

God's Advocate

by Frank Grenville Beardsley

Frank Grenville Beardsley's sermon explores Charles G. Finney's journey from law to ministry, emphasizing his unique theological approach and preaching style.

Scripture: Proverbs 3:5, Acts 17:11, Romans 12:2, 1 Corinthians 1:18, Philippians 3:8, 2 Timothy 2:15, Hebrews 4:12, 1 Peter 3:15

Topics: "Calling To Ministry", "Evangelism"

Description

Professor G. Frederick Wright discusses the mysterious first year and a half of Charles G. Finney's life after his conversion, paralleling it to the Apostle Paul's renewed life. Despite having a promising legal career ahead, Finney felt called to preach the Gospel, turning down lucrative opportunities in law to pursue ministry. He faced opposition and criticism for his theological views, which he developed through prayerful study of the Scriptures and independent thinking. Finney's unique preaching style, characterized by logical arguments and simplicity, aimed at persuading souls to accept salvation through Jesus Christ.

Transcript

"ABOUT as much mystery," says Professor G. Frederick Wright, "hangs over the first year and a half of Finney's life subsequent to his conversion as that which shrouds the corresponding period of the Apostle Paul's renewed life." So far as we are able to learn, for several months he seems to have been occupied chiefly in furthering, by personal efforts and otherwise, the interests of the religious revival which had swept over the town of Adams and the surrounding country as a result of his conversion.

The purpose which he had expressed on his homeward way from the woods, to preach the Gospel if he were converted, remained uppermost in his mind. He had been very fond of his profession, but after his conversion he found no pleasure in attending to legal business. Many pressing invitations came to him to conduct lawsuits, but he uniformly refused. He said: "I did not dare to trust myself in the excitement of a contested lawsuit; and furthermore, the business itself of conducting other people's controversies appeared odious and offensive to me."

Possessed of gifts, as he undoubtedly was, which would have given him a place at the very forefront of the legal profession, together with the prospects for political preferment which would naturally have come his way as a rising young attorney, it was no small sacrifice for Finney to turn aside from the law. His magnetic and commanding personality, his brilliant mind, his incisive logic, his eloquence and persuasive power as a speaker, all would have combined to make him an outstanding figure in the forum and at the

bar.

His friends viewed his decision with dismay. Horatio N. Davis, who had been one of his pupils at Henderson, 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 to the highest position at the bar and in politics."

From the standpoint of purely worldly advantage the ministry at that time had little or nothing to offer. But Finney had made up his mind that, at whatever cost, he would devote his life to the preaching of the Gospel. Accordingly on June 25, 1823, at a meeting held at Adams, he was taken under the care of the St. Lawrence Presbytery "with a view to the gospel ministry." Writing of this epoch in his life he says:

"Some of the ministers urged me to go to Princeton to study theology; but I declined. When they asked me why I would not go to Princeton, I told them that my pecuniary circumstances forbade it. This was true; but they said they would see that my expenses were paid. Still I refused to go; and, when urged to give my reasons, I plainly told them that I would not put myself under such an influence as they had been under; that I was confident they had been wrongly educated, and they were not ministers that met my ideal of what a minister of Christ should be. I told them this reluctantly, but I could not withhold it."

His remarks seem to have occasioned no offence, and according to the records of the Presbytery he was "directed to pursue his studies under the direction of Rev. Messrs. Gale and Boardman." The former was his pastor and the latter, the Rev. George Smith Boardman, also a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary, was for many years pastor of the Presbyterian Church at Watertown, New York. Finney's studies, however, seem to have been under the direction of his pastor chiefly. He boarded for a time in the home of Mr. Gale who gave him every encouragement, kindly offered him the use of his library, and expressed a willingness to assist him in every way that he could.

Modern methods in theological education were then just in their beginnings. The Congregationalists had founded their first theological seminary at Andover, Massachusetts, in 1808, and the Presbyterians their seminary at Princeton in 1812. Prior to that time the usual practice for young men who were preparing for the ministry, was to "read" theology under the guidance of some experienced pastor. From 1773 to 1827, during his pastorate at Franklin, Massachusetts, a hundred young men were prepared for the ministry under the celebrated Dr. Nathaniel Emmons. This method of theological instruction continued well into the nineteenth century, and in some instances almost down to the present day.

It was after this fashion that Finney was to receive his theological training. The only data which we have covering this period in his life are his Memoirs. From all that can be gathered his doctrinal education seems to have consisted chiefly in controversial discussions with his instructor. But he could not be persuaded to accept the hyper-Calvinistic viewpoint of the latter, who held that men were sinners by birth, with a constitution morally depraved and a will so enslaved as to be utterly unable to comply with the terms of the Gospel--to repent, believe or do anything that God required of them. They were free to commit sin, but were not free to do right. For this sinful nature, received from Adam by natural generation, as well as their own transgressions, all mankind was doomed to eternal damnation. Christ died only for the elect, exact justice having been satisfied by His sufferings on the cross, whereby their debt was paid and the penalty required by the divine law was discharged in full. Regeneration was a physical change wrought by the Holy Spirit acting directly upon the substance of the soul. In this process the sinner was passive. Nothing he could do, nothing anyone else could do for him, would avail for his salvation. In due time, if he

was of the elect, God would convert him, but if he was of the nonelect he would remain without hope and without God in the world.

The idea of a necessitated will was particularly repugnant to the logical and analytical mind of the young attorney. He was convinced that ability was commensurate with responsibility, that men were not sinners by birth but from choice, that they were endowed by nature with all the powers of moral agency and what was required of them was not to alter these powers but to use them in the service of their Maker. Regeneration was not a physical change, a change in the substance of the soul, but a change in the general preference of the mind, effected by the moral influence of the Holy Spirit in persuading men through motives to embrace the truths of the Gospel. It was the duty, therefore, of men to repent, believe, and obey the Gospel.

The views of the two men were diametrically opposite and when Finney, unconvinced by the arguments of his pastor, refused to accept his theological viewpoint Mr. Gale said repeatedly: "Mr. Finney, if you continue to argue and reason, you will land in infidelity, just as some of the students at Princeton have done who reasoned upon the subject and refused to accept the Confession of Faith. You must not be so opinionated, but accept the teachings of the great doctors of the church."

As an attorney and a student of the law Finney had been trained to exact thinking. That one should suffer his reason to abdicate and accept a ready-made theology was to him unthinkable. In the preface to his Lectures on Systematic Theology, published some twenty years later, he said:

"My brother, sister, friend--reason, study, think. . . . You were made to think. It will do you good to think; to develop your powers of study. God designed that religion should require thought; intense thought and should thoroughly develop our powers of thought. The Bible itself is written in a style so condensed as to require much intense study. Many know nothing of the Bible or of religion because they will not think and study."

What Finney afterwards commended to others, he scrupulously practiced as a student of theology. Believing that the truth was supreme and that it must justify itself in the light of human reason, he would accept nothing on Mr. Gale's say-so or on the authority of the theologians of the day.

Finally Mr. Gale said to him: "You ought to defer to the opinions of the great and good men, who by much study and deliberation have come to such conclusions. It is unbecoming in one so young and inexperienced as yourself, bred in the profession of the law and having no theological education, to oppose the views of trained and learned theologians. The decisions of the church ought to be respected and you should surrender your own judgment to the superior wisdom of others."

Finney felt that there was considerable force to this argument; yet he could not suffer his reason to abdicate, or surrender his own judgment to merely human opinion. He said: "I found myself utterly unable to accept doctrines on the ground of authority. If I tried to accept those doctrines as mere dogmas, I could not do it. I could not be honest in doing it; I could not respect myself in doing it. Often when I left Mr. Gale I would go to my room and spend a long time on my knees over my Bible. Indeed I read my Bible on my knees a great deal during those days of conflict, beseeching the Lord to teach me his own mind on those points. I had no where to go but directly to the Bible and to the philosophy or workings of my own mind, as revealed in consciousness."

Independently working out his theological doctrines, as he did upon bended knees and with the Holy Bible open before him, he nevertheless found it a sore trial to disagree with his pastor and instructor. Often he was greatly depressed and discouraged. There were times when he felt almost persuaded to relinquish studying for the ministry altogether. But he received encouragement and comfort from an elder of the church to whom he freely opened his mind. This man had been trained in the old views, but after protracted conversations with Finney he became satisfied that the views of the latter were correct. Frequently he would visit him to pray with him and encourage him in his studies, until Finney became more firmly decided than ever that, come what might, he would preach the Gospel.

Another incident served to confirm him in his views. A Universalist minister about this time began to promulgate his tenets in the community. He inveighed against the doctrine of endless punishment and affirmed that a God of love could not punish men forever and forever. After hearing one of his discourses Finney arose and said: "This Universalist preacher holds forth doctrines that are new to me, and I do not believe that they are taught in the Bible. But I am going to examine the subject, and if I cannot show that they are false I will become a Universalist myself."

To his friends this seemed like a startling if not a rash and presumptuous statement to make, but it was characteristic of Finney's frankness, and of his confidence that the truths of religion would stand the test of reason and that all of God's ways could be justified to men. After thoroughly preparing himself by an intensive study of the Scriptures upon the subject, during the following week he delivered two lectures in which he answered the arguments of the Universalist to the general satisfaction of the people.

Seeing that he could accomplish nothing further along that line, the Universalist now undertook to propagate his views of universal salvation on the ground that the provisions of the atonement of Christ were ample for the whole race, and since the debt of all mankind had been paid the electing love of God must include all men and thus secure their salvation.

Mr. Gale was ill at the time and so he asked his pupil to answer these arguments. This Finney did by admitting that the provisions of the atonement were ample for the whole race; but he dissented from the view that Christ had literally paid the debt of sinners. On the contrary he affirmed that Christ had died to remove an insurmountable difficulty in the way of God's forgiving sinners, so as to make it possible for Him to proclaim a universal amnesty; the interests of "public justice" demanded some substitute for the penalties of a broken law; and since Christ had honored the law in His obedience and death, it was safe for God to pardon any and all men who would repent of their sins and believe in Him. Christ's death did not cancel sin in the sense of a literal payment of debt, but was a condition to the forgiveness of sin, since it satisfied the demands of "public justice." The Universalist was vanquished by these arguments much to the surprise of Mr. Gale, who was greatly nonplused at the result, but unconvinced as yet of the correctness of his pupil's views.

Finney not only worked out his own system of theology, based as it was upon his prayerful and independent study of the Scriptures interpreted in the light of the vivid religious experience through which he had passed, but he had his own notions as to how the Gospel should be preached. Written sermons at that time were the order of the day. But Finney preached as he would address a jury. "What would be thought of a lawyer," he asked, "who should stand up before a jury and read an essay to them? He would lose his case!"

As an attorney sought to win a verdict for his client, so he aimed at bringing men to a decision for Jesus Christ. He was God's advocate pleading with the souls of men to turn from the error of their ways and accept the proffered gift of salvation. He sought to convert men by the truth and like Paul of old he "reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come." His preaching was in a high degree logical and analytical. In fact the criticism was made that there was a tendency to excess in this particular, his sermons sometimes having as high as forty to fifty divisions, or "heads." These divisions often consisted of a single sentence, but so clear was the thought and so logical the application that the most simple statement went like a winged arrow to its mark.

He sought to express his thoughts in the simplest language in order that everyone might understand his message, and his illustrations were drawn from the ordinary vocations in life. He said: "When I came to preach the gospel, my mind was so anxious to be thoroughly understood, that I studied in the most earnest manner, on the one hand to avoid what was vulgar, and on the other to express my thought with the greatest simplicity of language."

His manner of delivery was colloquial and repetitious, often arguing truths that seemed to need no further argument, and repeating statements that apparently had been taken for granted. He said: "I talked to the people as I would have talked to a jury. Of all the causes that were ever plead, the cause of religion, I thought, had the fewest able advocates, and that if advocates at the bar should pursue the same course in pleading the cause of their clients that ministers do in pleading the cause of Christ with sinners, they would not gain a single case."

He was often criticized for his lawyerlike method of presenting the truth and for letting down the dignity of the pulpit. But to his hearers it seemed as if he were conversing with them personally about matters of great mutual concern. Those who heard him often said: "Why it didn't seem like preaching. It seemed as if Mr. Finney had taken me alone, and was conversing with me face to face."

Mr. Finney's manner of preparation for the pulpit was unique. During the earlier years of his ministry, amidst the stress and strain of his work, when he had but little time for thought or study and the only preparation which he could get was upon his knees, often he would enter the pulpit without knowing from what text he should preach and depending solely upon the Holy Spirit to suggest to him the subject of his discourse as well as the manner in which it should be treated. These sermons which he delivered with such power he never regarded as the products of his own brain. He said: "If I did not preach from inspiration, I don't know how I did preach."

It must not be supposed that he advocated preaching without preparation. He said: "My habit has always been to study the gospel, and the best application of it, all the time. I do not confine myself to hours and days of writing my sermons; but my mind is always pondering the truths of the gospel, and the best ways of using them. I go among the people and learn their wants. Then, in the light of the Holy Spirit, I take a subject that I think will meet their present necessities. I think intensely on it, and pray much over the subject, and then go and pour it out to the people. I think I have studied all the more for not having written my sermons. I have been obliged to make the subjects upon which I have preached familiar to my thoughts, to fill my mind with them, and then go and talk them off to the people I simply jot down the order of my propositions, and the positions which I propose to take; and in a word sketch an outline of the remarks and inferences with which I conclude."

Charles G. Finney was not the sort of man who could be put in an ecclesiastical strait-jacket. He insisted on working out his own system of religious doctrine and his own method of proclaiming the Gospel. The months which he spent in the study of his pastor were not without their value. His discussions with Mr. Gale, no doubt, served to clarify his own views and at the same time enabled him to perceive the strength and weaknesses of the views which he opposed.

Finally, after such an unusual course of ministerial preparation, Finney was licensed to preach by the Presbytery on December 30, 1823. He preached two trial sermons from texts which had been given him by the Presbytery and went through the customary forms of examination. He expected some opposition on account of his doctrinal views, but to his surprise the vote for licensure was unanimous. This was due doubtless to no love for the doctrines of the candidate, but, as Professor Wright surmises, to "general considerations of policy, and from fear of being found fighting against God."

During his examination he was asked if he accepted the Westminster Confession of Faith. He says: "I had not examined it, that is, the large work concerning the catechism and confession. This had made no part of my study. I replied that I received it for substance of doctrine so far as I understood it. But I spoke in a way that plainly implied, I think, that I did not know much about it. When I came to read the Confession of Faith and ponder it, I saw that although I could receive it as I know multitudes do, as containing the substance of Christian doctrine, yet there were several points upon which I could not put the same construction that was put upon them at Princeton; and I, accordingly, everywhere gave the people to understand that I did not accept that construction; or if that was the true construction; then I entirely differed from the Confession of Faith."

The Sunday following his licensure he preached for Mr. Gale who told him as they left the pulpit that he should be very much ashamed to have it known wherever he went that he had studied theology under him. This distressed Finney somewhat at the time, but in after years he had the satisfaction of knowing that his former pastor and theological instructor had embraced views of truth quite similar to his own.

Mr. Gale subsequently became a leader among the New School Presbyterians, that branch of the Presbyterian Church which modified or toned down some of the more objectionable features of the Westminster Confession. For a time he was compelled by ill health to give up the work of the ministry, but two or three years later he opened the way for Finney to go to Western and conduct the remarkable revivals with which that community and the surrounding section were visited. He finally went to the state of Illinois, where his name has been perpetuated in the city of Galesburg, the seat of Knox College, which he helped to found.

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