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Charles G. Finney—

Prototype of the Modern Evangelist

WHEN CHARLES Grandison Finney left his law office in 1821 to devote his life to the gospel ministry he inaugurated a new era in American revivalism. Not only did he develop new techniques for promoting conversions and a new style for pulpit oratory but he transformed the whole philosophy and process of evangelism.

It has been said "evangelism entered modernity with him."¹ It was Finney who originated many of the methods used by such famous revivalists as Moody, Chapman, and Mills, who in turn passed them on to be adapted later by men such as Billy Sunday and Billy Graham.

It is the purpose of this study to review Finney's contribution, especially from the standpoint of these "new measures," as they came to be termed.

Finney's "New Measures"

In 1835 Finney published his *Lectures on Revival*, a careful delineation of the means and measures for promoting revivals that had been developed in thirteen years of extensive preaching experience and shrewd observation.

In the first lecture Finney asserted with the finality of a physicist defining a law of leverage that a revival "is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constitutional means,"² and by philosophical he meant scientific. Though these means seem common now,

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they were new in Finney's time and aroused considerable resistance, especially among the Presbyterian and Congregational clergy. The Princeton reviewer of the *Lectures*, Professor Albert Dod, declared that through Finney's "experiments with the efficacy of different measures . . . the house of God becomes transformed into a kind of laboratory."³

The most prominent "new measures" were (1) basing sermons on sound oratorical and psychological principles, (2) protracted meetings, (3) securing decisions by the use of the "anxious seat," (4) using music to give the audience a sense of participation and to put them in the proper frame of mind, (5) advertising the time and the place of the meetings, (6) allowing women to pray in public in the presence of men, and (7) praying for people by name in open meetings.

Revival Preaching

To be practical, said Finney, revival preaching had to attract attention. To do this it had to be exciting. It had to suit the tastes of the age, to reach the understanding of common people, and to produce an active response on the part of the auditor.

"We must have exciting powerful preaching, or the devil will have the people except for what the Methodists can save," he said. Few Presbyterian ministers in recent years, he continued, "have gathered so large assemblies or won so many souls" as the Methodists simply because they failed to see that "the character of the age is changed." Instead of conforming to the new age many ministers still "retain the same stiff, dry, prosing style of preaching that answered half a century ago." What was needed was a "plain, pointed, and simple but warm and animated mode of preaching."⁴ Ministers educated at the eastern seminaries were taught to write out their sermons and to make them "literary essays," in which the artificial rhetoric of classical antiquity replaced the natural eloquence that came from burning conviction. "No doubt written sermons have done a great deal of good, but they can never give to the gospel its great power."⁵

"They used to complain," Finney wrote in his *Memoirs* in reference to college-educated ministers, "that I let down the dignity of the pulpit; that I was a disgrace to the ministerial profession; that I talked like a lawyer at the bar; that I talked to the people in a colloquial manner; that I said 'you' instead of preaching

about sin and sinners and saying 'they'; that I said 'hell' and with such emphasis as often to shock the people."⁶

Seminary graduates illustrated their sermons by references to ancient history; Finney illustrated his ideas "by references to the common affairs of men," and "among farmers and mechanics and other classes of men I borrowed my illustrations from their various occupations." He addressed them "in the language of the common people."⁷ Preaching should be "conversational" and should arouse interest by anecdotes "real or supposed." If the learned complain, "He tells stories" or "He is simply a story-telling minister," let them remember that "that is the way Jesus preached. And it is the only way to preach."⁸

Finney objected to manuscript preaching not only because it impeded the natural flow of thought but also the natural flow of emotions and the use of gestures. "Gestures are of more importance than is generally supposed. Mere words will never express the full meaning of the gospel." If a minister only feels what he says, and acts as he feels, "he will be eloquent." A minister must do what the actor does, "so throw himself into the spirit and meaning of the writer as to adopt his sentiments . . . embody them, throw them out upon the audience as a living reality. . . . If by 'theatrical' be meant the strongest possible representation of the sentiments expressed, then the more theatrical a sermon is the better."⁹

When objectors cry out that this is letting down "the dignity of the pulpit," they ought to remember that while they are preaching "sanctimonious starch" the "theatres will be thronged every night," for "the common-sense people will be entertained."¹⁰

Those who objected to revivalists' arousing the emotions forgot, said Finney, that "God has found it necessary to take advantage of the excitability there is in mankind to produce powerful excitements among them before He can lead them to obey."¹¹

Yet Finney was no advocate of emotionalism for its own sake. He emphasized the necessity for the revivalist to keep control over his meetings. He quoted the Biblical injunction, "Let all things be done decently and in order," and deplored the "fanaticism" and "rash zeal" of the great revivals of Edwards and Whitefield.¹²

Finney believed that almost every conversion took place in two stages: that



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of being awakened and that of being quickened. During the first stage the revivalist was to address himself to the "animal feelings" or the natural affections, while during the second he addressed the spiritual or religious affections. It was all very well to excite individuals in order to "awaken" them, but a very different approach was necessary to get them from that state to a state of conviction. The ignorant revivalists stopped at arousing the animal emotions, instead of proceeding to appeal to the religious affections.

Protracted Meetings

The only thing more effective in converting sinners than a good sermon based on these sound oratorical and psychological principles was a series of such sermons. Hence he advocated the use of "protracted meetings." "The design" of a protracted meeting, he said, was "to devote a series of days to religious services in order to make a more powerful impression of divine things upon the minds of the people."¹³

Finney's justification of these meetings was typical of his outlook. "Their novelty excites and fixes attention. Their being continued from day to day served to enlighten the mind and has a philosophical tendency to issue in conversions."¹⁴ He knew that protracted meetings could be overdone and realized that they must not interfere with worldly duties or family devotions. The minister must use common sense in scheduling meetings, particularly during such unusually busy periods as the planting and harvest seasons.

Later evangelists used protracted meetings as a matter of course. Moody regularly conducted two or three meetings a day, and sometimes held all-day meetings.¹⁵ Finney's advice to have one minister or evangelist conduct the protracted meetings from beginning to end, coupled with the idea of a continuous series of services for prayer and preaching over a long period of time, was the start of the standard type of revival meeting that became prevalent throughout the United States in the nineteenth century.

The Anxious Seat

Finney described the anxious seat as "the appointment of some particular seat in the place of meeting (usually the front benches or pews) where the anxious may come and be addressed particularly and be made the subject of prayers and sometimes conversed with individually." He

was convinced from experience that the use of anxious seats and anxious meetings was "undoubtedly philosophical and according to the laws of mind." They not only helped to break the "chains of pride" but they forced a definite commitment "to be on the Lord's side" from persons who might otherwise hold back.¹⁶ This, too, was a comparatively new measure that went back no farther than the use of the "mourners' bench" at the Methodist camp meetings. The practice of requiring awakened sinners to come forward publicly at the close of a sermon and express their desire or purpose to be saved became part of all revivals after Finney's day.

The Use of Music

An extremely important aspect of revival meetings (which Finney failed to discuss in his *Lectures*) was his use of music. The frontier camp meeting had strongly emphasized congregational singing, but the Presbyterian and Congregational churches were slow to abandon the old psalms and the stolid hymns of Isaac Watts. Finney did his best to promote good choir singing and introduced more modern music into his meetings.

When Finney came to New York in 1832 he brought with him as his musical assistant a man named Thomas Hastings of Utica. Hastings compiled several songbooks, taught and wrote music, directed Finney's choir, and composed the melody for "Rock of Ages." Hastings set a precedent for future "choristers" and musical "co-evangelists."

Advertising

For some reason Finney did not include in his lectures on revivals some of the techniques he had employed to promote his meetings at the Chatham Street Chapel. For example, he carefully "trained" the members of his church in New York to "go out in the highways and hedges to bring people to hear preaching. When we wished to give notice of any 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 both men and women of the congregation. By this method of advertising "the house could be filled any evening in the week."¹⁷

A minister who wished to work up a revival, he believed, should show the same wisdom as the politician and use "the appropriate means to the end. . . . What do the politicians do? They get up



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meetings, circulate handbills and pamphlets, blaze away in the newspapers, send coaches all over town with handbills, . . . all to gain attention to their cause and elect their candidate."¹⁸

These, and other of Finney's new measures, were resisted because they violated the customs of the day. In an age when laymen were expected to do little in the church other than absorb the minister's teachings, and women were not thought to be equal with men in any way, Finney's allowance of public prayer by laymen and particularly by women was shocking to consider. To people unused to aggressive and incessant advertising campaigns, the thought of God's services competing for attention with theaters and patent medicines was too horrible to contemplate. But all of those aspects of revival technique used by Finney became a part of modern evangelism.

Finney is worthy of our attention because he popularized many techniques of the evangelist that were to become standard practice for years to come. If not all of the "new measures" were entirely original with Finney, nevertheless he did modify them and amalgamate them into a completely new approach to evangelism, an approach that later revivalists adapted to the changing times but never basically altered.

Finney represents the transition in religious oratory from the frontier preacher to the city evangelist and was one of the few men in his time who practiced in speech delivery the modern concept of "energized conversation." The correctness of his ideas is attested to by many of his critics, who laid aside their objections after observing him work, as well as by the great numbers of city evangelists who eventually adopted his theories and methods. ■

¹ Grover C. Loud, *Evangelized America*, p. 228, cited in Rollin W. Quimby, "Charles Grandison Finney: Herald of Modern Revivalism," *Speech Monographs*, November, 1953, p. 293.

² Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revival* (W. G. McLoughlin, ed.) (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 17, 13, 12.

³ William G. McLoughlin, Jr., *Modern Revivalism* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1959), p. 84.

⁴ *Lectures on Revival*, pp. 272-275.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

⁶ Charles G. Finney, *The Memoirs of the Rev. Charles G. Finney* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1876), p. 83.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁸ *Lectures on Revival*, p. 209.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 10.

¹² McLoughlin, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

¹³ *Lectures on Revival*, pp. 262-265.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Quimby, *op. cit.*, p. 298.

¹⁶ *Lectures on Revival*, pp. 267, 268. (For a discussion of objections to the use of the anxious seat see Introduction to 1960 edition of *Lectures on Revival*.)

¹⁷ McLoughlin, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

¹⁸ *Lectures on Revival*, p. 167.