

# Pastorate in New York

by Frank Grenville Beardsley

---

*Charles G. Finney's pastorate in New York City was marked by significant evangelistic efforts, the establishment of the Chatham Street Chapel and the Broadway Tabernacle, and the publication of his influential Revival Lectures.*

**Scripture:** Proverbs 16:3, Matthew 28:19, Acts 1:8, 1 Corinthians 3:6, Philippians 1:6

**Topics:** "Church Revival", "Evangelism Ministry"

---

## Description

Frank Grenville Beardsley preaches about Charles G. Finney's impactful ministry in New York City, where he faced challenges but successfully established the Chatham Street Chapel, transforming a former theatre into a church and leading numerous revival meetings. Finney's dedication to evangelism and his emphasis on reaching the ungodly resulted in many conversions and the establishment of several free churches in New York. Despite facing opposition and health challenges, Finney's commitment to spreading the Gospel and promoting revivals led to significant spiritual growth and the foundation of educational institutions like Oberlin College.

---

## Transcript

THE origin of the Presbyterian Free Church movement has been mentioned in a previous chapter. Early in 1832 Mr. Finney was invited to New York City by individuals belonging to the First and Second Free Presbyterian churches, it being the intention to organize a third church. After more mature consideration it was decided to relinquish that plan for the time being and enlarge the scope of the Second Church under Finney's pastoral supervision.

For nearly ten years Charles G. Finney had labored incessantly as an evangelist, with but brief seasons for rest during the entire period. He now had three children and found it practically impossible to take them with him about the country. His health, moreover, had become seriously impaired by reason of his arduous labors. Not only for these reasons, but because of the opportunities for service and usefulness thus afforded, was a pastorate in a great city like New York desirable. He accordingly accepted the call now extended to him and entered upon his duties in the city.

After experiencing some difficulty in securing a suitable place for him to labor, Lewis and Arthur Tappan, David Hale, and others leased the Chatham Street Theatre, which heretofore had been a haunt of obscenity, intemperance, and vice. The last week in April, 1832, two gentlemen approached Mr. Blanchard, the lessee, and asked him if he would sell his lease. "What for?" he bluntly asked. "For a

church." "A w-h-a-t?" "A church, sir." With open eyes and mouth he exclaimed, "You mean to make a c-h-u-r-c-h here!" Upon being assured that this was their purpose, he burst into tears and said, "You may have it and I will contribute a thousand dollars towards it."

The arrangement was completed and at the close of the morning rehearsal, the hymn, The Voice of Free Grace, was sung, after which Mr. Arthur Tappan announced to the actors that the scenery would be removed, a pulpit placed on the stage, and an "anxious seat" arranged at the footlights; that on the following Sunday and each evening thereafter preaching services would be conducted in the Theatre, to which all were invited. The next morning a prayer meeting was held at half-past five o'clock, some eight hundred persons being present. Prayers were offered by Rev. Herman Norton, secretary of the Foreign Evangelical Society, Zechariah Lewis, Esq., one of the first editors of the New York Commercial Advertiser, John Wheelwright, and Rev. John Woodbridge who also delivered a brief address and pronounced the benediction.

At an expense of nearly seven thousand dollars the theatre was refitted as a church auditorium, with lecture and Sunday School rooms adjoining, and at half-past ten Sunday morning, May 6, the building was dedicated as Chatham Street Chapel, Mr. Finney preaching from the text, "Who is on the Lord's side?" In the afternoon the Lord's Supper was administered, and at the evening service the place was too strait for them, hundreds of people being turned away. Mr. Finney took as his text: "I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live." An attempt was made to interrupt the meeting that night, but police quelled the disturbance. For seventy successive evenings Finney preached to audiences ranging from 1500 to 2500 persons.

The work in the Chatham Street Theatre having been launched with every promise of success, on September 28, 1832, Finney was installed as pastor by a commission appointed by the Third Presbytery of New York, a branch of the First Presbytery. The installation sermon was preached by Rev. Joel Parker from the text, "Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it; except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain."

In addition to the preaching services at the Chatham Street Chapel, Bible classes were formed; prayer meetings instituted; Bibles and religious literature circulated; shops, stores, saloons, and offices visited, and their frequenters invited to attend the services. The barroom of the theatre was transformed into a prayer room, and it is a fact worthy of record that the first man to kneel there offered this petition: "O Lord, forgive my sins! The last time I was here Thou knowest that I was a wicked actor on this stage. O Lord, have mercy on me!"

Three large rooms connected with the front part of the theatre were fitted up for prayer meetings and as a lecture room. These rooms were connected one above the other with the three tiers of galleries with which the theatre was equipped. This made an exceedingly convenient arrangement for carrying on the work of evangelism. Said Finney:

"I instructed my church-members to scatter themselves over the whole house, and to keep their eyes open, in regard to any that were seriously affected under preaching, and if possible detain them after preaching for conversation and prayer. They were true to their teaching, and were on the lookout at every meeting to see with whom the word of God was taking effect; and they had faith enough to dismiss their fears, and to speak to any whom they saw to be affected by the word. In this way the conversion of a great

many souls was secured."

The summer after the commencement of his labors in New York, the city was visited with a scourge of cholera. On one occasion, from the door of his house, Finney counted five hearses drawn up at different doors within sight. Not willing to leave his people while the mortality was so great he remained in the city all summer. Finally in the fall he fell a victim himself, and such were the drastic means used for his recovery that his system received a severe shock and he was ill a long time. By spring, however, he was able to preach again. Not long afterwards he inaugurated a revival campaign, preaching nightly for twenty evenings, during which some five hundred persons were converted. The membership now became so large that a colony was sent out to form another church for which a suitable structure was erected on Madison and Catherine Streets.

The Chatham Street Chapel continued to be a scene of revivalistic inspiration and work. Meetings of inquiry were held once or twice a week and sometimes oftener. A goodly number of conversions was reported every week. Of the character of the membership Finney wrote:

"The church were a praying, working people. They were thoroughly united, were well-trained in regard to labors for the conversion of sinners, and were a most devoted and efficient church of Christ. They would go out into the high-ways and hedges and bring people to hear preaching, whenever they were called upon to do so. Both men and women would undertake this work. When we wished to give notice of extra meetings, little slips of paper, on which was printed an invitation to attend the services, would be carried from house to house in every direction, by the members of the church, especially in that part of the city in which Chatham Street Chapel, as we called it, was located. By the distribution of these slips, and by oral invitations, the house could be filled, any evening in the week. Our ladies were not afraid to go out and gather in all classes, from the neighborhood round about.

"When I first went to Chatham Street Chapel, I informed the brethren that I did not wish to fill up the house with Christians from other churches, as my object was to gather from the world. I wanted to secure the conversion of the ungodly, to the utmost possible extent. We therefore gave ourselves to labor for that class of persons, and by the blessing of God, with good success. Conversions were multiplied so much that our church soon would become so large that we would send off a colony; and when I left New York, I think, we had seven free churches, whose members were laboring with all their might to secure the salvation of souls. They were supported mostly by collections, that were taken up from Sabbath to Sabbath. If at any time there was a deficiency in the treasury, there were a number of brethren of property, who would at once supply the deficiency from their own purses; so that we never had the least difficulty in meeting the pecuniary demands.

"A more harmonious, prayerful, and efficient people, I never knew, than were the members of those free churches. They were not among the rich, although there were several men of property belonging to them. In general they were gathered from the middle and lower classes of people. This was what we aimed to accomplish, to preach the Gospel especially to the poor."

Becoming dissatisfied about this time with the difficulty of administering discipline through the centralized polity of Presbyterianism, Mr. Finney and his friends organized a Congregational Church. As a matter of fact Finney had been a Presbyterian largely by accident. From the hyper-Calvinism then prevalent in Presbyterian circles, its practical denial of human freedom, its doctrine of an atonement for the elect only, and its idea of physical regeneration, he had recoiled before and after his conversion. The churches which

he had served as a home missionary pastor both at Evans Mills and Antwerp were Congregational. From that time to his acceptance of the pastorate of the Chatham Street Chapel, he had labored as an evangelist and so he had had little opportunity to observe the practical workings of Presbyterian church government. After assuming his pastoral duties in New York he discovered that he was as little of a Presbyterian in church administration as he had been doctrinally.

So far as his theological views were concerned, they probably were no more welcome in Congregational circles than they had been among the Presbyterians, and it is doubtful whether his taking up with the Congregational form of church government was regarded as an asset to that denomination, for theologically, during practically the whole of his life, he was looked upon with suspicion by the Congregationalists. It was solely upon the grounds of church administration that Finney decided to make this change in his ecclesiastical relations. For the further continuance of his labors in New York, the Broadway Tabernacle was organized. Aside from some slight changes in its organization, under its succession of able and distinguished pastors Broadway Tabernacle has continued to be a center of Christian usefulness. During the antislavery agitation it exerted a nation-wide influence.

Among the various obstacles which Mr. Finney had encountered in his work were ill-constructed audience rooms, which, while ornate and artistic, were in no wise adapted to the purposes of public speaking. So when Broadway Tabernacle was erected he insisted that it should conform to his own ideas. He said:

"The plan of the interior of that house was my own. I had observed the defects of churches in regard to sound, and was sure that I could give the plan of a church in which I could easily speak to a much larger congregation than any house would hold that I had ever seen. An architect was consulted, and I gave him my plan. But he objected to it, that it would not appear well, and feared that it would injure his reputation to build a church with such an interior as that. I told him that if he would not build it on that plan, he was not the man to superintend its construction at all. It was finally built in accordance with my ideas; and it was a most commodious place to speak in."

The building as planned by Mr. Finney, who cared more for acoustics than aesthetics, was one hundred feet square, with plain brick walls and was located fifty feet from Broadway in the center of a built-up block, so that no expense should be incurred for outside adornment. Erected at an expense of sixty-six thousand five hundred dollars, the seats in the auditorium were arranged in the form of a circle, into which extended a spacious square platform about a fourth of the distance from the rear wall. All around was a deep gallery, so that the entire audience was seated about the preacher. The tabernacle had sittings for twenty-five hundred persons and could accommodate fifteen hundred more.

It was the most perfect auditorium in New York at that time, every listener being within eighty feet of the speaker, enabling him to speak with perfect ease and every listener to hear without difficulty. Under the choir loft at the rear of the platform were arranged the pastor's study and a large lecture room which could be used in giving instruction to young men who were preparing for the ministry. In that auditorium not only was heard the voice of Finney, but Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Lucy Stone, Fred Douglass, Louis Kossuth, and other notables also spoke from its platform, so that it has been said, "What Faneuil Hall was to Boston, the old Tabernacle was to New York."

In 1834 Mr. Finney made a trip to the Mediterranean for the recovery of his health. The trip was made on a small brig, the captain of which was given to the excessive use of stimulants. On one occasion during a storm at sea he was so intoxicated that Finney was obliged to assume command of the vessel. His

knowledge of navigation, which he had acquired as a boy when living at Henderson's Harbor on Lake Ontario, stood him well in hand, and taking charge of the brig he discharged his duties to the satisfaction of all on board. Six months later, having spent some weeks in Malta and Sicily, he returned to New York. Almost immediately on the resumption of his labors at Broadway Tabernacle, a great revival began which continued throughout the remainder of his pastorate in the city. Shortly after his return to New York he delivered his celebrated Lectures on Revivals of Religion, which were first published in the New York Evangelist, a periodical which had been established to promote the revivals in which he was engaged.

The establishment of the Evangelist was brought about on this wise. The New York Observer, which had given currency to the criticisms which Nettleton and others had made against Finney, refused to publish anything in his favor. Judge Jonas Platt of the New York Supreme Court, who with his son and daughter had been converted in the revival which Finney had conducted in Utica, one day found pasted on the inside cover of one of his law books a letter which had been written by a New York pastor against Whitefield. Judge Platt sent it to Mr. Morse of the Observer requesting him to publish it merely as a literary curiosity. But the latter refused on the ground that its publication might give the impression that the opponents of Finney were manifesting the same spirit of opposition which formerly had greeted Whitefield. The friends of Finney, therefore, decided to project a new paper which should be favorable to the revivals identified with his name.

The first issue of the Evangelist appeared March 6, 1830, Mr. Finney assisting in its preparation. The paper soon succeeded in acquiring a considerable circulation, especially after two or three years, when the Rev. Joshua Leavitt assumed the editorial chair.

Mr. Leavitt was an ardent advocate of the antislavery reform. Mr. Finney also adhered to antislavery principles, but he did not hold radical or extreme views upon the subject. On the eve of his departure to the Mediterranean he cautioned Leavitt against being too radical in the expression of his views, lest he should destroy the influence of the paper. This caution, however, was unheeded, and on Finney's return Leavitt went to him and said: "I have ruined the Evangelist. I have not been as prudent as you cautioned me to be, and I have gone so far ahead of public intelligence and feeling on the subject, that my subscription list is rapidly falling; and we shall not be able to continue its publication beyond the first of January, unless you can do something to bring back the paper to public favor again."

After deliberating over the matter a day or two, Finney proposed to deliver to his people a course of lectures on revivals of religion which Leavitt might report for his paper. The proposal met with the latter's enthusiastic approbation. These lectures were delivered extemporaneously. Mr. Leavitt could not write shorthand, but he took down abridged notes in longhand which he afterwards expanded and submitted to Mr. Finney for correction before publication. These printed lectures had the desired effect in building up the circulation of the Evangelist. Almost like magic the subscriptions began pouring in, and in a little time the paper had regained its former influence.

These lectures were published afterwards in book form, twelve thousand copies of the first American edition being sold as rapidly as they could be issued from the press. The book was reprinted in England, France, and Wales. One London publisher alone issued eighty thousand copies. Finney's Revival Lectures promoted revivals not only in England, Scotland, and Wales, but in many places on the Continent. The reading of these Lectures through the columns of the New York Evangelist resulted in multitudes of conversions all over our own country. This book contains in detail the philosophy of Finney's methods in promoting revivals and has remained to this day the great classic upon the subject.\*

"A brief selection from its pages, scattered almost broadcast in the Far East, led to the Manchurian revival in 1910." A new English edition was published in 1910, with an introduction and annotations by William H. Harding.

In his introduction Mr. Harding says: "These Lectures have owed nothing to richness of mechanical production, but have made their way--perhaps among the rank and file of evangelistic forces, rather than in the seats of learning and power--by sheer merit. Finney, however, has come into his own. The demand for his lectures, after a lapse of three-quarters of a century, is a sufficient answer to criticism, although not many decades since to have mentioned the book as a Christian classic would have provoked a sneer such as Cowper anticipated if, in verse, he should mention the name of John Bunyan."

During his pastorate in New York numerous applications had come to Finney from young men, requesting him to take them as students in theology. But his hands were too full to attempt anything of the sort. When the Broadway Tabernacle was erected, a room was provided under the choir loft which could be used for prayer meetings, but more particularly for a theological lecture room. Finney had resolved to give each year a course of theological lectures, which might be attended gratuitously by theological students. Before he could carry his resolution into effect events transpired which were destined to alter the entire current of his life.

In 1833 Rev. John J. Shipherd, a young Presbyterian minister, and Rev. Philo P. Stewart, who had been a missionary under the American Board to the Choctaw Indians in Mississippi, founded a colony and an educational institute in Lorain County, Ohio, upon a tract of land which had been donated for the purpose. The new community was named in honor of John Frederick Oberlin, the eminent evangelical pastor of Alsace, in the Vosges Mountains, the story of whose self-sacrificing life had just reached America. The colonists, all of New England birth or ancestry, came with high resolves and lofty moral purposes, pledging themselves to self-denying efforts in the support of the school and the extension of the Redeemer's Kingdom. The Collegiate Institute, which was the first in America to offer equal advantages to women, opened its doors in December, 1833, with two instructors and thirty-four students. The total attendance during this introductory term reached forty-four, twenty-nine men and fifteen women.

It was the ultimate intention of the founders of the school to establish a department of theology, but this came about sooner than was anticipated and in a very surprising manner. In 1834 the trustees of Lane Theological Seminary, in Cincinnati, becoming alarmed at the growth of antislavery views among the students, passed a rule prohibiting them from discussing the slavery question in public or private. Four-fifths of the students thereupon withdrew and for a time attempted to instruct themselves. Learning of this state of affairs, Mr. Arthur Tappan, of New York, offering to pay all of the expenses of the undertaking, proposed to Mr. Finney that he go to some point in Ohio, and prepare these young men for the work of the ministry in the West.

In the meantime Mr. Shipherd, who was going East to secure funds and a president for Oberlin, after fasting and prayer was impressed that he must go by way of Cincinnati. He could not account for this impression and at first was disposed to regard it as unreasonable. He had no acquaintances in Cincinnati and there was no special reason, as he thought, why he should not go directly eastward, but so strong was the impression that he could not set it aside, and so finally he decided to go East in that roundabout way.

On his arrival in Cincinnati he learned for the first time what had transpired at Lane Seminary. He succeeded in persuading Rev. Asa Mahan, pastor of the Sixth Street Presbyterian Church and a dissenting member of the trustees of Lane Seminary, to accept the presidency of Oberlin. The students agreed to go there also, provided Charles G. Finney could be secured as professor of theology.

In the pursuit of this object Messrs. Shipherd and Mahan proceeded to New York to confer with Mr. Finney. Mr. Mahan, of course, had never been at Oberlin, and although Mr. Shipherd had secured for the school a charter adapted to the aims of a university, all that could be reported from Oberlin was that "the trees had been removed from the college square, some dwelling houses and one college building erected, and about a hundred pupils had been gathered in the preparatory and academic departments of the institution." From many standpoints the proposition which was laid before Finney was far from attractive. The proposal of the Lane students, however, to go to Oberlin carried weight.

"This proposal," wrote Finney, "met with the views of Arthur and Lewis Tappan, and many of the friends of the slave who sympathized with Mr. Tappan in his wish to have these young men instructed and brought into the ministry. We had several consultations on the subject. The brethren in New York who were interested in the question offered, if I would go and spend half of each year at Oberlin, to endow the Institution so far as the professorships were concerned, and to do it immediately.

"In view of the condition at Lane Seminary I said to Mr. Shipherd that I would not go at any rate, unless two points were conceded by the trustees. One was that they should never interfere with the internal regulation of the school, but should leave that entirely to the discretion of the faculty. The other was that we should be allowed to receive colored people on the same condition as we did white people; that there should be no discrimination made on account of color.

"When these conditions were forwarded to Oberlin, the trustees were called together, and after a great struggle to overcome their own prejudices, and the prejudices of the community, they passed the resolutions complying with the conditions proposed. This difficulty being removed, the friends in New York were called together, to see what they could do about endowing the institution. In the course of an hour or two, they had a subscription filled for the endowment of eight professorships; as many, it was supposed, as the institution would need for several years."

Even after this endowment was subscribed Finney said: "I felt great difficulty in giving up that admirable place for preaching the gospel, where such crowds were gathered within the sound of my voice. I felt, too, assured that in this new enterprise, we should have great opposition from many sources. I therefore told Arthur Tappan that my mind did not feel at rest upon the subject; that we should meet with great opposition because of our anti-slavery principles; and that we could expect to get but very scanty funds to put up our buildings, and procure all the requisite apparatus of a college; that therefore I did not see my way clear, after all, to commit myself unless something could be done that should guarantee us the funds that were indispensable.

"Arthur Tappan's heart was as large as all New York, and I might say, as large as the world. When I laid the case before him, he said, 'Brother Finney, my own income averages about a hundred thousand dollars a year. Now if you will go to Oberlin, take hold of the work and go on, and see that buildings are put up, and a library and everything provided, I will pledge you my entire income except what I need to provide for my family, till you are beyond pecuniary want.' Having perfect confidence in Brother Tappan I said 'That will do. Thus far the difficulties are out of the way.'

"But still there was a great difficulty in leaving my church in New York. I had never thought of having my labors at Oberlin interfere with my revival labors and preaching. It was therefore agreed between myself and the church, that I should spend my winters in New York, and my summers at Oberlin; and that the church would be at the expense of my going and coming. When this was arranged, I took my family, and arrived in Oberlin at the beginning of the summer, 1835."

\* Speaking, in one of his addresses, of the time when he was an apprentice lad of fifteen or sixteen, Gen. William Booth said, "How I can remember rushing along the streets during my forty minutes' dinner time, reading the Bible or C. G. Finney's Lectures on Revivals of Religion as I went, careful, too, not to be a minute late." Speaking of Gen. Booth's sermon making, his official biographer, Commissioner G. S. Railton wrote: "He took the best models he could find--men like John Wesley, George Whitefield, and, above all, C. G. Finney, who he could be certain had never sought in their preaching for human applause, but for the glory of God and the good of souls alone." But for the influence of Charles G. Finney, the mighty work of the Salvation Army might never have been.

---

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/frank-grenville-beardsley/pastorate-in-new-york/>

# *Grow in Your Walk with Christ*

---

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

**[www.sermonindex.net](http://www.sermonindex.net)**

