

HOLY SPIRIT REVIVALS

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Charles Finney



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INTRODUCTION

Charles Grandison Finney was a man with a message that burned through the religious deadwood and secular darkness of his time. He had the ability to shock both saint and sinner alike. Because he was radical in both his methods and his message, Finney was criticized for almost everything except being boring. Even so, Finney's sermons and writings continue to reappear to each new generation of young Christians as a fresh challenge to holiness and spiritual awakening.

Finney was nearly thirty years of age before he turned from his skepticism regarding Christianity and whole-heartedly embraced the Bible as the true Word of God. He gave up his law profession in order to spread the gospel, and he soon became the most noteworthy revivalist of the nineteenth century. Finney's travels as an evangelist were largely concentrated in upstate New York, which he refers to here as "the West," but his ministry extended into other northeastern states and even as far as England. It is estimated that over 250,000 souls were converted as a result of his preaching.

The following pages contain Finney's personal record of the many revivals that he witnessed during his lifetime. His complete memoirs were published by the trustees of Oberlin College in 1876. The theological ideas that Finney originally presented here have been abridged, and an elaboration of these ideas can be found in the book that was originally published with the title *Sermons on Important Subjects*.¹

The substance of Finney's dealings with sinners was "to make them understand that God required of them then to yield themselves entirely to His will, to ground their weapons of rebellion, to submit to Him as their rightful Sovereign, and to accept Jesus as their only Redeemer." Accordingly, it is right to say that Finney's focus was always upon the hearts of his fellowmen, and his ever present wish was that all might be saved and "*come unto the knowledge of the truth*" (1 Timothy 2:4).

1. Also titled *God in You* as published by Whitaker House (now out of print).

1

BIRTH AND EARLY EDUCATION

It has pleased God to connect my name and labors with an extensive movement of the church of Christ, especially in relation to revivals of religion. To a considerable degree, this movement involved some views of Christian doctrine that had not been common, along with changes in the means of carrying forward the work of evangelism. Thus, it was very natural that some misunderstanding prevailed so that, to some extent, even good men called into question the wisdom of these measures and the soundness of these theological statements. It was also natural that ungodly men were irritated and, for a time, strenuously opposed to these great movements.

I was connected with these movements, but only as one of the many ministers and servants of Christ who shared prominently in promoting them. Some parts of the church have considered me as an innovator in both doctrine and measures, and many have looked upon me as rather prominent, especially in attacking some of the old forms of theological thought and expression and in stating the doctrines of the gospel in new language.

For a number of years, I have been asked, by the friends of the revivals with which my name and labors have been connected, to write a history of them. Because so much misunderstanding has prevailed regarding them, it is thought that the truth of history demands a statement from me of the doctrines that were preached, of the measures used, and of the results of preaching those doctrines and using those measures.

My mind seems to recoil instinctively from saying much about myself, but I am obliged to do so in order to speak honestly of the revivals and my relation to them. For this reason I have declined, up to this time, to undertake such a work. However, the trustees of Oberlin College, together with other friends in this country and in England, have laid the matter before

me and urged me to undertake it for the cause of Christ. They have insisted that a better understanding needs to exist in the church regarding the revivals that occurred in upstate New York and elsewhere, beginning in 1821, because those revivals have been most misrepresented and opposed.

I approach the subject with reluctance for many reasons. I have kept no diary and consequently must depend on my memory. However, my memory is naturally very tenacious, and the events that I have witnessed in revivals of religion have made a very deep impression on my mind. I remember, with great distinctness, many more events than I will have time to communicate. Anyone who has witnessed powerful revivals of religion is aware that many cases of conviction and conversion are daily occurring. Such cases are frequently so numerous that, if all the highly interesting facts of even one revival were narrated, they would fill a large volume.

I propose only to relate a few of the instances of conversion that occurred in different places, along with an account of the doctrines that were preached and the measures that were used. In this way, the church will be enabled, at least in part, to estimate the power and purity of those great works of God. To give any intelligible account of the part that I was called to play in those scenes, it is necessary that I give a little history of the manner in which I came to adopt the doctrinal views that I have long held and preached and that have been regarded by many people as objectionable.

I must commence by giving a brief account of my birth, my early circumstances and education, my conversion to Christ, my study of theology, and my entering into the work of the ministry. I am not about to write an autobiography, so I will relate the events of my private life only as far as is necessary to give an intelligible account of the manner in which I became related to those great movements of the church.

I was born in Warren, Connecticut, on August 29, 1792. When I was about two years old, my family moved to Oneida County, New York, which was mostly wilderness at that time. No religious privileges were enjoyed by the people, and very few religious books could be found. The new settlers, being mostly from New England, almost immediately established public schools; but they had among them very little intelligent preaching of the gospel. I attended a public school until I was about

fifteen or sixteen years old, and I advanced so far as to be thought capable of teaching in the public school myself.

Neither of my parents were Christians, and among our neighbors there were very few religious people. I seldom heard a sermon, unless it was an occasional one from some traveling minister. I recollect very well that the preachers I heard were so ignorant that the people would return from the meetings and spend a considerable time in irrepressible laughter at the mistakes and absurdities of the preaching.

A church had just been built in my neighborhood, and a minister chosen, when my father was induced to move into the wilderness skirting the southern shore of Lake Ontario, a little south of Sackett's Harbor. Here I lived for several years, again enjoying no better religious privileges than I had in Oneida County.

When I was about twenty years old, I returned to Connecticut, and from there I went to New Jersey in order to teach. I taught and studied as best I could, and twice I returned to New England to attend an academy, for a season. While attending the academy, I considered going to Yale College. My teacher was a graduate of Yale, but he advised me not to go. He said it would be a waste of time, because I could easily study Yale's curriculum myself in two years, whereas it would cost me four years to graduate from there. Because of what he said, I did not pursue my education any further at that time. I later acquired some knowledge of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, but I was never a classical scholar and never possessed so much knowledge of the ancient languages as to think of myself as capable of criticizing our English translation of the Bible.

The teacher to whom I have referred asked me to join him in conducting an academy in one of the Southern states. I was inclined to accept his proposal, with the intention of pursuing and completing my studies under his instruction. But when I informed my parents, whom I had not seen for four years, of my contemplated move south, they both came immediately after me and persuaded me to go home with them to Jefferson County, New York. After this, I decided to enter the law office of Squire Wright as a student. His office was located in the town of Adams, in Jefferson County. This was in 1818.

Up to this time I had never enjoyed what might be called religious privileges. I had never lived in a praying community, except during the periods when I was attending the academy in New England; and the religion in that place was not at all calculated to arrest my attention. The preaching there was by an aged clergyman who read his sermons in a manner that left no impression on my mind. He had a monotonous, humdrum way of reading what he had probably written many years before. Although the people paid close and reverent attention to his reading, I must confess that to me it was not much like preaching.

To give a better idea of his preaching, let me say that his sermons were written on a piece of paper just small enough to put into a small Bible. I sat in the balcony and observed that he placed his manuscript in the middle of his Bible and used his fingers as bookmarks for the passages of Scripture to be quoted in his sermon. This made it necessary to hold his Bible in both hands and rendered all hand gestures impossible. As he proceeded, he would read the passages of Scripture where his fingers were inserted, and thus he would liberate one finger after another, until the fingers of both hands were read out of their places. When his fingers were all read out, he was near the close of the sermon. Anyone can judge whether such preaching was calculated to instruct or interest a young man who neither knew nor cared anything about religion.

When I was teaching school in New Jersey, the preaching in the neighborhood was chiefly in German. I do not think I heard half a dozen sermons in English during my whole stay in New Jersey, which was about three years.

Thus, when I went to Adams to study law, I was almost as ignorant of religion as a heathen. I had been brought up mostly in the dark. I had very little regard for the Sabbath and had no definite knowledge of religious truth.

At Adams, for the first time, I regularly heard the preaching of an educated minister. Rev. George W. Gale, from Princeton, New Jersey, became pastor of the local Presbyterian church soon after I arrived there. His preaching was of the old-school and was therefore thoroughly Calvinistic, sometimes resembling what has been called hyper-Calvinism. I was not able to gain very much instruction from his preaching because,

as I sometimes told him, he seemed to assume many things that to my mind needed to be proved. He seemed to take it for granted that his hearers were theologians and that he might therefore assume all the great and fundamental doctrines of the gospel. But I was more perplexed than edified by his preaching.

Until this time I had never lived where I could attend a regular prayer meeting. So I began to attend one that was held near our office every week, as often as I could be excused from business at that hour.

In studying elementary law, I found the old authors frequently quoting the Scriptures and referring especially to the Pentateuch as authority for many of the great principles of common law. This excited my curiosity so much that I went and purchased a Bible, the first I had ever owned. Whenever I found a reference to the Bible included by the old law authors, I turned to the passage of Scripture. This soon led to my taking a new interest in the Bible, and I read and meditated on it much more than I had ever done before in my life. However, much of it I did not understand.

Mr. Gale frequently dropped by our office and seemed anxious to know what impression his sermons had made on my mind. I used to converse with him freely, and I now think that I sometimes criticized his sermons unmercifully. I raised whatever objections I had against his positions.

In conversing with him, I confirmed my suspicion that he himself was confused and that he did not accurately define to himself what he meant by many of the important terms that he used. Indeed, I found it impossible to attach any meaning to many of the terms he used with great formality and frequency. What did he mean by repentance? Was it a mere feeling of sorrow for sin? Was it altogether a passive state of mind, or did it involve a voluntary element? If it was a change of mind, in what respect was it a change of mind? What did he mean by the term *regeneration*? What did such language mean when applied to a spiritual change? What did he mean by faith? Was it merely an intellectual state? Was it merely a conviction, or persuasion, that the things stated in the gospel were true? What did he mean by sanctification? Did it involve any physical change in the person, or any physical

influence on the part of God? I could not tell, nor did he himself seem to know, in what sense he used these and similar terms.

We had many interesting conversations, but they seemed to raise more questions in my mind rather than to satisfy me in respect to the truth. But as I read my Bible, attended the prayer meetings, heard Mr. Gale preach, and conversed with him and the elders of the church and others from time to time, I became very restless. A little consideration convinced me that I was by no means in a state of mind to go to heaven if I were to die. It seemed to me that religion contained something infinitely important, and so I decided that if the soul was immortal, I needed a great change in my inward state to be prepared for happiness in heaven. But still I was not sure of the truth of the gospel and the Christian religion, and the question was of too much importance to allow me to rest in any uncertainty on the subject.

I was particularly struck with the fact that the prayers that I had listened to from week to week were not answered. Indeed, from continued prayers and from other remarks, I understood that those who offered them did not regard them as answered. I heard the people pray continually for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and just as often I heard them confess that they did not receive what they had asked for. When I read my Bible, I learned what Christ had said in regard to prayer and answers to prayer:

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

(Matthew 7:7-8)

I also read that God is more willing to give His Holy Spirit to those who ask Him than earthly parents are to give good gifts to their children. (See verse 11.)

This inconsistency—the fact that they prayed so much and were not answered—was a sad stumbling block to me. I did not know what to make of it. Was I to believe that these people were not truly Christians and therefore did not prevail with God? Did I misunderstand the promises and teachings of the Bible on this subject? Or was I to conclude that the Bible

was not true? Here was something inexplicable to me, and at one point it seemed that it would almost drive me into skepticism. It seemed to me that the teachings of the Bible did not at all agree with the facts that were before my eyes.

On one occasion, when I was in one of the prayer meetings, some of the attendees asked if I wanted them to pray for me. I told them no, because I did not see that God answered their prayers. I said, "I suppose I need to be prayed for, for I am conscious that I am a sinner. But I do not see that it will do any good for you to pray for me, for you are continually asking, but you do not receive. You have been praying for a revival of religion ever since I have been in Adams, and yet you have not seen it happen. You have been praying for the Holy Spirit to descend upon you, and yet you complain of your spiritual leanness. You have prayed enough since I have attended these meetings to have prayed the Devil out of Adams, if there is any virtue in your prayers. But here you are, still praying and still complaining." I was quite earnest and probably very irritable as a result of being brought face to face with religious truth, which was a new state of things to me.

On further reading of my Bible, it struck me that their prayers were not answered because they did not comply with the conditions upon which God had promised to answer prayer. They did not pray in faith, in the sense of expecting God to give them the thing for which they asked. For some time this thought only led me to more questions, rather than to anything definite. However, this relieved me. After struggling in that way for two or three years, I firmly concluded that whatever confusion there might be either in my own mind, in my pastor's, or in the mind of the church, the Bible was, nevertheless, the true Word of God.

This being settled, I was brought face to face with the question of accepting Christ and His gospel or pursuing a worldly life. The Holy Spirit was so much at work in me, though I did not know it then, that I could not leave this question unsettled for much longer.