

A School in the Wilderness

by Frank Grenville Beardsley

This sermon explores the life and ministry of Charles Finney, particularly his views on sanctification and his impact on American Christianity.

Scripture: Proverbs 16:3, 1 Corinthians 15:58, Philipians 2:3, Colossians 3:23, 1 Peter 4:10

Topics: "Christian Leadership", "Faith Sanctification"

Description

Frank Grenville Beardsley preaches about Charles G. Finney's journey of sacrifice and dedication to preach the Gospel, from renouncing a legal career to accepting a professorship at Oberlin despite challenges. Finney's influential teaching role at Oberlin, amidst a small student body and forest surroundings, showcased his commitment to shaping young minds and spreading the Gospel. Despite initial challenges and opposition, Finney's leadership at Oberlin led to growth, financial struggles, and the establishment of theological views emphasizing faith, sanctification, and the necessity of independent thought. His legacy as a teacher, president, and pastor at Oberlin College left a lasting impact on students and the community.

Transcript

AT HIS conversion Finney renounced the prospects of a brilliant legal career in order to preach the Gospel, and now at the very zenith of his power as a preacher and evangelist he accepted the position of professor of theology at Oberlin.

It may seem strange that, with his great and truly remarkable abilities, he should ever have consented to become a teacher in an institution, which as yet was in its experimental stage, in the woods and wilds of northern Ohio. The attitude of the average minister towards such a proposition may be surmised from that of Dr. Theodore L. Cuyler, who was asked to become his successor in the pastorate of the First Church at Oberlin. Finney wrote to him, saying:

"I think that 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 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."

Although the invitation came as a great surprise to Dr. Cuyler, he refused even to consider it, saying that the "kind overture was promptly declined."

Oberlin could offer no such inducements to Finney as were held out to Dr. Cuyler. Instead of a thousand students, the institution at that time had but one hundred. All around was an unbroken forest. When Finney came on the ground the first living thing that he saw was a hedgehog. "He was a symbol of the state of feeling that for some time prevailed in the country towards Oberlin." As he took a defiant attitude, erecting his quills in every direction, Finney seized a club and killed him. The deer were so plentiful in the vicinity, that to escape from the pressure upon his mind, Finney frequently would take his rifle and go into the woods. He seldom went more than forty rods from the clearing without seeing a deer.

So far as the Collegiate Institute and its environment at Oberlin were concerned, there was little that would appeal to the pastor of a great metropolitan church. However, Finney's health had become so impaired that he could no longer give himself continuously to revival labors, and an open door of usefulness seemed to have been set before him at Oberlin. Moreover it is doubtful whether he could have gone to any other place where his influence would have been so wide reaching as it was in the institution to whose interests the next forty years of his life were to be devoted.

Writing of the coming of the Lane "rebels" in 1835, President James H. Fairchild said: "President Mahan came to Oberlin about the first of May, followed a month later by his family and a large number of the students from Lane. For the president's family, the first log house erected here was vacated and made ready, and this house they occupied several months, until the 'President's House,' at the southwest corner of the square, could be built. For the students who came from Lane, special provision was made. A building was extemporized, called 'Cincinnati Hall.' It was one story high, one hundred and forty-four feet long, and twenty-four feet wide. Its sides and partitions and ceilings and floors were of beech boards fresh from the mill. On the outside it was battened with 'slabs' retaining the bark of the original tree, which gave the building a decidedly rustic aspect. One end of the 'Hall' was fitted up as a kitchen and dining-room, and the remainder was divided into rooms twelve feet square, with a single window to each, and a door opening out upon the forest. Two students were assigned to each room. Oberlin strained a point to give the newcomers a reception and accommodations worthy of their fame. The enthusiasm of the new enterprise lightened hardships and made the rough places smooth. All were satisfied. The number of students that came was about thirty--not all theological students. Several were from the literary course at Lane, in preparation for theology, and entered a similar course here. A few of those who had been most prominent in the movement at Lane, as Theodore D. Weld and Henry B. Stanton, did not come to Oberlin to remain, but were drawn at once into public anti-slavery labors in the country, and only dropped in at Oberlin from time to time as their work permitted."

Professor Finney came to Oberlin in June. As has already been intimated, he had no thought at that time of devoting his entire attention to the work of teaching. The long vacation at Oberlin had been placed in the winter instead of summer to enable the students to find employment as teachers when such services were in demand. This gave Finney some three months in which to continue the duties of his New York pastorate. Moreover the trustees at the time of his appointment had taken this action: "Resolved, that with the view of the increased influence of Mr. Finney in the church at large, he have liberty to be absent four or five months of each year, when, on consulting with the Faculty, and with them making the arrangement so as to secure the best interests of the institution, he shall deem it to be his duty."

For two seasons he returned to New York, but owing to the state of his health he found it impracticable to continue the arrangement, and on April 6, 1837, he was dismissed by advice of the New York Association from the pastorate of the Broadway Tabernacle. Thereafter he devoted two months of the long vacation, so far as his health would permit, to evangelistic labors.

At the organization of the Oberlin church, Rev. James J. Shipherd was called to the pastorate. This position he filled until his resignation, on account of ill health, in 1836. Mr. Finney was asked to take "temporary charge" of the church. This relationship was finally made permanent and Mr. Finney continued the pastorate of the church, in connection with his college duties, until 1872. During a considerable portion of this time Professor Morgan was associated with him as assistant pastor.

For some years preaching services were held in Colonial Hall, which was completed in the spring of 1836, but within a very few years the place had become too small. Various experiments were resorted to, and during the summers the "Big Tent"* was used for church services.

Finally it was resolved to build. This was no small undertaking in those days. The expense of building homes had drained the finances of the colonists, the salaries of the professors were more or less precarious, while the students for the most part were self-supporting. But the people "had a mind to work" and a suitable edifice, which has since been the home of the First Church at Oberlin (now the United Church), was erected. The building was enclosed in 1842, but was not completed until some time later. It provided sittings for sixteen hundred persons and could accommodate five hundred more. This building, erected at a cost of twelve thousand dollars, furnished a throne for Mr. Finney's eloquence, and here some of his greatest sermons were preached.

In 1838, The Oberlin Evangelist, a semimonthly, eight-page quarto, was launched. It soon attained a circulation of five thousand copies. The principal contributors were President Mahan and Professors Finney, Morgan, Cowles, and Cochran. Their work was entirely gratuitous, the only person receiving compensation was an office editor who gave his full time to the paper. Almost every issue contained a sermon by Mr. Finney or President Mahan. Mr. Finney also contributed many letters and other articles to its columns. During 1845-1846 he contributed a series of thirty-two letters on Revivals, in which he supplemented his lectures on the same subject. The Oberlin Evangelist was continued for twenty-four years, until during the Civil War, when for the want of support its publication was suspended.

One peculiarity of the Oberlin community, which was fostered by Mr. Finney and his associates, was its open-mindedness and readiness to discuss all questions, religious or otherwise, which were of interest to the people. From the college platform were discussed dietetics, abolitionism, second-adventism, and so forth. Both sides of the question were always considered and the utmost freedom was allowed in the presentation of views. No questions were debated which elicited a keener interest than those pertaining to the interests of religion. In the year 1839 the foundation of moral obligation was discussed in the college chapel by President Mahan and Professor J. P. Cowles of the Theological Department, Professor Finney presiding. President Mahan held to the theory of an intuitive principle of right as the ultimate ground of obligation, while Professor Cowles advocated the utilitarian theory that happiness, or well-being, is the ground of conduct. This discussion was continued for several days, neither of the disputants being able to convince the other of the unsoundness of his views.

At the close of the debate Finney, in summing up the discussion, with his luminous logic combined the two theories into one, in which he argued that happiness, or well-being, is the ultimate good and that obligation

is intuitive, but that the latter can be seen only in the presence of the good and must rest upon happiness, or well-being, as the ultimate good. He afterwards elaborated this view as the "Benevolence Theory" in his Systematic Theology.

A topic of absorbing interest at this time in Oberlin was the doctrine of the higher life. As early as the summer of 1836 some copies of the New Haven Perfectionist were circulated in the community, and although the teachings which it advocated did not receive wide acceptance it served to stimulate inquiry upon the subject. The following autumn, during a religious quickening, many of the students and citizens were led to pray for a fuller consecration of heart to the service of Christ. At one of the services a student arose and asked what measure of help he might reasonably expect in his efforts to lead a Christian life. Were the provisions and promises of the Gospel sufficient to keep him from all sin and enable him to withstand every temptation?

President Mahan promptly answered these questions in the affirmative. The inquiry, however, served to fix his own attention upon the subject with the result that he entered into a new experience which he characterized as a coming out of darkness into light. Others were similarly wrought upon and the belief became prevalent that for all Christians there was a higher plane of living in which an unbroken communion could be maintained with Christ. To this experience various names were given: "the blessing," "perfect love," "sanctification," the "gift of the Holy Ghost," etc.

Finney's earliest views upon the subject are found in his Lectures to Professing Christians, delivered in New York during the winter of 1836-1837. These lectures were printed in the New York Evangelist, but seem to have occasioned no special comment at the time. In them he defines sanctification as "perfect obedience to the law of God. The law of God requires perfect, disinterested, impartial benevolence, love to God and love to our neighbor."

With characteristic frankness he disclaims having reached this state of perfect obedience, saying: "I do not myself profess now to have attained perfect sanctification; but if I had attained to it, if I felt that God had really given me the victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil, and made me free from sin, would I keep it a secret, locked up in my own breast, and let my brethren stumble on in ignorance of what the grace of God can do? Never!" Since Finney never afterwards professed perfect obedience, the inference is that never in his own experience did he feel that he had attained that state in the divine life.

As to the attainability of sanctification he says: "There is no moral inability to be perfectly holy. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as Moral Inability. I have always maintained that Christian perfection is a duty, and I am more convinced than ever, during the last few months, that it is attainable in this life." He not only teaches the attainability of sanctification, but contends that it is attainable by faith: "It is faith that must sanctify; it is faith that purifies the heart."

In 1839 Finney elaborated his views in a series of lectures first published in the Oberlin Evangelist and afterwards issued in book form under the title Views of Sanctification. All that was characteristic or distinctive in his later teachings appears in these lectures. He defines sanctification in "its simple and primary meaning" as "a state of consecration to God. To sanctify is to set apart to a holy use--to consecrate a thing to the service of God. A state of sanctification is a state of consecration, or being set apart to the service of God. This is plainly both the Old and New Testament use of the term."

He distinguishes between entire, or present, and permanent sanctification: "By entire sanctification I understand, the consecration of the whole being to God. In other words, it is that state of devotedness to

God and his service required by the moral law. The law is perfect. It requires just what is right, all that is right, and nothing more. Nothing more or less can possibly be perfection or entire sanctification than obedience to the law. Obedience to the law of God in an infant, a man, an angel, and in God himself, is perfection in each of them; and nothing can possibly be perfection in any being short of this, nor can there possibly be anything above it."

"That a thing or person may be for the time being wholly consecrated to God and afterwards desecrated or diverted from that service, is certain. That Adam and 'the angels who kept not their first estate' were entirely sanctified and yet not permanently so, is also certain."

"By permanent sanctification I understand, then, a state not only of entire but of perpetual unending consecration to God."

"Simple obedience to the law of God is what I understand to be present, and its continuance to be permanent sanctification."

That entire or permanent sanctification is attainable in this present life, he contends for the following reasons:

"1. It is self-evident that entire obedience to God's law is possible on the ground of natural ability. To deny this, is to deny that a man is able to do as well as he can. The very language of the law is such as to level its claims to the capacity of the subject, however great or small that capacity may be. 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind, and with all thy strength.' Here then it is plain that all the law demands, is the exercise of whatever strength we have in the service of God. Now, as entire sanctification consists in perfect obedience to the law of God, and as the law requires nothing more than the right use of whatever strength we have, it is of course forever settled that a state of entire and permanent sanctification is attainable in this life on the ground of natural ability.

"2. The provisions of grace are such as to render its actual attainment in this life the object of reasonable pursuit. It is admitted that the entire and permanent sanctification of the church is to be accomplished. It is also admitted that this work is to be accomplished 'through the sanctification of the Spirit and the belief of the truth.' It is also universally agreed that this work must be begun here; and also that it must be completed before the soul can enter heaven. This then is the inquiry:

"Is this state attainable as a matter of fact before death; and if so, when, in this life may we expect to attain it?"

There was nothing particularly unorthodox in Finney's views on sanctification, except to those who held that complete, or what Finney would term "permanent sanctification," did not take place until death. Finney held to the opposite viewpoint and contended that sanctification is to be sought and obtained through faith as a present and permanent possession. This question he sought to settle by reference to the Word of God, showing that it promises and exhorts to this very end, making provision against all the occasions of sin and enabling one to overcome it.

Aside from the controversial matter in answer to the objections of Dr. Leonard Woods of Andover, and the criticisms of the Troy Presbytery, the chapters on sanctification in his Theological Lectures are practically an expansion of his Views of Sanctification. The language is often identical, while the point of view is precisely the same.

Misapprehensions concerning the abolition sentiments then prevalent, about the prominence given to the subject of sanctification, together with various other misunderstandings that became current concerning the school, were a means of bringing it into disrepute in various sections of the country. When it became noised abroad that Oberlin was to open its doors on equal terms, irrespective of race or color, the cry of "amalgamation" was heard, although this idea was never taught or countenanced in the community.

The number of colored students never was large. With the coming of the Lane "rebels" a single colored student accompanied them. Others came soon after, and from 1840 to 1860 the proportion of colored students was between four and five per cent. After the Civil War the percentage increased somewhat for a time, but soon fell to about the ratio which had prevailed before. Oberlin never was intended as a colored school, nor were any inducements held out to colored students; they simply were received on the same terms as whites. But the attitude of Oberlin on this subject and her well known abolition sympathies created a prejudice against her, a prejudice which was so strong that for four successive years, ending in 1842, attempts were made in the Ohio legislature to abrogate the charter of the college.

Notwithstanding the fact that Finney had said that he would go a hundred miles on his hands and knees to see a man who lived without sin, a hue and cry was raised over "perfectionism." Finney's views upon other phases of Christian truth were also the object of suspicion, and so it came to pass that presbyteries refused to grant ordination to Oberlin graduates, missionary societies would not commission them, and churches sometimes refused to grant letters of dismissal to members wishing to unite with the church at Oberlin. When some of the early students wished to go as missionaries to the Indians in the Northwest, they asked the American Board (Congregational) to commission them; but the answer was: "We cannot. You are good men, and we wish you well, but it will not do."

This attitude led, in 1846, to the formation of the American Missionary Association, which commissioned scores of Oberlin graduates for work in the home and foreign fields. After the Civil War and the subsidence of old prejudices, the American Missionary Association transferred its foreign fields to the American Board and has since devoted its efforts chiefly to the work of Negro education and evangelization in the Southern States.

Oberlin was destined to suffer also from the rivalry of other institutions, this making it difficult to obtain recognition and harder still to secure funds. The American Education Society was not disposed to assist students at Oberlin as students in other institutions were assisted. A convention, moreover, was called at Cleveland, Ohio, to consider Western Education and Western Colleges. Dr. Lyman Beecher was the moving spirit in this convention and the purpose seemed to be to put Oberlin under the ban and hinder her in every way, one minister expressing the opinion that Oberlin doctrines and the influence there manifest were worse than Roman Catholicism. Mr. Finney attended many of the sessions of this convention, but was denied membership. Speaking of this opposition he wrote: "The policy that we pursued was to let opposition alone. We kept about our own business, and always had as many students as we knew what to do with. Our hands were always full of labor, and we were greatly encouraged in our efforts."

Sometimes the opposition partook of a ludicrous nature. On one occasion Mr. Finney was travelling in his carriage from Oberlin to Akron, and overtaking an elderly lady who was journeying on foot, he invited her to ride. After riding some distance, she inquired, "To whom am I indebted for this ride?" Upon his giving her his name and residence she appeared greatly startled and exclaimed, "From Oberlin! why, our minister said he would as soon send a son to the penitentiary as to Oberlin!"

To add to the embarrassments engendered by this opposition, the institution became involved in financial difficulties. Arthur Tappan and other New York friends had promised great things to the school, but these were only partially realized. The financial panic which swept over the country in 1837 brought financial ruin to most of these men, leaving the college without endowment and heavily involved in debt. Finally it was decided to appeal to England for help, and Messrs. John Keep and William Dawes were sent in 1839 to solicit funds.

Although Finney's Revival Lectures had been given a very cordial reception in that country, it was less than twenty-five years since the last war between England and the United States, so that the attitude of the British public at that time was none too friendly towards America. Nevertheless from the friends which they succeeded in raising up, and especially from members of the Society of Friends, otherwise the Quakers, who through their abolition sentiments were friendly towards Oberlin, they secured contributions amounting to six thousand pounds sterling, which nearly, if not quite, sufficed to cancel the outstanding indebtedness. The school, however, was often sore pressed for funds, involving considerable hardship to Finney and his colleagues. Referring to this period he gave the following incident:

"At one time I saw no means of providing for my family through the winter. Thanksgiving-day came, and found us so poor that I had been obliged to sell my travelling trunk, which I had used in my evangelistic labors, to supply the place of a cow that I had lost. I rose on the morning of Thanksgiving-day and spread our necessities before the Lord. I finally concluded by saying that, if help did not come, I should assume that it was best that it should not, and I would be entirely satisfied with any course that the Lord would see wise to take. I went and preached, and enjoyed my own preaching as well, I think, as I ever did. I had a blessed day to my own soul; I could see that the people enjoyed it exceedingly.

"After meeting I was detained a little while in conversation with some brethren, and my wife returned home. When I reached the gate she was standing in the open door with a letter in her hand. As I approached she smilingly said, 'The answer has come, my dear'; and handed me the letter containing a check from Mr. Josiah Chapin of Providence, for two hundred dollars. He had been here the previous summer with his wife. I said nothing about my wants at all, as I never was in the habit of mentioning them to anybody. But in the letter containing the check he said he had learned that the endowment fund had failed, and that I was in want of help. He intimated that I might expect more from time to time. He continued to send me six hundred dollars a year for several years, and on this I managed to live."

Notwithstanding all of these difficulties and embarrassments the school grew and prospered. From 1835 to 1840 the attendance increased from 101 to 484. Considering that the school was situated in a pioneer community in the woods of northern Ohio, that its endowment had vanished, and that it was passing through a fiery trial of opposition, this seems remarkable. But the magnet of Finney's name drew students from the Middle States, from New England, from the West Indies, from England, Wales, and Scotland. Among the latter was a younger brother of David Livingstone, the famous missionary to Africa, who sent his first quarterly salary as a missionary to this brother urging him to go to Oberlin. In 1851 Professor Finney was made president of the college, and the next year the attendance leaped from 571 to 1020, ever remaining above the one thousand mark except for a time during the Civil War.

When Finney accepted the professorship in theology at Oberlin his system of theology had not yet been formulated. In the sermons which he had preached, he had elaborated with more or less fulness many of the important doctrines of the Christian faith, such as the divine government, repentance, the atonement, regeneration, election, reprobation, etc. His theory of virtue, to which reference has been made, and his

doctrine of sanctification were developed at Oberlin. This was true of other phases of his system. In 1841 William Cochrane, then a student in the theological department, read and published a paper on The Simplicity of Moral Action, holding to the impossibility of a divided heart in moral action and affirming that the sinner, in his sin, is wholly destitute of righteousness, while the Christian in his obedience is wholly conformed to the Lord's will. This paper won over the entire theological faculty, with the possible exception of Professor Cowles [and Pres. Mahan], and Finney forthwith incorporated it into his system of theology.

Finney began the publication of his theological views as early as 1840 in a volume, *Skeletons of a Course of Theological Lectures*. Six or seven years later he published Volumes II and III of his *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, it being his intention to prepare another volume on natural theology to precede these. This volume, however, was never written. In 1850, when in England, he rewrote his lectures and published them in a single volume for the benefit of the British public. After his death this volume was abridged by President Fairchild and published at Oberlin in 1878. After the death of E. J. Goodrich, the Oberlin publisher, in 1912, the plates of this edition which had been lost for many years were found, and a new edition was published in New York.

The theology of Charles G. Finney was the theology of an evangelist. All theology is designed to justify the ways of God to men. It is one thing, however, to confirm and strengthen faith by showing that it rests upon reason; but it is quite another to create faith by appealing to reason. The latter was the determining principle in Finney's system. The one great obstacle which had confronted him in his work of evangelism was the theory then prevalent of a necessitated will. To combat that theory was one of the great objects of his theology.

The obligation to obey the moral law; the theory of virtue, or the end of obedience; the necessity of serving God with an undivided heart; the essence of man's sinfulness, as set forth in his doctrine of moral depravity; the atonement as a means to remove the obstacle to forgiveness caused by man's disobedience; the necessity for repentance; the nature of regeneration; the justification of the sinner through the pardon of his offences; sanctification, or the life of continued obedience; divine election; reprobation; and the perseverance of the saints, constitute the principal elements in his system.

As a teacher, the attitude of Mr. Finney towards his pupils was that of a fellow student rather than a master. The story is told of one of the early students, that Finney went to his room early one morning and roused him from his slumbers to tell him that he, the student, had been right and himself wrong in the statement of a theological proposition the day before.

"His method of instruction," said President Fairchild, "was to draw out his pupils in inquiry and discussion, and thus establish in them the power and habit of independent thought. All his own views, as well as those of his pupils, were subjected to this ordeal; and it was no rare thing for him to readjust his doctrinal statement to meet the new light which he had thus obtained. It was vain to bring against his better view some former argument or statement of his own. He would smilingly reply to any such suggestion, 'Well, I don't agree with Finney on that point.' It was his aim to be right rather than consistent. But his interest in philosophical truth was always subordinate to his great aim of bringing human souls to God, and thus his great anxiety in reference to his pupils always was that the Gospel should possess their hearts and shape their lives. No member of his class was in doubt that this was the burden of his soul."

In 1851, upon the resignation of Dr. Asa Mahan, Finney was elected to the presidency of Oberlin College, with the understanding that he was not to be burdened with the routine and details of the office, but that he

should give his attention to its more public duties. His work as a teacher remained unchanged, with the exception that for a time he instructed the senior college class in moral philosophy. In 1858 he surrendered the chair of systematic theology, but retained his work as instructor in pastoral theology and as pastor of the church. After serving fifteen years as president of the college, in 1865, because of advancing years, he resigned the presidency, but continued his pastoral duties until 1872, and his lectures in pastoral theology until his death, in 1875.

* This tent, one hundred feet in diameter, had been contributed by some of Finney's New York friends to enable him to hold evangelistic meetings in the country round about. It was provided with a blue streamer bearing the inscription in large white letters, "Holiness to the Lord." For a number of years the "Big Tent" accommodated the audiences at the Oberlin Commencement exercises.

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