

Opposition to New Measures

by Frank Grenville Beardsley

The sermon discusses the opposition to Charles Finney's work and methods, particularly in Oneida County, and how he and his supporters responded to the false accusations and misrepresentations.

Scripture: Proverbs 16:7, Matthew 5:11, Romans 8:31, 1 Peter 3:16, 1 Peter 4:14

Topics: "Persecution", "Revival Ministry"

Description

Frank Grenville Beardsley preaches about the challenges and opposition faced by Charles Finney in his revival work, including false accusations and exaggerated statements about his methods. Despite the opposition, Finney continued his work and witnessed triumphs in his revival labors. The accusations against Finney were proven to be mostly untrue, and his friends defended him against the attacks. The New Lebanon convention was held to address differences of opinion regarding revivals of religion, where resolutions were passed to rebuke the spirit of opposition and clarify misconceptions about Finney's work.

Transcript

FOR some time there had been a growing antagonism to the methods and measures of Finney. Already he had encountered opposition of a certain sort. During the progress of his work in Oneida County "Father" Nash, in a letter written under date of May 11, 1826, had said: "The work of God moves forward in power, in some places against dreadful opposition. Mr. Finney and I have both been hanged in effigy. We have frequently been disturbed in our religious meetings. Sometimes the opposers make a noise in the house of God; sometimes they gather round the house and stone it, and discharge guns. There is almost as much writing, intrigue, and lying, and reporting of lies, as there would be if we were on the eve of a presidential election. Oh, what a world! How much it hates the truth! How unwilling to be saved! But I think the work will go on."

In spite of these things Finney had gone right on with his work and had witnessed uninterrupted triumphs in his revival labors. But the opposition which now confronted him was of an altogether different character and was brought about chiefly by false and exaggerated statements of his work and methods which had been sent to the religious press by his enemies. It was alleged that his meetings were boisterous and prolonged to unseasonable hours, that he was harsh and rude in the pulpit and given to saying unkind and censorious things, that he was irreverent in his prayers and prayed for people by name without their consent, that he encouraged the practice of women speaking and praying in promiscuous assemblies, that he had requested persons to come forward to the anxious seat or to rise in public to signify that they had

given their hearts to God and would attend to religion, and that he had advertised his meetings by means of sensational handbills.

These allegations for the most part were untrue. At the crisis of his work at Evans Mills Finney had asked the people to rise, and on a single occasion at Rutland he had asked those who wished to give their hearts to God to take the front seat. Otherwise he had never used either of these measures until the great Rochester revival in the winter of 1830-1831.

He and his friends, moreover, were accused of going into churches and parishes without invitation, and even in defiance of the wishes of settled pastors. Writing of this "Father" Nash said: "When Mr. Finney and I began our race, we had no thought of going amongst ministers. Our highest ambition was to go where there was neither minister nor reformation, and try to look up the lost sheep for whom no man cared. We began, and the Lord prospered us. We soon became the subjects of much speculation, and were soon drawn into contact with ministers. But we go into no man's parish, unless called. Ministers who do not want us have only to refrain from inviting us into their parishes, and we shall not trouble them. We have room enough to work, and work enough to do."

The most active opponent to Finney's work in the region where he had labored was the Rev. William R. Weeks, pastor of the Congregational Church at Paris Hill. He was a "Hopkinsian," an advocate of the system of theology propounded by Samuel Hopkins, although he had some leanings towards the teachings of Dr. Nathaniel Emmons. He held that "both sin and holiness were produced by a direct act of Almighty Power; that God made men sinners or holy at His sovereign discretion, but in both cases by a direct act of Almighty Power, an act as irresistible as that of creation itself; that, in fact, God was the only proper agent of the universe, and that all creatures acted, only as they were moved and compelled to act, by His irresistible power; that every sin in the universe, both of men and devils, was the result of a direct irresistible act on the part of God."

Unable to impose his views upon the members of the Presbytery with which he was connected, Mr. Weeks withdrew and organized the Oneida Association, which had but a feeble existence at the time of which we are writing and which was completely dominated by Mr. Weeks, who busied himself in writing against Finney to the religious leaders of New England, besides publishing pamphlets and preparing articles for the religious press.

Under his direction a pastoral letter was sent out by the Oneida Association in which Finney and his friends were charged with "calling men hard names"; "reporting great, powerful revivals which afterwards came to little or nothing"; "ostentation and noise"; "not guarding against false conversions"; "injudicious treatment of young converts, such as turning them into exhorters and teachers"; "giving heed to impressions, feelings, and supposed revelations"; "allowing anybody and everybody to speak and pray in promiscuous meetings of whatever age, sex, or qualification"; using means of exciting fears, such as saying to a sinner: "If you don't repent today, you will be in hell tomorrow"; "you are a reprobate, you are going straight to hell"; familiar use of the words "devil," "hell," "cursed," "damned," in a tone and manner like profane swearing; calling elderly people, by youths and boys, "old hypocrites," "old apostates"; imprecations in prayer; interference, by ministers and others, with congregations to which they did not belong; female prayer and exhortations in public; etc., etc.

In view of the accusations made in this document the Oneida Presbytery appointed the Rev. Messrs. Frost, Aiken, and Gale to inquire of the writer of it "whether he has any evidence that any member of this

Presbytery used any of the exceptionable expressions quoted" by him, and this committee subsequently reported that "he had refused to give them any information" on the subject.

Another factor in the opposition was the Unitarian Church at Trenton, New York, a prominent member of which wrote a pamphlet, the scurrilous nature of which may be surmised from its title page:

A

BUNKER HILL CONTEST

A.D., 1826.

Between the "Holy Alliance," for the Establishment of
Hierarchy and Ecclesiastical Domination

over the Human Mind

ON THE ONE SIDE,

And the Asserters of Free Inquiry, Bible Religion,

Christian Freedom and Civil Liberty

ON THE OTHER

THE REV. CHARLES FINNEY,

"Home Missionary" and High Priest of the Alliance in
the Interior of New York.

Headquarters: County of Oneida.

In this pamphlet it was alleged that concerted action was being taken among the Presbyterians, especially, for a national church, by whose strength "all the opposition of infidelity would be borne down and overpowered."

Finney's inquiry meetings were described as follows: "They are generally, if not always, held in the night. The room is darkened, so that persons can only see to walk and discover each other; and the reign of universal silence is interrupted only by now and then a dolorous groan from different parts of the room. The leader or leaders tread softly about, as they proceed, whispering to each individual some question or questions, such as 'Do you love God?' etc." It was affirmed, moreover, that "in a circle of the anxious, Mr. Finney would go round, and, by putting his eyes on each individual for a few seconds, tell the exact state of their mind; and would congratulate one and another with their new hope, even though they were strangers."

To such charges a committee of the Oneida Presbytery made the following reply: "Why did not these authors, after describing the darkness of the rooms at these meetings, say that Mr. Finney professed to have powers of vision that he could see the faces of the converts in the dark, as well as 'tell the exact state of their minds'? This would have increased the wonder." This committee concluded their review of these

misrepresentations and slanders with the following observations:

"Brethren, we see on record that hatred which exists extensively against those revivals of religion with which our churches have from time to time been blessed

For several years past a spirit of bitterness has been manifesting itself, particularly in this State, against a faithful ministry and against the benevolent exertions of the church of Christ. This moral poison has been circulating among a considerable portion of the community, in scurrilous newspapers and pamphlets, which have passed unnoticed. Among the unenlightened and irreligious they have had more influence than Christians have generally supposed A great cry is raised about the immense sums which are contributed to carry into effect the plans of benevolence. But when tenfold more is expended in the grog-shop, in the theatre, and in gambling houses, these opposers manifest no uneasiness, and will not unite with Christians to put an end to such shameful waste of time, and money, and health, and life itself."

At a meeting of the Presbytery of Oneida, held at Whitesborough, September 8, 1826, a committee consisting of Rev. John Frost, Rev. Moses Gillet, and Rev. Noah Coe was appointed to report on the revivals within the bounds of that Presbytery. The report, or Narrative of the Revival of Religion in the County of Oneida; particularly in the bounds of the Presbytery of Oneida, in the year 1826, is contained in a bulky pamphlet consisting of sixty-seven closely printed octavo pages. In a footnote the members of the committee expressed in this way their judgment of Mr. Finney, the chief promoter of these revivals:

"He possesses a discriminating and self-balanced mind; has a good share of courage and decision; possesses naturally a good temper; is frank and magnanimous in his deportment--ardent and persevering in the performance of the duties of his office; exhibits as much discretion and judgment, as those who may think him deficient in these qualities would do, did they possess his zeal and activity; and on the whole, is as well calculated to be extensively useful in promoting revivals of religion as any man of whom we have knowledge. To say that he never errs, is more than can, with truth be said of any man, who has ever done much to promote the temporal or spiritual interests of his fellow men."

The Narrative of the Revival of Religion in the County of Oneida consists of three parts, the first of which contains accounts of the revival, written by the pastors of the churches which had been visited with "seasons of refreshing from the presence of the Lord." The second part consists of Remarks on the Character of this Revival of Religion, as follows:

"1. More than three thousand are indulging hope that they have become reconciled to God through the Redeemer. About half this number have already united with the Presbyterian and Congregational churches, and a large proportion of the remainder with the Baptist and Methodist churches. Never before have the churches in this region been blessed with so great a shower of divine grace.

"2. This revival has continued longer, particularly in some of our societies, than has been usual in former revivals.

"3. Considering the number of converts, and the time that has elapsed since the revival commenced, the instances of backsliding have been fewer than usual.

"4. In this revival there has been less appearance of mere sympathy and excitement of the passions, unaccompanied with conviction of sin, than usual.

"5. This revival has been characterized by a remarkable spirit of prayer. Often it has been said--'Christians pray as they have never prayed before.' Many have been in deep distress, and felt what it was to travail in birth for souls.

"6. Unusual strength of faith in the promises and threatenings of God has been manifested in many of our churches.

"7. An unusual spirit of prayer has prevailed among converts, and they have manifested a disposition to converse with their friends and others on the subject of religion.

"8. This revival has extended to all classes of society Many men of wealth and learning and talents have been converted Many who had embraced universalism and other errors, have fled from their refuges of lies to lay hold of the hope set before them in the gospel.

"9. Great heart-searchings among professors have characterized this revival.

"10. Converts, especially during the greatest excitement, have manifested more joy and stronger hope than in any preceding revivals among us.

"11. Much opposition has been made to this revival. ... False reports have been circulated. Gross misrepresentations have been made of the preaching, and other means which have been employed to promote the work. Prejudices have thus been excited in the minds of some, who are doubtless the friends of religion, but who have not been in circumstances favorable to judge for themselves. It is not to be expected, that men actuated by the best motives, and pursuing with hallowed zeal the most noble objects, should act with perfect wisdom and discretion. But from the preceding accounts, and from personal observation, the committee feel warranted in saying that ministers and churches have exhibited as much sound wisdom and discretion, as has ever been exhibited in any revival of which they have knowledge. Yea, we believe that there has been an unusual spirit of prayer to God for that wisdom which is profitable to direct.

"It would savor of weakness and spiritual pride in our churches, to justify everything which has been said and done, in public and private, by the friends of the revival. But we believe it a duty we owe to the cause of truth, to say, that most of the opposition has been excited by that preaching, and those means, which have met the approbation of the great Head of the Church."

The third section of the Narrative of the Revival of Religion in the County of Oneida was a description of "Means which appear to have been blessed in promoting this Revival"; which in brief were as follows:

"1. Seasons of fasting and prayer.

2. Confession of sin in churches

3. Church discipline

4. Visiting from house to house

5. Preaching the gospel, its doctrines and precepts, its promises and threatenings, with great plainness and earnestness.

6. Union of feeling and effort in churches has promoted this revival

7. Meetings of inquiry have been greatly blessed.
8. Avoiding disputes upon minor points
9. Urging awakened sinners to immediate repentance and reconciliation to God
10. The visits of ministers, professors, and others, where revivals had commenced, have had a powerful effect in extending the work
11. The preaching and labors of evangelists have been a very obvious and efficient means of originating and carrying forward this work
12. United, agonizing, persevering prayer
13. The instructions given in Sabbath schools and Bible classes have been eminently blessed "

Notwithstanding the description of the character of the revival in Oneida County and the means which had been used to promote it, as set forth by the men who had been associated with Finney and who were, therefore, best qualified to speak in his defense against the scurrilous attacks which had been made upon him and his work, nevertheless a great deal of uneasiness was created, particularly in New England, over the measures and methods which had been ascribed to him. Foremost among those to take a stand against Finney, by reason of these false reports, were Drs. Asahel Nettleton and Lyman Beecher. Dr. Nettleton had been a very successful evangelist and had been greatly blessed in his labors in New York and New England, but at this time he had ceased active evangelistic labors on account of failing health. He was nine years older than Finney and the latter held him in high esteem.

In the autumn of 1826 Finney paid him a visit at Albany and wrote: "He was the guest of a family with which I was acquainted. I spent part of an afternoon with him, and conversed with him in regard to his doctrinal views; especially the views held by the Dutch and Presbyterian churches in regard to the nature of moral depravity. I found that he entirely agreed with me, so far as I had opportunity to converse with him, on all the points upon which we conversed. Indeed there had been no complaint, by Dr. Beecher, or Mr. Nettleton, of our teaching in those revivals. They did not complain that we did not teach what they regarded as the true Gospel. What they complained of was something that they supposed was highly objectionable in the measures that we used."

Nettleton seems not to have been quite frank towards Finney on this occasion; for when the latter told him that he intended to remain in Albany and hear him preach in the evening he manifested great uneasiness and remarked that he "must not be seen with him." So Finney went and sat in the gallery with a judge who had been in college with Nettleton. What he saw was sufficient to convince him that he could expect no advice or instruction from Nettleton, but rather that he was there to take a stand against him.

Nettleton himself was not altogether free from the charge of being an innovator. Dr. E. N. Kirk says of him that "he was not quite fair, for I am informed that no Revivalist or Evangelist in our day has so abounded in new measures, contrivances, and management, as he." Nettleton, however, was broken in health and seems to have been unduly influenced by the reports which had reached him concerning Finney's labors.

Alarmed by adverse reports about Finney's work and greatly disturbed lest a lasting injury should be done to true revivals, Dr. Nettleton, under date of January 13, 1827, wrote a letter to Dr. Aiken of Utica, criticising the spirit of denunciation which had grown out of the revivals in the West, condemning the

practice of permitting females to pray in promiscuous assemblies, and also that of praying for people by name, intimating that such and such persons were unconverted, which, he affirmed, had become "an engine of public slander of the worst form."

Referring to this letter in his Autobiography Finney says: "Mr. Nettleton wrote some letters to Mr. Aiken, with whom I was laboring; in which it was manifest that he was very much mistaken in regard to the character of those revivals. Mr. Aiken showed me those letters; and they were handed around among the ministers in the neighborhood, as they were intended to be. Among them was the one in which Mr. Nettleton stated fully what he regarded as objectionable in the conduct of these revivals; but as no such things as he complained of were done in those revivals, or had been known at all, we took no notice of the letters than to read them, and let them pass. Mr. Aiken, however, replied privately to one or two of them, assuring Mr. Nettleton that no such things were done."

The misapprehensions of Dr. Nettleton were shared by so many in New England and elsewhere that a number of representative Presbyterian and Congregational ministers, including both the friends and opponents of Mr. Finney, at the invitation of Dr. Lyman Beecher and Dr. N. S. S. Beman, met at New Lebanon, New York, to consider certain differences of opinion which were "supposed to exist among themselves and their brethren in respect to revivals of religion." This convention met at the house of Mr. Betts, Wednesday, July 18, 1827, and, with the exception of Sunday, continued in session until Thursday, July 26, when it was dissolved.

This "Convention of Ministers of the Gospel" was made up of the following: Asahel Norton, D.D., Clinton, New York; Lyman Beecher, D.D., Boston, Massachusetts; Moses Gillett, Rome, New York; Nathan S. S. Beman, Troy, New York; Dirck C. Lansing, D.D., Auburn, New York; Heman Humphrey, D.D., Amherst College, Massachusetts; John Frost, Whitesborough, New York; Asahel Nettleton, Connecticut; William R. Weeks, Paris, New York; Justin Edwards, Andover, Massachusetts; Henry Smith, Camden, New York; Charles G. Finney, Oneida County, New York; Caleb J. Tenney, Weathersfield, Connecticut; Joel Hawes, Hartford, Connecticut; George W. Gale, Oneida Academy, New York; Silas Churchill, New Lebanon, New York; Samuel C. Aiken, Utica, New York; and Henry R. Weed, Albany, New York. Heman Humphrey, D.D., was elected moderator and William R. Weeks and Henry Smith, scribes.

A series of resolutions was first adopted commending revivals in general, and expressing the hope that greater revivals were "to be expected, than have ever yet existed." Differences in method and relative imperfections attending revivals did not necessarily impair their usefulness, but it was affirmed that the "infirmity, indiscretion and wickedness of man may be the means of preventing the conversion of more souls than have been converted during the revivals."

These resolutions having been adopted unanimously by the convention, a series of resolutions was then introduced condemning the very measures of which Finney had been falsely accused in the revivals which he had conducted. His friends, therefore, raised the objection that these resolutions were liable to misconstruction and would lead to the belief that the accusations had been well founded, but to this the reply was made that they were merely prospective and designed as a safeguard against possible abuses in the future. With this understanding Finney gave assent to the resolutions.

However, from the attitude of Lyman Beecher, Asahel Nettleton, and others, it was evident that they had come to New Lebanon to take a stand against the revivals conducted by Finney and to justify their opposition to the measures supposed to be employed by him. When the question was raised as to the

sources of their information upon certain points Dr. Beecher replied, "We have not come here to be catechised, and our spiritual dignity forbids us to answer any such questions." When the question came up as to the truthfulness of the reports which had been circulated, both Nettleton and Beecher took the position that the testimony of Finney and the ministers who had been associated with him should be excluded because they were the objects of censure; therefore it was not admissible since they would be testifying in their own behalf. Dr. Humphrey, the moderator, however, insisted that they were the very actors in the case, they knew what they had done, and for that reason the convention should receive their statements without hesitation. To this all assented except Beecher and Nettleton.

In view of all the facts it is not easy to excuse, much less to justify, the attitude of Nettleton and Beecher. Both had been the undoubted friends and promoters of revivals, the one as an honored and successful evangelist, the other as an evangelistic pastor, the chief end of whose ministry had been the winning of souls. Prejudice, however, is a much more formidable foe to overcome than reason. It may mislead the best of men and blind their eyes to the truth. Nettleton and Beecher had been so influenced by the current misrepresentations about Finney and his work that in all good conscience they thought that they must oppose him and wage an unceasing warfare against the methods and measures of which he was supposed to be the exponent. They had such confidence in the alleged facts which had been brought to their attention by the opponents of Finney that they could credit nothing to the contrary.

After the adoption of the resolutions which had been presented by his adversaries Finney and his friends had their day in court.*

Dr. N. S. S. Beman now sponsored a series of propositions designed to rebuke the spirit of opposition which had been engendered. Beecher, Edwards, Weeks and others declined to vote for these propositions on the ground that they did "not appear" to them "to be, in the course of divine Providence called for." The propositions, however, were passed by the convention as follows:

"As human instrumentality must be employed in promoting revivals of religion, some things undesirable may be expected to accompany them; and as those things are often proclaimed abroad and magnified, great caution should be exercised in listening to unfavorable reports.

"Although revivals of religion may be so imperfectly conducted, as to be attended with disastrous consequences to the church and the souls of men; yet, it is also true, that the best conducted revivals are liable to be stigmatized and opposed by lukewarm professors and enemies of evangelical truth.

"Attempts to remedy evils existing in revivals of religion may, through the infirmity and indiscretion and wickedness of man, do more injury, and ruin more souls, than those evils which such attempts are intended to correct.

"In public meetings for religious worship, composed of men and women, females are not to pray.

"The writing of letters to individuals in the congregations of acknowledged ministers, or circulating letters which have been written by others, complaining of measures which may have been employed in revivals of religion; or visiting the congregations of such ministers, and conferring with opposers, without conversing with the ministers of such places, and speaking against measures which have been adopted; or for ministers residing in the congregations of settled pastors to pursue the same course; thus strengthening the hands of the wicked, and weakening the hands of settled pastors, are breaches of Christian charity, and ought to be carefully avoided.

"In preaching the Gospel, language ought not to be employed with the intention of irritating or giving offence; but, that preaching is not the best adapted to do good and save souls, which the hearer does not perceive to be applicable to his own character."

As events shaped themselves in the convention, matters did not turn out altogether to the liking of Drs. Nettleton and Beecher. After the fourth day Nettleton absented himself from the remaining sessions. On his homeward way, in the presence of the keeper of a wayside inn, Dr. Beecher dropped the remark, "We crossed the mountains expecting to meet a company of boys, but we found them to be full grown men."

The next year at the session of the Presbyterian General Assembly in Philadelphia the following document was signed and published:

"The subscribers having had opportunity for free conversation on certain subjects pertaining to revivals of religion, concerning which we have differed, are of the opinion that the general interests of religion would not be promoted by any further publications on those subjects, or personal discussions, we do hereby engage to cease from all publications, correspondences, conversations, and conduct designed and calculated to keep those subjects before the public mind; and that so far as our influence may avail, we will exert it to induce our friends on either side to do the same."

To this document were affixed the following signatures: Lyman Beecher, Dirck C. Lansing, S.C. Aiken, A. D. Eddy, C. G. Finney, Sylvester Holmes, Ebenezer Cheever, John Frost, Nathan S. S. Beman, Noah Coe, E. W. Gilbert, and Joel Parker.

The New Lebanon convention and the events leading thereto constitute a painful chapter in the life of the great revivalist. Nor did the opposition at once subside. Throughout his lifetime he was subject to misapprehension because of the methods and measures which had been attributed to him. While it doubtless interfered with his usefulness for a time, in the end it brought him more prominently before the church than ever and introduced him to wider fields of service and usefulness.

* The friends who stood so loyally by him at this time, Finney ever held in grateful remembrance. His eldest son, born three years later, was named Charles Beman in honor of Dr. Beman of Troy, New York, and his second son, born five years later, was named Frederick Norton in honor of Dr. Norton of Clinton, New York.

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