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## Charles Grandison Finney

(Memorial Address, delivered at the dedication of the Finney Memorial Chapel, Oberlin, June 21, 1908.)

A recent author has announced, as the result of his investigations in the psychology of religion, that conversion is distinctly a phenomenon of adolescence; that the event occurs most often at the age of sixteen and immediately before and after that year, and that if conversion has not occurred before twenty, the chances are small that it will ever be experienced.\*

If this is a faithful picture and a just conclusion, the Church is in danger. If it be conceded that religion has no power to attract men of mature judgment, wide reading and experience, and cultivated habits of thought, the church will lose not only *them*; but many of the young converts, who will, sooner or later, come to believe that religion is a species of children's disease and that manhood requires them to *reject* what, they find, other men are not expected to *accept*.

It is my privilege, tonight, to speak of a conspicuous exception to the rule, if there be any such rule.

The religion of Charles G. Finney had nothing to do with adolescence. He was not the product of the Sunday School. He never entered one until long after he was converted. He was not swept into the church on the tide of a great emotional revival.

At the age of twenty-nine, Charles G. Finney was a splendid pagan—a young man rejoicing in his strength, proudly conscious of his physical and intellectual superiority to all around him. He had a magnificent physique. Standing six feet two in his stocking feet, he looked much taller than that, for he was very erect, very alert, full of life and energy and walked with a quick, elastic step that made people instinctively turn and look at him. Without an ounce of superfluous flesh he weighed one hundred and eight-five pounds. He could not remember that he had ever been sick a day in his life. He had been trained in nature's gymnasium—the forest, the clearing, the field.

The young people had their athletic sports in those days, as well

\* *Psychology of Religion*, by Prof. E. D. Starbuck, Ph. D., pp. 28, 30, 38.

as now. Every Fourth of July, Training Day and Thanksgiving Day was a "field day," in which old and young engaged in the various sports and champions of different towns and "cross-roads" strove for the mastery. Mr. Finney did his full share of the work and entered with zest into all such games and contests. He brought to every task and every game, besides his athletic frame,—keen intelligence, nervous energy and indomitable will. When he was twenty, he excelled every man and boy he met, in every species of toil or sport. No man could throw him; no man could knock his hat off; no man could run faster, jump farther, leap higher, or throw a ball with greater force and precision. When his family moved to the shore of Henderson's Bay, near Sackett's Harbor, he added to his accomplishments rowing, swimming and sailing. He was a lover of nature and the "call of the wild" was strong in him. He hardly knew which he loved most—the depth of the forest, with its mysterious life and whisperings; or the solitude of the open lake with the great depths of sky above and water below and nothing between him and eternity, but the thin sides of a boat.

He had a very large head, symmetrically developed and crowned with abundant light-brown hair, silky in texture and curling at the ends. His nose was strongly aquiline. His eyes were large and blue, at times mild as an April sky, and at others, cold and penetrating as polished steel. At times they beamed with love and sympathy, at other times they became scrutinizing and inscrutable. One day, nothing escaped their attention; the next, they seemed to take note of nothing terrestrial. When in full tide of his eloquence, they swept his audience like search lights, fascinating, compelling attention, yet producing strange, uneasy feelings. His complexion was fair, and readily flushed with every passing emotion.

At Henderson, he taught school from his sixteenth to his twentieth year, two months in summer and three months in winter. It was like the ideal university—in one respect—anybody could study anything. There were no grades and no prescribed text books. Each scholar brought such books as he possessed and the teacher did the rest. One\* who attended this school said of him:

"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

\* Horatio N. Davis, father of Senator Cushman K. Davis of Minnesota.

idol of his pupils. He joined in their sports before and after school, and although at first there were older and larger boys than he in the school, he could beat them at everything. He would lie down on the ground and let as many as could pile on top of him and try and hold him down. He would say, 'Are you ready?' Then he would make a quick turn, rise up and shake them all off, just as a lion might shake off a lot of puppies. In school, all was different. He was very dignified and kept perfect order. Should any boy create any disturbance, one flash of Mr. Finney's eye would quell the sinner at once. Oh, I tell you, they all loved and worshiped him, and all felt that some day he would be a great man, perhaps President of the United States."

A young man, from sixteen to twenty could hardly be employed better than in teaching a country school. It completes his own elementary education; gives him power to express clearly what he knows; awakes in him a consciousness of power over others and a knowledge of human nature; the effort to command the respect of others contributes to his own dignity and self-respect. It makes him careful in his speech and manners, so as not to offend or corrupt any of the little ones committed to his charge. Thus Mr. Finney grew to manhood, strong, self-respecting, helpful to others, clean of speech and correct in habits.

Mr. Finney was fitted for this work of teaching, by two years' schooling in the Hamilton Oneida Institute, at Clinton, New York.\* only a few miles from his father's farm in Oneida County. The principal of this school, at that time, was Seth Norton, a graduate of Yale College and a tutor there for two years before coming to Clinton. He was a fine classical scholar, an inspiring teacher and a lover of music. He discovered great possibilities in this tall, blue-eyed child of the woods, and seems to have given him unusual attention. He inspired him with an ambition for a classical education and evoked an intense love of music. He taught him to sing, to read music at sight, and to play on the violin and bass viol, or what we would call the violoncello. That instrument appealed powerfully to Mr. Finney's passionate nature. When he began to earn money by teaching, the first use he made of it was to buy a 'cello. Then he gave up much of his leisure to singing, to the mastery and to a thorough understanding of harmony and composition. It was the

\* Afterwards incorporated as Hamilton College.

days of the "buckwheat notes" and "figured base" and, without a master, he soon learned to invest an air with its appropriate chords and to write out the different parts for a chorus. He thus came into the very heart of music; to have a thorough appreciation of all that was good, and a proper contempt for all that was trivial. This deep understanding of, and loving interest in good music in after years secured for him the devoted attachment of such organists and composers as Lowell Mason, at Boston, and Thomas Hastings and William B. Bradbury at New York. They were glad to consult his wishes while conducting choirs in the places where he preached. I may be pardoned for dwelling at such length on his musical tastes and accomplishments, for they played an important part in shaping his subsequent career, and they contributed in no small degree to make Oberlin the musical center that it is today.

He had a musical voice of phenomenal range, flexibility and power, and song was the natural expression of his healthy, joyous soul. But he was also intensely emotional and almost as sensitive to sympathetic appeals as his 'cello was to the vibrations of the strings. It was not an unusual thing for him, strong and vigorous as he was, to weep over his 'cello and he resorted to it, in every hour of trouble, as to a bosom friend. To use his own expression, his "sensibility often overflowed." But this mood was exceptional. He was, normally, full of fun and endowed with a keen sense of the ridiculous. He loved to dance and was foremost in social meetings of every sort. He was saved from intemperance, and profanity, and vileness—not by any *religious scruples*, for at this time he had none—but by his innate delicacy and refinement.

In the fall of 1812, Mr. Finney went to Warren, Connecticut, his native town, there to prepare for college in a high school which enjoyed a wide reputation. Two years were spent in study. Mr. Finney supported himself by work on his uncle's farm, in summer, and teaching singing school, in winter. The young people came from miles around to attend this school, and the traditions of his fine singing are still well preserved in that vicinity. He developed a great reputation as a wit, an orator, and a poet. He was the editor of a school journal which was prepared in manuscript and passed from hand to hand. It abounded in local hits, and every foible of teacher, pastor, leading citizens, or pupils, was touched up in satirical vein.

In 1814 Mr. Finney was prepared to enter Yale College and be-

gan to think of ways and means for going, but his teacher, himself a Yale graduate, advised him not to go, saying that he had already learned to study and think and did not need the recitations, that it was a waste of time to attend them, and that he could easily take the whole four years' course in two. This was verified by the actual experience of Horace Bushnell, who afterwards attended this same high school and then graduated from Yale College in two years. Forty years later Andrew D. White went through Yale, and complains, in his autobiography, that he learned nothing there, except what was in his books, and that he could have learned a great deal more, if he had not been obliged to waste three of the best hours of each day in attending recitations. Mr. Finney followed the advice of his teacher, went to New Jersey to teach school, and at the same time carried on his college studies, going back to Warren, at intervals to review them with his teacher and to receive further suggestions and assistance. Thus he had mastered the whole college curriculum at the age of twenty-six. His knowledge of Latin, Greek, and mathematics was as good as that of any graduate who had not pursued post-graduate courses; *but* he had not received a college diploma. No one has ever questioned the scholarship of Father Keep, John P. Cowles or Henry Cowles, because they secured Yale diplomas. President Mahan secured one at Hamilton College, Dr. Morgan secured one at Williams, President Fairchild secured one at Oberlin. All these were accounted "learned men." If they had not received degrees, they might have been called *ignorant* men. That is the fate which has overtaken their associate, Mr. Finney, in these latter days. Men who never knew him have spoken of him as though he were a fervid, but uneducated exhorter, and in a History of Presbyterianism in Central New York, I was startled to find him charged with "rashness" due to 'imperfect education.' It is news to the Alumni and ex-students of Oberlin College. It is *news* to the hundreds of men and women who heard him preach in this country and Great Britain. It affects us much as it would to hear Benjamin Franklin called an ignorant man, though his schooling ended at the age of ten; or William Cullen Bryant, though he did not get beyond the freshman year; or Joseph Henry, who graduated at an academy, like the Warren high school, and never went to a college. We should remember that while colleges and professional schools afford *facilities* for acquiring an education, they have no *monopoly*. There were great lawyers, be-

fore any of the existing law schools were founded, and great preachers and theologians before any of the seminaries came into existence. Great scientists, linguists, statesmen, and economist have grown up entirely *outside of* the schools. If a man will read, investigate, and think, wherever he is, he will become *educated*. No man ever talked with Mr. Finney half-an-hour without being impressed with the great scope and variety of his learning. It seemed almost *presumption* to attempt to enlighten him on any subject. Yet, if a man values his reputation, it is not enough to secure an *education*; he must secure a *diploma* and become one of a body of alumni who habitually speak of their college and their fellow alumni as *great*.

Mr. Finney has said, in his "Memoirs":

"I never possessed so much knowledge of the ancient languages as to think myself capable of independently criticising our English translation of the Bible." It would be well, if some of our Bible critics were *educated enough* to say the same.

Mr. Finney's knowledge of the Greek Testament and Hebrew Bible was much more intimate and profound than that of most seminary graduates. He had a peculiarly inquiring mind and everything in nature, books, or the affairs of men, interested him. He was not content with a mere smattering of information; it must be full and exact, or he professed ignorance. He was a master of the English language. His style was formed by general reading, but chiefly by studying Shakespeare, Blackstone, the decisions of such judges as Chancellors Kent and Livingston, and—after he had once made its acquaintance—the English Bible.

In 1818, Mr. Finney settled down to the study of law at Adams, a lively little town near his paternal home. He read law diligently, became the law clerk of Judge Benjamin Wright, the most prominent lawyer and politician in that region, was admitted to practice at the age of twenty-eight, and at once became active in the profession.

When he first went to Adams he was asked to lead the choir, on account of his musical accomplishments, and he accepted. He organized the young people of the village into a chorus, taught them singing, and led them with his 'cello. They became warmly attached to him, as did all who were brought into contact with him. A year after Mr. Finney went to Adams, Rev. George W. Gale, a graduate of Princeton College and Seminary, was installed as pastor of the church. He was struck with the intelligence, high character, and

remarkable influence of Mr. Finney, and made a confidant of him. On "blue Monday" he often sought him out and asked him what he thought of the sermon the day before. These sermons were always carefully written and left small excuse for criticism as English compositions, but Mr. Finney was painfully candid—he never did flatter, anybody—and told him that he did not believe the people understood one-half of what was written and that many of his doctrines were *contrary to reason*. They had many arguments. Mr. Finney was fearless and unsparing in his criticism, and if Monday was "blue" before the interview, it must often have appeared *black* before they got through. Yet Mr. Finney was so manifestly serious and sincere, it was impossible to feel resentment. Mr. Gale did, however, feel deeply concerned at Mr. Finney's mental attitude, and he warned other young people not to talk with him, as he would surely lead them astray.

When the session proposed, in 1821, to try to get up a revival in the church, Mr. Gale said it was of no use; that Mr. Finney's influence with the young people was so great that nothing could be done with them while he remained in Adams. He said that he had labored with Mr. Finney for two years and came nearer making a shipwreck of his own faith than to converting him. He said he found him very intelligent and very hardened and not at all impressed with the importance of religion. Other men about town would say, when approached on the subject of religion, "Well, there's Finney, he attends church all the time—why don't you convert him? If *he* becomes a Christian, I'll think there's something in it." Mr. Gale found himself in a heart breaking position—as many another young minister has—trying, without meeting his arguments, to convert a man who *would reason* instead of accepting the doctrines of the church on authority. His health began to fail and he told them they had better call some one else, as he was not equal to the situation. Church people were filled with doubt and discouragement. The irreligious laughed and said, "Mr. Finney is too much for them. He is altogether too smart to be caught by such chaff." On Sunday, October 7, 1821, Mr. Gale—sick in body and ill at ease—preached in a half hearted way. There was not the slightest change apparent in the manner of the young man, whose blue eyes almost paralyzed him with their cold, critical searching.

Yet, on the following Thursday morning, excited people spread

the news all over town, "Mr. Finney has been *converted*. Mr. Finney has been converted." The news seemed too good to be true. Mr. Gale said he did not believe it, and one of the local skeptics said:

"It is one of Finney's practical jokes. He is trying to see just what he can make people believe."

That evening the church was crowded with people, without any appointment, eager to hear all about it, and Mr. Finney, himself, rose, without any preliminary exercises, or introduction, and related his experience, and the great revival in Adams began then and there.

There was absolutely nothing in the ministry at that time to attract an ambitious and self-seeking man. Religion was everywhere at a low ebb; the prominent professional and business men had little or nothing to do with it; clergymen were poorly paid and treated with scant respect; Tom Paine's "Age of Reason" and so-called "French Infidelity" had infected the masses; churches and church meetings seemed to be kept up for the exclusive benefit of a few superstitious women and goody-good children. Mr. Finney was proud, ambitious, accomplished and self-seeking, and on the high-road to success in his chosen profession. The historian of Jefferson County, New York, speaking of the conversion of Mr. Finney, says:

"He had previously been a law student under Judge Benjamin Wright and evinced an ability and sagacity that would doubtless have made him eminent in that profession." \* One of the younger set, who were devoted admirers and followers of Mr. Finney, said:

"When he abandoned the profession and decided to study for the ministry, we all felt that he had made an awful mistake. That if he had continued in the practice he was destined, in a very short time, to attain the highest position at the bar and in politics."† He was peculiarly fitted to succeed in the practice of law at a time when text books were almost unknown, when the published reports could all be placed upon a single shelf, and when success depended upon close, logical reasoning from general principles. He, himself, has recorded that he *loved his profession* and that the stumbling block in the way of his earlier conversion, was the feeling that if he submitted, he would have to give up his practice and go into the ministry.‡ Every judge and lawyer who heard Mr. Finney preach felt that a great lawyer was lost to the bar of New York, when Charles G.

\* Houghes' History of Jefferson County, N. Y., 1854, p. 76.

† Horatio N. Davis, father of Senator Cushman K. Davis.

‡ Memoirs of Charles G. Finney. pp. 25, 36.



Finney united with the church at Adams. We have said that he was *ambitious*. The petty practice of a country town would not have contented him long. Either he would have moved to a larger city—Utica, Rochester, or Albany, and sought business of a higher type, or he would have gone into politics; and here, again, circumstances were such as to favor a successful career. Loved, admired, respected, with a large and devoted following, if any man should have been satisfied with his prospects in life and could have got along without religion in this world, it was Charles G. Finney at the age of twenty-nine.

His conversion resulted from thoughtful reading of the Bible, a copy of which he had bought shortly after beginning the study of the law—the first he ever owned. He had read many books before—everything, in fact, he could find within a day's walk of places where he chanced to live—but this book was *different*. It was the only book that described God as having any interest in, or direct influence over the affairs of men, as asserting Divine authority and promising to reward or punish men according to their deserts. It kindled new thoughts in his active mind and he began to see in dim outline the great scheme of the moral universe. In a few months' time, he became convinced that the Bible was indeed the word of God; that no men could have written such a book without being Divinely inspired. He then studied it with the diligence that he had before given to the New York Statutes and Reports and to his legal text-books.

He began to feel the need of pardon and forgiveness. He indulged in secret prayer. And the more he read and prayed, the more convinced he became that he must get rid of his pride and ambition, must give up the profession which he loved, and the political prospects which glittered before him, and must atone for his previous indifference—by supreme devotion to the Master's service. Could he do it? What would people say? The very reiteration of these questions revealed to him the sinfulness of his heart, the proud and rebellious spirit which had actuated him all along. Then followed that great emotional struggle, of which no man but himself was aware at the time, lasting three days and three nights, at the end of which he made a complete surrender, gave up everything for which he had planned and worked, and received the assurance that he was forgiven. The struggle was so severe and the joy of adoption so overwhelming, that he always remembered and often celebrated the

day of this "new birth", October 10, 1821. The keynote of his whole subsequent career is found in his remark to a client, next morning:

"I have a retainer from the Lord Jesus Christ to plead his cause, and you must go and get some one else to attend to *your* law suit. I cannot do it."

He refused all offers of business after that, because he did not dare trust himself in the excitement of a contested law suit. He began, at once, to work for the conversion of others. He called his choir together; confessed that he had been a stumbling block in the way of their conversion, asked for their forgiveness, related his experience, urged them to become Christians at once, and prayed with them, and all joined the church within a short time. In a few days he went to Henderson, spoke to his parents and appointed a prayer conference meeting at the Baptist church—then without a pastor—and a revival began there. Wherever he was known, the most powerful argument that could be used was the fact of his own conversion. If this intellectual skeptic, this promising lawyer and rising politician, this boon companion and social leader had become converted, there must be something in religion. Men's attention was arrested, their thoughts were engaged, and they yielded to his arguments and prayers almost instantly. Long before Mr. Finney was licensed to preach, he had accomplished more in the way of converting souls, than most ministers do in a life time.

When he announced his intention to study for the ministry, the local Presbytery committed him to the care of Mr. Gale, and he pursued his studies under Mr. Gale's direction and part of the time at his house. His theological education seems to have consisted largely in reading his Bible and *disputing* certain doctrines of the Old School Presbyterians. He accepted nothing on Mr. Gale's say-so, and the fact that such and such views were held *at Princeton*, made no impression upon him. He continued to *reason*, and to accept nothing that his *reason* did not commend, and poor Mr. Gale said again and again. "Mr. Finney, if you continue to argue and reason, you will land in infidelity, just as many of the students at Princeton have done. You must accept some things on the faith of the great fathers of the church, and not be so opinionated."

The fruit of this reliance on his own *reasoning* was seen in his absolute confidence in his *conclusions*. He not only rested on convictions so reached, but he believed that he could convince *any man*,

who was honest and earnest, of the truth of his views. This was one secret of his tremendous power over adults.

After he was licensed to preach, wherever he went he sought out privately, or contrived to have brought before him, the men of character and intelligence who were indifferent or openly opposed to religion, and *reasoned* with them. He would say:

"I have not come to find fault, I have been in the same position myself. I may be able to help you solve some of your difficulties. I think I have found the truth. Let us talk it over and see if you are mistaken, or whether I am all wrong." And he almost *never failed*, if the man was really a man of character, and had no secret vices. Among the first to be converted in Rome and Utica and Rochester were the Presidents of Infidel Clubs founded by Tom Paine's "Age of Reason." If Tom Paine had been living, Mr. Finney would undoubtedly have sought *him* out and *reasoned* with him.

When the Bench and Bar of Rochester, New York, united in a written request to Mr. Finney to deliver a series of lectures for their especial benefit, he was warned that they were mostly Deists, and not particularly concerned about their soul's salvation; that they had all read Tom Paine and did not believe in the Bible, and that many of them signed just out of curiosity to hear what kind of an argument a *lawyer* would put up for religion. Mr. Finney accepted the challenge, took the Bible from its place on the pulpit and said he would not replace it, until they were convinced in their hearts that it ought to be there and that they needed it.

He took for the text of his first discourse, "*Do We Know Anything?*" and reasoned from the facts of common experience and the dictates of common sense for nine successive sessions, of two hours each. He awakened in every mind a conviction of sin—the certainty that an *omniscient* God must know and disapprove of it; the certainty that a *just* God would punish it, as an infraction of the moral law which was written in every heart; that we all saw sinners escaping just punishment in this world and as lawyers, sometimes helped them to escape; that this brought contempt on the administration of justice here on earth, and that like contempt would be felt by God's government, unless we believed that somehow, somewhere, they would get their just deserts; that no one who believed in God at all could doubt his *power* to administer punishment and that it would be *right* to do so. The penalties for violating

Nature's laws were inexorable and everlasting. They could derive no comfort from analogy, and common sense could not show them how to escape like consequences for a violation of the Moral Law. The sinner's case was *hopeless* and deservedly so. He searched their consciences. With his knowledge of human nature, he lifted the veil from long hidden faults and exposed their failings and corruption to themselves. If you won't obey God or the dictates of your own consciences now, why should you ever do so? Even if you make up your minds to do so from now henceforth, how are you going to atone for the sins already committed? You can never make good even to you fellow-men, the losses you have inflicted upon them. *Damages*, as every lawyer knows, are poor reparation for sufferings inflicted by wilful misconduct. How, then, can you satisfy the demands of the moral Ruler of the Universe, to whom damages are as dust in the balance, an earthly expedient beneath contempt?

Then he took the Bible and they listened, with streaming eyes, as he read the tender passages of Scripture, revealing God's love and fatherly solicitude and the Gospel Plan of Salvation. "And that is the book," he said, "which you have removed from your shelves to make room for Tom Paine's shallow 'Age of Reason'?" How can you escape if you neglect so great salvation?" The effect was tremendous. Judge Gardiner crept up the pulpit steps and said, "Mr. Finney I am convinced. Won't you pray for me by name and I will take the anxious seat." The lawyers rose en masse and crowded to the front and knelt down for prayers. Nearly every one was converted. Many of them gave up their profession and went into the ministry. The revival swept the whole community and spread from it as a center in every direction. Oh, that we had that magnificent argument, in permanent form! It could not be comprehended by children of sixteen but it might continue to save *men*, as it did when originally delivered. Mr. Finney never went into the pulpit without a determination to win his case. He wanted a verdict from every audience he faced, and if he did not get it, he felt that his sermon was wasted. He aimed at producing conviction, confession, repentance, restitution, submission, prayer for forgiveness, and self dedication to God's service. Unless a man is convicted of sin, nothing can be done with him, because he feels no need of Salvation. Christ did not die for him. It was in his efforts to produce con-

victions that Mr. Finney displayed his wonderful knowledge of human nature and set up the most exalted standard of ethics.

• “If you design to make an *impression* contrary to the naked truth—you *lie*.”

“If, in managing an estate, you gain for *yourself* some advantage which you might have gained for the estate—you *steal*.”

He said, in 1834, to an audience of New York business men:

“The reason there is not more pure piety in New York City is that almost every one is guilty of some form of dishonesty.”

He struck at the present day evil of “*Rebates*” when, in 1834, he denounced at one and the same time the merchant who asked one price and would take another; and the customer who, when told the price of an article, immediately tried to get it for less. Both were trying to deceive and each was seeking to get an undue advantage of the other. The customer, who supposed he was getting goods for less than their true value, must also have supposed that other customers would have to pay more in order to make up for the loss. He therefore was willing to rob others that he himself, might become rich.

The Tappans, merchant princes, were so impressed with this argument that they adopted the one price plan and, strange to say, lost a large percentage of the customers who insisted on buying their goods for less than they supposed any one else would have to pay.

He sounded the key note of *civic reform* when he preached to his congregation in the Broadway Tabernacle:

“Instead of voting for a man because he belongs to your party  
\* \* \* \*you must find out whether he is honest and fit to be  
trusted. \* \* \* If you will give your vote only for honest  
men, the country will be obliged to have honest rulers. All parties  
will be compelled to put up honest men as candidates.”

He would not preach the doctrine of “*Imputed Sin*,” because he believed every man had quite enough sins of his own to atone for. His favorite recipe for the “*uncou gude*” was to have him write down any doubtful act he had ever been guilty of, then go to his neighbor against whom the fault was committed and make confession and restitution, than try to think of another and set it down. “Once you have begun,” he adds, cheerfully, “you will be surprised to see how easy it is to remember others and how little conceit you will have left.”

He insisted on confession and restitution and would promise relief on no other terms.

"If you have defrauded anybody, send the money—the full amount—and the interest."

"If the individual you have injured is too far off for you to go and see him, sit down and write him a letter and confess the injury, *pay the postage* and put it into the mail immediately."

He had to be particular about the postage, for, in his day, letters could be sent at the expense of the person addressed.

"A man does not forsake his sins until he has made all the reparation in his power."

"If you think you can practice a *little* dishonesty and yet continue to enjoy the presence of God, you deceive yourselves."

He spoke of sins prevalent in the communities he visited, in the most direct and scathing terms. He called a spade, "a spade" and not "an agricultural implement compounded of wood and iron." An unrepentant sinner was a *wretch*, to be *despised* and *condemned* and not a mere *unfortunate* to be pitied and coddled.

Men often resented what they regarded as personal allusions, and threatened to chastise and even kill him; but there was something so majestic in his bearing, so earnest and sincere in his words and manner, that no one ever got near to him without being overcome. He never had a personal encounter after he entered the ministry. One man said:

"When I heard about what Finney said, I wanted to thrash him; when I *saw* him, I had my doubts as to whether I *could*; and when I *heard* him, he could do what he pleased with me."

He was not content with mere "professions of faith." There must be newness of life. He cleaned up every community he visited—and so thoroughly, that they staid clean for at least a generation afterwards.

What Dr. Bush says of the revival in Rochester might be said of every place in which he preached:

"\* \* \* \* \* the courts and the prisons bore witness to its blessed effects. There was a wonderful falling off in crime. The courts had little to do, and the jail was nearly empty for years afterwards." (\*)

\* Reminiscences. p. 15.

When Mr. Finney was licensed to preach, he first went to small towns in Jefferson and St. Lawrence Counties, under the auspices of a Woman's Missionary Society. He preached in churches, school houses, barns—anywhere he could gather an audience. As Dr. Bush said:

“The amount of hard work for brain and muscle performed by that man in those six months was something prodigious.” (\*)

He preached three times on Sundays and three or four times during the week, attending prayer and inquiry meetings, went from house to house talking and praying with the people, and was accessible to visitors at all hours of the day or night. His sermons averaged two hours in length and often extended to two and a half or three. Yet whether he preached in the back woods, or the cities of New York, or in the great city of London, his audience never seemed to weary, and it was a rare circumstance for any to go out. Such interest can only be awakened and kept up by an engaging personality, by the highest oratorical power, by ever varying the themes and illustrations, and by presenting new thoughts, or old thoughts clothed in new and striking phraseology. The first half hour was usually didactic and expository. He defined words largely by stating what they did not mean, thus getting rid of popular misconception; then he proceeded to make practical application of the doctrine embodied in the text to the affairs of life, and to point out what sort of people it was intended to fit, and there were just such persons in nearly every audience. All this part of the sermon was clear, logical, and forcible, and delivered in the manner of the class-room, or court-room, rather than that of the pulpit or platform. Then he closed with “a few remarks” which might last half an hour, or an hour and a half—no one ever knew, or cared to know, for it was at this stage of the sermon that he summoned every power of imagination, feeling, gesture and facial expression to his aid, and his wonderful word paintings thrilled his audience, and his appeals to the emotions were most effective.

And it is here that all reports of his sermons completely fail. There is absolutely no record of his impassioned eloquence. As Dr. Edwards Park said:

“Some of his rhetorical utterances were indescribable, \* \* \*  
\* \* \* but if every word of it were on the printed page it would

\* *Reminiscences.* p. 11.

not be the identical sermon of the living preacher." (\*)

He was unconsciously *dramatic*—never theatrical. One of the most impressive sermons I ever heard him deliver was on the text:

"Judgement also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet, and hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies." Isaiah xxviii, 17.

It was an exposition of merciless justice, of guilty men caught in their own traps, and terror-stricken, like drowning rats. Then right before our eyes he conjured up such a terrible storm of wind, rain, and hail, that I grew chilled through and through. I shivered and buttoned my coat up tight and I saw uneasiness and apprehension depicted on the faces of all around me.

I was never more astonished in my life than when I went outside and saw the world bathed in sunlight, the birds twittering and all as calm and serene as a June day could ever be. And yet I have been told I never heard Mr. Finney preach. I was born too late.

How he did it I cannot tell. No one can tell. He probably could not tell, himself. No one else could do such a thing. And when I read Professor Cowles' report of this same sermon (†) I do not find a *word* that *even suggests* this part of the sermon. The sermon itself was an hour and a half long. You can read Professor Cowles' report in fifteen minutes.

Dr. Cuyler says:

"Charles G. Finney was the acknowledged king of American evangelists." \* \* \* \* \*

"His sermons were chain lightning, flashing conviction into the hearts of the stoutest skeptics and the links of his logic were so compact they defied resistance. Probably no minister in America ever numbered among his converts so many lawyers and men of intellectual culture." (‡)

Dr. Stanton of Cincinnati says:

"I have heard many of the great preachers of the day, and I regard him as the greatest preacher I have ever heard." (§)

William E. Dodge says:

"He was the most remarkable preacher that I have ever listened to. He would hold those audiences as in Bruce Street, and in the

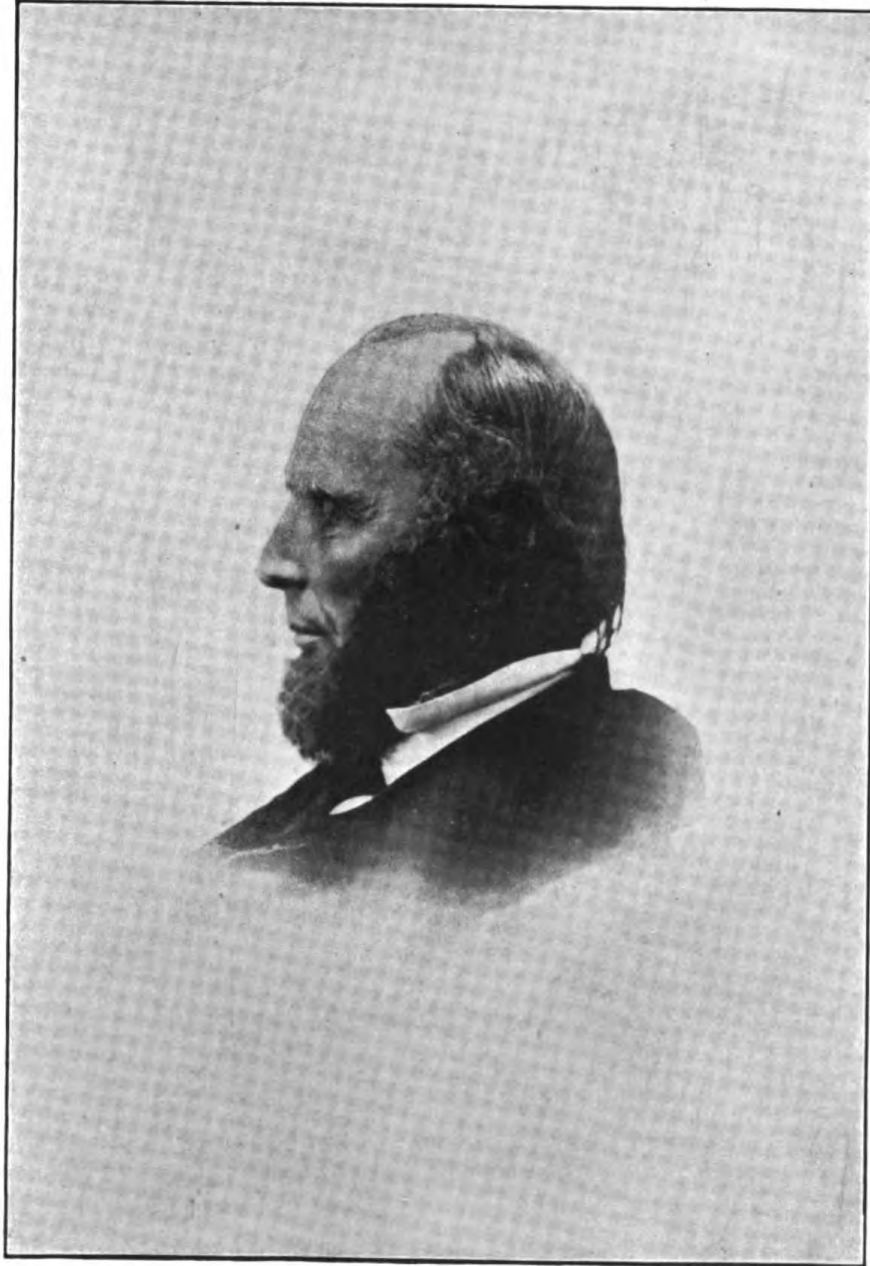
\* Charles Grandison Finney, by G. F. Wright. pp. 72, 74.

† Gospel Themes, p. 119.

‡ Recollections of a Long Life, p. 215.

§ Reminiscences. p. 26.





**CHARLES G. FINNEY**

*From an Ambrotype*



Tabernacle for an hour and a half and two hours and no one seemed to think that the time hung heavy." (\*)

If you were to ask any man, who had heard Mr. Finney preach between the years 1824 and 1860, "What was the most impressive sermon you ever heard?" the chances are one hundred to one, he would name some one of Mr. Finney's.

Dr. Edward Beecher says a sermon Mr. Finney preached in the Park Street Church, Boston in 1831 was "the most impressive and powerful sermon I ever heard. No one can form any conception of the power of his appeal." (†)

Dr. Edwards Park says the greatest sermon *he* ever heard, was one preached by Mr. Finney in Andover, on the text, "The Wages of Sin is Death." Romans vi, 23. "Every one of the men (sitting with him) was trembling with excitement."

General J. D. Cox has told me of the tremendous effect of a sermon preached from the same text in Niblo's Theatre in New York. But the greatest sermon *he* ever heard was one from the text, "How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?" Hebrews II, 3. General Cox was a cool man, a brave man, not given to hysterics, and, like Mr. Finney, he *would reason*. Yet, at the close of that sermon, when sinners were invited to come forward and accept the proffered salvation, and the aisles were crowded, he went leaping down to the front, using the backs of the seats as stepping stones. He believed then that if he remained in his seat *one minute* his soul would be lost. Various efforts have been made to define this power. Some writers call it the "power of suggestion." Some say he had "personal magnetism;" others, a "high hypnotic potential." I call it a transcendent power of communicating thought, imagination and feeling. But none of these definitions help us to understand it, or acquire it.

His success among the rude frontier settlers might be attributed to the reawakening of a sense of decency in the hearts of men conscious of their coarseness and degradation. The people knew they were leading immoral lives and didn't need an argument to convince them of sin. All they needed was a cogent appeal to abandon it. But when Mr. Finney began preaching in the cities—Rome, Utica, Auburn, Troy, Rochester—he had an altogether different class to deal with, and his success was even more phenomenal. The revival

\* Reminiscences. p. 26.

† Wright's Charles Grandison Finney. p. 105.

in these places began at the top and worked downwards. The first to be converted were the educated men, leading citizens, respected judges, lawyers, doctors, bankers, merchants, manufacturers—and they constituted the prominent portion of his audiences to the end. The whole community was involved in serious thought and conversations, and the very atmosphere seemed charged with emotion. During twenty days spent in Rome there were five hundred conversions. "Nearly all the adult population of the town were brought into the church." In Utica and vicinity some fifteen hundred were added to the churches in a six weeks' campaign. In the Oneida Presbytery, alone, over three thousand conversions were reported as the result of his labors in the year 1826.

Then a strange thing happened. Christ said to his apostles: "They shall put you out of the synagogues." John xvi, 2. This was spoken of the Jews; but the Presbyterians took it upon themselves to fulfil the prophecy in the nineteenth century. As the news of these revivals spread, a powerful opposition was awakened. It seemed as though the thing most to be dreaded by all orthodox Presbyterians, was a sudden increase in church membership. Dr. Morgan has recorded that even *he* "was shocked with the rapidity with which converts were admitted to the churches." (\*) Dr. Lyman Beecher of Boston, Dr. N. W. Taylor of New Haven, and Dr. Ashel Nettleton, having no personal knowledge of the facts and misled by some very sensational reports of the meetings, began writing letters to the brethren, in New York State and elsewhere, warning them against Mr. Finney and his "new measures," advising them not to invite him to their pulpits, or to countenance his revivals. These letters were received, among others, by pastors with whom he had been working at Rome, Utica, Clinton, Auburn, and Troy, and were shown to him. The objectors were shining lights in the church, all of them successful revivalists of high repute. To a man of Mr. Finney's sensitiveness, this concerted movement to suppress him was a profound shock. For a time all seemed dark before him, and it seemed certain that he must give up preaching and go back to the practice of the law. He tried to think of all occasions for offense he had given, he wept and prayed, and the 'cello, long neglected, was again brought into requisition. At last he received the assurance that he need not give up, that if he would persevere, the way

\* Reminiscences. p. 57.

would be made plain before him, and opposition would cease. Mr. Finney's friends and coadjutors set to work in earnest and under the leadership of Dr. Beman, of Troy, secured a conference at New Lebanon, in July, 1827, to which Dr. Beecher, Dr. Nettleton, Dr. Taylor, Dr. Hawes of Hartford, President Humphreys of Amherst College, Justin Edwards of Andover and other New England clergymen came, to talk matters over with the clergy of Auburn, Rome, Utica, Clinton, and Troy. The conference lasted nine days. When the facts were presented, their minds were disabused, their prejudices largely dissipated, and all but Dr. Nettleton professed to be satisfied with the explanations made. On his way home from this conference, Dr. Beecher is reported to have said, "We crossed the mountains expecting to meet a company of *boys*, but we found them to be *full grown men*." (\*) Mr. Finney, himself, had very little to say, but the depth of his feeling, and the warmth of his gratitude to the men who stood by him in this extremity, may be judged from the fact that his oldest son, born three years later was named, Charles Beman after Dr. Beman of Troy, and his second son, the donor of this Chapel—born five years later—was named Norton after Dr. Norton of Clinton.

Although the New Lebanon Conference had tended thus to clear the atmosphere, the New York City pastors were still so prejudiced that none of them would invite Mr. Finney to his pulpit. Many of the laymen were anxious to hear him, and Anson G. Phelps determined that he should be heard in New York City. He hired a vacant church that could be had for three months, and sent for him, agreeing to pay all the expenses of carrying on the meetings. When the three months were out, Mr. Phelps purchased a Universalist Church in Prince Street near Broadway, and services were carried on there for several months. As there was no organized church, converts were instructed to unite with the church they had been accustomed to attend, or the one nearest to where they lived, and thus every Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed, and Baptist Church in New York City reported accessions of from fifty to two hundred as a result of his preaching, in 1830. They were received into churches which were opposed to revivals, and constituted a helpless minority, and Mr. Phelps, the Tappans and others, who were by this time interested decided that they ought to be gathered into churches

\* Wright's Charles Grandison Finney. p. 94.

of their own, where their new zeal could have a chance to show itself and induce further growth. So the first Free Presbyterian Church was organized and put under the charge of Rev. Joel Parker, of Rochester, New York, and it prospered so greatly that a Second Free Presbyterian Church was organized and, in 1832, the Chatham Street Theatre was purchased and converted into a chapel on condition that Mr. Finney would become its pastor. In the meantime he had been having powerful revival meetings at Rochester, Auburn, Buffalo, Providence, and Boston. He commenced in April, 1832, and worked right through the summer, although New York City had a terrible visitation of the cholera and he could count five hearses at a time drawn up at doors on the street where he lived. Finally, in the fall, he was stricken with the disease and could not preach again until the following spring. Then, although still weak, he began his labors with such power that five hundred members were added in a few weeks, and another and another colony was sent off to form new churches. In February, 1835, Lewis Tappan wrote to the English Commissioners who came to study the State of Religion in America, that as a result of this movement four churches had been organized in as many years, with a total membership of fifteen hundred and eighty-seven; that steps were then being taken to organize two more, and that fifty-one young men belonging to these churches were studying for the ministry;\* and, he added:

“More than half the persons who are hopefully converted in these congregations unite with other churches, owing to various circumstances.”

“Could suitable ministers be procured it would be no difficult thing for the membership of the Free Churches to *organize many new churches every year.*”†

In the fall of 1833 Mr. Finney's friends decided to build for him a large church with a seating capacity of twenty-five hundred and a total capacity of four thousand. He designed the structure himself. It was exactly one hundred feet square, with plain brick walls, located fifty feet from Broadway in the center of a built-up block, so that not a dollar should be wasted on external ornament. He cared more for acoustics than aesthetics. It had a deep gallery all around and a spacious platform about one third of the way from the back to

\* Letter of Lewis Tappan, Feb. 1, 1836, published as Appendix VIII to Reed & Mattheson's Visit to American Churches, pp. 345, 346.

† Ibid, 351

the front. Every listener was within eighty feet of the speaker. It was, when finished, the most perfect auditorium in New York City. As one of his successors said, "it was one in which the speaker could speak and the hearers hear, *without effort*." It cost \$66,500. Under the rear gallery were arranged rooms for the pastor's study, and a large class room where it was expected that he would give instruction to the young men who were preparing for the ministry. Services were held in it for the first time in April, 1835. Mr. Finney now had just what he wanted, a *pou sto* from which to lift the whole new world. It was not merely that New York was the largest city on the Continent and capable in itself of furnishing large and ever changing audiences—but it was the landing place of nearly all European emigrants—English, Scotch, Irish, Welsh, German, Scandinavian; it was the place to which merchants, planters, and manufacturers went from all parts of the country, to trade and lay in their stocks of goods and supplies. They had to go to this great mart of commerce several times a year, because "commercial travellers" were then unknown. Where on earth could man hope to exercise a greater influence? If he regarded *fame*—where could he find a better opportunity to achieve it? If he wished to prepare young men for the ministry, the class-room was ready, and fifty-one of his own converts eager to begin their studies.

Now occurred what I must regard as the most extraordinary incident in this extraordinary life. Father Shipherd, having secured the most undesirable tract of land to be found in Northern Ohio and founded a school in which labor and learning were to go hand in hand, having cleared about twenty acres, erected Oberlin Hall, a two story frame building about thirty-five by forty feet, a saw mill and a few shanties, and having gotten together about a hundred students—only four of whom were far enough advanced to be called freshmen—went to New York City and asked Mr. Finney to leave his church and the great field opening before him and come out to *Oberlin* to be a Professor of Theology. Was there ever a more absurd proposition?

About the same time, a country clergyman in New England was invited to come out and become one of the professors. He declined the appointment, saying that a friend whose judgement he was bound to respect, had urged the greatest caution, since Oberlin was *only an experiment*, and further, "it was the offspring of a projector, who is

a son of a projector whose projects have always failed." That was what might be called "the *common sense* answer" to such a proposition. Mr. Shipherd had one of the elements of a successful projector, the *nerve to ask* for what he wanted. The New England clergyman had comparatively little to lose. Mr. Finney was asked to throw away the finest opportunity that any preacher of his day and generation ever had—not merely an opportunity to preach to large crowds and become famous—but an opportunity to do untold good. What other clergyman would have done, under like circumstances, may be judged from Dr. Cuyler's attitude—after the future of Oberlin was secure beyond a reasonable doubt. Mr. Finney being eighty years old and unable longer to preach regularly, was trying to find a man to fill the First Church pulpit. He wrote to Dr. Theodore L. Cuyler, pleading with him to come.

"I think there is no more important field of ministerial labor in the world. I know that you have a great congregation in Brooklyn and are mightily prospered in your labors, but your flock does not contain a *thousand students* pursuing the higher branches of education from year to year. Surely your field in Brooklyn is not more important than mine was at the Broadway Tabernacle in New York, nor can your people be more attached to you than mine were to me."\* Dr. Cuyler writes, "the kind overture was promptly declined," and does not seem to think his decision requires any explanation, or apology. There were favorable considerations presented to *him*, that could not be presented to Mr. Finney. And yet, Mr. Finney left the Broadway Tabernacle, just one month after it was completed, and came to Oberlin. Dr. Charles E. Jefferson said, on the sixtieth Anniversary of the Broadway Tabernacle: "What might have been the future under Mr. Finney's continued leadership we shall never know, for at the end of the first year, two visitors arrived from the west who carried him to Ohio, to become the head of a *little school just organized at Oberlin.*" The last seven words of Jefferson express his opinion of the move. He was not even to be the *head* of the "little school!"

In 1851 Dr. John Campbell of London, in bidding farewell to Mr. Finney, after nine months of continuous revival preaching, said:

"We cannot say that we are much gratified at the thought of Mr. Finney's returning to College duties and the general ministry of

\* *Recollections of a Long Life*, Theodore L. Cuyler, p. 219.



a rural charge. We do not consider that such is the place for the man; and we must be allowed to think that fifteen years ago a mistake was committed when he became located in the midst of academic bowers. \* \* \* \* He is made for the millions—his place is in the pulpit, rather than the professor's chair. He is a heaven born sovereign of the people. The people he loves; and the mass of the people all but idolized him." These men probably voiced the sentiment of thousands of Mr. Finney's friends and admirers. Why did he go? I think the best answer which can be given to that question is, *Because he did not want to.* That was the answer he gave to a friend who asked him why he went to *Boston* to preach, when he had remarked that the conditions were more discouraging there than in any large city which he visited.\* Whenever he did what he did not want to do his labors were especially blessed.

In the summer of 1834, Lewis Tappan had asked him to go out to Cincinnati and prepare a class of forty young men for the ministry, and offered to pay all the expenses. These young men had left Lane Seminary in a body, when the Trustees passed a resolution suppressing the discussion of Slavery, and were still holding together at Cumminsville, a suburb of Cincinnati. It was a splendid class, their average age was twenty-six, they were men of mature judgement, well grounded in classical studies and practiced in debate. Two-thirds of them were from New York State and New England, and a majority of them were Mr. Finney's own converts. Of course, he was interested in them and anxious to accommodate Lewis Tappan; but he said he could not leave his church, and made the sensible suggestion that as soon as his class room in the Broadway Tabernacle was ready for use they should be brought on to New York and receive instruction there. He considered the matter as settled and went on to prepare and deliver that course of "Lectures on Revivals," which had such a wide circulation and influence. Then came Father Shipherd and Rev. Asa Mahan, who put themselves into communication with the Tappans and reopened the whole question. Mr. Finney did not want to leave his church and, with remarkable foresight, stated the hazards of the new enterprise and the objections to leaving his work in the city, to embark on what Dr. Leonard rightly calls a "tremendous venture." But all his demands were met and at last the question presented itself in this form: Dr. Mahan and Professor

\* Deacon Lamson, *Reminiscences*, p. 41.

Morgan and at least forty students of Theology will go to Oberlin if you go. The Tappans and their friends will provide salaries for eight professors and will pay \$10,000 down for necessary buildings, and, in time, \$80,000 more for endowment. You need not give up your church, you can spend your summers in Oberlin and your winters in New York, and the church will pay your expenses both going and coming. It is the one chance to establish a school in the west, where young men may be properly trained for the ministry and where all men may gain correct views of the great evil of slavery. Still more, Lewis Tappan privately pledged to Mr. Finney his entire income, then amounting to \$100,000 a year—less what was necessary for his family—in support of the enterprise. If he *refused* to go, Oberlin would get *nothing*, the Lane Seminary students would scatter, and a great opportunity for doing good would be lost.

When so presented, Mr. Finney feared that further opposition to the Oberlin plan might be due to a selfish regard for his own comfort, or advancement, and so—he went. If he had come to a different decision, you and I would not be here today. Our fellow alumni, occupying stations of usefulness all over the world, would not be where they are. President Fairchild, who never used extravagant language, wrote: "If Charles G. Finney had not lived and labored Oberlin could not have existed."\* "Without them" (the anti-slavery impulse and Charles G. Finney) "Oberlin could never have done the work which has fallen to it and probably could not have existed beyond a single decade."†

Mr. Finney's coming secured for Oberlin not merely the things promised, but the attention of the whole religious world. His reputation and wide acquaintance attracted hundreds—I may say thousands—of students from New York, Pennsylvania, and New England long before the local field yielded its full crops. He it was that insisted that one of the first eight professors should be a "Professor of Sacred Music," and that the best man that could be found should be appointed to carry it to its highest perfection. He tried to get Mason, Hastings, or Bradbury, but they were not altruistic enough to give up lucrative church and chorus appointments in the East; although, at his request, both Mason and Hastings came out at various times to give the Oberlin chorus special instruction and lead the

\* *Reminiscences*, p. 77.

† Introduction to *Leonard's History of Oberlin*, p. 15.

Commencement music. And it was under George N. Allen, a pupil of Lowell Mason, that classical music and the great chorus became established features of Oberlin life and student culture. There is not today in all this broad land, one college which can boast of such a choir and furnish such music as the Musical Union of Oberlin. It is perhaps the greatest—certainly the most quickly appreciated—of the *outward* signs which distinguish Oberlin from other schools.

But Mr. Finney had still to make a harder decision. In the summer of 1837 he was satisfied that he could not continue to be pastor of the Broadway Tabernacle and Professor of Theology at Oberlin. The work in New York suffered during his absence and he could not find an assistant pastor capable of keeping the church alive and active while he was away. He must give up one or the other. Which should it be? While he was debating this question at Oberlin, the terrible panic of 1837 struck the country, and nearly every merchant in New York City was forced into bankruptcy, including the Tappans and all of the subscribers to the \$80,000 professorship fund. Oberlin was cut off from its source of supply and was in debt nearly \$30,000 for new buildings and expenses incurred on the faith of the promised endowment. The Lane Seminary students had mostly graduated. Father Shipherd had gone off to found other institutions. He had done his full duty by *them*. The College enterprise was, to all appearance, a failure, and he was under no legal or moral obligation to stay. Of course, the *sensible* thing to do was to go back to New York and devote himself exclusively to the interests of his church. He could find a ready support anywhere in the East. Let the College take care of itself! But he looked at the hard lot of Oberlin College and all the good people, old and young, who had come there, largely on his account, and again he chose the rough and thorny path and sent his resignation—to the *Broadway Tabernacle*. His cow died, and he sold his travelling trunk to buy another (for without a cow his family could not live.) He had come *to stay*. On Thanksgiving Day, 1837, he was at the end of his resources. He did not know where he could get funds to pay for another meal. He went to church and conducted Thanksgiving services for a congregation as hard pressed as himself, and all were lifted above the cares of this world. He says, naively—he enjoyed his own preaching that day as much as ever he did in his life—and then went home, to be met at the gate by a letter, wholly unexpected, from Josiah Chapin,

of Providence, Rhode Island, enclosing a draft for \$200 and a promise to pay his salary as professor as long as it might be needed.\*

The prejudice against Oberlin was so great and the effect of the panic so universal and prostrating that relief could not be expected in this country. After much prayer and consideration, Father Keep and William Dawes were sent to England to try and raise funds to tide the College over its difficulties. Had they friends or personal acquaintances in England? Not one! What interest had England in Oberlin? Absolutely none! *Ohio* was but a spot on their maps. No Englishman had ever heard of Oberlin. How, then, could these men expect to get a dollar for the College? They had two words to conjure with—Anti-Slavery and Charles G. Finney. England had just emancipated her slaves. The moral force which brought this about had not spent itself. Mr. Finney's reputation preceded Keep and Dawes across the ocean. The "Revival Lectures," which he preached in 1834, had been reprinted in Great Britain and had an enormous circulation. One publisher alone reported a sale of eighty thousand copies. They were almost sure to find a copy of this book in the house of every minister and intelligent layman they called upon. They could say the author of this great work, this great revivalist, was a professor and pastor at Oberlin; that he was influencing hundreds of young people every year who would in turn influence hundreds of others in all parts of the country, and that the whole influence was directed against slavery. And they could add that all this was in danger, unless they could get a little timely assistance—and they got \$30,000 over and above all expenses.

Friends:—time will not permit me to speak further of this man. You are probably as well informed about his work here as Professor, President, Pastor and Guide, as I am, myself.

It is fitting that this Memorial should stand in Oberlin, on the place where he lived for forty years. It is fitting that it should take the form of a chapel, in which large numbers can be stirred to newness of life by good preaching and good music.

And as long as this Chapel stands, let men remember that this servant of God based his faith on *reason*, addressed himself to *adults*, expected *adults* to be converted, and was not disappointed. And as long as Oberlin stands, let her sons and daughters remember that he who was *greatest* among her founders accomplished *most* through the *sacrifice of self*.

WILLIAM C. COCHRAN.

\* *Memoirs*, p. 338.