

# Charles Grandison Finney

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Early life		
Revivals	For the American fantasy novelist, see Charles G. Finney.	
Abolitionism	Charles Grandison Finney (August 29, 1792 – August 16, 1875) was an American Presbyterian minister and leader in the Second Great Awakening in the United States. He has been called the "Father of Old	Charles Grandison Finney
President of Oberlin College	Revivalism." <sup>[1]</sup> Finney rejected much of traditional Reformed theology.	
Personal life	Finney was best known as a passionate revivalist preacher from 1825 to 1835 in the Burned-over District in	
Theology	Upstate New York and Manhattan, an opponent of Old School Presbyterian theology, an advocate of	
Criticisms	Christian perfectionism, and a religious writer.	
In popular culture	His religious views led him, together with several other evangelical leaders, to promote social reforms, such	
See also	as abolitionism and equal education for women and African Americans. From 1835 he taught at Oberlin	
✓ Notes and references	College of Ohio, which accepted students without regard to race or sex. He served as its second president from 1851 to 1865, and its faculty and students were activists for abolitionism, the Underground Railroad,	
Citations	and universal education.	
Sources		
Further reading	Early life [edit]	2nd President of Oberlin College
External links	Born in Warren, Connecticut, on August 29, 1792, <sup>[2]</sup> Finney was the youngest of nine children. The son of	In office
	farmers who moved to the upstate frontier of Jefferson County, New York, after the American Revolutionary	1851–1866
	War, Finney never attended college. His leadership abilities, musical skill, 6'3" height, and piercing eyes	Preceded by Asa Mahan

gained him recognition in his community.<sup>[3]</sup> He and his family attended the Baptist church in Henderson, New

York, where the preacher led emotional, revival-style meetings. The Baptists and the Methodists displayed

fervor in the early 19th century.<sup>[4]</sup> He "read the law", studying as an apprentice to become a lawyer under

Benjamin Wright.<sup>[5]</sup> In Adams, New York, he entered the congregation of George Washington Gale and

Holy Spirit he gave up legal practice to preach the Gospel.<sup>[7][8]</sup> As a young man, Finney was a Master

Mason, but after his conversion, he left the group as antithetical to Christianity and was active in Anti-

became the director of the church choir.<sup>[6]:8</sup> After a dramatic conversion experience and baptism into the

In 1821, Finney started studies at 29 under George Washington Gale, to become a licensed minister in the

took a commission for six months of a Female Missionary Society, located in Oneida County. I

Succeeded by James Fairchild **Personal details** August 29, 1792 Born Warren, Connecticut, U.S. Died August 16, 1875 (aged 82) Oberlin, Ohio, U.S. Lydia Root Andrews (m. 1824) Spouse(s) Elizabeth Ford Atkinson (m. 1848) Rebecca Allen Rayl (m. 1865) Presbyterian minister, Profession evangelist, revivalist, author Signature 6. G. Finny.

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went into the northern part of Jefferson County and began my labors at Evans' Mills, in the town of Le Ray.<sup>[10]</sup>

When Gale moved to a farm in Western, Oneida County, New York, Finney accompanied him and worked on Gale's farm in exchange for instruction, a forerunner of Gale's Oneida Institute. He had many misgivings about the fundamental doctrines taught in Presbyterianism.<sup>[11]</sup> He moved to New York City in 1832, where he was minister of the Chatham Street Chapel and took the breathtaking step of barring all slave owners and traders from Communion. <sup>[12]:29[4]</sup> Since the Chatham Street Chapel was not a church but a theater "fitted up" to serve as a church, a new Broadway Tabernacle was built for him in 1836 that was "the largest Protestant house of worship in the country."<sup>[13]:22</sup> In 1835, he became the professor of systematic theology at the newly formed Oberlin Collegiate Institute in Oberlin, Ohio.<sup>[14]</sup>

# Revivals [edit]

Masonic movements.<sup>[9]</sup>

Presbyterian Church. Like his teacher Gale, he

Finney was active as a revivalist from 1825 to 1835 in Jefferson County and for a few years in Manhattan. In 1830–1831, he led a revival in Rochester, New York, which has been noted as inspiring other revivals of the Second Great Awakening.<sup>[15]</sup> A leading pastor in New York who was converted in the Rochester meetings gave the following account of the effects of Finney's meetings in that city: "The whole community was stirred. Religion was the topic of conversation in the house, in the shop, in the office and on the street. The only theater in the city was converted into a livery stable; the only circus into a soap and candle factory. Grog shops were closed; the Sabbath was honored; the sanctuaries were thronged with happy worshippers; a new impulse was given to every philanthropic enterprise; the fountains of benevolence were opened, and men lived to good."<sup>[16]</sup>

Finney was known for his innovations in preaching and the conduct of religious meetings, which often impacted entire communities. Innovations included having women pray out loud in public meetings of mixed sexes, the introduction of the "anxious seat" in which those considering becoming Christians could sit to receive prayer, and public censure of individuals by name in sermons and prayers.<sup>[17]</sup> He was also known for his extemporaneous preaching.

Finney "had a deep insight into the almost interminable intricacies of human depravity.... He poured the floods of gospel love upon the audience. He took short-cuts to men's hearts, and his trip-hammer blows demolished the subterfuges of unbelief."<sup>[18]:39</sup>

Disciples of Finney included Theodore Weld, John Humphrey Noyes, and Andrew Leete Stone.

## Abolitionism [edit]

In addition to becoming a widely popular Christian evangelist, Finney was involved with social reforms, particularly the abolitionist movement. Finney frequently denounced slavery from the pulpit, called it a "great national sin," and refused Holy Communion to slaveholders.<sup>[19]</sup>

# President of Oberlin College [edit]

In 1835, the wealthy silk merchant and benefactor Arthur Tappan (1786–1865) offered financial backing to the new Oberlin Collegiate Institute (as Oberlin College had been known until 1850), and he invited Finney, on the recommendation of abolitionist Theodore Dwight Weld (1803–1895), to establish its theological department. After much wrangling, Finney accepted on the conditions that he be allowed to continue to preach in New York, the school admit blacks, and free speech be guaranteed at Oberlin. After more than a decade, he was selected as its second president, serving from 1851 to 1866. (He had already served as acting president in 1849.)<sup>[20]</sup> Oberlin was the first American college to accept women and blacks as students in addition to white men. From its early years, its faculty and students were active in the abolitionist movement. They participated together with people of the town in biracial efforts to help fugitive slaves on the Underground Railroad and to resist the Fugitive Slave Act.<sup>[21]</sup> Many slaves escaped to Ohio across the Ohio River from Kentucky, which made Ohio a critical area for their passage to freedom.

# Personal life [edit]

Finney was twice a widower and married three times. In 1824, he married Lydia Root Andrews (1804–1847) while he lived in Jefferson County. They had six children together. In 1848, a year after Lydia's death, he married Elizabeth Ford Atkinson (1799–1863) in Ohio. In 1865, he married Rebecca Allen Rayl (1824–1907), also in Ohio. Each of Finney's three wives accompanied him on his revival tours and joined him in his evangelistic efforts.

Finney's great-grandson, also named Charles Grandison Finney, became a famous author.

# Theology [edit]

Finney was a New School Presbyterian, and his theology was similar to that of Nathaniel William Taylor. Finney departed strongly from traditional Calvinist Soteriology, in particular by denying the doctrine of total depravity, implying humans can please God without the intervention of his grace.<sup>[22]</sup> Some call his stance pure Pelagianism.<sup>[23]</sup> However, Finney affirmed both the external and internal work of the Holy Spirit within the context of salvation, though with the sole purpose of motivation.<sup>[24]</sup> This is why some others call his stance "soft semi-Pelagianism", although recognizing its mere Pelagian nature.<sup>[25]</sup>

Finney's theory of atonement combines principles from different historical theories, notably the moral influence theory, but can't be associated exclusively with either of them.<sup>[26]</sup>

Finney was an advocate of perfectionism, the doctrine that through complete faith in Christ believers could receive a "second blessing of the Holy Spirit" and reach Christian perfection, a higher level of sanctification. For Finney, that meant living in obedience to God's law and loving God and one's neighbors but was not a sinless perfection. For Finney, even sanctified Christians are susceptible to temptation and capable of sin. Finney believed that it is possible for Christians to backslide, even to the point of losing their salvation.<sup>[27]</sup>

A major theme of his preaching was the need for what he called conversion. He also focused on the responsibilities that converts had to dedicate themselves to disinterested benevolence and to work to build the kingdom of God on earth. He taught that preachers had vital roles in producing revival, and wrote in 1835, "A revival is not a miracle, or dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means."<sup>[28]</sup>

Finney's eschatology was postmillennial, meaning he believed the Millennium (a thousand-year reign of Christ on Earth) would begin before Christ's Second Coming. Finney believed Christians could bring in the Millennium by ridding the world of "great and sore evils". Frances FitzGerald wrote, "In his preaching the emphasis was always on the ability of men to choose their own salvation, to work for the general welfare, and to build a new society."<sup>[29]</sup>

#### Criticisms [edit]

Benjamin Warfield, a professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, wrote, "God might be eliminated from it [Finney's theology] entirely without essentially changing its character."<sup>[30]</sup> Albert Baldwin Dod, another Old School Presbyterian, reviewed Finney's 1835 book *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*.<sup>[31]</sup> He rejected it as theologically unsound.<sup>[32]</sup> Dod was a defender of Reformed orthodoxy and was especially critical of Finney's view of the doctrine of total depravity.<sup>[33]</sup>

## In popular culture [edit]

In Charles W. Chesnutt's short story "The Passing of Grandison" (1899), published in the collection *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*, the enslaved hero is named "Grandison", likely an allusion to the well-known abolitionist.<sup>[34]</sup>

The Charles Finney School was established in Rochester, New York, in 1992.

Finney is included as a political figure in the video game *Victoria 3*.

#### See also [edit]

- Manie Payne Ferguson
- Theodore Pollock Ferguson
- Keith Green
- Joshua Hall McIlvaine
- Nathaniel William Taylor

# Notes and references [edit]

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- 3. <sup>∧</sup> "I. Birth and Early Education" <sup>∠</sup>, *Memoirs of Charles G. Finney*, Gospel truth, 1868.
- 4. <sup>*a b*</sup> Perciaccante, Marianne (2005), *Calling Down Fire: Charles Grandison Finney and Revivalism in Jefferson County, New York, 1800–1841*, pp. 2–4.
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- 16. **^** Hyatt, 126
- 17. A The various types of new measures are identified mostly by sources critical of Finney, such as Bennet, Tyler (1996), Bonar, Andrew (ed.), Asahel Nettleton: Life and Labors, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, pp. 342–55; Letters of Rev. Dr. [Lyman] Beecher and the Rev. Mr. Nettleton on the New Measures in Conducting Revivals of Religion with a Review of a Sermon by Novanglus, New York: G&C Carvill, 1828, pp. 83–96; and Hodge, Charles (July 1833), "Dangerous Innovations" 2, Biblical Repertory and Theological Review, vol. 5, University of Michigan, pp. 328–33, retrieved March 31, 2008.

- 18. <sup>▲</sup> Wishard, S. E. (1890). "Historical Sketch of Lane Seminary from 1853 to 1856". *Pamphlet souvenir of the sixtieth anniversary in the history of Lane Theological Seminary, containing papers read before the Lane Club* <sup>∠</sup>. Cincinnati: Lane Theological Seminary. pp. 30–40.
- 19. **^** FitzGerald 2017, p. 40.
- 20. ^ "Charles Grandison Finney Papers" 2. Oberlin College Archives. Oberlin College. Retrieved April 30, 2020.
- 21. A Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism (1996) p 199
- 22. A Bounds 2011, p. 47. "Finney argued that all humanity sins, but not because of a sinful nature, and that all humanity has the capacity to do what God requires for salvation."
- 23. A Todd 2020, p. 331. "According to Horton, "Finney is not merely an Arminian, but a Pelagian"."
- 24. **^** Smith 1992, p. 77. "Since Finney does not permit the Spirit to go beyond persuasion and motivation in securing a Person's salvation, the real agent behind regeneration is the individual."
- 25. A Bounds 2011, p. 47, . "Soft Semi-Pelagianism has influenced the Wesleyan tradition, [...] through the preaching and later teaching of nineteenth-century revivalist Charles Finney."
- 26. A Todd 2020, p. 332. "On one hand, the Finneyite atonement combined the dramatic presence of Christus Victor, the satisfaction theme of Anselm, the substitutionary elements of penal substitution, the rectoral framework of moral government, and the ethical focus of moral influence, all into one. On the other hand, Finney's version resembled none of these historical theories of the atonement."
- 27. **^** FitzGerald 2017, p. 44.
- 28. ^ FitzGerald 2017, p. 36.
- 29. **^** FitzGerald 2017, p. 37.
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- 31. ^ "On Revivals of Religion" ∠ Archived ∠ July 20, 2011, at the Wayback Machine. Biblical Repertory and Theological Review Vol. 7 No. 4 (1835) p.626-674
- A Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism<sup>™</sup>, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996. ISBN 0-8028-0129-3, p.159
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## External links [edit]

- The Theology of C. G. Finney explained and defended 🖉
- "The COMPLETE WORKS of CHARLES G. FINNEY" 2, collected by Gospel Truth Ministries
- A biography of Charles Finney by G. Frederick Wright Archived April 13, 2012, at the Wayback Machine (Holiness perspective; supportive)
- A Vindication of the Methods and Results of Charles Finney's Ministry 
   <sup>™</sup>
   (Revivalist perspective; supportive; answers many traditional Old School Calvinist critiques)
- Charles Grandison Finney: New York Revivalism in the 1820-1830s <sup>™</sup> by John H. Martin, *Crooked Lake Review*
- Articles on Finney (conservative Calvinist perspective; critical)
- How Charles Finney's Theology Ravaged the Evangelical Movement 
   <sup>™</sup>
   (conservative Calvinist perspective; critical)
- "The Legacy of Charles Finney" 🖉 Archived 🖉 May 22, 2008, at the Wayback Machine by Dr. Michael S. Horton (conservative perspective; critical)
- The Oberlin Heritage Center 2-Local history museum and historical society of Oberlin, OH, where Finney lived and worked for decades.
- Finney's Lectures on Theology by Charles Hodge ∠ (conservative Calvinist perspective; critical)
- The Church in Crisis Z A critical look at Finney's revivalist methods and their impact on the modern church in America
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V·T·E	Oberlin College	[show]
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