

# ASSESSING THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS IDEAS

## CHARLES FINNEY'S PERFECTIONISM

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Charles Finney about the time of the publication of his *Systematic Theology*

In a recent issue of the *Journal of the Early Republic* Allen Guelzo has aptly summarized the historical consensus with his comment that "No important survey of the early American republic fails to give Charles Grandison Finney one of the starring roles in its story." Indeed ever since the writings of Timothy Smith and Perry Miller, Charles Finney has been accorded a position as a preeminent theologian of Jacksonian America, with his perfectionism described as an expression of Jacksonian optimism. Although many histories of antebellum religion, such as Paul Conkin's excellent work, *The Uneasy Center*, feature other theologians, it is probably safe to assert that Finney's perfectionism would receive better recognition among students of American history than the work of Charles Hodge, Justin Edwards, Albert Barnes, or a large number of other less colorful

ministers.<sup>(1)</sup> Such an assertion undoubtedly would have puzzled many of Finney's contemporaries, who regarded Finney's perfectionism as a dangerous heresy, and the above named ministers as pillars of their community.

The art of writing intellectual history can never be precise, especially when attempting to assess the influence of an idea upon a larger community. Nevertheless, we can apply tangible criteria; including declarations of church bodies, or the curriculum at major theological seminaries to evaluate the influence of Finney's perfectionism. A more careful analysis will show that Finney's perfectionism (that is his theology after 1836) was rejected by the New School Presbyterians and marginally tolerated by the Congregationalists. With regard to the Methodists, it is a question of whether Finney influenced or was influenced by the Methodists. To be sure, Finney had a considerable impact upon antebellum America. By proclaiming provocative ideas, he stimulated thoughts on the subjects of human sin and ability. His early denunciations of slavery were critical to the beginnings of the abolition movement in the United States. Yet the number of clergy who openly accepted Finney's version of perfectionism in antebellum America was truly limited.

To simplify this discussion Charles Finney's life can be divided into three phases: (1) the beginning, which lasted until the New Lebanon Conference of 1827; (2) the respectable phase, which lasted from the New Lebanon Conference until Finney's movement to Oberlin in 1835 followed by his espousal of a perfectionist theology two years later; and (3) the perfectionist or Oberlin phase, which continued for the remainder of his life.<sup>(2)</sup>

During the earliest phase, Finney served as an itinerant Presbyterian revivalists in upstate New York, getting his start in the far northern regions along Lake Ontario. In this capacity he was perhaps the best known of several revivalists who traveled the so-called "burnt over district." Although capable of inspiring revivals, Finney was also quite capable of inspiring hostility from the settled clergy, who resented his interference with their congregations. Finney especially outraged his fellow Presbyterian clergy with his sermon, *Can Two Walk Together, except they be agreed?* in which he suggested that a congregation might find another pastor if their minister could not inspire revivals. This sermon questioned the long established Congregational and Presbyterian practice of maintaining a settled and educated minister. Hoping to curb what they perceived to be Finney's threat to the settled clergy more conventional Congregationalists, including Lyman Beecher and Asahel Nettleton, proposed the so-called New Lebanon Conference, bringing together Finney's supporters and critics to discuss their differences and produce a statement of common principles.<sup>(3)</sup>

Although the conference was inconclusive, it did usher in the respectable phase of Finney's career. Finney ceased his attacks upon settled clergy, and in return received an acceptance from the Presbyterian and Congregational clergy. His most dramatic success came with the Rochester revival during the winter of 1830/1831. Arriving at a time when the city was being transformed by the booming Erie Canal, and when divisions among the Presbyterians were creating new tensions, Finney soon dominated city life with his presence. During that winter he brought converts into the city churches. His work brought

a substantial measure of sobriety to Rochester at the same time that it increased the church membership.<sup>(4)</sup>

As I will argue for the rest of this paper the revival in Rochester revival constituted the pinnacle of Finney's career. After leaving Rochester he preached in Wilmington, Delaware; Philadelphia; Providence, Rhode Island; New York City; and Boston. In Boston, he had the pleasure of preaching at Lyman Beecher's church. In New York, transcriptions of his sermons led to the publication of his first major works, *Sermons on Important Subjects*, and *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*.

Yet his revivals in the eastern seaports never seemed to catch the same fire as did his work in upstate New York. Certainly he remained a vigorous influence upon the American religious scene, but his subsequent efforts did not achieve the resounding success of the Rochester revival. In Boston, even his friends such as George Gale regarded his mission as a disappointment, and Finney's *Memoirs* reflect his complaint that the presence of Unitarians discouraged the trinitarians from preaching sound doctrine. In New York his ministry was disrupted first by an episode of cholera and second by recurrent anti-abolitionist violence. Finney responded by an extended absence, ostensibly to recover his health. The publications of his sermons provided a welcome financial and personal boost. Just as the work in New York City appeared to be moving upwards, Finney accepted the position as a professor at Oberlin.<sup>(5)</sup>

The last phase of Finney's career began in 1835, when he accepted a professorship of theology at the Oberlin Collegiate Institute. Despite frequent absences to conduct revivals, he kept his affiliation with Oberlin for the rest of his life, first as a professor, then as college president. Shortly after his arrival at Oberlin, he followed President Asa Mahan's lead in asserting that humans were truly capable of perfect obedience to God's commandments; that is he became a perfectionist. He constructed a theoretical basis for his perfectionism with his *Lectures to Professing Christians* in 1837, followed by his two volume *Lectures in Systematic Theology* in 1846 and 1847.

Up to this point Finney's theology might be described as derived from the New Haven theology of Nathaniel William Taylor and other New School Calvinists. He carried Taylor's careful qualifications of the traditional Calvinist ideas well beyond what Taylor would have accepted, much to the embarrassment of Taylor, Beecher, and the other New Haven theologians. Moreover his methods such as protracted meetings or the anxious bench aroused concern among the more traditional Presbyterian and Congregational ministers. Yet Finney still retained the essential features of New Haven theology. His assertions that humans were truly capable of perfect obedience to God's law marked a definite departure from the New Haven theology. Finney and the other Oberlin perfectionists were now clearly distinguished from the New Haven theologians.<sup>(6)</sup>

The question remains, however, just how much influence did Finney exert after his espousal of perfectionist theology. Let's look at the particulars in the Presbyterian, Congregational, and Methodists denominations.

Finney was first ordained in the Presbyterian community, and the early part of his career was as a Presbyterian minister. Nevertheless, here Finney perfectionism received the strongest rejection. The response of the Presbyterians to Finney's perfectionism must be taken within the context of the Presbyterian schism of 1837. During the 1830s tensions between conservative ministers, who adhered to a strict interpretation of the Westminster Confession and the New Haven adherents, who favored a re-explanation of Calvinist doctrines on human ability, led to a division into Old School and New School. Old School members refused to accept even the more moderate New Haven theology, and they had their doubts about Hopkinsianism. An obvious fact, often overlooked, by those who place Finney at the center of American theology, is that the Old School was in the majority during the 1837 schism. Charles Hodge, who Perry Miller so readily deprecated, was the highly respected mentor to hundreds of young men entering the ministry, including the fathers of Woodrow Wilson and Grover Cleveland. Indeed, Princeton Seminary remained a highly influential center of conservative theology throughout the nineteenth century.

Far from embracing Finney's perfectionism after the schism, the New School Presbyterians shifted in a conservative direction until the eventual re-union of the two factions was possible in 1869. Immediately after the divisive 1837 General Assembly, New School delegates met at Auburn Seminary in New York to draft a declaration of principles that remained the unofficial standard of orthodoxy for the denomination until the reunion. It consisted of a point by point refutation of sixteen doctrinal errors alleged by the Old School, asserting their orthodoxy on every point. The Auburn Declaration was an unequivocal rejection of Finney's perfectionism.<sup>(7)</sup>

The Synod of the Western Reserve, located in northeastern Ohio, was long regarded as a stronghold of New School theology within the Presbyterian Community. It was the first synod to be expelled during the 1837 General Assembly session. Oberlin's location within the middle of the Western Reserve might suggest that Finney could exert some influence there. Nonetheless, this particular synod was exceptionally hostile to the perfectionist theologians within their region. The Presbytery of Cleveland appointed a committee to prepare a refutation of Oberlin theology. While professing a respect for the work that Finney had performed prior to joining the Oberlin faculty, the work raised an alarm about the possible entrance of perfectionist ideas into the Presbyterian communion. "That the facility with which not a few, who once abhorred Wesleyan Perfectionism, have been led to embrace a theory far more extravagant and pernicious, should be set down among the darker signs of the times, and as indicating the importance of more thorough and discriminating doctrinal instruction in the churches, as well as of deeper reverence for the teachings of God's word, and less regard for the opinions of men."<sup>(8)</sup>

Finney's own memoirs complained about the hostility and lack of financial support from his fellow clergy. He recalled the time when he offered a lady a ride in his buggy. After learning that he was from Oberlin, his passenger "made a motion as if she would sit as far from me as she could; and turning and looking earnestly at me, she said 'From Oberlin! why,' said she, 'our minister said he would just as soon send a son to state-prison as to Oberlin.'" At another time Finney claimed that he was excluded from a convention

regarding western education, largely by the machinations of Lyman Beecher. He did gain admittance to one session where he heard the speaker denounce Oberlin as worse than Roman Catholicism.<sup>(9)</sup>

Outside of the Western Reserve, New School Presbyterians were equally hostile to the idea of perfectionist theology. The Presbytery of Detroit issued a denunciation of Oberlin theology at their session of 1847, which received the endorsement of the Synod of Michigan. In part, it denied that members of the Presbyterian community disseminated these "mischievous and fatal errors," rather it complained of Congregational clergy who broached perfectionist ideas. George Duffield, who had once been accused of New Haven heresies himself, published a lengthy refutation of Oberlin theology in the *American Biblical Repository*.<sup>(10)</sup>

New School controlled theological seminaries provided no support to Finney. Auburn was best known as the location where New School delegates drafted their denial of any departure from the Westminster standards of orthodoxy. Lane Theological Seminary, under the presidency of Lyman Beecher, certainly was not sympathetic to perfectionist ideas. Indeed Finney's animosity towards Beecher is readily apparent through his memoirs. Finney was especially resentful because of Beecher's opposition to Oberlin College.

Union Theological Seminary, in New York City, officially remained outside of the New School oversight, and was open to students from all denominations. In practice, it was controlled by New School Presbyterians. From a modest beginning in 1836, the school rapidly rose to become a leading New School institution. By 1852 the school enrolled 80 students; and that figure rose to 146 during the revivals of 1858. Like the other New School Presbyterians, the founders of Union Seminary found no place for perfectionism. Faculty members were required to subscribe to the Westminster Confession as containing the "system of doctrines" found in the scripture. One of its most prominent faculty members, Henry Boynton Smith, led the movement toward a more conservative theology that made the reunion with the Old School possible.<sup>(11)</sup>

Because Finney joined the Congregational community after his departure from the Presbyterians, one would expect that he should have received a warmer welcome within this community. Moreover, the Congregational tradition of greater doctrinal latitude provided a better climate for the spread of Finney's perfectionist ideas. At first glance it would appear that the Congregational community did accept Finney's perfectionism. Oberlin graduates were ordained into the ministry. Indeed, the Congregational acceptance of Finney was a major contributing factor to the dissolution of a long standing cooperative agreement with the New School Presbyterians in 1852.

Nevertheless, it is important to make a distinction between tolerating perfectionism, and endorsing it. An article in the New Haven publication *The New Englander* provides a suggestion of how perfectionism was viewed within the New England communities. The author was defending the Congregational practice of accepting perfectionist ministers by pointing to the allegedly difficulties within the western states:

"Ripe scholars and trained theologians do not, for some reason, affect itinerating among sparse settlements for some indefinable portion of four hundred dollars a year. Men go there, of brief study and imperfect discipline-ready men, of more practical than systematic divinity, and quite as likely to be Presbyterians as Congregationalists; more likely to be Methodists than either. Yet poorly furnished as they are, and with all their Arminianism, and with worse Perfectionism than Oberlin was ever charged with, who will not thank God for the labors of the Methodist pioneer ministry in the West? And no less, rather much more, should we be thankful that Oberlin has been able to meet in part the exigency of the times, and send forth a class of men able, if not to master all the heights of Calvinism, yet to endure hardness as good soldiers. They have done much good work in the West with some abatements-done it in Presbyterian churches and in Congregational, and in proportion to their relative numbers it would be difficult to say in which most. The Oberlinism which remains, whatever may have been taught, is, with rare exception, rather a sympathy with earnest and enterprising religion and with direct zealous affecting preachers; and an admiration of Mr. Finney as eminently such a Christian and such a preacher, than any doctrinal peculiarity ever set forth at Oberlin. ... It is time this terror of Oberlin were frankly and honestly discarded, East and West."<sup>(12)</sup>

The writer was not endorsing Perfectionism. Rather he was suggesting that in the unsettled conditions of the West, any Christian instruction was better than irreligion. The doctrinal errors of Oberlin were less important than the vigor and discipline of its graduates. He even suggested that perhaps Oberlin graduates had attenuated some of their perfectionism. Given the frequent condescending attitudes of Congregationalists toward Methodists, the insinuation that Oberlinism was better than Methodism was not the highest praise. Moreover, the article was published in 1853, more than fifteen years after Finney and Mahan had first broached the idea of Christian Perfection.

Yet even this tepid endorsement of Finney's Perfectionism provoked an outraged reaction from the *New School Presbyterian Quarterly Review*. Its editors indignantly denied the insinuation that Presbyterians had allowed Oberlin ministers within their denomination. They further accused the Congregationalists of sheltering heresies in order to gain a foothold in regions previously dominated by the Presbyterians.<sup>(13)</sup>

Other Congregationalists were less charitable towards Finney, Oberlin, and Perfectionism. The Congregationalist-dominated American Education Society refused to provide financial support to Oberlin students, ostensibly because the school neglected the classics.<sup>(14)</sup>

Finney's missions in Boston during the winters of 1841-1842 and 1843-1844 showed how far his influence had fallen from the days of the Rochester revival. Lacking the large

church that he would have attracted substantial audiences, Finney used the Marlborough Chapel, which was supported by the abolitionists Willard Sears and used for the small Free Congregational Church. Even this small congregation was torn by divisions that Finney could not prevent, as he tried to preach to a diminishing congregation. During his 1841 visit to Boston Finney also faced ostracism by ministers who declined to extend the normal courtesies of Christian fellowship. In his *Memoirs*, Finney attributed these frustrations to the influence of Unitarianism and the timidity of trinitarian ministers in the face of Unitarianism. He also recounted a spiritual crisis, in which he faced the old Hopkinsian question about whether he could accept God's judgement of damnation. One must wonder why Finney worked under such adverse conditions, when he had always sought out the locations that could produce the greatest success. In other words, was Boston the best situation that he could find?<sup>(15)</sup>

To be sure, Finney's itinerant revivals during his perfectionist years reached an audience, and attracted attention from the religious periodicals. Yet he certainly lacked the stunning achievements of the Rochester revival of 1830-1831.

An earlier edition of *The New Englander* provided a critical review of a book that promoted perfectionism by asserting that the doctrine would have detrimental effects upon its adherents:

"Whether these writers design it or not, their book will be sure to lead many to strive after fevors [sic] and ecstasies of emotion, in their religion, when they have much more need of quietness, reflection, and a faithful observance of common duties. It will lead them to proclaim aloud their own attainments in holiness, when there is much more need that they should give evidence of such attainments in their daily life and conduct. It will lead them to censure, and even to despise, their brethren and sisters in the churches from whose counsel and example they have much need to learn wisdom. It will lead them to adopt impressions, and visions, and emotions, and supposed witness of the Spirit, as the infallible guide of their religious life, and thus shut their minds and hearts against instructions and admonitions, to which they should give earnest heed."<sup>(16)</sup>

The principal Congregational theological seminaries provide further evidence of the failure of Oberlin theology to make significant penetrations into the Congregational community. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the theological school replaced the older apprenticeship system in preparing prospective clergy for the ministry. Here young men would devote three years toward advanced study of theology and scripture. While it was still possible for a man to be ordained after studying under a minister, the seminary became the method of choice.<sup>(17)</sup>

Andover Seminary, founded in 1808, was the preeminent post graduate institution for Congregational clergy. Although enrollment figures fluctuated, approximately 90 students were enrolled prior to 1850, and then enrollment rose steadily until it reached 123 in 1857. Andover graduates filled the pulpits of New England and dominated the foreign fields. Founded to defend orthodox Calvinism against the inroads of Unitarianism, Andover originally reflected a balance between the traditional Calvinists and those who agreed with the controversial alterations of Samuel Hopkins (Hopkinsians). As the New Haven theology spread throughout New England, New Haven adherents including Moses Stuart, Calvin Stowe, and Thomas Skinner were added to the faculty, even while keeping such Hopkinsians as Leonard Woods or Edwards A. Park. There were no perfectionist leaning faculty members at Andover.<sup>(18)</sup>

The Theological Department at Yale College performed the same function as Andover, that of preparing college graduates for a career in the ministry. Yet the size of its enrollment fluctuated more than Andover's. At its peak during the late 1830s, Yale rivaled Andover in size, with over 80 students. Yet the faculty, being all approximately the same age, reached the terminal phases of their careers during the 1850s, with a corresponding loss of student enrollments to Andover and Union Seminaries. By the later 1850s enrollment at Yale averaged in the low 20s. After the Civil War, the Theological Department revived under the vigorous leadership of the younger Timothy Dwight (grandson of the former president of Yale), and the school moved to the forefront of theological institutions where it has remained to this date.<sup>(19)</sup>

The importance of Yale to the antebellum religious community lay in the contributions of its faculty towards the refinement of traditional Calvinist doctrines. Under the leadership of Nathaniel William Taylor, the Yale faculty, proposed new definition for the traditional Calvinist tenets that influenced, entirely or partially, the seminaries at Yale, Andover, Union, Auburn, and Lane. Taylor's theology rested upon carefully qualified reinterpretations of traditional dogmas to assert human freedom and responsibility for sin. Prior to his perfectionist days Finney built upon Taylor's theology, even while disregarding Taylor's careful distinctions and qualifications. Yet Taylor showed no sympathy for Finney's perfectionism. Taylor's two major works, *Lectures on the Moral Government of God* and *Essays, Lectures Etc. Upon Select Topics in Revealed Theology* displayed the ultimate sign of disdain. He did not bother to argue with Finney or even mention perfectionism.<sup>(20)</sup>

Two smaller schools maintained the pattern of excluding perfectionism from their curriculum. Bangor Seminary, founded in 1820, provided a theological education for prospective ministers in the newly admitted state of Maine. Its comparatively conservative faculty included the Hopkinsians Leonard Woods and Enoch Pond. The East Windsor Theological Seminary was created under the leadership of Bennett Tyler because of its founders' implacable opposition to the liberal trends of Yale and Taylor. Its existence highlighted the respectable element of Hopkinsianism that remained in New England Congregationalism throughout the antebellum era.<sup>(21)</sup>

Oberlin Collegiate Institute, known as Oberlin College after 1850, was the one important school associated with Congregationalism that did teach perfectionism. Created in 1833, the school fulfilled a variety of functions. It contained a very large Preparatory Department, which offered an education to young men not quite prepared for college, somewhat similar to an academy. Many students attended Oberlin only to go to the Preparatory School. The Female Department was a radical departure from the custom of the nineteenth century in that young women were admitted to the same courses as the young men, with some variances such as exclusion from the classical languages or increased course work in religion. Together the Preparatory and Female Departments constituted over 90 percent of the students. The Collegiate Department educated young men at a more advanced level. Women from the Female Department could attend the same courses as the Collegiate Department, and thus receive a comparable education. The Theological Department will be discussed later.<sup>(22)</sup>

The initial years of the school were stormy, as it gained a reputation for unconventional practices, in addition to its perfectionist theology. Oberlin was not only a center of abolitionist sentiment, but African-Americans were admitted on equal terms to the white students. The practice of racial integration or the Female Department by themselves would have been unconventional. The combination, however, raised the apprehensions of Black men associating with young white women, a truly radical departure from antebellum customs. Experiments with the Graham diet were less scandalous to the antebellum culture, but they did perpetuate stories of Oberlin students starving while experimenting with the Graham diet. The manual labor program was an effort to allow indigent young men earn their way through the school through the college enterprises.

Nevertheless the school survived its early years. An endowment campaign from 1850 to 1851 provided financial stability and allowed the enrollment to roughly double to over 1,000 students. As the school's historian has noted, the financial success also diminished the level of religious zeal, as students became more interested in the practical advantages of their education.<sup>(23)</sup>

In contrast to the success of the other departments, the Theological Department declined through the antebellum era. Created to train young men for the ministry, the Theological Department was Oberlin's equivalent to Andover, or the Yale Theological Department. Here potential ministers studied perfectionist theology directly under the supervision of Finney and other professors. The Theological Department grew with remarkable speed during its first few years, cresting at 64 students in 1840. Considering that Andover's population hovered in the 90s, Oberlin must have appeared alarming to the conservatives. Yet enrollment declined precipitously after 1840, dropping to 32 students in 1844, and then declining even further to 16 students by 1857. During the 1860s the Theological Department almost terminated; and was maintained only through a vigorous collection of funds.<sup>(24)</sup>

In short, Oberlin was quite successful at providing an education to young men and women who might have found such an education unattainable. Its Preparatory and Female Departments were most notably successful. The policies on co-education and

racial integration set precedents that would be admired in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the institution was not the center of a theological revolution within the Congregational community. As the Theological Department faded out of existence in the post-Civil War years, perfectionism disappeared from the Congregational denomination.

Finney's perfectionism was excluded outright from the New School Presbyterian community, and tolerated at the margins of the Congregational community. The situation with the Methodists is more muddled and confusing than it is with the two Calvinist denominations. Here Finney played an important role in encouraging a trend that had begun before Finney; but it is also true the intellectual influences between Finney's perfectionism and Methodism worked both ways, with Finney deriving much of his inspiration from the Methodist tradition.

The Methodist perfectionist tradition could be traced back to the John Wesley; and it has been ably chronicled by other historians, most effectively by John L. Peters.<sup>(25)</sup> The Wesleyan tradition of perfection (or entire sanctification, or holiness) rested upon the belief that God might grant a second blessing to members of His Church, and thus it had some important variations from Finney's emphasis upon perfect obedience as a requirement of God's law.

Although a part of the Methodist heritage, this aspect of their theology received comparatively little attention during the opening decades of the nineteenth century. In his superb recent study of American Methodism, John H. Wigger notes that Wesley's ideas of entire sanctification received a diminished emphasis in America. During the 1830s, however, the holiness movement gained new importance, led by the remarkably energetic lay woman, Phoebe Palmer. For the remainder of the nineteenth century, the holiness movements attracted an important, but not unanimous following among the various Methodist denominations. It also led to several schisms, especially after the Civil War.<sup>(26)</sup>

Finney's role in the Methodist perfectionist movement could be described as both influenced by and influencing the Methodists. For all of his protestations of originality, there is little doubt that either Finney or Mahan would have conceived of a perfectionist theology without the influence of the Methodist tradition. In return, Finney, and the Oberlin faculty, gave further stimulation to the holiness movements with American and British Methodism. As Peters has pointed out Finney's endorsement of Perfection was welcomed by many within the Methodist community.<sup>(27)</sup>

Nevertheless, it must be remembered that the resurgence in Perfectionism began independently of Finney. Moreover, important Methodists, such as George Peck, editor of the *Methodist Quarterly Review* and a leading promoter of holiness, asserted that Finney's emphasis upon legal obedience differentiated him from the Methodists. Finney responded by confirming that his theology differed from the Methodists. "I [Finney] had known considerable [sic] of the view of sanctification entertained by our Methodist brethren, but as their view of sanctification seemed to me to relate almost altogether to the states of the sensibility ... I could not receive their teaching."<sup>(28)</sup>

It has been said that the art of writing intellectual history resembles nailing jelly to the wall. In all intellectual history problems with the context of a work, the lack of precision in language, or the changing nature of the subjects thoughts make the arena challenging for any historian. Among the problems of writing about ideas is to assess their impact upon the contemporary society. In the case of Charles Finney and the Oberlin version of Perfection we can base our judgements upon tangible criteria, including the pronouncement of church bodies and the curriculum at the leading theological seminaries. An examination of this criteria shows that Oberlin Perfection achieved little acceptance within the Congregational and Presbyterian communities. Old School and New School Presbyterian rejected perfectionism with varying degrees of venom. Congregationalists nominally tolerated Oberlin theology, but it received little institutional acceptance. Its influence within the Methodist denominations was complicated the existence of a prior tradition, which existed independently of Finney's influence. To be sure, Finney played an important role in the history of American religion. By advocating controversial ideas he stimulated thought and discussions about American religion. His early advocacy of abolition and other reforms were critical to the early years of these movements. We may never know how many people such as George Beecher contemplated perfectionist ideas without openly siding with Finney.

Instead of over emphasizing Charles Finney and his perfectionism historians of American religion, especially those who study the Calvinist denominations, should examine other names that illustrate the diversity of nuances within the Congregational and Presbyterian communities. A survey of these ministers also shows a strong sense of traditional Calvinism. Although they differed in interpretations, all of these men professed an adherence to the Westminster standards as the measure of orthodoxy.

Certainly the professors at Princeton seminary, including Charles Hodge, Archibald Alexander, Samuel Miller, and later James W. Alexander deserve a prominent place in any survey of the religious scene. Princeton seminary produced hundreds of young ministers throughout the course of the nineteenth century, with an especially strong influence within the southern and mid Atlantic states. Renown for its adherence to classic Calvinism, the Princeton theology was an intellectually viable tradition in the antebellum political culture.

The so-called ultra-conservatives of the Presbyterian community, consisting of such men as Robert Breckinridge, Joshua Wilson, Samuel Baird, and George Junkin, were theologically similar to the Princeton theologians. They differed, however, by their implacable opposition to any perceived heresies, including Hopkinsianism and New Haven theology. They were willing to use any necessary measures to remove any challenges to their strict adherence to Calvinist standards, even at the risk of schism. Until 1837 these men were a significant minority within the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. In that year they gained the cooperation of the Princeton theologians and ejected several New School leaning synods, at the cost of the Church's unity.

Among the New England Congregationalists, Hopkinsianism, as exemplified by such men as Bennett Tyler, Asahel Nettleton, or Joseph Harvey, remained a respectable,

although declining branch of New England theology. Named after the controversial eighteenth theologian, Samuel Hopkins, the Hopkinsians promoted a branch of New England theology derived from Jonathan Edwards. Although they were steadily losing ground to the New Haven adherents, Hopkinsians fought a credible rear-guard action, and even created the East Windsor Seminary to counter the growing New Haven influence. If we were to judge influence by the number of ministerial candidates trained, then Bennett Tyler would rival Charles Finney as a figure in antebellum religious history.

Finally we have the New School, or New Haven, adherents, who were represented in both the Presbyterian and Congregational communities. Some New Haven adherents, such as Nathaniel William Taylor or Moses Stuart remained Congregationalists throughout their lives, while others, such as Albert Barnes or Henry Boynton Smith were Presbyterians. Another common pattern was for men such as Lyman Beecher to move between the two denominations. By the late 1830s the New School constituted about 44% of the Presbyterians and a larger portion of the Congregationalists. New School adherents are also of interest to historians because of the prominent role that they played in various aspects of antebellum reform movements.<sup>(29)</sup>

Unlike Finney, the New Haven theologians never repudiated the Westminster Confession. Instead they qualified and redefined the terms in such a way that critics complained that they had obscured the meaning of Calvinist piety. Men such as Lyman Beecher or Albert Barnes responded by vigorously protesting their orthodoxy, asserting that they remained within the Westminster standards, with only variations in the language or explanations.

If we wish to understand the typical antebellum pulpit, especially within the Congregational or Presbyterian communities, we would do well to place Charles Finney's perfectionism in its proper context. The less colorful, but more influential, clergy mentioned in the closing portions of this paper represent the nuances of theology with American religion during the antebellum era.

## NOTES

1. Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957); Perry Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc. 1965); Paul Conkin, *The Uneasy Center: Reformed Christianity in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815-1860* 2nd ed. (New York: Hill & Wang, 1997); Guelzo, "An Heir or a Rebel," 61.text

2. Among the best discussions of Finney are Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996); William McLoughlin's introduction to Finney's *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1960); William McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalists: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New

York: Ronald Press, 1959); Keith Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney, 1792-1875: Revivalist and Reformer* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1987); Glenn A. Hewitt, *Regeneration and Morality: A Study of Charles Finney, Charles Hodge, John W. Nevin, and Horace Bushnell* (Brooklyn, Carlson Publishing Inc., 1991); Melvin L. Vulgamore, "Social Reform in the Theology of Charles Grandison Finney" (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1963); Garth M. Rosell, "Charles Grandison Finney and the Rise of the Benevolence Empire" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1971); and Bernard A. Weisberger, *They Gathered at the River: The Story of Great Revivalists and Their Impact upon Religion in America* (Boston: Little Brown, 1958), pp. 116-35. Leonard Sweet makes some cogent comments on Finney in "The View of Man Inherent in New Measures Revivalism," *Church History* 45 (June 1976): 206-21. Allen Guelzo argues that Finney remained within the Edwardsean tradition in "An Heir or a Rebel? Charles Grandison Finney and the New England Theology," *Journal of the Early Republic* 17 (Spring 1997): 61-94.text

3. *Letters of the Rev. Dr. Beecher and Rev. Mr. Nettleton on the "New Measures" in Conducting Revivals of Religion* (New York: S. & C. Carvill, 1828), passim.text

4. See Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978).text

5. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney*, 135, 121-125, 142-164.text

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