# Saints, Sinners and Reformers

## The Burned-Over District Re-Visited

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#### Chapter 7

### Charles Grandison Finney

#### Religion on the Frontier of Western New York: ****New York Revivalism in the 1820-1830s****

Charles Grandison Finney is credited with being one of the most forceful American evangelists, one who was greatly responsible for the rise of religious fervor in western New York from the 1820s to the 1850s. There can be little doubt as to the forcefulness of his personality or of the impact of his message which helped to give the name of the "Burned-Over District" to western New York as one religious revival after another swept over the area. Finney can also be seen as one who was to help to re-make much of American Protestantism in his turning away from traditional New England Christian theology in favor of a less rigid approach favored by the Methodists and Baptists of his day. He is remembered as well for his embracing the more emotional approach to preaching which began with George Whitefield in New England before the American Revolution.

By the beginning of the 1800s, the orthodox intellectuality of New England Puritan divines, with their faith based on the writings of their church predecessors and particularly in the doctrine of pre-destination of John Calvin (whereby God had ordained before one's birth whether one was destined for Heaven or Hell) was beginning to wane. At the same time, a new approach to the giving of sermons developed when George Whitefield, a Methodist colleague of the Wesleys in England, came to America to preach. He used a new, somewhat emotional style of preaching about the evils of sin and the fear of Hell which rather scandalized the staid New England and Virginia church leaders. Yale and Harvard, those bastions of orthodoxy, and most of the churches, closed their doors to Whitefield. He may have been persona non grata in orthodox churches, but he made his mark with many church goers by adding a new emotional tone to American preaching.

A new era, known as the Romantic Period, was coming into existence at the turn of the 1800s. It would flourish intellectually in various quarters, such as in the Boston of Emerson and other New Englanders before long. Out on the frontier, however, it would flourish in a variant form of romanticism, in religion in particular, which was often anti-intellectual. The religious faith of the frontier era was motivated by emotion and the warmth of a new spirit in religion, and this was most obviously observed in the manifestation of the new religious revival movement. Puritan theology was seen as bookish, dry, and musty by many frontiersmen, many of whom were illiterate. Thus on the frontier, religion often substituted emotion for intellectual thought. As one scholar of American life, Dr. Sidney Mead has put it, "Around 1800 American religion gained a heart—and lost its head." This was particularly to be true in western New York.

At the same time that Whitefield was visiting America before the American Revolution, Methodist and Baptist theological notions were taking hold in the American seaboard colonies, and these ideas were to combine with the new emotional type of preaching of which Whitefield was the forerunner. These dissident sects held Arminian beliefs, named for Jacob Arminius (1560-1609), a Dutch theologian who had begun a break with Calvinism. These two new faiths, along with Arminius, held that individuals were not predestined before their birth to their fate by an omnipotent God, nor did they accept the belief that only the elect would go to Heaven at the decision of the Almighty. Instead, the Baptists and the Methodists believed that God had given each person free will, and thus individuals could chose between good and evil and work out their own religious destiny both here and in the hereafter. They also held that in his death, Jesus had assumed the sins of mankind, not just the sins of those elected by God, and thus the version of original sin which the orthodox clung to was no longer valid.

The Methodists and the Baptists were not ready to give up the traditional doctrine of man's sinfulness entirely. They did find a theological loophole in that man could rise above his inherent sinful nature through religious effort, through a decision to lead a religious life. This was in opposition to the doctrine of Calvin and New England Presbyterianism that one could do little about one's sinful state. Further, as the average American looked about him, he saw that he and his neighbors were no doubt fallible, but perhaps they were not doomed to everlasting iniquity as the traditional preachers claimed. Americans were trying to improve their lot by the building of schools and mutual aid societies. Ben Franklin., for example, started public libraries, public fire departments, public academies for the betterment of mankind. He attended no church, but he gave to all churches or societies in need. Mankind could not be as hopeless as Calvin had thought.

This concept of self-improvement would in time lead to a form of perfectionism. An individual could perfect his nature and his universe—yet there was still the problem of sin. It was here that the American religious mind developed a technique which could bring the two concepts together, and this was through the device of the American religious revival. The religious revivals which were to spread from the frontier to all of American society in the nineteenth century were a peculiarly American approach to Christianity. If it is found in operation hereafter anywhere else in the world than in the United States, one can be certain that an American missionary has been in the vicinity.

In a religious revival, an individual could take cognizance of his sinfulness while, at the same time, the form of the revival provided a means for him to come forth "to be saved." At a revival meeting, a sinful American could find Christ within and would vow to be good and to do good thereafter. He would do this publicly during the revival, and the repentant sinner thus came out of the meeting as a new individual. It was an emotional and an uplifting experience. Fortunately, being saved could be experienced annually, since at a revival one vowed to be and to do good, but inevitably one fell into one's slothful and even sinful ways and had to be saved again, which was quite possible at the next revival. Thus the American revival system squared the traditional Christian doctrine of man's sinfulness with the possibility of improvement and salvation. The revival system institutionalized these two opposing views of sinfulness and salvation with little regard for logic or the traditional theology of Christianity.

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There were many reasons why this American religious pattern was to catch fire, particularly on the frontier. The life of the frontiersman was not only lonely, but it was fraught with danger. The life was difficult: one labored from dawn to dusk at back breaking tasks in the hope of eking out a successful livelihood. The loneliness of life on the frontier is something that cannot be realized today. There were few breaks in what was a very solitary and onerous regimen for a family. The fear of illness or sudden disaster was always present, far away from neighbors or any medical care, and what medical care was available was often far less than adequate. Inability to work due to illness or to accident could lead to the loss of the ability to farm and thus to starvation and the loss of survival. Wives often died in childbirth; children often died young. Life was precarious.

Living under these conditions, the annual American revival in frontier lands became a once a year event of great note. It provided an emotional release from tensions through the public confession of one's sins, through the emotional ecstasy which a revival preacher might invoke in one, and even through the often excessive expression of emotion in physical manifestations to which some gave vent during camp meetings and revival services on the frontier. The annual revival provided companionship during the religious exercises and pleasure in the evenings afterwards. It provided a chance for young people to meet members of the opposite sex. The revival thus became a social-cultural-religious event of the first order in the life of rural America in the first half of the nineteenth century. There was, naturally a down-side to such occasions, what with the hawkers, the whiskey sellers, the ruffians, the camp followers, and even sex.

Western New York was quite ripe for such revivals by the 1820s. It was rural and sparsely populated. It was inhabited primarily by Yankees and was almost completely untouched by foreign immigration or non-Protestant religions. Into this region needing emotional release, there came Charles Grandison Finney, an almost irresistible religious force. He was a handsome, eloquent preacher with a hypnotic eye, a mellifluous voice of great power and pitch, he spoke without mannerisms, and with sufficient imagery of the terrors of Hell for the unrepentant which swept up hundreds of converts in what became known as the "Great Revival." His sermons were spoken extemporaneously and not from a prepared text as was used by most clergymen, and he illustrated his points from the common life of his hearers: his forceful presentations were immensely effective. The emotional fires he generated gave the area the name of "The Burned-Over District," an area which was to be burned over by the fires of religious enthusiasm for a number of years.

Charles Finney had been educated in academies in Connecticut and New Jersey, and afterwards taught for awhile. He next apprenticed to a lawyer, and then in 1821 at twenty-nine years of age he practiced law with a confident manner which often bordered on arrogance. Studies in Hebraic law led him further into religious studies and eventually to the realization that the ministry was where his talents belonged. He was ordained a Presbyterian minister on July 1, 1824, and he appeared in a number of churches to lead revivals. In late 1825 a major revival ignited Rome, New York, and Finney not only took part in the revival but then proceeded to lead revivals throughout New York State and Pennsylvania. In his early period in the revivals he was derogatory of the traditional clergy and their approach to religion, and this was to bar him from many Presbyterian and Congregational churches whose ministers were offended by his words.

In 1830 he moved to Rochester where the three leading Presbyterian churches were feuding, and Finney was welcomed in the hopes that a revival might heal the split among the churches. Here Finney preached three times on Sunday and three more times during the week. While depicting the terrors of Hell fire for the unredeemed, he gradually developed a logical and unemotional presentation which avoided the excesses of the ranting revivalists, yet his preaching held a conviction and forcefulness which would move congregations. His campaign exceeded the hopes of the sponsors that winter as thousands came to hear Finney, primarily from the surrounding countryside. Revivals were often most effective in the winter when farm people had time on their hands, and the revivals offered a release from an otherwise dry-emotional and unproductive season. The revivals of 1826 and 1831 became noted as the Great Revivals of the era.

Using what he termed the "New Measures," Finney's revivals swept away doctrinal differences which had separated the Protestant churches since medieval times. Ritual, ceremonies, doctrines were set aside. In his small "Cottage Prayer Meetings," the unconverted were prayed for by name. Those with an afflicted conscience were invited to the front of the meeting to the "anxious bench" while the preacher threatened the fires of hell to the unrepentant and the members of the meeting prayed for the sinner before them. One could be shamed into a state of grace before one's neighbors in such sessions. On the other hand, Finney also dealt with people individually in the process of saving their souls from damnation and Hell's fires. He permitted women full participation in religious services, an innovation never before permitted. His whole approach of personalizing religion and bringing it down to the individual person became known as "Finney's New Measures," and the approach was to be copied by other evangelists.

Among the "New Measures" was a more direct preaching to the congregation in an emotional manner which avoided the rhetorical approach of traditional clergy. The language to be used was simple, and the sentences were short and to the point as to the unhappy destiny for those who sinned. A colloquial rather than a formal language was employed with much repetition to drive home the preacher's points. Sinners were always described as "You" rather than being addressed in the third person. Many of Finney's followers in the pulpit varied their tone from whispers to shouts as they swayed back and forth during their peroration. Protracted meetings were another device so as to whip up enthusiasm and to keep it at an intense emotional level.

As the facets of traditional Calvinism: election, predestination, eternal sin were cast aside, he watered down Presbyterian Calvinism to a point where a new approach to religion was created and the nature of Protestant church services was to be changed. He had one major theme: only by repentance at a revival and the acceptance of Christ in one's soul could one be saved from damnation and Hell's fires and be assured of a place in Heaven. One could perfect one's life, one could save one's nature through one's own efforts. The new Christian should aim at being holy and not rest satisfied until he was as perfect as God. Such preaching was terrifying and could lead to an emotional trauma for the listeners, but then, upon repentance, a tremendous lifting of fear for the future, and a joyousness of being "saved" could result.

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