



LIBRARY OF RELIGIOUS BIOGRAPHY

---

# CHARLES G. FINNEY

and the Spirit of  
American Evangelicalism



CHARLES E. HAMBRICK-STOWE

---

# Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism

---

Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe

WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY  
GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN / CAMBRIDGE, U.K.

© 1996 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.  
255 Jefferson Ave. S.E., Grand Rapids, Michigan 49503 /  
P.O. Box 163, Cambridge CB3 9PU U.K.  
All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

01 00 99 98 97 96      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Hambrick-Stowe, Charles E.

Charles G. Finney and the spirit of American Evangelicalism /  
Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe.

p.      cm. — (Library of religious biography)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8028-0129-3 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Finney, Charles Grandison, 1792-1875. 2. Congregational  
churches — United States — Clergy — Biography. 3. Evangelists — United  
States — Biography. 4. Revivals — United States — History — 19th  
century. 5. Evangelicalism — United States — History — 19th century.

I. Title. II. Series.

BX7260.F47H35 1996

285.8'092 — dc20

[B]

96-16697

CIP

## LIBRARY OF RELIGIOUS BIOGRAPHY

---

Edited by Mark A. Noll, Nathan O. Hatch,  
and Allen C. Guelzo

The LIBRARY OF RELIGIOUS BIOGRAPHY is a series of original biographies on important religious figures throughout American and British history.

The authors are well-known historians, each a recognized authority in the period of religious history in which his or her subject lived and worked. Grounded in solid research of both published and archival sources, these volumes link the lives of their subjects — not always thought of as “religious” persons — to the broader cultural contexts and religious issues that surrounded them. Each volume includes a bibliographical essay and an index to serve the needs of students, teachers, and researchers.

Marked by careful scholarship yet free of footnotes and academic jargon, the books in this series are well-written narratives meant to be *read* and *enjoyed* as well as studied.

## LIBRARY OF RELIGIOUS BIOGRAPHY

---

### *available*

Billy Sunday and the Redemption of Urban America

*by Lyle W. Dorsett*

Liberty of Conscience: Roger Williams in America

*by Edwin S. Gaustad*

The Divine Dramatist:

George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism

*by Harry S. Stout*

William Ewart Gladstone:

Faith and Politics in Victorian Britain

*by David Bebbington*

Aimee Semple McPherson: Everybody's Sister

*Edith L. Blumhofer*

Thomas Jefferson

*Edwin S. Gaustad*

Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism

*Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe*

### *forthcoming*

Emily Dickinson: The Fate of Theology in American Culture

*Roger Lundin*

## Foreword

---

It would be hard to tell the story of the American republic before the Civil War without giving Charles Grandison Finney one of the starring roles. And yet, pinning down what it was in Finney that made him so important has proven highly difficult. Very few biographers have found much of interest in Finney as a theologian, and even those who hang his importance on his fame as a preacher of mass religious revival usually find little that was permanent or even admirable in Finney's revivals. Finney is most often assigned a niche as a cultural symbol, a sort of religious counterpart to his political contemporary Andrew Jackson. Historians from Whitney Cross and Perry Miller to Timothy L. Smith and Paul Johnson have loved to paint Finney as the perfect Jacksonian democrat, the enemy of aristocratic Calvinism, the apostle of do-it-yourself salvation. By these conventional accounts, Andrew Jackson was the spirit of the age and Finney was his prophet.

And yet, for those who have read Finney beyond his well-known and deliberately provocative *Lectures on Revivals of*

*Religion* (1835) and *Memoirs* (1876), Finney turns out to be quite a different character. A close reading of Finney's papers, as well as his articles in the *Oberlin Evangelist* from 1838 to 1862 and his less-well-known books, shows him to have been persistently hostile to Jacksonian politics. And, in startling contrast to his reputation as an anti-Calvinist, Finney did not hesitate to speak of himself as a disciple and admirer of Edwards and the New England Theology. No wonder that on rare occasions some modern interpreters, caught between the Finney they read and the Finney they have read about, simply confess an element of bewilderment about the man.

Part of the confusion over Finney has surely been generated by Finney himself. His famous *Memoirs* are rich in self-congratulation over his successes as a revivalist in upstate New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and elsewhere, but they are curiously opaque about his intellectual and theological development. Modern historians have also had difficulty sorting out Finney's complex and idiosyncratic theological vocabulary. In the process, they have written off that vocabulary as just another example of Finney's eccentricities or else have taken it as one more example of his rebellion against conventional theology. But many of these supposed eccentricities are actually rhetorical tag lines that link Finney to a very specific theological context, one that has little relationship to the assumptions of Jacksonian democracy but one that owes a very great deal indeed to the very Edwardsean Calvinism Finney is supposed to have repudiated.

It is one of the major achievements of Charles Hambrick-Stowe in this new biography to have penetrated both of these veils of difficulty. Hambrick-Stowe's account of the life and career of Finney benefits from the first access any major Finney biographer has had to the newly restored full text of the *Memoirs*, edited by Garth Rosell and Richard A. G. Dupuis (Zondervan, 1989), and he has made extensive use of the Charles G. Finney Papers in the Oberlin College Archives and the files of Oberlin's volatile and widely circulated publications

*The Oberlin Evangelist* and *The Oberlin Quarterly Review*. Hambrick-Stowe thereby discovers a Finney who was certainly no democratic loner. This Finney emerges from the context of New England migration to upstate New York at the turn of the eighteenth century, when the intellectual climate was heavy with the thunderous preaching of the Edwardsean "New Divinity." Hambrick-Stowe then positions the young-adult Finney within a lively coterie of Edwards-influenced "New School" revivalists in the rural New York churches formed by the 1801 Plan of Union (which licensed joint Congregationalist-Presbyterian church-planting efforts in upstate New York). He also shifts the conventional story of Finney's stormy relationship with his Presbyterian mentor, George Washington Gale (in which Gale usually poses as the Calvinistic foil to Finney's sui generis Arminianism), to a much more powerful version of the relationship in which their controversy is transformed into an intellectual sparring contest between the rival Calvinisms of Princeton and New England in the early Republic. Even John Williamson Nevin's acidulous and long-lived denunciations of Finney — that Finney had substituted "salvation by feeling for salvation by faith" — are set in a new relationship through Hambrick-Stowe's account of Finney's connections with dissident German Reformed pastors who were already questioning Nevin and the "Mercersburg Theology." Perhaps the most surprising contribution Hambrick-Stowe has to make concerns Finney's family life — his three marriages, his complex and sometimes wayward children, his own private yearnings to flee from the public limelight to a quiet farmer's life in New York — little of which has been integrated into other Finney biographies.

In the largest sense, Hambrick-Stowe presents a Finney-in-context. That signals an important reversal of the tendency of Finney biographers from G. Frederick Wright (1893) to Keith Hardman (1987) to take Finney at his own word and describe him as a solitary individual who read the Bible for himself, received divine illumination for himself, and labored with no



accountability to anyone else but God. In Hambrick-Stowe's skillful hands, Finney becomes a man of numerous theological connections, debts, and borrowings. From this we discover not only a new Finney but a far wider and more varied sense of the culture of the early American Republic. Reading Finney as one of the heirs of the New England theology rather than a lone rebel against it lets us see how rich and numerous were the threads of consistency and continuity between Finney and the Great Awakening of the 1740s and, beyond that, to the shape of modern evangelical Protestantism. The Finney whom we meet on these pages becomes simultaneously more clearly rooted in his own history and dramatically closer to the spirit of modern evangelicalism than we have thought.

Allen C. Guelzo

## Preface

---

Charles G. Finney, born in 1792, was the most widely known of the many great revival preachers in the pre-Civil War United States. His campaigns from 1824 to 1834 in the so-called “burned-over district” of upstate New York and in Philadelphia, New York City, and Boston made his name synonymous with the final stage of the Second Great Awakening as it has traditionally been understood. In 1835, at age forty-three, Finney moved to Oberlin, Ohio, where he became professor of theology and later president of Oberlin College. Oberlin was noted for its abolitionist stance, for its acceptance of black students, and as a pioneer in coeducation for women. Finney and the other faculty also put forth the doctrine of entire sanctification and began to use the controversial language of perfection to describe the life of Christian obedience at the same time that the Wesleyan holiness movement came to life. Finney continued his evangelistic preaching, toured England twice, and served as pastor of the church in Oberlin for thirty-five years. He remained an active preacher and teacher until his death in 1875.

In an era when evangelical Protestantism was defined in

terms of revivalism, education, and social reform, Charles Finney was both a representative American evangelical and an evangelical who was truly a representative American. In *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, Mark Noll ranks Finney "with Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, and Andrew Carnegie . . . as one of the most important public figures in nineteenth-century America." Theodore Dwight Weld offered a similar assessment in 1829 when he compared Finney with the other preachers of the day: "He rises above them to an overshadowing height."

Charles Finney was an evangelical, and this book uses the story of his life and ministry to open a window on American evangelicalism. The "spirit" of evangelical Protestantism has exercised a powerful influence alongside economic, cultural, and political developments in American history, for both weal and woe. Finney's career embodied that spirit to a great degree. But there are some surprises here. Today many think of an evangelical as a Christian who is religiously and socially conservative. Finney was theologically and socially conservative in some ways yet progressive and even radical in others.

The word *evangelical* has carried with it a broad variety of applications in history. *Evangel*, derived from the Greek word *euangelion*, means "good news." The corresponding English word *gospel* comes from the Anglo-Saxon *godspell* (*god*, a form of "good," and *spell*, meaning "story.'). An evangelical is one who believes the gospel of what God has done through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Bible. In that fundamental sense, all Christians are evangelicals. The word took on specificity in the sixteenth century when it was used to describe Protestants who embraced the revolutionary spiritual insight of Martin Luther and other Reformers that salvation is available to sinful humanity through the grace of God in Jesus Christ and can be received through faith. *Evangelicalism* thus came to refer to a way of being Christian that was distinct from the more priestly, sacramental, and institutional faith of traditional Roman Catholic Christianity. Evangelicalism relies on the preaching of the gospel of salva-

tion more than on religious ritual and on the personal commitment of faith more than on the church's institutional authority. In the 1600s, the English Puritans espoused this form of Christian faith, and it was Puritan Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Baptists who first imprinted evangelicalism on the eastern seaboard of North America. While evangelical "heart religion" has characterized the experience of many believers in all three major branches of the Christian family — Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox — it has most often been associated with the faith of Protestants.

Today's use of the word *evangelical* goes back to the spiritual awakenings in the British Isles and North America during the early and middle 1700s. In the thirteen Anglo-American colonies that became the United States, these revivals were called the Great Awakening. The leading figures in this revival included the New England Congregationalist pastor-theologian Jonathan Edwards and, in the middle colonies, the Presbyterian evangelist Gilbert Tennent. The most influential preacher of all was the itinerant Church of England evangelist George Whitefield. With his extemporaneous preaching and dramatic style, Whitefield addressed huge crowds spanning all social classes. He presented the gospel in such basic terms that people from every Protestant tradition responded to his message: Each person is utterly sinful and must repent, but salvation may be had freely through faith in Jesus Christ. Whitefield created the modern revival tradition and gave voice to the broad evangelicalism that came to characterize much of American religion.

After the Revolution, American society was freer than in colonial days as states ended the practice of favoring an established church with tax support. Churches vied with one another for members as never before. They also made common cause to win over a culture that they believed was in danger of slipping into atheism and barbarism. At the same time politics and commerce became arenas of competitive human endeavor, religion became competitive. Evangelical revivalism, rooted in seventeenth-century Puritanism and flowering in the Great Awakening, bore fruit in the early years of the United

States. It was a form of Christianity particularly well-suited to the robust young society. In a society alive with religious variety, innovation, and competition, evangelicalism became a common language of faith, a fundamental spirituality shared across economic and geographical barriers.

The term "evangelical spirit" used in the title of this book refers to the religious ethos that pervaded much of the early Republic, including what has recently been called the "evangelical mind." Finney's generation worked hard in the classroom and in print to modify Calvinist theology in ways that enhanced the human response of faith. Evangelicalism was more than an intellectual movement; it was a popular movement, a mass movement. We can thus speak of an American evangelical "mentality" or an American evangelical "culture." Despite its European origins and continued trans-Atlantic connections, evangelicalism appeared to many to have been born in the United States, baptized in its market economy, and married to its national destiny. The career of Charles G. Finney reveals the strength and the limitations of such faith.

Finney is a significant figure, as well, because he managed to hold together a number of elements of evangelical religion that flew apart after his death, by the end of the nineteenth century: urban revivalism, conversion preaching, racial justice, women's rights, education reform, abstinence from alcohol and stimulants, the holiness movement, the second blessing and higher Christian life, baptism of the Holy Ghost, ecclesiastical independence, impatience with doctrinal conservatism, progressive theology, the life of prayer, criticism of government policies, advocacy of civil disobedience, and aloofness from politics. Many of these elements seemed mutually contradictory to Finney's critics during his lifetime, and yet collectively they have shaped American evangelicalism. Charles Finney certainly did not embrace every element of typical evangelical religion (e.g., he was not a premillennialist), but in many ways he was a mediating figure. He held conflicting tendencies together by his zeal for souls, his passion for justice, and his prayerful love of God.

Charles Finney also participated fully in the characteristic divisiveness of the American church. He always had plenty of theological enemies. He was involved in the Presbyterian New School–Old School schism, and he often battled in the no-man’s-land between Calvinist and Wesleyan versions of the Protestant gospel. He would not have been surprised that American Protestantism splintered not long after his death with the rise of a number of opposing movements. Fundamentalism stands against liberalism, the Social Gospel and Pentecostalism reflect radically different spiritualities, rival understandings of the authority of Scripture and of the millennium have taken shape, and Christians have taken to the streets and gone to the polls as both liberal and conservative political activists. Finney would have understood all of this and recognized the roots of it in his own era. But he never abandoned his prayer and work for essential, practical Christian unity. To use the language of our own time, Finney was both ecumenical and evangelical.

This book is a biographical study of an influential nineteenth-century Christian. It is also an effort to discern ways in which Charles G. Finney’s experience as a typical American on the one hand and as a biblical believer on the other interacted, reacted, and blended together. Although the pre-Civil War United States is scarcely identical to the complex nation of the 1990s, the evangelical faith embodied in Finney’s life continues to resonate in many ways with the faith of a vast proportion of the population — across the spectrum from religious right to left.

\* \* \* \* \*

My interest in Charles G. Finney grew out of a desire to explore the religious experiences of Americans who thought of themselves as heirs of the seventeenth-century Puritans. I appreciated Mark Noll’s confidence and encouragement when we discussed my plan to turn my attention to the nineteenth century during breaks at a conference. I am grateful to Roland M. Baumann, College Archivist at Oberlin, for his assistance whenever I came to the institution; I am grateful as well to the

Oberlin College Library for loaning me the Finney Papers on microfilm. The 1992 conference and exhibition at Oberlin College honoring the bicentennial of Finney's birth stimulated my early thinking. Harold F. Worthley and his staff at the Congregational Library in Boston generously made their Finney materials available to me during several visits and by loan. It was a great pleasure to research Charles G. Finney at two sites of his own labors, at the modern library behind Professor Street in Oberlin and in the reading room overlooking Boston's Park Street Church. I also wish to thank the Philip Schaff Library of Lancaster Theological Seminary, the United Church of Christ Archives, and the Shadek-Fackenthal Library of Franklin and Marshall College for providing background materials and facilities in which to review them.

Four scholars participated with me in a lively session on Charles G. Finney at a meeting of the American Society of Church History held at Oberlin College and First Church in the spring of 1994. Our session was conducted in Finney's 1842 meetinghouse, where we spoke from his pulpit. Papers and comments by Allen C. Guelzo, Marianne Perciaccante, Garth M. Rosell, and Barbara Brown Zikmund helped me to build upon my own paper from that conference. Garth Rosell, Allen Guelzo, and Mark Noll read the manuscript of this book with a critical eye and offered many helpful suggestions.

Like Charles G. Finney, I have endeavored to follow a dual calling in life as a pastor and an academic. My understanding of nineteenth-century evangelicalism has evolved through my years of teaching American religious history at Lancaster Theological Seminary. I accomplished my Finney research on mornings taken off from duties at my church over a four-year period, and I wrote the book during a three-month sabbatical that the congregation graciously provided. To the members of Church of the Apostles, United Church of Christ, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and to my excellent colleague Pastor Glenn J. Rader, I express my deep appreciation. Elizabeth A. Hambrick-Stowe enabled this project to reach fruition by her constant support and, in the writing stage, scrupulous editorial advice.

*Religion is the work of man.* It is something for man to do. It consists in obeying God. It is man's duty. It is true, God induces him to do it. He influences him by his Spirit, because of his great wickedness and reluctance to obey. . . .

A revival of religion is not a miracle . . . or dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means — as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means. . . . But means will not produce a revival, we all know, without the blessing of God. No more will grain, when it is sowed, produce a crop without the blessing of God. It is impossible for us to say that there is not as direct an influence or agency from God, to produce a crop of grain, as there is to produce a revival. . . .

A revival breaks the power of the world and of sin over Christians. It brings them to such a vantage ground that they get a fresh impulse towards heaven. They have a new foretaste of heaven, and new desires after union to God; and the charm of the world is broken, and the power of sin is overcome. . . . The worst parts of human society are softened, and reclaimed, and made to appear as lovely specimens of the beauty of holiness. . . .

If there is a sinner in this house, let me say to him, Abandon all your excuses. You have been told to-night that they are all in vain. To-night it will be told in hell, and told in heaven, and echoed from the ends of the universe, what you decide to do. This very hour may seal your eternal destiny. Will you submit to God to-night — NOW?

Charles G. Finney,  
*Lectures on Revivals of Religion*  
(1835)



