

Introduction to the Charles Grandison Finney Letter

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Upon his arrival in Rochester NY on or about the 9th of September 1830, the revivalist Charles Grandison Finney discovered a Protestant community consumed by internal strife, and riven with personal disputes. The Presbyterian church, which would serve as the focus of his revival efforts, was rent by factions and internal infighting. Unity within the largely middle class denominations was at a low ebb, and concerted action on religious and reform matters was impossible.¹ The church, as Finney may have noted, was in a decidedly "backslidden" state. That backsliding, and its tangible manifestation in the form of internal strife, was largely attributable to the actions of one man; interestingly, the very man who had persuaded Finney to attempt a revival in Rochester.

Finney had come to Rochester at the behest of Josiah Bissel, a leading citizen and elder of the third Presbyterian Church of Rochester. Bissel, a dedicated evangelical, was remarkable principally for his publication of the radically evangelical *Rochester Observer*, for the founding of an unsuccessful Sabaterian stage coach line, and for lobbying to prevent the delivery of mail on Sundays.² Bissel was also remarkable for the degree to which he had single handedly divided Rochester's middle class Presbyterian community. As an elder, and major benefactor, of Third Church, Bissel had demonstrated few qualms about injecting his own evangelical beliefs into the proceedings of the church.

Bissel's support of evangelical Christianity, strict sabaterianism, and temperance, alienated many of his fellow churchgoers, who regarded him as a coercive and authoritarian figure, who, by virtue of his patronage, wished to control the church, and force it to support his theology. Bissel's successful attempt at removing the pastor of Second Church (for riding in one of the seven day coaches) only exacerbated this situation.³ The failure of a major temperance crusade, and the effects of anti-masonry on congregational

¹ Hardman, Keith. *Charles Grandison Finney, 1792-1875, Revivalist and Reformer*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, (1987): 193.

² Hardman, Keith: 193.

³ Hardman, Keith: 193.

unity, left the Rochester Presbytery in greater disarray still.⁴ While Finney was aware of these divisions in Rochester, he resolved, nevertheless, to travel west and work for a revival.⁵

The following letter, composed by Finney in the fall of 1830, attests to his success. Indeed, the Rochester revival is commonly held to be Finney's greatest success.⁶ While, as the letter suggests, the revival took a great deal out of Finney, it also established him as the preeminent evangelist of his era. The Second Great Awakening, which had, since the 1790's, been on the move in America in some form or other, would achieve one of its great tangible successes in Rochester New York and its environs - "the burned over district."

Finney's letter provides ample evidence as to the nature of his revival. Finney notes that the lawyers, and other eminent citizens, are among the most readily converted. Indeed, as studies of the revival have shown, merchants, lawyers and businessmen who engaged in commerce with the city of Rochester, and the surrounding areas, were far more likely to become evangelicals than merchants who were oriented toward the canal trade.⁷ The effects of social and economic pressure on conversions is, therefore, something to be considered, in terms of causal factors. So too is Finney's legal training, which was often evident in his deductively valid, logical, and almost legal arguments for conversion.⁸ In any event, it is evident that Finney and his revival played especially well in the middle class quarters which he targeted.

Finney's letter also reveals something of his methodology. His revivals centered on extemporaneous preaching, excitement, and a repudiation of the doctrine of predestination.⁹ Finney's appeal was evangelical in the best sense of the term: not only could his adherents make positive changes in their own lives, thus avoiding sin and moving closer to God, they could effect a positive change in the moral fiber of their community as well. Evangelism of this sort, by stressing the role that the individual could play in his own, and his community's betterment, led to a powerful reform impetus which would accompany revivals throughout America in the 1830's.¹⁰

Temperance, sabaterianism, hard work, and diligent church attendance were tangible actions that the individual could take to improve his own moral character and better his

⁴ Johnson, Paul. *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*. New York: Hill and Wang, (1978) Ch. 4.

⁵ Hardman, Keith: 194.

⁶ Johnson, Paul: 5.

⁷ Hardman, Keith: 199.

⁸ Hardman, Keith: 202.

⁹ Finney, Charles Grandison. *What a Revival of Religion Is*. Ed. David A. Hollinger Charles Capper. 3rd ed. New York: Oxford, 1997. 202-203.

¹⁰ Johnson, Paul: 117, 128.

chances for the afterlife. Individualism was tempered with a collective impulse as well. By working to encourage these positive traits in others, one could spread God's work and improve the moral fiber of the entire community. This impulse toward mass moral improvement was an integral part of American millennialism, a spiritual nationalism as it were, which stressed the role that America could play as a heaven on earth - if only it could reform itself sufficiently to warrant that title.

Finney's work in Rochester achieved that goal. As he notes, in this letter to Richard Norris Kirk - friend, and fellow evangelical preacher in Albany - the revival had energized religious opinion throughout the region, had set the whole region on fire, so to speak. When Finney left Rochester, in the spring of 1831, he left in his wake a fully evangelized and theologically united middle class. A social group which, having overcome its divisions, was now in a position to proselytize the other elements of the community. Through temperance, church attendance and sabaterianism, (all of which were enforced by rigid social sanctions) Rochester prepared itself for its newfound millennial role.¹¹

Finney's unique preaching style, his effects on the middle and upper classes, and the sort of opposition he had grown to expect from traditional churches and their hierarchies are all alluded to in this letter. Finney notes, however, that he encountered little opposition from the theological establishment in Rochester. (This lack of opposition from established church hierarchies had not been the case in earlier revivals.¹² This lack of conventional opposition was probably due to the "backslidden" state of the church, and the divisiveness which tore the establishment apart from the late 1820's on. Moreover, the church establishment in Rochester seems to have been united by one thing - the degree to which their theology, and their reform efforts, had failed both to unite them, and to convert and control the rapidly growing and unstable mass of urban workers in Rochester.¹³

This sense of weakness, and the threat to middle class prerogatives and values which it implied, was, perhaps, the leading reason why the establishment acquiesced to Finney's unconventional methods and theology.¹⁴ It may also explain why the Rochester revival of 1830-31 was such an unprecedented success for Finney's methods. His style of preaching, his theology, his arguments, were all convincing, no doubt. However, it may have taken the threat posed by middle class disunity in the face of a rising, and threatening, working class, to unite Finney's audience, to make them susceptible, and to lead to such a dramatic, and definitive, success. In the end, revivals, evangelical Christianity and middle class morality were part and parcel of the Age of Jackson.

¹¹ Johnson, Paul: 122-123.

¹² Hardman, Keith: 202-203.

¹³ Johnson, Paul: 93-94.

¹⁴ Johnson, Paul: Ch. 6.

Transcription of a letter from Charles Grandison Finney to Richard Norris Kirk

[The original letter is held in the Manuscript Collection of the University of Rochester Rare Books and Special Collections Department.]

Rochester 1st Nov. 1830.

Dr. Br. Kirk. The bearer is the Rev. Mr. Whelply. He has been spending several weeks with me in the midst of this glorious + powerfull work of God. He can tell you more about it then I have time to write. Great multitudes of every class are hoping. The Lord has especially displayed his grace among the Lawyers + the principle men + women. The work is very [general?] overwhelming. I was called out of bed last night to converse + pray with a lawyer who had been standing out till he could resist no longer. A large proportion of the lawyers in town are hoping + I suspect most if not all of the rest are under [conviction?]. The work has been + still is peculiarly powerful among the first + most influential people. The high Sheriff a brother of Dr. Livingstone of Phil. Was hopefully [converted?] last week + a number of others of the same class.

I have been unwell several days but am now better. The good work has begun in many towns around here + now Dr. Kirk you can tell how much I want your help. The Lord seems ready to work in all this region. I have preached in several of the towns. In every instance the Lord has come down + commenced a work upon the spot. Br. Whelply is a man of our views of things. Why will you not let him take your place + come + help me. Dr. K. I think I must have your help. I doubt not if you come here you might be instrumental in the conversion of thousands in a few months. Don't think the 4th chh in A of more importance than this great work. So has Br. Beman argued about Troy until God has laid him aside. That it is your duty immediately to become an evangelist I am persuaded + never was I in any region of country when the fields seemed so ripe as in this. I have preached incessantly until I am almost exhausted + yet the [massed Amen?] cry comes [upon every house.?] If I could lay this whole subject before you I dont believe you would dare to stay in Albany another week, but would for a time at least, fly to my aid. I am nearly exhausted + yet all the towns + counties in this region are not only open but are waving to the [Messiah? harvest?]

Ex tempory preaching will be followed by the mass. Reading sermons wont collect the people The great work here has, like the bursting of a shell set the whole region on fire. Ministers and Christians from every direction are coming in to behold the wonderful work of God. I hear of no cavelling nor opposition as yet from ministers nor [????] of any denomination. Sinners have from the beginning of this work been so awed that I have heard very little of opposition from any quarter.

Indeed they so intensely overdid the matter in their opposition at Troy and Albany and in that region that ever since as in this place people have seemed to stand amazed and said "what could all that opposition mean". It will be surprising however if opposition does not arise soon from some quarter. If Br. Whelply does not go immediately to Albany I shall send this by mail. Write me immediately whether you will come + help me.

Take a trip out here and see me at all events + we will talk the matter over. I know what your people will say. But they are selfish. So said Bemans people. They laughed at all my intriaties to have B. become an evangellist or leave them for another place. Now I believe the Lord is cursing them + him too. Think of this Br. K. + come and see me. If 20 evangellists came here of the right [stamp?] There is more than labor enough for them all.

Your Brother forever

C.G. Finney