

The Lies of Michael Horton

by C. J. Schmitz

A Lesson in Deception

The Straw Man fallacy is committed when a person simply ignores a person's actual position and substitutes a distorted, exaggerated or misrepresented version of that position.

Dan Corner

I was never as convinced that much of what Finney preached was Biblical until I became familiar with his opponents. More than anything, it has amazed me how they misrepresent Finney and are incapable of dealing with the real issues. Such is the case with Michael Horton. Many have labeled this form of argument "the straw man," but in this case it can also be called slander. "Slander" is defined in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as: "a false report maliciously uttered and tending to injure the reputation of a person." Michael Horton's comments on Finney amount to little more than slander. Horton, commenting on what is wrong with Finney's theology, states:

"One need go no farther than the table of contents of his Systematic Theology to learn that Finney's entire theology revolved around human morality. Chapters one through five are on moral government, obligation, and the unity of moral action, chapters six and seven are [obedience entire], as chapters eight through fourteen discuss attributes of love, selfishness, and virtues, and vice in general. Not until the twenty-first chapter does one read anything that is especially Christian in its interest, on the atonement. This is followed by a discussion of regeneration, repentance, and faith. There is one chapter on justification, followed by six on sanctification. In other words, Finney did not really write a systematic theology, but a collection of essays on ethics." -Michael Horton



Horton's pronouncements are truly horrendous. Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. Is not this "especially Christian in its interest?" This is what the first chapters of Finney's Systematic Theology discuss. They describe what the law is. The second chapter speaks of why we need direction, guidance, "law" (moral government), and why we are responsible to God for our conduct. In other words, he discusses why we would need a greatest commandment or any commandment at all.

In the case of the word obligation, Finney used three terms: "I have defined obligation in its universal forms, i.e., obligation to be benevolent, to love God and our neighbor, or to will the universal good of being for its intrinsic value" (Ch 2, 17, Ch 3). Ultimately, this is what the first chapters are about. Finney said that "This consecration is really demanded by the law of God in the two great precepts laid down by Christ, and this benevolence, when perfect, is in fact a compliance with the entire spirit of the law. This is right in itself, and consequently is always duty and always right" (Ch 4, 28, Ch 5). We can say it in broader terms, or merely say with Paul that "Love is the fulfilment of the law" (Romans 13:10). It is outrageous that he could say that this is not "especially Christian in interest."

Michael, if your faith is just a collection of ideas in your head, bereft of love and holiness, you have missed the heart of the Gospel. John said, "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." 1 John 3:7-8.

Virtue and Vice

What is wrong with talking about "virtue and vice?" What is wrong with talking about patience, meekness, and self-denial, as Finney did in chapter 11/(21)? Jesus did. What about falsehood, lying, and pride (Ch. 14/(29))? The Bible also talks about these things, but apparently Mr. Horton has not listened. How could he delude himself so much as to represent these things (The whole first 21 chapters) as not especially Christian in interest? I cannot possibly express my utter disgust after having read this, especially when I consider Horton's prominence in the evangelical world.

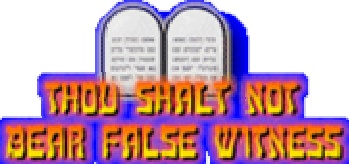
Impacting the world

Horton takes issue with those who try to affect the world on a social/moral level, but is that not love? Is that not what it is to be salt and light in the world? We should be thankful that Finney and other believers were involved in the abolition of the slave trade. Yes, Finney's theology is aimed at practical issues. What's wrong with that? Paul gave practical instructions for widows, the poor, slaves, husbands and wives.

"... Finney's moralistic impulse envisioned a church that was in large measure an agency of personal and social reform rather than the institution in which the means of grace, Word and Sacrament, are made available to believers who then take the Gospel to the world."

Horton is in this regard using a false "*either or*" argument. He implies that it is either word and sacrament, or personal and social reform, the truth is it should be "*both and*"

The Atonement



Horton's slander is blatant in his discussion of the atonement. Following is an exact quote showing how he lies (yes, lies) about Finney's teaching. Then I'll quote what Finney actually did teach.

Horton: "The first thing we must note about the atonement, Finney says, is that Christ could not have died for anyone else's sins than his own." This is a lie! Finney defined the atonement as "The governmental substitution of the sufferings of Christ for the punishment of sinners. It is a covering of their sins by his sufferings" (Ch 21, 197, Ch. 34). In the atonement chapter, Finney quotes nearly four pages of scripture that speak of Christ's vicarious death in our place. I am aware that many people consider this so disturbing that they assume I must be the one who is exaggerating. My only suggestion is that you do your own research. The process is fairly straight forward: see if I quoted Michael properly, then go and see whether Finney said what Michael asserts or what I assert. I am not saying you will find Finney promoting limited atonement and making all the Calvinists laud him, but I am saying that the situation is quite different from how Michael portrays it.

Imputed Righteousness

Horton's next statement is also misleading, because it follows a lie and fails to represent the true issues: " His obedience to the law and his perfect righteousness were sufficient to save him, but could not be legally accepted on behalf of others." The issue here is that Horton teaches that Christ suffered and obeyed in our place. Finney taught that Christ suffered in our place, but considered a substitution of obedience unnecessary. "Christ the spotless lamb suffered and died for us; it is entirely unnecessary that he would "obey" in our place. As Finney states, "Had he obeyed for us, he would not have suffered for us. Were his obedience to be substituted for our obedience, he need not certainly have both fulfilled the law for us as our substitute, under a covenant of works, and at the same time have suffered as a substitute, in submitting to the penalty of the law" (Ch 21, 206, Ch 34). Speaking on the subject of Jesus obeying for us, Finney said;

"The idea is absurd and impossible for this reason: Jesus Christ was bound to obey the Law himself. It was his duty to love the Lord his God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love his neighbor as himself. If he had not done so it would have been sin.

Although Christ owed perfect obedience to the Law himself, and could not therefore obey as our substitute, yet since he perfectly obeyed, he owed no suffering to the Law or to the Divine Government on his own account. He could therefore suffer for us. This is the true basis for the Gospel: not that Christ obeyed for us, but that he died for us. He took the punishment we deserved.

The doctrine of imputed righteousness as they describe it represents God as requiring that:

A) Christ should render perfect obedience for us

B) Christ should die just as if no such obedience had been rendered

C) We should repent and obey ourselves

Does God exact triple service?" (Justification)

The Big Lie

... In the size of the lie there is a certain factor of credibility... they fall victim more easily to a big lie than to a small one, since they themselves occasionally lie in small matters but they would be ashamed to tell great lies. Such a falsehood will not enter their minds, and they will also not be able to imagine others asserting the great boldness of the most infamous misrepresentation. And even with the explanation of the matter, they long hesitate and vacillate and accept at least some ground as true; consequently, from the most bold lie something will remain...

Hitler, *Mein Kampf*

Horton is obviously hoping that people will trust him and write Finney off without even checking out his quotes (or, more accurately, his misquotes). He is apparently using the same tactic as Adolph Hitler, a tactic called "the Big Lie". In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler said that the average person would be more prone to believing a big lie than a small one, because they wouldn't imagine that anyone would lie about something really big. In the context of doctrinal discussion, charging Finney with denying the atonement is more than merely a strong charge; it is a Big Lie. It gives the false impression that if he indeed does deny the atonement (which he does not), then he has nothing valuable to say. Horton uses this lie as a back handed means of demeaning Billy Graham and many other reputable men of God who are then slandered by their association with Finney.

"Jerry Falwell calls him 'one of my heroes and a hero to many evangelicals, including Billy Graham.'...and his imprint can be seen in movements that appear to be diverse, but in reality are merely heirs to Finney's legacy. From the Vineyard movement and the church growth movement to the political and social crusades, televangelism, and the Promise-Keepers movement, as a former Wheaton College president rather glowingly cheered, 'Finney lives on!'"

This method has been called damning the source, and works through a process of association. Various groups will say that the Trinity is a pagan doctrine, and easter is a pagan holiday; neither statement demonstrates that the Trinity or Easter is as we understand it "pagan". In the case at hand Horton implies that various

movements, Church Growth etc, are all a part of Finney's "heretical" legacy.

We are told to follow Christ's example, yet in Michael Horton we find someone following the example of the father of lies. I could give you more examples, but these are obvious enough.

I almost wonder if Horton has read Finney at all. Either he is as corrupt as Benjamin Warfield, or has used Warfield as his only source. If this is the case, Horton would be classified as deceived rather than deliberately trying to mislead people. Considering his position, however, I would hardly even consider that excusable. He should check his sources before he publishes something. Some might think I am being unduly harsh, but this is a serious issue.

Michael Horton's comments are misleading and slanderous. I believe that until he repents and makes it his aim to speak honestly, he deserves little respect in a theological discussion, because God hates slander.

If you want to find out what Finney REALLY believed (and why) read his writings.

Notes

All links are to the chapters from the online 1851 version. I have also added bookmarks, these will take you to the quotes I have used, so that you can see them in context.

Other chapter/page references are from the condensed bicentennial version.
Finney, Charles G. Finney's Systematic Theology. Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1976.

Horton, Michael S. "The legacy of Charles Finney"
<http://capo.org/premise/95/march/horton-f.html> March 1995.