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American Christianity and Its Jesuses

Lawrence R. Rast Jr.

WWJD? So pervasive is the idea of Jesus in American culture that Christ's name need not even be mentioned in order to invoke him. But a deeper point underlies this: how is it that the name—or the letter—of Jesus can be invoked in such an authoritative way for what most Christians would claim is a highly secularized culture? After all, WWJD was and is an American phenomenon. Even where it impacted other nations, it was generally presented in the English of its American originators.

WWJD grew out of Charles Sheldon's 1896 novel, *In His Steps*.¹ Sheldon captured the essence of Christianity as he understood it in the phrase, "What Would Jesus Do?" In this Sheldon reflected the nineteenth-century model of moral government theology—Jesus serving primarily as a moral example rather than effecting a substitutionary atonement.²

In the late 1980s, youth ministers began putting "W.W.J.D." on buttons and bracelets. Local merchandisers picked up the idea and eventually WWJD found its way on to mugs, rings, bumper stickers, bookmarks, key rings, and other things.³ The expression has inspired a myriad of variations, usually of a humorous character, though not always so. An example of the latter is the song "Craig" on Stephen Lynch's 2005 CD, *The Craig Machine*.⁴ The song is the story of Craig, Jesus' unknown, neglected, wild, and fundamentally jealous brother.⁵ Unlike Jesus, who turns water into wine, Craig turns water into . . . well, listen:

¹ For a biography of Charles Sheldon, see "Charles M. Sheldon," <http://spider.georgetowncollege.edu/HTALLANT/COURSES/his338/students/nbrooking/cms.htm> (accessed February 16, 2007). Charles M. Sheldon, *In His Steps* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston Co., 1937).

² Sheldon's ideas coalesced with those that formed into the Social Gospel espoused by Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch, among others. Rauschenbusch later acknowledged his debt to Sheldon's novel.

³ The irony, of course, is that Sheldon's social gospel is absolutely at odds with the commercialization of the phrase.

⁴ Stephen Lynch, *The Craig Machine*, compact disc, © 2005 What Are Records. "Craig" is track 5 on the CD.

⁵ "What would Jesus do? Summary," *BookRags Web site*, http://www.bookrags.com/What_would_Jesus_do%3F.

Cuz when Craig's in sight
 We'll party all damn night.
 I don't turn water into wine
 But into cold Coors Light.

The punch line of this violent and profane song is the following:

And now the question for you
 Is not "What Would Jesus Do?"
 But where will you be
 When the Craig Machine comes partyin' through?
 And if the Lord will allow
 You've got to ask yourself how,
 When, who and why and where is your messiah now?

Not surprisingly, Lynch fans began to ask "WWCD?" or "What would Craig do?"

The phrase, and the variations it has generated, has also been used for political, satirical, and, of course, theological purposes. Consider the following examples:

"Who Wants Jelly Donuts?"

"What Would Jesus Drive?"

On *The Simpsons*, Ned Flanders shows Homer a movie guide put out by his church, titled "What Would Jesus View?"

Also on *The Simpsons*, Homer was surprised to learn that the "J" in WWJD stood for Jesus; he thought it was for Geppetto.

In a *Family Guy* episode, Jesus drove a car with a front license plate reading "WWID?" namely, "What Would I Do?"

"What Would Scooby Do?"

And plenty more could be cited.

Needless to say, belief in "God" runs high among Americans. Belief in Jesus runs high as well. Surveys, often appearing around Christmas or Easter, perennially inform us of the distinctively American trait of seeing Jesus as a personal hero, cultural icon, primary model for life, philosophical model, and there are plenty of other images. This plethora of Jesuses characterizes the history of Christianity and other religions in America.

To this end, several recently appearing books pick up the question of how Americans have viewed Jesus. *Jesus in America: Personal Savior, Cultural Hero, National Obsession* by Richard Wightman Fox traces the many ways that Americans have conceived of Jesus and presented him to their neighbors. Fox captures well the many Jesuses of the American scene:

Benjamin Franklin understood Jesus as a wise man worthy of imitation. Thomas Jefferson regarded him as a moral teacher. The assassination of Abraham Lincoln, which occurred on Good Friday, was popularly interpreted as paralleling the crucifixion of Jesus . . . as one preacher put it: "Jesus Christ died for the world, Abraham Lincoln died for his country." Elizabeth Cady Stanton appropriated Jesus' message to champion women's rights. George W. Bush named Jesus as his favorite political philosopher As we have seen in recent presidential elections, the name of Jesus is often thrust into the center of political debates, and many Americans regularly enlist Jesus, their ultimate arbiter of value, as the standard bearer for their views and causes.⁶

Fox chronicles the variety of American Jesuses. He shows how the image of Jesus held by significant historical persons influenced American history. It led to Columbus's voyage of 1492, the expeditions of the Spanish missionaries, the establishment of the Puritan and Pilgrim colonies, the American Revolution, the American Civil War, and the abolition of slavery. It spurred social and cultural movements spanning from the emergence of organized labor to the counter-culture of the 1960s. Finally, he brings the story to its end in the almost universal appeal of Jesus in the contemporary period.

An even more helpful book is Stephen Prothero's *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*.⁷ Like Fox, Prothero considers several concrete ways in which distinctively American versions of Jesus have been advanced. More importantly, however, is Prothero's thesis: The nineteenth century was the century of Jesuses in America. During that century, a number of distinctively American Jesuses emerged.

The remainder of this paper will look at three different "versions" of Jesus within American Christianity during the first half of the nineteenth century. First, Barton Warren Stone (1772-1844) defined a Unitarian and

⁶ Richard Wightman Fox, *Jesus in America: Personal Savior, Cultural Hero, National Obsession* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004). This book summary appears on the front flap of the dust jacket.

⁷ Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

Arian version of Jesus on the Kentucky frontier. At the same time, within American Lutheranism a radical expression of rationalism exhibited itself in the second oldest Lutheran synod in America, The Evangelical Lutheran Ministerium of New York. Frederick Henry Quitman (1760–1832) defined the gospel as the free response of the willful subject to the divine government revealed in and through Christ. Finally, Charles Grandison Finney (1792–1875) articulated a perfectionist vision of moral government theology that explicitly and purposefully denied forensic justification and the idea of imputation. In each case, Fox's and Prothero's claims that Americans were intently determined to fashion their own version of Jesus was borne out, and the effects of this remain evident in the present.

I. Barton Warren Stone (1772–1844)

Biography

Barton W. Stone was born in Maryland on December 24, 1772. Largely unchurched during his youth, he was nevertheless surrounded by a plethora of denominations, all of which he questioned theologically. After an intense personal religious experience, he joined the Presbyterian church and later became a pastor in this denomination. He did so, however, with reservations. He could never quite bring himself to accept the confessional standards of the Presbyterian tradition because of certain doctrinal points. As such, his relationship with his tradition was a tension-filled one. As one biographer has put it:

He had grave doubts about some of the points of doctrine of the Presbyterian Church. Before he joined this church he had a long conversation with two Presbyterian ministers, relating to them the state of his mind on some points which disturbed him. These ministers wished to retain so promising a young man for the Presbyterian Church. They asked him how far he would be willing to subscribe to the Confession. He replied: "As far as it is consistent with the word of God." This showed his great respect, even while he was in the wilderness of confusion, for the word of God. When he was ordained as a minister in the Presbyterian Church, he gave the same answer to the presbytery – that he would subscribe to the Confession only so far as it was consistent with the word of God.⁸

⁸ Henry Leo Boles, *Biographical Sketches of Gospel Preachers* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1932), 29. Pages 28–32 are also available online as H. Leo Boles, "Barton W. Stone," *The Restoration Movement Web site* (Scott Harp, 2000), <http://www.therestorationmovement.com/stone,bw.htm> (accessed February 1, 2007).

It is possible to explore any number of points where Stone was formative for the American Christian experience. His key part in the great Cane Ridge Revival and his instrumental role in the formation of the Restorationist Movement/"Christian" tradition are noteworthy. For the task at hand, the topic will be limited to a brief consideration of his Christology.

Unit/Arianism

From early in his ministry, Barton Warren Stone was the object of significant controversy due to his stances on the doctrines of the Trinity and Christ. To be blunt, Stone had, at the very least, Unitarian leanings in respect to the Trinity and Arian leanings in respect to the person of Christ. Both affected his doctrine of the atonement.

The first stumbling block for Stone was the doctrine of the Trinity as confessed by the church catholic. While he accepted the biblical designations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, he rejected the language of three persons in one divine essence as a human philosophical construct that was fundamentally contrary to reason. To speak of three persons was to speak of three separate entities, three "gods." Since the Bible clearly affirmed that there was only one God, such language was anti-biblical. Yet the question of how to deal with the language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit presented him with problems. His solution was to speak of the Son as the first creation of the Father and the Spirit as the power of God.⁹

This, however, only solved part of the problem. What of the verses of Scripture that spoke of the oneness of Father and Son? Stone's solution follows:

They are one, or agree in their testimony. . . . To say these three are one God, would contradict the original; for the word *hen*, translated *one*, is in the neuter gender, and can not agree with the word *God*. Nor is it correct to say, these three are one being; for Paul and Apollos are said to be one—I Cor. iii: 8. "Now he that planteth and he that watereth are (*hen*) *one*." No one imagines that they were one being; but agree, that they were two distinct men engaged in one work, in one spirit. Our blessed Saviour prays the Father, that all believers might be (*hen*) *one*, even as he

⁹ R. N. Gillmore, "R. N. Gillmore's From Revival to Restoration," *Restoration Movement Web site* (Hans Rollmann, 1999–2005), <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/pp/PP021.HTM> (accessed February 2, 2007). Also available in print form as R. N. Gillmore, *From Revival to Restoration*, Provocative Pamphlets No. 21 (Melbourne: Federal Literature Committee of Churches of Christ in Australia, 1956), 5.

and the Father were (*hen*) *one*. Now as all believers are not one substance nor one being; and as they are all one, *even* as the Father and Son are one; we must then conclude, that the Father and Son are not one substance, nor one being. This is further evident from John x: 30, "I and my Father are (*hen*) one," says Jesus. Yet in the same Evangelist he said, "*My Father is greater than I.*" John xiv: 28. If they were one substance, or one being, there could be no comparison; as *one* can not be greater or less than itself. The fact is, all believers are one in spirit, purpose, and mind—and this is the oneness which our Lord prayed they might have—this was the oneness of Paul and Apollos.—This appears to me to be the oneness of the Father and the Son.¹⁰

Turning to Christology, Stone explores the ramifications of his trinitarian thought for the person and work of Christ. Jesus may be labeled "Son of God" in a sense, but not with the meaning that he is essentially equal to the Father.

That the Son of God was very and eternal God, and yet eternally begotten, is a doctrine to which I can not subscribe; because the terms eternal Son, eternally begotten, are not found in the Bible. As they are human inventions, by human reason they may be tried, without the imputation of impiety. According to the before cited articles, the Father and Son are one eternal substance. The voice of reason is, that the same individual substance can not beget itself, nor be begotten by itself. Therefore the substance of the Son was never begotten nor born. If it be granted, that the substance of the Son was eternal, and therefore never begotten; but still urged that the Son was eternally begotten; then it must follow that, what was eternally begotten had no substance, and therefore, was not a real being. This is virtually to deny the Son.¹¹

What is the bottom line? "If language conveys ideas, it is plain that the act of begetting implies a previous agent; and that the agent and the act must precede the thing begotten; therefore the Son could not be eternally begotten."¹² The incarnation compromised, it is not surprising to find that Stone's idea of the atonement is affected in basic ways.

Let us turn to the cross and ask, who is he that suffers, bleeds and dies? The articles before quoted say, That the second person of trinity was

¹⁰ Barton W. Stone, "An Address to the Churches (Mathes Edition 1859)," <http://thriceholly.net/Texts/Stone.html> (accessed January 29, 2007).

¹¹ Stone, "An Address to the Churches."

¹² Stone, "An Address to the Churches."

united with our nature, that the two whole and entire natures, Godhead and manhood, were *inseparably* united, *never to be divided*, very God and very man in one person, who truly suffered, was crucified, dead and buried, to reconcile the Father to us. Hence we must conclude that the very God suffered, yea, *truly* suffered!—that the very and only one God was crucified! yea, was dead!—and buried too!!—and continued three days and nights under the power of death!—for the two natures, Godhead and manhood, are *inseparably united never to be divided*—therefore as the human body was in Joseph's tomb, so must be the Godhead too!—All this was done and suffered by the very God, say our brethren in the forecited, articles, to reconcile the Father to us! Here is certainly the notion of two distinct Gods held forth—the one an unchangeable God; the other a changeable one—the one a living God; the other a dead, buried one—the one reconciling; the other reconciled! But as all acknowledge that there is but one only *living* God; therefore we must conclude that the one that was dead was not that one only living and true God. And as all acknowledge the one only living and true God is *without passions*, therefore he that suffered such exquisite *passion* on the cross, was not the only living and true God.¹³

Thus, simply, Jesus cannot substantially be God.

All must acknowledge that the only true God can not suffer; for he was as happy during the suffering of Jesus, as he had been from eternity. I ask again, who suffered on the cross? Our brethren say that the Son was very and eternal God; then it follows that the Son did not suffer nor die; for very and eternal God can not suffer nor die. I repeat the question, who suffered on the cross? The answer must be, according to these opinions, not the Son of God who came from heaven, but a mere man, born of Mary thirty-three years before. How then is the love of God commended in his death? Let our brethren, who continually say that we deny Christ, and the virtue of his blood—let them beware lest they be found, at least in words, doing it themselves.¹⁴

Stone's views concerning the Trinity and his idea of Christ and the atonement were branded absurd, unscriptural, and heretical by his colleagues in the Presbyterian ministry. Taking advantage of the freedoms offered by the American frontier, he simply moved out from under their jurisdiction and continued to teach and preach according to the intended

¹³ Stone, "An Address to the Churches."

¹⁴ Stone, "An Address to the Churches."

sense of the Scriptures—as he read them.¹⁵ The historic doctrine of the Trinity was an absurdity, and the notion that Jesus was God was simply a rational impossibility. Trinitarian speculation that centered on three persons in one divine essence and Christology that spoke of two natures in one person simply did not communicate the biblical truth.

Arius asserted that Jesus Christ was a created intelligence of the highest order, and Athanasius contended he was *begotten, not made* . . . and to this [Athanasius] have I subscribed long ago, as the most probable. See my letters to Doc. Blythe. I acknowledge that much speculation has been used on both sides of the long vexatious question. I, like many others, have indulged in it; but convinced of its inutility, and bad effects in society, have for several years back relinquished these speculations, and have confined myself to the language of scripture in my public teaching.¹⁶

Rather, Stone argued for the strict use of only biblical terminology to describe God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit.¹⁷

¹⁵ “When all his disguises are stripped off, one opponent said, he stands convicted of occupying Arian, Socinian, and Pelagian ground. . . . Stone did indeed believe personally that the doctrine of the trinity as taught by the Westminster Confession was an incomprehensible absurdity. He evidently did understand Christ to be a created being who had been made equal with the Father in name and office. For him, the atonement was not expiatory, but a reconciliation brought about when people are conformed to the nature of God, that is, become holy. That state of holiness is a result of one’s salvation through faith, faith being an act of the will and intellect, believing the written word of God. In the case of none of these doctrines, however, did Stone believe that one who held another idea was not a true Christian. These were matters about which the scriptures were not absolutely explicit and therefore could not be made terms of Christian fellowship.” Douglas A. Foster, “The Springfield and Cumberland Presbyteries: Conflict and Secession in the Old Southwest,” *Restoration Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (1990), http://www.acu.edu/sponsored/restoration_quarterly/archives/1990s/vol_32_no_3_contents/foster.html (accessed February 2, 2007).

¹⁶ Barton W. Stone, “The Editor’s remarks on brother H. Cyrus’ letter, No. 2,” *Christian Messenger* 9 (July 1835): 163.

¹⁷ Some interpreters dispute Stone’s Arianism, claiming that later in life he had moved beyond it. It is important to note, however, that he never disavowed his earlier position. What does appear to have changed was the manner in which he discussed Christology. According to John Mark Hicks, “For Stone’s part, while he had earlier flirted with Arianism, by his death he had rejected all such speculative language and come to rest only, he claimed, in the words of Scripture. Stone acknowledged his debt to Campbell for rejecting speculation and ‘expressing the faith of the gospel in the words of revelation.’ In his last decade, his Christological statements are replete with biblical phrases without extended speculation as to their ultimate ontology.” John Mark Hicks,

Summary

Barton Stone hoped to restore true, biblical Christianity from the impurities foisted upon it by human philosophical speculation. To the end of his life, however, Stone remained unconvinced that traditional, creedal Christianity accurately reflected the biblical witness. "If a doctrine be revealed, however mysterious it may be, I will humbly receive it. My reason shall ever bow to revelation; but it shall never be prostrated to human contradictions and inventions. Pious and good men have received such doctrines. God loves and pities them; and so will I."¹⁸

It is not surprising that Stone's Unitarian and Arian leanings affected the manner in which Stone viewed Christ's atoning work. As we will see with Charles Finney below, Stone held to a view of the atonement usually called the moral influence, or moral government, theory. That is, Jesus died to demonstrate self-sacrificing love. However, Stone and Finney were not the only ones who adopted the moral government theology. That perspective also made itself felt within the Lutheran tradition.

II. Frederick Henry Quitman (1760–1832)

Biography

Friedrich Heinrich Quitman was born in Westphalia, Germany—on an island in the Rhine—on August 7, 1760. He died in Rhinebeck, New York, on June 26, 1832. He attended the university at Halle and studied both philosophy and theology. In the year 1781, he was ordained to the ministry by the Lutheran consistory of Amsterdam and was sent as pastor of the Lutheran congregation on the island of Curagoa in the West Indies. He remained until the uprising of 1795, which drove him and his family to New York. His intention was to return to Holland where a life-pension awaited him, but the depressed conditions of Lutheranism in New York led him to stay. He accepted a call from the united congregations at Schoharie and Cobleskill, New York, where he remained about two years. In 1798 he accepted a call from four congregations near Rhinebeck, New York, serving until his retirement in 1828 (by then he was simply serving

"What Did Christ's Sacrifice Accomplish? Atonement in Early Restorationist Thought" (Society of Biblical Literature Conference, Chicago, Illinois, November, 1994), <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/studies/whatdid.htm> (accessed February 2, 2007). That being said, Stone's contemporaries remained unconvinced. See Thomas Cleland, *The Socini-Arian Detected, A Series of Letters to Barton W. Stone, and Some Important Subjects of Theological Discussion, Referred to in His "Address" to the Christian Churches in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Ohio* (Lexington, Ky.: Thomas T. Skillman, 1815).

¹⁸ Stone, "An Address to the Churches."

one congregation). Well-known in larger theological circles, Harvard awarded him a Doctor of Divinity in 1814. In 1807 he was elected president of the New York Ministerium, a post that he held until 1825.¹⁹ He also served as the chairman of the board of trustees of Hartwick Seminary, just south of Cooperstown, New York, which was founded in 1815. He was not a particularly prolific writer, but he did publish several important texts, including a *Treatise on Magic, Evangelical Catechism*, and *Three Sermons on the Reformation*, as well as editing the *Hymnbook of the Ministerium of New York*.²⁰ The first of these had little to do with theology. The others, however, are evidence of radical rationalism's brief flourishing in the Lutheran church in the United States.²¹

Radical Rationalism

The religion of Jesus, in Quitman's mind, was a simple thing. In his *Evangelical Catechism* he defined the kingdom of God as "every institution which God has employed, and continues to employ for raising man to higher moral perfection."²² This straightforward, practice-oriented religion had been corrupted by the ministers of the church who convoked "ecclesiastical assemblies, in order to establish and enforce their opinions

¹⁹ Harry J. Kreider, historian of the New York Ministerium, has provided the invaluable service of transcribing the minutes of the Ministerium from 1807 to 1818. A copy of this transcription may be found in the collection of the Concordia Historical Institute in Saint Louis, Missouri. The minutes show the pivotal role played by Quitman in leading the Ministerium.

²⁰ Frederick Henry Quitman, *A Treatise on Magic, or, On the Intercourse between Spirits and Men with Annotations* (Albany, NY: Balance Press, 1810); Quitman, *Evangelical Catechism; or A Short Exposition of the Principal Doctrines and Precepts of the Christian Religion, For the Use of the Churches Belonging to the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of the State of New York* (Hudson, NY: William E. Norman, 1814); Quitman, *Three Sermons, the First Preached before the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Convened in Christ's Church, in the Town of Claverack, on Sunday the 7th of September, 1817: and the Second and Third on the Reformation by Doctor Martin Luther* (Hudson, NY: William E. Norman, 1817); and Quitman, *A Collection of Hymns, and a Liturgy, for the Use of Evangelical Lutheran Churches; To Which Are Added Prayers for Families and Individuals* (Philadelphia: G. & D. Billmeyer, 1814).

²¹ Biographies of Quitman are limited. See "Frederick Henry Quitman," *Evangelical Review* 10 (October 1858): 183-190; John G. Morris, *Fifty Years in the Lutheran Ministry* (Baltimore: Printed for the Author, 1878); and Douglas Stange, "Frederick Henry Quitman, D.D. (1760-1832): The Flowering of Rationalism in the American Lutheran Church" (unpublished essay, in the library of the Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis, MO). For an analysis of the theology of Quitman, especially in his hymnal, see Benjamin A. Kolodziej, "Frederick Henry Quitman and the Catechesis of the American Lutheran Enlightenment," *CTQ* 70 (2006): 341-366.

²² Quitman, *Evangelical Catechism*, 43.

and decrees by excommunicating and anathematizing all those, who dissented from them.”²³ The simple gospel of the Scriptures is that God has a “merciful disposition” toward humankind, which is revealed in the sending of

his only begotten Son into the world, that through his mediation, or through his doctrine, life and death, man should be delivered from ignorance, and superstition, from sin and misery, and conducted to the possession of truth and the enjoyment of everlasting life. Every one, that is willing to accept of this gracious offer, and to demonstrate his faith in the Redeemer by sincere love to God, and an active zeal for the welfare of his neighbours, may rely upon the assistance of the Holy Spirit, and thus be rendered meet, by the means of grace, which the Gospel commends, for the enjoyment of eternal felicity, which Jesus himself is to impart to his true believers after having rescued them from the grave.²⁴

In contrast to this simple gospel are those systems that are, in the words of Quitman, “too narrow and circumscribed, to leave room for the expansion of the human mind, too obscure and intricate, to illuminate the understanding, too brittle, to support the mind under affliction and doubt, and too frigid, to warm the heart with love to God, and charity to men.”²⁵ Dead orthodoxy was, for Quitman, quite as serious a threat as the dogmatism of Rome. Luther and true Lutheranism, according to Quitman, appealed to the better qualities of the human person. “Man is a progressive being, capable of improvement. The more he exerts the faculties of his mind, the more he may be said to comply with the purpose for which they were bestowed.”²⁶

Quitman provided a vehicle for the improvement of the human mind with his *Evangelical Catechism*. In it one sees the brief flowering of Quitman’s rationalistic Lutheranism. In the first place, Quitman takes up the Apostles’ Creed and offers an exposition of it. Noting that the Creed was not written by the apostles proper, but rather reflects their doctrine as they learned it from Christ and recorded it in the Scriptures, Quitman takes up question of God. Notably absent in his discussion of God is any use of the word “Trinity.” Though he speaks of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, nowhere does he carefully work out the relationship of the three persons in one divine essence. His position is vague to say the least,

²³ Quitman, *Three Sermons*, 5; emphasis added.

²⁴ Quitman, *Three Sermons*, 8.

²⁵ Quitman, *Three Sermons*, 11-12.

²⁶ Quitman, *Three Sermons*, 12.

particularly in respect to the relationship of Father and Son. As he puts it when posing the question of why God is represented as Father, "This title is given in the first article to God, chiefly to signify his near relation to our Lord Jesus Christ."²⁷

Not surprisingly, as Quitman turns to the doctrine of Christ, one finds that his trinitarian theology affects his understanding of Christ's person and work. Jesus is called "the only begotten son of God," but the meaning of this is not explored. He is also given the titles of savior, redeemer, and messiah, but only insofar as he is the divine example, set apart to excite human imitation.

In the character of Jesus, as delineated by the evangelists there is something so excellent and divine, that few of his most violent enemies have attempted to find fault with it. His piety towards God, his zeal for the honour of his heavenly Father; his charity towards all men, his candour, disinterestedness and equanimity in all the various scenes of life; his liberality and forbearance with the frailties of others, and great plan for which he was sent in [*sic*] the world, are so conspicuous in every stage of his private and public life, and in particular in the hour of his last sufferings and death, that they could not fail to strike the unprejudiced mind, and shone forth with such luster, even when he was hanging on the cross, that the Roman Centurion . . . was induced to exclaim: Certainly this was a righteous man."²⁸

This Jesus is "Lord" because, on the basis of his faithfulness in keeping God's law, "God has committed to him the government of his church."²⁹ The gospel is defined as follows:

That God is a propitious father of the whole human race, that, as a pledge of this truth, he had sent his only begotten son into the world, so that if men repent of their errors and sins, and believing in Jesus Christ as their saviour, take him for their guide, he will not only pardon their sins, but also enable them, by the assistance of his holy spirit to lead a godly life, and in this way prepare them for a better and happier world.³⁰

²⁷ Quitman, *Evangelical Catechism*, 23.

²⁸ Quitman, *Evangelical Catechism*, 33.

²⁹ Quitman, *Evangelical Catechism*, 34.

³⁰ Quitman, *Evangelical Catechism*, 37. William Sutton claims that the moral government theology of Nathaniel William Taylor provided the theological substructure for the Second Great Awakening. See William R. Sutton, "Benevolent Calvinism and the Moral Government of God: The Influence of Nathaniel W. Taylor on

The resurrected and ascended Christ now lives to rule his church at the right hand of God, namely "he partakes of the divine government of the moral world."³¹ Christ's example moves us to "faith," namely, "the condition of man's acceptance with God."³² Quitman defines faith as "an impressive sense of the glorious perfections of God, and of his relation to men, as their creator, preserver, governor and judge, and a corresponding pious disposition, arising from it."³³ What, he continues, is faith in Christ? "A firm belief in the divine authority of Jesus, and of his doctrine and promises, expressed by a sincere zeal to cherish christian [*sic*] sentiments and dispositions, and to cultivate christian [*sic*] graces."³⁴ The centrality of reason and the freedom of the human will, already evident in the foregoing discussion of Stone, are also in the forefront of Quitman's treatment. To the question "Do you believe that man is deprived of free moral agency?" his catechism responds, "By no means; For if that were the case, how should God judge the world, and treat us as accountable beings? Besides this, religion addresses man as a free agent, and ascribes to him the power of choice and resistance."³⁵

Without a meaningful trinitarian theology, Quitman's Jesus became little more than the man par excellence. His belief in Christianity as a basic, practice-oriented imitation of the life of Jesus was not unique, though it was perhaps more reductionistic than most of his colleagues. Still, Quitman was not alone in such sentiments. As his public ministry in New York drew to a close (1828), another figure burst onto the scene, similar in theological perspective to Quitman, who would transform Christian doctrine and practice in the United States. That man was Charles Grandison Finney.

Revivalism in the Second Great Awakening," *Religion and American Culture* 2 (Winter 1992): 23–47. Notably, however, Quitman's theology, which was contemporary with Taylor's, was also similar to it in some respects. Quitman was in correspondence with many of his contemporaries and even received an honorary doctorate from Harvard. Could there have been some cross-pollination between Quitman and Taylor? It is a question worth exploring.

³¹ Quitman, *Evangelical Catechism*, 40.

³² Quitman, *Evangelical Catechism*, 47.

³³ Quitman, *Evangelical Catechism*, 47.

³⁴ Quitman, *Evangelical Catechism*, 47–48.

³⁵ Quitman, *Evangelical Catechism*, 20.

III. Charles Grandison Finney (1792–1875)

Biography

America has not, historically speaking, produced a large stable of well-known theologians. Jonathan Edwards is recognized as one of the few giants that America has produced. But how many have spent significant time studying Frederick Quitman or Barton Stone? In the early national period, however, the nation's first post-colonial theologian came to the forefront—one whose legacy stands above all other challengers. He is perhaps most accurately labeled America's theologian.³⁶

Charles Grandison Finney was born in Warren County, Connecticut, on August 29, 1792, the seventh child of Sylvester and Rebecca Finney. His family moved to central New York two years later. When Finney was sixteen, the family moved yet again, this time to a small town called Henderson, New York, on the shore of Lake Ontario. Throughout his childhood, "Finney . . . heard very little preaching, and that mostly by uneducated and ignorant men, whose mistakes in grammar so impressed themselves upon his mind that they were the subjects of merriment to him to his dying day."³⁷ A series of teaching jobs in New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey left him unsatisfied, and he returned to Henderson. He found his mother ill so he remained in the area, studying law. He also began attending church, but found himself at odds with the church's confession and practice, particularly its heavy-handed, double-predestinarian Calvinism. He bought a Bible, started reading it, and became convinced that it was the word of God. Yet he could not commit himself fully to the demands of the gospel. After years of struggle as to whether he could truly "surrender all his worldly plans and submit his will without reservation to Christ," he gave himself to Christ on October 10, 1821, and began his study for the ministry under the pastor of his

³⁶ This is not to diminish the stature or influence of Edwards, nor to challenge Richard Jenson's claim that Edwards is "America's Theologian." See Jenson, *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). Finney's practical influence, however, far exceeds that of Edwards.

³⁷ G. Frederick Wright, "Charles G. Finney - CHARLES GRANDISON FINNEY - Charles Finney 1792-1875," *Truth in Heart Web page* (Fenwick, MI: Truth in Heart, 1995–2007), <http://truthinheart.com/EarlyOberlinCD/CD/Finney/Biography/finneybi.htm> (accessed February 20, 2007). Also available in print form as G. Frederick Wright, *Charles Grandison Finney* (Boston, New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1891).

church.³⁸ He was licensed to preach by the Presbytery in 1824, three years after he marked his conversion.

While much has been written about the revivals of Finney in the burned-over district of New York, his revivalistic work at the Broadway Tabernacle in New York City, and his involvement with the abolitionist movement, the focus here is on his influential *Systematic Theology*.³⁹ First published in 1846, thirteen years after assuming a professorship at Oberlin College, its articles on the nature of the atonement and the doctrine of justification reveal a seriously deficient Christology.⁴⁰

Moral Government Theology, the Atonement, and Justification by Faith

Lecture 25 of Finney's *Systematic Theology* addresses the doctrine of justification. In it he is dependent upon the moral law that he outlined at the opening of his lectures. The fundamental starting point for Finney is the moral government of God; that is, that God has created all things and rules all things under a moral law that is intrinsic to the divine essence and hence is a divine attribute. This moral law, which Finney later calls a natural law, is part of every man, and is "the law developed or revealed within himself; and thus he becomes 'a law to himself,' his own reason affirming his obligation to conform to this idea, or law."⁴¹ While it is developed inside of man, moral law and its obligation is "a rule of duty, prescribed by the supreme Lawgiver, and external to self."⁴² As it is a divine attribute, it is something that is independent of the will of God; he binds himself to it, and so is himself bound to it and binds every moral agent (including all human beings) to it. It "can never change, or be changed," and is "the unalterable demand of the reason, that the whole

³⁸ G. Frederick Wright, "Charles G. Finney."

³⁹ Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology, Embracing Lectures on Moral Government Together with Atonement, Moral and Physical Depravity, Regeneration, Philosophical Theories, and Evidences of Regeneration* (Oberlin, OH: James M. Fitch; Boston: Crocker & Brewster; New York: Saxton & Miles, 1846). Available online as Charles G. Finney, "Finney's SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY 1846: Table of Contents," *The Gospel Truth Web site* (Orange, CA: Gospel Truth Ministries, 1999-2006), http://www.gospeltruth.net/1846ST/1846st_toc.htm (accessed February 2, 2007). For this paper, the expanded 1878 edition will be used. This has been reprinted as Charles Finney, *Finney's Systematic Theology*, ed. Dennis Carroll, Bill Nicely, and L. G. Parkhurst, Jr. (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1994).

⁴⁰ Finney became president of Oberlin in 1851 and served in that capacity until his retirement in 1866. Notably, Oberlin was the first college in the United States formally to admit women and African-Americans.

⁴¹ Finney, *Finney's Systematic Theology*, 20.

⁴² Finney, *Finney's Systematic Theology*, 20.

being, whatever there is of it at any time, shall be entirely consecrated to the highest good of universal being, and for this reason God requires this of us, with all the weight of His authority."⁴³

Just as the American government of Finney's day was based on the rule of law, so the moral government of God went as well. Finney calls the atonement "the governmental substitution of the sufferings of Christ for the punishment of sinners . . . it is a covering of their sins by his sufferings."⁴⁴ What does he mean by a governmental substitution? Basing his remarks on Grotius and Arminius, he claims that when Christ died on the cross, he suffered a penalty that substituted for the punishment due to sinners. The substitute for man's punishment, the Son of God, gives to men who accept his gospel a substitutionary payment for their sins. Human sin is not imputed to Christ and as such he does not receive the actual punishment due sinners. Indeed, he *could not* receive the actual punishment because it was not his to receive. For Christ to be punished for the sins of another would violate God's justice.⁴⁵ Continuing in point eleven, Finney writes that the death of Christ on the cross, which he calls "public justice," "could strictly require only the execution of law," and "an atonement . . . would more fully meet the necessities of government, and act as a more efficient preventive of sin, and a more powerful persuasive to holiness, than the infliction of the legal penalty would do."⁴⁶ Here Finney is clear: the atonement for sin is only the means to a greater end, or ends. He outlines God's options: either he sets up a payment by sending his Son to die on the cross, a kind of heavenly scholarship for which people may apply; or he metes out his punishment personally, administers it to all, and hopes that cures it. Thus, for Finney, God chooses the lesser of two evils, and gives the atonement a purpose that does not have the expiation of sin as the primary function but rather shows people what they owe when they sin so they will be moved not to sin. Echoes of American "can-doism" are easily heard, as in the voice of Poor Richard: "God helps those who help themselves."

⁴³ Finney, *Finney's Systematic Theology*, 21–22. The rhetorical similarity to the foundational American documents is readily apparent.

⁴⁴ Finney, *Finney's Systematic Theology*, 211.

⁴⁵ Finney makes the same point in his notorious sermon, "Justification by Faith." See Charles G. Finney, "Justification by Faith," *The Gospel Truth Web site* (Orange, CA: Gospel Truth Ministries, 1999–2006), http://www.gospeltruth.net/1837LTPC/lptc05_just_by_faith.htm (accessed February 12, 2007).

⁴⁶ Finney, *Finney's Systematic Theology*, 214.

Finney expands his points, arguing that because “Christ owed obedience to the moral law, both as God and man” and “was under as much obligation to be perfectly benevolent as any moral agent is,” he could not obey the law for us, because he was bound to keep it for himself.⁴⁷ Further, the punishment theory of the magisterial Reformation made no logical sense, because “He need not certainly have both fulfilled the law for us, as our substitute, under a covenant of works, and at the same time suffered as a substitute, in submitting to the penalty of the law.”⁴⁸ In short, Christ must either fulfill the law as our substitute and receive glory and honor, or suffer the substitutionary atonement. Christ chose the latter. If Christ suffered the actual punishment due to all humankind, Finney argued, then he would have ended up in hell, suffering eternal death billions of times over. That was the true justice due to mankind, and, being a moral governor bound to moral law, God could not set it aside by suffering the punishment himself; it simply was not lawful for him to do.

Finney opens his discussion of the nature of justification by first describing what it is not. He then describes the governmental lens through which he views the Scriptures, going through the American branches of government and seeing to which branches of God’s moral government justification should be assigned. His thesis was: “[G]ospel justification is not to be regarded as a forensic or judicial proceeding.”⁴⁹ Arguing governmentally, he states that pardoning, or setting aside executions, is not a power given to the judicial branch of government; those powers are given to either the executive or legislative branches. Justification, being “declared” righteous in a forensic or judicial sense, cannot occur if the person is actually guilty of the crime. For God to pronounce such a verdict would, again, violate the moral law – in other words, it would compromise God’s own essence. As such, forensic justification is a logical and essential impossibility. “Gospel justification is the justification of sinners; it is, therefore, naturally impossible, and a most palpable contradiction, to affirm that the justification of a sinner, or of one who has violated the law, is a forensic or judicial justification.”⁵⁰

What then is the nature of justification? Justification does *not* mean being declared not guilty by an eternal court of moral law. It is an executive decision, a pardon that comes from the highest executive in the moral government of God: God himself. This kind treatment, of course, has

⁴⁷ Finney, *Finney’s Systematic Theology*, 218.

⁴⁸ Finney, *Finney’s Systematic Theology*, 218.

⁴⁹ Finney, *Finney’s Systematic Theology*, 360.

⁵⁰ Finney, *Finney’s Systematic Theology*, 360.

several strings attached to it, each a *sine qua non*. Before laying out those conditions, he again appeals to his idea that Christ owed obedience to this moral law as much as anyone else. According to Finney: “[Christ] was bound for Himself to love God with all His heart, and soul, and mind, and strength, and His neighbor as Himself. He did no more than this. He could do no more.”⁵¹ So, how could Christ’s obedience be applied to all humankind when legally it should only be applied to himself? Simply put: on the basis of several conditions.

The first condition for justification is the atonement. He makes a distinction between the ground, “the moving, procuring cause” of justification, and a condition, something that lays the groundwork. The atonement is a condition to justification, because, according to Finney, “the Godhead desired to save sinners, but could not safely do so without danger to the universe, unless something was done to satisfy public, not retributive justice.”⁵² It would be a gross violation of moral law for the simple act of atonement to be the ground of justification. It would cause the moral law to collapse, along with Finney’s theory of God and his attributes. He also separates the atonement and justification not only logically, but theologically, by saying that people who believe that the atonement is the ground for justification put all the grace in the atonement and leave none for justification. Justification in this sense, says Finney, is *simply* a pronouncement, which has no power to motivate the “justified” to the sanctified life.⁵³

The second condition for justification is the willful human act of repentance. He states, “It must be certain that the government of God cannot pardon sin without repentance. This is as truly a doctrine of natural as of revealed religion.”⁵⁴ He continues, “It is self-evident that, until the sinner breaks off from sins by repentance or turning to God, he cannot be justified in any sense. This is everywhere assumed, implied, and taught in the Bible. No reader of the Bible can call this in question.”⁵⁵ Man, as a moral agent, has the innate ability to choose to live in accordance with moral law and to ask for God’s help to do so, or not. If he seeks God’s will and fulfills it (certainly with the help of God), he will be justified. If he chooses not to, he will be damned.

⁵¹ Finney, *Finney’s Systematic Theology*, 363.

⁵² Finney, *Finney’s Systematic Theology*, 363.

⁵³ Of course, Finney also held to perfectionism—a point that is beyond the scope of this paper but that fits perfectly within his larger theological system.

⁵⁴ Finney, *Finney’s Systematic Theology*, 366.

⁵⁵ Finney, *Finney’s Systematic Theology*, 366.

Finney's third condition for justification is a largely obvious one: faith in Christ. However, he chastises those who see it as the means by which the merits of Christ are apprehended. If faith is merely a "condition" for justification—that which passively receives the benefits of Christ's atoning work—the result will be antinomianism. Rather, faith is fundamentally active and has a quantitative character to it. That is, by virtue of exercising faith, faith grows and increases—one might call it a divine wellness program—which, if cultivated properly and consistently, will eventuate in the state of sanctified perfection. All of this is consistent with his basic theme of man as a free moral agent who, with faith active in love, may be said to be "justified."⁵⁶

Summary

For Finney, Christ's work of living and dying on behalf of sinners did not objectively accomplish the payment for the sins of the world. Rather, Christ fulfilled the law, as he must, *for himself*. Beyond that, however, his faithfulness opened possibilities to those who obediently followed him in a life of obedience to the revealed will of God. Christ's death and resurrection did not accomplish salvation—they *made salvation a possibility*. The realization of that possibility remained the responsibility of the individual Christian who, by acts of the will, chose to live the obedient life. For Finney, this act of the will coupled with the obedient life is faith. Thus faith is knowledge, trust, assent, and act.

Finney's theology proved to be enormously attractive to Americans in the second third of the nineteenth century. No evangelist was more successful than he was, and his version of Jesus continues to be formative for many even in the present.

IV. Conclusion

In *American Jesus*, Stephen Prothero argues that the manner in which Americans have configured the person and work of Jesus provides a kind of looking glass into their self-understanding. If this is so—and Prothero makes a strong case—then the picture that emerges from our three examples is not a happy one. Take the following example. Notably absent from Finney's discussion of the Trinity, Christ, atonement, and justification, is the doctrine of imputation. In no sense is the sin of Adam imputed to Christ, nor is the righteousness of Christ imputed to humankind. The result necessarily is that Christ is reduced simply to an example, and moral government theology carries away any sense of Christ

⁵⁶ Finney, *Finney's Systematic Theology*, 366.

meaningfully making a substitutionary atonement for sin. While this point of view finds its most sustained treatment in Finney's *Systematic Theology*, this study shows how pervasive this perspective was in the early national period. Indeed, John R. Fitzmier has repeatedly made the point in his lectures that one of the most striking theological characteristics of the early national period is the disappearance of the doctrine of imputation.⁵⁷ If this study has shown nothing else, it is the manner in which the doctrines of the Trinity, the person and work of Christ, the atonement, and justification were bound up together in the Jesuses that American Christianity produced in the early national period.

Response to Lawrence R. Rast Jr.

Rod Rosenblatt

I would like to thank Dr. Rast for providing a historical, empirical description of critical-rationalist theologians of the not-so-distant past. This critique is also valuable in the case of today's thousands of Schwärmerei groups. I would also like to offer a few thoughts in response.

First, it was refreshing to read a paper that braves stepping beyond the specialization approach which is now almost universal in American university circles. A bright young church historian does not bow to the ever-present "American university rules" of over-specialization (consciously patterned after German universities), and deigns to comment on some historical examples of bad *theology*—theology concerning which its adherents quote the text of Scripture but insult the text's truth claims a sentence later.

Second, he has provided excellent examples of what many of us were taught, namely, that to change one doctrine *always* has a deleterious effect on other doctrines—and that by necessity because the laws of logic cannot be transcended.

In the case of Barton Stone, Dr. Rast shows how equivocating about the Trinity leads directly and logically to deep problems with regard to the person of Christ. This in turn leads to real problems with the substitutionary nature of Jesus' atoning death. Stone's Unitarian

⁵⁷ Fitzmier, long-time professor at Vanderbilt Divinity School, is now the Executive Director of the American Academy of Religion. His claim is worthy of a more careful, sustained study.

tendencies logically forced him to an Arian view of Jesus Christ. Then his Arian tendencies logically caused his problems with the substitutionary work of Christ. Without grounding in trinitarianism, any penal view of the atonement becomes a repulsive caricature. In particular, vicarious substitution makes little sense if it was not the case that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19).

In the case of Frederick Quitman, Dr. Rast has explicated a quintessential Enlightenment optimism as an invader into American Lutheranism. According to Quitman: "Man is a progressive being, capable of improvement." In the words of Dr. Rast, "[Jesus] is also given the titles of savior, redeemer, and messiah, but only insofar as he is the divine example, set apart to excite human imitation." Rather than using the Reformation distinction between "things earthly" and "things heavenly," to the question "Do you believe that man is deprived of free moral agency?" Quitman answers simply: "By no means!" and "religion addresses man as a free agent, and ascribes to him the power of choice and resistance."

In the case of "America's theologian," Charles Grandison Finney starts from "the moral government of God" and arrives at "the unchanging moral law our whole being must be entirely consecrated; God requires this of us, with all the weight of His authority." As Dr. Rast observes, Christ did not, according to Finney, receive the actual punishment due sinners! Why not? Because he *could* not—it was not his to receive! As Finney wrote, "[A]n atonement . . . would more fully meet the necessities of government, and act as a more efficient preventative of sin, and a more powerful persuasive to holiness, than the infliction of the legal penalty would do." For Finney, the atonement for sin is only the means to a greater end: it shows people what they owe when they sin so they will be moved not to sin.

Third, the amount of space that Dr. Rast devoted to *concrete* examples was refreshing, examples of individuals who could not abide Christianity's biblical assertions regarding the Trinity, sin, the person and work of Christ, justification, and particularly imputed righteousness.

This is all the more important because the seminary curricula of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) spend little time on John Wesley, Charles Finney, or others like them. The reasons for this are different, of course. For all Lutherans, the claim of accomplishable perfection prior to death is repugnant, a view based on good biblical foundations. In the case of ELCA seminary training, student mastery of John Wesley and/or

Charles Finney is repugnant for at least two reasons: first, because it is not far from the pietism in which many of them grew up, and against which more than one professor has spent his or her whole life reacting; second, because Wesley was always quoting the Scriptures *as if they were true*—a real “problem”! As a consequence, the student at a liberal Lutheran seminary does not spend much time on Wesley or Finney.

In LCMS seminaries, it appears that for the seminarians to spend valuable time on Wesley, “circuit riders” like Peter Cartwright, lawyer Charles Finney, the “holiness bodies,” Pentecostal and enthusiast churches, and the like is just not important enough to displace curricular time spent on more important subjects. Thank God for Dr. Thomas Manteufel! He is, hopefully for publication, writing the missing section on Wesley and revivalism for the comparative dogmatics textbook by F. E. Mayer.⁵⁸ Mayer has substantial treatments of Rome, of Eastern Orthodoxy, of classical Lutheranism, and of classical Calvinism, but Wesley received only a few pages.

In a way, this is understandable. Sociologically speaking, people choose between Lutheran theology and churches and Presbyterian or Episcopal theology and churches (lately perhaps more between these and Roman or Eastern Orthodox theologies). But surely *not* between Lutheran theology and the Schwärmerei mess of perfectionist bodies? Sociologically speaking, this is probably true, but now there are the multi-thousands attending mega-churches that call themselves “non-denominational.” Who provides the intellectual backbone for the sermon content and curricula of such “non-denominational” churches? At best, John Wesley does—whether the pastor knows it or not! At worst, it is Charles Finney.

This makes the work of scholars like Dr. Rast all the more important. Studies like “American Christianity and Its Jesuses” are part of an important biblical critique. It is a critique not just of the dangers of an unbiblical Enlightenment optimism but rather it functions as well for the benefit of thousands and thousands of “non-denominational Christians.” Though often their leaders have had no formal theological training—maybe not even a two-year Associate of Arts degree from a Bible school—they live, preach, and teach in the conceptual framework of Wesley’s perfectionism. In these groups, issues such as sin, atonement, and justification are glossed over or ignored—even more than was the case with Dr. Rast’s three examples of Enlightenment rationalism. In either

⁵⁸ F. E. Mayer, *The Religious Bodies of America*, 4th ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961).

case, these people end up with a Jesus who is finally a moral improver, that is, a model of moral living for sinners to emulate. In terms of law and gospel, Jesus is finally a newer, kinder, gentler Moses—but a Moses nevertheless. In terms Dr. Rast uses, both sides end up in a “moral government” view of the atonement. The connecting link is the stress on Christianity as a method of moral improvement of people—people who are basically good but need excitement! What Christianity finally is *not* is “To the one who does not work, but trusts Him who justifies the *wicked*, his faith is reckoned as if it were righteousness” (Rom 4:5). As Dr. Rast rightly tells us, “Finney’s theology proved to be enormously attractive to Americans in the second third of the nineteenth century. No evangelist was more successful than he was, and his version of Jesus continues to be formative for many even in the present.”

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