept out of sight so far as possible for fear that some one should see him on the way to the woods and should think that he was going there to pray. He penetrated far into the woods where some large trees had fallen across each other leaving an open space between. Into this space he crept to pray. "But when I attempted to pray," says he, "I found that my heart would not pray." He was in great fear lest someone should come and find him praying. He was on the verge of despair, having promised God not to leave the spot until he settled the question of his soul's salvation, and yet it seemed impossible to him to settle the question. "Just at this moment," says he, "I again thought I heard someone approach me, and I opened my eyes to see whether it were so. But right there the revelation of my pride of heart, as the great difficulty that stood in the way, was distinctly shown me. An overwhelming sense of my wickedness in being ashamed to have a human being see me on my knees before God, took such powerful possession of me, that I cried at the top of my voice, and exclaimed that I would not leave that place if all the men on earth and all the devils in hell surrounded me." He was completely humbled in soul by the thought of his pride. Then the most comforting verses of Scripture seemed to pour into his soul. He saw clearly that faith was not an intellectual state but a voluntary act, and he accepted the promise of God.

Promises of salvation, from both Old and New Testaments, continued to pour into his soul, and he continued to pray. "I prayed," says he, "until my mind became so full that, before I was aware of it, I was

on my feet and tripping up the ascent toward the road." On reaching the village he found that it was noon, although he had gone into the woods immediately after an early breakfast. He had been so absorbed in prayer that he had no idea of the time. There was now a great calm in his soul, and the burden of sin had completely rolled away, yet he was tempted to believe that he was not yet born of God. He went to his dinner, but found that he had no appetite. He then went to the office and took down his bass viol, and began to play some hymns, but his soul was so overflowing that he could not sing without weeping.

On the evening of the same day in which Finney received the pardon of his sins, in the manner already described, he received a mighty overwhelming baptism of the Holy Spirit which started him immediately to preaching the gospel. We will allow him to describe this filling of the Spirit in his own words. Continuing the narrative of his conversion, he says:

"After dinner we (Squire Wright and himself) were engaged in removing the books and furniture to another office. We were very busy in this, and had but little conversation all the afternoon. My mind, however, remained in that profoundly tranquil state. There was a great sweetness and tenderness in my thoughts and feelings. Everything appeared to be going right, and nothing seemed to disturb me or ruffle me in the least. "Just before evening the thought took possession of my mind, that as soon as I was left alone in the new office, I would try to pray again — that I was not going to abandon the subject of religion and give it up, at any rate; and therefore, although I no longer had any concern about my soul, still, I would continue to pray.

"By evening we got the books and furniture adjusted; and I made up, in an open fire-place, a good fire, hoping to spend the evening alone. Just at dark Squire W -- , seeing that everything was adjusted, bade me good-night and went to his home. I had accompanied him to the door; and as I closed the door and turned around, my heart seemed to be liquid within me. All my feelings seemed to rise and flow out; and the utterance of my heart was, ' I want to pour my whole soul out to God.' The rising of my soul was so great that I rushed into the room back of the front office, to pray.

"There was no fire, and no light, in the room; nevertheless it appeared to me as if it were perfectly light. As I went in and shut the door after me, it seemed as if I met the Lord Jesus Christ face to face. It did not occur to me then, nor did it for some time afterward, that it was wholly a mental state. On the contrary it seemed to me that I saw Him as I would see any other man. He said nothing, but looked at me in such a manner as to break me right down at His feet. I have always since regarded this as a most remarkable state of mind; for it seemed to me a reality, that He stood before me, and I fell down at His feet and poured out my soul to Him. I wept aloud like a child, and made such confession as I could with my choked utterance. It seemed to me that I bathed His feet with my tears; and yet I had no distinct impression that I touched Him, that I recollect.

"I must have continued in this state for a good while; but my mind was too much absorbed with the interview to recollect anything that I said. But I know, as soon as my mind became calm enough to break off from the interview, I returned to the front office, and found that the fire that I had made of large wood was nearly burned out. But as I turned and was about to take a seat by the fire, I received a mighty baptism of the Holy Ghost. Without any expectation of it, without ever having the thought in my mind that there was any such thing for me, without any recollection that I had ever heard the thing mentioned by any person in the world, the Holy Ghost descended on me in a manner that seemed to go through me, body and soul. I could feel the impression, like a wave of electricity, going through and through me. Indeed it seemed to come in waves and waves of liquid love; for I could not express it in

any other way. It seemed like the very breath of God. I can recollect distinctly that it seemed to fan me, like immense wings.

"No words can express the wonderful love that was shed abroad in my heart. I wept aloud with joy and love; and I do not know but I should say, I literally bellowed out the unutterable gushings of my heart. The waves came over me, and over me, one after the other, until I recollect I cried out, 'I shall die if these waves continue to pass over me'. I said, ' Lord, I cannot bear any more; ' yet I had no fear of death."

Finney continued for some time under this remarkable manifestation of the Holy Spirit's power. Wave after wave of spiritual power rolled over him, and through him, thrilling every fibre of his being. Late in the evening a member of his choir — for he was the leader of the choir — came into the office. He was a member of the church, but was astonished to see Finney weeping under the power of the Spirit. After asking a few questions, he went after an elder of the church who was a very serious man, but who laughed with joy when he saw Finney weeping under the Spirit's power. A young man who had associated much with Finney came into the office while Finney was trying to relate his experience to the elder and the member of the choir. He listened with astonishment to what Finney was saying, and suddenly fell upon the floor, crying out in the greatest agony of mind and saying, "Do pray for me!"

Although he had experienced so remarkable a baptism of the Holy Spirit, Finney was tempted the same night, when retiring to bed, to believe that he had been deluded in some way or other, and that he had not received the real baptism of the Spirit. "I soon fell asleep" says he, "but almost as soon woke again on account of the great flow of the love of God that was in my heart. I was so filled with love that I could not sleep. Soon I fell asleep again and awoke in the same manner. When I awoke this temptation would return upon me, and the love that seemed to be in my heart would abate; but as soon as I was asleep it was so warm within me that I would immediately awake. Thus I continued till, late at night, I obtained some sound repose.

"When I awoke in the morning the sun had risen, and was pouring a clear light into my room. Words cannot express the impression that the sunlight made upon me. Instantly the baptism that I had received the night before, returned upon me in the same manner. I arose upon my knees in the bed and wept aloud with joy, and remained for some time too much overwhelmed with the baptism of the Spirit to do anything but pour out my soul to God. It seemed as if this morning's baptism was accompanied with a gentle reproof, and the Spirit seemed to say to me, 'Will you doubt?' "Will you doubt ? 'I cried, ' No! I will not doubt; I cannot doubt.' He then cleared the subject up so much to my mind that it was in fact impossible for me to doubt that the Spirit of God had taken possession of my soul."

On the morning just described Finney went to his office, and the waves of power continued to flood his soul. When Squire Wright came into the office, Finney said a few words to him about the salvation of his soul. He made no reply, but dropped his head and went away. Finney says, "I thought no more of it then, but afterward found that the remark I made pierced him like a sword; and he did not recover from it till he was converted."

Almost every person Finney spoke to during the day was stricken with conviction of sin and afterwards found peace with God. His words seemed to pierce their hearts like arrows. Although he had been fond of law, Finney now lost all taste for it and for every other secular business. His whole desire now was to preach the gospel and to win men to Christ. Nothing else seemed of any consequence. He left the office and went out to talk to individuals concerning the salvation of their souls. Among those brought to

Christ through his efforts that day were a Universalist and a distiller. During the day there had been much conversation and excitement concerning Finney's conversion, and in the evening most of the people in the village gathered at the church, although no meeting had been appointed so far as Finney could learn. All the people seemed to be waiting for him to speak, and he arose and related what the Lord had done for his soul. A certain Mr. C, who was present, was so convicted of sin that he arose and rushed out and went home without his hat. Many others were also deeply convicted of sin.. Finney spoke and prayed with liberty, although he had never prayed in public before. The meeting was a wonderful one, and from that day meetings were held every night for some time. The revival spread among all classes in the village and to many surrounding places. All of Finney's former companions, with one exception, were brought to Christ.

Finney soon visited his home at Henderson, New York, and his parents were brought to Christ. On his return to Adams, he continued his meetings, and spent much time in fasting and prayer. One time as he approached the meeting-house "a light perfectly ineffable" shone in his soul, and almost prostrated him to the ground. It seemed greater than the light of the noon-day sun, as did the light which prostrated Saul on the way to Damascus. Many were brought to Christ, and some were healed in body, in answer to Finney's prayers. He now learned what it was to have real travail of soul for the unsaved. "When Zion travails, she shall bring forth" became a precious promise to him.

Soon after receiving the anointing of the Holy Spirit, Finney had a lengthy conversation with his pastor, Mr. Gale, concerning the advisability of preparing for the ministry. Mr. Gale was a graduate of Princeton University, but was a firm believer in the Old School Calvinistic doctrines, which to Finney's mind seemed very absurd and contradictory. Mr. Gale and he could scarcely agree on any point of doctrine. Mr. Gale believed in the doctrine of a limited atonement, or that Christ died only for the elect, while Finney believed that He died for all. Mr. Gale held that men were so depraved by nature that they had no free agency, while Finney believed that all men had the power to accept or reject salvation. Mr. Gale believed that Christ paid the exact penalty of the sinner, while Finney believed that He did not bear the exact penalty but that He bore sufficient penalty to enable God to forgive sin without mankind thinking that He was allowing sin to go unpunished. Notwithstanding their differences Finney, in 1822, placed himself under the care of the Presbytery as a candidate for the ministry. Some of the ministers urged him to go to Princeton, but he declined. They then appointed Mr. Gale to superintend his studies. His studies, so far as Mr. Gale was concerned, were only a series of controversies, but he made good use of Mr. Gale's library. He felt that he would rather not preach than teach the doctrines held by Mr. Gale, but a good elder in the church who held similar views to Finney gave him much encouragement, and prayed with him frequently. During the few months that Finney studied under Mr. Gale a Universalist minister came to Adams and greatly disturbed the faith of many. Finney replied to his arguments and completely overthrew them.

The Presbytery was finally called together at Adams, in 1824, and licensed Finney to preach. The two written sermons he prepared for them were, with two exceptions, the only written sermons he ever prepared. He tried one other time to preach from a written sermon, but believed that it hindered the Spirit of God from speaking through him.

Finney's first regular meetings were held at Evans Mills, Oneida County, New York. The people praised his sermons, but for two or three weeks no one decided for Christ. Then Finney urged all who were willing to accept Christ to rise to their feet and all who were willing to reject him to remain on their seats. This was very unusual in those days, and made the people so angry that they were almost

ready to mob Finney. Next day he spent the day in fasting and prayer, and in the evening preached with such unction and power that a great conviction of sin swept over the people. All night long they were sending for him to come and pray with them. Even hardened atheists were brought to Christ.

He continued to preach the gospel, with increasing power and results, visiting many of the leading cities of America and Great Britain. Sometimes the power of God was so manifest in his meetings that almost the entire audience fell on their knees in prayer or were prostrated on the floor. When in the pulpit he sometimes felt almost lifted off his feet by the power of the Spirit of God. Some persons believe that the moral work of the Holy Spirit is not accompanied by any physical manifestations; but both in Bible times and in Finney's meetings remarkable physical manifestations seemed to accompany the moral work of the Holy Spirit when the moral work was deep and powerful. At times, when Finney was speaking, the power of the Spirit seemed to descend like a cloud of glory upon him. Often a hallowed calm, noticeable even to the unsaved, seemed to settle down upon cities where he was holding meetings. Sinners were often brought under conviction of sin almost as soon as they entered these cities.

Finney seemed so anointed with the Holy Spirit that people were often brought under conviction of sin just by looking at him. When holding meetings at Utica, New York, he visited a large factory there and was looking at the machinery. At the sight of him one of the operatives, and then another, and then another broke down and wept under a sense of their sins, and finally so many were sobbing and weeping that the machinery had to be stopped while Finney pointed them to Christ.

At a country place named Sodom, in the state of New York, Finney gave one address in which he described the condition of Sodom before God destroyed it. "I had not spoken in this strain more than a quarter of an hour" says he "when an awful solemnity seemed to settle upon them; the congregation began to fall from their seats in every direction, and cried for mercy. If I had had a sword in each hand, I could not have cut them down as fast as they fell. Nearly the whole congregation were either on their knees or prostrate, I should think, in less than two minutes from the first shock that fell upon them. Every one prayed who was able to speak at all." Similar scenes were witnessed in many other places.

In London, England, between 1,500 and 2,000 persons were seeking salvation in one day in Finney's meetings. Enormous numbers inquired the way of salvation in his meetings in New York, Boston, Rochester, and many other important cities of America. The great revival of 1858-1859, one of the greatest revivals in the world's history, was the direct result of his meetings. "That was the greatest work of God, and the greatest revival of religion the world has ever seen," says Dr. Lyman Beecher. It is estimated that six hundred thousand persons were brought to Christ in this revival.

In 1833 Finney became a Congregationalist, and later a founder and first President of Oberlin College, Ohio. The great object in founding this college was to train students for the ministry. The remainder of Finney's time was divided between his work at Oberlin and holding meetings in different parts of the country.

Finney's writings have had an enormous circulation and have greatly influenced the religious life of the world. This is especially true of his "Autobiography," his "Lectures on Revivals," "Lectures to Professing Christians," and his "Systematic Theology." These books have all had a world-wide circulation.

Finney continued to preach and to lecture to the students at Oberlin until two weeks before he was eighty-three years of age, when he was called up higher to enjoy the reward of those who have "turned many to righteousness".