

Chaison, Charles Grandison Finney Letter

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HIS 267
Other People's Mail
December 2003

Introduction to the Charles Grandison Finney Letter

Charles Grandison Finney, a leading evangelist of the Second Great Awakening, is best known for his leadership of the 1830-31 revivals in Rochester, New York. Born on August 29th, 1792, to Sylvester Finney and Rebecca Rice, Connecticut farmers, his family moved to Oneida County, New York in 1802. Between the ages of 20 and 22, Finney studied at the Warren Academy and taught school in New Jersey for four more years before studying and practicing law in Adams, New York. During a 1821 revival, Finney underwent a spiritual crisis and promised God that "If I am ever converted, I will preach the gospel."¹ Instead of attending seminary school, Finney studied under the tutelage of his pastor, George W. Gale, and in 1824 he was ordained by the presbytery and commissioned as an evangelist by the Female Missionary Society of the Western District of New York. Shortly after, Finney began his brilliant career as a prominent evangelist, dedicated reformer and active missionary, which culminated in his presidency of Oberlin College.

The national revivals of 1831 were the climax of a generation of revivals that historians have termed the Second Great Awakening.² These revivals mark a shift away from the evangelical Calvinism that characterized the first Great Awakening to the evangelical arminianism that was a powerful component of the second. Evangelical preachers of the Presbyterian New School, such as Finney, espoused human agency in salvation and Finney preached that human beings are responsible for their own sinfulness as each person is a free moral agent able to choose good or evil.³ Prayer, Finney believed, was a powerful device that established one's relationship with God and served as an assurance that an individual was one of God's people, for God granted new life in answer to faithful prayer.⁴ Social prayer united the unregenerate with the saved in the spirit of prayer so that they might experience conversion and achieve salvation. Paul Johnson states that the revival made an evangelist of every convert, and most turned their power on family members.⁵

¹ John A. Garraty & Mark C. Carnes, eds., American National Biography, vol. 7 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 935.

² Paul B. Johnson, Shopkeeper's Millennium, Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978) 4.

³ Garraty & Carnes, vol. 7, 936,

⁴ Johnson, 96-97.

⁵ Johnson, 100.

Unlike strict Calvinism, the doctrine of human agency and the power of prayer meant that the families and neighbors of the saved, even all of America, might be saved by the efforts of the converted. The spirit of evangelism spilled outside old social circles, transforming and uniting the Protestant community into a powerful base for the subsequent reform movements that swept through antebellum America on the shoulders of these Christian soldiers.⁶

In 1829, Josiah Bissel asked Finney to come to Rochester as "the state of religion is low; because the people & church know not the power of the Gospel of Jesus."⁷

Sabbatarianism, antimasonry and the temperance movement controversies had divided the families, friendships, churches and political connections of Rochester's business and landed class, which was already adrift in the midst of the economic and social changes of the 1800's. In the 1820's, Rochester was the fastest growing community in the United States, but the majority of the residents were male and transient and 3/4ths of the population was under the age of 35. New labor arrangements had separated the two classes as workingmen moved away from the household control of their master and developed their own autonomous life that often revolved around liquor.⁸ Attempts to recapture the social control of their community by the elites were quickly rebuffed by the laborers and fractured the alliances of the entrepreneur class in the process.

Finney arrived in Rochester in September of 1830 and stayed six months, preaching everyday of the week and three times on Sunday, while spending most of his days praying with individuals and leading prayer meetings, fueling a religious zeal that swept through Rochester and the surrounding regions so fervently that the region was called the Burned Over district.⁹ The grueling schedule tired Finney, and in November he wrote to Edward Norris Kirk, a fellow evangelist preacher, revivalist leader, and pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church in Albany, to ask for his assistance. Dr. Kirk also identified with the New School of Calvinism and had invited Finney to preach from his pulpit when other Albany church pastors refused. Throughout his letter, Finney tries to describe to Dr. Kirk, the enormity of the situation stating that he has never seen a region of the country where "the fields are so ripe for picking", that the revival has been "particularly powerful among the first and most influential people" and that "even if 20 evangellists of the right stamp" came to Rochester, "there would be labor enough for them all". Finney urges Kirk to forsake his ministry in Albany for the more important evangelical work of God that is occurring in Rochester, reminding Kirk of the troubles of Nathan Beman and his church in Troy during the revival of 1826 and even sends a replacement pastor, Mr. Whelpley.¹⁰

⁶ Johnson, 100.

⁷ Johnson, 94.

⁸ Johnson, 60-61.

⁹ Johnson, 137.

¹⁰ Garraty & Carnes, vol. 2, 541.

Finney's letter also reveals part of his preaching style as he writes to Dr. Kirk that extemporaneous preaching will be followed by the masses but "reading sermons won't collect the people". (Perhaps obliquely referring to why Mr. Whelply is being sent on instead of staying in Rochester to assist the exhausted Finney?) Finney, himself, preached without notes, addressed people as "you", looked them in the eye and argued for salvation like a well trained lawyer." He preached with enormous power and magnetism and often directly to the people on the seats of the "anxious bench".¹¹ The style and techniques of Finney's preaching influenced contemporary and later revivalist preachers, including Billy Graham, while inducing fits of high emotionalism that worried more traditional Protestant preachers.¹²

As news of the Rochester revivals spread throughout the country, a wave of religious enthusiasm followed, and revivals grew throughout the northern United States. Finney's revival, through the individual power of prayer, had healed the divisions in the Rochester community and created a multi-sectarian coalition of the religious community that wielded immense political and economic power.¹³ As church membership grew and conversions multiplied in other parts of the country, Rochester Protestants, from their first hand religious experience, began to see the possibility for bringing about the millennium. With discipline, morality and reform movements, the middle and upper classes of Rochester and America could christianize the world, but also reestablish the old social controls by imparting on the working class that virtue and order were not part of the external order imposed from the top on down, but choices made by morally responsible individuals.¹⁴ In the ensuing months and years, converted American evangelical Protestants worked hard to recreate America into the "City on the Hill" of their Puritan ancestors, hoping to stand as a beacon of moral and religious piety for the rest of the world.

[Please note: while the original version of this student project contained a footnote number 11, "Garraty & Carnes, vol. 12, 935.", the superscript 11 did not actually appear in the text of the introduction. This version thus contains footnotes 1-14, rather than the 1-15 that are contained within the original, which can be found in a [web-archived version of the resource](#).]

¹¹ Finney developed the anxious bench during the Rochester revivals. The bench was reserved for prominent citizens who wished to convert and their conversion created grand public spectacles that united the community.

¹² Garraty & Carnes, vol. 12, 937.

¹³ Johnson, 109.

¹⁴ Johnson, 111.

Transcription of a letter from Charles Grandison Finney to Edward 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 + powerful work of God. He can tell you more about it than 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 has 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 the rest are under conviction[s?]. The work has been + still is particularly powerful among the first and most influential people. The High Sheriff, a brother of Dr. Livingston of Phil. was hopefully converted last week + a number of others of this town 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 cant 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 plase + come + help me. Dr. K. I think I must have your help I doubt not if [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 good work. So has Br. Beman argued about Troy until God has laid him aside. That it is your duty immediately to become an Evangellest I am persuaded + never was I in [crossed out word] any region of the country when the fields seemed so ripe as in this. I have preached incessantly until I am almost exhausted + yet the mased [????] cry comes before every [b????].

If I could lay this whole subject before you I don't believe you would dare to stay in Albany another week, but would for a time at least fly to my aid. I am really exhausted + yet all the towns + counties in this region are not only open but are waving to the [Harvest?].

Extempory preaching will be followed by the mass. Reading sermons wont collect the people. The great work here has, like the [bursting?] of a shell let the whole region on fire. Ministers + christians from every direction are comming in to behold the wonderful works 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 inten[s?]ly overdid the matter in their opposition at Troy + Albany + in that region that [smudged/crossed out words ever since ?] as in this place, people have seemed to stand amazed + 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 A. I shall send this by mail.

Write me immediately whether you will come + help me.

Take a trip out here + 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 at all my intreaties 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 to 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