

Early Life of Charles Finney

by Frank Grenville Beardsley

The sermon explores the early life of Charles Finney, from his birth and family to his conversion and entry into the ministry.

Scripture: Psalm 51:10, Matthew 7:7, Acts 9:3, Hebrews 4:12, James 4:8

Topics: "Spiritual Awakening", "Christian Conversion"

Description

Frank Grenville Beardsley delves into the life of Charles G. Finney, a prominent figure in American evangelism, who, despite not experiencing a religious revival himself, became a fervent preacher of the Gospel. From his humble beginnings on a farm to his ventures in law and eventual conversion, Finney's journey reflects a transformation akin to that of Saul of Tarsus. His encounters with different forms of religious teachings and his critical spirit towards theological doctrines led him on a path of spiritual awakening and deep reflection, ultimately leading to his profound conversion experience.

Transcript

EARLY LIFE

EVER since the Great Awakening, when George Whitefield travelled throughout the colonies from Maine to Georgia stirring the multitudes by the power of his impassioned eloquence, almost every American generation has had its revival preachers. These itinerant evangelists have made it their business to go from place to place arousing lukewarm and indifferent professors of religion and exhorting sinners to repentance. No name bulks larger in the history of American evangelism than that of Charles G. Finney, who, with some intermissions as a pastor and teacher, continued his evangelistic labors for nearly half a century and whose writings still receive a wide acceptance.

Paradoxical as it may seem, Finney was not converted in a religious revival and never attended an evangelistic meeting until he began to conduct such services himself. After a conversion almost as remarkable as that of Saul of Tarsus he abandoned the practice of law and, with no preparation for the ministry aside from some months spent in the study of his pastor, began to preach the Gospel.

At the outset of his ministry he had no thought of preaching elsewhere than in the backwoods and rural districts. But within a few years his services were in demand in the great cities, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. At the height of his evangelistic career he organized Broadway Tabernacle, one of the leading Congregational churches in the country, from the pastorate of which he was called to Oberlin

College, recently started in the pioneer wilds of Northern Ohio. From his work as a teacher and administrator he was frequently summoned to various cities throughout the country, and twice he spent extended periods in Great Britain. The story of his life reads like a romance, and from it we may gain some insight into the sources of his power as a preacher of righteousness and a winner of souls.

The son of Sylvester Finney, a farmer and a veteran of the Revolutionary War, he was born in Warren, Litchfield County, Connecticut, August 29, 1792. He was named Charles Grandison after a character in one of Richardson's novels. Shortly after the War for Independence the movement of population to the westward had begun. In the venturesome spirit of their Pioneer ancestors sturdy New Englanders, former soldiers, of the Revolution and others, set out with their families and portable possessions in ox carts and covered wagons for the unoccupied regions to the west of the Hudson River and beyond. When Finney was two years of age his parents, following this tide of emigration, removed to Oneida County, New York, locating temporarily at Brotherton, but taking up their permanent abode in the vicinity of Hanover, now Kirkland, but at that time a part of Paris.

The outdoor life on the farm, the "chores" in which at an early age he was expected to participate, and, as he grew older, the work of tilling the soil and felling timber, developed in the youth Finney a strong and rugged constitution which stood him well in hand amidst the arduous activities of his later life. During the hunting season with his long barreled flintlock rifle he scoured the woods in the pursuit of game. He became an expert shot and until long past middle life enjoyed hunting as a diversion and means of recreation. He joined in the rude sports of the period. Said his grandson, "When he was twenty he excelled every man and boy he met, in every species of toil or sport. No man could throw him; no man could knock his hat off; no man could run faster, jump farther, leap higher or throw a ball with greater force and precision. When his family moved to the shore of Henderson's Bay, near Sackett's Harbor, he added to his accomplishments rowing, swimming, and sailing."

True to their antecedents and traditions the pioneers from New England established schools in the wilderness, the principal aim of which was to teach the pupils to read and spell correctly, to write legibly, and to cipher with sufficient accuracy to keep family accounts correctly and compute interest on a debt. The teachers, who usually boarded "round" as a part of their compensation, as a rule had seldom gone beyond the rudimentary branches themselves. Occasionally a theological student, who sought thus to augment his funds to continue his course at Harvard or Yale, was employed for a term or two. The course of instruction was crude. All of the appliances of the modern teacher, maps, charts, globes, and models, were lacking. Textbooks were few. Webster's blue-backed "Speller" had come into common use; Hodder's and Pike's arithmetics were the only ones available in that branch; while Jedidiah Morse's Universal Geography, an 18mo volume with four maps, covered that field.

After completing such studies as could be taken in the rural schools, young Finney attended, for two years, Hamilton Oneida Institute, at Clinton, New York, only a few miles distant from his father's farm in Oneida County. This institute had been projected in 1793 by Samuel Kirkland, famous as a missionary to the Indians, to provide instruction for Indians and whites. Named in honor of Alexander Hamilton, one of its first trustees, the school was incorporated as Hamilton College in 1812. The corner stone for the first building was laid July 1, 1794, by Baron von Steuben of Revolutionary fame, but owing to the lack of funds, the building was not completed for several years, and it was not until 1798 that the Institute was opened for instruction.

During Finney's student days in Hamilton Oneida Institute the principal was Seth Norton who later became professor of languages in Hamilton College. He was a graduate of Yale College and had been a tutor there two years previous to his entrance upon the principalship of the Institute. A fine classical scholar and a lover of music as well, he succeeded in instilling within the mind of Finney an intense love of music, teaching him to sing, to read music at sight, and to play upon the violin and bass viol, or violoncello as it is called today. With the first money which he earned in teaching Finney purchased a base viol upon which he became a skilled performer.

About 1808 his parents moved to Henderson, on Lake Ontario, in Jefferson County, New York. The next four years he taught at Henderson, two months in the summer and three months in the winter. He was the idol of his pupils, participating with zest in their sports before and after school. Although there were older and larger boys than he in school, he could excel them all in their feats of strength and skill. He commanded the respect of those who were disposed to be unruly and in the schoolroom he maintained perfect discipline. At the first hint of disorder a flash of his eye would quell the disturber at once.

In the summer of 1812, when an invasion from Canada was threatened, Finney went to Sackett's Harbor with the intention of enlisting in the navy. The town was a scene of confusion and disorder. Drunken militiamen jostled one another in the streets, quarreling, cursing, and polluting the very atmosphere with their oaths and ribald jests. Said his grandson: "He heard more profanity and obscenity in that one day, than he had heard in all his life before. To cap the climax, he was accosted by an abandoned woman--a follower of the camp--young, pretty, and saucy. He looked at her in wonder and, when he comprehended the nature of her request, he was so overcome with pity for her degradation and lack of shame that his cheeks burned, and before he could check it he was shedding tears and sobbing violently. She, moved to shame by this extraordinary spectacle, wept too, and without another word they parted. In narrating the incident fifty-five years later he was visibly affected and remarked: 'Oh, if I had only been a Christian at that time! The young woman might have been saved! Perhaps God brought about this meeting on purpose to open her eyes and she may have repented.'"

The threatened invasion proved a fiasco and, deeply distressed by all that he had seen and heard, Finney returned to his home. Later that same year, having abandoned the idea of enlisting in the navy, he went back to his native town, Warren, Connecticut, where for a period of two years he attended an academy or high school. During this time he supported himself by working on his uncle's farm in summer and conducting a singing school in winter largely attended by the young people from miles around. In the academy he manifested those qualities of leadership for which he was afterwards distinguished, acquiring a reputation for wit and oratory in the literary society and serving as editor of the school journal which, in the form of manuscript, passed from hand to hand. It was his intention to take a full classical course at Yale College, but his teacher, a Yale graduate, persuaded him that this would be a waste of time, since with the habits of study which he had acquired he would be able in two years easily to complete privately the four years' work required for graduation.

Listening to this advice Finney spent the next two years teaching in New Jersey, returning to Warren from time to time to report progress to his teacher and to receive further suggestions as to his studies. Although not a college graduate, he acquired a working knowledge of the ancient languages, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, but in his Autobiography he speaks modestly of his linguistic attainments, saying, "I never possessed so much knowledge of the ancient languages as to think myself capable of independently criticising our English translation of the Bible."

After an absence of four years he returned to New York State. It was then his purpose to join his former teacher in the establishment of an academy at some point in the South, but owing to the ill health of his mother and the importunities of his father he was persuaded to relinquish the undertaking.

After deliberating at length as to his future he finally decided to prepare himself for the legal profession, and sometime during the year 1818 he went to Adams, Jefferson County, New York, a few miles distant from the home of his parents, to enter the office of Judge Benjamin Wright, the leading attorney in that section of the state. Active in politics and a warm personal friend of Governor De Witt Clinton, Judge Wright was appointed by the latter a Canal Commissioner and at a later time Surrogate of Jefferson County. After reading law in his office for a period of two years Finney was duly admitted to the bar and entered at once into partnership with his preceptor in the law.

As a law student and young attorney Finney entered whole-heartedly into the social and religious life of the community. He took an active part in the work of the Masonic fraternity. At the age of twenty-one, while attending school in Warren, Connecticut, and living at the home of his uncle, the latter suggested that, as he was away from home and among strangers, it would be an advantage to him to become a member of the Ancient Free and Accepted Masons, since as such he would find friends everywhere. Accepting his advice he applied for membership in the lodge at Warren and after passing through the required preliminaries he was duly raised to the "Sublime degree of Master Mason." On commencing his legal studies he "demitted" to the lodge at Adams and after a time was elected its secretary. By assiduous attention to the ritual and lectures of the different "degrees" he developed into what his Masonic brethren termed a "bright Mason."

Up to this time his religious privileges had been meager. Neither of his parents was religiously inclined and his opportunities for church attendance had been limited. There was no church in the vicinity of his father's farm in Oneida County until about a year before their departure to Jefferson County. The town of Henderson was marked by a similar absence of religious services. Infrequently in the communities where he had lived some illiterate itinerant preacher had held forth, to the no small amusement of the inhabitants, who took a keen delight in criticizing the grammatical errors which they heard and exposing to ridicule the ludicrous misstatements that had been made.

Until he attended school in New England he had never lived in a praying community, and the type of religious life with which he there came into contact did not impress him deeply. The minister of the parish was an aged man, whose sermons for the most part were dry, doctrinal disquisitions which he read in a dull, monotonous fashion so that they did not appeal to the ardent nature of young Finney. In New Jersey where he taught school the preaching was in German, which to say the least was not edifying to one who did not understand the language. In view of these limited opportunities it was not strange that he should have said of himself: "When I went to Adams to study law, I was almost as ignorant of religion as a heathen. I had been brought up mostly in the woods. I had little regard to the Sabbath, and had no definite knowledge of religious truth."

At Adams, where he was invited to lead the choir, he was brought under the preaching of Rev. George W. Gale, a Princeton graduate, whose theology was strongly tinged with the hyper-Calvinism of the period. The preaching of this good man was a source of much perplexity to the young attorney. He held that men were sinful by nature, that the will was so enslaved as to be utterly incapable of a right choice, and that conversion was a physical change, to be wrought independently of man's agency through the electing grace of God. If he preached on repentance he would be sure to inform his hearers that they could not

repent, or if he spoke on saving faith he would tell them that they could not believe until their natures were changed by the Holy Spirit.

Writing of Mr. Gale's preaching Finney said: "I now think that I criticised his sermons unmercifully. ...Indeed, I found it impossible to attach any meaning to the terms which he used with great formality and frequency. What did he mean by repentance? Was it a mere feeling of sorrow for sin? Was it altogether a passive state of mind, or did it involve a voluntary element? If it was a change of mind, in what sense was it a change of mind? What did he mean by the term 'regeneration'? What did such language mean when applied to a spiritual change? What did he mean by faith? Was it merely an intellectual state? Was it merely a conviction or persuasion that the things stated in the gospel were true? What did he mean by sanctification? Did it involve any physical change in the subject, or any physical influence on the part of God? I could not tell; neither did he seem to know himself. I sometimes told him that he seemed to begin in the middle of his discourse, and to assume many things which, to my mind, needed to be proved. I must say, I was rather perplexed than edified by his preaching."

To Finney there was an element of unreality in the pastor's preaching. He was not at all convinced that, even in the minister's own thinking, the doctrines which entered into his theological system had any real relation to life. One Sunday evening after service he took Mr. Gale to task for some statement which he had made, saying, "You do not believe what you preach; were I in your place, holding to the teachings which you declare, I would ring the church bell and cry in the streets 'Fire! Fire!'" Even though he made no pretensions to the way of faith Finney felt that the gripping power of religion ought to possess one's very being and stir him to the innermost depths of his nature.

Occasionally Mr. Gale would drop into the young attorney's office to engage him in religious conversation, but such were the objections which the latter raised and the questions which he propounded that the minister concluded that he must be thoroughly hardened, and when some of his parishioners proposed making Finney a subject of prayer he discouraged the idea because in his judgment it would be useless, and he went so far as to express the opinion that such was the young attorney's influence over the young people of the community that there could be no hope for their conversion so long as he remained in Adams. Notwithstanding the pastor's pessimistic attitude a little company of young people in his congregation, among them the young woman who subsequently became Finney's wife, banded themselves together to intercede with God for his salvation.

Finney not only opposed the theological views of his pastor, but he was unsparing in his criticism of the members of the church for their inconsistencies and particularly for their want of faith. He was in the habit of attending prayer meeting whenever his duties would permit, and one evening when someone asked him if he did not wish to be prayed for, he arose with the caustic reply: "I suppose I need to be prayed for; I am conscious that I am a sinner; but I do not see that it will do any good for you to pray for me; you are continually asking, but you do not receive. You have been praying for the Holy Spirit to descend upon yourselves, and yet complaining of your leanness. You have prayed enough since I have attended these meetings to have prayed the devil out of Adams, if there is any virtue in your prayers. But here you are praying on and complaining still."

While it is doubtless true, as Finney intimates, that the unanswered prayers of Christian people were a great stumblingblock to him, nevertheless from the sharpness of his reply it is evident that the prayers of the young people were having their effect and that he was in the throes of that spiritual conflict which was to culminate in his conversion.

In the meanwhile he had purchased his first copy of the Bible. In the legal works which he had studied, the Mosaic Institutes were frequently referred to as an authority for many of the principles of common law. His curiosity having become aroused he purchased a copy of the sacred Scriptures. A candid examination of its contents convinced him that it was precisely what it claimed to be--the Word of God.

His study of the Scriptures, his attendance at the services of worship, together with a consideration of the problems thus arising were not without their effect and, to use his own expression, he "became very restless." The young disciple of Blackstone was not far from the Kingdom of God. He realized that he was not fit for heaven should he die, while the question whether he should accept salvation or continue the pursuit of a worldly life kept coming before his mind with great urgency and pungent force. He was approaching the crisis of his life, and soon it was to be said of him as of old it had been said of Saul of Tarsus, "behold, he prayeth."

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