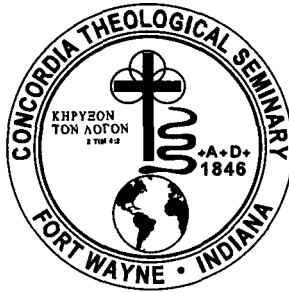


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Theological Observer

Charles Finney on Theology and Worship

“Without new measures it is impossible that the Church should succeed in gaining the attention of the world to religion. There are so many exciting subjects constantly brought before the public mind, such a running to and fro, so many that cry ‘Lo here!’ and ‘Lo there!’ that the Church cannot maintain her ground without sufficient novelty in measures, to get the public ear.”¹

If one knew no better, one might conclude that this quote dates from 1998. Everywhere we turn it seems that we hear one call after another for the church to “get up to date,” “get in line with the times,” or to “go contemporary.” Actually, though, the quote dates from the 1830s when Charles Finney first published his noted *Revival Lectures*. It is not too much to say that Finney has been the single most influential theologian in America – not because he was the most profound, not because he was the most subtle and careful, but because he understood the crucial link between democratic individualism and market capitalism, and then wedded those two with Arminian theology. The results for worship practice and doctrine? The classic American revival and its theological counterpart, “decision theology” – the precursors of today’s “contemporary worship.”

Who was Finney, and why are we beginning to hear so much about him in our circles? Briefly, Charles Finney was born in Connecticut in 1792, but his family moved to upstate New York two years later. It was there that he received his education in frontier schools. As a young man, he studied law and set up practice at Adams, New York, in the northern reaches of the state. While reading Blackstone’s *Commentaries on Law*, he noted continuous references to the Holy Scriptures, which Blackstone viewed as the highest authority. This, along with repeated urging from a clergyman friend, moved Finney to buy a Bible, and he soon was reading it more than law. The circumstances of his conversion are telling. On October 10, 1821, out in the woods by himself, far away from the Church

¹Charles Grandison Finney, *Revival Lectures* (Grand Rapids: Flemming H. Revell, n.d.), 309.

gathered by God around Word and Sacrament, he made his decision to give his heart to Jesus.

He soon began conducting revival meetings. Finney's reputation grew from his use of the "New Measures" – worship devices that were designed to inflame the passions of people and to put them into the right emotional state so that they would make a decision for Christ. Most notorious among these was the "anxious" or "mourner's" bench, where those who were disturbed over their sin, would be driven into making the leap toward God and salvation. He held revivals all over the eastern seaboard, including Rome, Utica, Auburn, and Troy, New York, as well as Wilmington, Philadelphia, Boston, and New York City. Later, he systematized his theology during his long tenure as a professor at Oberlin College.² He died in 1875.

What was the content of Finney's Christianity? Very simply, he disagreed with Scripture on some fundamental points. First, he denied original sin. In spite of the clear words of Psalm 51:5, he claimed that man does not come into this world at war with God and with a disposition to sin. Rather, his will is intact and he can choose to do good spiritual works apart from God's Spirit working in his lives. "Let him [the preacher] go right over against them, urge upon them their ability to obey God, show them their obligation and duty, and press them with that until he brings them to submit and be saved."³

This leads to the second and much more grievous error. If man can turn himself to God, then why does he need a Savior? The answer for Finney is, basically, man does not need a Savior—at least not in the scriptural sense! He is his own Savior. Finney does not view Jesus' death as payment for the sins of human beings who cannot save themselves. Rather, Jesus' death demonstrates God's anger over sin and his great love for humankind. Jesus becomes merely an example of what

²Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, volumes two and three (Oberlin, Ohio: James M. Fitch, 1846, 1847). Volume one never appeared.

³*Revival Lectures*, 224-225. Not surprisingly, Finney denied that Baptism worked regeneration and forgiveness of sins.

we should do for God if we really love him—give ourselves totally up to him. This notion, the so-called “moral government” theory of the atonement, compromises the biblical doctrine of salvation, where Jesus came to offer his life as a ransom for imprisoned and helpless sinners (Matthew 20:28).

And that really brings us to the heart of the matter. We are not saved by grace, according to Finney, we are saved by our own works. “Sinners ought to be made to feel that they have *something* to do, and that is, *to repent*; that it is something which *no other* being can do for them, neither God nor man; and something which *they can* do, and do *now*. Religion is something to *do*, not something to *wait for*. And they must do it now, or they are in danger of eternal death.”⁴

Now, what does all this mean for worship practice? Finney’s own words clearly show us that there can be no false dichotomy raised between “style and substance,” content and form. The two are inextricably linked. The way one believes forms the way one worships and the way one worships forms the way one believes. To Finney’s credit, he admitted as much.

All ministers should be revival ministers, and all preaching should be revival preaching; that is, it should be calculated to promote holiness. People say: “It is very well to have some men in the Church, who are revival preachers, and who can go about and promote revivals; but then you must have others to *indoctrinate* the Church.” Strange! Do they know that a revival indoctrinates the Church faster than anything else? And a minister will never produce a revival if he does not indoctrinate his hearers. The preaching I have described is full of doctrine, but it is doctrine to be *practised*.⁵

What was *the* form of preaching and worship that Finney saw bound up inseparably together? Theater, drama, and high emotion! Those are the things of true religion for Finney.

⁴Revival Lectures, 232.

⁵Revival Lectures, 246.

Now, what is the design of the actor in theatrical representation? It is so to throw himself into the spirit and meaning of the writer, as to adopt his sentiments, and make them his own: to feel them, embody them, throw them out upon the audience as a living reality. Now, what is the objection to all this in preaching? The actor suits the action to the word, and the word to the action. His looks, his hands, his attitudes, and everything, are designed to express the *full meaning* of the writer. Now, this should be the aim of the preacher. And if by "theatrical" be meant the strongest possible representation of the sentiments expressed, then the more theatrical the sermon is, the better.⁶

Hopefully, applications to the present situation of American Lutheranism should be clear by now. The greatest advocate of revivals and decision theology clearly tells us that there is no division to be made between substance and style. He is absolutely right! What is troublesome is the setting in the LCMS today, which argues that if we keep the substance of the message—salvation by grace through faith—then we can use any "style" of worship that appeals to us or to our hearers. Finney will have nothing of the sort. His "style" of worship is inextricably linked to a specific theology, and vice versa. To adopt one for Finney, means to adopt the other. But while Finney is right on the relationship of theology and worship practice, he is dead wrong theologically. His theology is at odds with the scriptural doctrine of justification by grace through faith. It is a theology that confuses the Law and the Gospel. It is a theology that minimizes the work of Christ to save sinners. It is a theology that puts the responsibility for salvation squarely on the shoulders of human beings. "*Religion is the work of man*. It is something for man to do. It consists in obeying God. It is man's duty."⁷ Therefore his practice is wrong, too. Still, those in our midst clamoring incessantly for "contemporary worship" would do well to note the words of their teacher.

⁶*Revival Lectures*, 247.

⁷*Revival Lectures*, 1.

Finney's words cited at the opening of this little paper show a man who believes that God is not ultimately in control of his church—that human beings are the ones running the show—and that unless they start meeting the world on its own terms, the church is doomed. There is only one word that can summarize such a theology: faithless—without faith in God's promises, but full of faith in the works of men. Consider again his words with a bit of emphasis added: "Without new measures it is *impossible* that the Church should succeed in gaining the attention of the world to religion. There are so many exciting subjects constantly brought before the public mind, such a running to and fro, so many that cry 'Lo here!' and 'Lo there!' that the Church *cannot* maintain her ground without sufficient novelty in measures, to get the public ear."⁸ And then consider the words of Christ, again with a little emphasis added: "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for this was *not* revealed to you *by man*, but *by my Father in heaven*. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:17-18).

Lawrence R. Rast Jr.

⁸Revival Lectures, 309.