

# The Trouble With Finney

By Earnest Seeker (NOTE: this document is still under construction)

Evangelist Charles Finney (1792-1875) became widely known for the astonishing signs and wonders that accompanied his evangelistic campaigns. But this statement requires understanding of the background: Finney started ministry in the early 1800s while contact with the church in Britain was still sparse after the American Revolutionary War.

Indeed, the increasing political strain was interfering with religion for at least twenty years before the war:

## ***The Loss of Preachers***

"So it was that the way of the preachers on every side was almost hedged up; and for a considerable time it was with the utmost difficulty, and at the greatest risk of personal safety, that they could travel and preach at all." Whatever the dear Captain may have said and done regarding the American Revolution, it is apparent that his motives were right, and his burden was for the advancement of God's cause on this continent. The Revolutionary War posed problems for virtually all of the English preachers on American soil, and even for some of the native American preachers who shunned involvement in this political conflict suffered persecution as a result. It was a difficult time for Methodism [and for the advancement of God's cause in America](#).

Even Asbury, the most "American" of all of the English Methodist preachers, was compelled to "take refuge" during the Revolution. In the beginning of 1775 Asbury writes, "I am once more able to write, and feel a solemn, grateful sense of God's goodness. My all of body, soul, and time, are his due; and should be devoted, without the least reserve, to His service and glory. O that He may give me grace sufficient! I am still getting better, but am not able to speak in public; though the word of the Lord is like fire within me, and I am almost weary of forbearing. My mind is filled with pure, evangelical peace. I had some conversation with Captain Webb, an Israelite indeed, and we both concluded that it was my duty to go to Baltimore. I feel willing to go, if it is even to die there."

While Asbury felt constrained to remain in America during the Revolutionary War, come what may, virtually all of the other Methodist missionaries, including Captain Webb, finally felt that it was best for them to return to England. He lingered in the Colonies a year more after the departure of Boardman and Pilmoor, laboring with His might to extend and fortify the young Societies, notwithstanding the increasing tumults of politics and war. Then, about 1775, his beneficent labors in America were apparently cut short, and he too returned to England." from: "Captain Thomas Webb, The First Apostle of American Wesleyanism" It may be found on the History page.

## ***The Loss of Religion***

This lack of qualified preachers left the American church victim to many enticing but mistaken home-made theories of holiness such as "Taylorism", "Perfectionism" and a list of others.

In 1805, Unitarians captured the chair of theology at formerly devout Harvard, and at Yale students were addressing one another as Robespierre and Voltaire! The 1798 report of the General Assembly of the newly organized Presbyterian Church in the USA highlighted the dark spiritual state of the nation: "We perceive with pain and fearful apprehension a general dereliction of religious principle and practice among our fellow-citizens, a visible and prevailing impiety and contempt for the laws and institutions of religion and an abounding infidelity which tends to atheism itself."

## ***The Arrival of Finney***

"Here was this young man, but two years a minister, but four a Christian, with no traditions of refinement behind him, and no experience of preaching save as a frontier missionary, suddenly leading an assault upon the churches. He was naturally extravagant in his assertions, imperious and harsh in his bearing, relying more on harrowing men's feelings than on melting them with tender appeal. "Force," says the judicious observer whom we are here drawing upon — "force was his factor, and 'breaking down' his process." And in exercising this force he did not shrink from denunciations which bordered on the defamatory, or from the free use of language which can be characterized not otherwise than as coarse and irreverent.

All this was no doubt to be expected in the circumstances; and it was to be expected also no doubt that Finney should give himself of set purpose to stir up a commotion; and, having the assistance of a band of able coadjutors, that he should succeed in doing so to an incredible extent. The whole region was stricken with religious excitement, and nothing was permitted to stand in the way of fanning this excitement into ever hotter flames. Parishes were invaded without invitation, churches divided, opposing ministers "broken down," or even driven from their pulpits, the people everywhere set and kept on edge. Finney was under no illusions as to the nature of this excitement or as to its dangers. He did not confound it with a movement of grace. It was only an instrument which he used to attract popular attention to the business he had in hand. It served him in other words as a means of "advance publicity." "It seems sometimes to be indispensable," he says, "that a high degree of excitement should prevail for a time, to arrest public and individual attention, and to draw people off from other pursuits to attend to the concerns of their souls." This function served, the excitement is so little of further value that it becomes noxious; it now draws the mind off from the religion to prepare the way for which it is invoked, and if it were long continued, in "the high degree in which it is sometimes witnessed," it could end in nothing but insanity. Nevertheless Finney permitted himself to play with this fire; and it is a question whether his chief work in this region consisted in much else than in kindling it. Certainly the characteristic feature of these "Western Revivals" lies in the immensity of the religious excitement engendered by them; and it is matter of discussion until to-day whether their chief results are not summed up in this effect. That many souls were born again and became ultimately the support and stay of the churches of the region, nobody doubts. As little does anybody doubt that grave evils also resulted, the effects of which have been overcome only with difficulty and through the lapse of time. There is room for difference only in the relative estimate placed on these two opposite effects." P. 6-7 "Oberlin Perfectionism" by B. B. Warfield

The district where Finney preached in frontier New York State became known as [the "burnt-over district"](#), referring to its spiritually shell-shocked population. The believers tended to be more afraid of hell than lovers of God, while many promptly backslid after Finney left. Out of this troubled district came the charismatic founder of Mormonism, [Joseph Smith \(1805-1844\)](#) who was raised near Palmyra NY. He published his revelations in 1830, and soon had many followers, including his friends and family.

Apparently the burning effects of this lived long, and spread as far as Cincinnati:

"It might be well to notice that the conditions for planting the holiness work in Cincinnati were anything but favorable when Brother Knapp went there. It was what is familiarly called a "burnt district." Holiness had been planted there years before by the great leaders of the modern "National Holiness Association" movement. I think, if my memory is not at fault, that Inskip, Macdonald, and Lowrey had labored there. After them came Dr. Keen, of sainted memory. But after all this noble, initial work of seed-planting had been done, the devil got in his finest work. He induced some of the local people, by his Satanic impressions, to go off into fanaticism. It floats through my mind vaguely, from a conversation I once had with somebody in Cincinnati about it, that one of these fanatics claimed to be Christ incarnated again, (was this Joseph Smith?) and received worship as such. Fanaticism is Satan's finest work; and in this case he rather outdid himself. Holiness, and even the very word, became an offense to thoughtful and sensible people.

Of course there were humble souls here and there who remained true, who walked with God in the darkness, who mourned over the desolations of Zion, and who prayed for God to send deliverance. Among these was Sister Mary Storey, who welcomed Mr. and Mrs. Knapp to the city nearly ten years ago. She felt that God had sent Brother Knapp to rebuild the walls of the wasted holiness Zion in Cincinnati and the surrounding country. Her conjecture proved blessedly true. In no city in America is the work of holiness so thoroughly established, so well fortified and organized, and so broad and comprehensive in its plans, and so striking and puissant in its achievements, as it is now in Cincinnati. The journey of the little Methodist preacher to Cincinnati was like the journey of the little Apostle Paul to Rome; it meant a great deal to the service and kingdom of Jesus Christ.

This Sister Mary Storey stood by Brother Knapp and his wife through all the years; and so wise and helpful was she in her evangelistic work, and so discreet and efficient in her friendship and counsels, that Brother Knapp named her as one of the trustees of the work." *from: P. 76 "A Hero of Faith and Prayer" or Life of Rev. M. W. Knapp by A. M. Hills*

## ***Finney and Wesley***

Not surprisingly, Finney did not follow Wesley although he knew of him at a distance. The difference between Finney's system and those who continued in Wesley's line of thinking is very simple: Wesley worked with the thousands of believers who came into an experience of His Rest in his time. Through searching the scriptures and asking souls who had just been sanctified details of their experience, he built up a consistent picture confirmed by personal observation. Wesley was a hands-on researcher who asked the same questions to thousands of those who entered His Rest to verify what the Lord had showed him. Instead, Finney was an unsanctified theoretician. Mostly from period sources and his own experience he tried to develop a system that encompassed things described by Wesley. In the unblinking gaze of history, we can clearly see that he failed to provide one that brought forth the fruit of an abundance of souls entering His Rest because he did not even believe in it, although that is difficult to tell because he borrows so many Wesleyan terms, and applies his own definitions to them.

So, Finney, who was an evangelist, and not a theologian mixed the thoughts of several religious thinkers with his own thoughts to create his own brew of errors. But Finney was enabled to use his renown as an evangelist to promote his books, theories, and Bible school despite his theological deficit.

By the time mature ministers could understand what was going on, the hysteria had already consumed their churches! "Finney" quickly became a household word to be feared! His infamy made printed copies of his sermons sell like hot cakes.

But carnal fear and hysteria were never were faithful tools of the Lord, so many of the "converts" gained through this method backslid afterwards after sanity had time to prevail. But his many biographers do not dig deeply enough to report this, instead they joined the gravy train of popularity and sold their books for fame and money. After these many years these authors and their ill-gotten gains are gone, but their unbalanced books remain with us sowing confusion afresh. They remain popular because people are always fascinated by the spectacular. Carnal believers are always hoping to hear impressive stories of God "blasting" unbelievers into faith so that they can idolatrously follow that minister, instead of trusting God.

Those who were actual theologians attempted to communicate their concerns to Finney, but by this time he was too popular to listen. (See the impressive "Warnings to Church Leaders" on the "Ichabod" page above) Zealous believers who followed Finney's writings closely have often struggled greatly- especially those at Finney's famed Oberlin College, which went on to become a hotbed of Universalism. His enticing books continue to actively spread sneaky errors that are difficult to discern even today!

So, Finney's own books are filled startling errors, contradictions and exaggerations. He takes positions which are just plainly absurd to mature believers in His Rest. I do not at all recommend that you use Finney to help you gain entry into His Rest.

## ***Finney's Doctrine***

"That it was "the new measures" rather than the Pelagianism of "the Western Revivals" which in the first instance at least offended the Eastern brethren is no doubt due in part to the general fact that it is always external things which first meet the eye.

The external things in this instance were shocking in themselves; and their rooting in a doctrinal cause was often felt but vaguely or not at all. Pelagianizing modes of thought, derived from the same general source from which Finney had himself drunk the "New Divinity" taught at New Haven were moreover widely diffused among the New England clergy themselves. Men of this type of thinking might be offended by Finney's practices on general grounds, but could scarcely be expected, for that very reason, to assign them as to their cause to a doctrine common to his and their own thinking. And that the more that there were as yet no adequate means of ascertaining what the doctrinal basis of Finney's preaching was. Only his actual hearers were in any real sense informed of his teaching. When a little later he began to publish lectures and sermons the scales fell from men's eyes. The discerning had no difficulty then in seeing the correlation between his practices and his doctrines, or in clearly understanding that the phenomena of his revivals which gave most offence were merely the natural consequences of the fundamental fact that they were Pelagian revivals.

Accordingly Albert B. Dod is found writing: “We recollect that it was matter of surprise to many when the conjunction took place between the coarse, bustling fanaticism of the New Measures and the refined, intellectual abstractions of the New Divinity. — It was a union between Mars and Minerva, — unnatural, and boding no good to the church. But our readers will have observed that there is a close and logical connection between Mark (Charles) Finney’s theology and his measures. The demand created for the one by the other, and the mutual assistance which they render, are so evident, that we will spend no time in the explanation of them.” And Charles Hodge: “That the new measures and the new divinity should have formed an intimate alliance, can surprise no one aware of their natural affinity... No better method therefore could be devised to secure the adoption of the new doctrines, than the introduction of the new measures. The attempt has accordingly been made. The cold, Pelagian system of the new divinity has been attached to the engine of fanaticism.” These writers, it will be observed, do not assert that such practices as are summed up in the “new measures” may not exist — have not existed — apart from a determinate Pelagian system: what they affirm is that it is in such practices that a Pelagian system naturally expresses itself if it seeks to become aggressively evangelistic, and that in them we may perceive the Pelagian system running out into its appropriate methods. Joseph Ives Foot describes Finney’s revivals therefore frankly from this point of view. “These doctrines, with a corresponding system of measures, [were driven like a hurricane through the churches](#). To resist this operation was to resist God. Conscientious Christians gave place, till they should see what it was. Timorous ones were attached to his triumphal car, while the bold and the ignorant seized the reins and the whip; and hundreds and thousands under these various influences, were led to believe themselves converted, and were immediately driven into the church. These scenes were called revivals; and thus the very name of the operations of divine grace was brought into suspicion.” It is from the same point of view that Charles D. Pigeon writes with a somewhat broader reference: “We look upon the course of Finney as particularly instructive. He of all others has taught the New Haven theology in its greatest purity and has ventured to push its principles to their legitimate results. Those parts of New York which have been the scene of his labours, are giving, and will long continue to give the most instructive lessons as to the nature of that system of doctrine, and its influence on individual character and religious institutions.” And it is still from the same point of view that Samuel J. Baird places at the head of the very instructive chapter in which he gives an account of “the Western Revivals” the descriptive title of “Practical Pelagianism,” and brings the chapter to a close with these words: “Such were the fruits, widely realized in Western New York, from the New Haven theology. They were its legitimate and proper results. The good taste, common sense, and piety, of many of the disciples of that school, may revolt from these exhibitions, and pause before adopting them, in their full development. But the practical system of Finney, Burchard, Myrick, and their compeers, was deduced, from the theology of New Haven, by a logic, which no ingenuity can evade.” It will not have escaped observation that the writers we have last quoted assume that “the Western Revivals” were already generally understood to have been far from successful, as judged by their ultimate fruits. That indeed was the case. We have already seen that Finney himself came in the end to a recognition of this unhappy fact. It will cause no surprise that he should become wearied with this unfruitful work. Already in 1832 he was looking back upon this portion of his career as [a closed page of doubtful success](#), and was consciously seeking a new phase of activity. He was yet to do a great deal of evangelistic work; but, although he threw the circle of his labors wider and wider, even across the seas, he thought of himself as no longer an evangelist — he had become a pastor. His own account of the change is as follows, “I had become fatigued, as I had labored about ten years as an evangelist, without anything more than a few days or weeks of rest, during the whole period... We had three children, and I could not well take my family with me, while laboring as an evangelist. My strength, too, had become a good deal exhausted; and on praying and looking the matter over, I concluded that I would accept the call from the Second Free church, and labor, for a time at least, in New York.” By this action Finney became a part of a movement then making in the Presbyterian churches of New York to reach the people by the establishment of “free” churches, that is, churches with no pew-rentals and otherwise adapted to attract and hold the unchurched masses, In this way he gave to his pastorate a genuinely evangelistic character.” "Oberlin Perfectionism" page 10:

### ***The Terms That Finney Used***

Finney tries to tell us what he means by his terms:

"The subject he chose to speak on was the Baptism of the Holy Ghost; and his treatment of the theme ran on the lines laid down in Mahan’s recently published book. He followed up his address with some letters printed in The

Independent, and afterwards put into tract form. In the first of these (called "Power from on High") he outlines the doctrine of the baptism of the Spirit for power, as he had outlined it at the Council; and it might almost have been simply transcribed from Mahan. This baptism of the Holy Ghost, he declares, is the indispensable condition of performing the work given us by Christ to do; Christ has expressly promised it to the whole Church; the condition of receiving it is to continue in prayer and supplication until we receive it; it is not to be confounded with the peace which comes to the justified state — it is not peace but power; Christ gives peace but promises power — and we must not rest in conversion but go on to this second blessing which is at our disposal. A second letter now followed, in which the doctrine is given a somewhat new turn. The blessing conferred on the Apostles at Pentecost by the baptism of the Spirit is first reduced to "the power to fasten saving impressions upon the minds of men," the power "to savingly impress men." And then in his effort to define precisely what this power consists in, Finney comes to this: — "It was God speaking in and through them. It was a power from on high — God in them making a saving impression upon those to whom they spoke." And then he still further teaches that the power was not conferred at Pentecost alone, and not alone on the Apostles. It is still conferred: he himself has received it. He has often converted men by so chance a word that he had no remembrance of having spoken it, or even by a mere look. He illustrates this with anecdotes from his own life, such as are found in the "Memoirs" which he had recently completed. It is a sufficiently odd doctrine which he here enunciates, a kind of new Lutheranism with the evangelist substituted for the Word. The Holy Ghost is represented, not, as in the Reformed doctrine, as accompanying the word preached extrinsecus accedens — "the Lord opened Lydia's heart," "Paul may plant and Apollos water, the Lord gives the increase"; and not as in the Lutheran doctrine as intrinsic in the Word spoken, acting out from the Word on the heart of the hearer; **but as intrinsic in the evangelist speaking.** By a mere gaze, without a word spoken, Finney says he reduced a whole room-full of factory girls to hysteria. As the Lutheran says God in the Word works a saving impression, Finney says God in the preacher works a saving impression. Not the Word, but the preacher is the power of God unto salvation. The evangelist has become a Sacrament. The letters were continued after an interval. There was another descriptive one ("The Enduement of the Spirit") in which the anecdote of the preaching in "Sodom" related in the "Memoirs" is repeated. Then there was one called "Power from on High: Who May Expect the Enduement?" in which he explains that "all Christians, by virtue of their relation to Christ, may ask and receive this enduement of power to win souls to Him," adding that it comes "after their first faith," and as an "instantaneous" gift. In another, "Is It a Hard Saying?" he defends his assertion that those without this power are disqualified for office in the Church." (and it goes on....) "Oberlin Perfectionism" Page 45:

So he is not referring to the work of grace called entire sanctification at all. Nor is he referring to the gift that will be discovered at Asuza Street. He is trying to communicate about his own special gift: the gift or office of evangelist with supernatural power. He goes on to so verbalize his wonderful gift that he takes it out of all proper context: there are other gifts and offices also. There are yet gifts and a work of grace beyond his ken... Earnest Seeker

### ***Rapid Decay and Loss***

Meanwhile, at Oberlin itself the doctrine was making a history which began with enthusiastic acceptance, and passed forward rapidly into indifference and decay. The originators of the doctrine never lost their hold upon it or their zeal for it. Finney was still teaching it up to the end of his long life (died 1875), the whole of which was spent at Oberlin. Mahan, whose connection with Oberlin was severed in 1850, after an unfortunate venture at Cleveland (1850-1854) and a more successful one at Adrian, Michigan (1855-1871), had yet fifteen years or so to spend in England in active propaganda for his favorite doctrine (he died 1889). But the vogue of the doctrine at Oberlin was not very long-lived. James H. Fairchild gives us a very illuminating sketch of its fortunes there. "The visible impulse of the movement," he says, "to a great extent expended itself within the first few years." Men sought and found with decreasing frequency the special experiences — "the blessing," "the second conversion" — which were connected with it as first preached. Those who went out to preach "under the influence of this fresh experience" came ultimately to permit it to drop into the background. "So far as I am informed," says Fairchild, "not one among them all continued for any length of time to be recognized as a preacher of these special views." They did not repudiate their former views; but they found that "they could preach the truth as it is in Jesus more effectively than by giving to their doctrine the odor of Christian perfection, or the higher life." Whatever their motive was, they ceased to be propagandists of perfectionism. A similar decay of interest in the doctrine was working itself out at

Oberlin itself. Confidence “in the style of Christian culture, involving a special experience, which the movement introduced” grew progressively less clear and firm. This special experience — the “blessing” — was not found to be always associated with an advance in Christian attainment and character. On the contrary, it was observed that those who obtained it were apt to be among the less balanced characters of the community. Others who had not sought or found the experiences were not obviously less earnest and effective in Christian work than those who had enjoyed them. Thus the peculiar ideas and experiences connected with the “entire sanctification” movement gradually lost their appeal. Fairchild does not mention them, but there were also scandals to accentuate the decreasing sense of the value of the doctrine. The most shocking of them was probably the lamentable fall from virtue in 1842 of H. C. Taylor, “who had held prominent stations in both church and business affairs, had been a leader in ‘moral reform (social purity),’ and had also been numbered among the ‘sanctified.’”

A tendency has developed itself among recent Oberlin writers, as for example, D. L. Leonard, to represent the whole history of Oberlin Perfectionism as only a temporary aberration which befell the institution in its early days. Leonard speaks of “the perfection episode,” and is happy to say it is altogether a matter of the past.

Oberlin has heard nothing of it for years and years — for a generation, he says, writing in 1898. He even goes so far as to suggest that perfectionism was never anything more than a “foible” at Oberlin; a “foible” like its early tendency to Grahamism, and its manual laborism and its temporary misprision of the classics. It may be condoned in those early leaders as their other foibles were condoned; it was a product of the earnestness of their purpose and of the strong determination of their high characters to holy living. [Experience has shown, however, that it was a delusion.](#)” “Oberlin Perfectionism” page 72

### ***Possessed by the Weak-Minded***

There were those who received “the blessing” and could not keep it; lapsing speedily into their old “earthy” conditions. There were those who had it, and did not seem to have profited anything by it. It was not “the best, the truest-hearted, the most reliable and useful disciples” who had it; they might on the contrary be “the weak-minded, the shallow, the merely sentimental.” This has been the experience at Oberlin, according to Leonard. Leonard writes confessedly under the influence of Fairchild, and can scarcely be taken as bearing independent witness to anything beyond the attitude toward its early perfectionism which modern Oberlin takes. Changes have befallen Oberlin. The modern Oberlin is not the old Oberlin, and it is not merely the perfectionism of the past that has faded away.

### ***Persistent Errors***

But if, as we are told, its early perfectionism has left no trace of itself at Oberlin, that cannot be said of it elsewhere. There are great religious movements still in existence in which its influence still makes itself felt. Finney’s doctrine of “the simplicity of moral action” continued to be enthusiastically taught even by his successor in the Presidency, J. H. Fairchild, although Fairchild found a way- not a very convincing way — to separate it from the “perfectionism” with which it was inseparably bound up by Finney. Mahan’s lifelong propaganda of the earlier form of Oberlin Perfectionism was not barren of fruit. [The “Higher Life Movement”](#) which swept over the English-speaking world — and across the narrow seas into the Continent of Europe — in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, was not without traits which derived from Oberlin. And Mahan lived to stand by the side of Pearsall Smith at the great Oxford Convention of 1874, and to become with him a factor in [the inauguration of the great “Keswick Movement,”](#) which has brought down much of the spirit and many of the forms of teaching of Oberlin Perfectionism to our own day.

### ***Remember Oberlin and Weep***

If Oberlin Perfectionism is dead, it has found its grave not in the abyss of nonexistence, but in the Higher Life Movement, the Keswick Movement, the Victorious Life Movement, and other kindred forms of perfectionist teaching. They are its abiding monuments. Perhaps as the old Egyptian monarchs, in taking over the structures of their predecessors, endeavored to obliterate the signatures of those from whom they had inherited them, these later movements would be glad to have us forget the sources out of which they have sprung. But as the names of the earlier Egyptian kings may still be read even in their defaced cartouches, so the name of Oberlin may still be read

stamped on movements which do not acknowledge its parentage, but which have not been able to escape altogether from its impress.” “Oberlin Perfectionism” page 73

## Finney and Entire Sanctification

“It is not merely misery that loves company; and the desire to discover precedents is ordinarily strong enough to lead us to take them where we can find them. It is meanwhile clear enough that Finney’s and Mahan’s sense of solidarity with perfectionists as such was strong. It was strongest, of course, with the Methodists, from whom they derived most — among other things the terms by which they expressed their new doctrine. “The terms by which we designated it,” says Mahan,<sup>f153</sup> “were those by which it had been presented since the times of Wesley and Fletcher, namely, Christian Perfection, Entire Sanctification, and Full Salvation.” The *thing* expressed by these terms they would not admit they got from the Methodists. What they offered they got direct from the Scriptures — though this affirmation naturally can be overpressed. “I gave myself earnestly,” says Finney,<sup>f154</sup> “to search the Scriptures, and to read whatever came to hand upon the subject, until my mind was satisfied that an altogether higher and more stable form of Christian life was attainable, and was the privilege of all Christians... I was satisfied that the doctrine of sanctification in this life, and entire sanctification, in the sense that it was the privilege of Christians to live without known sin, was a doctrine taught in the Bible, and that abundant means were provided for the securing of that attainment.” The doctrine thus described as derived from the Scriptures has in any case somewhat close affinities with the Methodist doctrine.<sup>f155</sup> No sooner was the Oberlin doctrine of perfection conceived than it was published. Finney was the first to publish it. He was in New York during the winter months of 1836-1837 for the purpose of preaching in the “Broadway Tabernacle.” Preoccupied with the subject of the Christian walk, he delivered to his congregation a series of “Lectures to Professing Christians,” which were [printed as they were delivered](#) in *The New York Evangelist*, and soon afterward (1837) were gathered into a volume.<sup>f156</sup> Two of these lectures were devoted to the subject of “Christian Perfection.” In this first exposition of Oberlin perfectionism there are naturally seen lying in the background all the characteristic traits of Finney’s theological thinking. All virtue consists in disinterested benevolence; nothing is sinful but voluntary action; we have no obligation beyond our ability — we can do all that we ought to do, and what, for any reason whatever, we cannot do, we no longer, in any sense whatever, ought to do: it is such conceptions as these which form the substructure. On this basis a perfectionism is developed which already bears the fundamental character that ever afterwards marked the Oberlin doctrine. What is taught is a perfection that consists in complete righteousness, but in righteousness which is adjusted to fluctuating ability. Enoch Pond, in reviewing the lectures, rejoices to find that the perfection taught — in contrast with the Wesleyan doctrine of a so-called “evangelical perfection” — requires the perfect fulfilment of the law of God.<sup>f157</sup> But, as W. E. Boardman — discriminating later the “Oberlinian” from the Wesleyan doctrine — points out, what is really distinctive of “Oberlinian” perfection is the “view of the claims of the law as graduated to the sinner’s ability.”<sup>f158</sup> This teaching is already here. But the more fundamental idea that perfection is the fulfilment of the law is more dwelt upon. The lectures are thus given the aspect of insisting on perfect righteousness, and point is given to this insistence by an open polemic against the Wesleyan conception. “No part of the obligation of the law is discharged,” it is said:<sup>f159</sup> “the Gospel holds those who are under it to the same holiness as those under the law.” The definition of Christian Perfection is given crisply as “perfect obedience to the law of God”; and this is explained as requiring that “we should do neither more nor less than the law of God prescribes.” “This,” it is added,<sup>f160</sup> “is being, morally, just as perfect as God.”

When Finney undertakes to show that this perfection is attainable in this life, his argument runs on the familiar lines.<sup>f161</sup> He pleads that God wills our perfection; that all the promises and prophecies of God respecting our sanctification have perfect sanctification in view; that this is the great blessing promised throughout the Bible; and the very object for which the Holy Spirit is given. Every one of these propositions is true; and none of them is to the point. The whole point at issue concerns the process by which the believer is made perfect; or perhaps we would better say, whether it is by a process that he is made perfect. Avoiding the hinge of the argument, Finney endeavors to impale his readers on dilemmas.<sup>f162</sup> “If it is not a practicable duty to be perfectly holy in this world, then it will follow that the devil has so completely accomplished his design of corrupting mankind, that Jesus Christ is at fault, and has no way to sanctify His people but by taking them out of the world.” “If perfect sanctification is not attainable in this world, it must be either from a want of motives in the Gospel, or a want of sufficient power in the Spirit of God.” It would be a poor reader indeed who did not perceive at once that such dilemmas could be applied

equally to every evil with which man is afflicted — disease, death, the uncompleted salvation of the world. If it is not a practicable thing to be perfectly well in this world, then Jesus Christ has been vanquished by the Devil and has no way to make His people well except by taking them out of the world. If freedom from death is not attainable in this world, then it must be due to want of sufficient power in the Spirit of God. If the world does not become at once the pure Kingdom of God in which only righteousness dwells, then we must infer either a want of sufficient motives in the Gospel or a want of sufficient power in the Son of God. There have been people who reasoned thus: the point of interest now is, that it was not otherwise that Finney reasoned — and that accounts for many things besides his perfectionism. It is a simple matter of fact that the effects of redemption, in the individual and in the world at large, are realized, not all at once, but through a long process: and that their complete enjoyment lies only “at the end.” A certain lack of logical coherence is discernable in other features of these lectures also. Finney was too good a Pelagian readily to homologate Quietistic conceptions: it is not for the Pelagian to say, “Cast thy dreadful doing down”: doing is with him rather the beginning, and middle, and end of all things. Yet we have already seen Mahan imbuing him with his newly-found notion ([borrowed ultimately from the Wesleyans](#)) that sanctification is to be attained immediately by an act of faith, and indeed also with his mystical Quietistic explanation of how this sanctification is brought about by faith. We noted at the time that it was interesting to observe this, and the interest seems to us to be enhanced when we observe the doctrine enunciated — so far as it is enunciated — in the context of these lectures. Finney the Pelagian denies that Christ in His Spirit can work on man otherwise than by bringing motives to action to bear on him — in a word by persuading him himself to act.

Whatever man does, then, in the way of obeying the law — perfect obedience to which constitutes his perfection — he must himself do: it cannot be done for him or in him or through him by another; no other can affect him otherwise than by presenting motives to action to him. We should like to know then exactly what Finney means when he rebukes those who seek sanctification “by their own resolutions and works, their fastings and prayers, their endeavors and activity, instead of taking right hold of Christ by faith, for sanctification, as they do for justification.”<sup>n163</sup> What he says is that we may — must — attain to sanctification — or, as entire sanctification is meant, to perfection, that perfection which is perfect obedience to the law of God — immediately by an act of faith, without any resolution or effort on our part to obey the law, or apparently, any activity on our part in obeying it. “Faith,” he says, “will bring Christ right into the soul, and fill it with the same spirit” — note the small s — “that breathes through Himself.” We greatly wonder how “faith” does all this, and note only that it is faith that does it, not Christ: Christ supplies only the model to which faith conforms us. For light on this dark question, however, we shall have to go elsewhere.

Finney’s inconcinnity is not occasional merely but constant. Take another instance.<sup>n164</sup> He is arguing that the power of habit need not inhibit perfection, since it does not inhibit conversion. The power of habit is a thing that may be overcome. As he argues this point, however, he raises in our minds a previous question — the question whether God can save at all. The answer he supplies is yes, sometimes; and sometimes, no — at least “consistently with his wisdom,” a phrase which does not vacate but only locates His inability. Of man in his natural state we must recognize, he says, that “selfishness has the entire control of the mind, and... the habits of sin are wholly unbroken.” And this condition of course presents an obstacle to salvation -an obstacle, he says, “so great, in all cases, that no power but that of the Holy Ghost can overcome it.” It is indeed, he adds, “so great, in many instances, that God himself cannot consistently with his wisdom, use the means necessary to convert the soul.” Men then, it seems, may be so set in their wickedness that no “power” — the term is misleading; God uses no power in the transaction except the power of persuasion-which God, being wise, is willing to use upon them will avail for their salvation. Finney says this is the actual case “in many instances.” These men, clearly, then, are unsalvable. God, so long as he remains the wise God, cannot save men so sunk in sin. We have thus reached the astonishing conclusion that men may be too sinful to be saved. They are saved, or they are not saved, according to their determination in sin. Moderately sinful souls can be saved, very sinful souls are beyond the possibilities of salvation. This no doubt is good Pelagian doctrine: it is not Paul’s doctrine or Christ’s. We are surprised to find it here where Finney had started out to prove that evil habits cannot inhibit the attainment of perfection, because they do not inhibit the attainment of conversion. We have ended by proving that “in many instances” they can and do inhibit the attainment of conversion; and that, whether we are converted or not does not depend therefore on God who in many cases is helpless in the face of our sinfulness, but on the degree of our sinfulness.

In his “Lectures on Systematic Theology,”<sup>n165</sup> Finney makes the following remarks concerning the lectures we have

been considering. “These lectures were soon spread before thousands of readers. Whatever was thought of them, I heard not a word of objection to the doctrine from any quarter. If any was made, it did not, to my recollection, come to my knowledge.” He is often inexact in his historical statements; and perhaps we should not wonder that he is inexact here too. In point of fact the lectures received the normal attention of reviewers; and it is difficult to believe that the strictures made on them were not at the time brought to the author’s attention.

*The Quarterly Christian Spectator*, the organ of Finney’s own party, gives them, it is true, only passing mention. But this passing mention is not without its significance.

Its object is apparently to read Finney a lecture, as the *enfant terrible* of the “New Divinity” party, and to serve notice on him that he was expected to keep within the bounds and to content himself with repeating the shibboleths appointed for him. “On the subject of *Christian Perfection*,” we read,<sup>f166</sup> “we think Mark Finney is not always sufficiently guarded, and though we do not believe he means anything more than we should fully admit — the possibility and duty of obedience to God in all things commanded- yet we fear he may be liable to misconstruction and injure the consciences of many weak, but pious persons.” The note of irritation here is unmistakable: in the sequence of obligation, ability, actualization, could not Finney, like the rest of them, be satisfied with the first two without pushing on inconsiderately to the third? So far then from there having been no word of objection to the teaching of the lectures spoken from any quarter, they were objected to from all quarters.

And, naturally, the reviewers “from the other side” did not content themselves with passing mention but subjected them to reasoned criticism. This was done, for example, by Joseph Ives Foot in a trenchant article in *The Literary and Theological Review*,<sup>f167</sup> which was given the uncompromising title of “Influence of Pelagianism on the Theological Course of Rev. C. G. Finney, developed in his Sermons and Lectures.” It was done also by Enoch Pond in a prudent article published in *The American Biblical Repository*.<sup>f168</sup> And although it was not done in a subsequent article on current works on perfectionism published in the same journal by N. S. Folsom,<sup>f169</sup> it was made plain that that was only because the writer considered that it had been already sufficiently done by Pond. Pond as a good New Englander goes so far with Finney that he is glad to allow “the attainableness” of perfection by the Christian, or, as he phrases it, “its metaphysical attainableness”; but like *The Quarterly Christian Spectator* he wishes to stop right there and deny that it is ever “attained actually.” On the ground of the current New England doctrine, which postulated “natural ability” for all that can be required, the whole question reduced itself thus for him to one of mere fact, and he argues it on that understanding.

## **MAHAN’S TYPE OF TEACHING**

WE have given more space to the earliest presentation of the Oberlin doctrine of perfection than it intrinsically deserves. This, partly, because it was its first presentation; but more because, despite its brevity and the colloquial looseness of its language, it was in more than a temporal sense the forerunner of a whole group of others which shortly followed it. For nearly two years, it is true, it stood alone. Then, at the close of 1838, *The Oberlin Evangelist* was founded to be, above everything else, the organ of the doctrine. And early in 1839 the book was published which has the best right of all to be considered the representative statement of the Oberlin Doctrine at this stage of its development. This is Mahan’s “*Christian Perfection*.”<sup>f171</sup> The nucleus of this book was a sermon first preached in Oberlin and afterwards widely published and especially printed by request in *The New York Evangelist* (in November 1838).<sup>f172</sup> The “series of discourses” of which it professes to be further made up were delivered in the Marlboro Chapel, Boston, where Mahan was supplying the pulpit during the illness of the pastor.<sup>f172</sup> The book ran through many editions and enjoyed a very wide circulation.<sup>f173</sup> During the same year Henry Cowles’ little booklet on “*The Holiness of Christians in the Present Life*” was reprinted “with some revision” from *The Oberlin Evangelist*; and in 1840 the much more considerable volume by Finney, entitled “*Views of Sanctification*” was reproduced from the same journal. A pamphlet by Charles Fitch, pastor of the Free Presbyterian Church at Newark, New Jersey, bearing the same title as Finney’s volume — “*Views of Sanctification*” — preceded that volume by a year (1839). It deserves to be included in this group of writings, because, although its author was not connected with Oberlin, he teaches the same doctrine as the Oberlin writers; and although he does this perhaps more attractively than they do themselves, he does it obviously in immediate dependence on them.<sup>f174</sup> All this group of writings not only teach the same doctrine, but teach it after the same fashion, employing common definitions, a common logical method, the same supporting Scriptures, expounded on the same principles and applied with the same argumentative peculiarities; there has clearly been the closest collusion between them. Each writer has an individuality of his own,

of course, and shows it in his use of the common material. But this does not abate the essential oneness of their conception and mode of presentation. They all obviously come from one mint; and there seems good reason to believe that the dominant influence producing this uniformity was Mahan's. It is only fair to speak of this phase of Oberlin Perfectionism, therefore, as the period of the ascendancy of Mahan's thought.

At this stage of its development, Oberlin Perfectionism would not be inaptly described as Wesleyan Perfectionism grafted on the stock of the New Divinity — Wesleyan Perfectionism so far modified as to adjust it to the paradigms of the New Divinity. As the New Divinity was primarily an ethical scheme and Wesleyan Perfectionism primarily a religious doctrine, this process might be not unjustly described as so far a process of "religionizing" the New Divinity. Mahan took the lead in this work. That was the significance of his rediscovery of the supernaturalness of salvation as already described; of his conjoint vision of Christ as the soul's all in all and of the Spirit who baptizes the soul with power; of his suspension of everything on the simple act of faith. This was no ephemeral enthusiasm with him. It was a profound spiritual revolution which reversed all the currents of his being and determined the course of his subsequent life. From this time to the end of his life, a half a century later, he knew nothing but the twin doctrines he acquired in this moving religious experience — the doctrines of Christian Perfection and the Baptism of the Spirit; and he gave himself to their exposition and propagation with an unwearied constancy which his readers may be tempted sometimes to think wearisome persistency.<sup>f175</sup> He infected his colleagues with these doctrines; but they never took the place in their theology which they did in his. In the succeeding adjustments it became thus his function to emphasize the new doctrines to the utmost; it was the function of Finney, say, on the other hand, to see that in the engrafting of the new doctrines on the stock of the New Divinity the concepts of the New Divinity suffered no loss. This brings about a certain difference in tone — not exactly in teaching — between the two writers. Mahan's "Christian Perfection" and Finney's "Views of Sanctification" teach the same general doctrine, and they teach it with the same clearness of conviction. But in the one the main interest has shifted from the New Divinity to Perfectionism — though the concepts of the New Divinity are not abandoned; in the other it remains with the New Divinity — though the concepts brought in by Perfectionism are welcomed. Perhaps it would be too much to say that the emphasis differs: what differs is not so much the emphasis as the concernment, and that seems to be rooted less in a difference in the convictions than in the temperament of the two writers.

The perfectionism of this stage of Oberlin Perfectionism, as we have said, is fundamentally Wesleyan. It was not merely the "terms" which were retained from the Wesleyan doctrine, as Mahan tells us; but so far the thing.<sup>f176</sup> What was taught was the immediate attainment of entire sanctification by a special act of faith directed to this end. Justification was presupposed as already enjoyed. There were accordingly two kinds of Christians, a lower kind who had received only justification, and a higher kind who had received also sanctification. This is all Wesleyan, although, of course, it is not all that is Wesleyan.<sup>f177</sup> When this doctrine was transferred into a New Divinity setting, the primary effort was to adjust to the new setting the conception of the content of the perfection thus attained. The New Divinity was a Pelagian scheme; a scheme of ethics; it was therefore essentially legalistic and could not conceive of perfection otherwise than as perfect obedience to law — the law of God. It could not homologate therefore the Wesleyan idea of an "evangelical obedience," graciously accepted of believers in lieu of the "legal obedience" they were not in a position to render. Of anything else, as constituting perfection, than complete obedience to the law of God, the Oberlin men would hear nothing. But they had their own way of reaching the same relaxing result which the Wesleyans had reached. They defined the content of the law, obedience to which constitutes perfection, as just "love"; and although this language meant with them something different from what it meant with the Wesleyans, it is not clear that they were able to give it any greater ethical content. Supposing them successful, however, in pouring into the concept of love, objectively, the whole content of righteousness ideally viewed, they did not in any case require this content for the love by which a man is made perfect. To be perfect, he does not require to love as God loves — in whose love all righteousness is embraced — or as the angels love, or as Adam loved, or even as any better man than he loves. He only requires to love as he himself, being what he is, and in the condition in which he finds himself, can love. If he loves all he can love in his present condition, he is perfect. No matter how he came into his present condition; suppose if you will that he came into it by a long course of vice, or by some supreme act of vice, it makes no difference. His obligation is limited by his ability; we cannot say, he ought to do more than he can do; if he does all he can do, he has no further obligation, he is perfect. The moral idiot — Finney does not hesitate to say it- is as perfect as God is: being a moral idiot, he has no moral obligation; when he has done nothing at all he has done all that he ought to do: he is perfect.<sup>f178</sup> God Himself cannot

do more than all He ought to do; and when He has done all He ought to do, He is no more perfect than the moral idiot is — although what He has done is to fulfil all that is ideally righteous and the moral idiot has done nothing.

In this conception the law of God, complete obedience to which is perfection, is made a sliding scale.<sup>f179</sup> It is not that perfect rule, which as the Greeks say, like a straight-edge, straight itself, measures both the straight and the crooked; but a flexible line which follows the inequalities of the surface on which it is laid, not molding it, but molded by it. Obligation here is interpreted in terms of ability with the result that each man becomes a law to himself, creating his own law; while the objective law of God, the standard of holiness in all, is annulled, and there are as many laws, as many standards of holiness, as there are moral beings. To object on this basis to the Wesleyan doctrine of “evangelical obedience” on the ground that it supposes a relaxation of the universal obligation of the law, is fatuous. There is no such thing as a universal obligation of the law to be relaxed; or indeed as a universal law, binding on all alike, to create a universal obligation. Each man’s obligation is exhausted in the law which his own ability creates for him; and as soon as the Wesleyans remind us that in their view “evangelical obedience” is accepted primarily because it alone is within the capacity of men to render — “legal obedience” being beyond their power — the Oberlin objector is dumb; that is just his own doctrine.

Except for this — that, not content with this general adjustment of the requirements of the law to the moral capacity of sinful men, he pushes the principle to such an extreme as to adjust them in detail to the moral capacity of each individual sinner, all the way down to moral idiocy; with the effect of making our sin the excuse for our sin, until we may cease to be sinners altogether by simply becoming sinful enough. Of course he does not really believe this. If he had really believed it, we should not have found Finney troubling to argue — as we have found him arguing<sup>f180</sup> — that the ingrained habit of evil need not inhibit the attainment of perfection — that would be a matter of course; or that men may become so wicked that they cannot be saved — that would be absurd. He would only have needed to point out that the acquisition of unconquerable habits of evil, by progressively destroying obligation, renders perfection ever easier of acquisition by constantly reducing the content of the perfection to be acquired; and that one of the surest roads to salvation is therefore to become incurably wicked. “Oberlin Perfectionism” pages 18-22

### ***The Genesis of His Doctrine of Holiness***

The form given to the Oberlin doctrine of perfection in the first stage of its development did not remain its permanent form. It was distinctly taught in essentially this form, it is true, throughout his long life, by Asa Mahan, to whose influence apparently the first shaping of the doctrine was mainly due. And Henry Cowles seems never to have advanced much beyond this mode of conceiving it. But it was not long before, in its general apprehension: it. Suffered a sea-change which gave it a totally new character. This was due to the dominating place given in Oberlin thinking, from 1841 on, to what is called the doctrine of “the simplicity of moral action.” This was not a new doctrine. It lay, as corollary, too near to the teleological ethics inherited by Oberlin from the New England theology, for it not to have had attention drawn to it before. Frank H. Foster has shown that it is very clearly alluded to in certain arguments of Nathaniel Emmons,<sup>f283</sup> and indeed that it was already more than hinted at by Samuel Hopkins: “Every moral action is either perfectly holy or perfectly sinful.”<sup>f284</sup> It was a settled presupposition of Finney’s thought from at least the beginning of 1839, although he recalls a time when he had not yet recognized it.<sup>f285</sup> But it seems to have been left to two of the theological students at Oberlin of the class of 1842, to bring it out of comparative neglect, announce it as of primary importance, enforce it by extended reasoning, and make it a determining factor in Oberlin thinking.

It is interesting to observe the part taken by the students at Oberlin in formulating its doctrine of perfection. We have already seen that, had the students not intervened, the Oberlin professors might never have discovered that they were in fact teaching a doctrine of perfection. And we see them intervening here again to bring into full recognition and use a fundamental principle of Oberlin thinking which appeared to be in danger of being neglected. In neither instance was there a new discovery made. In both instances what we are called upon to observe is the fresh young minds of the students, in working on the material given to them, throwing up into clear view elements of necessary implication which were being left by their teachers out of sight.

Finney, writing in 1847, felicitates himself on the method of instruction pursued at Oberlin, by which the students were made fellow workers with the teachers; and handsomely acknowledges the benefit he had received from his students' activity.

"I... owe not a little to my classes," he says,<sup>f286</sup> "for I have availed myself to the uttermost of the learning and sagacity and talent of every member of my classes in pushing my investigations." The particular members of his classes to whose sagacity he owes not indeed his knowledge of the doctrine of "the simplicity of moral action," but its elevation to the commanding place it at once took in Oberlin thinking, were two brothers, Samuel D. and William Cochran.

It was William Cochran, a brilliant young man who afterwards served a few years as a professor at Oberlin, until cut off by an untimely death in 1847, who brought the subject into public discussion. This he did in an address delivered before the Society of Inquiry in the spring of 1841 and repeated the following autumn, at Commencement, before the Society of Alumni. Permanency was given to this address by its publication in *The Oberlin Evangelist*,<sup>f287</sup> and Cochran afterwards developed his views at greater length in the pages of *The Oberlin Quarterly Review*.<sup>f288</sup> From this time on the doctrine of "the simplicity of moral action" became a characteristic feature of Oberlin theology. The leading instructors and preachers of the time, with "the possible exception of Henry Cowles" embraced it at once; and "especially by the consistent and unvarying advocacy of President Fairchild" it was propagated through a succeeding generation as the only genuine Oberlin teaching.<sup>f289</sup> The essence of this doctrine is briefly explained by Fairchild<sup>f290</sup> as follows: "The doctrine maintains the impossibility of a divided heart in moral action. The sinner, in his sin, is utterly destitute of righteousness, and the good man, in his obedience, is completely, entirely obedient: sin on the one side and obedience, on the other belonging only to voluntary states. The division of the will between the two contradictory moral attitudes of sin and holiness is a metaphysical impossibility." The ethical theory underlying the doctrine is here thrown into emphasis. The man is dissolved into a series of volitions. Each volition is isolated and looked at apart: and being treated as a bare volition, it is said not to be capable of a composite character.

Volitions are either good or bad; and that is the end of it. But beyond the volition no man is recognized: the volition is the man, and what the volition is at any moment that the man is. As volitions are either good or bad, so then the man is. The morally grey is eliminated: only black and white are allowed to be possible. Every man is either as bad or as good as he can be in the circumstances in which he stands for the moment. "Oberlin Perfectionism" Page 46