

Winning Souls for Christ

by Frank Grenville Beardsley

Charles Finney's revival work was characterized by conviction, prayer, and clear preaching, resulting in a profound impact on the communities he visited.

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:14, Psalm 51:10, Proverbs 16:3, Isaiah 55:11, Matthew 5:10, Acts 4:31, Romans 8:31, 1 Corinthians 1:27, Ephesians 6:18, James 5:16

Topics: "Evangelism", "Revival"

Description

Frank Grenville Beardsley preaches about the powerful impact of Charles G. Finney's home missionary work in northern New York, where he faced initial rejection but eventually sparked a powerful revival through his bold preaching and unwavering faith. Despite facing threats and opposition, Finney's perseverance and reliance on prayer led to numerous conversions and transformed communities, even reaching a village nicknamed 'Sodom.' His revival work extended to various towns, leading to emotional outbursts, miraculous conversions, and lasting spiritual transformations. Finney's compelling will and dedication to preaching in unconventional places, like schoolhouses and barns, resulted in widespread revival, demonstrating the unexpected ways God uses individuals for His purposes.

Transcript

ABOUT three months after his licensure to preach Finney was commissioned by the Female Missionary Society of the Western District of New York to labor for three months, as a home missionary, in the northern parts of Jefferson County, New York. He commenced his labors at Evans Mills where he preached in a large stone school house which was used on alternate Sabbaths by the Baptists and Congregationalists. He accordingly divided his time between the congregation at Evans Mills and the Congregational Church at Antwerp, a town some thirteen miles distant.

The church organization at Evans Mills was feeble and its membership small, but the preaching of Finney soon attracted the attention of the people, who flocked to the services in large numbers, but to his disappointment no conversions resulted from his labors. Finally at the close of one of his Sabbath services he announced his dissatisfaction by informing his congregation that he should remain there no longer unless they would accept the Gospel. After explaining his position somewhat he asked all who would accept the Saviour to arise while the remainder should keep their seats. As he expected, no one arose, and looking over the congregation for a short time he said: "Then you are committed. You have rejected Christ and His Gospel; and ye are witnesses one against the other, and God is a witness against you all.

This is explicit, and you may remember as long as you live, that you have committed yourselves against the Saviour, and said, 'We will not have this man Christ Jesus, to reign over us.'

His audience was indignant at this application and rose en masse to leave the building. He paused abruptly in his remarks and they halted to see why he did not go on; whereupon he informed them that he was sorry for them, and would make one more appointment to preach to them the following night. All then retired except a Baptist deacon who came up to him and said: "Brother Finney, you have got them. They cannot rest under this, rely upon it. The brethren are all discouraged, but I am not. I believe you have done the very thing that needed to be done, and that we shall see results." It was arranged that they two should spend the following day in fasting and prayer--"separately in the morning and together in the afternoon." The people were highly indignant at the unfair advantage which they believed Finney had taken of them, and threats of violence against his person were heard during the day.

In the afternoon, according to agreement, Finney and the deacon prayed together. As they did so they were inspired with the assurance of victory. That night the house was packed, and Finney preached a powerful Gospel sermon of which he said: "The Spirit of God came upon me with such power, that it was like opening a battery upon them. For more than an hour the word of God came through me to them in a manner that I could see was carrying all before it. It was a fire and hammer breaking the rock; and as the sword that was piercing to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit. I saw that a general conviction was spreading over the whole congregation. Many of them could not hold up their heads." He asked for no reversal of their former action, seeming to take it for granted that the people were committed against Christ. Such was the spirit of conviction produced by this sermon that Finney was sought after several times during the night, but as he was absent from his customary lodgings the feelings of all who sought him were greatly intensified.

The next day was spent in visiting from house to house and conversing with the people about their spiritual needs. A powerful revival followed, which was characterized to some extent by emotional outbursts similar to those witnessed under the preaching of Jonathan Edwards. A woman fell down speechless at the close of a service and was carried from the house in a sort of trance in which she remained sixteen hours, emerging at last with a song of deliverance upon her lips. On another occasion a man, who had taken an oath to kill Finney and had armed himself with a loaded pistol to accomplish his purpose, fell from his seat, crying out, "I am sinking into hell." After a sleepless night he too experienced joy and peace in believing. Men of the strongest nerves were so affected that they had to be carried home by their friends.

Finney made no attempt to repress these manifestations, as he would have done at a later period in his career. Notwithstanding these peculiarities the work went on until nearly the entire community was gathered into the fold of Christ. The tavern keeper of the village, who had been an infidel and a disorderly character, was converted and his house was transformed into a house of prayer. The revival extended to surrounding neighborhoods and produced a lasting effect for good.

A few weeks later the Presbytery of St. Lawrence met at Evans Mills and among other matters considered the advisability of ordaining Finney. He was asked to preach, which he did without previous preparation, upon the subject, "Without holiness no man shall see the Lord." The sermon seemed to meet with the approbation of those who were present, although the opinion was expressed by some that he ought to confine his efforts to schoolhouses and country districts.

Little did the members of that Presbytery dream of the mighty fields of usefulness which lay before this young preacher who had lately forsaken the practice of law to proclaim "the unsearchable riches of Christ." The Almighty does not always commission the wise and the prudent as the instruments of His power. For the accomplishment of His purposes He may call a man from a miner's cabin as He did Martin Luther, or from a shoe shop as He did William Carey, or from behind the counter as He did Dwight L. Moody, or from a law office as He did Charles G. Finney. Neither human foresight nor wisdom can determine the results which may come from the labors of one whom God has called. However, it was voted to ordain Finney, and on the evening of July 1, 1824, in accordance with the usages of the Presbyterian Church, he was solemnly set apart to the work of the Gospel ministry.

The ordination services were conducted in "the Methodist meeting house" at Evans Mills, Rev. A. W. Platt presiding, Rev. J. Clinton preaching the sermon, Rev. G. S. Boardman delivering the charge, Rev. S. F. Snowden offering the prayer of consecration, and Rev. E. Bliss and Rev. W. B. Stowe leading in the devotions at the opening and closing of the service.

Although Finney's original commission, as a home missionary to the northern parts of Jefferson County, was but for three months he remained at least six months on the field, the first part of his labors being devoted mainly to Evans Mills and the country round about, but apparently the greater portion of the remainder of his time was spent at Antwerp, where a powerful revival swept over the community. When he began his labors he met with some opposition. The church had been pastorless for some time and the congregation had become so weakened that services had been entirely discontinued and the church building closed. The landlord of the local tavern had been made the custodian of the key and on Finney's arrival had refused to open the church for services. Meetings were therefore begun in a friendly parlor, but such was the interest that was aroused that it became necessary to transfer the services to the schoolhouse. Soon the obdurate heart of the tavern keeper was softened and he opened the church to the multitudes who flocked to the services. Numbers were converted and the influence of the revival extended in all directions.

Not far from Antwerp was a community which had been nicknamed Sodom on account of its supposed resemblance to Sodom of old. There was but a single praying man in the community and he had been nicknamed Lot. Finney was invited to preach in this place and, though unacquainted with the circumstances, by a strange coincidence selected as his text, "Up, get you out of this place; for the Lord will destroy this city." He graphically described the condition of Sodom its wickedness, and the urgency with which Lot was exhorted to escape. The people, supposing him to be offensively personal, took umbrage at his remarks. But in concluding his discourse he said that he understood that they had never had a religious service in the place before, and the inference was that it must be a very ungodly community. Taking this as the basis of his appeal he urged upon them the necessity for immediate repentance.

The resentment of the people was transformed into conviction, which became so intense that they began to fall on their knees and cry for mercy. This of course made an end to the sermon. Finney asked the old man called Lot to pray, but his stentorian voice was lost amidst the cries and groans of the penitent. Having another appointment that evening, Finney left the service in the hands of Lot.

So deep was the interest that the meeting continued all night, and in the morning some who had not yet found peace were taken from the schoolhouse to a private dwelling. The revival was as genuine as it was remarkable and from that day "Sodom" was a transformed community. Other neighborhoods were blessed

with revivals and a strong church was built up at Antwerp, which has enjoyed a prosperous history down to the present day.

When Finney commenced his home missionary labors his physical health was greatly impaired. Physicians told him that he had consumption and his friends thought that he could live but a short time. He was told to preach but once a week and not more than half an hour at a time. An evidence of his strength of will, which also sheds considerable light upon his entire subsequent career, is that he proceeded to throw this advice to the winds and entered upon his labors with all of the ardor and enthusiasm of his nature. He said: "I preached out of doors. I preached in barns. I preached in schoolhouses. I preached nearly every night. I preached about two hours at a time. Before the six months were completed my health was entirely restored, my lungs were sound, and a glorious revival spread over all that region of country." It was this compelling force of his will that enabled him to win such triumphs for his Master and made him a mighty winner of souls.

In the spring of 1825, while on his way to Whitestone, Oneida County, to get his wife, whom he had married the October previous and from whom he had been separated all winter on account of the stress of his work, he stopped at Le Rayville to have his horse shod. When the people learned of his presence they besought him, since they had no church edifice, to preach that afternoon in the village schoolhouse. The building was packed and such was the interest that he decided to preach again that evening. The interest increasing still further at this service, he made arrangements with one of the brethren to take his horse and cutter and go after his wife, while he devoted his attention to the revival which had already commenced. A remarkable work of grace was wrought at Le Rayville and in the adjoining town of Rutland.

Finney next visited Gouverneur, where a widespread revival attended his labors. There were many notable converts, among them several Universalists and infidels whose arguments vanished before the incisive logic of the earnest revivalist. He was assisted in this place by "Father" Nash, quite as remarkable a character in his way as Finney himself. When the latter was ordained by the Presbytery at Evans Mills, Nash was present, but at that time was in a low state spiritually. After a subsequent illness which brought him into a deeper religious experience he devoted himself with great earnestness to the work of saving souls.

Nash had remarkable power in prayer and was in the habit of making a praying list of persons for whose conversion he daily prayed in secret. It was avowed by his detractors that it was impossible for him to pray in secret since, whether he went into his closet or the woods, he prayed with such vehemence that he could be heard half a mile away. A man once heard him praying in the forest and, although he could not distinguish a word that was uttered, the prayer so impressed him with the reality of religion, that he could find no peace until he dedicated his heart to the Lord. The answers to his prayers sometimes seemed almost miraculous, for he did not confine his "list" to those whom he thought might be reached by the revival, but the most obdurate and unlikely cases were made the subjects of prayer, with results that were truly astounding. He often accompanied Finney to the communities whither he went for the purpose of sustaining him in prayer.

"Father" Nash sometimes did things which did not commend themselves to Finney's judgment. At Gouverneur, for example, a number of young men banded themselves together to resist the influences of the revival. One evening at the close of his remarks Nash addressed them thus: "Now mark me, young men, God will break your ranks in less than one week, either by converting some of you or sending some of you to hell. He will do this as certainly as the Lord is my God!" Finney stood aghast at this declaration

and felt that his coworker had gone too far. The leader of the young men, however, was soon converted and at Finney's suggestion exhorted his companions to turn at once to Christ. Before the end of the week nearly all of the young men had ceased their opposition and had consecrated their hearts to Jesus Christ.

From Gouverneur Finney went to De Kalb. A spirit of bitterness had long existed between the Presbyterians and Methodists in that place. It seems that some years before the Methodists had enjoyed a revival in which there had been a number of instances of "falling under the power of God," which met with a spirit of opposition on the part of the Presbyterians. During Finney's labors there were several cases of "falling under the power of God," but strange to say all who were so affected were Presbyterians, and this led to such confessions and explanations as to effect a mutual reconciliation. Conversions were numerous and the influence of the revival extended as far as the town of Ogdensburg, sixteen miles distant.

Early in the fall of 1825 Finney, accompanied by his wife, went to Utica to attend the synod of which he was a member. On his return he was met by Rev. G. W. Gale, his former pastor and theological instructor, who had retired temporarily from the ministry on account of ill health and was residing on a farm near the town of Western, Oneida County. He persuaded Finney to preach there the following Sunday. The Presbyterian Church was not only pastorless but in a low spiritual condition. On Sunday, however, the church was packed and such was the interest that various meetings were appointed at surrounding schoolhouses during the following week.

Finney was greatly exercised in prayer, and others, he found, were in the same state of mind. A Mrs. H--, a frail delicate woman, was so affected that her husband became alarmed over her condition. During the week Finney called, and when she heard his voice she came into the room with face illumined and exclaimed: "Brother Finney, the Lord has come! This work will spread all over this region! A cloud of mercy overhangs us all; and we shall see such a work of grace as we have never yet seen!" To her husband this was unintelligible, but Finney accepted it as a token of the victory of prevailing prayer. A great revival followed, the influence of which was felt in all directions and which extended as far as Rome and Utica.

Of the revival at Western, Mr. Gale wrote: "On the last of September, 1825, the Rev. Charles G. Finney arrived in this town (after a short visit to recruit his health in this county), on his way to the county of St. Lawrence, where he has been laboring with success, and where the people were anxiously waiting his return He commenced preaching three times on the Sabbath, and almost every evening in the week in different parts of the town, besides visiting during the day from house to house. Professors of religion were urged to 'pray without ceasing.' . . . Sinners were pressed with the duty of immediate repentance by every truth and motive which the word of God presents, and in language plain and pointed. These efforts were not permitted to be made in vain, even in this unpromising field. Christians were humbled for their past unfaithfulness, and led to pray as they had not prayed before. Sinners began to inquire what they must do. Convictions and conversions multiplied and spread through the town. In some instances whole households were converted The number of converts in this town, and that part of Lee where the people attended meetings here, is supposed to be about one hundred and forty. Thirty-seven have united with the Presbyterian Church on confession of faith; a number with other denominations; and many have not yet united with any church."

While the revival at Western was still in progress a company of young people, out of motives of curiosity and for purposes of amusement, drove over from Rome to attend the meetings, but so deeply were they influenced by what they saw and heard, that although they "came to scoff" they "remained to pray." They carried the revival spirit back to Rome, and not long afterwards Rev. Moses Gillett, pastor of the

Congregational Church there, attended some of the meetings at Western. He was so impressed that he proposed an exchange of pulpits with Mr. Finney, to which the latter gave a somewhat reluctant consent. As the Sabbath approached he regretted the arrangement, fearful lest the revival spirit at Western might be quenched. He went, however, and preached with marked effect. An inquiry meeting was appointed for the following evening. A deep interest was awakened which led to a revival that continued for several weeks, so that Mr. Finney was obliged to give his whole attention to the work at Rome.

Of the results of this revival Mr. Gillett wrote: "Worldly business was to a great extent suspended. Religion was the principal subject of conversation in our streets, stores, and even taverns. Merchants' and mechanics' shops were many of them closed in the evening, that all might attend meeting All classes of people were affected. Many who had regularly attended worship for twenty years, and lived through revivals unmoved, were now made to tremble and bow before the cross. Four lawyers, four physicians, all the merchants who were not professors before, and men of the first respectability in the place are hopeful converts In March one hundred and sixty-seven were received into the church upon profession of faith. The whole number received is two hundred and eighty-four. Upwards of thirty have united with the Methodist Church, and some with the Baptists and Episcopalians. The number of hopeful converts cannot be accurately stated. Probably not far from five hundred. Some of them were from adjacent towns A marked reformation of morals is too apparent to be denied. The Sabbath is more strictly observed. Intemperance and profane swearing are checked. More good feeling in families and neighborhoods prevails. The church is blessed with harmony. In truth it may be said these Christians love one another."

From Rome the influence of the revival spread to surrounding communities. At Verona about one hundred were converted. At Camden, which was visited by Mr. Finney's coworker, "Father" Nash, about one hundred and fifty united with the Presbyterian Church and a number with the Methodist. Rev. Ira Manly, who supplied the Presbyterian Church at Boonville, visited Rome and on his return gave an account of the revival there. Meetings were inaugurated which were largely attended, Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians participating in the services. Sixty-seven united with the Presbyterian Church and many with the Baptists and Methodists.

Whitesborough was also visited with a season of refreshing. Rev. John Frost, pastor of the Presbyterian Church, wrote: "The revival in Rome excited a deep interest here. Some of the members visited that place, and returned with increased feeling The latter part of February, the attention began to extend, and in March was more powerful than anything I have witnessed here before One hundred and sixteen have, upon examination, united with the Presbyterian Church. Forty-five of them are heads of families. About one hundred have united with the Methodists, seventy-eight with the Baptists, and three or four with the Episcopalians The whole number who have indulged hope is not far from three hundred. Several, and especially among the young, have not united. A number who visited the place from abroad became subjects."

Up to this time Mr. Finney's work had attracted a local attention only. In fact, at his entrance upon the ministry he had no conception of the wide fields of usefulness to which he should be called, nor of the important service which he was to render to the cause of religion both in this country and abroad.

He said: "Having had no training for the ministry, I did not expect or desire to labor in large towns or cities, or minister to cultivated communities. I intended to go to the new settlements, and preach in school-houses and barns and groves, as best I could." In accordance with this purpose his earlier labors had been in home missionary territory, but his work at Rome may be said to be the commencement of a

new era. From this time he was to assume the more important role of a general revivalist. For this work he was eminently fitted by nature, and a providential preparation had been afforded in his earlier labors to introduce him to wider fields of usefulness.

The progress of the revival at Rome had created no small degree of interest in the neighboring town of Utica. One of the prominent citizens at Rome was the president of a bank at Utica. He was not a Christian and the first time he heard Finney he said: "That man is mad. I should not be surprised if he set the town on fire." At first he refused to go to the meetings, but not long afterwards at a meeting of the directors of the bank, he was rallied on the state of things at Rome. He replied: "Gentlemen, say what you will, there is something very remarkable in the state of things at Rome. Certainly no human power or eloquence has produced what we see there. I cannot understand it. You say it will soon subside. No doubt the intensity of feeling that is now in Rome will soon subside, or the people will become insane. But gentlemen, there is no accounting for that state of feeling by any philosophy, unless there is something Divine in it." Within a short time the banker was converted.

As the reports of the revival at Rome were noised abroad in Utica a spirit of prayer came upon some of the people in that place, one woman in particular being so exercised that for two days and nights she prayed incessantly until her strength had become fairly exhausted. She could not rest unless someone was praying for her friends and neighbors. About this time Rev. Dr. Samuel Clark Aiken, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Utica, invited Finney to attend the funeral of a prominent elder in his church. Signs of a revival becoming manifest, he was urged to remain. As soon as he could he made arrangements to transfer the base of his operations from Rome to Utica. Within a short time a powerful revival was effected, more than five hundred conversions being reported. Such was the interest that the leading hotel became a center of religious influence, and transients who stopped for a lodging or a meal were converted before proceeding on their way.

Of this revival Dr. Aiken, the pastor, wrote: "The probable number of converts in Utica is about five hundred Not far from sixty persons, some of whom were travellers, who 'turned in to tarry but for a night,' or day or week; others belonging to the towns around, experienced, as we trust, the grace of God in this village. More than a hundred, the subjects of the revival, have united with the First Presbyterian Church; numbers with the Methodists and Baptists . . . Never was so large a church more happily united than we have been during this revival, and it is so still . . . Some few individuals have differed from their brethren, with regard to the propriety of some measures; but I have seen none who were blind to the mighty hand of God that was bowing down rebel sinners on every side, and none so hardened in unbelief as not to adore and rejoice in it. The society, also, is evidently strengthened and built up."

One of the notable conversions at Utica was that of Theodore Weld who afterwards became prominent in antislavery circles. At this time he was a student in Hamilton College and through the persuasions of an aunt was induced to attend the meetings. He was virulent in his opposition to Finney's work, declaring that it was nothing but fanaticism and boasting to his fellow students that he would not be moved. He chanced to meet Finney after he had heard him once and abused him most shamefully. Finney spoke a few words and left him. Such was the conviction which followed this brief conversation that on that very night, in an agony of spirit and in a rebellious frame of mind, Weld paced the floor of his room until daylight, when he was overborne with a sense of his lost and sinful condition. He became submissive, gave his heart to God, and the following night made a public confession before the whole congregation. From that time he manifested a consistent Christian spirit and rendered effective service in the work of the revival.

During the progress of this revival the Presbytery of Oneida convened in Utica. At one of the sessions an aged Scotch minister made a speech violently denouncing revivals of religion. Fearing that his words might result in checking the influence of the revival several of the brethren gave themselves to prayer, interceding with Divine Providence to counteract the effects of that speech. The next morning the man was found dead in bed.

From Utica the influence of the revival extended to the surrounding communities, the following being a characteristic incident: Visiting the village of New York Mills to preach one evening, Mr. Finney on the following morning was invited to visit a large cotton manufactory located in the place. As he passed through, the operatives seemed strangely agitated. In one of the rooms where a number of young women were weaving one of them paused at her loom and made some trifling remark to her companion, at which both laughed. With an expression of pain upon his countenance Finney stopped a moment and gave her a searching look. On observing it she ceased laughing and became so agitated that her thread broke. She tried to mend it, but overcome by her emotions she soon burst into tears. Others were similarly affected, whereupon the proprietor, although not a Christian, said to the superintendent, "Stop the mill, and let the people attend to religion; it is more important that our souls should be saved than that the factory should run." Within a few days nearly every girl employed in the mill professed conversion.

While the revival at Utica was still in progress the Rev. Dirck C. Lansing visited the city. Dr. Lansing was pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Auburn and one of the founders of Auburn Theological Seminary. So deeply impressed was he by Finney's work that he urged him to visit Auburn. In response to this invitation he went there in the summer of 1826 and "preached with great power and marked success." Multitudes were converted and, as his custom was at this time, he preached in many of the neighboring towns and villages. In consequence the influence of the revival became wide reaching and extended as far as Skaneateles and Cayuga.

In Auburn a spirit of opposition manifested itself and a number of prominent men withdrew from Dr. Lansing's church to form a new congregation. Most of these men were unconverted and it is interesting to note that five years afterwards, when Finney, journeying from Rochester to Boston, was detained a few days in Auburn on account of illness, these very men signed a petition requesting him to overlook their former opposition and conduct meetings in their church. Although he had paid his stage fare and had directed the driver to call him at two o'clock the following morning, when this request was sent to his room, after he had retired, he sent down word to those who were in waiting: "Go to the stage office and withdraw my name from the list of passengers." He remained in the city three or four weeks and a gracious revival followed.

There were numerous accessions to the two Presbyterian churches and to the Methodist and Baptist churches as well.

One of the converts in this second revival was a whiskey distiller, whose business at that time was considered quite respectable. He had been among those who had opposed Mr. Finney at the time of his first visit and had left the church to form the new congregation. Curious to hear what the preacher had to say he dropped into the services one evening. His interest was aroused, his reason was convinced, and being made to realize that he was a sinner, straightway he was brought to repentance. He at once ordered the fires in his distillery to be extinguished, and deliberately broke open his casks of liquor and allowed the contents to flow into the gutter.

From Auburn Finney was invited to Troy by the Rev. N. S. S. Beman and the session of his church. The greater part of the autumn and winter of 1826-1827 was accordingly spent in this city. During the progress of the revival certain disaffected members of Dr. Beman's church brought vexatious charges against him before the presbytery. These charges were not based upon heresy or anything bearing upon his moral character, but related to certain infelicities in his family life and to the methods which he, in conjunction with Finney, was using to promote the revival. The investigations of the presbytery which took Dr. Beman from the meetings for a time, resulted in his complete vindication. In the meanwhile Finney had kept on preaching so that the revival went on with unabated interest and power. In fact the trial of Dr. Beman seemed to help rather than hinder the work and, as the charges had been brought on account of the revival quite as much as against Dr. Beman, his opponents were greatly discomfited at the outcome of the trial.

While the revival was in progress a prominent young woman from New Lebanon came to Troy to purchase a ball dress. Her friends in the city invited her to attend the meetings. She did so with the result that she took back a new heart in place of the new dress and commenced to pray and labor for a revival. Through her efforts such an interest was awakened that she besought Mr. Finney to come and preach. He did so and in consequence a revival swept over the place resulting in the conversion of most of the prominent men in the community.

While the work at New Lebanon was in progress a convention met there to investigate the methods and measures ascribed to Finney. This, however, did not seem in any way to detract from the interest of the revival which swept forward with power undiminished. The occasion, the purpose, and the results of the New Lebanon Convention, as it was called, will be considered in the following chapter.

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