

Reformation  
& Revival



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A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

Volume 6, Number 4 • Fall 1997

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In every period when God has awakened His people, the gospel of justification has come to the fore.

*Robert Horn*

I have preached justification by faith so often, and I feel sometimes that you are so slow to receive it that I could almost take the Bible and bang it about your heads.

*Martin Luther*

The doctrine of justification by faith . . . is a blessed relief from sterile legalism and unavailing self-effort.

*A. W. Tozer*

Justification is totally against formal religion. God has no room for those who persist in relying on forms or ceremonies.

*Robert Horn*

## Charles G. Finney's Doctrine of Justification

David H. Linden

Charles Grandison Finney lived in a day when a certain view of justification was in vogue. It would always be in his mind as that other view he did not hold, a view of faith alone as the condition and the obedience of Christ as the foundation. Finney would turn this Reformation doctrine on its head and bring about a degree of counterreformation within Protestantism that the Roman church in its Council of Trent was never able to secure. Yet Finney was accepted in Protestant circles not because of his theology but rather for his results. Many reasoned, "How could such a success be anything but of God?" Those who study that period of history think his results deserve a sober second look. The results and the success of new measures are still evident today in the place that methods, management and man have in current church life.

May the historians continue their analysis; it is needed. My purpose is to review his doctrine in one area—justification. If Finney is "America's Greatest Revivalist,"<sup>1</sup> his evangel invites and deserves examination. But I expect the reader to find the views of Finney presented here incredible. One seminary professor found that the only way to get his students to believe that what he represented as being Finney's doctrine, was to have the students read Finney directly and experience the surprise on their own. I did expect an Arminian theology, but I did not expect the work of Christ on the cross to be removed as the basis of justification, and the obedience of Christ replaced by the sinner's. Thus the direct reading of Finney is strongly urged. Many quotations and references will be provided here to support this analysis of his teaching, but those should be an incentive to look at this man's teaching and influence much more carefully.

I am reviewing mainly Lecture 25 on Justification, in Finney's *Systematic Theology*, pages 360-77 in the 1994

Bethany House publication.<sup>2</sup>

### **Finney's View of Justification<sup>3</sup>**

One must grasp Finney's governmental framework to understand his doctrine. Justification, to him, is a governmental decree of pardon or amnesty in which God restores to favor those who have sinned.<sup>4</sup> The governor of an American state can pardon, but a judge cannot. Judges may acquit but not pardon; governors may pardon but not acquit. Thus justification is not forensic whatsoever.<sup>5</sup> It is a pardon with conditions, among which are the full penitence and reformed behavior of the former criminal who has turned to a life of present full obedience to God, a course in which the sinner must continue sinlessly all his life, for justification to be maintained. Any sin creates the need for a fresh justification, and places the Christian immediately under condemnation. To all who meet these conditions, and only to those who meet all, God shows a sincere mercy, which is the message of Charles Finney's gospel.

The only obedience God requires, in Finney's view, is the obedience of the one to be justified. Such a person cannot get it from anyone else, including the Lord Jesus Christ. This is a very different view from that of the Reformation, which sees the model as God the judge acquitting and eternally accepting the sinner. This justification is based both on the gift of righteousness from Christ, as well as the full removal of the sinner's guilt because it was atoned for on the cross. The condition laid upon the sinner is faith, which is a nonmeritorious resting upon the work of Another and the receiving of the gospel promise. These are two extremely different views of salvation, the Reformation holding to Christ alone (*solus Christus*), and Finney's doctrine, a view of "sinner alone."

### **Finney's Multiple Conditions of Justification**

Before stating the conditions of justification, Finney is

very clear on his terms, defining and distinguishing "condition" and "ground":

In this discussion I use the term condition in the sense of a *sine qua non*, a "not without which."

... A condition as distinct from a ground of justification, is anything without which sinners cannot be justified, which, nevertheless, is not a procuring cause or fundamental reason of their justification. As we shall see there are many conditions while there is but one ground of the justification of sinners. . . .<sup>6</sup>

The five conditions are the atonement of Christ, repentance, faith in Christ, present sanctification, and perseverance in faith and obedience.<sup>7</sup>

For now, we shall treat only the four required of sinners. But let it be clear that Finney explicitly argues against faith as the only condition of salvation.<sup>8</sup> In his sole paragraph in this lecture on faith never once does he argue for a trust in the work of Christ. Should a good lecture on justification devote only one paragraph to faith as Finney has done, and then spend half of that arguing against "faith alone"?<sup>9</sup> Finney reminds us that true faith is a faith that works (Gal. 5:6 [KJV]), but there is no teaching on a faith that rests, as in Hebrews 4:9-11.<sup>10</sup>

The repentance he has in mind is total outward reformation,<sup>11</sup> a "change of moral character."<sup>12</sup> Repentance "cannot consist in conviction of sin,"<sup>13</sup> "nor sorrow for it,"<sup>14</sup> or merely a sense of our need of a Savior.

In order to be justified the sinner must believe and arrive at "present sanctification, in the sense of present full consecration to God" (condition #4).<sup>15</sup> (By this Finney means "present" vs. "former.") This perfection in holiness must then be followed by the fifth and last of Finney's conditions, a perseverance in obedience, which is also "an unalterable

condition of justification."<sup>16</sup> In other words the sinner's works are as much a condition of justification as faith.

Some theologians have made justification a condition of sanctification, instead of making sanctification a condition of justification . . . [Sanctification] is a state of consecration to Him. This is present obedience to the moral law. . . . It certainly cannot be true that God accepts and justifies the sinner in his sins. The Bible . . . conditionates justification upon sanctification in the sense of present obedience to God. . . . By sanctification being a condition of justification, the following things are intended: That present, full and entire consecration of heart and life to God and His service, is an unalterable condition of present pardon of past sin, and of present acceptance with God.<sup>17</sup> And that the penitent soul remains justified no longer than this full-hearted consecration continues. . . .<sup>18</sup>

#### **An Analysis of Finney's Rejection of Faith Alone**

If this full obedience is not met, justification is immediately lost, and the Christian stands under the condemnation of God.<sup>19</sup> This is a tall order for a man to meet, when in his flesh he cannot please God. It is in conflict with all biblical teaching about sin remaining in us.

When any reviewer says that Finney teaches a salvation by works, his conclusion may well be met with resistance that "America's Greatest Revivalist" could ever be judged that harshly. But let Finney declare himself: "Our own works, or obedience to the law or to the gospel, are not the ground or foundation of our justification. . . . These are conditions of our justification. . . . None of these must be omitted upon pain of eternal damnation."<sup>20</sup> His own words condemn his theology. It is as if he never read the Bible's relentless rejection of works opposed to faith. His distinction that our legal obedience is only a condition and not the ground

of justification is irrelevant. In his doctrine, man is still saved on condition of his own obedience. What Finney labeled a condition has indeed become the real ground.

Where is Christ in all these conditions Finney would have us meet? Where is His obedience, which is the very heart of the gospel and the foundation of justification? In the gospel, a righteousness that comes from God and not ourselves, has been made known (Rom. 1:17). When Finney rejected "justification by imputed righteousness"<sup>21</sup> he was rejecting the righteousness produced in the sinless life of Christ. He says, "It was naturally impossible for Him, then, to obey in our behalf."<sup>22</sup>

Finney can state Reformation theology accurately: "Christ's righteousness is the ground and that his [i.e., the sinner's] own present obedience is not even a condition of his justification."<sup>23</sup> So Finney was not uninformed of the gospel of the Reformation.<sup>24</sup> If Finney had only advocated human works as the condition of justification, he would have crossed over the line away from evangelical teaching.

He did not cross lines timidly. He sought to be as consistent as possible, a tribute to him in spite of his error. We could argue that his view of our obedience is an implicit rejection of Christ's, but he spares us that task when he did it for us by explicitly denying that justification rests on the obedience of Christ. In his closing argument of this, his only lecture dedicated to justification, Finney tells us:

They must have a justification while yet at least in some degree of sin. This must be brought about by imputed righteousness. The intellect revolts at a justification in sin. So a scheme is devised to divert the eye of the law and the law-giver from the sinner to his substitute, who has perfectly obeyed the law. But in order to make out the possibility of his obedience being imputed to them, it must be assumed that He owed no obedience for Himself; than which a

greater absurdity cannot be conceived.<sup>25</sup>

To his credit, Finney never flirted with the notion of God not requiring obedience; he simply thought it could be found in us, and denied that it was found in Christ.<sup>26</sup> While the professed requirement of real obedience is not relaxed, the source of salvation is dismissed. In order to have justification, righteousness must come from somewhere. When he denies Christ as the source, all hope rests on the obedience that must be self-generated by the sinner who makes a decision to change his life. All Christians know this is ludicrous. In such a scheme as Finney's, it will take a god of very bad eyesight to justify us, a lot of scrambling to redefine sin, and a crash program of fig leaf production.

Finney told sinners to present *their* righteousness to God. But in the gospel God does some presenting too. He has presented Christ as a propitiation (Rom. 3:25). Finney insisted that Christ "could not . . . obey as our substitute," yet he repeatedly said that Christ's death was vicarious.<sup>27</sup> But we have now come to the other side of our Lord's obedience, since we are justified by both His "doing and dying."<sup>28</sup> We have come to Charles Finney's view of the cross.

#### **Charles Finney's View of the Atonement**

**What the atonement does not mean.** This odd way to begin is customary Finney. His answer for the ground of justification begins, "It is not founded in Christ's literally suffering the exact penalty of the law for them, and in this sense literally purchasing their justification and eternal salvation."<sup>29</sup> The Reformation saw the biblical truth that Christ satisfied divine justice by receiving divine wrath in His vicarious death. Finney retains the word "justice" when he says the atonement is to "satisfy public justice," but it is not "retributive justice."<sup>30</sup> Retributive justice means that the guilt of sin is actually punished. Finney held that sins may be par-

doned, but for those saved, they are not punished. They cannot be imputed to another person. This is Finney in all his consistency. First, the sinner's needed obedience comes only from himself, and now that we look at Finney's atonement, we learn that sin falls only on the one committing it, a double denial of the Savior's work.

He elaborates that the atonement is not "a proper full payment of the debt of the justified."<sup>31</sup> That to Finney is impossible in the very idea of one dying for another. What Christ suffered is "indefinitely less in amount than was deserved by the transgressors."<sup>32</sup> Finney's penchant to quantify both the obedience of Christ, and now His sufferings, shows that he has rejected the representative principle of the Mediator standing in for others. One should not measure the amount of blood, total His pain, nor clock the time hanging on the cross. The New Testament has no embarrassment to report that His death came sooner than the ones beside Him, because a quantification of the physical side is irrelevant to the atonement.

One must remember Finney's distinction regarding the atonement as condition and not ground of justification. That leads to what might be his most sweeping statement to detach the cross from justification: "Neither is the atonement nor anything in the mediatorial work of Christ, the foundation of our justification, in the sense of the source, moving or procuring cause."<sup>33</sup> (I nominate that as the most wicked thing I have read in Charles Finney.) It means that to find the real procuring cause of justification one must not look to the cross. He will say the ground of justification lies only in the heart of infinite love. If so, justification's basis does not lie in the divine act of intervention in history in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. For Finney, the gospel has moved away from the redemptive action where "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third

day" (1 Cor. 15:3-4). But divine love did act in Christ when God's reconciliation took the path and principle of not imputing men's sins to them, because those sins were imputed to the One made sin for them and executed accordingly. But in Finney's atonement, that labor of love on the cross procured nothing at all in regard to forgiveness. He has detached love and the cross when the apostle John did the opposite in fusing them, "He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (NKJV).<sup>34</sup>

Finney's supporters will say this is a distortion since God's love is the cause, and God did provide the atonement as a condition—a true statement of Finney's position. But that the ground of justification is not in any sense the mediatorial ministry of the Savior is straight Finney. The love of God is affirmed in Finney, but, for him, love causes what the atonement did not and could not. No, the gracious love of God sent the Son to reconcile in a redemptive activity that is effective. First Peter 3:18 says, "Christ died for sins [Finney differed, saying it is not retributive], the righteous for the unrighteous [Finney denies Christ represented anyone], to bring you to God." (Finney disagrees again since the mediatorial work of Christ never procured anything for us.) This is a small example of the pervasiveness of his denials. If one were to correct his systematic theology point for point, it would be the writing of an encyclopedia. Finney could not sing, "On the cross He sealed my pardon, paid the debt and made me free," because those words, three times, affirm that the mediator *procured* our forgiveness.

#### **What the Atonement Does Mean in Finney's Theology.**

God only pardons as Governor; He does not acquit as Judge. This is a basic key to Finney's thought. Sinners are judged on their obedience, with Christ's obedience not allowed into the picture judicially. But if the criminal is repentant and sins no more, he may then be pardoned (gov-

ernmentally) without too much damage to the maintenance of good government if God would only make some demonstration of His view of sin. And to Finney that is the gospel—pardon for those who sin no more, the pardon always being of past sins, and always conditioned on present obedience. The Governor of Connecticut (in which state Charles Finney was born) might let a man off, a far cry from declaring him righteous. If the lawbreaker is still breaking the law then a pardon is highly inappropriate. For such a thing there is no room in good government, and in Finney's mind, God's good moral government is no different from the principles of any wise human government. The concept of a God justifying the wicked while still wicked is repulsive. But pardon of those truly sorry for their past sins and determined to live obediently to God, is a real part of benevolent government of both God and man.

Finney saw dangers here: First, if the sinner continues to have sins, a pardon would be detrimental to good government, and this is something God just would not do. This is solved by the new acquired intention of the sinner to desire and act unselfishly for the good of the universe. (I plead with people to read what Finney really says.) This means that the sinner has become righteous in himself!

And second, one might presume that the Governor is soft on crime. Finney's proposed solution for this one is the atonement. The universe needs to be secured "against a misapprehension of the character and design of God in forgiving and saving sinners."<sup>35</sup> What will the editorial pages say about the Governor if he lets sinners off? The Governor's commitment to law and good moral government must be upheld against all misunderstanding, so God must justify "wisely."<sup>36</sup> The world is watching Him. "Has He not given us intelligence on purpose that we may be able to see and judge the propriety of His public acts? Does He not invite and require scrutiny?"<sup>37</sup> (Where in God's Word does

Finney ever find such a view of God?)

God in His "public justice" must protect the public interest. Sometimes this involves "the execution of the penalties of law [i.e., retributive justice] . . . unless something else is done that will as effectually secure the public interest."<sup>38</sup> That "something else" is the atonement. If there were no atonement it would weaken government, "by begetting and fostering a hope of impunity in the minds of those who are tempted to violate the law."<sup>39</sup> So rather than satisfying God's justice, the atonement is resorted to as "a governmental expedient"<sup>40</sup> to set things straight in the minds of all the rest of us in the universe. It was not God's justice that was addressed at the cross. The atonement was resorted to to protect God's image in our eyes, and to relieve *our* sense of justice. If our sense of wrong and our scrutiny of God's good government are key to this view of the atonement, then one could virtually say that we are propitiated rather than God. The cross is supposed to remove our sense of indignation that God might be letting his law down. So God showed His seriousness about His law, not in not punishing sinners for breaking it, but by having the One who never did, crucified. Jesus died in a public relations gesture.

There is certainly no propitiation of God in Finney's systematic theology. The cross has become, for Finney, God's media event so He will not be misunderstood and we will not misunderstand. And that is all the death of the Son of God accomplished, no washing away of sin, just a washing away of our possible misunderstandings. Finney's god is quite insecure! He has to worry about our view of Him and prepare for our scrutiny, and so resort to the crucifixion of the Son of God to satisfy public justice. I think such a crime would do the opposite. If that crucifixion was not a penalty for sin, it is intrinsically unjust. Finney preserves justice by mutilating it. So when he speaks of the "vicarious nature" of the atonement, one should not think he speaks with the

same meaning as evangelicals have ordinarily had for those words.<sup>41</sup> His vocabulary is Christian; his content is the leaven of the Pharisees.

Finney's cross has an educational side. The cross acts "as a more efficient preventative of sin, and a more powerful persuasive to holiness, than the infliction of the legal penalty would do."<sup>42</sup> It impresses lessons that need to be taught, since for Finney the great purpose of penalties is prevention.<sup>43</sup> How he sounds like a modern man. We used to think that the great purpose of penalties was that justice might be done. Does God consign to hell only to prevent sin? Satisfying justice is not a part of Finney's atonement in the reformation sense. One kind of satisfaction satisfies God's justice; Finney's satisfies public opinion.

But Charles Finney is consistent here. For him, Christ does not supply us with righteousness in the forensic sense, nor was the crucifixion judicial. No penalty was exacted there, no crime punished, and no guilt of sin removed. The cross stands in history only to teach us a good lesson. It is not central to forgiveness, is not a foundation of justification; it is a mere sideshow, not the main event. Little wonder that in all the pages I have read, there is not a word about the Lord's Supper, which, had it been reflected upon, might have spared Finney a view of the atonement that is closer to a civics text than the Bible.

#### How Did Finney Go Astray?

Finney was a man of very definite views. His training as a lawyer is often evident in his writings. He never went to seminary and began the ministry without formal training, walking from the law office into the pulpit. He was an American whose birth in 1792 was only months removed from the ratification of the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights. His ideas of what good government should be, and thus what God's good government ought to be, were well

established in his mind before his conversion at age twenty-nine. This, however, was not the chief influence on his reasoning.

His *Systematic Theology* is anything but one, leaving huge areas of Christian doctrine untouched.<sup>44</sup> He assigned to natural theology things that can be known only by revelation. Of all things, into this area apart from special revelation, he placed much of his reasoning about the atonement. Those unfamiliar with Finney should not miss this point. He knew that there ought to be an atonement and he knew its purpose before opening his Bible. His theology is highly affected by his philosophic commitment.<sup>45</sup>

A major feature of Finney's thought is the place he assigned to reason.<sup>46</sup> "Reason is that function of the intellect which immediately holds or intuits a class of truths. . . ."<sup>47</sup> "Immediately" does not mean "right now," but that there is no intermediate means of learning. The truths he refers to as "immediately" held are known without revelation, with no mediating objective Word from God to inform his mind. No Bible was necessary, because ". . . in regard to the intuitions of the reason, this faculty directly beholds the truths which it affirms . . . They are not received second hand."<sup>48</sup> Again, "directly" means without a revelation from God, since those things are known intuitively.

The point here is critical to his theology. We expect all Christians to say that we do not know the mind of God unless He reveals it to us. Yet for Finney, "Theology is to a great extent, the science of mind in its relations to moral law."<sup>49</sup> Much of his theology is *a priori*, a massive volume of "first truths" and "self evident truths" "which need no proof."<sup>50</sup> Angels might fear to tread here, but we now know the reason for Finney's boldness in breaking with so much that the Reformers arrived at by careful study of the Scriptures, since for Finney "there can be no error in the *a priori* intuitions of the reason."<sup>51</sup> The Bible is in the category

of a "second hand" way of knowing. The revelation of the Word of God kicks in where intuition stops. The first truths of intuition are without error. So the American church in the nineteenth century was going to be massively influenced by a theologian who knew what the Bible ought to say apart from the necessity of reading it. In this light, it is easy to understand why there is such a paucity of exegesis in Finney's writings. He knows without reading the Bible how God ought to govern the universe. His confidence was certainly bolstered by the error-free intuitions of his mind. But in the Gospel of John, the Lord Jesus conveys truths that are not His intuition, but things acquired from His Father (John 7:16; 8:40; 12:49). Finney claimed a kind of knowledge the Son of God did not.

Now, into this philosophic framework falls the atonement and justification. We know it is coming. Finney predicted: "In all our future investigations we shall have abundant occasion for the application of what has now been said of first truths of reason."<sup>52</sup> It was nonsense, in Finney's intuition, for God to justify a man who still has sins, so it just cannot be. This is "too plain to need proof."<sup>53</sup> It is nonsense for us to have the righteousness of another, so that cannot be either. That all gets settled in a great hurry. A truth of reason does not need to be a matter of revelation!<sup>54</sup> God not only meets the demands of His own intelligence, but of the universe as well.<sup>55</sup> (But if God meets the universe's demands, then the universe is God, not God.) Finney was confident his "governmental philosophy can satisfactorily explain" the atonement.<sup>56</sup> "Reason can discern divine philosophy!"<sup>57</sup> In such thinking, the cross has again run into the wisdom of this world (1 Cor. 1:17-19).

". . . We shall be naturally conducted by reason and revelation to our ultimate conclusions."<sup>58</sup> His understanding of the atonement came from these two sources. Many will admit that by nature and the law written in the heart, we

have a real sense of the judgment of God—a proper sense of intuition otherwise known as the conscience. But to suggest that “it might naturally have been inferred, that the wisdom . . . of God would devise and execute some method of meeting the demands of public justice, that should render the forgiveness of sins possible” is utterly outrageous.<sup>59</sup> That “method” is the atonement. Finney does not say that his intuition foresaw that God would send His Son. That he does leave to revelation. But his human intuition led him to think that some governmental expedient as the atonement “is just what might have been expected of the benevolence of God.”<sup>60</sup> Finney’s god is predictable to him. The real God is mysterious and His grace is a surprise from which we never wish to recover. It was owed to no one.<sup>61</sup> Finney replaced amazement with expectations. It is difficult to imagine a hymn that lifts our hearts in gratitude for an atonement that was God’s “governmental expedient.”

Finney spelled out four pages of the affirmations of reason on the atonement before we have any material from divine revelation in the Bible.<sup>62</sup> Reason told him that God would pardon sin.<sup>63</sup> No such truth was self evident to Adam and Eve before the fall. No angel who sinned has ever experienced such a grace as God’s forgiveness. So this self-evident truth is an error. Yet it is an infallible truth to Finney that God would pursue “as far as possible public and individual happiness.”<sup>64</sup> That is a formula for an empty hell. What ever happened to the priority of God’s glory as God?

According to Jeremiah 23, Dr. Finney should have stood quietly in God’s council to learn from God. “. . . Who has listened and heard his word?”—a rather hard thing to do when sure that one’s intuitions are absolutely correct apart from second hand revelation. This is why false prophets speak visions from their own minds (v. 16). God has said of such prophets, “I did not send these prophets, yet they have run with their message . . .” (v. 21). Beware of a theologian who

knows by his own reason the very secrets of God apart from God revealing them (Deut. 29:29). This is a basic problem with Finney’s atonement and his doctrine of a justification. God’s ways are unsearchable and past our ever finding out in all the coming ages of His teaching us the incomparable riches of His grace (Rom. 11:33-34; Eph. 2:7). What was so predictable to Finney was but the imagination of his mind. Thus did he trample on precious things, and dismiss them out of hand when they did not fit in with what he expected to be proper for God.<sup>65</sup>

### Finney’s Counsel in Evangelism

Finney lectured on “How to Preach the Gospel.”<sup>66</sup> He counseled on the manner of the preacher, but when specifying content, never once mentioned the action of God in Christ at the cross. The focus instead was on the interior decision of the sinner. “A prime object with the preacher must be to make present obligation felt.”<sup>67</sup> “Sinners ought to be made to feel that they have something to do . . . Religion is something to do, not something to wait for . . .”<sup>68</sup> “. . . A change of heart is the sinner’s own act. . .”<sup>69</sup>

Then in his “Directions to Sinners” there is one passing reference to the cross, an explanation of what faith is not. “Christ died for you in particular . . .” —a point of doctrine Finney denied anyway. Having steered the sinner away from that, he then did not even give his own view of the cross. The cross was absent in these lectures to evangelists and also in his direction to sinners. But he did offer “a proper answer for this inquiry, ‘What must I do to be saved?’” He began his reply: “And, generally, you may give the sinner any direction, or tell him to do anything, that includes a right heart, and if you make him understand it, and do it, he will be saved.”<sup>70</sup> (Please read that carefully.) He ended his reply:

There is a great variety in people's exercises. Whatever point is taken hold of, between God and the sinner, when the sinner yields that, he is converted. Whatever the particular exercise may be, if it includes obedience of heart to God on any point, it is true conversion. Whenever the mind is directed to any one point of duty, he is ready to follow. It matters very little which of these directions is given, if it is only made plain, and if it is to the point, so as to serve as a test of obedience to God. If it is to the point that the Spirit of God is debating with the sinner's mind, so as to fall in with the Spirit's work, and not to divert the sinner's attention from the very point in controversy, let it be made perfectly clear, and then pressed till the sinner yields, and he will be saved.<sup>71</sup>

Did Finney forget that the real answer to this question in Acts 16:31 is, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ"? If the sinner will stop trying to climb up to heaven or down into the deep and simply confess with his mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in his heart that God has raised Him from the dead (and that's all), he shall be saved (Rom. 10: 5-13).

### Conclusion

Charles Finney was passionate in his disagreement with the learning and heritage of the Reformers. He dismissed their return to Scripture and Christ-centered grace. In its place he urged the vagaries of his own thought, thinking heavily colored by Enlightenment views of human reason. Holy things such as the very thought that Another could represent us, obey for us, and die for us, were all treated with arrogant disdain. The promise of the gospel was replaced with the pretense of our righteousness, a burden unbearable to every sinner. To this evil he then added an explanation of the cross as something without power to remove sin, bring us to God or remove our guilt. Finney

exclaimed that nothing at all in the mediatorial work of Christ procures our standing with God. The proper response to such a gospel from "America's Greatest Revivalist" is rejection of his error and disgust for profaning the work of our Lord.

Yet the virus of Finney is still present in the evangelical bloodstream. It shows up whenever God's love is presented detached from the violence of the wrath of God's fury against our sin on the cross, where God smote the Holy One Who became sin for us. The cross is the gospel. God's love is never at variance with His loving His own grace and justice. Gracious love and retributive justice are not at odds with each other. One is the wellspring of the other because God expressed love by providing the atonement. Whenever one is detached from the other, a Finney-like reduction of the gospel is with us still. The cross is rooted in God's love and is God's declared means of saving, yet Finney insisted the ground of justification is love and not the cross alone. What God has channeled through the cross, Finney detours around it, bringing the love of God to wicked sinners with sin yet unatoned for, never realizing that a crossless contact with God would incinerate us for our sin. We need our Mediator. God can be approached in no other way, nor does He approach us in any other way.<sup>72</sup>

Finney's intuition did not reveal the gospel to him, so he concocted a non-atoning atonement. A failure to proclaim the cross in its necessity, centrality and effectiveness as the climax of our Savior's lifelong obedience is to give up the real ground of our justification. In Christ's obedience we rest from our worries and our works. Only one clean lawkeeping life has occurred in the filth of human history. That righteousness of His is there in the gospel for all who will in faith embrace it. At Calvary, the only hell on earth to precede the Judgment Day has already happened. That too will replace all the hells of all who believe God's promise. But poor

Charles Finney denied both the doing and the dying of Christ. He led people away from Christ, and led sinners to, of all things, themselves! Our great high priest learned obedience in His days on earth, and in His sacrifice met the law's penalties. Yet Finney told people to bring to God their own obedience and held out forgiveness with sin not paid for. It is difficult to imagine a more thorough denial of justification by faith alone by anyone purported to be an evangelist.

He was a wolf in sheep's clothing. In our tolerant age of discomfort with God's doctrines coupled with our principle of avoiding almost all disagreement, Finney's denials are allowed to sit unnoticed in our evangelical Hall of Fame. The laudatory language should stop. The gospel treasure he denied should be mined in God's Word again with due diligence, articulate definition, and joyful proclamation. In all this, Finney is no role model for us. We should admit at last that Charles Grandison Finney was a false prophet, an evangelist who did not believe nor preach the gospel.

#### Author

David H. Linden lives in Calgary, Alberta, where he works with international students at the University of Calgary in association with Action International Ministries. He is a graduate of New Brunswick Bible Institute, Columbia International University (formerly Columbia Bible College), and Covenant Theological Seminary. Under the ministry of Action International Ministries David has lectured on the subject of justification both in North America and the Philippines.

#### Endnotes

- 1 From the cover of the 1976 edition of Charles G. Finney, *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1976).

- 2 There is also a briefer 432-page 1976 edition by Bethany House. The 1994 edition has 602 pages.
- 3 Any student who seeks to derive Finney's position from this theology will find at many critical places that Finney is quite passionate to say what he does *not* believe. He at times makes it plain that it is the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (see the author's preface, pp. 3-4) and Reformation theology in general. The difficulty, though, is to find his view stated positively without the polemics taking charge of his discussion. In pages 360-61 the discussion of what justification is not, is double what it is. And when he is stating what it is, he cannot cease from saying what it is not. Finney often refutes more than he affirms. Thus this writer sometimes has to cull the position he is affirming from the negatives.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 361.
- 5 "... a merciful acceptance of the penitents and never as a forensic or judicial acquittal or justification of them" (p. 361). Here Finney, the trained lawyer, slips into a use of the word "justification" where the forensic nature of it shines through. But theologically he held that justifying a sinner is a contraction in terms and is nonsense.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 362.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 362-73.
- 8 "They have talked of justification by faith, as if they supposed that, by an arbitrary appointment of God, faith was the condition, and the only condition of justification" (p. 366).
- 9 There is another that is not didactic. Its purpose is simply to introduce a series of Scripture quotations.
- 10 I have found no reference in Finney to a faith that does not work as in the case of Abraham, "to him who does not work but believes . . ." (Rom. 4:5). He lists the verse twice, once with no treatment of it, as is his usual custom. In the case where he does comment, he claims,

"Here justification is represented only as consisting in forgiveness of sin . . ." (p. 373). Amazingly, to Finney the words "his faith are credited as righteousness," teach only forgiveness and do not teach imputed righteousness. That faith works is agreed to. But when faith receives, it does not work. Once justification has been decreed and thus the Spirit given, the fruit of the Spirit comes into play. Thus faith without works moves on to be a faith that does work. The standard Roman confusion of this point is found throughout Finney.

- 11 "It [repentance] implies a universal reformation of life, that is a reformation extending to all outward sin. The penitent does not, and remaining penitent, cannot reform in respect to some sins only" (p. 346).
- 12 Ibid., 343.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid., 344.
- 15 Ibid., 368.
- 16 Ibid., 369.
- 17 Ibid., 368-69.
- 18 In another chapter Finney says, ". . . if it be true that Christians are justified without present full obedience. That surely must be a doctrine of devils" (p. 125). He is seeking to avoid antinomianism, and he is arguing for the necessity of repentance—that purpose I do not dispute, but he sees only full obedience in the Christian as a condition of justification and that is the matter now being disputed in this article. We do argue for full obedience as the very ground of justification, but it is the obedience of Christ.
- 19 ". . . The Christian . . . is justified no longer than he obeys, and must be condemned when he disobeys . . . the sinning Christian and the unconverted sinner are upon precisely the same ground" (p. 116).
- 20 Ibid., 375.

- 21 Ibid., 369.
- 22 Ibid., 363.
- 23 Ibid., 369.
- 24 Yet at times Finney seems not to comprehend the view he seeks to refute. On p. 124 he thinks Reformation theology believes "a partial obedience can be accepted" by God, when the real position is that only the unblemished obedience of Christ is the ground of our hope.
- 25 Ibid., 377.
- 26 In Lecture 8, "Obedience to the Moral Law," he does reduce the definition of sin, as not including such things as "constitutional appetites and susceptibilities" (p. 129), and therefore presumably lust. Obedience does not even "imply that we always, or even aim at, or do our duty" (p. 136). This is not surprising in any system where our obedience is a condition of our salvation, that there would be tremendous pressure to define sin in a way more congenial to our corruption.
- 27 Ibid., 364.
- 28 Page xi in the Foreword by Robert L. Reymond of *Justification by Faith Alone*, Charles Hodge (Hobbs, New Mexico: The Trinity Foundation, 1995).
- 29 Ibid., 373.
- 30 Ibid., 209.
- 31 Ibid., 374.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid., 375-76.
- 34 The NIV does not use the sharper word "propitiation." It says "atoning sacrifice." When we see the kind of confusion Finney spread, and his works do follow him, it is wise to use the sharpest translation possible. Finney's *Systematic Theology* has a glossary which includes an entry for atonement, but nothing on propitiation. Bringing those two words together would be a corrective to Finney's theology. The glossary says atonement

is: "The governmental substitution of the sufferings of Christ for the punishment of sinners. It is a covering of their sins by His sufferings" (p. 586). One had better read Finney carefully to see what those words mean.

35 Ibid., 372. This paragraph is long but would be one of the better places to read for a summary of his thought on the atonement. In the lecture on justification, he expends much ink to say what the atonement does not mean. Here he says more of what it does, but even there he cannot get through the paragraph without resuming his attack on imputed righteousness.

36 Ibid., 374.

37 Ibid., 125.

38 Ibid., 209.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., 364. On page 372, Finney uses the words "resorted to."

41 Ibid., 215.

42 Ibid., 214.

43 Ibid., 213.

44 I recommend Michael Horton's two 1995 papers from *Modern Reformation* on "The Legacy of Charles Finney" and "Charles Finney vs. *The Westminster Confession*." Also the Winter 1997 issue of the *Reformation & Revival Journal* has four articles that either focus or bear on Finney. My article does not purport to be an historical survey. An example here: It would be unreasonable for a law to be enacted which citizens cannot fulfill, such as working twenty-five hours a day. Finney is right, so he reasons that it is the same with God: if God commands perfect obedience, then obviously man is capable of such obedience, or it would have been oppressive of God to require it. "To talk of inability to obey moral law is to talk nonsense" (p. 21). In our sin we cannot obey, and in God's holiness, He cannot command less. Finney

resolves this with a defective view of the Fall. Finney's view of what a human legislature should do colors his views of God's government.

46 See especially pp. 11-19.

47 Ibid., 13.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid., 12.

50 Ibid., 15.

51 Ibid., 14.

52 Ibid., 17.

53 Ibid., 126.

54 Ibid., 74.

55 Ibid., 75.

56 Ibid., 212.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid., 19.

59 Ibid., 212.

60 Ibid.

61 Unfortunately Finney held that what is expedient is demanded of moral law. The atonement is expedient and therefore it was incumbent upon God in His wise governing to resort to an atonement. God is under obligation to the moral law (p. 122) to govern by these principles, thus the atonement is not a gracious act but an expediency it is His duty to pursue. The deeper one digs in Finney's theology the more obnoxious it becomes. I think the angels who sinned wish that Finney were right and that a way of forgiving them would be resorted to under the obligation of God to pursue universal benevolence. Why not save fallen angels, if the ultimate purpose of the law is the happiness of the creature (p. 85) and benevolence constitutes true religion? (p. 102).

62 Ibid., 211-14.

63 Ibid., 212.

64 Ibid., 214.

- 65 How frank Finney can be! There is little surprise in the Scriptures for him, "The Bible reads just as it might be expected to read . . ." (p. 74). Did he ever come across something in his reason that the Bible contradicted, forcing him to submit to a truth not congenial to his expectations? I wonder. There is no evidence of this in his doctrine of justification or the atonement. These doctrines ended up being read "just as it might be expected."
- 66 This section is drawn from *Revivals of Religion* (Moody, 1962). Finney's 1835 preface informs us that he read the reporter's notes of his lectures. Finney expressed surprise that the reporter "could so nearly report my meaning."
- 67 *Revivals of Religion*, 168.
- 68 *Ibid.*, 169.
- 69 *Ibid.*, 160.
- 70 *Ibid.*, 266.
- 71 *Ibid.*, 273.
- 72 See *In the Face of God: The Dangers and Delights of Spiritual Intimacy*, Michael S. Horton (Word, 1996).