Charles G. Finney and the Second Great Awakening

Gbenga Simeon Babatope

A Thesis

In

The Department

Of

Theological Studies

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts (Theological Studies) at

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Gbenga Simeon Babatope

Entitled: Charles G. Finney and the Second Great Awakening

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Theological Studies)

Complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final examining committee:

_____ Chair
Dr. Marie-France Dion

_____ Examiner
Dr. Christine Jamieson

_____ Examiner
Dr. Lucian Turcescu

_____ Thesis Supervisor
Dr. André Gagné

24th of March, 2025

_____
Dr. Lucian Turcescu, Graduate Program Director

_____
Dr. Pascale Sicotte, Dean, Faculty of Arts and Science

Abstract

Charles G Finney and the Second Great Awakening

Gbenga Simeon Babatope

This thesis explores Charles G. Finney's theological and philosophical perspectives and their impact on the Second Great Awakening. The work examines how Finney's ministry influenced this pivotal movement and established a lasting legacy on the religious landscape of the United States. His notable contributions include significant advancements in various social reforms, such as the abolitionist movement, the temperance movement, women's rights, education, and the democratization of religion in the country. The research uses historical and theological sources, drawing on a range of primary and secondary sources. Finney's writings, including his autobiography and sermons, will be analyzed. Secondary sources will include scholarly studies of the Second Great Awakening, Finney's life and work, and the period's broader religious and cultural context.

Keyworks

Charles G. Finney, Second Great Awakening, Revival, Social Reform, Abolitionism, Women's Rights, Temperance Movement, Education, Calvinism, Democratization, Free Will, Altar Call

Acknowledgments

I want to begin by thanking my supervisor, Dr. André Gagné. As a master's student in the Department of Theological Studies at Concordia, I am fortunate to have such a supportive supervisor. Due to your guidance and enthusiasm, I have become a better academic and more well-rounded individual. I truly appreciate the time I have spent with you as a student and assistant. I would also like to thank the entirety of the Department of Theological Studies - to all the professors, students, and staff that I have met during my time in the Department. Thank you for the opportunities and experiences you afforded me; I will never forget them! Finally, I thank my family, especially my wife, Ololade. Without the support of my wife, none of this could be possible.

Lastly, I am grateful to the authors, scholars, and researchers whose works have inspired and informed this study. Your contributions have been instrumental in shaping the foundation of my thesis.

I am deeply thankful to all who have supported me in this endeavour.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

Background on the Second Great Awakening (1790-1840)

After the American Revolution, the United States experienced significant population growth and territorial expansion, profoundly shaping the Second Great Awakening context. From a population of nearly 4 million in 1790, the nation surged to 17 million by 1840. This growth was not confined to the original thirteen colonies but spread westward into territories such as Kentucky, Ohio, Tennessee, and beyond following the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. The rapid movement into the frontier brought unique challenges, including a lack of established churches and clergy to serve the growing communities. Revivalists seized this opportunity, viewing the frontier as fertile ground for spreading evangelical Christianity. Through camp meetings and itinerant preaching, they reached isolated settlers, fostering religious renewal and community cohesion.[1]

To achieve this, evangelists organized lively Christian revival meetings, which became the hallmark of the Second Great Awakening. These gatherings, often held in rural areas and frontier towns, drew large crowds and were designed to stir deep emotional responses. Revival meetings featured passionate sermons that emphasized personal salvation, repentance, and the possibility of redemption through Jesus Christ. Attendees were encouraged to reflect on their sins and seek a transformative relationship with God. This approach appealed to a broad audience, cutting across class and social lines, and effectively democratized religion by making spiritual experiences accessible to all.[2]

The Second Great Awakening, which began around 1800 and reached its zenith in the early 1830s, marked a pivotal moment in American religious history. Building upon the foundation laid by the First Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s, this revivalist movement emphasized the urgency of personal salvation and the transformative power of individual religious experience. The revival emerged in response to the growing secularization and moral laxity perceived in post-Revolutionary America. Religious leaders, concerned about the nation's spiritual state, called for renewed devotion and evangelism. These efforts sparked a widespread spiritual awakening that swept across both urban centres and rural frontiers, redefining the religious landscape of the young republic.[3]

Like its predecessor, the Second Great Awakening resulted in widespread religious renewal by converting individuals to Protestant Christianity. However, it differed significantly in scope and strategy. While the First Great Awakening had been mainly confined to the established colonies, the Second Great Awakening spread rapidly to the western frontier, where camp meetings became a hallmark of the revival. These gatherings, characterized by emotional preaching and collective worship, played a crucial role in spreading evangelical fervour. The movement also saw the rise of influential preachers such as Charles Grandison Finney, who pioneered innovative methods of evangelism, including using the "anxious bench" to encourage public declarations of faith. These

---

[1] Hatch, Nathan O. *The Democratization of American Christianity*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 55.

[2] Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 112.

[3] Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 132.

approaches underscored the democratization of religion, making faith accessible to ordinary Americans and breaking down traditional denominational barriers.[4]

The Second Great Awakening left a lasting legacy on American religious and social life. It spurred the rapid growth of evangelical denominations, particularly Methodism and Baptism, which emerged as dominant forces in American Protestantism. Furthermore, the revivalist spirit encouraged the establishment of missionary societies and educational institutions to spread Christian values and combat moral decay. This period of religious fervour revitalized American Christianity and reinforced the nation's self-image as a "city upon a hill" destined to model Christian virtue to the world.[5] In doing so, the Second Great Awakening profoundly shaped the moral and cultural ethos of 19th-century America, setting the stage for continued religious and social activism.

The Christianity of the Second Great Awakening became widely associated with evangelicalism, a movement that stressed the proclamation of the "good news" or Gospel, derived from the Greek term *euangelion*. This wave of revivalism redefined religious practice by shifting focus from traditional, hierarchical church structures to a more personal and experiential faith. Evangelical Christians sought a direct, emotional connection with God, facilitated by revival meetings and heartfelt conversion experiences. They rejected the notion that salvation could be mediated exclusively through clergy or formal sacraments, advocating instead for a personal commitment to Christ as the cornerstone of spiritual life.[6]

A hallmark of evangelical Christianity during this period was its emphasis on personal morality and spiritual transformation. Revivalists taught that faith was not merely a matter of belief but should be evidenced by a radical change in one's life. This view differed from earlier Puritanical and Calvinistic views that emphasized predestination and divine election. Instead, evangelicals believed all individuals could choose salvation through repentance and faith. This theological shift, rooted in Arminianism, resonated deeply in the democratic ethos of the early American republic, where personal agency and responsibility were highly valued.[7] The evangelical focus on individual transformation fostered a sense of empowerment, allowing adherents to feel that they could contribute meaningfully to the moral fabric of society. Another defining feature of evangelicalism during the Second Great Awakening was its focus on social action and moral reform. Revivalists believed that spiritual renewal should lead to societal improvement. They championed causes such as temperance, education, prison reform, women's rights[8] and, most notably, the abolition of slavery. The moral imperatives from evangelical theology encouraged adherents to view societal ills as affronts to God's will and to work actively for their eradication. Figures like Lyman Beecher and Charles Finney argued that revivals were about saving souls *and*

[4] Barry Hankins, *The Second Great Awakening and the Transcendentalists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 58.
[5] Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 177.
[6] William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607–1977* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 92.
[7] Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 67.
[8] James H. Moorhead, *World Without End: Mainstream American Protestant Visions of the Last Things, 1880–1925* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 23.

transforming communities to reflect Christian values.[9] This blend of personal piety and social activism became a powerful force in shaping American public life. This vision was particularly compelling in a rapidly expanding and diversifying America, as it offered a unifying moral framework in a time of significant social change.[10] Thus, evangelicalism during the Second Great Awakening shaped religious practice and laid the groundwork for major reform movements defining the 19th century.

The Second Great Awakening also emerged as a counterpoint to the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason and scientific inquiry, which had influenced the ideological foundations of the United States. The Enlightenment's rationalism and deism promoted a worldview in which God was perceived as a distant creator who set the universe in motion but remained uninvolved in human affairs. This perspective, prevalent among many of the nation's founders, fostered a more intellectual and impersonal approach to religion. However, the revivals of the Second Great Awakening sought to reclaim a more immediate and personal connection to the divine, emphasizing the active role of God in both individual lives and societal events.[11] The movement's leaders argued that rationalism failed to address the population's spiritual needs, particularly in the rapidly expanding and often chaotic frontier regions. Evangelical preachers during this period highlighted the flaws of deism, which they believed undermined the emotional and spiritual core of Christianity. They contended that a distant, uninvolved God could not offer individuals the personal salvation or moral guidance required. Instead, revivalists like Charles Grandison Finney preached about a God intimately involved in human affairs, emphasizing personal accountability and the possibility of direct divine intervention.[12] This approach resonated with many Americans, particularly those facing the uncertainties of westward expansion, economic change, and social upheaval. The emotional intensity of revival meetings and the promise of a personal relationship with God offered comfort and hope to individuals seeking stability and meaning in a rapidly changing world.

In rejecting Enlightenment rationalism, the Second Great Awakening did not entirely dismiss intellectual inquiry but sought to subordinate reason to faith. Evangelicals asserted that true wisdom and understanding stemmed from divine revelation rather than human logic. This stance was particularly evident in promoting Bible study and missionary activities, which aimed to spread religious truths as divinely inspired rather than intellectually derived.[13] By doing so, the movement not only reinforced the centrality of religious experience but also challenged the prevailing secular ideologies of the time, contributing to a distinctly American blend of faith and public life that persisted throughout the 19th century.

Thesis Statement and Methodological Approach

To grasp the significance of Finney within the context of the Second Great Awakening, one must examine the broader historical, social, and religious landscape of early 19th-century America. As supported by Nathan O. Hatch, this period was characterized by rapid social change, economic expansion, and increasing religious pluralism, creating fertile ground for the revivalist fervour that

[9] Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 120.
[10] Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*, 56.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid, 102.
[13] Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 45.

swept the nation of America.[14] *This thesis will explore Finney's theological and philosophical perspectives, examining how his ideas and teachings influenced the Second Great Awakening*. To investigate the impact of Charles G. Finney's ministry on the Second Great Awakening and the indelible legacy left by him on the life and religious landscape of the people of the United States of America, I will employ a historical and theological approach in this thesis, drawing on a range of primary and secondary sources. Finney's writings, including his autobiography, sermons, and his systematic theology will be analyzed. Secondary sources will include scholarly studies of the Second Great Awakening, Finney's life and work, and the period's broader religious and cultural context. The data from these sources will be subjected to content analysis and presented thematically.

Although various notable people featured in the Great Awakening, such as Dwight L. Moody, Barton W. Stone and James McGready, the overall focus of this thesis will be limited to Finney. Specifically, my objective is to present a nuanced understanding of Finney's theology and revivalistic methods, shedding light on the factors that contributed to the success of the Second Great Awakening.

[14] Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 6.

CHAPTER 1 : The Second Great Awakening and Finney's Life and Ministry

1.1. Overview of the Second Great Awakening's Key Features

The Second Great Awakening (1790–1840) was a transformative religious movement in the United States, characterized by a range of distinct features that reshaped American religious and social life. These features include widespread revivalism, the democratization of religion, a focus on personal conversion, and the rise of social reform movements, among many others.

1.1.1. Revival and Camp Meetings

Revival and camp meetings were central to the Second Great Awakening as powerful tools for spreading evangelical fervour and reaching a broad audience. These gatherings, often held in rural areas, were marked by their large size, emotional intensity, and inclusive nature. Revival meetings aimed to ignite religious enthusiasm, leading individuals to personal conversions and a renewed sense of moral responsibility. Camp meetings, in particular, provided a unique platform for communal worship and spiritual renewal, often lasting several days and drawing participants from diverse backgrounds. These meetings became a defining characteristic of the revivalist movement, shaping the religious and social dynamics of early 19th-century America.[15]

The significance of revival and camp meetings lay in their ability to democratize religious experience. In an era when formal church attendance was declining, particularly on the frontier, camp meetings offered an accessible and emotionally engaging alternative. These gatherings featured charismatic preaching, public confessions, and intense prayer sessions, which created an atmosphere of spiritual urgency. The preaching style was often dramatic, aiming to provoke emotional responses and lead individuals to immediate repentance and conversion. This emphasis on personal experience and direct encounters with God broke down traditional barriers to religious participation, allowing individuals from all social classes, including women and African Americans, to engage fully in the spiritual renewal process.[16]

Furthermore, revival and camp meetings were critical in fostering community and shared purpose among participants. These events were religious and social gatherings that brought together people from different regions and backgrounds. The communal nature of camp meetings reinforced the idea of collective moral responsibility, encouraging participants to work towards societal reform as an extension of their spiritual commitments. Many attendees left these meetings with a renewed determination to address social issues such as slavery, temperance, and inequality, thereby linking revivalism with broader social reform movements. In this way, revival and camp meetings revitalized American evangelicalism and helped shape the nation's moral and social fabric during the Second Great Awakening.[17]

---

[15] Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 202.
[16] John Boles, *The Great Revival: Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 78.
[17] Ellen Eslinger, *Citizens of Zion: The Social Origins of Camp Meeting Revivalism* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 152.

1.1.2. Social Reforms

The Second Great Awakening revitalized religious fervour in the United States and catalyzed significant social reforms. From the late 18th century to the mid-19th century, this period was marked by an awakening of moral consciousness, driven by the belief that personal salvation should translate into societal transformation. Revivalists emphasized that faith required active efforts to improve the world, leading to the rise of various reform movements aimed at addressing societal ills such as slavery, intemperance, and gender inequality. These movements were deeply intertwined with the religious zeal of the time, reflecting the broader evangelical mission to create a morally upright society.[18]

One of the most notable social reform movements associated with the Second Great Awakening was the *abolitionist movement*. Revivalists like Theodore Dwight Weld and Charles G. Finney argued that slavery was a sin against both God and humanity. Evangelical churches, particularly in the North, became centers for anti-slavery advocacy, hosting lectures, distributing literature, and organizing rallies. The American Anti-Slavery Society, founded in 1833, was heavily influenced by the religious revival, drawing upon the moral imperative preached during this era to push for the immediate emancipation of enslaved people. The movement's religious underpinnings helped frame slavery as a moral crisis that demanded urgent action, demonstrating how the spiritual revival translated into a powerful force for social justice.[19]

The *temperance movement* was another significant reform effort spurred by the Second Great Awakening. Evangelical leaders saw alcohol consumption as an essential source of societal decay linked to poverty, crime, and family disintegration. Preachers such as Lyman Beecher delivered fiery sermons warning of the dangers of intemperance, calling for individual repentance and societal change. The formation of temperance societies, such as the American Temperance Society in 1826, was a direct outcome of this religious fervour. These organizations campaigned for abstinence from alcohol, using moral persuasion and, later, legislative efforts to promote sobriety. The temperance movement reflected the revival's emphasis on personal moral discipline and highlighted the role of collective action in pursuing societal reform.[20]

Furthermore, the Second Great Awakening played a pivotal role in advancing *women's rights and education*. Women were active participants in revival meetings and often took on leadership roles within reform movements, leveraging the moral authority granted to them by their religious convictions. Figures like Catharine Beecher and Sarah Grimké advocated for women's education and equal rights, arguing that women had a vital role in shaping a virtuous society. The awakening also contributed to establishing women-led missionary societies and charitable organizations, which aimed to uplift the less fortunate and spread Christian values. These efforts laid the groundwork for the later women's suffrage movement, illustrating how the spiritual revival provided a platform for challenging traditional gender roles and advocating for greater social equality.[21]

---

[18] Michael Young, *Bearing Witness Against Sin: The Evangelical Birth of the American Social Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 112.
[19] James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 88.
[20] Richard Carwardine, *Transatlantic Revivalism: Popular Evangelicalism in Britain and America, 1790–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 68.
[21] Donald Matthews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 204.

The Second Great Awakening was instrumental in fostering social reform movements that sought to align American society more closely with Christian moral principles. These movements not only addressed pressing societal issues but also demonstrated the enduring influence of religious revivalism on the nation's moral and social fabric.

1.1.3. Democratization of Religion

The Second Great Awakening (1790–1840) was a period of profound religious transformation in the United States, marked by a shift towards democratizing religion. This movement made religious experience and participation accessible to a broader spectrum of society, transcending traditional hierarchies and fostering a sense of equality and agency among believers. Unlike the First Great Awakening, which essentially reinforced established religious orders, the Second Great Awakening was characterized by a more inclusive approach that reflected the democratic ethos of the burgeoning American republic.[22]

One of the most notable aspects of this democratization was the emphasis on personal conversion and individual choice. The revivalists of the Second Great Awakening, such as Charles G. Finney, rejected the Calvinist predestination notion, suggesting that salvation was reserved for a select few. Instead, they promoted an Arminian theology that underscored free will and the ability of every individual to seek salvation through faith and repentance. This theological shift allowed people from all walks of life to feel empowered in their spiritual journeys, fostering a sense of personal responsibility and egalitarianism within religious communities.[23] The widespread adoption of this belief system enabled the movement to thrive, particularly in the frontier regions, where established religious institutions were scarce.

The democratization of religion was further amplified through the camp meetings that became a hallmark of the Second Great Awakening. These gatherings, often held in rural areas, were open to everyone regardless of social class, gender, or race. They allowed thousands of individuals to unite, experience intense religious fervour, and participate actively in worship. The informal and emotionally charged atmosphere of camp meetings broke down social barriers and allowed marginalized groups, including women and African Americans, to play significant roles in religious life. Women, in particular, found new avenues for leadership and influence, as they often led prayer meetings and contributed to the spread of revivalism in their communities.[24] Similarly, free and enslaved African Americans used the revivalist platform to form independent religious institutions, such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which was crucial in fostering a sense of identity and solidarity.

1.1.4. Colleges and Seminaries

One of the defining features of the Second Great Awakening was the establishment and expansion of colleges and seminaries, which played a crucial role in spreading revivalist ideals and training the next generation of religious leaders. These institutions were instrumental in fostering intellectual and spiritual growth, providing a structured environment for studying and disseminating evangelical theology. The emphasis on higher education during this period reflected

[22] Frank Lambert, *Inventing the "Great Awakening"* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 56.
[23] John Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 62.
[24] Boles, *The Great Revival*, 110.

the belief that educated clergy, and lay leaders were essential for sustaining the momentum of the revival and promoting social reform. As a result, the Second Great Awakening revitalized individual faith and reshaped American religious education.

Prominent among these institutions was Oberlin College, founded in 1833 in Ohio, which became a hub for revivalist and reformist activities under the leadership of Charles G. Finney. Oberlin distinguished itself by admitting both men and women and actively supporting the abolitionist movement. Finney, who served as president from 1851 to 1866, integrated religious revivalism with social activism, making the college a training ground for ministers who would champion both evangelical and reformist causes. Oberlin's unique blend of rigorous academic instruction and a commitment to moral reform underscored the idea that education was vital for societal transformation.[25]

In addition to Oberlin, other seminaries like Andover Theological Seminary and Yale Divinity School were central to the theological developments of the time. These institutions emphasized the need for a learned clergy capable of defending and propagating evangelical doctrines. Andover, founded in 1807, became a bastion of New England revivalism, promoting a theology that combined traditional Calvinism with the revivalist emphasis on individual conversion. Meanwhile, under the influence of figures like Nathaniel William Taylor, Yale Divinity School advanced a new theological framework that balanced the sovereignty of God with human responsibility, aligning closely with the revivalist ethos.[26]

The proliferation of colleges and seminaries during the Second Great Awakening also reflected a broader societal shift towards the democratization of education. Institutions such as Berea College and Lane Theological Seminary were established to make higher education accessible to marginalized groups, including African Americans and women. This emphasis on inclusivity was a direct outgrowth of the revival's focus on personal salvation and social equality. Berea College, for instance, admitted students, regardless of race or gender, embodying the egalitarian spirit of the awakening. These colleges not only equipped students with theological knowledge but also prepared them to be agents of social change, embodying the revival's dual commitment to personal and societal transformation.[27]

1.2. Finney's Biographical Background (1792-1875)

Charles Finney's career was exceptional, from his rise to international recognition as a revivalist to his role as a professor and president at a distinctive educational institution. He was also a strong proponent of the controversial doctrine of Christian perfection. Finney's influence on American religion was profound, as he questioned prevailing views on conversion, evangelism, and personal holiness, ultimately reshaping Christian thought in the United States. Despite differing opinions on his controversial ideas, Finney remains remarkable in American Christianity's history.

Charles Finney was born in 1792 in Warren, Connecticut, to a family with deep roots in New England. In 1794, his family relocated to New York State, where he grew up in the central and northern regions. They later settled in Henderson, close to Lake Ontario, where Finney spent

[25] George Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 215.
[26] David Holmes, *A Brief History of the Episcopal Church* (Horsham, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993), 98.
[27] Moorhead, *World Without End*, 58.

much of his teenage years. As a young man, Finney chose to pursue law and began his studies in the office of Benjamin Wright, a lawyer in Adams, New York. In addition to his legal pursuits, Finney was an avid musician, playing the cello and leading the choir at the local Presbyterian church, where the Rev. George W. Gale served as pastor. According to his memoirs, Finney felt the urgent need to resolve the question of his soul's salvation during this period. He ventured into the woods alone, knelt beside a log, and prayed fervently, experiencing an immediate and profound conversion. The event was so powerful that Finney later described it as waves of "liquid love" flowing through his body, a sensation so vivid that he recounted it in great detail later in life. This intense experience left him with little patience in his later years for those who could not recount a similar transformative moment.

1.2.1. Finney's Conversion Experience and Theological Development

Finney's conversion experience is one of the most pivotal and transformative moments in his personal life and the broader history of American evangelicalism. His journey to salvation was marked by a dramatic and profoundly emotional encounter with God that shaped his theological outlook and revivalist methods. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Finney did not undergo a gradual or contemplative conversion but experienced a sudden, intense spiritual transformation that he would later describe in vivid and mystical terms. His conversion, which took place in 1821 while studying law in Adams, New York, was a direct and personal encounter with the divine that served as the foundation for his unique approach to theology and revivalism.[28]

Finney's conversion occurs after he decides to settle the matter of his soul's salvation. In a deeply personal moment, he retreated to the woods, alone and in prayer, where he experienced what he later called "waves of liquid love" flowing through his body. This powerful experience led him to an immediate and lasting assurance of salvation. Finney believed this event was a spiritual awakening and a physical manifestation of God's grace. In his memoirs, he described the moment as so dramatic that he felt his entire body was consumed by divine love, a sensation that profoundly affected his theology. Finney believed that the Holy Spirit's presence could lead to a tangible, emotional experience of God's love, and this understanding would shape his approach to revivals.[29] Therefore, his conversion was about individual salvation and an emotional, transformative encounter that could be replicated through public revival meetings.

This theological shift laid the groundwork for Finney's departure from traditional Calvinist teachings, which emphasized predestination and the inability of individuals to influence their salvation. In contrast, Finney adopted an Arminian perspective, which stressed the role of human free will in salvation. He believed that individuals could make a conscious decision to repent and accept Christ, which starkly contrasted the more deterministic views that were dominant in much of American Protestantism at the time. His theology emphasized that salvation was available to all who chose to seek it, positioning human choice and action at the center of the spiritual journey. This understanding of free will and personal responsibility not only defined his theological

[28] Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 37.
[29] William McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York: Macmillan, 2014), 106.

development but also informed his radical approach to revivalism, where he sought to create environments in which people could experience immediate conversion.[30]

Finney's theological development was also deeply intertwined with his commitment to social reform. He argued that true conversion should lead to social action. This belief was central to his revivals, often including calls for social reform and personal repentance. His theology, therefore, became a framework for both spiritual and societal renewal, blending the individual pursuit of salvation with a broader vision of a morally just society.[31]

1.2.2. Finney's Pastoral Ministry in New York and Ohio

Finney's pastoral ministry, which spanned New York and Ohio, was a significant aspect of his career, marked by a fervent commitment to revivalism and social reform. After his dramatic conversion in 1821, Finney felt a divine calling to enter the ministry, initially serving as an evangelist before taking on pastoral responsibilities. His ministry not only reflected his theological convictions but also had a profound impact on the development of American evangelicalism during the Second Great Awakening.

Finney's first major pastoral work began in Rochester, New York, where he was appointed pastor of the First Congregational Church in 1831. This pastorate was a crucial period for both Finney and the church, as the area was deeply affected by the spiritual revivalism of the time. Finney's tenure in Rochester was marked by extensive revival meetings, during which he employed his well-known methods, including the use of the "anxious bench," a practice where individuals publicly expressed their desire for salvation. This practice was controversial but highly effective in drawing people to Christ. Finney's innovative revival techniques, characterized by emotional appeals and a focus on personal choice in salvation, resonated with the people of Rochester, and his ministry attracted widespread attention.[32]

In Ohio, Finney's pastoral ministry took on an even more influential role. In 1835, he moved to Oberlin, Ohio, where he became the president of Oberlin College. Though his primary role at Oberlin was academic, Finney also served as a pastor at the Oberlin Congregational Church, and his influence on the religious life of the area was immense. Oberlin became a center for religious revival and social reform, with Finney promoting education for women and African Americans and advocating for the abolition of slavery. His dual focus on salvation and social action shaped Oberlin into a unique institution where theology and reform were intertwined. Finney's preaching was notable for its emphasis on personal responsibility and the transformative power of conversion, which also influenced the region's broader social and political landscape.[33]

In addition to his pastoral leadership, Finney's influence in New York and Ohio extended to his role as a theologian and social activist. He was deeply involved in the abolitionist movement, using his pastoral platform to preach against slavery and to promote racial equality. His sermons and writings reflected his belief that true Christian conversion would inevitably lead to a commitment to social justice. Finney's ministry in New York and Ohio played a critical role in

---

[30] Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 168.
[31] Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind*, 122.
[32] Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 153.
[33] McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, 72.

shaping the moral and religious character of the American Northeast and Midwest, helping to establish evangelicalism as a force for personal salvation and social change.[34]

1.3. Finney's Role in the Second Great Awakening: Revivalist, Theologian, and Educator

Finney was a central figure in the Second Great Awakening, a religious revival that swept through the United States in the early 19th century. His contributions as a revivalist, theologian, and educator were instrumental in shaping American evangelicalism's spiritual and intellectual contours. Finney's distinctive revival techniques, theological innovations, and involvement in religious education laid the groundwork for the development of modern evangelicalism. They had a lasting impact on American religious and social life.

1.3.1. Revivalist: Catalyst for the Second Great Awakening

Finney was one of the most influential revivalists during the Second Great Awakening, and his unique approach to revival meetings significantly shaped the course of this religious movement. The Second Great Awakening began in the early 19th century and was marked by a surge of evangelical fervour that sought to reinvigorate the American Protestant church. Finney played a key role in this religious revival by employing methods that made the experience of conversion more personal, emotional, and accessible, thereby drawing large crowds and encouraging widespread conversions. His revival techniques, sometimes described as "new measures," broke away from the traditional, passive forms of worship and introduced practices that emphasized emotional engagement and personal decision-making in the process of salvation.[35]

Finney's approach radically differed from earlier revivalist methods that relied primarily on the preacher's authority and the passive reception of religious doctrine. Instead, he emphasized active participation from the congregation, aiming to create a sense of urgency and personal responsibility for one's salvation. His revival meetings were characterized by intense emotional appeals, public confessions, and direct challenges to individuals to take immediate action and commit to Christ. Using the "anxious bench" is one of Finney's most notable innovations. It was a space at the front of the church where individuals could come forward and openly wrestle with their spiritual struggles. It created a visible and physical sign of commitment, encouraging others to join in the act of salvation. The emotional intensity of these meetings and Finney's direct engagement with his audience made the experience of salvation immediate and tangible, allowing for the sense of a "new birth" in Christ.[36]

Finney also understood the power of preaching as a tool for social and personal transformation. His revival efforts were not confined to the church alone; they had far-reaching social implications. For Finney, revivals were not just about spiritual awakening. Still, they were intended to inspire people to engage in social change actively, thus influencing the development of various reform movements that arose during the 19th century.[37]

---

[34] Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 115.
[35] Ibid, 89.
[36] McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, 120.
[37] Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 203.

1.3.2. Theologian: Innovator and Reformer

Finney's role as a theologian was as influential as his role as a revivalist. Finney's theological ideas and doctrines were revolutionary for their time, and they played a crucial part in shaping the direction of Protestantism in 19th-century America. One of Finney's most significant contributions was his rejection of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, which held that God predetermined who would be saved and who would be damned. Instead, Finney embraced a more optimistic and democratic theological framework rooted in the Arminian belief that salvation was available to all people through their free will and conscious decision to accept God's grace. His views on free will and personal responsibility provided a fresh interpretation of Christian salvation that resonated with the democratic and individualistic spirit of 19th-century America.[38]

In his seminal work, *Systematic Theology*, Finney emphasized the idea of moral government, a concept that defined his entire theological approach. For Finney, God's rule was not one of arbitrary power but one based on moral principles and justice. He argued that human beings, as moral agents, were responsible for their actions and choices. Unlike earlier theological systems that emphasized the depravity of humanity and the inability to choose salvation, Finney insisted that individuals possessed the inherent capacity to choose salvation through their own will. This view contrasted sharply with Calvinist teachings that emphasized God's absolute sovereignty in the matter of salvation. Finney believed individuals exercised their moral responsibility by accepting or rejecting God's call. This emphasis on human agency and the capacity for moral improvement challenged the fatalistic views of sin and redemption that had characterized much of traditional Reformed theology.[39]

Moreover, Finney's theology was foundational in developing the revivalistic and moralistic elements that would later be central to the Social Gospel movement. Finney rejected the notion that the church's primary mission was to offer spiritual salvation disconnected from the pressing social issues of the time. His insistence on the moral improvement of both individuals and society would profoundly influence later Christian social reformers, who saw social action as a reflection of their Christian faith.[40]

Finney's theological ideas, mainly his focus on free will, moral responsibility, and societal transformation, were central to the religious climate of the Second Great Awakening. They reflected the broader cultural and political shifts of 19th-century America, which placed a premium on individualism, personal responsibility, and social progress. His theology shaped the nature of the revivals during his lifetime and impacted subsequent Protestant thought. Finney's rejection of predestination, his insistence on human agency in salvation, and his call for moral and social reform laid the foundation for evangelical movements that would continue to challenge social injustices and promote individual spiritual growth throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

1.3.3. Educator: Legacy in Religious Education

As an educator, Finney's role was critical to his influence on the Second Great Awakening and the broader religious landscape of 19th-century America. He recognized that the revitalization of religious life required not only fervent revival meetings and personal conversions but also the

[38] Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 82.
[39] Holifield, *Theology in America*, 278.
[40] Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 156.

training and education of religious leaders who could sustain and spread the revival's ideals. His contributions to religious education were most prominently realized through his leadership at Oberlin College, where he served as president from 1851 to 1866. Under his guidance, Oberlin became a pioneering institution known for its progressive educational philosophy and commitment to social reform. Finney believed that education was a key element in equipping clergy and laity to address the pressing moral and social issues of the day, and his work at Oberlin was foundational in shaping how religious institutions would approach higher education in the United States.

One of Finney's most significant contributions to religious education was his emphasis on integrating religious and moral instruction with broader academic subjects. At Oberlin, he encouraged the development of a curriculum that combined traditional theological training with a focus on social ethics, including the abolition of slavery, the temperance movement, and women's rights. This integration of religious education with social responsibility was groundbreaking and reflected Finney's belief that the Christian faith should extend beyond personal piety to include action for social justice. Oberlin College became known for admitting women and African Americans, aligning with Finney's commitment to equality and social progress. This approach to education was aligned with the ideals of the Second Great Awakening, which called for the spiritual and moral transformation of society, not just the individual.[41]

Moreover, Finney's emphasis on education also extended to training ministers who would lead other revival efforts and promote social reform in their communities. Oberlin's theological seminary became a vital center for the study of evangelical theology, where students were encouraged to deepen their understanding of scripture and engage with the practical and moral issues of the world around them. Finney's idea of education was not limited to acquiring knowledge but also included equipping individuals to live out their faith in ways that affected their personal lives and society. He believed ministers should be trained to lead revivals and engage in social reforms, combining theological expertise with a deep understanding of their time's moral and political needs.[42]

His impact as an educator was not confined to the walls of Oberlin. Finney's influence spread through his sermons, writings, and lectures, many designed to educate laypeople and clergy on the necessity of revivalism and social reform. In his book *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, Finney outlined the principles and techniques for conducting successful revivals, offering practical advice for ministers who sought to engage their congregations and spark spiritual renewal. His writings emphasized the role of personal agency in salvation and the moral responsibilities that came with Christian faith, making them an essential resource for individuals and churches seeking to understand the relationship between faith and action.[43] These lectures and writings shaped the clergy of his time and the lay movements that carried the revivalist spirit into the broader social and political spheres.

Finney's legacy as an educator in religious contexts was multifaceted and enduring. His work at Oberlin College and broader educational contributions helped shape a generation of clergy and laypeople committed to spiritual and social reform. His belief in integrating religious education with social action and his emphasis on moral responsibility set a precedent for future generations of religious leaders and institutions. Through his commitment to a holistic approach

[41] McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, 68.
[42] Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind*, 43.
[43] Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 94.

to education, Finney not only influenced the religious revivalism of his era but also helped define the role of Christian education in shaping American society's moral and social fabric.

CHAPTER 2: Finney's Revival Methods and Theology

Charles G. Finney's revival ways and beliefs considerably changed faith in 19th-century America, being key in the Second Great Awakening. As a revival preacher, Finney brought new methods that broke old traditions and changed how revivals happened. Along with his push for everyday people to join the revival, his use of strong emotions, "alter calls," and long meetings made it easier for more people to attend. These approaches caught much attention and led to many people converting and committing to Christianity. Finney's style showed his belief that individuals have a big part in their salvation, matching the time's focus on personal choice.

In addition to his revival methods, Finney's theological views were equally influential, as evidenced by his acceptance of Oberlin's theology and controversial doctrine of perfectionism. His emphasis on free will and moral responsibility represents a departure from the initial form of Calvinism of earlier revivalists, such as Jonathan Edwards. Finney's integration of social justice into a religious framework emphasizes his commitment to tackling social problems such as slavery and inequality, representing a holistic view of faith extending beyond personal salvation. This chapter will explore Finney's revival methods and theological innovations, analyzing their impact on American evangelicalism and comparing his work to the revivalist traditions that preceded him.

2.1. Analysis of Finney's Revival Techniques

Finney's teachings were revolutionary for his time and changed the landscape of American evangelism. His methods, known for their effectiveness and efficiency, differed from traditional revival methods and focused on creating a conscious and direct experience for participants. He used the reading method to encourage reflection and spiritual response, while activities such as the altar provided a public meeting place for people to express their ideas. Extended meetings extended the duration of the revival, allowing for a focus on spiritual renewal and increased community involvement. Furthermore, Finney included workers in the tradition of encouraging individual believers to work together independently. This chapter examines these new structures, focusing on their impact on the theology and social relations of nineteenth-century evangelicalism.

2.1.1. Emotional Appeal

One of the most notable aspects of Finney's methods during the Second Great Awakening was his reliance on emotional appeals to elicit a rapid and profound response from his audience. Finney believed it was essential to influence the emotions of believers to convict them of sin and encourage them to repent. His method of emotional communication was consistent with his emphasis on the attainment of salvation and the active role of man in the process of transformation, which distinguished him for most of his life.

He often uses imagery and language to confront his audience with the ugliness of their sinful nature and the consequences of not accepting salvation. He describes hell, for example, vividly, describing it as a place of unimaginable torment designed to inspire fear and scrutiny when he is in public. The purpose is to get people to hear the weight of their sin personally and in their hearts, which he calls "touching the old man of the heart."[44] This strategy is rooted in his belief that intellectual engagement alone is insufficient for genuine change. In addition, the heart must be opened to the truth.

[44] Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 84.

Another method Finney used to heighten the mood was the "seat of fear," a designated area at the front of the church where those convicted of their sins could come to pray and lead. This public event added emotional strength to those involved and the church throughout the season. The Sorrowful Seat showed public awareness and recognition of spiritual need, leading to tears, confessions and other visible emotions. Finney believed that emotional expression was a powerful tool in motivating others in the audience to think about their spiritual lives and their need for salvation.[45]

Finney also incorporated music and other elements of worship into his revival meetings to build excitement and create an atmosphere of spiritual awakening. The songs were carefully chosen to complement the themes of his teachings and were sung with love to inspire fear, repentance, and hope. Music bridges the intellectual brilliance of Finney's message and the emotions he wanted to instill in his audience. Singing praises to God together, especially those with strong and powerful lyrics, strengthened people's feelings and helped the participants feel connected to God and other believers.[46]

Although Finney's style effectively attracted large crowds and converted people, it had its critics. Some of his contemporaries believed that his methods favoured mental manipulation over spiritual change. Critics feared the great enthusiasm inspired during the Finney Revival would lead to superficial or temporary conversions rather than spiritual change. However, Finney defended his approach, arguing that emotions were essential to the human experience and that revival meetings must unite the heart and mind to achieve true spiritual revival.[47]

Finney's style also laid the foundation for modern evangelistic practices. Today's sermons often include hymns, personal testimonies, and calls to action that follow his revivalist methods. His approach demonstrates the power of emotional engagement to create powerful and shared religious experiences, a tradition that continues to shape American evangelicalism today.

2.1.2. Altar Calls

One of Finney's most notable contributions to revivalism during the Second Great Awakening was his new method of calling people to the altar, a hallmark of his evangelical church. The altar call, also known as the "Sorrow Seat," invites people to come publicly after the preaching during the Church service to commit to Christ or express their desire for prayer and spiritual guidance. This approach marked a radical change from earlier revivalist traditions, often emphasizing private reflection and incremental change. In contrast, Finney's approach to personal decision-making and redemptive responsibility was consistent with his broader theological and social reform agenda.

Finney introduced the altar call as part of his broader strategy to make revivals more effective and participatory. He believed that the altar call served several practical and spiritual purposes. First, it allowed people to publicly demonstrate their willingness to turn to God, strengthening their resolve and encouraging others in the community to make the same decision. Second, pastors and recovery workers had the opportunity to provide direct spiritual counsel and prayer to those who had repented of their sins, ensuring that they were trained and guided in their

[45] McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, 103.
[46] Boles, *The Great Revival*, 172.
[47] Holifield, *Theology in America*, 280.

new faith. Finally, the public nature of the altar call was consistent with Finney's theology of free will, emphasizing the individual's responsibility to respond promptly to God's offer of salvation.[48] For Finney, delaying such decisions was a rejection of the gospel, and the altar call eliminated any excuse for not doing so.

The use of altar calls has much to do with Finney's vision, which broke with the traditions and graces of the old Calvinists. Finney stuck to the Arminian view, emphasizing human agency and the individual's right to choose salvation. The call to the altar is a true expression of this trust because it places the responsibility of responding to God's mercy on the person. Finney argued that salvation is available to all and that securing it requires eternal work. By deciding to go forward, people showed their will by playing their part in salvation.[49]

Furthermore, the altar call reflects Finney's belief that salvation can bring about social and personal change. The people's response to the altar call represents a commitment to living a life consistent with moral and social reform and spiritual renewal. Finney often linked his transformation to social responsibilities such as abolition, temperance, and other reform movements of the time. The altar call became a defining moment with extra-personal significance, reinforcing the connection between faith and action in Finney's redemptive message.[50]

Altar calls were a powerful and effective tool in Finney's revival, but they were also criticized by some contemporaries who called them manipulative or overly intolerant. Critics have argued that this practice relies too much on the excitement and possibilities of underground revolution rather than on real and lasting faith. Traditional Calvinists were deeply skeptical of this principle because it undermines God's sovereignty in the work of salvation and places too much emphasis on human effort.[51]

Despite these objections, the altar call became a symbol of evangelical revival and remains a common practice in many Protestant traditions today. Finney's innovations significantly impacted the structure and culture of American evangelicalism, helping to shape the nature of religious decisions and celebrations. Altar calls also influenced the development of popular evangelicalism in the 20th century, with figures such as Billy Graham adopting and popularizing the practice on a larger scale. This method allowed Finney to participate and continue to make decisions in the Christian religion, showing his belief that faith must be lived out with strength and truth.

2.1.3. Protracted Meetings

Long meetings were a significant component of Finney's revival methods and a new and defining method for his approach to religious revival during the Second Great Awakening. These gatherings were organized for days or weeks to maintain religious power and allow people to be converted. Finney adopted and developed this method, which differed significantly from the early years' fragmented and disorganized revival meetings. By creating a stable environment for

[48] Hankins, *The Second Great Awakening and the Transcendentalists*, 97.
[49] Holifield, *Theology in America*, 293.
[50] John Boles, *The Great Revival, 1787-1805: The Origins of the Southern Evangelical Mind* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1972), 44.
[51] Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 174.

spiritual awakening, long meetings became one of the tools for spreading the revival and increasing church membership in Finney's ministry.

The importance of the extended meeting lies in the deliberate extension of time for students to listen to sermons repeatedly, pray, and meditate individually. Finney organized these meetings to encourage those who attended, where each day included several sermons combined with prayer meetings, singing, and personal instruction designed to bring about a decision for Christ quickly.[52] Finney believed that repeated preaching of the gospel would eliminate resistance to conversion and create a favourable climate for people to respond to the call to salvation. By extending the revival events, the endurance sessions allowed students ample time to grapple with their spiritual situation and take firm steps of faith.

Finney believed these long meetings created a moral and spiritual atmosphere that moved people to act. He once made it clear that revival was "the result of the proper use of established methods," emphasizing that such results depended not only on divine intervention but also on the deliberate efforts of pastors and churches.[53] The General Assembly was thus a valuable work of this theology, providing a helpful way for people to participate in their spiritual destiny. This emphasis on action and choice made Finney's approach to reform particularly attractive in an era of increasing democratization in America.

The format of the long meetings also encourages a more participatory and community-oriented form of worship. Unlike traditional church services, which are often more formal and hierarchical, the long meetings invite the rank-and-file to participate actively. The "anxiety of sitting," another characteristic of Finney's craft, was evident in the meeting. These meetings are for those struggling with faith and seeking salvation, and they serve as a public space for individuals to demonstrate their willingness to be converted. The communal aspect of these meetings fosters a shared sense of spiritual urgency as participants pray together for the unconverted and help one another on their spiritual journeys.[54] This power of inclusion helps break down barriers between clergy and laity, democratizing the revival process and encouraging greater participation.

Furthermore, these long meetings are not confined to church buildings but are often held in public places such as schools and open spaces so that many people can access them. This flexibility allowed Finney to reach both rural and urban populations, broadening the reach of his revival message. The meetings often attracted large crowds, and their long duration meant that people who might not have attended a single church service could attend. This inclusion and flexibility contributed to the effectiveness of the long meetings in spreading the revival among communities.[55]

Critics of long meetings, however, argue that the emotional intensity can lead to shallow or short-term conversions. Some traditional pastors worry that extended sessions and emotional stimulation favour immediate emotional responses over genuine, lasting faith. Despite these criticisms, the long-term impact of long meetings is not negative. They became a common feature

[52] Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 182.
[53] Charles Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982), 273.
[54] Michael Crawford, *Seasons of Grace: Colonial New England's Revival Tradition in Its British Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 54.
[55] Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 203.

of revivals and influenced Finney's contemporaries and subsequent evangelical movements. The emphasis on long meetings of worship and repentance continued into the 20th century, shaping the methods of revivalists such as Dwight L. Moody and Billy Graham.[56]

2.1.4. Lay Participation

Another hallmark of Finney's revivalist approach was the involvement of ordinary people in revival. Finney believed successful revivalism depended on the clergy's and ordinary people's participation. This method marked a significant departure from the tradition of churches, which created spaces for ordinary people to worship and participate in the religious life of their communities. By involving the laity in all aspects of the church revival, Finney established a democratic religion and made revival communal. The emphasis on lay participation was crucial to the spread of the Second Great Awakening, as it brought together many people to share in the work of evangelism and change.

Finney's revival meetings often featured lay people as senior contributors, whether through prayer, witnessing, or encouragement. One of his most significant innovations was extended sessions, revival services lasting several days or weeks. In these meetings, laypeople were encouraged to participate by leading prayer groups, sharing conversion stories, and inviting others to participate. Finney believed that the participation of lay people was necessary to strengthen the revivalistic spiritual power and the collective spirit of saving lives.[57] This participatory model empowers people to take control of their faith and creates a sense of a revival culture.

Another critical aspect of participation in his revival meetings was the use of "prayer benches," which were seats in front of the meeting where converts could come to pray and seek counsel. The presence of the "prayer bench" encouraged ordinary people to help those in spiritual distress through prayer and dialogue. Finney saw this as a way of involving the entire church in the revival because it encouraged laypeople to actively and spiritually engage with others. The "prayer bench" symbolized participation in the Finney's revival movement because it allowed ordinary people to serve one another rather than relying solely on religious leaders.[58]

Finney's involvement in the revival directly impacted the organization and practice of American evangelism. By emphasizing the importance of participation, he helped to dismantle the traditional church system and promote a model of religious government. This approach was in keeping with the democratic ideals of the time, combining freedom with the broader cultural values of equality and participation. The emphasis on participation also led to the growth of voluntary religious organizations, such as missionary societies and Sunday school programs, which became an essential part of evangelism in the 1900s.[59]

2.2. Examination of Finney's Theological Views

2.2.1. Oberlin Theology

Many aspects of Finney's influence are summarized in what is known as Oberlin theology. This theological system, developed during Finney's tenure at Oberlin College, reflected his

[56] Boles, *The Great Revival*, 119.
[57] Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 94.
[58] Holifield, *Theology in America*, 281.
[59] Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind*, 217.

libertarian principles and reacted to Calvinist teachings. Oberlin emphasized the holiness and moral responsibility of the individual and the ability to enjoy the best of this world through total obedience to God. He advocated for a departure from the Calvinist worldview and a theology centred on predestination. Oberlin's religious education was a definitive reflection of the theological and moral dimensions of the Second Great Awakening and left a lasting mark on American evangelicalism.

Central to Oberlin faith is an emphasis on free will and the power of the individual to choose salvation. Finney rejected the Calvinist interpretation, which held that God predetermined salvation and restricted it to the elect. Instead, he took an Arminian angle and said that man can accept or reject God's grace. According to Finney, humans are morally responsible for their actions and can choose to obey God by exercising free will. Finney's religious position encouraged the revival process and was consistent with similar ideas of the Second Great Awakening.[60] Arguing that people should actively participate in salvation rather than be mere recipients of God's grace, Finney made salvation meetings a place where people could make life decisions.

Another characteristic of Oberlin theology is its focus on what Finney considered true Christianity. He taught that believers could achieve complete sanctification, or a state of freedom from sin, through complete obedience to God in this life. Unlike traditional Protestant teachings that view sanctification as a process, Finney believed that sanctification could occur when a person completely surrenders to the will of God. The doctrine of perfection reflects Finney's belief that Christians are called to be moral exemplars and to implement gospel principles in their daily lives. Oberlin's idealism has been a source of intrigue and controversy, and critics have accused Finney of setting unrealistic expectations of human behaviour.

Finney's greatest virtue was not his idealism but his ability to use it properly to improve society and life. He argued that true consecration would lead to opportunities to solve social ills such as slavery, alcoholism, and inequality. This emphasis on moral reform is integral to Oberlin theology, bridging the gap between personal worship and social action. Finney's belief in the transformative power of sanctification encouraged many of his followers to join the abolitionist and temperance movements.[61]

The foundation of Oberlin theology was Finney's teachings of Kingdom Theology, which viewed God as a moral ruler based on moral law. Finney believed that sin was not a natural condition inherited from Adam but rather a voluntary act of rebellion against God's moral law. This view was very different from Calvin's doctrine of sin, which held that man was essentially a sinner and could not choose the right thing without God's help.[62] In Kingdom Theology, people were considered capable of living righteous lives if they chose to abide by God's moral standards. This system placed great emphasis on human responsibility and accountability. Finney believed that individuals could obey God's laws and were morally obligated. This theological perspective supported Finney's revivalist methods, which aimed to bring about immediate and conscious decisions for Christ. By portraying God as a just and loving ruler who desired voluntary obedience

[60] Holifield, *Theology in America*, 280.
[61] McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, 145.
[62] Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 84.

rather than coerced submission, moral government theology presented a vision of faith that resonated with the democratic and reformist spirit of the Second Great Awakening.[63]

Despite its significant contributions, Oberlin theology faced criticism for departing from traditional Protestant doctrine. Critics accused Finney of underestimating the role of God's grace in salvation and overemphasizing human effort. However, the theological emphasis on moral work and social stigma has proven to have lasting importance in American religious life. Oberlin theology laid the foundation for movements such as the Social Gospel, which addressed social injustice through the application of Christian ethics.

2.2.1.1. Perfectionism

One of the most unique and controversial aspects of Finney's legacy is his doctrine of perfectionism. The optimism, rooted in his broader theological framework, reflected Finney's belief that Christians could achieve a state of perfection in this world by exercising free will and the power of the Holy Spirit. This philosophy was central to his ministry and teachings and influenced the Second Great Awakening revival movements and the broader American evangelical movement.[64] Finney's emphasis on perfection struck a chord with many during the revival. Still, it also drew considerable criticism from traditional theologians who saw it as a departure from orthodox Protestant teaching.

Finney's optimism was inextricably linked to his rejection of Calvinist doctrine, especially regarding man's corruption and inability to live without sin. Influenced by Arminian theology, Finney argued that man is no longer bound by sin and can dwell in the flesh in subjection to God through free will and faith in God's grace alone. He described this type of "absolute sanctification," in which believers consciously and continually choose to avoid sin and conform their lives to God's moral law.

Finney believed that moral perfection was not limited to personal piety but extended to addressing societal evils such as slavery, intemperance, and gender inequality. His insistence on living a life of perfect holiness inspired his followers to take active roles in social reform movements, reflecting his conviction that personal sanctification and social responsibility were inseparable.[65]

While Finney's perfectionism attracted a devoted following, it also provoked significant criticism from other theologians and religious leaders of his time. Traditional Calvinists, in particular, viewed Finney's teachings as a dangerous departure from the Reformed doctrine of grace, emphasizing God's sovereignty and the impossibility of achieving moral perfection apart from divine intervention.[66] Additionally, some opponents feared that Finney's perfectionism could lead to spiritual pride or disillusionment among believers who failed to achieve the high standards he set.

Despite the controversies surrounding his teachings, Finney's doctrine of perfectionism left a lasting impact on American evangelicalism. It influenced the Holiness Movement of the late 19th century, which emphasized the possibility of attaining entire sanctification through the work of the

[63] Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 164.
[64] Charles Finney, *Systematic Theology* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1994), 348.
[65] Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 168.
[66] Holifield, *Theology in America*, 283.

Holy Spirit. Many Holiness preachers and theologians drew inspiration from Finney's teachings, integrating his ideas into their theological frameworks. Perfectionism also shaped the early Pentecostal movement's theological and practical priorities, emphasizing personal holiness and spiritual empowerment.[67]

2.2.1.2. Free Will

Free will was a cornerstone of Finney's theological framework and one of the most distinctive aspects of his departure from traditional Calvinist doctrine. In contrast to the deterministic views of predestination held by many of his contemporaries, Finney championed the idea that human beings possess the inherent ability to choose salvation and obey God's commands. His emphasis on free will reshape American evangelicalism during the Second Great Awakening and provided theological justification for individual moral accountability and social reform efforts.

He argued that if individuals could not choose between good and evil, they could not justly be held accountable for their sins or rewarded for their faith. This position was central to Finney's *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, where he stated that moral responsibility requires the power of contrary choice; without free will, morality would be meaningless.[68] Finney's rejection of predestination aligned with the broader democratic ethos of the Second Great Awakening, which emphasized individual agency and equality before God.

At the heart of Finney's theology of free will was his concept of the "moral government of God." He envisioned God as a moral governor who established laws and called humanity to obey them. Within this framework, Finney asserted that humans were created with the ability to comply with divine law, but that obedience required conscious, voluntary choice. In Finney's view, sin was a willful act of disobedience rather than an inherited condition, and salvation was available to anyone who chose to repent and live following God's will.[69] This perspective encouraged individuals to take active responsibility for their spiritual growth and to live lives of consistent moral integrity.[70]

The theological emphasis on free will had profound implications for Finney's revivalist methods and his engagement with social reform. Techniques such as using the "anxious bench" squarely placed the responsibility for conversion on the individual, reflecting Finney's belief that salvation was contingent on exercising free will.[71] By empowering people to make their own spiritual decisions, Finney democratized the experience of faith and made evangelical religion accessible to a broader audience. In Finney's view, free will was not merely a theological concept but a call to action for personal and societal transformation.[72]

2.2.1.3. Social Justice

Charles G. Finney's theological views were deeply intertwined with his commitment to social justice, making him one of the most influential religious reformers of the 19th century. For

[67] Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind*, 212.
[68] Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology*. Edited by Richard Friedrich (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2003), 218.
[69] Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism*, 87.
[70] Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind*, 103.
[71] McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, 142.
[72] Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 122.

Finney, religion was not merely a private affair; it was a moral and social force capable of transforming individuals and, by extension, society. His theological emphasis on personal responsibility, free will, and individuals' moral agency naturally extended to a broader commitment to address societal injustices. Finney's belief that true conversion resulted in personal and societal transformation underpinned his advocacy for causes such as abolitionism, temperance, and women's rights. His theology linked revivalism with reform, creating a model of faith that was as much about action as it was about belief.

At Oberlin College, where he served as president, Finney helped make the institution a hub for abolitionist activity. The college admitted Black students when such inclusivity was rare, reflecting Finney's commitment to racial equality as an extension of his theological principles.[73] He viewed the abolition of slavery not just as a political issue but as a divine mandate, urging Christians to take active steps to eradicate it. Finney's insistence on linking revivalism with abolitionism demonstrated his belief that religion had a practical and moral role in shaping a just society. This integration of faith and activism became a hallmark of his theological legacy.[74]

Another area where Finney's theology intersected with social justice was the temperance movement. Finney viewed alcohol consumption as a significant moral and social problem, contributing to poverty, domestic violence, and the degradation of communities. His revivals often included appeals for temperance, urging individuals to abstain from alcohol as part of their commitment to living a righteous life. For Finney, temperance was about personal discipline and creating a healthier, more equitable society.[75] The temperance movement, like abolitionism, became a practical application of Finney's theology, illustrating how personal faith could lead to societal reform.[76]

Finney's commitment to social justice also extended to advancing women's rights. At Oberlin College, Finney supported the admission of women, making it one of the first coeducational institutions in the United States. He believed women had a vital role in the church and society and encouraged their participation in revival meetings and reform movements.[77] While Finney did not advocate for full gender equality as understood today, his willingness to challenge traditional gender roles within education and religious participation demonstrated his broader commitment to justice and inclusion.[78]

His theological perspective laid the foundation for his involvement in various social reform movements and his insistence that revivalism should address spiritual needs and societal issues.[79] His integration of faith and activism influenced subsequent movements, including the Social Gospel movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. By demonstrating that personal piety

[73] Hankins, *The Second Great Awakening and the Transcendentalists*, 64.
[74] McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, 122.
[75] Boles, *The Great Revival, 1787–1805*, 89.
[76] Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 134.
[77] Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 98.
[78] Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind*, 152.
[79] Holifield, *Theology in America*, 279.

and social reform could coexist, Finney set a precedent for future Christians to engage with social issues to express their faith.[80]

2.3. Comparison to Other Revivalists: Charles Finney and Jonathan Edwards

The theological perspectives and revivalist techniques of Charles G. Finney and Jonathan Edwards, both pivotal figures in American religious history, spotlight the evolution of revivalism from the First Great Awakening to the Second Great Awakening. While both preachers sought to awaken spiritual renewal and foster a more profound dedication to religion, their theological frameworks and strategies for revivalism substantially differed, reflecting their respective eras' religious and cultural contexts. An evaluation of Finney and Edwards gives insight into the contrasting dynamics of Calvinist and Arminian theology and the shifting strategies of evangelism in early American Protestantism.

Jonathan Edwards, a key figure in the First Great Awakening (1730s-1740s), adhered to a Calvinist theology emphasizing God's sovereignty, predestination, and human depravity. Edwards believed that salvation was entirely the work of God, granted to a chosen few according to divine will, and not contingent upon human attempt. His sermons, which include the famous *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, vividly depicted humanity's utter dependence on God's grace for salvation. Edwards regarded revival as a sovereign act of God, while the Holy Spirit moved hearts toward repentance, frequently observed through dramatic emotional outpourings.[81]

In contrast, Charles Finney's theology, formed throughout the Second Great Awakening (1800s-1840s), became rooted in Arminianism and emphasized unfastened will, human organization, and personal duty in salvation. Finney rejected the Calvinist view of predestination and argued that each man or woman could choose salvation through repentance and faith. He adopted a theological framework where God is portrayed as a governor who required individuals to align their wills with divine regulation. According to Finney, revival became not a mysterious act of God but a result of human efforts, particularly the faithful preaching of the gospel and the use of revivalist strategies to engage the audience.[82] This shift from a God-centered to a human-centred view of revival marked a considerable departure from Edwards' theology.

Edwards' revival techniques had been reflective of his theological ideals. He relied on preaching God's sovereignty and the depravity of humankind, trusting that the Holy Spirit might work in the hearts of listeners as He saw fit. While Edwards did not oppose emotional responses through revivals, he became careful about their excesses. He sought to ensure that any outward presentations of emotion were true signs of God's work.[83] His technique aimed to convict listeners through sound judgment, Scripture, and a feeling of awe before God.

On the other hand, Finney pioneered modern and frequently arguable revivalist techniques, referred to as "new measures," designed to elicit immediate responses from his audience. These

[80] Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind*, 161.
[81] George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 185.
[82] Boles, *The Great Revival, 1787-1805*, 198.
[83] Harry Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), 87.

covered the "anxious bench," wherein people convicted of sin would come forward for public prayer and directly appealed of his listeners through dramatic sermons. Finney also believed in the importance of revival as a device for social reform, integrating his preaching with references to abolitionism and temperance. His pragmatic method created conditions that could ignite people to decide for Christ during the revival, an idea different from that of Edwards, who focused on passive reliance and divine timing.[84]

[84] Holifield, *Theology in America*, 302.

CHAPTER 3: Finney's Contribution to Social Reforms and Legacy

Charles G. Finney's role in social change and legacy reflects his unique role as a religious leader whose work went beyond preaching. A prominent figure in the Civil War, Finney used his leadership to promote abolition, used his influence to fight slavery and advocate for racial equality. As previously stated, he also supported women's rights, encouraged women to participate in religious activities, and challenged the practices of the time. In addition, Finney was an anti-riot advocate who promoted moral reform as the foundation of the Church of God. His efforts led to his status as a university professor and reformer at Oberlin University, known for its progressive racial and gender policies and commitment to higher education for all. Through these programs, Finney influenced American evangelism and social change in the 1800s, leading generations to engage in faith in action.

3.1. Abolitionism: Finney's Involvement and Influence

Finney was a prominent motivational and religious figure during the Civil War and influential in the anti-slavery movement. His theological beliefs, emphasis on moral responsibility, and commitment to cultural change led him to reject slavery as a grave sin. Finney's involvement in abolitionism was linked to his motivational goals because he believed abolition was necessary to achieve a just society based on Christian principles. Finney played a significant role in supporting the abolitionist movement through his teaching, writing, and leadership at Oberlin College and helped develop the religious basis of the broader abolitionist movement.

His commitment to abolition arose from his belief in the moral right of Christians to fight and eradicate sin in all its forms. As part of his revival work, Finney often preached against slavery, condemning it as a violation of Christianity and the Constitution. He said that slavery was a sin for which individuals and nations were held accountable before God. His sermons were dramatic and urged his listeners to repent of their association with the institution of slavery and to take drastic action to combat it.[85]

Finney's motivational meetings often included statements that caused controversy in many communities, especially in the South. He believed that true awakening and moral change could not happen in a society that tolerates oppression. This attack gained some followers, but many people also participated in the crime. Finney used revivalism as a platform for the anti-slavery movement, combining religious reform with social work and promoting the idea that religion wanted to affect slavery.[86]

As president of Oberlin College, Finney used his position to help fight for abolition. Under his leadership, Oberlin became one of the first colleges in the United States to admit African-American students and to support the movement. The college was a refuge from slavery, and faculty and students often participated in the abolitionist movement and helped build the

[85] Marsden, *The Evangelical*, 102.
[86] Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 183.

Underground Railroad. Finney was a proponent of equality, believing that African-American participation in higher education was a moral obligation and a necessary step toward achieving social justice.[87]

Finney's leadership at Oberlin also embraced the theological teachings of missionaries who continued promoting abolition in their communities. By incorporating antislavery principles into the college's curriculum and culture, Finney ensured that the next generation of religious leaders would carry the abolition message. Oberlin alumni played a significant role in the expansion of the antislavery movement, spreading Finney's vision of a society free from the evils of slavery.[88]

His influence on the abolitionist movement was not limited to his followers and students but extended to the broader population. He incorporated abolitionist principles into his theology and revivalist methods, helping to promote the gospel and the cause of anti-slavery. This connection was vital in the northern states, where many churches and organizations were members of the abolitionist movement. Finney's ability to see slavery as a spiritual issue resonated with evangelical audiences and provided spiritual and religious support for the criminalization of slavery.[89]

His writings also contributed to the intellectual and moral foundations of the abolitionist movement. In his book *Lectures on Revival*, he emphasized the evils of exploitation, including the responsibility of Christians to fight against slavery. His arguments theologically support the idea that true revival requires personal salvation and social change. This idea influenced other prominent abolitionists, including Oberlin graduate and anti-slavery Theodore Dwight Weld, who incorporated Finney's revivalist approach into his abolitionist movement.[90] Finney's efforts supported the practice of anti-slavery and helped end slavery in the United States. His legacy as an abolitionist continues to demonstrate the power of faith-based coercion against social evils.

3.2. Women's Rights

Finney connected religious revivals and the feminist movement with moral reform, especially during the Second Great Awakening. Although his main work was evangelism, his therapeutic methods and religious ideas enabled women to join religious and moral reform groups. By advocating for social change, Finney laid the foundation for women's participation in public affairs and supported a vision for gender equality that was important at the time. His work demonstrates how religious beliefs are linked to significant social changes, particularly the advancement of women's rights.

His revival meetings were unique in that they allowed and encouraged women to participate in ways not common at the time. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Finney did not compromise the role of women in religious affairs. During its revival, women were often allowed to speak in public, pray aloud, and bear witness, a practice considered controversial in a society where women did housework. Finney demonstrates this inclusivity by emphasizing the equality of

[87] McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, 204.
[88] Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 210.
[89] Holifield, *Theology in America*, 278.
[90] Moorhead, *World Without End*, 145.

all souls before God and asserting that women are equal to men.[91] By empowering women, Finney enabled them to be visible and active participants in religious and social activities.

Inspired by Finney's message, women became important reform movement leaders, using their moral authority as the basis for initiatives. For example, temperance movements aimed at reducing alcohol consumption rely heavily on women's participation and leadership due to its negative impact on families and communities. His emphasis on personal responsibility and social change provided an ethical framework encouraging women to participate in these activities.[92]

His commitment to women's rights was also seen in academia. As president of Oberlin College, he led one of the first colleges in the United States to admit both women and men. Oberlin was also the first college in the United States to offer doctoral degrees to women, a significant achievement that reflected Finney's belief in the potential of women. Finney and the Oberlin Institute encouraged women to pursue higher education, arguing that educated women could better fulfill their moral and spiritual roles in society.[93] The college also supports women in teaching and ministry and provides opportunities for women to assume leadership roles in religious and educational activities.

Many women educated at Oberlin became leaders in social change, including the abolition of slavery and early women's suffrage. Finney's belief that women could and should contribute to the moral improvement of society was central to their fight for political rights. Although Finney did not support women's suffrage, his emphasis on women's moral rights and their role in civil reform paved the way for increased suffrage in later years.[94]

Finney's advocacy of women's rights was based on a moral vision of women and men. His beliefs emphasized the moral responsibility of all people, regardless of gender, to live righteously and work to improve society. He believed that women's spiritual equality with men gave them a fair place to deal with evil and to bring about moral reform. This thinking changed during a time when women held the most responsibility in the country. Finney challenged gender entitlement by advocating for women's participation in revival, education, and change and encouraged greater integration of Christian ministry.[95]

His honest vision also encompassed family and societal issues, viewing women as key change agents. She recognized the unique challenges women faced, especially those related to domestic violence, poverty, and social inequality. His support for movements such as abolition is often associated with women's health because these issues affect women and their households. Finney's words resonated with women seeking spiritual healing and solutions to the injustices they faced daily.[96]

His belief in the equality of women and men provided the theological basis for their participation in public life and laid the groundwork for future progress in gender equality. Although

---

[91] Nancy Hardesty, *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 85

[92] Catherine Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740–1845* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 230.

[93] Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind*, 156.

[94] Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 97.

[95] Holifield, *Theology in America*, 288.

[96] Moorhead, *World Without End*, 189.

Finney's primary goal was spiritual and moral reform, his work encouraged broader change, allowing women to challenge traditional roles and become more involved in religion and faith.

3.3. Temperance

Finney was a leading advocate of moral reform, and his support of temperance reflected his belief that personal salvation must lead to social change. As one of the most influential leaders during the Civil War, Finney saw alcohol as a significant moral and health problem that kept people from being virtuous and social. His involvement in the conflict demonstrated his interest in communicating the benefits of social reform, which was an essential part of his faith and training. By emphasizing the dangers of alcohol and promoting moral character, Finney helped lay the foundation for nationwide support for temperance and prohibition in the 1800s.

His crusade against alcohol was based on his belief that it stunted the development of the mind and character. He described alcoholism as a violation of God's law and an obstacle to spiritual revival, which he sought to promote through his ministry. His sermons often emphasized the destructive effects of alcohol on families and communities, stating that it led to poverty, domestic violence, and corruption.[97]

His messages not only called for abstinence but also urged the community to formulate policies that would prevent the consumption of alcohol.[98] A society that does not adhere to the principles of Christianity cannot avoid suffering and the consequences of alcoholism.[99]

Under Finney's influence, self-sufficiency became a prominent feature of the evangelical Reformation movement. Organizations that gained momentum during the Second Great Awakening, such as the American Temperance Association, adopted many moral arguments Finney and other revivalists put forward. The organization worked to raise awareness of the dangers of alcohol and advocated for laws to prevent it. Finney's reformation efforts often served as a forum for Protestants, encouraging Christians to take vows of abstinence to demonstrate their commitment to godly living.[100]

The fundamental laws Finney and his contemporaries enacted led to the end of state and national Prohibition in the early 20th century. Although Prohibition itself was controversial, the movement helped shape public attitudes toward alcohol and reinforced the relationship between personal piety and drinking as a social responsibility.[101]

He demonstrated the transformative power of evangelical faith when addressing alcohol as a spiritual and social issue. His belief in self-control as a practical Christianity led many people to see their faith as a catalyst for positive change in their lives and communities. By espousing it, Finney underscored that true religious revival must move beyond the church to the broader social system, addressing the root causes of suffering and injustice.

---

[97] McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, 145.
[98] Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 89.
[99] Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 205
[100] Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment: Phases of American Social History to 1860* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1944), 54.
[101] Marsden, *The Evangelical*, 112.

3.4. Education: Finney's Founding of Oberlin College

In addition to his work as a revivalist and theologian, Finney helped found and directed Oberlin College in Ohio, which became a center for religious education and social reform. As president of Oberlin College, Finney combined his evangelical principles with a commitment to education, educating ministers who were not only religiously literate but also able to address the social issues of the day. Known for its stance on abolition and women's education issues, Oberlin represented Finney's vision of a unified faith, including personal freedom and social reform.[102]

His work at Oberlin and his educational philosophy emphasized his belief that the Church should address social issues, using education as a means of change. Under his leadership, Oberlin became a model for combining theological education with social work, which led to the rise of the Social Gospel movement in the late 1800s. Finney's legacy highlights the importance of theology in preparing religious leaders who can preach the gospel and respond to today's moral and social challenges.[103]

Finney's theology, especially his teachings on free will and moral responsibility, transformed Protestant thought and aligned it with the modern thinking of the time. Ultimately, his participation in theological studies, particularly at Oberlin College, helped to train a new generation of pastors and social workers committed to personal and social change. Finney's legacy in these three areas continues today in American religious life.

[102] McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, 143.
[103] Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind*, 213.

CONCLUSION

Charles G. Finney was one of the most transformative figures in American history, leaving behind a profound legacy and many influences that shaped the direction of evangelism and social reform during his time of the Second Great Awakening. His revivalist methods transformed religious practice, promoting a form of participatory worship and emotional labour that strengthened faith and increased participation. Finney represents a major theological shift from Calvinism to Arminianism with a strong emphasis on free will and moral responsibility, placing individual action at the center of spiritual renewal. Through his sermons, revival meetings, and innovative use of tools such as the "anxious bench," Finney redefined the role of the preacher and laid the foundation for new evangelistic efforts. His contributions to theology and the understanding of salvation renewed American Protestantism and ensured that evangelicalism remained a powerful and adaptable force in American society.

Finney's influence on American religious history is marked by scholarly writings highlighting his unique contributions to revival and social change. McLaughlin argues that Finney's approach was revolutionary because he rejected Calvinist methods of death that emphasized God's authority over human will, preferring man's work and responsibility.[104] These changes emphasized individual faith and created a framework to encourage believers to be active in solving social problems. Likewise, Heims sees Finney's use of various methods as a sign of a new era of evangelism. At this time, public participation and expression of faith were central to revival events. These practices empowered the participants, allowing them to experience personal transformation and participate in spreading the gospel.[105] My research showed that these changes made the gospel more inclusive and accessible, paving the way for it to become a popular movement that reaches many people.

Moreover, Finney's emphasis on moral responsibility influenced individual beliefs and helped shape the spirit of the social reform movement during the Second Great Awakening. According to Sweet, Finney's theology influenced abolitionists, activists, and women's rights activists to see their cause as an extension of the Christian faith.[106] Finney bridged the gap between spiritual renewal and social change by linking personal revival to social action. His incorporation of faith and empowerment provided an inspiring example of how religious movements can address structural injustices, and this legacy continues to inspire contemporary religious advocacy.

Finney's lasting influence lies in his ability to combine theology and practice to create a holistic approach to faith that transformed individuals and society. According to Smith, Finney's influence extended beyond his lifetime, as his principles of participatory faith and moral mobilization became part of evangelism throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.[107] Finney's success was based on his ability to connect spiritual renewal with concrete social outcomes. This combination ensured that his legacy would continue in the growing Christian world of America. His work shows that the power of faith extends beyond personal salvation to include broader social

---

[104] McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, 127.
[105] Robert Himes, *The Revivalist's Revolution: Finney and Evangelicalism in America* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 212.
[106] William Warren Sweet, *Religion in the Development of American Culture, 1765-1840* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), 64.
[107] Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 201.

responsibilities, making him an example of the combination of spiritual desire and work in the pursuit of social reform.

Finney's influence extended beyond the church and played a significant role in the social reform movement in 19th-century America. His commitment to abolition, temperance, and gender equality demonstrated his belief that Christianity was not just a personal religion but also about active participation in social ills. For example, Finney's campaign for the abolition of slavery helped the religious community combat one of the nation's greatest moral evils. His efforts to promote peace and women's education further strengthened his commitment to using faith as a catalyst for social change. By aligning religious beliefs with social action, Finney provided a moral and theological framework for addressing the major social issues of his time, inspiring generations of religious leaders and followers to pursue a faith connected to justice and righteousness.

His role in the abolitionist movement was influential because he used his authority to challenge the church and society to combat spiritual abuse and slavery. As a professor and president of Oberlin College, Finney ensured that the campus became a center for the anti-corruption movement, fostering an environment where students and faculty would fight against abolition. Oberlin was one of the first colleges to recognize American fraternities, reflecting Finney's belief that all men are created equal in the sight of God.[108] This progressive spirit not only contributed to the development of the abolitionist movement but also established evangelical Christianity as a significant force for social justice. In my estimation, Finney's work showed that the church could play an essential role in transforming society because he received a prophetic message about injustice. The integration of faith and advocacy at Oberlin provides a powerful example of how institutions can lead the fight for equality and human rights.

Finney's advocacy of temperance was another vital element of his social reform efforts. He viewed alcoholism as a grave moral problem that was damaging to families and society, and he often addressed it in revival meetings. His teachings not only called for individual discernment but also encouraged people to develop strategies to address the root causes of alcoholism. According to scholars such as Noll, Finney's approach to self-discipline was based on his belief that social evils could be eradicated through individual and societal repentance.[109] My understanding is that Finney's temperance work demonstrates the power of faith-based action to address systemic issues grounded in the power of ethics to bring about social change. Today, his temperance campaign reminds us of how religious leaders can use their platforms to promote policies that protect vulnerable communities.

In addition to his abolitionist and temperance work, Finney promoted women's rights, particularly in education. By supporting Oberlin College's decision to admit women, he questioned the social norms of his day and emphasized the role of women in the church and society. His belief in the spiritual equality of men and women reflects a theological commitment to justice and impartiality.[110] Finney's efforts laid the foundation for future movements for gender equality, including suffrage, researchers say. His example highlights the importance of combining faith and feminism, demonstrating that religious faith can be powerful in dismantling patriarchal

[108] McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, 212.
[109] Noll, *America's God*, 186.
[110] Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 98.

institutions. By advocating for women's education, Finney expanded opportunities for women and strengthened the church's power, which was in line with the struggle for justice for all.

As an educator, Finney's work at Oberlin College informed his comprehensive approach to spiritual and social development. Under his leadership, Oberlin became a symbol of progressive education, advocating for the inclusion of women and African Americans and promoting a curriculum that combined religious education with moral and social responsibility. Finney's commitment to education solidified the Second Great Awakening principles carried forward by new generations of pastors and reformers. Primarily through integrating spiritual and cultural knowledge, his influence on religious education is a model for Christian organizations to act as agents of social change. Through Oberlin and his academic endeavours, Finney demonstrated that the revivalist spirit could be maintained and expanded through systematic study and moral stimulation.

Finney's tenure as president of Oberlin College also marked a sharp departure from the prevailing academic principles of the day. Finney extended the principles of the Second Great Awakening into effective social reform, making universities centers of abolitionist activity and supporting the Underground Railroad. Scholars such as Donald W. Dayton have emphasized Oberlin's role as "the evangelical center of the abolitionist movement," noting that its graduates often led antislavery movements across the United States.[111] This marriage of theology and social practice was an experience that reflected Finney's belief that spiritual faith required visible manifestations of justice. From my observations, Oberlin's policies, such as allowing African Americans and women to enroll, embodied his vision of education as a tool for social equality despite strong opposition from mainstream institutions.

Furthermore, Finney's educational philosophy also reflected his overall commitment to theology, particularly his concern with human agency and moral responsibility. As historian Mark A. Noll has noted, Oberlin became a training ground for pastors and reformers who embraced a theology of moral goodness that emphasized a sinless life as evidence of true faith.[112] This approach, although controversial, proved to be a powerful catalyst for social reform, as Oberlin students advanced Finney's ideas in movements such as temperance, prison reform, and public education. I conclude that Finney's blend of theology and moral philosophy ensured that Oberlin graduates not only spread the message of revival but became active participants in the broader social reforms of the 19th century. His leadership exemplified a combination of intellectual rigour and ethical activism that continues to serve as a model for religious institutions seeking to reconcile spiritual formation and public engagement.

I understand that Finney's legacy in religious education is historically significant and essential to current discussions about the role of religious institutions in the development of society. As Oberlin demonstrates, integrating theological principles with practical social applications challenges today's Christian colleges and seminaries to consider how their programs address current social issues. Timothy Smith believes that Finney's teaching methods anticipated the evangelical social movement, which sought to apply Christian principles to the social problems of the early 20th century.[113] With this connection in mind, Finney's work at Oberlin can serve as a blueprint for educational institutions looking to close the gap between belief and action,

[111] Donald Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage* (New York, Harper & Row, 1976), 113.
[112] Noll, *America's God*, 192.
[113] Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 98.

particularly when addressing global issues such as inequality, environmental stewardship and social justice. Finney's holistic approach to education remains an important reference point for scholars and practitioners seeking to reconcile faith with meaningful social impact.

In summary, the life and work of Charles G. Finney exemplify the transformative power of faith combined with action. His revivalist approach and theological innovations inspired American evangelicalism, and his consistent commitment to social reform demonstrated the practical impact of Christian ethics in addressing social problems. Finney's legacy and deep commitment to social justice has had a profound impact on progressive evangelicals and their involvement in faith-based social and political movements. By combining spiritual renewal with moral responsibility, Finney proposed a model of action that impacted the religious and social context of his time and remains relevant today. His life was a testament to the power of faith to inspire personal transformation and collective growth, making him one of the most influential figures in American religious history.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works cited:

Boles, John. *The Great Revival, 1787–1805: The Origins of the Southern Evangelical Mind*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996.

Boles, John. *The Great Revival: Beginnings of the Bible Belt*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996.

Brekus, Catherine. *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740–1845*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

Carwardine, Richard. *Transatlantic Revivalism: Popular Evangelicalism in Britain and America, 1790–1865*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.

Crawford, Michael. *Seasons of Grace: Colonial New England's Revival Tradition in Its British Context*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Dayton, Donald. *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage*. New York: Harper & Row, 1976.

Eslinger, Ellen. *Citizens of Zion: The Social Origins of Camp Meeting Revivalism*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1999.

Finney, Charles G. *Lectures on Systematic Theology*. Edited by Richard Friedrich, Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2003.

Finney, Charles. *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982.

Hambrick-Stowe, Charles E. *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996.

Hankins, Barry. *The Second Great Awakening and the Transcendentalists*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004.

Hardesty, Nancy. *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the Nineteenth Century.* Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1984.

Hatch, Nathan O. *The Democratization of American Christianity*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989.

Haynes, Stephen. *Finney and His Influence: Charles Finney and the Second Great Awakening.* New York: Harper & Row, 1975.

Heyrman, Christine Leigh. *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

Himes, Robert. *The Revivalist's Revolution: Finney and Evangelicalism in America*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.

Holifield, Brooks. *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003.

Johnson, Paul E. *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1978.

Lambert, Frank. *Inventing the "Great Awakening."* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Marsden, George. *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth-Century America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970.

Marsden, George M. *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003.

Marsden, George M. *Fundamentalism and American Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.

McLoughlin, William G. *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham*. New York: Macmillan, 2014.

McLoughlin, William. *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607–1977.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Moorhead, James H. *World Without End: Mainstream American Protestant Visions of the Last Things, 1880–1925*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999.

Noll, Mark A. *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Smith, Timothy L. *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

Stout, Harry S. *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1991.

Sweet, William Warren. *Religion in the Development of American Culture, 1765-1840.* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952.

Tyler, Alice Felt. *Freedom's Ferment: Phases of American Social History to 1860*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1944.

Other works consulted:

Ahlstrom, Sydney E. *A Religious History of the American People*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972.

Andrews, Edward Deming. *The People Called Shakers: A Search for the Perfect Society*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1963.

Beckwith, Francis. *African Americans and the Quest for Education in Antebellum Ohio*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

Bonomi, Patricia U. *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Bushman, Richard Lyman. *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2005.

Davis, David Brion. *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Fogel, Robert William. *The Fourth Great Awakening and the Future of Egalitarianism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Foster, Stephen. *Abolitionism and the Civil War: A Social History of the Anti-Slavery Movement*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Guelzo, Allen C. *For the Union of Evangelical Christendom: The Irony of the Reformed Episcopalians*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1994.

Holmes, David. *A Brief History of the Episcopal Church*. Horsham, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993.

Knight, George. *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1999.

Larsen, Timothy. *The Theology of the Revival: A Study of Charles Finney's Contribution to Evangelical Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Larsen, Timothy. *A People of One Book: The Bible and the Victorians*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Long, Kathryn Teresa. *The Revival of 1857–58: Interpreting an American Religious Awakening*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Matthews, Donald. *Religion in the Old South*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

McCormick, Richard. *The Making of American Evangelicalism: From Revivalism to the Age of Globalization*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

Miller, Perry. *The Life of the Mind in America: From the Revolution to the Civil War*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965.

Quinn, Michael. *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*. Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1994.

Rauschenbusch, Walter. *A Theology for the Social Gospel*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007.

Stewart, James Brewer. *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1996.

Sweet, Leonard. *The Minister's Task and Calling in Historical Perspective*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985.

Vander Velde, Luther. *American Evangelicalism: A History*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1988.

Wigger, John. *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Worth, Howard. *Charles G. Finney and the Temperance Movement*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Young, Michael. *Bearing Witness Against Sin: The Evangelical Birth of the American Social Movement*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Yrigoyen, Charles Jr. *Fire from the Midst of You: Charles Finney and the Awakening of American Religion*. Chicago: Oxford University Press, 2010.