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CHARLES G. FINNEY AND A
THEOLOGY OF REVIVALISM
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Charles Grandison Finney appeared on the American religious scene in the early 1820's, and following a rather dramatic conversion experience he determined to enter the ministry. With some tutoring from his pastor, the Reverend George W. Gale, but no formal theological training, he began to preach in the "burned-over district" of upper New York State. His early successes in attaining conversions led him to adopt a pragmatic approach to the problems of theology and thus to be quite impatient with the Calvinistic theological system.

Finney's most active years in evangelism were from 1825 to 1835 although he continued to hold campaigns throughout his life while serving as both a professor and president of Oberlin College. His most detailed writings on theology appeared with the publication at Oberlin of his *Lectures on Systematic Theology* in 1846 and 1847, although some of his writings had appeared as early as 1836.

Although Finney had many interests in life he was first and foremost a revivalist. His early success in that field set the course for the rest of his life and almost everything he did or said must be placed in a revivalistic context. Hence, his theology was patterned to fit his career as revivalist. He chose the well-worn path of New England theology in his challenge to Calvinism and thus had a wealth of information at his disposal. Never a man to dodge an argument he lived almost constantly in the realm of controversy and debate. Since his theological system was designed to complement his career as an evangelist his theology often assumed strange shapes in order to accommodate to the revivalistic milieu.

The Congregational system in New England had assumed that if God willed a man's salvation it would come to pass. The New England preachers following well-trodden paths emphasized the inability of the sinner to better his own condition since he was dead in his sins. Jonathan Edwards saw that conversions were the great necessity of the times, and in so doing he provided the foundation for the New England theology of the early nineteenth century. Actually Edwards merely restated the doctrine of justification by faith as he preached that a revival was necessary at his parish in Northampton.¹ He did so without abandoning Calvinism or compromising with the Arminian viewpoint.

Whether or not Edwards intended it to be so a new doctrine evolved from his preaching which insisted that although God was sovereign and conversion was the work of God, certain means might

1. Frank Hugh Foster, *A Genetic History of New England Theology* (Chicago, 1907), pp. 53-55.

be used in order to put the person into the place where God's spirit could deal with him. The tendency of this doctrine was in the direction of human responsibility.² New England Congregationalists split as a result of the Great Awakening resulting in the liberal and orthodox factions with the former establishing Unitarianism while the latter formed the Edwardean school. Supporters of Edwards' cause were Joseph Bellamy and Samuel Hopkins, disciples who probably carried the master's ideas a step further than he had been willing to go.³

Three of the more important names in the New England revivals of the early nineteenth century were Timothy Dwight, Lyman Beecher, and Nathaniel W. Taylor. Their actions resulted in a modification of Calvinism to the point that it could hardly be recognized as such.⁴ These men were never as concerned with building a coherent scheme of theological thought as they were in winning conversions. Timothy Dwight was interested in obtaining the triumph of Christianity over the forces of infidelity at Yale and in other places where they had crept in as a result of the Enlightenment. Beecher and Taylor were interested in a restatement of Calvinism that would enable orthodoxy to withstand the challenge of Unitarianism.⁵ What these men were seeking was a new theology more acceptable to the age in which they lived, and a method of wielding it in the most effective manner. Revivalism was the means which they employed to obtain their ends.

Consequently, the New School consisting mostly of New England ministers came into existence.⁶ The divergence of views between them and the Old School came primarily from the fact that the New School wanted to modify the Calvinistic view of the arbitrary will of God. By attempting to ethicize theology they threw a flood of light upon the nature of faith, regeneration, conversion, justification, and the

2. William Warren Sweet, *The Story of Religions in America* (New York, 1930), p. 185. The author comments that "It was the combination of these two influences—the presence among the people of a 'tremendous amount of latent fear' and the doctrine of human responsibility in conversion—that largely accounts for the great revival which began in central Massachusetts in the fourth decade of the eighteenth century. . . . At the very center of this great religious movement stands Jonathan Edwards. . . ."
3. Sidney Earl Mead, *Nathaniel W. Taylor 1786-1858: A Connecticut Liberal* (Chicago, 1942), pp. 17-18. Hopkins was supposed to have been greatly influenced by the piety exhibited by Mrs. Edwards and a willingness to be "damned for the glory of God" became popularly synonymous with "Hopkinsianism." The "Hopkinsian Triangle" was a term derived from a series of pamphlets called *The Triangle* by "Investigator" (the Reverend Samuel Whelpley), later published in book form (*The Triangle*, [New York, 1832]). The three Calvinistic doctrines of Original Sin, Inability, and the Atonement formed the triangle, which Whelpley, an ardent Hopkinsian, attacked in his pamphlets. Cf. Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond (eds.), *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimke Weld and Sarah Grimke 1822-1844* (New York, 1934), I, 10, and Foster, *History of New England Theology*, pp. 107-155.
4. Sidney E. Mead, "Denominationalism: The Shape of Protestantism in America," *Church History*, (December, 1954), p. 308.
5. Mead, *Nathaniel William Taylor*, p. 99. Mead demonstrates that these men had to become doctrinal fence straddlers, since they often reverted to the old Calvinism for their answers when doctrinal issues of a fundamental nature arose. Yet they were unwilling to be called either Calvinist or Arminian.
6. Samuel J. Baird, *A History of the New School, and of the Questions Involved In The Disruption of the Presbyterian Church in 1833* (Philadelphia, 1868), pp. 11-12.

atonement. "They necessarily broke down thereby the forensic system of Calvinism," and the result, according to Foster, was a "... new era of practical activity in the church."⁷ The origin of this break lay in two great truths derived from the Scriptures—original sin and freedom of the will.⁸ This was the beginning of the divergence, but as the two factions continued to defend their respective positions differences of opinion resulted on most of the important theological doctrines.⁹

This theology was identified with New Haven where Nathaniel W. Taylor was teaching at the time. Taylor, under attack for his ideas on basic Calvinistic doctrines,¹⁰ answered with the "Concio ad Clerum" sermon in the chapel of Yale College in September, 1828.¹¹ The home of Taylor became a stopping place for many visitors, and Albert Barnes came to see him as well as Finney who is said to have spent the night there.¹²

The New Haven theology migrated westward from New England principally because of the Plan of Union of 1801 at which time the General Assembly of the Presbyterians and the Connecticut Congregational Association agreed to combine their missionary efforts, their ministers serving either congregation.¹³ The practical effect of this action was that a liberalized Calvinism was introduced into the Presbyterian Churches, and this was a contributing factor to the controversy among Presbyterians which caused a split in their ranks in 1837.¹⁴ Before this split occurred the Old School had brought charges of heresy against many of the New School men. Finney had been on trial at New Lebanon, Albert Barnes was tried at Philadelphia for doctrinal aberrations regarding the doctrines of depravity and the atonement, and Lyman Beecher was put on trial by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church at Pittsburg in 1835. These trials represented the reaction of the absolutist theologians thoroughly aroused to the dangers of the New Haven doctrines.¹⁵ In 1837 the

7. Foster, *History of New England Theology*, p. 547.

8. Charles Beecher (ed.), *Autobiography, Correspondence, Etc., of Lyman Beecher, D.D.* (New York, 1865), II, 346-350. Cf. Mead, *Nathaniel W. Taylor*, p. 225.

9. *Oberlin Evangelist*, July 20, 1842.

10. Mead, *Nathaniel W. Taylor*, p. 220.

11. Information on this episode can be found in: Baird, *History of the New School*, pp. 191-192; Foster, *History of New England Theology*, p. 370; and Sydney W. Ahlstrom, "The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology," *Church History*, (September, 1955), pp. 262-264.

12. *Reminiscences of Rev. Charles G. Finney. Speeches and Sketches at the Gathering of His Friends and Pupils, in Oberlin, July 28, 1876, Together With President Fairchild's Memorial Sermon, Delivered Before the Graduating Classes, July 30, 1876* (Oberlin, 1876), p. 49. The Rev. George Clark tells that he was present at New Haven sometime in the early 1830's at an interview between Finney and Taylor, and listened as these two discussed great theological questions. Mead, *Nathaniel W. Taylor*, p. 167, says that Finney spent the night at Taylor's home.

13. William Charles Walzer, "Charles Grandison Finney and the Presbyterian Revivals of Northern and Western New York," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1944), p. 187.

14. William Warren Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier 1783-1850, Vol. II, The Presbyterians* (Chicago, 1936), 46-47.

15. Baird, *History of the New School*, pp. 344-345.

conservative elements were in control of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church and they voted to exclude several "Puritan" synods which had in other years blocked any attempts to deal with the revival methods and doctrinal heresies sponsored by such men as Albert Barnes, Lyman Beecher, and Nathan Beman.¹⁶ The majority of these "Puritan" synods contained New England Congregationalists or Presbyterians who sponsored the liberalized Calvinism. A spokesman for the Old School summed it up: "Against Congregationalism as such there exists no hostility. But when, through the Plan of Union, it became the means, like the Trojan horse, of introducing into our body many who were unfriendly to our doctrines and government, it became necessary in self-defense, to free the church from this improper, and to us ruinous connection."¹⁷

The theology that came to be identified with Charles G. Finney and with Oberlin had its roots in this New England background. After his decision to enter the ministry Finney began to study theology with his pastor, George W. Gale. He objected to the Old School positions as set forth by Gale but had nothing to offer in their place.¹⁸ The reason for this reaction is not readily apparent. Finney claimed that his theology evolved independently, while others say that perhaps his thinking was independent but his ideas were not as original as he thought. In fact the whole New Haven theology was Arminian in tone, and had been enunciated well before the nineteenth century. There were certainly some underground currents from New Haven that carried theological ideas which Finney could have imbibed. At any rate, Finney ultimately adopted most of Taylor's ideas and has been called "Taylor's true successor."¹⁹ Finney's biographer of an earlier day recognized the connection, and a prominent critic said: "Finney's thought was not merely into the general mold of Pelagianism, but into the special mold of the particular mode of stating Pelagianism which had been worked out by N. W. Taylor."²⁰ The most sweeping judgment of all is given by a student of the New England theology: "It will be the less important for us to dwell further upon Finney's system because it may be dismissed in one word 'Taylorism,' independent as it was, and as vigorously as its author had impressed upon it the marks of his own individuality."²¹ A. T. Swing,

16. Timothy Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform* (New York, 1958), p. 26.

17. James Wood, *Old and New Theology* (Philadelphia, 1838), p. 7. Cf. Lefferts A. Loetscher, "The Problem of Christian Unity in Early Nineteenth Century America," *Church History*, (March, 1963), pp. 13-14.

18. *Memoirs of Charles G. Finney* (New York, 1876), p. 54.

19. Foster, *History of New England Theology*, p. 453.

20. B. B. Warfield, *Princeton Theological Review*, XIX (January, 1921), 17. See also George F. Wright, *Charles Grandison Finney* (Boston, 1891), pp. 25, 179, 181, 196, 200. Warfield was an Old School Presbyterian who was bitterly opposed to Finney's theology. His works are referred to occasionally in this paper because his research was impressive and his trenchant criticisms are well-stated, but nevertheless, biased.

21. Foster, *History of New England Theology*, p. 457. Taylor's views are most adequately dealt with in Mead, *Nathaniel W. Taylor, passim*. Mead has a footnote on pp. 224-225 which briefly surveys some of the literature on Taylor and explains his (Mead's) differences with Foster and Haroutunian. Cf. Haroutunian, *Piety versus Moralism*. (New

however, took Finney's word that his theology evolved independently: "What in New England had been gradually evolved from Old Calvinism . . . was substantially wrought out independently of them by President Finney's rational revolt which was so closely connected with his conversion as to be practically inseparable from it."²²

Whereas Foster much later praised Finney for adopting Taylorism others condemned him for doing so. A balanced view probably is that his theology derived both from the New England group and from his own independent reflection. The essential point, moreover, is that Finney did become identified with the New School and the inevitable controversies connected with it.²³

The reason for the similarity between Finney's and Taylor's theology was that they were both revivalists and their modifications of Calvinism grew out of their revivalistic labors.²⁴ The pragmatic approach was in vogue on the frontier, and that doctrine was to be used which brought about the conversion of souls. If Calvinism interfered, it had to be modified or cast away. Finney and his friends spread the New Haven doctrines in Central and Western New York State. The main agency to propagate these ideas, of course, was the revival meeting, and these revivals were most prominent in the area from 1825-1835. The converts then carried the views they imbibed to other places.²⁵ Further agencies in spreading the new theology were conference meetings, sermon reports in the *New York Evangelist*, the *Western Recorder*, the *Rochester Observer*, and gospel tracts. Perhaps it is fair to say that Finney was the first preacher who attempted to employ the New Haven theology in practical evangelistic work in Central and Western New York, and thus he caught the public eye. Not all of the New School men were willing to accept Finney's extreme view that men possessed a "natural ability" although they were willing to replace the idea that man was tainted by original sin with the view that original sin was a diseased condition of the moral nature.²⁶

Finney can best be understood by remembering that "the preacher is the key to the theologian," and that each of his doctrines must be examined in order to see what practical purpose it was meant to

York, 1932), pp. 256-257. See also Sydney E. Ahlstrom (ed.), *Theology in America* (New York, 1967), pp. 41-45, and "Theology in America: A Historical Survey," in *The Shaping of American Religion*, I, *Religion in American Life*, 4 vols., James W. Smith and A. Leland Jamison, eds. (Princeton University Press, 1961), 254-260.

22. A. T. Swing, "President Finney and an Oberlin Theology," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, LVII (1900), 465.

23. Foster, *History of New England Theology*, p. 453. Cf. Warfield, *Perfectionism*, II, 19. (disapproval of his theology of perfectionism.)

(Later on several New School Presbyteries passed resolutions of censure expressing their

24. Mead, *Nathaniel W. Taylor*, p. 158. See also William McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism* (New York, 1959), pp. 30-78.

25. Joseph I. Foot, "Influence of Pelagianism in the Theological Course of the Rev. C. G. Finney Developed in His Sermons and Lectures," *Literary and Theological Review*, V (1838), 50. Cf. Mead, *Nathaniel W. Taylor*, p. 114, and Haroutunian, *Piety versus Moralism*, pp. 255-256.

26. Baird, *History of the New School*, p. 217.

fulfill.²⁷ His test of a doctrine was the results it was able to achieve in the form of conversions and holy living. Finney did not lack the ability to think profoundly on abstract subjects, but he refused to preach on such topics because he believed in using the simplest possible method of presenting the gospel truth to men and women to prepare them for conversion.

From the orthodox standpoint Finney's messages were very radical for he openly repudiated the main tenets of Calvinism.²⁸ The Calvinist theology, said Finney, led to a fatalistic conception of life. It caused men to believe that they could do nothing for themselves but must wait for God to save them in due time, if He so chose. If men were elected to be saved, the Holy Spirit would eventually convert them. Finney's messages were designed to combat traditional Calvinism by arousing men to the idea that they were sinners by choice and could only change the situation by exercising their own wills. He had refused to attend Princeton Theological Seminary claiming that he did not want his theology fashioned for him. The fruits of salvation, he insisted, should be readily apparent since each convert should set out with the objective of living as useful a life as he possibly could. He felt that the Calvinist doctrines were stumbling blocks to revivals²⁹ and his theology can perhaps be looked upon as a revolt against what he considered to be the paralyzing tendencies of the old dogmas.³⁰ Finney was no more successful than was Jonathan Edwards in harmonizing human responsibility with the doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of God, but he rejected the concept of total depravity in favor of the doctrine of free will.

Two factors that erected a barrier for Finney against the Calvinism of the day were his conversion and his legal training that stressed an independent approach to problems. His theology went through a series of phases beginning with his conversion in 1821 when he was under the influence of Gale, but protesting on many counts; from 1825 to 1835 when he experimented with the "new measures" and was identified with the New School; and from 1835 on when he began to publish some of his ideas and moved steadily in the direction of perfectionism.³¹ From most accounts of his early life it does not appear that Finney received any teaching regarding theological issues from his family background—this in spite of the fact that some felt that he was by nature "unusually susceptible to moral and religious impressions," and that susceptibility must have been fostered to some extent "by the Puritan notions which came with the family from their

27. Walzer, "Charles Grandison Finney and the Presbyterian Revivals," p. 179.

28. A concise statement of Old School Calvinism can be found in Haroutunian, *Piety versus Moralism*, pp. 143-144.

29. Finney, *Memoirs*, p. 59.

30. Richard Shelley Taylor, "The Doctrines of Sin in the Theology of Charles Grandison Finney," (unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Boston University School of Theology, 1953), p. 253.

31. Charles C. Cole, Jr., *The Social Ideas of the Northern Evangelists* (Columbia University Press, 1954), p. 63.

New England home."³²

Undoubtedly his extraordinary conversion influenced his later views. His detailed description of the event in his *Memoirs*, even though at an advanced age, is proof that it had affected him greatly. He had refused to accept Gale's ideas and he did not agree with the doctrinal views to be found in Gale's library. He relates that pride and other sins stood in the way of his conversion, so he decided to do something about it. "On a Sabbath evening in the autumn of 1821," he says, "I made up my mind that I would settle the question of my soul's salvation at once."³³ 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. Once he had settled the question of his own salvation he became convinced that the total depravity which the Calvinists talked about was a state of voluntary sinfulness. Whether this was interjected by Finney at a later date or not, one can see the evangelistic aim of this theology. His rejection of arbitrary regeneration and total inability was necessary before he could construct a consistent system of free will and moral responsibility,³⁴ and thus project an all-inclusive invitation into his revival meetings.

Under ordinary circumstances, nevertheless, it would seem quite presumptuous for a man of Finney's experience to attempt a restatement of the theology of the church. He had not purchased a Bible until he was nearly thirty years old, and he declined formal schooling as preparation for the ministry so that he could begin preaching immediately. He studied theology for only a few months with G. W. Gale, and when he was licensed to preach he still had not read the Westminster Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church.³⁵ His comment upon the Westminster Confession when he finally did read it was as follows: "When I came to read the confession of faith . . . I was absolutely ashamed of it. I could not feel any respect for a document that would undertake to impose on mankind such dogmas as those, sustained, for the most part, by passages of Scripture that were totally irrelevant. . . ."³⁶

Gale, an Old School man, preached the necessity of conversion, but he ended each sermon with the statement that the people could do nothing but wait for the Holy Spirit to convert them. Finney was unwilling to accept this because he felt that God was willing to answer

32. Hiram Mead, "Charles Grandison Finney," *Congregational Quarterly*, XIX, (January 1877), 2.

33. Finney, *Memoirs*, p. 12. Foster, *History of New England Theology*, p. 253, suggests that Finney's consciousness of his own freedom to act was one of his arguments in favor of free will, but Wright, *Finney*, p. 6, says that Finney may have written in some theology when he penned his *Memoirs* that was not there in his early years. He wrote the *Memoirs* when he was nearly eighty years old.

34. Taylor, "Doctrine of Sin in the Theology of Finney," p. 249. Mead, *Nathaniel W. Taylor*, p. 65, says that most evangelists had to discard or evade the basic doctrines of Calvinism.

35. P. H. Fowler, *Historical Sketch of Presbyterianism Within the Bounds of the Synod of Central New York* (Utica, 1877), p. 262.

36. Finney, *Memoirs*, p. 60.

the prayer of individuals if they were trying to help themselves. "At first being no theologian my attitude in respect to his peculiar views was rather that of negation or denial than that of any positive view in opposition to his," wrote Finney of his studies with Gale.³⁷ As he continued to study with his pastor Finney became convinced that Gale's views were not valid: "Often when I left Mr. Gale, I would go to my room and spend a long time on my knees over my Bible. I had nowhere to go but directly to the Bible, and to the philosophy or workings of my own mind, as revealed in consciousness."³⁸

This seems to be Finney's independence asserting itself, and as he could find no satisfaction in Gale's teachings or in Gale's library full of books defending the Old School position, he turned to the Bible to find out for himself what he should believe. The process was gradual, but definite: "My views took on a positive type but slowly. At first I found myself unable to receive his peculiar views; and then gradually formed views of my own in opposition to them, which appeared to me to be unequivocally taught in the Bible."³⁹ After a while Gale was on the defensive and he confessed to Finney that he did not know whether he had ever been instrumental in converting a sinner. Two years from that time Finney and Gale were reunited in the town of Western, New York, where Gale asked Finney to hold a revival. Finney says that Gale told him at that time that he "thanked God that he had had no influence with me, to lead me to adopt his views; that I should have been ruined as a minister if he had prevailed."⁴⁰

Finney's greatest success as a revivalist was achieved in the years 1826 through 1831. During that time he traveled about in the "burnt district" of upper New York State winning converts wherever he held meetings. He was too busy as a revivalist to be thinking about a theological system, but the very success he was enjoying obviously influenced him when he later attempted to create a doctrinal scheme.⁴¹

The Universalists and Unitarians also presented a challenge to Finney. The Universalists objected to the emphasis with which he depicted the realities of hell. Since the Universalists placed great emphasis on the sufficiency of the atonement for the entire human race it is understandable that they would make this a point of contention. The Universalists were more formidable than their size would indicate because they produced an unusually large number of periodicals in which they could articulate their views. The Unitarians, likewise, compared Finney's approach which stressed agonizing prayers, entreaties, exhortations, and inquiry meetings, to their own approach of addressing the understanding and endeavoring to enlighten the mind.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

41. Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District* (Cornell University Press, 1950), p. 160. Cross says that Finney contributed a set of practices more than a theology and thereby "served to popularize and vitalize the New Haven theology."

Like the Universalists, the Unitarians engaged in pamphlet writing, and so the charges and counter-charges between the Unitarians and the Oneida Presbytery (which supported Finney) kept the printing presses busy.⁴²

Other revivalists such as Lyman Beecher and Asahel Nettleton opposed Finney. The friction between Finney and Beecher was not theological in nature, in fact, they were close to agreement on such matters and both were New School adherents. Beecher was apprehensive regarding the "new measures" being employed by Finney lest they disrupt the unity of the church and eventually hinder the cause of revivals.⁴³

Asahel Nettleton, an Old School revivalist, was opposed to Finney's theology as well as his measures.⁴⁴ He felt that Finney was sowing the seeds for fanatical outbreaks and demonstrations. In this opposition to Finney's measures he was supported by Beecher, A. S. Norton, William Weeks, and other new School men. William Weeks, a Congregational minister in Oneida county wrote a pamphlet explaining why he and his fellow ministers opposed Finney and his evangelistic methods. Weeks was particularly concerned about any disorders and extravagances in revivals which would bring reproach upon the name of religion.⁴⁵

One of the basic issues involved in the "new measure" controversy was whether there could even be a revival without the use of some human means to bring it about.⁴⁶ This was the point of disagreement

42. The pamphlet literature was voluminous. An example of Unitarian pamphleteering was: Ephraim Perkins, *A "Bunker Hill" Contest, A.D. 1826. Between the "Holy Alliance" For the Establishment of Hierarchy, and Ecclesiastical Domination Over the Human Mind, On the One Side; and the Asserters of Free Inquiry, Bible Religion, Christian Freedom and Civil Liberty on the Other. The Rev. Charles Finney, "Home Missionary," And High Priest of the Expeditions of the Alliance In The Interior of New York; Head Quarters, County of Oneida, (Utica; 1826).* The Presbytery of Oneida answered with *A Narrative of the Revival of Religion In the County of Oneida, Particularly In the Bounds of the Presbytery of Oneida, In The Year 1826* (Utica: 1826). Perkins then rejoined with *Letter to The Presbytery of Oneida County, New York, and Their Committee, The Rev. John Frost, Rev. Moses Gillet, and Rev. Noah Coe, "Appointed to Receive Communications From Ministers and Others Respecting the Late Revival, In This County,"* By "A Plain Farmer" of Trenton, (Utica, 1827). A Universalist pamphlet directed against one of Finney's allies was: Dolphus Skinner, *A Series of Letters on Important Doctrinal and Practical Subjects, addressed to Rev. Samuel C. Aiken, Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, in Utica, N. Y. to which are annexed a Bible Creed and Six Letters to Rev. D. C. Lansing, D.D., late Pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church, in said city, on the subject of A Course of Lectures Delivered by Him Against Universalism, in the winter of 1830,* (Utica, 1833).
43. *Letters of the Rev. Dr. Beecher and Rev. Mr. Nettleton, on the "New Measures" in Conducting Revivals of Religion, With A Review of a Sermon by Novanglus* (New York, 1828), p. 99.
44. Nettleton's clashes with Finney are covered in: Bennet Tyler, *Memoir of the Life and Character of Rev. Asahel Nettleton, D.D.* (Hartford, 1845), pp. 238ff., Finney, *Memoirs*, pp. 195ff., Beecher, *Autobiography*, II, 93-94; Bernard A. Weisberger, *They Gathered at the River* (Boston, 1958), pp. 116-120; and McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, pp. 33-39.
45. *A Pastoral Letter of the Ministers of the Oneida Association to the Churches Under Their Care on the Subject of Revivals of Religion,* (Utica, 1827), *passim*.
46. John W. Nevin, *The Anxious Bench* (Mercersburg, 1843), *passim*. This is a trenchant criticism of new measures. Nevin was answered by R. Weiser, *The Mourner's Bench, or An Humble Attempt to Vindicate New Measures* (William Chapman, Jr., 1844). A more recent account is in James Hastings Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology* (University of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 52-63.

for many since the scriptures did not have any specific directions for conducting revival meetings. Hence, Beecher, Nettleton, and Finney all agreed on revivals as an effective means of obtaining conversions but they disagreed on the methodology of conducting them.

Finney and Beecher finally agreed to a compromise meeting to adopt some harmonious conclusions regarding the use of "new measures." The meeting was held at New Lebanon, New York, a village which lay a few miles west of the Massachusetts line near the town of Albany, on July 18, 1827.⁴⁷ The delegates represented the "Western" men or Finney supporters from the "burnt district," and "Eastern" men supporting Beecher, Nettleton, and the New England point of view. The issue on trial was the use of "new measures," not Finney or his theology *per se*. The consensus of the meeting was that certain measures could be used in promoting revivals, but caution was advised at all times. Finney emerged from the conference with few battle wounds and new worlds to conquer. Before the conference he was known mainly in the "burnt district," but afterwards, the "new measures" of the Oneida County revivals and Finney himself became the objects of national attention.⁴⁸

Finney assumed a pastorate in New York City in 1832 and while there he delivered a series of *Lectures on Revivals* from the pulpit of the Chatham Street Chapel: "I found a particular inducement to this course, in the fact that on my return from the Mediterranean, I learned with pain, that the spirit of revival had greatly declined in the United States, and that a spirit of jangling and controversy alarmingly prevailed."⁴⁹ The lectures were given extemporaneously with the evangelist using only a brief outline as a guide, and the demand was so great that they were printed in book form and widely circulated.⁵⁰ Five years afterwards Finney received a letter from an association of ministers in Wales telling him of how the readings of the *Lectures* had resulted in a revival in that country.⁵¹ John Keep, writing from London to Gerrit Smith, said that he found many people "who seized upon the views of truth contained in Finney's lectures with a greediness, and that some of the ministers were beginning to read them—

47. The proceedings were printed in full by the Unitarians in the *Christian Examiner and Theological Review* IV, (July and August, 1827), 357-370. Beecher's account of it is found in the *Autobiography*, II, 89-108. See also Finney, *Memoirs*, pp. 201-225; and the *Western Recorder*, (August 7, 1827). A good source is Charles C. Cole, Jr., "The New Lebanon Convention," *New York History*, XXX (October, 1950), 391-394.

48. Beecher increasingly sided with Finney while Nettleton became alienated from almost the entire New School. See Robert S. Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College* (Oberlin, 1943), I, 30.

49. Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (New York, 1835), Preface.

50. Perry Miller says that "Indeed, Finney's chapter on 'False Comforts for Sinners' is so complete an uprooting of the historic American conception of Protestantism, so profound a reading of new meanings into the age of the Revival, that it is in effect a declaration of evangelical independence." Perry Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America* (New York, 1965), pp. 32-33.

51. Independent Ministers of South Wales to Finney, July 13, 1940. *Finney Papers* (Oberlin College Library). See also Congregational Ministers of North Wales to Finney, February 27, 1840, *Ibid.*

because they find that the people will have them."⁵²

The *Lectures on Revivals* contain none of that abstract theology later published at Oberlin. Finney did criticize the Westminster Confession of Faith causing a writer in the *Princeton Review*, probably Albert Dod, to ask why Finney stayed in the Presbyterian Church.⁵³ Other statements claimed that the *Lectures* contained "exploded heresies," and charged that Finney's language was "habitually low and vulgar." The reviewer also struck at the shallowness of the evangelist's work: "It is now generally understood that the numerous converts of the new measures have been, in most cases, like the morning cloud and the early dew. In some places, not a half, a fifth, or even a tenth part of them remain."⁵⁴ Another review, probably also written by an adherent of the Old School, said, "We think that Mr. Finney has been instrumental in plunging multitudes into a fatal delusion; of widely diffusing a bold and licentious fanaticism; how far guilt belongs to him, it is neither our province or wish to determine."⁵⁵

Finney was an itinerant evangelist from 1825 to 1832. Whenever he visited a community, excitement was the norm. When he left, the task of preventing backsliding was left to the local pastor. Since his own conversion had been so unusual, the revival pitch of emotion was almost a habit with him. When he went to New York City in 1832, he began to see some of the problems of everyday Christian living. Even in New York City the conditions were not entirely normal, however, since the church which he pastored experienced an almost continuous revival. He began to ask himself about the permanent value of his work and to ponder the problem as to why so many Christians lost their enthusiasm after the revivals were over. The publication of the *Sermons on Important Subjects* and *Lectures to Professing Christians* in 1836 and 1837 represent his moving toward a deliberate effort to help people maintain their spiritual balance once they were converted. However, a reviewer also scored these works and said that "Mr. Finney has in those volumes gone to the ultimate boundary of religious error. . . . Through the members of his Institute, those views will soon be claiming a general admission to the pulpits, and an extensive hearing by the church. Like the evils of

52. John Keep to Gerrit Smith, November 13, 1839, *Gerrit Smith Papers* (Syracuse University Library).

53. *The Biblical Repertory and Theological Review*, VII (1835), 526-527. The writer said: "We tender him our thanks for the substantial service he had done the church by exposing the naked deformities of the New Divinity. He can render her still another, and in rendering it perform only his plain duty, by leaving her communion, and finding one within which he can preach and publish his opinions without making war upon the standards in which he has solemnly professed his faith." In the next issue of the same journal he said again, "We conclude this article, as we did our former, by pointing out to Mr. Finney his duty to leave our church." *Ibid.*, pp. 673-674. (Finney did eventually leave the Presbyterian Church. He resigned from the third Presbytery on March 13, 1836, and then accepted the pastorate of the Sixth Free Church or Broadway Tabernacle under Congregational rather than Presbyterian rules.)

54. *Ibid.*, pp. 482, 663.

55. *Literary and Theological Review*, II (December 1835), 697-698. An excellent discussion of the *Lectures* is in: McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*. pp. 83-91.

fabled box, they are seen to break forth, and more widely to infect the heritage of the Lord."⁵⁶ Finney was used to criticism, or at least he should have been, for critical comments had followed him wherever he went. While preaching in Boston in 1832 his sermon on "Making A New Heart" was soundly rebuked in a pamphlet by Asa Rand, editor of *The Volunteer*.⁵⁷

When Finney traveled West in 1835 to take up his post as a Professor of Theology at Oberlin he was identified with most of the New School doctrines, but he had not worked out any comprehensive scheme of theology. As he began to systematize his beliefs he found that his associates were of great help to him. The founders of Oberlin, in the words of President Fairchild, "were all earnest preachers of human ability," and thus they had ideas similar to those of Finney.⁵⁸ John and Henry Cowles were fresh from the classes of Nathaniel Taylor at New Haven while John Morgan had been associated with New School doctrines at various times including a period under Lyman Beecher at Lane Seminary. President Mahan was an Andover graduate.⁵⁹ In spite of such worthy associates, the historian of New England theology says that the "greatest mind and regulating force in the development of Oberlin theology was Charles G. Finney."⁶⁰

The evangelist also devoted himself to rekindling the revival fires among Christians. He addressed a series of letters through the columns of the *Oberlin Evangelist* to the converts of his earlier revivals, particularly stressing the duties of Christians.⁶¹ Finney also began to reminisce and to warn young preachers of the mistakes that he had made so they would not fall into the same errors. Much of this advice was of a practical nature: "The more experience I have in preaching the gospel," said he, "the more ripe are my convictions, that ministers take it for granted that their hearers are much better instructed on religious subjects than most of them really are."⁶² He then explained that this causes many misconceptions to be carried away from the meeting by those individuals who only partly understood what had been said to them. He showed that he could change his mind, and admitted his own errors. "I have thought that at least in a great many

56. Foot, *Literary and Theological Review*, V (March, 1838), 71.

57. Asa Rand, *The New Divinity Tried*. The pamphlet by Rand, and another called the "Review of 'The New Divinity Tried'," were published in the *Spirit of the Pilgrims*, V (March 1832). The tone of the "Review" was to defend Finney from charges of heresy insisting that although he explained the doctrines of Christianity differently he was nevertheless orthodox.

58. Warfield, *Princeton Theological Review*, XIX (January 1921), 47.

59. Wright, *Finney*, p. 181.

60. Foster, *History of New England Theology*, p. 453.

61. "Let me inquire again"; said Finney, "what are you *doing* for the conversion of sinners around you; and what for the conversion of the world? . . . Suppose there are a thousand million of men upon the earth; and suppose that one hundred million of these were just such Christians as you are, in your present state, and at your present rate of usefulness—when would the church be converted?" *Oberlin Evangelist*, February 13, 1839. Further, he stressed the fact that the older Christians should seek out the young converts so that they can help them to become stabilized and be in a better position to resist temptation. *Ibid.*, January 29, 1840.

62. *Ibid.*, August 28, 1839.

instances, stress enough has not been laid upon the necessity of divine influence upon the hearts of Christians and of sinners. I am confident that I have sometimes erred in this respect myself."⁶³

He began the publication of his theology in 1840 in the form of skeletons of lectures given to his Oberlin theological classes. Only one volume of these appeared; but six years later he began to publish his lectures in more finished form. These later two volumes began with the subject of moral government, and it was his intention to prefix a first volume to replace or fill out the skeleton lectures. Since the plan was never carried out these skeletons remain as the source for much of Finney's theology on standard doctrines.⁶⁴ The *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, published in 1846 and 1847, not only provoked a great deal of comment because they represented the core of Finney's thought, but also that they represented more mature thought than he preached in his early years. They were critically reviewed, probably by Dr. Hodge of Princeton, in *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*.⁶⁵ The review attacked the core of Finney's thinking that moral obligation and free will are vital to Christian living. The reviewer also said that the logic was incontrovertible: "The author begins with certain postulates, or what he calls first truths of reason, and these he traces out with singular clearness and strength to their legitimate conclusions." He did not see a defective link in the chain of logic forged by Finney. "If you grant his [Finney's] principle," he said, "you have already granted his conclusions." This did not stop the reviewer from disagreeing, however, and he demonstrated the danger of Finney's point of view by showing that "A very slight modification in the form of statement, would bring the doctrine of Mr. Finney, into exact conformity to the doctrine of the modern German school, which makes God but a name for the moral law or order of the universe, or reason in the abstract."⁶⁶ Hodge was implying, and perhaps he was partly right, that the New England theology as now interpreted by Finney tended towards a form of Deism which was dressed up to make it appear respectable. Finney, of course, heatedly denied that this was so.⁶⁷

The doctrine of the moral government of God was a basic tenet in Finney's theology, just as it was in that of Lyman Beecher and

63. *Ibid.*, February 12, 1845.

64. Foster, *History of New England Theology*, pp. 464-465. Wright, *Finney*, chapter VII illustrates the importance of the *Skeletons* in understanding the early theology of Finney.

65. *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*, XIX (1847), 237. The reviewer said: "This is in more senses than one a remarkable book. It is to a degree very unusual in original work; it is the product of the author's own mind. The principles which he holds, have indeed been held by others; and the conclusions at which he arrives had been reached before; but still it is abundantly evident that all the principles here advanced are adopted by the writer, not on authority, but on conviction, and that the conclusions presented have all been wrought out by himself and for himself. The work is therefore in a high degree logical. It is as hard to read as Euclid. Nothing can be omitted; nothing passed over slightly."

66. *Ibid.*, p. 239.

67. C. G. Finney, *The Reviewer Reviewed: or Finney's Theology and the Princeton Review* (Oberlin, 1847), p. 59.

Nathaniel W. Taylor. The central thesis presented was that the world is divided into two parts or divisions by God: the physical, dealing with material things, and the moral, which had to do with the mind. The moral government depends on motives, and consists of those considerations which are designed and intended to influence the "minds of intelligent creatures to pursue that course of conduct which will, in the highest manner, promote the glory of God, their own interest, and the happiness of the universe."⁶⁸ If there is to be a moral government, there must be a moral governor, moral agents who are the subjects of the government, a moral law, and moral obligation on the part of the agents of the government. God is the moral governor and men are the moral agents. Men cannot be agents of this government, however, unless they have intelligence, and freedom to use this intelligence. To the extent that every moral agent possesses such intelligence and freedom to choose, he is under moral obligation, or in other words, his choices are to be made on the basis of the fact that the best moral government is obtained when the well being of the moral governor is regarded as the highest good. This choice is a voluntary one but is made by the moral agent on the basis of his intelligence. "An additional argument adduced by Finney for the divine benevolence," says Wright, "is drawn from the fact that God has bestowed upon man a moral nature, and has thus made him capable of approving the good and condemning the evil."⁶⁹

In the *Preface* to his *Lectures on Systematic Theology* Finney says, "What I have said on the 'Foundation of Moral Obligation' is the key to the whole subject. Whoever masters and understands that can readily understand all the rest."⁷⁰ Finney is demonstrating a philosophy of causes at this point, and the first two hundred pages of his *Systematic Theology* deals with the moral government and the foundation of moral obligation. Warfield writing in a critical vein said, "It is quite clear that Finney gives us less a theology than a system of morals. God might be eliminated from it entirely without essentially changing its character. All virtue, all holiness, is made to consist in an ethical determination of will."⁷¹ Hodge in an attempt to divide the New School forces reviewed Finney's *Systematic Theology* from the standpoint that it was a *reductio ad absurdum* of the whole New School system, and that the only way to avoid such heretical conclusions was by abandoning the fundamental principles of the New School party.⁷²

68. Charles G. Finney, *Sermons on Important Subjects* (New York, 1836), p. 80.

69. Wright, *Finney*, pp. 197-198.

70. Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, II, *Preface*.

71. Benjamin B. Warfield, *Perfectionism*, (Philadelphia, 1958), p. 193. A defense of Finney can be found in George F. Wright, "Dr. Hodge's Misrepresentation of President Finney's System of Theology," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, XVI (April, 1876), 381-392.

72. Wright, *Finney*, pp. 208-209. One of Finney's students and admirers said that he "failed to ground law in the holiness of God and made it too much a matter of Expedience. It was the old error of Grotius. Government was a means to the good of being, rather than an expression of God's nature." See Augustus H. Strong, *Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism* (Philadelphia, 1899), p. 383.

It is no wonder that the Old School objected to this theology, for if Finney's presuppositions were accepted, then the inexcusability of sin must be accepted also. Sin was to be counted as a crime, not as a misfortune. Finney did not rebuke men for the sins of Adam, but rather challenged them to do something about their own sins. He left no room for excuses and interpreted a *can not* as being a *will not*. This is one of the reasons why Finney disagreed with Gale, since he insisted that God would not leave man in a helpless state regarding their sins, and yet leave them free to sin as much as they pleased.⁷³ He taught that ministers should aim at and expect the regeneration of sinners upon the spot, before they left the church. Regarding this position Wright says: "In these views we have the foundation for Finney's whole method of procedure in the promotion of revivals. He threw upon the soul of the sinner the responsibility of immediately accepting or rejecting the truth as then apprehended."⁷⁴ The first two sermons in Finney's *Sermons on Important Subjects are* "Sinners Bound To Change Their Own Hearts," and "How to Change Your Heart." This caused A. T. Swing to say that "historically . . . President Finney stands as one of the most earnest preachers of human ability," and that he even surpassed N. W. Taylor in this respect.⁷⁵

Finney found the cause of sin to be a wrong original choice. The only bondage of man, he said, is the voluntary bondage to his own appetite and love of the world. Under these circumstances the revivalist could demand immediate repentance and submission to God. "To say that God requires me, on pain of eternal death to do that which he knows I cannot do," said Finney, "is charging God with infinite tyranny. It is blasphemous."⁷⁶ If an inquirer said to Finney that the hardness of his heart was preventing his conversion Finney rejoined that hardness of the heart was a false name for stubbornness of the will. Thus the meaning of conversion was to turn from one's personal interests to a life of consecration to God's will and human well-being. "If you cannot make up your mind to discard sin and obey God," he said, "you may as well make up your mind to go to hell! There is no alternative."⁷⁷ The immediacy of his message was constantly stressed.⁷⁸

The fact that this theology supports the evangelist is quite apparent. Finney asserted that man could do something about his own salvation, and it was up to the evangelist to persuade people to act on their convictions using those means at his command. He did not deny

73. Finney, *Memoirs*, p. 46.

74. Wright, *Finney*, pp. 232-233. Finney's statement on ministers seeking immediate decisions is in his *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, II, 520.

75. Swing, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, LVII (1900), 466-467.

76. Charles G. Finney, *Sermons on Gospel Themes* (Oberlin, 1876), pp. 335-336.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

78. Charles G. Finney, *Lectures to Professing Christians Delivered in the City of New York in the Years 1836 and 1837* (New York, 1837), pp. 294-295. Stressing urgency, Finney said: "Some wait to become dead to the world. Some to get a broken heart. Some to get their doubts cleared up, before they come to Christ. THIS IS A GRAND MISTAKE. It is expecting to do that first before faith, which is only the result of faith."

predestination nor original sin, but rather stated over and over again that all would be saved who truly wanted to be. Or, as he stated the situation in blunt and succinct terms: "Don't wait for feeling, DO IT."⁷⁹

With this emphasis on the ability of man to act in his own behalf the question inevitably arose about the work of the Holy Spirit. The Calvinists said that man could do nothing until the Holy Spirit converted him, and they accused Finney and others of leaving God out of the picture.⁸⁰ Finney believed that the function of the Holy Spirit was to persuade men to make the right choices. Nevertheless, the evangelist was not willing to let the individual go free of his responsibility. "But the sinner actually changes," he said, "and is therefore, himself, in the most proper sense, the author of the change."⁸¹ The sinner could resist the persuasions of the Holy Spirit, and if this were the case, Finney asserted that the sinner's mind should then be brought under a degree of excitement to influence his will to make the right decision. The value of a religious revival in performing this function was not lost by Finney the evangelist. One of his critics complained, however, that this was a case of the sinner who "gets religion" rather than that of religion "getting the sinner." Perhaps this was inevitable due to the stress on personal religious experience in "conversion" which tends to make man's initiative primary.⁸²

Finney believed in the power of the Holy Spirit in his own life and mentioned how the "sword of the Lord slew them on the right hand and on the left" at Evans Mills, and how at Stephentown the people "chafed a little under the preaching, but with such power was it sent home by the Holy Spirit, that I soon heard no more complaint."⁸³ Nevertheless, Finney still insisted "that the actual turning, or change, is the sinner's own act."⁸⁴ Perhaps it is true, as some have said, that he was trying to formulate a "reasonable theology."⁸⁵

Finney spent much time on the question of ability because it was so vital to his system. Free moral agency was his key to the condition of man. He said that if men cannot obey God in their natural powers, then likewise they cannot sin in their natural powers. If this were true, then men were not blameworthy for what they did. But, in his scheme of things, the blameworthiness of the sinner was the hinge

79. Quoted in Perry Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America*, p. 33.

80. Warfield, *Princeton Theological Review*, XIX (July, 1921), 482 said: "When Finney strenuously argues that God can accept as righteous no one who is not intrinsically righteous, it cannot be denied that he teaches a work-salvation, and has put man's own righteousness in the place occupied in the Reformation doctrine of justification by the righteousness of Christ."

81. Finney, *Sermons on Important Subjects*, pp. 21-22.

82. Sidney E. Mead, "Denominationalism: The Shape of Protestantism in America," *Church History* (December, 1954), p. 308. Mead is referring to criticism voiced by John W. Nevin in *The Anxious Bench*.

83. Finney, *Memoirs*, pp. 183-184.

84. Finney, *Sermons on Important Subjects*, p. 20.

85. James Brand and John Ellis, *Memorial Addresses on The Occasion of the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of President Charles G. Finney* (Oberlin 1893). p. 21.

on which all else rested. From the practical standpoint, the character of God could be vindicated if man was a sinner by choice. This would make God a just and moral governor of the moral government system, and not a harsh, unyielding tyrant who chose some to be saved and some to be lost. Consequently, Finney's theological system could not accept any notions which would take from the sinner any of the blame for his lost condition.⁸⁶

Once Finney had committed himself on the ability question, his views on other doctrines had to fall in line. After he had been converted but a short time, he had an opportunity to debate with a Universalist minister on the subject of the atonement of Christ. The Universalist argued that the atonement was the literal payment of the debt of sinners, and that therefore all men would be saved because Christ had paid their debt. This substitutionary theory, *i.e.*, that Christ literally paid the debt of the elect, was held by Gale. Obviously one had only to concede that the payment was for all men rather than merely for the elect to find in this substitutionary theory a support for the Universalist doctrine of final restoration that rested upon the contention that the gospel does not teach eternal punishment, but that God, in his great mercy, will eventually restore all mankind to their creator. Seeing that the Universalist was swaying the people, Finney countered with his so-called governmental theory of the atonement.⁸⁷ The result, according to a well-known scholar, was that "The discredited Universalist left town, and George Gale was left to mull over the wreck that Finney had made of his creed."⁸⁸

The evangelistic emphasis shows through Finney's theology once again. The provisions were available for atonement, but men had to take an active part in choosing whether to accept them or not. G. F. Wright claims that the phrase "public justice" which Finney employed in his definition of the atonement in his *Memoirs* was a phrase from Edwards that Finney doubtless adopted from later reading and reflections, and unconsciously interjected in the account of his early experiences. "It is pretty certain that he had not then read Edwards," said Wright, "and it is extremely improbable that he independently coined the phrase."⁸⁹

86. Finney, *Sermons on Gospel Themes*, p. 193. "All men . . .," said Finney "naturally have freedom of will. . . . This freedom is in the will itself, and consists in its power of free choice. To do or not to do, and this is a moral sovereign over its own activities. In this fact lies the foundation for moral agency."

87. Finney, *Memoirs*, pp. 50-51. There is a smug tone to the *Memoirs* at this point, since Finney abandoned the Westminster Confession in his argument with the Universalist. One can legitimately wonder, however, whether he could have formulated such a sophisticated argument at this point in his ministerial career even with the legal background which would have helped in some ways.

88. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, p. 25.

89. Wright, *Finney*, p. 22. Finney came in contact with Jonathan Edwards' *Works* on revivals at the home of S. C. Aiken in Utica, New York. Wright says, "Of these he 'often spoke with rapture,' according to Dr. Aiken. . . ." Wright suggests that Finney toned down some of his harsh expressions after this experience. A letter by Aiken telling of Finney's reading of the works of Edwards while at his home is in the Beecher, *Autobiography*, II, 91.

The theory of the atonement, according to Finney, was not so much to satisfy divine honor, as Anselm said, and not so much to satisfy retributive justice, as the Reformers held, but to demonstrate both the integrity and love of God, and to satisfy this public justice.⁹⁰ He said that God's love would be of no avail without a system of penalties which would be sufficient to persuade the sinner to repent. Men would surely choose to make light of the moral law and indulge in gross vices, he said, if not for the punishment of eternal misery that would result. "The Atonement," he said, "is a governmental expedient to sustain law without execution of the penalty on the sinner."⁹¹ Consequently, the ultimate foundation of the universe could be nothing less than moral law. Moral government would have been a farce if God had forgiven men without an atonement. Christ by his death, made it possible for God to set aside the sentence of the sinner. The mercy of God permitted man to avail himself of this provision, but it was not automatic as the Universalists claimed. Once again the voluntary act of man was the key to the consummation of the transaction. Not only did Finney declare himself for a general atonement in opposition to the limited atonement advocated by the Calvinists, but he made the revival a divine instrument by which people could throw themselves upon the mercy of God and accept the salvation rendered possible. When the builders were planning the doors of the Broadway Tabernacle Finney wanted them made so they would swing open and fasten themselves as the symbol that the door of salvation was always open for all.⁹²

Another doctrine on which Finney and the Old School differed was the depravity of man. The Old School taught that man was totally depraved and that this was a condition which was inherent within all men as a result of the sin of Adam. Finney said that depravity was a state of selfishness, entirely voluntary, that all men were in if they were unconverted. Self gratification, rather than the glory of God, was the ultimate good of these unconverted and depraved men.⁹³ He was very insistent that he be allowed to define depravity in his own way, and stated that Adam's sin merely aggravated our temptations but did not give us a sinful nature. There could be no sin apart from transgression, and no person could be sinful until he exercised his powers of moral agency. Thus, did Finney reject the Calvinist view, and he stated that "These discourses exhibit a very different view of total depravity, from that which regards depravity, as physical, or constitutional, or as belonging to the substance of the body

90. Taylor, "Doctrine of Sin in the Theology of Finney," p. 185.

91. Finney, *Sermons on Gospel Themes*, pp. 5, 122, 206.

92. Walzer, "Charles Grandison Finney and the Presbyterian Revivals," p. 196.

93. Finney, *Sermons on Important Subjects*, p. 139. Two visitors from England traveling in New York State in 1830 observed that many were teaching total depravity as a "voluntary rebellion against God." Andrew Reed and James Matheson, *A Narrative of the Visit to the American Churches, By the Deputation From the Congregational Union of England and Wales* (New York, 1835), II, 26.

or mind. They exhibit all depravity as *voluntary*, as consisting in voluntary transgression."⁹⁴

Finney fell into a serious inconsistency by clinging to some of the terminology of Calvinist theology while at the same time discarding the meaning of the terms. He preached a general atonement but still held to the doctrine of election. Finney insisted that foreknowledge and election are not inconsistent with free agency, but are founded upon it. "The elect were chosen to eternal life," said Finney, "because God foresaw that in the perfect exercise of their freedom they could be induced to repent and embrace the gospel." Furthermore, "God will turn the damnation of the reprobate to good account. In establishing his government, he foresaw that great evils would be incidental to it—that multitudes would sin, and persevere in rebellion, until they were lost, notwithstanding all that could consistently be done to save them. When he cannot save them, he will, by their punishment, erect a monument to his justice, and lay its foundation deep in hell, and build it up to heaven, that being seen afar off in the smoke of their torment that ascendeth up forever and ever; it may ever stand as an affecting momento of the hatefulness and desert of sin."⁹⁵ The elect are not elect because they are better by nature than other people, or because Christ paid their ransom solely. The elect are those who will be converted with God's foreknowledge to bring about the wisest administration of his moral government.⁹⁶ Brushing aside certain apparent inconsistencies, Finney preached to sinners that their salvation was suspended on their choice.⁹⁷ This was again a case of a victory of the revivalist over the theologian.

There were many rough edges to Finney's theology in his early years as an itinerant. It would be accurate to say that he really had no theology at first but that the outline of an evolving theology was faintly visible. His extensive use of "new measures" to work up a revival did stir some opposition, but Finney found a certain satisfaction in the fact that they did work. He was successful in the business of conducting revivals. "Finney did not deliberately attempt to make Presbyterianism palatable to the rising common folk," said Whitney Cross, "but his conclusions did just that."⁹⁸

His theological system never was accepted by the Old School as evidenced by the opposition of Hodge and Warfield. He was attempting, however, to fashion a theology that would suit the masses and allow for the open invitation which was so necessary to his system of conducting revivals. It should be noted that many New School Presbyterians remained apprehensive regarding his use of "new measures," and were not at all sure of the permanent good to be derived from

94. Finney, *Sermons on Important Subjects*, p. 139.

95. *Ibid.*, pp. 229-253.

96. *Ibid.*, Sermon X "Doctrine of Election," *passim*.

97. *Ibid.*, Sermon I "Sinners Bound to Change Their Own Hearts," *passim*.

98. Cross, *Burned-over District*, p. 159.

them. In his later years he experienced some second thoughts as to the permanency of his methods, but as a young itinerant he advanced, boldly confident that he could win the day. He wanted a system that worked, one that produced results, and consequently employed the pragmatic approach that the New England theology had spawned. "Very early on, and more and more frequently as time went on," commented Perry Miller, "Finney perfected, in his *Memoirs*, the all-powerful answer to such objections, even as metaphysical ones as those of Nettleton: 'the results justify my methods.'"⁹⁹ Finney's heirs were men like D. L. Moody and Billy Sunday and they did not even attempt to put their theology into print as did Finney. They did follow the pragmatic line, however, and pragmatism reached a peak in Moody who "reputedly was an Arminian up to the cross but Calvinist beyond—and who declared forthrightly that 'It makes no difference how you get a man to God, provided you get him there.'"¹⁰⁰

Finney's theology of revivalism must be placed within the context of the times. The "idea of progress" as well as the importance of the individual were characteristic of the age of Jackson, and both worked to undermine the old doctrines of election and predestination. Optimism was the order of the day with an emphasis on the ultimate perfection of society through progressive improvement in mankind. The message of Finney appealed greatly to a generation of Americans who believed in what was subsequently called rugged individualism. Perry Miller delineated the problem clearly in a discussion of Calvin Colton's shock at the turn of events he discovered upon returning from England in 1836:

As Cooper fulminated against the degradation of democracy in *Home as Found*, Colton arraigned the evangelical churches in *Thoughts on the Religious State of the Country* for having degenerated into a mob. There was no question for Cooper as to who was primarily to blame for the debacle—Andrew Jackson. There was equally no difficulty for Calvin Colton to name his villain—Charles Finney.¹⁰¹

Finney's theology at Oberlin eventually took the fork of the road that led towards perfectionism. The urge to achieve perfection in this life was not confined to Oberlin, but Oberlin perfectionism obtained a wide hearing because it was associated with the name of Finney. Human frailty being what it is this doctrine contained moral dynamite and exposed Finney to the charge of antinomianism for opening the lid of an alleged box of evils. It also associated his name and that of Oberlin with some of the most bizarre personalities and unusual social movements of the Jacksonian era.¹⁰²

99. Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America*, p. 27.

100. Sidney E. Mead, "Denominationalism: The Shape of Protestantism in America," *Church History* (December, 1954), pp. 308-309.

101. Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America*, pp. 28-29. See also Cross, *Burned-over District*, p. 199; Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment*, pp. 23, 45; and McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, p. 131.

102. James E. Johnson, "Charles G. Finney and Oberlin Perfectionism," *Journal of Presbyterian History*, (March, 1968), pp. 42-57, and *Ibid.*, (June, 1968), pp. 128-138.

The inconsistencies in Finney's theology can be explained by the dilemma he faced. He did not see how the Old School Theology could be employed to conduct successful revivals. Unwilling to completely abandon Calvinism he modified the system creating a hybrid doctrine. It is quite likely that this theology was fashioned to fit the circumstances and was experimental in its origins. He probably felt more comfortable in the pulpit than in the study for he possessed a power over a crowd which was somewhat diminished when he put his ideas in print. The schema described in the *Lectures on Systematic Theology* had been hammered out on the anvil of practical experience in the "burned-over" district revivals.
