

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian Students

Presented by the
President of

Central Baptist
Theological Seminary
of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

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June 10, 2005
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Charles Grandison Finney

Part Two

Finney's Influence

The purpose of these essays is not to argue about the theoretical legitimacy of Finney's thought, but to point out the outcome it has had for the practice of Christianity in America. The first essay offered an overview of Finney's religious system and mentioned several areas in which Finney introduced new ideas or methods. This second essay aims to make explicit the consequences of Finney's ideas with respect to American Christianity.

The first such consequence was to open the door for theological modernism. If the twin criteria of reason and consciousness could nullify the authority of tradition and the confessions, they could also nullify the authority of Scripture. When modernists called an authoritative Bible a “paper pope,” they echoed the very language that Finney used in his diatribes against the Westminster Confession. Finney provided a precedent for the rejection of all external spiritual authority, as well as for undisciplined doctrinal deviation.

Even more disastrous were the cultural consequences of Finney's ideas. His revivalism hinged upon the creation of emotional crises. This meant that those who followed him had to produce constantly a bigger emotional bang or else face the charge of spiritual declension. And since the crisis required an excitement, the church had to truckle to worldly people, providing

whatever they were likely to find exciting at a given moment. Inescapably, the politicians, advertisers, and other shapers of worldly excitement were permitted to set the agenda for the church. In a word, the church became faddish, and Christianity degenerated into a form of amusement.

Finney could not have guessed how far this shift would reach. He ministered to a culture that was still deeply imbued with Christian ideals. With the invention of the steam-powered printing press, however, came the birth of popular culture, which always appeals to the lowest common denominator and which invariably tends toward secularism. When Finney's notions of revival were perpetuated in an increasingly secular culture, the result was the secularization of American Christianity itself. There is a certain perverse consistency in the progression from Finney's "new measures" to Sunday's showmanship to Norris' "pick a fight" mentality. The same twisted progression may be noted in the decreasing emphasis upon doctrinal purity from Finney through Moody all the way to Graham.

As American culture shifted into a sentimental brand of popular Victorian romanticism, revivalism followed suit. The hymns of Watts and Wesley were pushed out; the popular verse and tunes of Sankey, Bliss, and Doane were brought in. This milieu survived until the next major shift in popular culture ushered in the Jazz Era and the Rock Age. Indeed, one major difference between fundamentalism and evangelicalism is that evangelicals have rushed after the latest trends, while many fundamentalists are trying to stop at an older popularization. Significantly, however, the cultural agendas of both movements are essentially secular.

Profound consequences also arose from Finney's view of the Christian life. Finney held that the usual state of religion was one of decline: that a gradual, steady growth in Christ should not be expected. One consequence of this theory is that the Christian life is viewed as a cycle of repeated backsliding and crisis, in which "hard preaching" and "going to the altar" play a prominent role. Ministries which seek to develop disciples are regarded with suspicion: at best they are superfluous; at worst, a threat to the ministry of the church. Historic Christian emphases such as adoration, contemplation, and devotion are either redefined or else simply eliminated from the ministry of the church.

After Finney, soul-winning became the *sine qua non* of spirituality. This introduced a yardstick by which people might be held up as spiritual examples while manifesting some very fleshly attitudes. Those who won the greatest number of souls became the spiritual elite within the church. All others were made to feel guilty.

This approach to spirituality also produced a corresponding shift in the concept of Christian leadership. On the one hand, if Christians are normally backslidden, then leaders must take measures to guard the work of God against them. On the other hand, if the simple test of spirituality is soul-winning, then every church member is qualified to sit in judgment over the spiritual integrity of his pastor. What naturally arose was an ongoing power struggle between a highly authoritarian leadership and a highly egalitarian following. The end result was an atmosphere in which infighting and splintering were virtually unavoidable. This, I think, is a fair description of those branches of fundamentalism that fall most heavily under the umbra of Finney today.

One may object that Finney's thought and ministry also brought about many beneficial consequences. Granted. But the emphases which yielded the best long-term consequences tended to be those which Finney held in common with great Reformers, Pietists, and Awakeners before him. Emphases such as holy living and inward religion have been stressed by godly people in every age of the church. It is where Finney rejected the thought of his forbears in favor of a radical reinterpretation of Christianity that the results became disastrous.

Perhaps the most ironic result is that, as anti-traditional as Finney was, he managed to establish his own tradition. The tradition of revivalism continues to exert powerful influence within both fundamentalism and evangelicalism. To question it is to rank one's self with near-heretics, even where the tradition is clearly extra-biblical.

We all drink from Finney's well. We may even find that we are unable simply to pull up stakes and connect ourselves with an older, more biblical tradition. Even so, we can at least become more actively thoughtful, reflective and critical toward the results of the revivalistic tradition we have inherited. ✖

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of Central Seminary's professors, students, or alumni necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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