

Finney as an Evangelist

by Frank Grenville Beardsley

Charles G. Finney was a pioneering evangelist who emphasized the importance of preaching, the anxious seat, and the anointing of the Holy Spirit in achieving remarkable results in winning souls.

Scripture: Proverbs 11:30, Matthew 9:37, Acts 8:5, Romans 10:14, 1 Corinthians 3:6, 1 Thessalonians 1:5, 2 Timothy 4:5, James 5:16

Topics: "Evangelism Methods", "Revival History"

Description

Frank Grenville Beardsley discusses the impact of evangelists like WHITEFIELD, the Wesleys, Dwight L. Moody, and B. Fay Mills in preparing the way for the modern evangelistic campaigns. He highlights the techniques and innovations introduced by these evangelists, such as union evangelistic campaigns, singing evangelists, and organized committees for effective revival planning. Beardsley contrasts the methods of Charles G. Finney, emphasizing Finney's focus on personal responsibility, the need for immediate repentance, and the effectiveness of preaching to convert souls. He explores Finney's teachings on human nature, sin, and the role of the Holy Spirit in bringing sinners to repentance.

Transcript

WHITEFIELD and the Wesleys were the forerunners of the latter day evangelist. Instead of devoting themselves to the work of settled pastorates, they went in their flaming zeal from place to place to proclaim the "unsearchable riches of Jesus Christ" and to win men from sin to righteousness. They thus prepared the way for others who followed in their footsteps, with the consequence that, for a century and more, the work of the itinerant evangelist has bulked more or less largely in the life and work of the evangelical churches.

Not until within the last fifty years, however, has the technique of the modern evangelist been perfected. In an earlier day evangelists devoted their efforts to house to house visitation, to preaching, and to "meetings for the anxious" which were conducted for the purpose of instructing seekers in the way of salvation. To Dwight L. Moody we are indebted for the union evangelistic campaign, when the churches of a city would unite in a series of meetings to win men to Christ. He also introduced the idea of the singing evangelist, taking with him as his coworker Ira D. Sankey who did so much to popularize and make effective the work of Mr. Moody.

It was the genius of B. Fay Mills which, adding to the innovations of Mr. Moody, brought to perfection the modern evangelistic campaign. Months before a series of meetings was inaugurated an executive

committee of ministers and laymen was at work. To prepare for the campaign three committees were set to work--a Committee on Finance, to provide funds to carry on the meetings; a Committee on Visitation, to divide the city into districts and see that every family was given an invitation to attend the services; and a Committee on Music, to organize and train a large chorus choir.

For the direct work of the revival three additional committees were appointed--a Committee on Advertising, to see that the necessary publicity was secured; a Devotional Committee, to arrange for daily prayer meetings; and a Committee on Ushers. The ushers were charged not only with the duty of seating and looking after the comfort of those who attended the services, but they also had the supervision of personal work, directing seekers after salvation, instructing young converts, and seeing that decision cards were signed at the close of each service. Under proper leadership an evangelistic campaign so planned and organized could hardly fail to be effective.

In comparison with the methods of B. Fay Mills, which have since been employed by every successful evangelist, or even with those of Dwight L. Moody, the methods of Charles G. Finney were few and simple. There was no carefully planned and organized campaign, no union of forces throughout a city, no cooperation by the churches of various denominations.

On the contrary, often he had to stand alone and contend for the faith in the midst of the most persistent and virulent opposition. He was misrepresented and abused by those with whom he differed, yet in the face of it all the most remarkable results were achieved under his ministry. Dr. Theodore L. Cuyler said "he probably led more souls to Jesus than any other man during the nineteenth century."

In the accomplishment of his mighty results Finney's main reliance was upon preaching. The truths which he preached were especially suited to the age in which he lived and were calculated to arouse men from their state of apathy and indifference to a sense of their immediate need for repentance and acceptance of the Gospel of Christ. The Calvinistic conceptions of God's sovereignty, man's inability, divine election, etc., had been pushed to such extremes as to lead to a sort of fatalism. Men were taught that they could do nothing to save themselves; they must wait "God's time"; if God chose to save them He would do so; otherwise they would perish in their sins. The soul was passive in regeneration. If men were of the elect, in due time the Holy Spirit would convert them; but if they were of the nonelect, nothing they could do for themselves, nothing anyone else could do for them, would avail for their salvation.

In consequence of such teachings as these, an alarming indifference to religion was prevalent. The current doctrines were made a pretext for neglecting the claims of the Gospel. When approached upon the subject of religion the unconverted would say, "If we are to be saved, we shall be saved; but if we are to be lost, we shall be lost." Sin, moreover, was taught as an inheritance from Adam. Men were not sinners by choice, but by birth; hence in many quarters sin was looked upon as a calamity for which men were in no wise responsible, and sinners consequently were to be pitied rather than blamed.

Finney, on the contrary, preached that the sinner's "cannot" was his "will not," and that ability was commensurate with responsibility. Instead of holding them unable to do anything to save themselves, he preached from the text, "Make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die?" that sinners were bound to make themselves new hearts. Many had thought that they could as soon create a new world as to do that, but Mr. Finney showed that it was entirely practicable for them to do so by meeting the requirements laid down in the Scriptures, and making use of the provisions of the Gospel.

Instead of waiting God's time, he said, You have waited too long already. "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation." You need not wait for God, because He has been waiting for you, and "now commandeth all men everywhere to repent." God's command to repent implies man's ability to obey. It would be unjust in God to make such a command unless men were able to obey. It was the sinner's duty therefore to confess and forsake his sins without delay.

He emphasized the fact, moreover, that men were responsible for their sins. They were sinners, not by birth or from necessity, but from choice. The consequences of sin would overtake them, not on account of any inherited predisposition to sin, but because of their wilful transgression of God's law and their rebellion against Him and His government. Sin was not a calamity or an inheritance, but a voluntary transgression of the law, a foolish and wicked choice of one's own way in preference to God's way. He said:

"I assumed that moral depravity is and must be a voluntary attitude of the mind, that it does and must consist in the committal of the will to the gratification of the desires. One doctor of divinity told me that he felt a great deal more like weeping over sinners than blaming them. I replied that I did not wonder, if he believed that they had a sinful nature, and that sin was entailed upon them and they could not help it."

He affirmed that it was putting a stumblingblock in the way of the church and the world to teach "a nature sinful in itself, a total inability to obey God, and condemnation to eternal death for the sin of Adam. When men asked God to forgive them, they were to commit themselves unalterably to his will."

In all of his teachings he did not overlook the agency of the Holy Spirit. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts." No man emphasized this truth more constantly or forcibly than did Mr. Finney. He recognized the fact that it was the work of the Spirit to "reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment"; but, he insisted, the Holy Spirit works through means and instrumentalities, and if these are used in the manner prescribed by the Word of God, the Holy Spirit will make use of them in bringing sinners to repentance.

It was Mr. Finney's aim to convert men by the truth. He rebuked them, not for the sins of Adam, but for their own sins, and exhorted them to make their peace with God. He sought out every hiding place of the sinner and left him without excuse and without refuge. He did not preach about sinners, but directly to them. Often he would say, "Do not think I am talking about anybody else; but I mean you, and you, and you."

That men were converted by his searching presentation of the truth, there can be no question. Under his preaching they were turned from their viciousness, their penuriousness, and their self-idolatry. Criminals were reformed, and evil-minded men and women were induced to abandon their wickedness. Business men of good repute came forward and publicly confessed that they had underpaid their clerks, had cheated their customers, and had resorted to unfair methods with their competitors. Both in this country and in England large sums of money which had been obtained by the use of underhanded ways or fraudulent methods were restored.*

Charitable purposes received a fresh impulse, while entire communities were transformed and revolutionized.

Upon commencing revival labors Mr. Finney would first address himself to the church, reproving it for the sins of lukewarmness, worldliness, and neglect of the work of converting men. The church having become awakened by his powerful presentation of the truth and Christians having become aroused to work and

pray for the impenitent, he turned his attention to the unconverted, vividly bringing before them the requirements of God's law, its penalties and the justice with which these were enforced, the awfulness of man's guilt in transgressing that law and his failure to meet its requirements.

The cardinal truths of the Gospel were emphasized, and by every means within his power the great revivalist sought to reconcile men to God. In his preaching he adapted the truth to the needs of the locality. If the atmosphere of the place was Calvinistic he dwelt upon man's responsibility, but if it was Arminian he preached God upon the throne.

The means which he used for the promotion of revivals were neither extravagant nor extraordinary. He did not favor multiplying meetings unnecessarily. In his Letters on Revivals in the Oberlin Evangelist he said:

"We added to the services of the Sabbath as many meetings during the week as could well be attended, and yet allow the people to carry forward their necessary business; and we went no further than this. The grand error which seems to me to have prevailed for the last few years is this: Churches that are attempting to promote revivals, break in for a time on all the necessary duties of domestic, commercial, agricultural, and mechanical life; and make little or no effort to sustain the interests of religion, promote the conversion of sinners and the sanctification of the Church, at other seasons."

He did not oppose protracted meetings, but he thought that it was the duty of churches "to make special and extraordinary efforts at every season of the year when time can be spared from other necessary avocations to attend particularly to the great work of saving souls."

Although severely censured by his opponents as an innovator, Finney as a matter of fact was inclined to be cautious and conservative in the employment of novel methods and never defended their use on the score of the methods themselves. He believed, however, that "new measures" were justifiable at times for the purpose of awakening the attention of the people to the truth. His views as to the use of "new measures" are instructive and valuable. In his Lectures on Revivals he said:

"A minister should never introduce innovations that are not called for. If he does they will embarrass him. He cannot alter the Gospel; that remains the same. But new measures are necessary from time to time, to awaken attention and bring the Gospel to bear upon the public mind. And then a minister ought to know how to introduce new things, so as to create the least possible resistance or re-action. Mankind are fond of form in religion. They love to have their religious duties stereotyped, so as to leave them at ease; and they are therefore inclined to resist any new movement designed to rouse them up to action and feeling. Hence it is all important to introduce new things wisely, so as not to give needless occasion for apology or resistance."

In addition to preaching services, especially during his earlier ministry, he spent a great portion of his time in house to house visitation. Frequently, when he was seen to enter a home, the neighbors would come flocking from every direction. Prayers would then be offered, the claims of the Gospel would be presented, instructions would be given to anxious inquirers, while their needs and difficulties would be frankly considered and met. This house to house visitation supplemented the public services and served to augment the interest which had been aroused. It was his custom also to conduct meetings of inquiry, which Dr. Charles P. Bush has described as follows:

"Mr. Finney's method of conducting an inquiry meeting is worthy of special mention. He allowed no confusion, no loud talking, no moving about, except as he passed quietly from one to another, asking a

few questions in a subdued tone of voice, and addressing to each a few words of instruction and admonition. He did not commit this most difficult and delicate business to all alike; although he did sometimes call to his aid a few well-chosen friends, of ripe Christian experience.

"When he met a case of peculiar interest, he might, indeed, stop and call attention to it before going further; might make it the occasion of exact and definite instruction, and then commend the individual to God in special prayer. But the solemnity of eternity always brooded over those meetings. Common talk was excluded. All felt that God was there; and that immortal souls were in peril and anguish; and Mr. Finney moved about as the thoughtful physician moves in the room of the sick and the dying."

His thorough understanding of human nature stood him well in hand in this delicate work. The story is told of a flippant young infidel who went into an inquiry meeting chiefly through curiosity. When Mr. Finney approached him, he began to quote some of the stock arguments of infidelity. Mr. Finney merely turned his great searching eyes upon him, gave him one look of mingled scorn and pity, and passed on. The youth perceived in an instant that the man of God had read him through and through, and was confounded. Mighty conviction came upon him and as a humble penitent he soon sought for mercy. He afterwards acknowledged that nothing could have so touched him and brought him to his senses as that silent rebuke.

In dealing with individuals the great revivalist was characterized by rare tact and wisdom. A gentleman once acknowledged his belief in Deity but admitted that he did not worship and obey Him as he should. Finney thereupon replied: "Why should I give you further instruction and further light, if you will not do your duty and obey the light you already have? When you will make up your mind to live up to your convictions, to obey God according to the best light you have; when you will make up your mind to repent of your neglect thus far, and to please God just as well as you know how, the rest of your life, I will try to show you that the Bible is from God. Until then it is of no use to do any such thing." Admitting the reasonableness of this position, the man went his way, did as he was directed, became a generous and useful Christian, and subsequently served as a trustee of Oberlin College.

A thoughtful man told him that he could not receive the Bible because it teaches that "God has imputed Adam's sin to all his posterity, that we inherit the guilt of sin by nature, and are exposed to eternal damnation for the guilt of Adam's sin." Finney asked him for the chapter and verse where such a doctrine was taught, and the man began to quote from the Westminster Catechism, but Finney stopped him with the remark that he was quoting the Catechism and not the Bible. Very much surprised that a Presbyterian clergyman should call in question the teachings of the Catechism, the man went on to argue that the Bible commanded men to repent, and at the same time taught them that they could not repent. He said furthermore the Bible teaches that Christ died for the elect only and commanded all men, whether of the elect or nonelect, to believe on pain of eternal death. Mr. Finney again called his attention to the fact that these were not the teachings of the Bible, but the instructions of men. "Well then," he exclaimed with some impatience, "Mr. Finney, do tell me what you believe!" Finney then told him what he believed the Bible taught about Adam's sin and his own, and reasoned with him concerning these things until the man was enlightened, satisfied, and converted.

On another occasion, in the home where he was stopping, a devoted Christian woman had gotten into a despairing frame of mind, but was deeply concerned, nevertheless, for an impenitent young man who was opposing the revival. Mr. Finney said to her one day: "Aunt Lucy, when you and B-- die God will have to make a partition in Hell and give you a room by yourself." "Oh, Mr. Finney!" "Yes," he continued, "here he

is raving against God, and you are almost insane to see him in such a condition. Can two persons in such opposite frames of mind, do you think, be sent to the same place?" Her features relaxed and for the first time in many days she smiled. Finally she laughed and said, "We cannot." Her despair left her and she became as joyful as a young convert.

During the first Rochester revival Mr. Finney commenced the use of the anxious seat. This measure originated with the Methodists. During the winter of 1806-1807 there was a remarkable revival in New York which resulted in the accession of more than four hundred persons to the Methodist Episcopal Church. The congregations were so large and it became so difficult to pray and converse with seekers that they were invited to the front seats, which were vacated for the purpose. This measure came into general use, not only among the Methodists but among other religious denominations. Finney, during his early revival labors, had often felt the need for such a measure. As he says:

"I had sometimes asked persons in the congregation to stand up; but this I had not frequently done. However, in studying upon the subject, I had often felt the necessity of some measure that would bring sinners to a stand. From my own experience and observation I had found, that with the higher classes especially, the greatest obstacle to be overcome was their fear of being known as anxious inquirers. They were too proud to take any position that would reveal them to others as anxious for their souls.

"I had found also that something was needed, to make the impression on them that they were expected at once to give up their hearts; something that would call them to act, and act as publicly before the world, as they had in their sins; something that would commit them publicly to the service of Christ. When I had called them simply to stand up in the public congregation, I found that this had a very good effect; and so far as it went, it answered the purpose for which it was intended. But after all, I had felt for some time, that something more was necessary to bring them out from among the mass of the ungodly, to a public renunciation of their sinful ways, and a public committal of themselves to God."

From that time Finney made a general use of the measure, except in rare instances when, through deference to customary usage, it seemed expedient to do otherwise.

He insisted upon the anointing of the Holy Spirit as a very necessary qualification for success in winning souls, and said:

"When Christ commissioned his apostles to go and preach, he told them to abide at Jerusalem till they were endued with power from on high. This was the indispensable qualification for success in their ministry. The baptism was a divine purifying, an anointing, bestowing on them a divine illumination, filling them with faith and love, with peace and power, so that their words were made sharp in the hearts of God's enemies, quick and powerful like a two-edged sword. This is an indispensable qualification of a successful ministry; and I have been surprised and pained that, to this day, so little stress is laid upon this qualification for preaching Christ to a sinful world."

In all of his revival work he strongly emphasized the necessity for prevailing prayer. One cannot study the revivals which Finney conducted without being impressed by the fact that much of his success as a winner of souls is attributable to his power in prayer. Of himself he said:

"In regard to my own experience, I will say that unless I had the spirit of prayer I could do nothing. If even for a day or an hour I lost the spirit of grace and supplication, I found myself unable to preach with power and efficiency, or to win souls by personal conversation."

The enemies of Mr. Finney sought to give the impression that the revivals identified with his name were neither very deep nor lasting. Central New York was referred to as a "burnt district," and it was affirmed that the churches in that section of the state were long in recovering from the effects of those revivals, but Dr. Fowler, historian of the Synod of Central New York, wrote: "'Ye shall know them by their fruits.' The scene of these revivals lies before us, and their effects have had time for development, and what do we see? No 'burnt district' certainly, as in their day, and sometimes since it was called, the occurrence of what it was presumed must be, being mistaken for what is; but a quick and fertile soil, a harvest field, a beautiful garden. Revivals have made it the land of revivals."

During the winter of 1862-1863 Rev. E. P. Hammond was invited to labor in that region, and speaking of his work The Interior said: "When Mr. Hammond left New York City to engage in work in the central part of the State, a friend said to him: 'I am sorry you are going to those burnt-over districts. You will not find fruitful revival fields there.' The evangelist, therefore, went with some misgivings. He soon found his mistake, and was led to thank God for 'burnt-over districts.' He found those old men--who were converted thirty years before, under the labors of Finney and Knapp--were like old war horses, used to the sounds of battle. Not easily frightened by new methods, they entered heartily into the work, and gave the evangelist most cordial support."

A few years earlier, in 1856, Dr. D.C. Lansing had said: "I have been familiar with these churches [in Central and Western New York] since 1806. I have seen their birth, their progress, their manhood and maturity, and I deem it no great presumption in me to say that I know their history and character at least as well as any man living. That history is written upon the financial records of our Bible, Tract, Foreign and Home Missionary Societies, upon our academies and colleges and upon all those institutions whose object is the elevation of man or the advancement of the Redeemer's kingdom; upon the moral worth, the wealth, the general prosperity of cities, towns and villages in those sections of the State and upon the thousands of intelligent, devoted, active friends of Christ, the fruits of those revivals who continue to this day steadfast in the faith and hope they then embraced."

In 1871 Dr. Aiken, pastor at Utica during Finney's labors, said of that revival: "After surveying the result forty years, I am persuaded that it was the work of God."

In 1876 Dr. Charles P. Bush said of the first Rochester revival: "It is not too much to say that the whole character of the city was changed by that revival. Most of the leaders of society being converted, and exerting a controlling influence in social life, in business, and in civil affairs, religion was enthroned as it has been in few other places. The city has been famous ever since for its high moral tone, its strong churches, its evangelical and earnest ministry, its frequent and powerful revivals of religion."

Those who were best acquainted with Mr. Finney's work have thus given abundant evidence of its permanence and power. While it is doubtless true that of the multitudes who made a profession of religion under his preaching some went away into apostasy and denied the faith, it is none the less true that the great majority who were converted through his instrumentality were true to their vows and honored the Christian profession throughout the remainder of their lives.

* At Bolton, England, after Finney had preached upon Restitution, some hundreds--indeed it was believed thousands---of pounds sterling were restored to persons from whom money had been dishonestly obtained or withheld; the sums varied from small amounts to a single payment of £300 (The Revival, March 17, 1860).

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