

THE EIGHTH IN A SERIES ON REVIVAL

# CHARLES G. FINNEY: Groundbreaking Revivalist

BY KEN HORN



It was a strange scene that morning in the cotton factory near Whitesboro, N.Y. The looms and spinning mules had gone silent ... but new sounds, never before heard here, had replaced them.

Groans and cries from workers, many prostrate on the ground, filled the expansive building.

Evangelist Charles Finney had been touring the facility after preaching in the village schoolhouse the night before. It was early in the workday, and the labor was humming along as usual. It would be strange for one visiting individual to attract much notice, much less cause the bustling enterprise to grind to a screeching halt.

But that's exactly what happened.

As Finney simply observed the machinery, one worker, then another sank to the floor and burst into tears.

"The impression caught almost like powder," said Finney in his autobiography, "and in a few moments nearly all in the room were in tears."

The factory's owner, who was not a believer, was himself taken by what was happening.

"Stop the mill," he instructed his superintendent, "and let the people attend to religion; for it is more important that our souls should be saved than that this factory run."

The workers were assembled, and Finney preached. In his own words: "A more powerful meeting I scarcely ever attended. It went on with great power. The building was large, and had many people in it, from the garret to the cellar. The revival went through the mill with astonishing power, and in the course of a few days nearly all in the mill were hopefully converted."<sup>1</sup>

## Father of revivalism

Charles Grandison Finney was one of the most remarkable individuals in church history. A spiritual child of the Second Great Awakening, he has been called the "father of modern revivalism."

Finney once said, "A revival of religion presupposes a declension." His approach to revival and evangelism built on that very concept — the church needed to change, to be brought back to life.

Finney changed the face of evangelism and revival in the nation and popularized characteristics that are commonplace in evangelical Christianity today.

Finney brought revival and spiritual excitement to the East beginning in New York from 1824 until 1837. Here Finney utilized "new measures" that

were criticized by traditionalists but effective in building the Kingdom.

What were those controversial new measures?

He preached extemporaneously instead of reading from a manuscript.

He enlivened his messages with illustrations from daily life. This was hardly a new measure — Jesus did it — but it was not common in the staid churches of Finney's day.

He addressed the congregation as "you," while looking people directly in the eye. It is not difficult to understand why many lukewarm Christians were uncomfortable with this.

Informal prayers were offered which addressed God in familiar language.

He called for immediate decisions for Christ

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— unlike the dominant Calvinism of the day. For this he added an "anxious bench" or "mourners' bench" for those who responded to the public invitation of salvation. There was also an inquiry room to counsel seekers.

"Prevailing prayer" — extended periods of prayer for a person or need — was practiced.

Testimonies by the newly saved were encouraged, and women were allowed to speak in meetings.

There were even organized choirs and advanced advertising for the meetings.

In all of these, Finney was a trailblazer, showing the way for generations of evangelists to follow. When the Lord guided him to pastor a church, he even blazed a trail there, beginning his church in a theater.

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## Spiritual depth and "new measures"

Finney was very clear on the need for prayer and the value of the work of the Holy Spirit. That this spiritual depth applied to his own life is why sinners, such as those in the cotton mill, could be so deeply affected by his presence. He walked with God. That is the true secret of Finney's, or any other, revival. He once said, "A revival can

be expected when Christians have the spirit of prayer for a revival."

But he also said, "A revival can be expected when Christians are willing to make the sacrifices necessary to carry it on." He felt there were things Christians needed to do so there would be an opportunity to reach the maximum number of people with the soul-saving message.

"Without new measures it

is impossible that the church should succeed in gaining the attention of the world to religion," he said. "There are so many exciting subjects constantly brought before the public mind ... that the church cannot maintain her ground, cannot command attention, without very exciting preaching, and sufficient novelty in measure, to get the public ear."

But Finney's novelties never took center stage, and the gospel was never left ambiguous. Straight preaching and clear explanation of the Word of God marked all of his meetings.

Finney's revivals were also attended frequently by high emotions, most often demonstrating the convicting power of the Holy Spirit. People wept, cried out, even fell down during the

meetings — much like they did in the cotton factory.

## Finney's impact

Finney's impact extended beyond our own nation ... and even beyond where he could go physically to preach.

Revival seemed to follow everywhere he went, including many places overseas. In the 1840s his impact in Wales was so great that some called the awakening of those days "Finney's revival."

It is typical of revivals that their impact reaches other places through the writings of the revivalists or contemporary accounts. Finney's writings did indeed have a major impact.

A British citizen named George Williams was saved through reading Finney's works. Later, influenced by Finney's social reforms

— which Finney considered part and parcel of revival — Williams founded the YMCA.

## A lesson for today

Finney brought together Christians of different denominations and backgrounds. He found unity was a major key to communitywide revival. He referred to a divisive spirit that would prevent this as "a spirit of controversy."

The *Pentecostal Evangel* (then known as the *Weekly Evangel*) highlighted this in large print on the cover of the Feb. 19, 1916, issue under the heading "A Revival Needed!":

*Chas. G. Finney, America's greatest evangelist, said: "When there is a spirit of controversy in the church or in the land, a revival is needed. The spirit of religion is not the spirit of controversy. There can be no*

*prosperity in religion where the spirit of controversy prevails." If a spirit of controversy is detected in the work, it is high time to seek the face of God to send a revival which will paralyze the spirit of controversy by occupying the attention of all with the great work of soul-saving. Lord, send us a Pentecostal revival.*

There is much to learn from the life of Charles Finney. As we heed his words on unity and follow his example of spiritual depth, we can expect that, together, we may see another nation-changing move of God. **e**

1. From Charles G. Finney: An Autobiography, 1908 Edition

KEN HORN is the editor of the *Pentecostal Evangel*.

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