

THE THEOLOGY OF CHARLES FINNEY:
A SYSTEM OF SELF-REFORMATION

JAY E. SMITH¹

According to Mark Noll, Charles Finney "stands by himself as *the* crucial figure of American evangelicalism since Jonathan Edwards."² Sydney Ahlstrom apparently agrees, calling him "an immensely important man in American History by any standard of measure."³ Similarly, Richard Hofstadter feels that he "must be reckoned among our great men."⁴ Importance, however, must never be confused with respect and admiration, and this American revivalist, theologian, and educator of the nineteenth century, though admired by many, is not without his detractors.⁵ In recent years, Finney's theological views increasingly have become the focal point of a debate over his stature within evangelicalism.

Appraisals of the value and emphasis of Finney's theology fall into one of two camps. His theology has been judged either as "true to Scripture"⁶ or as "a system of morals [from which] God might be eliminated . . . entirely without essentially changing its character."⁷ This debate over Finney's theology should not be relegated to the antiquarian interests of the church historian, for American evangelicalism is currently experiencing a significant "revival" of interest in Finney and his theology.⁸ This makes a fresh evaluation of Finney's theology all the more important.

¹Jay E. Smith is a Ph.D. candidate in New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

²M. Noll, "Glimpses of Finney," *The Reformed Journal* 36 (1988) 22.

³S. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972) 461.

⁴R. Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962) 92.

⁵J. Gerstner, fully aware of Finney's historical importance, argues that he "became the greatest of nineteenth-century foes of evangelicalism." ("Theological Boundaries: The Reformed Perspective," in *The Evangelicals: What They Believe, Who They Are, Where They are Changing* [rev. ed., ed. D. Wells and J. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977] 27).

⁶L. G. Parkhurst, Jr. "Finney's Theology. True to Scripture, True to Reason, True to Life" (Edmond, OK: Revival Resources, 1990) 2, 13. Cf. id., "Charles Grandison Finney Preached for a Verdict," *Fundamentalist Journal* 3 (1984) 41-43; J. E. Hamilton, "Finney: An Appreciation," *Christianity Today* 19 (1975) 13-16; H. Conn, foreword to *Finney's Systematic Theology*, by C. G. Finney (reprint; Minneapolis: Bethany, 1976).

⁷B. B. Warfield, *Perfectionism* (2 vols.; New York: Oxford, 1931) 2.193. Cf. C. Hodge, "Finney's Lectures on Theology," *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 19 (1847) 237-77; J. Hannah, "The Doctrine of Original Sin in Postrevolutionary America," *BSac* 134 (1977) 25-53; D. O. Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity: American Fundamentalism Since 1850* (Greenville, SC: Unusual Publications, 1986) 73-75.

⁸The "Charles G. Finney Legacy of Revival" conference at Wheaton College in 1990, the "Charles G. Finney Conference on Theology" in Ft. Worth in 1991, the reprinting of many of Finney's works by Bethany House, two recent biographies by K. Hardman (*Charles Grandison Finney 1792-1875: Revivalist and Reformer* [Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987]) and L. Drummond (*The Life and Ministry of Charles G. Finney* [Minneapolis: Bethany, 1985]), and an entire fascicle of *Christian History* (vol. 7, no. 4, 1988) devoted to Finney are examples of the renewed interest. J. E. Johnson also refers to a "Finney cult" in America ("Charles Grandison Finney. Father of American Revivalism," *Christian History* 7 [1988] 9).

In attempting to provide such an evaluation, this essay agrees with the latter view and contends that Finney's theology is more morality than theology.⁹ It will seek to defend this position by showing that collectively (1) the formative influences behind Finney's theology, (2) the actual content of that theology, and (3) the results of his theology (how Finney's theology manifested itself in his ministry) point unequivocally to the conclusion that Finney's theology is primarily a system of morals based upon human effort with little need for God.

In seeking to accomplish this task, the formative influences, content, and results of his theology will be examined in order. The formative influences behind Finney's theology are discussed first, not as a subtle attempt to prejudice the issue at hand by assuming the thesis to be proven, but as a means to understand the chronological and logical development of his theology. Rather than prejudging Finney's theology, this initial section anticipates much of the later discussion concerning the content of his theology. Moreover, the identification of the formative influences and results of Finney's theology is incapable of proving the thesis directly and can show only that these factors are consistent with the thesis. As a result, these factors will be subsidiary, serving only to confirm and illuminate the thesis. The burden of proof rests with the actual content of Finney's theology.¹⁰

Finney wrote voluminously, and his theological thought is scattered throughout myriads of documents. This poses a potential problem in trying to present the basic content of his theology. Fortunately his *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, representing a systematic and reasonably late presentation of his thought, seems to capture his mature thinking accurately.¹¹ Therefore the source material used in this essay will be restricted primarily to this work.¹² Also, the examination of the *Lectures* does not intend or even need to be exhaustive, only even-handed and representative,¹³ to substantiate the thesis that, for Finney, the self-reformation of one's moral behavior constitutes the essence of Christianity.

⁹Special thanks are due to J. Hannah, for the genesis of this essay is found in his lectures on American church history.

¹⁰The goal is not to analyze and refute each element of Finney's theology but only to show that the basic content of his theology supports the thesis.

¹¹J. E. Johnson, "Charles G. Finney and a Theology of Revivalism," *CH* 38 (1969) 350. Finney's *Lectures on Systematic Theology* was published in 1846-47 and then revised in 1851. At the time of the revision, Finney was in his late fifties and had been teaching at Oberlin for over fifteen years. Parkhurst, the editor of many of Finney's works, indicates, "As far as I can tell, Finney never changed the substance of any of his central teachings" (L. G. Parkhurst, Jr., appendix to *Principles of Consecration*, by C. G. Finney [Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1990] 237). Finney himself maintained, "On the strictly fundamental questions in theology, my views have not, for many years, undergone any change, except as I have clearer apprehensions of them than formerly, and should now state them, perhaps, in some measure, differently from what I should then have done" (*Finney's Systematic Theology*, xiii). Cf. G. Rosell, "Charles Grandison Finney and the Rise of the Benevolence Empire" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, microfilm, 1971) 100; W. G. McLoughlin, Jr., introduction to *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, by C. Grandison Finney (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960) lii.

¹²Numerous editions of Finney's *Lectures on Systematic Theology* have been published. Bethany House's 1976 abridged reprint (hereafter, *Theology*) is the most readily available, and all quotations are taken from it unless otherwise indicated.

¹³This essay accurately and fairly represents Finney's views as evidenced from a comparison with Oberlin Professor G. F. Wright's sympathetic and landmark biography of Finney (*Charles Grandison Finney* [New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1891]) and Professor A. T. Swing's sympathetic treatment of Finney's theology ("President Finney and an Oberlin Theology," *BSac* 57 [1900] 465-82).

I. INFLUENCES BEHIND FINNEY'S THEOLOGY

A. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

Jacksonian America. During the "Age of Jackson"¹⁴ the American people possessed unlimited optimism both nationally and personally.¹⁵ After all, the United States, against all reasonable odds, had wrested its independence from the most powerful nation in the world. The American people had created a new nation, expanded across the Appalachians, subdued the Indians, and defeated the British for a second time. During the years of westward expansion after the War of 1812, America enjoyed a period of unparalleled prosperity. Surely reason and experience indicated that America's self-accomplishment had been and would continue to be nothing short of amazing. Later, Andrew Johnson would crystallize this self-reliant optimism in creed-like fashion:

I believe man can be elevated; man can become more and more endowed with divinity; and as he does he becomes more God-like in his character and capable of governing himself. Let us go on elevating our people, perfecting our institutions, until democracy shall reach such a point of perfection that we can acclaim with truth that the voice of the people is the voice of God.¹⁶

The Jacksonian era also marked the "rise of the common man." Led by Jackson himself, this movement, which championed the rights of the ordinary citizen, emphasized a more democratic way of life, opposed any signs of aristocracy in the nation, and extolled the virtues and ability of the average individual.¹⁷

Earlier, Jeffersonian republicanism had emphasized the need for leadership by those of greatest ability. Now Jacksonian democracy, stressing a more democratic philosophy, held that the ordinary citizen was capable of governing himself or herself.¹⁸ Although Jefferson believed in the sovereignty of the people, he did not assume that untrained individuals could handle the responsibilities of important

¹⁴Andrew Jackson was president from 1829 to 1837, but the trends of the "Age of Jackson" cannot be restricted exclusively to his administration.

¹⁵W. G. McLoughlin, Jr., "Charles Grandison Finney: The Revivalist as Culture Hero," *Journal of American Culture* 5 (1982) 85 (an excellent, concise discussion to which the following is heavily indebted); id., *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York: The Roland Press, 1959) 76, 100; Hannah, "Doctrine of Original Sin," 253; W. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1950) 79, 168, 199; Johnson, "Theology of Revivalism," 357; L. I. Sweet, "The View of Man in New Measures Revivalism," *CH* 45 (1976) 206-7.

¹⁶Quoted in D. Wecter, *The Saga of American Society: A Record of Social Aspiration, 1607-1937* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937) 100. The original source of this excerpt is unknown; however, Johnson's first inaugural address as the governor of Tennessee in October 1853—his famous "Jacob's Ladder" speech—bears a striking resemblance to this quotation.

¹⁷K. M. Stamp, "Politics for the Common Man," in *The National Experience* (2d. ed.; ed. J. M. Blum; Chicago: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968) 223; S. E. Morison, H. S. Commager, and W. E. Leuchtenburg, *The Growth of the American Republic* (7th. ed., 2 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980) 1.419-20; O. Handin, *The History of the United States* (2 vols.; Chicago: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1967) 1.506; J. A. Garraty and R. A. McCaughey, *The American Nation* (2 vols.; 6th. ed.; New York: Harper & Row, 1987) 1.266.

¹⁸For a brief discussion of the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian philosophies, see K. M. Stamp, "Jeffersonian Republicanism," in *The National Experience*, 167; id., "Politics for the Common Man," 223; Garraty and McCaughey, *The American Nation*, 1.266.

administrative positions. He did believe, however, that ordinary people could be educated to determine what was good and right. Jackson, on the contrary, "insisted that they knew what was right by instinct."¹⁹ "Never for a moment believe," said Jackson, "that the great body of the citizens . . . can deliberately intend to do wrong."²⁰

Self-reliant optimism, a democratic way of life, and rugged individualism characterized the Jacksonian democracy.²¹ Horatio Alger would soon embody this sentiment and become a national symbol of self-effort and determination leading inevitably to success.²² The American people were ready for a faith of action through self-accomplishment.²³ Democratic principles suggested that one's destiny was in one's own hands—punishment or reward depended solely upon self-effort. Within this milieu, Finney developed his theology, and he "was not immune to the demands that the historic evangelical theology should be brought into harmony with the concepts of the democratic philosophy."²⁴ Consequently, Finney "reworked Christian orthodoxy to suit the times" and "his theology had a message . . . which fitted perfectly the ebullient optimism of the 1830's."²⁵ In short, "Finney's theology was the Christian counterpart of Jacksonian democracy."²⁶

The Burned-Over District of Upstate New York. Upstate New York, where Finney grew up, was particularly suited to the development of his theology. Living on the western frontier demanded a spirit of self-reliance, and separation from the East loosened ties to tradition, including Calvinism. Finney's day also represented the second generation of Yankee settlers to this region.²⁷ This second generation was more settled and prosperous and consequently had more confidence in humanity's ability than their parents had.²⁸

¹⁹Garraty and McCaughey, *The American Nation*, 1.266.

²⁰A. Jackson, "Farewell Address" (March 4, 1837), *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents* (20 vols.; ed. J. D. Richardson; New York: Bureau of National Literature and Art, 1897) 4.1515.

²¹Johnson, "Theology of Revivalism," 357.

²²W. G. McLoughlin, Jr. *The American Evangelicals, 1800-1900* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968) 13.

²³Hannah "Doctrine of Original Sin," 253.

²⁴C. G. Singer, *A Theological Interpretation of American History* (2d. ed.; Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1981) 65.

²⁵McLoughlin, *Revivalism*, 120-21, 100. Weisberger observes that Finney "did not study the popular mind; he had it" (B. A. Weisberger, *They Gathered at the River: The Story of the Great Revivalists and Their Impact upon Religion in America* [Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1958] 88).

²⁶McLoughlin, *Revivalism*, 100. Similarly, P. Miller notes, "The kind of revival stimulated by Finney in upstate New York . . . was . . . an expression of that energy we call Jacksonian America" (*The Life of the Mind in America* [New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1965] 30). Cf. Sweet, "View of Man," 206-7, 221; Johnson, "Father of American Revivalism," 9.

²⁷Finney's father moved the family to upstate New York from Connecticut, making Charles a second-generation settler.

²⁸McLoughlin, *Revivalism*, 21-22.

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There was more to upstate New York, however, than the transplanting of a few Yankee settlers, for this region found itself in the throes of a cultural crisis.²⁹ The region was transformed by rapid industrial development, led by the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825. This development attracted thousands of enthusiastic new immigrants to the region, creating what Cross calls a "psychic highway."³⁰ In turn, "New Yorkers watched the crumbling of certain eternal verities—fixed land tenure, stable populace, small class distinctions, isolation for [*sic*] the outside world."³¹ Enthusiastic religion often provided the needed stability, and so often had the region been scorched by the heat and fervor of various religious revivals that it was dubbed the "burned-over district" before Finney's time.³² "All this made the area a fertile seedplot," says Sweet, "not only for sane and progressive social and religious movements but also for fads and extravagances."³³ In fact, during this period, upstate New York produced a remarkable array of perfectionistic, spiritualistic, and chiliastic sects, including the Mormons, the Millerites, the Fox sisters, and the followers of John Humphrey Noyes; as well as the anti-Masonic, Liberty, and Free-Soil political parties.³⁴ Thus by Finney's day, upstate New York had assembled the socioeconomic and religious machinery conducive to the development of an aberrant theology.

B. RELIGIOUS AND PHILOSOPHICAL DEVELOPMENTS

The Enlightenment, Common Sense Realism, and New England Theology. In America at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the rationalistic ideals of the Enlightenment, particularly the belief in the dignity of humanity, had been strengthened by the American and French revolutions.³⁵ The reinforcement of these ideals, coupled with the rise of Scottish Common Sense Realism, made traditional Calvinism seem unreasonable and unattractive.³⁶ The rationalistic arguments of the Deists, skeptics, and Unitarians "made sense," as did the more optimistic theology of

²⁹Cross, *The Burned-Over District*, 55-109; P. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium. Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978) 13-38; Weisberger, *They Gathered at the River*, 108.

³⁰Cross, *The Burned-Over District*, 3.

³¹Weisberger, *They Gathered at the River*, 108.

³²G. Rosell and R. Dupuis, eds., *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) 78 n. 24.

³³W. W. Sweet, *Religion in the Development of American Culture 1765-1840* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952) 282.

³⁴K. J. Hardman, *The Spiritual Awakeners* (Chicago: Moody, 1983) 177; J. E. Johnson, "Charles Finney and Oberlin Perfectionism," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 46 (1968) 43; Cross, *The Burned-Over District*, 30-40, 113-25, 138-50, 287-352; Morison, et al., *The Growth of the American Republic*, 487-88; Weisberger, *They Gathered at the River*, 109. The Shakers, Fourierists, and the "Universal Friends" also had numerous communities throughout the region.

³⁵McLoughlin, *Revivalism*, 12.

³⁶S. Ahlstrom, "The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology," *CH* 24 (1955) 269; M. Noll, "Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought," *American Quarterly* 37 (1985) 225-26. For Finney and his commitment to Common Sense Realism see J. L. Gresham, *Charles G. Finney's Doctrine of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987) 5; Hamilton, "Finney: An Appreciation," 13; D. C. Weddle, *The Law as Gospel: Revival and Reform in the Theology of Charles G. Finney* (Studies in Evangelicalism no. 6; Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1985) 2-3; M. Noll, ed., *The Princeton Theology 1812-1921* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 35; McLoughlin, *Revivalism*, 69.

Universalism.³⁷ It seemed that Christianity in general and Calvinism in particular needed to adjust to this changing world view.

The need to make this adjustment was felt acutely among New England's Calvinistic theologians. Jonathan Edwards's successors attempted to prove the compatibility of Calvinism with the prevailing common sense notion of humanity's ability. Hannah notes:

To demonstrate the defendability [*sic*] of Christianity, clergymen attempted to delineate its rationality. In reality, historic Calvinism, being subjected to rationalism, was altered; that is, the "gross absurdities" were "pared off *true* Calvinism." In their attempt to defend Calvinism by "restoring" it to purity and simplicity, New England divines drastically changed its structure and New England Theology was born.³⁸

Three main issues occupied the attention of the New England theologians of the post-war period: the "means" of regeneration, the question of universal salvation, and the nature and extent of sin.³⁹ After numerous developments by a series of New England divines,⁴⁰ including Joseph Bellamy (1719-1790), Samuel Hopkins (1721-1803), Jonathan Edwards, Jr. (1754-1801), Nathanael Emmons (1745-1840), and Timothy Dwight (1752-1817), New England theology reached its zenith⁴¹ under Nathaniel Taylor (1786-1858) and became identified with New Haven where Taylor taught for over thirty years.⁴² While rejecting the concept of original sin, Taylor argued that moral depravity consisted in a person's free, voluntary choices. Therefore, sin consisted in voluntary sinning with no real or symbolic connection to Adam. Taylor also taught a governmental theory of the atonement, free will, real human ability, that humans effected their own regeneration, and that conversion was a result of education.⁴³ In essence, Taylor reduced "Calvinism" to a secular system of morals.⁴⁴

The similarity between Finney's and Taylor's theologies is remarkable, raising the question of Finney's dependence on New England theology in general and on Taylor in

³⁷McLoughlin, *Revivalism*, 21-22.

³⁸Hannah, "Doctrine of Original Sin," 244-45.

³⁹Ibid., 250; cf. Johnson, "Theology of Revivalism," 339 n. 3; J. Buckham, "The New England Theologians," *AJT* 24 (1920) 19.

⁴⁰Ahlstrom, *Religious History of the American People*, 406-22.

⁴¹J. Haroutunian, *Piety Versus Moralism: The Passing of the New England Theology* (Hamden: Archon, 1932) xxii.

⁴²Taylor's development of New England theology is often known as New Haven theology or Taylorism.

⁴³For Taylor's views see N. Taylor, "Concio ad Clerum: A Sermon on Human Nature, Sin, and Freedom," reprinted in S. Ahlstrom, ed., *Theology in America: The Major Protestant Voices From Puritanism to Neo-Orthodoxy* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967) 213-49; Hannah, "Doctrine of Original Sin," 249-50; S. E. Mead, *Nathaniel William Taylor 1786-1858: A Connecticut Liberal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942) 119-20, 229-30; D. Wells, "The Collision of the Views on the Atonement," *BSac* 144 (1987) 369-74; G. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970) 49-51.

⁴⁴Johnson, "Theology of Revivalism," 339; Haroutunian, *Piety Versus Moralism*, xvi-xxii, 282; M. Noll, N. Hatch, G. Marsden, D. Wells, and J. Woodbridge, eds., *Eerdmans' Handbook to Christianity in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 191. Hannah claims that evangelism at this time had "a stress on moral action in the context of a virtuous environment" ("Doctrine of Original Sin," 251).

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particular.⁴⁵ Finney claimed that his theology evolved independently.⁴⁶ Albert Swing, taking Finney at his word, agrees:

Oberlin theology . . . is not to be thought of as an offshoot of the New England theology, but as largely an independent development from its own root. What in New England theology had been gradually evolved from Old Calvinism through two generations of theological reform was substantially wrought out independently of them by President Finney's rational revolt.⁴⁷

Finney's theology was not, however, entirely independent of all historical connections. The affinity between Taylor and Finney is far too close to be accounted for by a purely accidental parallel of thought.⁴⁸ Foster observes:

He [Finney] was not so completely independent as he was sometimes thought to be. Various underground currents set from New Haven westward, and some of them bore theological ideas into the region where Finney was. Subsequently he had personal association with the great New Haven theologian. . . . Finney's system . . . 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.⁴⁹

Warfield, commenting on these underground currents, agrees:

We do not need, however, to raise the question as to the channels of communication by which Taylorism was brought to Finney. Intercourse between Connecticut and Western New York was constant; Finney received part of his education in Connecticut and his was the common case; all ministers of his acquaintance were trained in the East and came from the East and

⁴⁵F. Foster, *The Genetic History of New England Theology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1907) 453, 467; Hannah, "Doctrine of Original Sin," 251-52.

⁴⁶Rosell and Dupuis, *Memoirs*, 9, 41-61, 87, and especially 57.

⁴⁷Swing, "Oberlin Theology," 465.

⁴⁸Foster refers to "the minute correspondence between the two thinkers" (*New England Theology*, 467); Finney's biographer Wright finds "clear evidence of the influence . . . of Dr. N. W. Taylor" (*Finney*, 25); A. H. Strong agrees: "Mr. Finney derived his theology from Taylor as much as from any other man" (*Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism* [Philadelphia: The Roger Williams Press, 1899] 383); Hollon also concedes that Taylor had a "strong though subtle impact [on Finney]" (D. L. Hollon, "Love as Holiness: An Examination of Charles G. Finney's Theology of Sanctification, 1830-1860" [Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1984, microfilm] 50-52); cf. Johnson, "Theology of Revivalism," 342; Gresham, *Baptism of the Spirit*, 5; M. Vulgamore, "Charles G. Finney: Catalyst in the Dissolution of American Calvinism," *The Reformed Review* 17 (1964) 41.

⁴⁹Foster, *New England Theology*, 453, 467. Foster is basically restating the view expressed earlier by Finney's biographer G. F. Wright:

There was, moreover, less of originality in his views than some of his admirers are accustomed to suppose, and than some of his opponents would be glad to believe. . . . They (Finney and his students at Oberlin) together sunk an artesian well at Oberlin, and found an abundant supply of refreshing water. Analysis, however, shows that this water filtered into its subterranean channels from New England. ("President Finney's System of Theology in its Relations to the So-Called New England Theology," *BSac* 34 [1877] 740-41).

For Finney's personal association with Taylor see Wright, *Finney*, 179; Mead, *Taylor*, 167; McLoughlin, *Revivalism*, 45-47; and Hollon, "Love as Holiness," 50-52.

maintained connection with the East; and Taylorism was, at the moment, the vogue.⁵⁰

This direct linkage between Taylorism and Finney, however, should not be emphasized to the neglect of the influence of their common religious heritage.⁵¹ As Rosell suggests, "The parallels between the men were not so much the product of direct contact in later life as the fact that [they] had drawn in earlier years upon the same well of religious thought—Connecticut Congregationalism."⁵² Even Foster is careful to note that Taylor influenced the future developments of the views already held by Finney.⁵³ Thus in summary, it seems best to say that, although unaware of it himself, Finney, nevertheless, was influenced heavily by a New England theology that was bearing more and more the imprint of Nathaniel Taylor and his anthropocentric system of moral philosophy.

Transcendentalism. Rationalism and Common Sense Realism were not the only forces at work in New England during Finney's day. Romanticism, with its emphasis on feeling and intuition, was beginning to express itself in the Transcendentalist movement. Although Transcendentalism did not emerge as an identifiable school of thought until the 1830s,⁵⁴ this movement away from the philosophy of the Enlightenment began much earlier.⁵⁵

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the leading figure behind Transcendentalism, through his essays and lectures, inspired countless Americans with his themes of self-reliance, the limitless potential of humanity, and the individual's innate goodness.⁵⁶ He also advocated progress and favored change, contributing to the country's climate of social

⁵⁰Warfield, *Perfectionism*, 2.19. For a summary of Finney's contact with various New England theologians see G. Salstrand, "C. G. Finney, Evangelist, Educator, Theologian" (Th.M. thesis; Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1942) 104-5; Wright, *Finney*, 179-81; Rosell, "Finney," 100-104; Vulgamore, "Finney," 41.

⁵¹This "common heritage" shared by Taylor and Finney is stressed by Rosell ("Finney," 100-101) and A. Guelzo ("The Making of a Revivalist: Finney and the Heritage of Edwards," *Christian History* 7 [1988] 30); cf. Hollon, "Love as Holiness," 50.

⁵²Rosell, "Finney," 101. Rosell outlines the formative influences to which Finney was exposed while attending the Warren Academy in Connecticut from 1812-14. There he was exposed to "a generous understanding of human ability" by the preaching of Peter Starr, who had in turn been influenced by Joseph Bellamy (*ibid.*, 100-104). Cf. Rosell and Dupuis, *Memoirs*, 6-9; Hardman, *Finney*, 32-33. Wright also suggests that Finney's Connecticut roots were significant:

Theological ideas are transported by a thousand different methods. President Finney himself was born in Connecticut. In the region where preaching is the pre-eminent influence, the language of common life becomes impregnated with its philosophical conceptions, and its forms of expression are transported with the other household furniture. The impressions of childhood are much more permanent than the memory of them ("President Finney's System of Theology," 741).

⁵³Foster, *New England Theology*, 453.

⁵⁴The Transcendental Club, an informal discussion group in Boston, began meeting in 1836, the same year Emerson published *Nature*.

⁵⁵Transcendentalism's roots lay in Romanticism, which, in its earliest forms, extended at least as far back as 1815 in the United States and the 1760s in Europe (L. Krieger, *Kings and Philosophers, 1689-1789* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1970] 218-37; Ahlstrom, *Religious History of the American People*, 583-614).

⁵⁶K. M. Stamp, "An Era of Reform," in *The National Experience*, 254-55; Garraty and McCaughey, *The American Nation*, 1.328; Morison, et al., *The Growth of the American Republic*, 494-96.

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reform and moral uplift.⁵⁷ Primarily through Emerson's influence, "the glorification of man [became] the central theme of Transcendentalism."⁵⁸

Though Transcendentalism's influence on theology was not as pervasive as the Enlightenment's impact, it significantly shaped the intellectual climate of New England.⁵⁹ Garraty and McCaughey observe, "By the second quarter of the 19th century few intellectuals were unmarked by it."⁶⁰ This seems to have included Finney, for "he was familiar with the standard authors in both philosophy and theology,"⁶¹ and his thought reflected "the self-reliant intuitionism of the American transcendental school."⁶²

Transcendentalism's impact was not confined to a group of New England intellectuals, however. Through an ideological alliance with the democratic philosophy of the Age of Jackson, it encouraged the reinterpretation of Christianity among all social classes throughout the United States. Singer writes,

Because the Transcendentalists spoke to the emerging democratic way of life with great appeal, they became a part of the Jacksonian era and played an important role in the rise of the common man, even though they, for the most part, were most uncommon men. Thus, their philosophy was important in the democratizing of American Christianity. It is at this point that we see the importance of the movement in the religious life of the nation rather than in the relatively small number of converts Transcendentalism was able to gain unto itself.⁶³

C. PERSONAL INFLUENCES

Conversion. Finney's detailed recollection of his conversion, though recorded in his memoirs when he was in his mid-seventies, suggests that his conversion strongly influenced his theological views.⁶⁴ In his conversion, Finney was supremely conscious of his seeking after salvation rather than of God drawing him. "On a Sabbath evening," he recalled, "just at this time of my history 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."⁶⁵ Concerning this incident Johnson notes, "In this manner he became convinced that the only inability of man was his voluntary unwillingness to do what he ought to do about his sins."⁶⁶ Two days later Finney stopped in the middle of

⁵⁷Stampf, "Era of Reform," 251; Garraty and McCaughey, *The American Nation*, 1.328; Singer, *Theological Interpretation*, 71-72.

⁵⁸Singer, *Theological Interpretation*, 62.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 52.

⁶⁰Garraty and McCaughey, *The American Nation*, 1.327.

⁶¹Wright, "President Finney's System of Theology," 740; cf. Rosell and Dupuis, *Memoirs*, 546 n. 41.

⁶²McLoughlin, *Revivalism*, 69. McLoughlin calls special attention to Finney's sermon, "Sinners Bound to Change Their Own Hearts" (*Sermons on Important Subjects* [New York: John S. Taylor, 1836] 3-42); cf. the discussion below on Finney's doctrine of natural ability.

⁶³Singer, *Theological Interpretation*, 65.

⁶⁴It is possible that Finney read his mature theology back into his conversion experience; however, the vividness of his recollection seems to suggest otherwise. Cf. Hardman, *Finney*, 443-44.

⁶⁵Rosell and Dupuis, *Memoirs*, 16.

⁶⁶Johnson, "Theology of Revivalism," 344.

the street and said to himself, "I will accept it [the gospel] to-day, or I will die in the attempt."⁶⁷ Weisberger observes, "Charles Finney had decided in that moment that salvation was up to him. He was now going to pound at the gate of heaven until he gained admittance."⁶⁸ Finney recalled that at the very instant of his conversion a "passage of Scripture seemed to drop into my mind with a flood of light: 'Then shall ye go and pray unto me, and I will answer you. Then shall ye seek me and shall find me, when you search for me with all your heart.'"⁶⁹ Thus beginning with his conversion, Finney began to construct a system of free will and moral responsibility.⁷⁰ All the sinner had to do to receive salvation was exactly what Finney himself found necessary, that is, "to get my own consent to give up my sins, and give myself to Christ."⁷¹

Natural Ability and Self-Confidence. William Cochran describes the young Charles Finney as a "splendid pagan—a young man rejoicing in his strength, proudly conscious of his physical and intellectual superiority to all around him."⁷² At six feet two inches and 185 pounds he was striking and handsome—the most eligible bachelor of Jefferson County, New York.⁷³ He was well-known for his dancing, musical skills, and athletic prowess.⁷⁴ A student he taught in grammar school declared,

There was nothing which anyone else knew, that Mr. Finney didn't know, and there was nothing which anyone else could do that Mr. Finney could not do—and do a great deal better. He was the idol of his pupils. . . . He was very dignified and kept perfect order. Should any boy attempt to create a disturbance, one flash of Mr. Finney's eye would quell the sinner at once. Oh, I tell you, they all loved and worshipped him, and all felt that some day he would be a great man.⁷⁵

Intellectually, Finney had few peers. He contemplated attending Yale, but one of his teachers advised him against it, claiming that he could master the entire curriculum by himself in two years.⁷⁶ In his mid-twenties Finney, fully able to meet the intellectual demands of the legal profession, turned his attention to a career in law and began his studies under the tutelage of a local lawyer, as was customary.⁷⁷ Finney's "remarkable natural abilities"⁷⁸ developed within him a self-confidence, bordering on arrogance.⁷⁹ So self-assured was Finney that when the local presbytery

⁶⁷Rosell and Dupuis, *Memoirs*, 18.

⁶⁸Weisberger, *They Gathered at the River*, 91.

⁶⁹Rosell and Dupuis, *Memoirs*, 20. The passage of Scripture is Jer 29:12-13.

⁷⁰For a brief discussion of the effects of Finney's conversion on the development of his theology see, F. Whitesell, "Finney and His Theology," (Th.D. diss., Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1931) 17-19.

⁷¹Rosell and Dupuis, *Memoirs*, 18.

⁷²W. C. Cochran, *Charles Grandison Finney* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1908) 13.

⁷³Hardman, *Spiritual Awakeners*, 167; McLoughlin, *Revivalism*, 17.

⁷⁴Hardman, *Finney*, 35-36; McLoughlin, "Finney," 82.

⁷⁵Cochran, *Finney*, 17-18.

⁷⁶McLoughlin, *Revivalism*, 15; Hardman, *Finney*, 33; Rosell and Dupuis, *Memoirs*, 7.

⁷⁷Hardman, *Finney*, 36; Rosell, "Finney," 105.

⁷⁸Wright, *Finney*, preface.

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suggested he enroll at Princeton to study theology, he refused to go, informing this prestigious body that:

I would not put myself under such an influence as they had been under. That I was confident they had been wrongly educated; and they were not ministers that met my ideal at all of what a minister of Christ should be.⁸⁰

After the members of the presbytery regained their composure, they agreed to allow Finney to pursue his theological studies under the local pastor's direction. Although by his own admission "being no theologian,"⁸¹ his confidence resurfaced as he repeatedly challenged and rejected his mentor's theological positions. Consequently, his training degenerated into "little else than controversy."⁸² In fact, he would later come to the conclusion that his mentor's education was "entirely defective," his theological views were "crippl[ing]," and his "*practical* views were equally erroneous."⁸³

Finney's self-confidence and ability had taught him that success was a question of natural ability and determination. Now as a young theologian, his self-confidence and natural talent convinced him that the gospel was also a matter of one's ability and effort.⁸⁴ In addition, his early success as an itinerant preacher served to confirm this idea.⁸⁵ Thus, humanity's spiritual problem was not one of ability but one of obstinacy and lack of determination.

Legal Training. In 1818 at the age of twenty-six, Finney began his career in law as the apprentice of Benjamin Wright in Adams, New York. Under Wright's tutelage, Finney read a great deal from William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, the main source of a country lawyer's education.⁸⁶ In Blackstone's discussions the concept of free will played a crucial role. He argued that only those violations committed voluntarily, as an act of free will, could be punished justifiably.⁸⁷ Culpability depended upon a will that was completely free. Inculcated with Blackstone, Finney developed the presuppositions and categories that would force him to reject the Reformers' conviction that the human will was in bondage, burdened with inherited guilt, and unable to obey God.⁸⁸ That an individual

⁷⁹Weisberger, *They Gathered at the River*, 90; C. C. Cole, *The Social Ideas of the Northern Evangelists 1826-1860* (New York: Octagon Books, 1954) 69; Hardman, *Finney*, 33.

⁸⁰Rosell and Dupuis, *Memoirs*, 47.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 55.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 48.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 55, 57, 57.

⁸⁴Hardman, *Spiritual Awakeners*, 173; McLoughlin, "Finney," 84.

⁸⁵Noll, *Princeton Theology*, 165; Drummond, *Finney*, 218; Weddle, *The Law as Gospel*, 6; Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity*, 73-74. Finney argued that his success as a revivalist vindicated his theology; cf. Rosell and Dupuis, *Memoirs*, 53, 83, 87.

⁸⁶Weddle, *The Law as Gospel*, 50; Hardman, *Finney*, 36.

⁸⁷W. Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (4 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1769) 4.20-21; cf. J. S. Mattson, "Charles Grandison Finney and the Emerging Tradition of 'New Measure' Revivalism" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 1970, microfilm) 183-84.

⁸⁸Mattson, "'New Measure' Revivalism" 154-92, esp. 164-69; Hardman, *Finney*, 38. Weddle notes, "Finney came to Christianity as a mature adult, with a clearly defined sense of identity and a well-formed world view" (*The Law as Gospel*, 5). Similarly, Mattson argues that Finney's "study of Common Law . . . provided him with a well-developed set of assumptions with which to interpret that which he read" (*ibid.*, 166).

was the passive victim of necessity was patently false, and that the will was completely free was self-evident.⁸⁹ As Rosell notes, "this possibility of choice at once became the essence of Finney's theology and preaching."⁹⁰

Blackstone was not the sole legal influence on the development of Finney's theology. His entire legal training "took the mystery out of theology."⁹¹ Rigorous legal reasoning eliminated, among other things, the notions of inherited depravity, substitution, imputation, and the tensions between divine sovereignty and free will and the "already" and "not yet."⁹² Furthermore, the choice presented to a jury for its deliberation suggested to Finney a parallel with the sinner's consideration of the gospel that vitiated the notions of depravity and the bondage of the will.⁹³

In short, Finney's training in law permeated his understanding of theology.⁹⁴ As Weddle observes, "The key to his theology is the unshakeable conviction, gained in the study of law, . . . that conversion is a reasoned decision to submit to God's moral government, as an act entirely within the sinner's natural powers."⁹⁵

II. THE CONTENT OF FINNEY'S THEOLOGY

The recent supporters of Finney have not defended his specific theological views in a detailed or systematic fashion.⁹⁶ Rather, they prefer to applaud his career as a revivalist and to assert, in only the most general terms, that his theology is faithful to Scripture. This assessment of Finney's theology is based on the assumption that his repeated references to Scripture and his success as a revivalist are indicative of a sound theology.⁹⁷ Unfortunately, neither the use of Scripture nor revivalistic success is incompatible with an aberrant theology.

Finney's current advocates seek to explain the controversy surrounding Finney's theology as the result of (1) an incomplete or cursory reading of his discussions,⁹⁸ (2) the defamation of his theology by "those less informed in matters of sound theology,"⁹⁹ (3) the incomplete nature of his *Lectures on Systematic Theology*,¹⁰⁰ and

⁸⁹Rosell, "Finney," 110.

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹Weddle, *The Law as Gospel*, 5; cf. Drummond, *Finney*, 220.

⁹²Cf. Rosell and Dupuis, *Memoirs*, 60-61; Drummond, *Finney*, 220.

⁹³Rosell and Dupuis, *Memoirs*, 16; Finney, "How to Preach the Gospel," *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 213-14; Rosell, "Finney," 111; Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America*, 24-25; Foster, *New England Theology*, 453.

⁹⁴Rosell, "Finney," 110-11.

⁹⁵Weddle, *The Law as Gospel*, 6.

⁹⁶V. R. Edman, *Finney Lives On: The Man, His Revival Methods, and His Message* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1951) 189-90; Parkhurst, "Finney's Theology," 1-13; id., "Finney Preached for a Verdict," 41-43; Hamilton, "Finney: An Appreciation," 13-16; Conn, foreword to *Finney's Systematic Theology*; J. W. Jepson, ed., *A Digest of Finney's Systematic Theology* (Lyons, OR: By the author, 1970) i. Although Drummond outlines Finney's theology in a systematic fashion and is not critical of his views, his work cannot be viewed as an endorsement of Finney's theology (*Finney*, 220-34). Gresham, though offering a more positive assessment, likewise does not give Finney's theology a blanket endorsement (*Baptism of the Spirit*, 86-91).

⁹⁷Edman, *Finney Lives On*, 190; Parkhurst, "Finney's Theology," 5-6; Conn, foreword to *Finney's Systematic Theology*; Jepson, *Digest*, i.

⁹⁸Jepson, *Digest*, i; cf. G. Redford, preface to *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, by C. G. Finney (New York: George Doran, 1878) vii.

⁹⁹Parkhurst, "Finney's Theology," 8.

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(4) an uncritical acceptance of Charles Hodge's criticisms.¹⁰¹ Though there may be an element of truth in these explanations, in the final analysis, they ignore the real point at issue: the content of Finney's theology—what Finney affirmed, and what he affirmed repeatedly with clarity and dogmatism.

A. FINNEY'S DOCTRINE OF MORAL DEPRAVITY¹⁰²

In discussing depravity, Finney distinguishes between physical and moral depravity. Physical depravity refers to the physiological states of disease, decay, and degeneration. It consists in "a physical departure from the laws of health; a lapsed, or fallen state, in which healthy organic action is not sustained."¹⁰³ Physical depravity has "in no case any moral character, because it is involuntary."¹⁰⁴ The involuntary nature of physical depravity results from the fact one inherits it from one's progenitors.¹⁰⁵

Moral depravity, on the other hand, has a moral character and consists in a Person's free, voluntary choices. It can be produced only by one's free moral choice. "Moral depravity is the depravity of free-will, not of the faculty itself, but of its free action. . . . Moral depravity is depravity of choice. It is a choice at variance with moral law, moral right."¹⁰⁶

Moral depravity does not consist in an inherent sinful nature. Sin falls strictly within the limits of voluntary choice.¹⁰⁷ "Moral depravity, as I use the term, does not consist in, nor imply a sinful nature. . . . It is not a constitutional sinfulness. Moral depravity . . . consists . . . in a state of voluntary committal of the will to self-gratification."¹⁰⁸ "Moral depravity is not then to be accounted for by ascribing it to a nature or constitution sinful in itself."¹⁰⁹ Thus for Finney, moral depravity consists in voluntary sinning with absolutely no direct connection to Adam or his sin.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁰Parkhurst, "Finney Preached for a Verdict," 43; cf. Noll, *Princeton Theology*, 166.

¹⁰¹Parkhurst, "Finney's Theology," 5-6 n. 9; cf. G. F. Wright, "Dr. Hodge's Misrepresentations of President Finney's Systematic Theology," *BSac* 33 (1876) 381-92. Hodge criticizes Finney's theology in *The Biblical Repository and Princeton Review*; see note 6 above.

¹⁰²The analysis here follows Finney's order of presentation in his *Lectures on Systematic Theology*.

¹⁰³Finney, *Theology*, 164.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 166.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, 165, 177, 186, 191.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, 165.

¹⁰⁷Gresham, *Baptism of the Spirit*, 31; Johnson, "Theology of Revivalism," 352, 355; Swing, "Oberlin Theology," 467, W. Unger, "The Social Views of Charles Grandison Finney" (Th.M. thesis; Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1969) 29.

¹⁰⁸Finney, *Theology*, 167.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, 172. Finney refers to the "dogma of a sinful constitution" as "antisciptural and nonsensical," "a relic of heathen philosophy," "infinitely dishonorable to God," "an abomination alike to God and human intellect," and "a grossly false and heathenish philosophy" (*ibid.*, 179, 188, 192).

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, 176-77, 185-86, 189. Cf. 275, 293; Johnson, "Theology of Revivalism," 355; E. Cairns, *An Endless Line of Splendor: Revivals and Their Leaders From the Great Awakening to the Present* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1986) 135; Unger, "The Social Views of Finney," 29; Warfield, *Perfectionism*, 2.179, 181; Hardman, *Finney*, 390-91.

Finney only briefly mentions Rom 5:12-19 and then only after generating a great deal of doubt and uncertainty about the meaning of the text:

Finney argues that moral depravity is universal. By this he means that "every moral agent of our race is, from the dawn of moral agency to the moment of regeneration by the Holy Spirit, morally depraved."¹¹¹ Without the doctrine of original sin, Finney is forced to account for the universality of moral depravity with various alternatives. This universality is to be accounted for "by ascribing it to the influence of temptation, or to a physically depraved constitution."¹¹² He also suggests that the circumstances surrounding normal childhood development are responsible for the universality of moral depravity.¹¹³ In this theory he argues that the sensibilities or feelings in a child develop faster than moral reason, and therefore self-gratification becomes the rule of action before the development of moral reason. By the time children come to the place of exercising moral reason, they are so in the habit of self-gratification that they can do nothing else. The will rejects the bidding of reason and clings to self-indulgence. The demands of self-gratification become more and more despotic, and selfishness strengthens and perpetuates itself by this natural process. Adam's contribution to the moral depravity of the race is indirect and parallels the causes given by Finney for moral depravity's universality. Thus Adam's sin, by generating physical deterioration in his descendants and by creating environmental havoc, exposed "his posterity to aggravated temptation," damaged the "physical constitution in all men," and corrupted "the influences under which they [all people] first form their moral character."¹¹⁴

B. FINNEY'S DOCTRINE OF THE ATONEMENT

Shortly after Finney's conversion he had the opportunity to debate a Universalist minister on the subject of the atonement of Christ. The Universalist argued, "The Atonement of Christ was the literal payment of the debt of the elect, a suffering of just what they deserved to suffer; so that the elect were saved upon the principle of exact

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. It only incidentally recognizes the fact, and then leaves it, just as if the *quo modo* was too obvious to need explanation (*Theology*, 189).

Finney's views represent the culmination of the New England theologians' drift from the traditional Reformed view that the relationship of Adam's sin to his posterity was real, transferable, and penal. Timothy Dwight, for example, viewed sin as strictly personal and nontransferable. To explain the universality of sin he maintained a "divine constitution" view of inherent sin. This view held that in Adam all persons were given an assured propensity to sin and were constituted as sinners because they sin, not because of their connection with Adam. Nathaniel Taylor and Finney went the final step by rejecting the divine constitution view of inherent sin and by placing sin strictly within the limits of voluntary choice. For a full discussion of this drift, see Hannah, "Doctrine of Original Sin," 245-50.

¹¹¹Finney, *Theology*, 169; According to Finney, infants have no moral nature, that is, they cannot be moved to action through inducements addressed to their moral judgment. Only later do children awake to moral values and become moral agents.

¹¹²*ibid.*, 174, cf. 178, 181, 190. According to Finney, the weakened state of physical depravity fosters moral depravity.

¹¹³*ibid.*, 189-90, 193-94; cf. 294-95, 298. Cf. Whitesell, "Finney and His Theology," 32; Mattson, "'New Measure' Revivalism," 208. For a criticism of this position see Warfield, *Perfectionism*, 2.182-85.

¹¹⁴Finney, *Theology*, 191. According to Finney, since "physical depravity [is] depravity of substance as opposed to depravity of the actions of free-will" (p. 165), Adam is responsible for the physical depravity of his posterity but not the moral depravity, which Finney insists must be a free, voluntary choice. As Warfield notes, "The one we may receive from our progenitors, the other can be produced only by our own moral action" (*Perfectionism*, 2.179).

justice. . . .¹¹⁵ The Universalist merely had to show that the payment was made for all people, rather than for only the elect, to find, in this penal-substitution theory, support for the doctrine that all people would be saved. Realizing that the Universalist was swaying the audience, Finney countered with his so-called governmental theory of the atonement:¹¹⁶

The Atonement did not consist in the literal payment of the debt of sinners, in the sense in which the Universalist maintained. That it simply rendered the salvation of all men *possible*; and did not of itself lay God under any obligation to save *anybody*. That it was not true that Christ suffered just what those for whom he died deserved to suffer. That no such thing as that was taught in the Bible; and no such thing was true. But on the contrary, that Christ died simply to remove an insurmountable obstacle out of the way of God's forgiving sinners; so as to render it possible for him to proclaim a universal *Amnesty*, inviting all men to repent, to believe in Christ, and to accept salvation. That instead of Christ's having satisfied *retributive* justice, and borne just what sinners deserve, he had only satisfied *public* justice, by honoring the law both in his obedience and death; and therefore rendering it safe for God to pardon sin, and to pardon the sins of any man, and of all men, who would repent and believe in Christ. I maintained that Christ in his Atonement merely did that which was necessary as a *condition* of the forgiveness of sin; and not that which *cancelled* sin, in the sense of literally paying the indebtedness of sinners.¹¹⁷

In developing his understanding of the atonement, Finney reasoned that God was capable of forgiving people simply by an act of good will, without requiring any payment for sin.¹¹⁸ "Theology can teach . . . that no atonement could be needed to satisfy any implacable spirit in the divine mind; that he was sufficiently and infinitely disposed to extend pardon to the penitent, if this could be wisely, benevolently, and safely done."¹¹⁹ God, however, could not pardon freely the repentant sinner, for that would mean that God had disregarded totally his moral law, which demands punishment for sin.¹²⁰ Furthermore, such pardon also would lead to antinomianism, since people would think that they could now sin with impunity.¹²¹ In the end, the law's authority and its effectiveness in deterring sin would be undermined, resulting in the dissolution of the very moral fiber of the universe.¹²² God somehow had to sustain the authority and influence of his moral law while not exacting its penalty on the

¹¹⁵Rosell and Dupuis, *Memoirs*, 50.

¹¹⁶Finney's view of the atonement is virtually identical with that of Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), the Dutch jurist and theologian.

¹¹⁷Rosell and Dupuis, *Memoirs*, 51. Cf. Finney, *Theology*, 334-35.

¹¹⁸Swing, "Oberlin Theology," 476; Wright, *Finney*, 236-37.

¹¹⁹Finney, *Theology*, 199; cf. 322, 336-37.

¹²⁰Johnson, "Theology of Revivalism," 355. Finney argues, "The head of every government is pledged to sustain the authority of law, by a due administration of rewards and punishments, and has no right in any instance to extend pardon, except upon conditions that will as effectually support the authority of law as the execution of its penalty would do" (*Theology*, 200).

¹²¹Johnson, "Theology of Revivalism," 355. Finney indicates, "Sin cannot be pardoned unless something is done to forbid the otherwise natural inference . . . that no one need fear punishment, in any case, as his forgiveness was secure, however much he might trample on the divine authority, upon a single condition which he could at will perform [i.e. repentance] ö (*Theology*, 199-200).

¹²²Johnson, "Theology of Revivalism," 355. Finney claims that forgiveness on such a basis "would be a virtual repeal of the divine law" (*Theology*, 200, cf. 322).

sinner.¹²³ Ultimately, God was able to sustain his moral law, despite suspending its penalty, through a public demonstration of his moral government, in the death of Christ. "The atonement . . . was a governmental expedient to reconcile the pardon of sin with a wholesome administration of justice."¹²⁴ Christ's death demonstrated publicly that God had not abandoned his law and that he was determined to support it. From Christ's death it was clear that God abhorred all violations of his precepts and that he would punish disobedience. In short, Christ's death allowed God to dispense with the Law's penalties, and yet publicly affirm his commitment to his moral law. Consequently, the atonement acted to deter sin. Forgiveness was available for the repentant, but God's moral law and its accompanying penalty remained in force for the impenitent, as Christ's death graphically illustrated.

Understanding the atonement as a deterrent to sin was the natural outgrowth of Finney's view of moral depravity.¹²⁵ Since people's liability before God results from their choices rather than their nature, they need only something that will motivate them to righteousness and deter them from sin. The atonement, which publicly reaffirms God's moral government, provides such an impetus.

C. FINNEY'S DOCTRINE OF REGENERATION

Finney defines regeneration as "a radical change of the ultimate intention."¹²⁶ "Regeneration," he says, "must consist in a change in the attitude of the will, or a change in its ultimate choice, intention, or preference."¹²⁷ Regeneration then is a change from "a state of entire consecration to self-interest . . . to a state of entire consecration to God, and to the interests of his kingdom" and thus is "a change from entire sinfulness to entire holiness."¹²⁸ As Warfield correctly notes, "The effect of the change thus brought about is that the sinner ceases to be a sinner, and becomes, at once on the change taking place, perfect."¹²⁹

Such a radical change in purpose¹³⁰ is accomplished by human and divine agencies working in tandem.¹³¹ For Finney, the term regeneration implies "the simultaneous

¹²³Swing, "Oberlin Theology," 467.

¹²⁴Finney, *Theology*, 322-23.

¹²⁵Johnson, "Theology of Revivalism," 355; Hannah, "Doctrine of Original Sin," 247. Cf. L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941) 389.

¹²⁶Finney, *Theology*, 223.

¹²⁷*Ibid.*

¹²⁸*Ibid.*, 223, 227.

¹²⁹Warfield, *Perfectionism*, 2.203. Finney maintains that selfishness (which is the essence of sin) and benevolence (which is the essence of holiness) cannot coexist in the same mind. Selfishness implies a state of supreme and entire consecration to self, while benevolence implies a state of entire obedience and supreme consecration to God and the good of the universe. Therefore one must be completely holy or completely sinful. There can be no gradations or degrees. Every person is either perfectly sinful or perfectly holy (Finney, *Theology*, 32-50, 86-90). Cf. Hardman, *Finney*, 389-90; Whitesell, "Finney and His Theology," 40; Gresham, *Baptism of the Spirit*, 29-30; Swing, "Oberlin Theology," 477; Wright, *Finney*, 210, 234; G. N. Boardman, *A History of New England Theology* (New York: A. D. F. Randolph, 1899) 281-82.

¹³⁰This characterization seems to reflect accurately Finney's view of regeneration and is made by H. O. Wiley (*Christian Theology* [3 vols.; Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1952] 2.421), Whitesell ("Finney and His Theology," 38), and Warfield (*Perfectionism*, 2.192).

¹³¹According to Wright, "Finney held . . . that regeneration and conversion are practically synonymous terms, designating an occurrence in which God and the sinner are coagents" (*Finney*, 230). Cf. Finney, *Theology*, 218, 223.

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exercise of both human and Divine agency."¹³² Moreover, "the fact that a new heart is the thing done, demonstrates the activity of the subject; and the word regeneration, or the expression 'born of the Holy Spirit,' asserts the Divine agency."¹³³

The divine side of this equation is the specific responsibility of the Holy Spirit.¹³⁴ The work of the Holy Spirit is not that of creating new life in the sinner;¹³⁵ rather the Spirit's efforts are confined exclusively to persuasion.¹³⁶ Finney believed that the Holy Spirit's function was to persuade individuals to make right choices.¹³⁷ People "will not, unless they are divinely persuaded, by the gracious influence of the Holy Spirit, in any case turn and consecrate their powers to the service of God."¹³⁸ Sinners were to be regenerated "by the influence of truth, argument, and persuasion," as the Holy Spirit "urged and pressed" on them "the end to be chosen."¹³⁹

Since Finney does not permit the Spirit to go beyond persuasion and motivation in securing a Person's salvation, the real agent behind regeneration is the individual.¹⁴⁰ "We have said that regeneration is synonymous, in the Bible, with a new heart. But sinners are required to make to themselves a new heart, which they could not do, if they were not active in this change."¹⁴¹ "The sinner has all the faculties and natural attributes requisite to render perfect obedience to God. All he needs is to be induced to use these powers and attributes as he ought."¹⁴² Regeneration then "consists in the

¹³²Finney, *Theology*, 220.

¹³³Ibid.

¹³⁴Ibid., 223.

¹³⁵Such creation of new life is usually seen in regeneration; cf., e.g., Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 468-69; M. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983-1985) 945; J. T. Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955) 363; C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor, 1986) 326; Wiley, *Christian Theology*, 3.419. Finney calls such views, "false and pernicious," "the greatest and most abominable and ruinous of falsehoods," "subversive of the gospel and repulsive to human intelligence," and aberrations that "should be laid aside as relics of a most unreasonable and confused philosophy" (*Theology*, 221, 226, 236).

¹³⁶A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Judson, 1907) 818; Whitesell, "Finney and His Theology," 41; Warfield, *Perfectionism*, 2.167, 171-74, 203-4, 206-8; McLoughlin, *Revivalism*, 71-72, 74-75; Unger, "The Social Views of Finney," 26; Wright, *Finney*, 231-32; Boardman, *New England Theology*, 290; S. J. Baird, *A History of the New School* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen & Haffelfinger, 1868) 223-24.

¹³⁷Johnson, "Theology of Revivalism," 353. Strong, commenting on Finney's view, notes, "The influence of the Holy Spirit differs from that of the preacher only in degree,—both use only moral suasion; both do nothing more than to present the truth; both work on the soul from without. 'Were I as eloquent as the Holy Ghost, I could convert sinners as well as he,' said a popular preacher of this school" (*Systematic Theology*, 818). This description by Strong seems to represent Finney accurately; cf. Finney, *Theology*, 224; Boardman, *New England Theology*, 290.

¹³⁸Finney, *Theology*, 278. Warfield notes, "How shall we account for the asserted fact that the will, inalienably able to turn at its option from its sins to God, in point of fact never does and never will so turn, except under the persuasive action of the Holy Spirit? A universal will-not, like this, has a very strong appearance of a can-not" (*Perfectionism*, 2.177).

¹³⁹Finney, *Theology*, 235, 234, 224.

¹⁴⁰Baird, *History of the New School*, 219-21.

¹⁴¹Finney, *Theology*, 220.

sinner changing his ultimate choice, intention, or preference"¹⁴³ and "neither God, nor any other being, can regenerate him, if he will not turn. If he will not change his choice, it is impossible that he should be changed."¹⁴⁴ "God cannot do the sinner's duty, and regenerate him without the right exercise of the sinner's own agency."¹⁴⁵ The precise interplay between persuasion and the sinner's choice in effecting regeneration is illustrated graphically by Finney in his sermon "Sinners Bound to Change Their Own Hearts":

Now, in speaking of this change, it is perfectly proper to say, that the Spirit turned him, just as you would say of a man, who had persuaded another to change his mind on the subject of politics, that he had converted him, and brought him over. It is also proper to say that the truth converted him; as in a case when the political sentiments of a man were changed by a certain argument, we should say, that argument brought him over. So also with perfect propriety may we ascribe the change to the living preacher, or to him who had presented the motives; just as we should say of a lawyer who had prevailed in his argument with a jury; he has got his case, he has converted the jury. . . . Now it is strictly true, and true in the most absolute and highest sense; the act is his own act, the turning is his own turning, while God by the truth has induced him to turn; still it is strictly true that he has turned and has done it himself. Thus you see the sense in which it is the work of God, and also the sense in which it is the Sinner's own work. The Spirit of God, by the truth, influences the sinner to change, and in this sense is the efficient cause of the change. But the sinner actually changes, and is therefore himself, in the most proper sense, the author of the change.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴²Ibid., 221. Baird, describing Finney's view, observes, "'Why does he [the sinner] need the Spirit of God?' For the same reason that a man who can pay his debts, but will not, needs the appliances of the law, to make him willing," (*History of the New School*, 220). Similarly, McLoughlin notes:

The heart, or soul, of man was not depraved by Adam's sin but prejudiced by self-interest and ignorance. It did not need a supernatural electric shock, but a humanly engineered reorientation. To alter the heart the preacher merely had to jar it out of its prejudice for evil (*Revivalism*, 69).

¹⁴³Finney, *Theology*, 224.

¹⁴⁴Ibid., 226.

¹⁴⁵Ibid., 236.

¹⁴⁶Finney, "Sinners Bound to Change," 21-22. Cf. Finney, *Theology*, 235, 286. Finney's famous illustration about the dreamer walking along the bank of the Niagara River is also quite illuminating:

Suppose yourself to be standing on the bank of the Falls of Niagara. As you stand upon the verge of the precipice, you behold a man lost in deep reverie, approaching its verge unconscious of his danger. He approaches nearer and nearer, until he actually lifts his foot to take the final step that shall plunge him in destruction. At this moment you lift your warning voice above the roar of the foaming waters, and cry out, *Stop*. The voice pierces his ear, and breaks the charm that binds him; he turns instantly upon his heel, all pale and aghast he retires, quivering from the verge of death ("Sinners Bound to Change," 20-21).

McLoughlin, commenting on Finney's illustration, wonders,

The man in the reverie, said Finney, was the careless sinner on his way to hell. The observer who shouted to him was the revival preacher or the soul-winning Christian. And the word 'Stop' was the 'word of life,' the truth of the gospel. . . . Now the agency of the sinner in turning himself, and the agencies of the preacher and the Word were clear enough, but where was the agency of God or the Holy Spirit? (*Revivalism*, 71).

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Finney's understanding of regeneration also must be seen as the result of his view of moral depravity. If a Person's guilt before God rests solely in one's choices rather than in one's nature, then an individual needs to use only his or her natural ability to make different choices.¹⁴⁷ Fortunately, one is not left unassisted in this, for the Spirit of God and faithful preachers of the gospel are in the business of persuading people to make those very choices.

D. FINNEY'S DOCTRINE OF NATURAL ABILITY

The ultimate reason Finney confines the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit to persuasion is his conviction that nothing more is needed.¹⁴⁸ This conviction rests on one of the most fundamental beliefs of Finney: the plenary ability of humanity.¹⁴⁹ Every person, possessing a will that is absolutely free, is able to do all that God requires.¹⁵⁰ "The moral government of God everywhere assumes and implies the liberty of the human will, and the natural ability of men to obey God. Every command . . . in the Bible implies and assumes this."¹⁵¹ "But I maintain this upon the ground, that men are able to do their duty, and that the difficulty does not lie in a proper inability, but in a voluntary selfishness, in an unwillingness to obey the blessed gospel."¹⁵² "I admit the ability of man, and hold that he is able, but utterly unwilling to obey God."¹⁵³

This plenary ability is a natural, innate ability and not a special ability graciously given by God.¹⁵⁴ "The sinner has all the faculties and natural attributes requisite to render perfect obedience to God."¹⁵⁵ "He must therefore . . . possess the power in himself directly to will as God commands."¹⁵⁶ "He must possess this power in himself as essential to his own nature . . . to will in every instance in accordance with moral obligation."¹⁵⁷

The strong language often found in scripture upon the subject of man's inability to obey God, is designed only to represent the strength of his voluntary selfishness and enmity against God, and never to imply a proper natural

Finney explains, "The Spirit of God forces the truth home upon him with such tremendous power as to induce him to turn" ("Sinners Bound to Change," 21).

¹⁴⁷Johnson, "Theology of Revivalism," 356.

¹⁴⁸Warfield, summarizing Finney's position, notes, "We need from Christ only an adequate inducement to use our own strength aright" (*Perfectionism*, 2.206.)

¹⁴⁹For an extended discussion of Finney's views of natural ability and free will see Mattson, "'New Measure' Revivalism," 193-239.

¹⁵⁰Hannah, "Doctrine of Original Sin," 253; Hardman, *Finney*, 389; Whitesell, "Finney and His Theology," 29; Swing, "Oberlin Theology," 466-67; Gresham, *Baptism of the Spirit*, 28; Unger, "The Social Views of Finney," 24. McLoughlin maintains that Finney "exalted man's free will to virtual omnipotence" (*Revivalism*, 70).

¹⁵¹Finney, *Theology*, 261; Swing noted, "Finney stands as one of the most earnest preachers of human ability" ("Oberlin Theology," 467).

¹⁵²Finney, *Theology*, 288.

¹⁵³*Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴Warfield, *Perfectionism*, 2.206.

¹⁵⁵Finney, *Theology*, 221.

¹⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 261.

¹⁵⁷*Ibid.*

inability. It is, therefore, a gross and most injurious perversion of scripture, as well as a contradiction of human reason, to deny the natural ability, or which is the same thing, the natural free agency of man, and to maintain a proper natural inability to obey God, and the absurd dogma of a gracious ability to do our duty.¹⁵⁸

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.¹⁵⁹ Finney's description of the doctrine of gracious ability advocated by other theologians shows that he understood their doctrine clearly in Arminian terms:

By a gracious ability they intend, that in consequence of the atonement of Christ, God has graciously restored to man ability to accept the terms of mercy, or to fulfill the conditions of acceptance with God; in other words, that by the gracious aid of the Holy Spirit which, upon condition of the atonement, God has given to every member of the human family, *all* men are endowed with a gracious ability to obey God. By a gracious ability is intended, then, that ability or power to obey God, which *all* men now possess, not by virtue of their own nature or constitutional powers, but by virtue of the indwelling and gracious influence of the Holy Spirit, gratuitously bestowed upon man in consequence of the atonement of Christ.¹⁶⁰

This doctrine of prevenient grace Finney calls an "absurdity."¹⁶¹

The reason for Finney's belief in the plenary ability of humanity, even without the aid of prevenient grace, is his insistence that obligation is limited by ability: "The Bible expressly limits obligation by ability."¹⁶² "With strict propriety, it cannot be said that . . . he [God] requires . . . any more than we are able . . . to do."¹⁶³ "A just command always implies an ability to obey it."¹⁶⁴

This principle is no metaphysical quibble for Finney but is an essential point upon which he insists. God would be unjust if he were to command as duty that which humans could not do, or if he were to punish them for not doing what they could not do.¹⁶⁵

Finney's doctrine of natural ability also must be seen as closely related to his view of moral depravity. Since a Person's nature is untainted by Adam's sin, there is nothing preventing a person from meeting all the requirements of God by his or her own innate ability.

E. FINNEY'S DOCTRINE OF FAITH

¹⁵⁸Ibid., 286.

¹⁵⁹Noll, "Glimpses," 23; Boardman, *New England Theology*, 288-89.

¹⁶⁰Finney, *Theology*, 277-78, emphasis added.

¹⁶¹Ibid., 278, 281, 288. Finney has been correctly labeled as a Pelagian. Cf. Hardman, *Finney*, 46, 48, 100, 289, 334; Whitesell, *Finney and his Theology*, 31; Warfield, *Perfectionism*, 2.188, 189, 202, 208; C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols., New York: Charles Scribner, 1878) 3.257; Salstrand, "Finney," 103; Boardman, *New England Theology*, 287.

¹⁶²Finney, *Theology*, 275. Cf. Gresham, *Baptism of the Spirit*, 28; Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3.9.

¹⁶³Finney, *Theology*, 276.

¹⁶⁴Ibid., 281.

¹⁶⁵Ibid., 281-82; cf. Swing, "Oberlin Theology," 466; Warfield, *Perfectionism*, 2.173; Boardman, *New England Theology*, 288; Baird, *History of the New School*, 222. For a brief response to this proposition see Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 249-50.

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Though Finney accepts the principle of *solafideism*,¹⁶⁶ he goes beyond the traditional distinction of *assensus* and *fiducia* in defining saving faith. In harmony with his understanding of justification,¹⁶⁷ Finney views faith as a virtue and as equivalent to a state of sinless perfection.¹⁶⁸ "It [faith] is always regarded as a virtue."¹⁶⁹ "Faith may be contemplated either as a distinct form of virtue, and as an attribute of love, or as comprehensive of all virtue."¹⁷⁰ Faith "implies a state of present sinlessness."¹⁷¹ It "implies the reception and the practice of all known or perceived truth."¹⁷² In short, rather than reject the Reformation principle of *sola fide*, Finney redefines faith so that it becomes "a cardinal form of virtue,"¹⁷³ or "comprehensive of all virtue,"¹⁷⁴ in a system of morals that requires total obedience for salvation.¹⁷⁵ According to Finney, the reason "faith is often spoken of in scripture as if it were the sole condition of salvation, [is] because, as we have seen, from its very nature it implies repentance and every virtue."¹⁷⁶

F. FINNEY'S DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

After indicating that "there is scarcely any question in theology that has been encumbered with more injurious and technical mysticism than that of justification," Finney proceeds to define justification as simply a decree of pardon, or amnesty.¹⁷⁷ Justification "consists not in the law pronouncing the sinner just, but . . . consists in a governmental decree of pardon or amnesty."¹⁷⁸

Finney distinguishes between the basis or ground of justification and the conditions or requirements that have to be met for justification. The basis of justification is the "benevolence and merciful disposition of the whole Godhead."¹⁷⁹ In other words, God justifies (grants amnesty to) sinners simply as an act of mercy without requiring any payment for sin.¹⁸⁰ As his doctrine of the atonement makes clear, Finney felt that such an action by God would jeopardize his entire moral

¹⁶⁶Finney, *Theology*, 313.

¹⁶⁷See the discussion below on Finney's view of justification.

¹⁶⁸F. D. Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 333-34; Hannah, "Doctrine of Original Sin," 252.

¹⁶⁹Finney, *Theology*, 309.

¹⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 313.

¹⁷¹*Ibid.*

¹⁷²*Ibid.*

¹⁷³*Ibid.*, 310.

¹⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 313.

¹⁷⁵Bruner, *Theology of the Holy Spirit*, 333-34; cf. the discussion below on Finney's view of justification. With one word, Bruner, in complete amazement, derides Finney's comment in his *Memoirs* that no one had impugned his orthodoxy: "incredible." Cf. Rosell and Dupuis, *Memoirs*, 405.

¹⁷⁶Finney, *Theology*, 326.

¹⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 318.

¹⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 319-20.

¹⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 322.

¹⁸⁰Cf. notes 117-18 above.

government of the universe.¹⁸¹ Therefore to "reconcile the pardon of sin with a wholesome administration of justice," God established certain conditions, or requirements, for justification.¹⁸² The atonement was the first condition, and it was naturally God's responsibility. Four other requirements, all of which are the sinner's responsibility to meet, are outlined by Finney: repentance, faith, sanctification, and perseverance.¹⁸³

Finney's exposition of these last two requirements is particularly significant, for it clearly reveals his rejection of forensic justification in favor of spiritual renewal or moral transformation.¹⁸⁴ Concerning the requirement of sanctification he states, "Present sanctification, in the sense of present full consecration to God, is another condition . . . of justification."¹⁸⁵ "Present, full, and entire consecration of heart and life to God and his service, is an unalterable condition of present pardon of past sin, and of present acceptance with God."¹⁸⁶ That justification requires a completely sinless life is made clear by Finney:

But again, to the question, can man be justified while sin remains in him? Surely he cannot, either upon legal or gospel principles, unless the law be repealed. That he cannot be justified by the law, while there is a particle of sin in him, is too plain to need proof. But can he be pardoned and accepted, and then justified, in the gospel sense, while sin, any degree of sin, remains in him? Certainly not.¹⁸⁷

Concerning the condition of perseverance, Finney argues that one must persevere not only in faith but also in this complete obedience. "Perseverance in faith and obedience, or in consecration to God, is also an unalterable condition of justification, or of pardon and acceptance with God."¹⁸⁸ "The penitent soul remains justified no longer than his full-hearted consecration continues."¹⁸⁹ "I am not here calling in question the fact, that all true saints do persevere in faith and obedience to the end; but am showing that such perseverance is a condition of salvation, or ultimate justification."¹⁹⁰

Finney's rejection of forensic justification is not merely implicit. He explicitly rejects the concept of forensic righteousness, calling the notion "impossible and absurd" and equating it with "antinomianism."¹⁹¹ Finney's position is unequivocal:

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, and of the literal imputation of Christ's righteousness or obedience to the elect, and the consequent

¹⁸¹Finney, *Theology*, 322.

¹⁸²*Ibid.*, 323.

¹⁸³*Ibid.*, 320-34.

¹⁸⁴Swing, "Oberlin Theology," 476; Wright, *Finney*, 235-38.

¹⁸⁵Finney, *Theology*, 327.

¹⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 328. Cf. Wright, *Finney*, 238, 250.

¹⁸⁷Finney, *Theology*, 57; cf. 46-47, 59-60, 206, 338; Bruner, *Theology of the Holy Spirit*, 333.

¹⁸⁸Finney, *Theology*, 328. This state of consecration is the same as sinless perfection; cf. note 128 above.

¹⁸⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 331.

¹⁹¹*Ibid.*, 320, 329, 332.

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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.¹⁹²

Finney, in understanding justification as moral transformation plus pardon, adopts essentially a Tridentine definition of justification.¹⁹³ This stands in sharp contrast to the views of the Reformers, who held that justification equaled pardon plus the imputation of Christ's righteousness.¹⁹⁴

Finney's Tridentine definition of justification follows naturally from his doctrines of moral depravity and natural ability. If a Person's nature is not corrupted by sin and if that person is able to obey God completely, then the Christian's "full obedience" as a condition for justification is both natural and reasonable.¹⁹⁵

G. FINNEY'S DOCTRINE OF SANCTIFICATION¹⁹⁶

According to Finney, regeneration results in "a state of entire and supreme consecration to God," that is, "a change from entire sinfulness to entire holiness" in which there is no "sin remaining in the regenerate heart."¹⁹⁷ Finney calls this state of sinless perfection, sanctification.¹⁹⁸ "Sanctification, then, is nothing more or less than entire obedience, for the time being, to the moral law."¹⁹⁹ "Its simple and primary meaning is a state of consecration to God."²⁰⁰

Thus the regenerate person is sanctified fully—for the moment. After regeneration, however, the Christian might fall back into sin and need to be regenerated again. This individual is not sanctified *entirely*. This state of entire sanctification not only consists in "perfect obedience"²⁰¹ but also in "*continued* obedience to the law of God"²⁰² in which a person "does not, and will not sin."²⁰³ Consequently, a more accurate label for

¹⁹²Ibid., 333.

¹⁹³The Council of Trent defined justification as "not only a remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man" (*Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* [trans. H. J. Schroeder; St. Louis: B. Herder, 1941] Session VI, chap. vii).

¹⁹⁴A. E. McGrath, *Justification by Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988) 47-61; L. Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1937) 220.

¹⁹⁵Bruner, *Theology of the Holy Spirit*, 333; Finney, *Theology*, 338.

¹⁹⁶In the 1840s Finney's doctrine of sanctification underwent modification, and its Wesleyan emphasis on a second blessing diminished (Rosell and Dupuis, *Memoirs*, 403 n. 89; Drummond, *Finney*, 230-31; Johnson, "Finney and Oberlin Perfectionism," 51; cf. T. L. Smith, "The Doctrine of the Sanctifying Spirit: Charles G. Finney's Synthesis of Wesleyan and Covenant Theology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 13 [1978] 98-108; id., "The Blessing of Abraham: Finney's Christian Perfection," *Christian History* 7 [1988] 24-26; Gresham, *Baptism of the Spirit*, 8-26, 36-38, 53).

¹⁹⁷Finney, *Theology*, 227. Cf. Wright, *Finney*, 239.

¹⁹⁸Johnson, "Finney and Oberlin Perfectionism," 50-52. As has been seen above, Finney also identifies this state of sinless perfection with faith.

¹⁹⁹Finney, *Theology*, 341.

²⁰⁰Ibid., 340; This state of consecration is the same as sinless perfection; cf. note 128 above.

²⁰¹Ibid., 343.

²⁰²Ibid., 342, emphasis added.

²⁰³Ibid.

the state of entire sanctification is permanent sanctification, and Finney often uses this latter phrase.²⁰⁴

For Finney, the real question at issue is not whether a state of sinless perfection is attainable in this life, but whether such a state can be maintained. Sinless perfection is clearly possible, for it is the essence of saving faith and is the direct result of regeneration.²⁰⁵ The real issue is whether such a state can be sustained: "Is a state of entire, in the sense of permanent sanctification, attainable in this life?"²⁰⁶

Finney answers this question in the affirmative with familiar logic: the law of God demands only what people are able to do; therefore, permanent sanctification can be attained on the grounds of natural ability.²⁰⁷ "The law requires nothing more than the right use of whatever strength we have, it is, of course, forever settled, that a state of entire sanctification is attainable in this life, on the ground of natural ability."²⁰⁸ Accordingly, Finney reduces the Holy spirit's role in sanctification simply to persuasion.²⁰⁹

It is true that few have attained this goal, but this, according to Finney, is not a reflection of humanity's inability. Rather, it reflects the low expectation set for professing Christians and the erroneous belief that such attainment is impossible.²¹⁰ Finney felt that if he could convince people that permanent sanctification was attainable in this life, they would rise to the occasion and meet this new standard.²¹¹ Permanent sanctification, lying within the grasp of one's natural ability, was available for the taking.

²⁰⁴Ibid., e.g. 342, 352. Finney indicates that the expression "entire sanctification" can be used in two senses: ô(1.) In the sense of present, full obedience, or entire consecration to God and (2.) In the sense of continued abiding consecration or obedience to God" (341). Finney generally used the term "sanctification" in the first sense and the phrase "entire sanctification" for the second meaning. For a further discussion, see Gresham, *Baptism of the Spirit*, 34.

²⁰⁵Finney, *Theology*, 223, 227, 252-54; Hardman, *Finney*, 390. This position is in perfect harmony with Finney's view of justification. Cf. Smith, "The Blessing of Abraham," 26.

²⁰⁶Finney, *Theology*, 342.

²⁰⁷J. E. Johnson, "The Life of Charles Grandison Finney" (Ph.D. diss., Syracuse University Press, 1959) 325; id., "Finney and Oberlin Perfectionism," 54-55; Gresham, *Baptism of the Spirit*, 28; Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3.256-57.

²⁰⁸Finney, *Theology*, 343, cf. 369-70.

²⁰⁹Ibid., 375-84, 410; cf. Warfield, *Perfectionism*, 2.208; Gresham, *Baptism of the Spirit*, 36-38.

²¹⁰Finney, *Theology*, 354. Cf. Wright, *Finney*, 248; Gresham, *Baptism of the Spirit*, 32-33.

²¹¹Finney, *Theology*, 359; Swing, "Oberlin Theology," 478; Wright, *Finney*, 248-49.

III. The Results of Finney's Theology

A. "NEW MEASURES"²¹²

Finney's adoption of a theology of self-reformation based upon natural ability led inevitably to attempts to influence the sinner's will.²¹³ With time, Finney perfected numerous innovative revivalistic techniques that were designed to compel people to repent and accept the gospel.²¹⁴ These innovative techniques or "new measures," included:²¹⁵

1. Praying by name for sinners present at public meetings.
2. Allowing women to pray and testify in public meetings.
3. Encouraging persons to come forward to an "anxious seat," a front pew for those under conviction, where attention was centered upon them as they dramatized for the audience the struggle between heaven and hell. At the "anxious seat" conversions became grand public spectacles that generated revivalistic momentum.
4. Mobilizing the entire community through bands of workers who canvassed the homes of "sinners."
5. Displacing the regular services of the church by "protracted meetings." These special services, often conducted late into the night for up to several weeks at a time, were "designed to marshal the group pressure in settled areas that the camp meeting had been so effective in fostering on the frontier."²¹⁶
6. The use of "inquiry meetings" for personal conversations with the "anxious."
7. "Invasions" of towns by revivalists without invitations from local pastors, and the mutiny of parishioners against their "unconverted" ministers.

²¹²Although Finney's use of the new measures preceded the publication of his *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, these techniques were, nevertheless, the logical result of his developing theological views that were later crystallized in his systematic theology. According to D. Wells, Archibald Alexander viewed Finney's new measures as the outgrowth of his theology ("American Society as Seen from the 19th-Century Pulpit," *BSac* 144 [1987] 142).

²¹³Baird, *History of the New School*, 223-25; J. H. Morehead, "Charles Finney and the Modernization of America," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 62 (1984) 102.

²¹⁴McLoughlin indicates that "few of the 'new measures' were entirely original with Finney, nevertheless he did modify them and amalgamate them into a completely new approach to revivals, an approach which later revivalists adapted to the changing times but never basically altered" (*Revivalism*, 99-100).

²¹⁵Hardman, *Spiritual Awakeners*, 178; McLoughlin, *Revivalism*, 29-30, 57, 73, 95-99; id., *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform. An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 125; J. E. Johnson, "Charles Grandison Finney and the Burned-Over District," *Eerdmans' Handbook*, 176; W. S. Hudson, *Religion in America* (4th. ed.; New York: MacMillan, 1987) 136-37; Weisberger, *They Gathered at the River*, 96-103; Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America*, 24; Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*, 95-102; Rosell, "Finney," 48-91; Mead, *Taylor*, 204; Wright, *Finney*, 69, 76-79; Baird, *History of the New School*, 226-34; Finney, "Measures to Promote Revivals"; *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 254-69.

²¹⁶Hudson, *Religion in America*, 137.

8. The use of music and an organized choir "to give the audience a sense of participation and to put them in the proper frame of mind."²¹⁷

9. Preaching "hellfire and damnation" with a great sense of urgency, often singling out a notorious sinner by name.

The philosophy behind these new measures is stated bluntly by Finney: "It [a revival] is not a miracle, or dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical [i.e. scientific]²¹⁸ result of the right use of constituted means—as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means."²¹⁹ This philosophy, with its emphasis on the human production of revivals and conversions, suggests that the only thing needed to save a sinner is the sinner's permission. Salvation no longer requires divine intervention. Moral effort, which can be induced through human engineering and coercion, is all that is necessary. Individuals are in absolute control of their destinies. Thus people are, for all practical purposes, omnipotent in effecting their conversions, creating revivals, and growing in holiness.

B. SOCIAL REFORM

During the first half of the nineteenth century, Christians organized hundreds of benevolent societies into an "empire of benevolence" devoted to eliminating every vice and social ill.²²⁰ Social crusades, based on a naive optimism about human nature, left almost no area of American life unaffected. Temperance, women's rights, education, world peace, abolition, the humane treatment of criminals and the insane, and the promotion of many other virtues became the goal of countless reformers.²²¹

Finney too believed that Christians should be actively involved in reforming all aspects of their society.²²² He insisted that his converts "set out with a determination to aim at being useful in the highest degree possible."²²³ It was not a matter of choice but of duty. If one refused to work for the betterment of society, his or her salvation was in question. Finney argued,

No one who does perform duty to God will neglect duty towards man. His sense of obligation to God and his practical submission to that sense of duty will certainly ensure his obedience in the lesser duties due towards his fellow-beings. If the doctrine of this text be true, he cannot be pious without being philanthropic also. If he performs his duty towards God, he will also towards

²¹⁷McLoughlin, *Revivalism*, 99.

²¹⁸McLoughlin, *Revivalism*, 84; Ahlstrom, *Religious History of the American People*, 460.

²¹⁹Finney, "What a Revival of Religion Is," *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 13.

²²⁰Hardman, *Spiritual Awakeners*, 184; Stamp, "Era of Reform," 257-67; *Eerdmans' Handbook*, 188-91; Hudson, *Religion in America*, 144-45; B. Bailyn, D. Davis, D. Donald, J. Thomas, R. Wiebe, and G. Wood, *The Great Republic: A History of the American People* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1977) 530, 541-48; Rosell, "Finney," 144-78.

²²¹Hardman, *Finney*, 253; Stamp, "Era of Reform," 257-67; Garraty and McCaughey, *The American Nation*, 1.306-14.

²²²Ahlstrom, *Religious History of the American People*, 460-61; Unger, "The Social Views of Finney," 55; Cole, *Social Ideas*, 204-5; Morehead, "Charles Finney and the Modernization of America," 95, 105; D. Dayton, *Discovering An Evangelical Heritage* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1976) 18-19. Cf. Finney, *Theology*, 247-50.

²²³Finney, "Instructions to Converts," *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 404.

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man. If he neglects his duty towards God, he will also neglect duty towards man.²²⁴

Naturally, Finney was involved personally in numerous reform movements. He participated in the antislavery and temperance movements.²²⁵ Other reforms also captured his energy, including health and diet reform, school reform, and a society devoted to the rehabilitation of prostitutes, the Female Reform Society of New York.²²⁶

Finney's advocacy of and participation in social reform was a natural extension of his theology of self-reformation.²²⁷ The belief that society could reform itself was simply Finney's conviction, on a larger scale, that the individual could reform himself or herself.²²⁸ If the individual Christian's task is to abandon every sin, then surely, "the great business of the church is to reform the world—to put away every kind of sin . . . to reform individuals, communities and governments . . . until every form of iniquity shall be driven from the earth."²²⁹ If individually people can obey God by their own natural ability, then collectively they can do the same.

IV. CONCLUSION

The formative influences behind Finney's theology, the actual content of that theology, and the results of his theology point unmistakably to the conclusion that Finney's theology is "a system of morals [from which] God might be eliminated . . . entirely without essentially changing its character."²³⁰ Furthermore, in Finney's scheme "man is quite able to save himself and in point of fact actually does, in every

²²⁴C. Finney, "On Sinning," *Oberlin Evangelist* 14NS (1857) 121. The text mentioned by Finney is Jas 4:17.

²²⁵Cole, *Social Ideas*, 60, 123, 204-20; Wright, *Finney*, 139-52; Rosell and Dupuis, *Memoirs*, 362-63; Finney, "Hindrances to Revivals," *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 286-88, 300-303; Unger, "The Social Views of Finney," 57-87; McLoughlin, *Revivalism*, 108-12. Cf. Finney, *Theology*, 163-64.

²²⁶Johnson, "Life of Charles Grandison Finney," 245-54. For an extended discussion of Finney's personal involvement in social reform see Hollon, "Love as Holiness," 190-208.

²²⁷Unger, "The Social Views of Finney," 54. Cf. W. W. Sweet, *Revivalism in America: Its Origin, Growth, and Decline* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1965) 160. For Finney's contribution to the popularization of benevolent societies see G. Rosell, "Charles G. Finney: His Place in the Stream of American Evangelicalism," in *The Evangelical Tradition in America* (ed. L. I. Sweet; Macon: Mercer University Press, 1984) 142-47. For the causal relationship between the theology of revivalism and social reform see T. L. Smith, *Revivalism & Social Reform in American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); G. H. Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse 1830-1844* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1933) xxxiii, 11, 16; Sweet, *Revivalism in America*, 152-61; Rosell, "Finney," 121-43.

²²⁸McLoughlin, *Revivalism*, 101; Hardman, *Finney*, 255; Dayton, *Discovering An Evangelical Heritage*, 18; Unger, "The Social Views of Finney," 54; Weddle, *The Law as Gospel*, 7.

²²⁹C. Finney, "The Pernicious Attitude of the Church on the Reforms of the Age," reprinted in Dayton, *Discovering An Evangelical Heritage*, 21.

²³⁰Warfield, *Perfectionism*, 2.193. Hodge indicates, "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'" ("Finney's Lectures on Theology," 241). Similarly Strong indicates, "Mr. Finney's 'Systematic Theology' is little more than a treatise on moral government under another name" (*Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism*, 383).

instance of his salvation, save himself."²³¹ In short, Finney's "theology" is one of self-reformation. This radical shift away from historic orthodox Christianity is explained by McLoughlin: "The difference between Edwards and Finney is essentially the difference between the medieval and modern temper. One saw God as the center of the universe, the other saw man."²³²

There is little question that Finney is an extremely important and popular figure in American church history. Neither his historical importance nor the admiration of his many present-day followers should blind one, however, to the heretical nature of his theological views. Although Finney was not heretical at all points, the few remnants of orthodox Christian doctrine left in his system are hardly enough to cover its nakedness. Instead of clothing believers with the righteousness of Christ, Finney's theology leaves them wearing the emperor's new clothes—which Isaiah pointedly says are "filthy rags" (Isa 64:6).

²³¹Warfield, *Perfectionism*, 2.178. Warfield adds, "It [is] clear that all God does toward saving man is directed to inducing the objects of salvation to save themselves" (2.167).

²³²McLoughlin, *Revivalism*, 11.