

NOT AS BAD AS THE TRUTH.

Charles Finney, a case of generous orthodoxy.



I think it would not be incorrect of me to say that of those Evangelicals who are celebrating the 500 anniversary of John Calvin's birth this year (1509), many will probably be outspoken critics of the ministry of Charles Grandison Finney (1793-1875). Yet, could they not both be spoken of as Reformers in the church of Jesus Christ? I think so.

Charles Finney's rise to prominence during the Second Great Awakening in America was meteoric. Being by nature talented and confident, and endowed with exceptionally penetrating powers of logic, he was admitted to the bar after little formal education in his late 20's. Then after a powerful conversion to Christ in 1821 in Adams, northern New York State, he began preaching as an evangelist with remarkable success. Since his meetings were attended with such power and conviction of sin, Finney was soon invited to preach throughout most of New England. His rather idiosyncratic theology was in keeping with the 'New School' Calvinism which laid more stress on human responsibility than the 'Old School' did. Though his unorthodox measures and stress on the need for immediate decision caused much alarm, many opened their pulpits to Finney and witnessed the transformation of their churches and towns. He later became Professor of Oberlin College in Ohio, the first academic institution in America to be both multi-racial and coeducational. Though originally licensed to preach as a Presbyterian, he later became Congregational. He had a profound influence on American evangelicals and his writings on revival have impacted churches on both sides of the Atlantic.

Yet today few (if any) preachers and theologians seem to have anything positive to say of someone who was once spoken of as one of the great evangelists of the Christian church. One popular website I visited spoke of him as a wolf in sheep's clothing. Many see his famous book *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* as a handbook on how to work up a revival from below, rather than of praying it down from above. Finney's so called 'new measure' of introducing the 'anxious bench' in his meetings is frequently cited as the genesis of that manipulative preacher-orchestrated conversionism common today. His theology is at times categorized as heretical and frequently as Pelagian, and his character is impugned as being arrogant, fractious and deceitful. Sadly, during this renaissance of evangelical Calvinism, attaining an objective appreciation of Finney is becoming all the more difficult.

I recently spent some time revisiting the life and theology of Charles Finney. Surprisingly, I found myself in the presence of a theological and moral doctor who began diagnosing the condition of my heart. I had my motives winnowed as I was brought face to face with the actual moral texture of my life. Finney kept insisting that being a Christian implied a lifestyle of

conscious and intentional God-wardness in every area of life. With crystal clear logic he explained what it actually meant to 'do all for the glory of God', from choosing clothing to choosing texts in preaching. It was unnerving and exposing, yet freeing. It was not the classical topics of theology which was pressed upon me as I read, but rather his stress on the ethical side of the Christian life. It is here, in the motives of the heart, that Finney is at his best. He put moral backbone into me again as I was confronted with that inalienable fact of my human responsibility.

After reading his *Memoirs and Systematic Theology*, I read the epistle of James, and found that both James and Finney had the same emphasis. I thought that as Luther was the apostle of 'justification by faith', so Finney might be the apostle of 'justification by works' (yes, that is biblical terminology). With Jacobite apostolic voice, Finney pressed home the claims of the moral law and the obligations that Christians were under, putting forth clearly and compellingly the Biblical vision of the need for (and the actually possibility of) *purity of heart*.

Finney reminds us that in the Bible there is an emphasis on both the divine sovereignty *and* the human responsibility. One is not emphasised at the expense of the other. The Word of God regards our human need to decide and respond for God with deadly seriousness. This Finney helps restore as he assists us to have a biblically robust grasp of the doctrine of human responsibility. I think that this emphasis fills a gap in our theological text books (who has read the book The Reformed Doctrine of Human Responsibility? I don't think there is such a book).

Many Christians greatly used of God fell beyond the pale of 'conventional orthodoxy'. We have only to think of people such as George Fox, Blaise Pascal, John Fletcher, Soren Kierkegaard, Oswald Chambers and a host of others. Yet all were within the fold of the Lord Jesus Christ. Together with these great men of God, Charles Finney can be considered as a great Reformer within the Christian Church.

I leave you with my conclusion: I believe that the Spirit of God who inspired the apostle James to write his letter rested on Charles Finney. What James did for the early church, so Finney did for the church of his time. Read James, then read Finney, and see if you agree. (and if you do not have the time, just read James!).