

#### IV. THE THEOLOGY OF CHARLES G. FINNEY<sup>1</sup>

THE elements of Finney's conception of the Plan of Salvation are given, in a very succinct form, in a summary of what he speaks of as the "provisions of grace."<sup>346</sup> "God," says he, "foresaw that all mankind would fall into a state of total alienation from him and his government. He also foresaw that by the wisest arrangement, he could secure the return and salvation of a part of mankind. He resolved to do so, and 'chose them to eternal salvation, through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth.'" Nothing is said of why God created a race the apostasy of which he foresaw,<sup>347</sup> or of what hindered His making an arrangement by which most of the apostates, or all of them, would be saved;<sup>348</sup> or of whether the part of mankind which He chose to salvation was a definite or indefinite part.<sup>349</sup> So far as this representation goes, God's entire action is determined by His creatures: He finds Himself (in His foresight) with an apostate race on His hands; an apostate race of whom He can "wisely"—a "wisely" which in Finney's scheme means ultimately "benevolently"—save only a part; and His choice of the part He will save is determined immediately by them and not Himself.

Now comes a description of God's mode of action under His decree of salvation. This action is summed up in the institution of a system of means to effect the end in view—"that is," says Finney, "with design to effect it." These means are the law, the atonement and mediatorial work of Christ, the publication of the Gospel and God's providential and moral government—and also "the gift and agency of the Holy Spirit." Of "the gift and agency of the Holy Spirit," it is said that it is "to excite in them," that is in the part of mankind chosen to salvation, "desire, and to work in them to will and to do, in so far as to secure in them the fulfillment of the conditions, and to them the fulfillment of the promises." This is followed by the assertion that grace has made sufficient provision to make the salvation of all men possible—a statement which, as we shall see, is on this scheme somewhat barren—and that of a portion of mankind certain: and this is followed by the declaration that all who have the Gospel are without excuse, if they are not saved—another barren statement on this scheme. And now we get at the gist of the matter. "Grace," we read (*italics ours*), "has made the salvation of every human being secure, who can be *persuaded*, by all the influences that God can *wisely* bring to bear upon him, to *accept* the offers of salvation." The words which we have italicized are key words in Finney's scheme of salvation. *Persuasion*—all that God does looking to the salvation of men is confined in its mode to persuasion. *Wisely*—the governing notion in all God's saving activities is uniformly represented as derived from His wisdom. *Accept*—the determining factor in man's salvation is his own acceptance. In this whole statement the

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<sup>1</sup> Reprinted from *The Princeton Theological Review*, xix. 1921, pp. 568–619; cf. Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield: Perfectionism, Part Two*, vol. 8, 166–216. <http://faithsaves.net>.

<sup>346</sup> P. 693.

<sup>347</sup> In point of fact Finney followed New Haven here; see G. F. Wright, as cited, p. 200.

<sup>348</sup> It emerges in the end that Finney considers that it would have required God to change the government He had instituted as the wisest.

<sup>349</sup> It was in Finney's view a definite part, foreseen as those who could be saved under the wisest government.

greatest care is expended in making it clear that all that God does toward saving men is directed to inducing the objects of salvation to save themselves. What He does, it is affirmed, is effective to the end in the case of those whose salvation He conceives it “wise” to “secure.”<sup>350</sup> But so far it is left obscure what the principle is on which the objects of salvation, the salvation of whom He judges it wise to secure, are determined—foresight, or election.

When we turn to the lecture on election, we quickly learn that Finney’s doctrine of election is just—Congruism. There are two varieties of Congruism, an Augustinian and an Anti-Augustinian. The Anti-Augustinian variety supposes that the same grace is given to all men alike, but is effective or not effective to salvation according as the hearts of men are “congruous” to it. In this variety there is no place for election, except on foresight of the salvability of men. The Augustinian variety supposes that God, respecting the free will of men, approaches them, just as in the other variety, with “suasive grace” only; but Himself adapts this grace so wisely to the hearts of those whom He has sovereignly selected to save, that they yield freely to its persuasion and are saved. In this variety election is the cause of salvation. Finney may superficially appear to be seeking some intermediate ground between these two ordinary varieties of Congruism: but in point of fact what he presents is, with some variation of form, a curiously complete reproduction of the Molinist scheme. According to him election proceeds on the foresight of salvability; but he does not suppose that the same grace is given to all men alike—although all receive “sufficient grace”—but that God employs in each case whatever grace it seems to Him wise to employ in order to accomplish His end. Those that are salvable—that is, those that are salvable under the wise government which He has established—He secures the salvation of. Those who, under this wise government, are not salvable, He leaves in their sins. Those whose salvation He undertakes to secure, because they are salvable under the wise government He has established, He brings to salvation by suasive influences of grace, adapted in each case to their special needs, and therefore certain to be effective. These are the elect. Obviously they are elected on the ground of their salvability—under the wise government which God has established. There is no sovereignty exhibited in their election itself, except in the sense that God might have left

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<sup>350</sup> We are somewhat surprised to find that Finney should have hesitated and vacillated over “Perseverance,” in the face of the clearness of this teaching, and of the corresponding representation of “permanent sanctification” as attainable, as the culminating attainment of Christian living (see, for instance, the tract “How to Win Souls”: There is nothing in the Bible “more expressly promised in this life than *permanent sanctification*”: we may fall away from regeneration, which is entire sanctification, but not from this permanent sanctification to which we are *sealed*: “this, remember, is a blessing that we receive after that we believe”). He tells us, however, (p. 843) that he did do so, although on the pressure of Scripture he finally accepts the doctrine, and, indeed gives it an exceptionally full treatment. His rejection of a “physical” regeneration seemed to him to remove one of the grounds for inferring it; and his rejection of what he calls a “perpetual” justification removes another. He is thrown back thus on the Scriptural declarations supported by the general doctrines of election and the initiative of grace—doctrines to which he gives a purer expression here (where he needs them) than in the residue of his system.

them also in their sin; if He were to save any, these were the only ones He could save—under the wise government established by Him. The only place in the whole transaction in which any real sovereignty is shown, lies in God’s having established the particular government which He has established, and which determines who are salvable and who not. The particular government which has been established has not been arbitrarily established. It is determined by its wisdom. It is the wisest possible government for God’s end—which is the good of being. Seeking the good of being, this is the government which an all-wise God must establish. Its establishment, however, divides men into two classes—the salvable and the unsalvable under the conditions of this wisest government. Here it is that election is determined. God elects to salvation all those who are salvable under this wise government. Any sovereignty which may appear in this election is derived wholly from the sovereignty of the choice of the wisest government to establish. That determined, everything else is determined with it: those that are salvable; those that, on foresight of their salvability, are elected to be saved; the manner of grace by which they are brought to salvation. Proximately their election is on foresight of salvability; only ultimately can it be called sovereign—that is through the sovereignty of the choice of the wisest government to establish.

The determining characteristic of the elect on this view, we presume, is that, in nature, character, situation, circumstances—in their totality, considered in all relations—the salvation of just these and none others serves as means to God’s ultimate supreme end—the good of being. Not merely the salvation of some rather than others, but the salvation of just these same rather than any others, subserves this end. “The best system of means for securing the great end of benevolence, included the election of just those who were elected, and no others.... The highest good demanded it.”<sup>351</sup> A slightly different turn is given to this statement, when it is said: “The fact, that the wisest and best system of government would secure the salvation of those who are elected, must have been a *condition* of their being elected.” What is suggested by this is, that the reason, or one of the reasons, why just those who are elected are elected, is that they, and not others, would be saved under the system of government which God had in mind to establish. He was bound to elect those and not others—or else alter the system of government He had it in mind to establish, under which none others could be saved: and He cannot alter this system of government because it is the wisest and best system. This brings us back to the point of view with which we began—that the real reason of the election of the elect is their salvability, that is, under the system of government established by God as the wisest. God elects those whom He *can* save, and leaves un-elected those whom He *cannot* save, consistently with the system of government which He has determined to establish as the wisest and best. And this seems strongly to suggest that there is an intrinsic difference between the objects of election and others, determining their different treatment.

The dominating place which Finney gives to the idea of wisdom in his construction will scarcely have passed unobserved. God saves all He can wisely save: the particular ones He saves are those whom alone He can wisely save. Here is rather a full statement:<sup>352</sup> “I suppose that God bestows on men unequal measures of gracious influence, but that in this there is nothing arbitrary; that, on the contrary, he sees the

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<sup>351</sup> P. 775.

<sup>352</sup> P. 778.

wisest and best reasons for this; that being in justice under obligation to *none*, he exercises his own benevolent discretion, in bestowing on all as much gracious influence as he sees to be upon the whole wise and good, and enough to throw the entire responsibility of their damnation upon them if they are lost.<sup>353</sup> But upon some he foresaw that he could wisely bestow a sufficient measure of gracious influence to secure their voluntary yielding, and upon others he could not bestow enough in fact to secure this result.” The upshot is that God elects all that it is wise for Him to elect; and as He elects them both to grace and glory, He saves all that it is wise for Him to save. The ground of His election of just them is that there is something in them or in their relations to His system of government of the world, which makes it wise to save them; and this is not true of the others. He does for those others too all that it is wise for Him to do, and He “has no right to do more than he does for them, all things considered.” What He does for either never passes beyond mere suasion: everything depends therefore at every step on the free movement of their will. “The elect were chosen to eternal life,” we read,<sup>354</sup> “upon condition that God foresaw that in the perfect exercise of their freedom, they could be induced to repent and embrace the gospel.” If there is not asserted here election on the foresight of faith, there is asserted election on the foresight of the possibility of faith: on foreseeing that they can be induced to believe, they are elected to life, and the inducements provided. It is foreseen that the non-elect cannot be induced to believe—at least wisely—and inducements to believe are not wasted on them.

It appears that Finney wishes to make it appear that election is in some sense the cause of salvation. But he is hampered by his preconceptions. He wishes to deny that election is “arbitrary.” He wishes to represent salvation as depending on the “voluntary” action of men. In order to protect this “voluntariness” of salvation, he wishes to confine all of God’s saving operations within the category of persuasion. And above all and governing all he wishes to make benevolence the one spring of the divine action. The ultimate result is that, representing God as ordering the universe for the one end of the production of the greatest happiness of the greatest number, he finds himself teaching that men are left to perish solely for the enhancement of the happiness of others. Reprobation is a thorny subject to handle in any case; but in Finney’s handling of it its thorniness is greatly increased. He is compelled to confess of the reprobate, that “God knows that his creating them, together with his providential dispensations, will be the occasion, not the cause, of their sin and consequent destruction.” Of course, God’s foreknowledge of these results when He created the reprobate, necessarily involves them also in His comprehensive intention; but equally of course the sin and destruction of the reprobate were not His ultimate end in their creation. But neither are the holiness and salvation of the elect the ultimate end of God in His dealing with them. In both cases alike His supreme ultimate end lies beyond. What God has determining regard to in His dealing

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<sup>353</sup> This is one of those numerous clauses which meet us in Finney’s discussions which have no meaning whatever in his scheme of thought, and are thrown in therefore merely for effect. In his scheme of thought, the entire responsibility for their damnation lies upon the lost in any case—even if no gracious influences at all work on them. They have plenary ability in any case to meet all their obligations, and are fully responsible for their failure to do so.

<sup>354</sup> P. 780.

with both alike, says Finney, is the wise ordering of His government. He would prefer the salvation of the reprobate, if—but only if—they could be saved consistently with the wise government He has ordained. But, says Finney,<sup>355</sup> “He regards their destruction as a less evil to the universe, than would be such a change in the administration and arrangements of his government as would secure their salvation.” They are sacrificed thus to the good of the universe, and perish not because justice demands that they perish, but because it is better for others—surely not for themselves—that they perish. This is a result of Finney’s teleological ethics. And it is here that the benevolence scheme is most severely strained. It was benevolent in God, says Finney,<sup>356</sup> to create men who were destined to reprobation, because, “if he foresaw that, upon the whole, he could secure such an amount of virtue and happiness by means of moral government, as to more than counterbalance the sin and misery of those who would be lost, then certainly it was a dictate of benevolence to create them.” We may possibly be able to bow before reasoning which is directed to show that our reprobation is the unavoidable condition of the attainment of an end high and holy enough to justify any individual evils which are incurred in its achievement—say, the vindication of the right, the preservation of the divine integrity, the manifestation of God’s righteousness, the enhancement of His glory. But it is not so easy to acquiesce when we are told that we must be miserable that others may be happy. If the happiness of being is the end to which everything is to give way, it is difficult to see why we should be excluded from our share of it. Surely at all events we must see the note of moral necessity, and not that of a mere governmental expediency, in the transaction before we can readily embrace it as just.

The ultimate reason why the entire action of God in salvation is confined by Finney to persuasion lies in his conviction that nothing more is needed—or, indeed, is possible. For the most deeply lying of all the assumptions which govern his thinking is that of the plenary ability of man. It is customary with him to assert this assumption in the form that obligation is limited by ability; that we are able to do all that we are under obligation to do; that nothing which we cannot do lies within the range of our duty.<sup>357</sup> He himself represents this as the fundamental principle of his teaching—“that obligation implies ability in the sense that it is possible for man to be all that he is under an obligation to be; that by willing, he can directly or indirectly do all that God requires him to do.”<sup>358</sup> He thus relegates to a position subordinate and subsidiary to the primary fact of plenary ability

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<sup>355</sup> Pp. 786–787.

<sup>356</sup> P. 790.

<sup>357</sup> Charles Hodge, *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*, April, 1847, p. 244, says that it is “merely a dictum of philosophers, not of common people” that “I ought, therefore I can.” Every unsophisticated heart and especially every heart burdened with a sense of sin says rather, “I ought to be able, but I am not.” He cites Julius Müller’s reply to Kant, in “*Lehre von der Sünde*,” ii. p. 116.

<sup>358</sup> P. 925. Accordingly A. T. Swing, *The Bibliotheca Sacra*, July, 1900, pp. 466–467, says: “The most fundamental of President Finney’s reform principles was, that human ability must be commensurate with human duty.” This, he says, dominated not only his thinking but his practice: “Sinners ought to respond at once, *because they can repent if they will*.” “Historically then President Finney stands as one of the most earnest preachers of human ability”—surpassing even N. W. Taylor in this.

even his ethical principle that moral value attaches in strictness only to the supreme ultimate intention, which gives its moral character to all else; and with it, his more fundamental ethical principle still that moral quality attaches only to deliberate acts of will. The ability which he thus ascribes to man as his inalienable possession is not merely that so-called “natural ability” which the New England divines were accustomed to accord to him, and which only recognized his possession of the natural powers by which obedience could be rendered were it not inhibited by man’s moral condition. He means, on the contrary, that man has by his natural constitution as a free agent the inalienable power to obey God perfectly. “This ability,” he says,<sup>359</sup> “is called a natural ability, because it belongs to man as a moral agent, in such a sense that without it he could not be a proper subject of command, of reward or punishment. That is, without this liberty or ability he could not be a moral agent, and a proper subject of moral government.” “Moral agency,” says he again,<sup>360</sup> “implies free agency. Free agency implies liberty of will. Liberty of will implies ability of will.” And this ability of will extends “so far as the sphere of moral agency extends.” The “ability to obey God” which Finney ascribes to man always and everywhere is thus, without any ifs and ands about it, just “the possession of power adequate to the performance of that which is required.”<sup>361</sup> In possession of this inalienable ability man’s salvation requires and admits of no other divine operation than persuasion.

It is a great concession from this point of view, indeed, to allow that it requires persuasion. Finney does allow this; and this is his sole concession to the supernaturalism of salvation. “From the beginning,” he says,<sup>362</sup> men “universally and voluntarily consecrate their powers to the gratification of self,” and “therefore they will not, unless they are divinely persuaded, by the gracious influence of the Holy Spirit, in any case turn and consecrate their powers to the service of God.” They will not; he will not admit that they cannot. He seems, indeed, almost inclined at times to declare that one not a Christian who supposes that “a man is unable to obey God without the Spirit’s agency.” The assertion of ability to obey God without the Spirit’s agency is express. “The question in debate is not whether men do, in any case, use the powers of nature in the manner that God requires, without the gracious influence of the Holy Spirit, but whether they are naturally able so to use them.”<sup>363</sup> But along with the strong assertion of their ability to do it, is an equally strong assertion of their universal unwillingness to do it, on the ground of which is erected an assertion of the necessity of the influence of the Spirit for salvation. “I admit and maintain,” says Finney,<sup>364</sup> “that regeneration is always induced and effected by the personal agency of the Holy Spirit.” “It is agreed,” he says again,<sup>365</sup> “that all who are converted, sanctified and saved, are converted, sanctified and saved by God’s own agency; that is, God saves them by securing, by his own agency, their personal and individual holiness.” The mode of the divine agency in securing these efforts, however, is

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<sup>359</sup> P. 484.

<sup>360</sup> P. 924.

<sup>361</sup> P. 500.

<sup>362</sup> Pp. 501–502.

<sup>363</sup> “Lectures on Systematic Theology,” p. 501.

<sup>364</sup> P. 422.

<sup>365</sup> P. 767.

purely suasive. We are saved “by free grace drawing and securing the concurrence of free-will”<sup>366</sup>—a formula which, so far as the words go, might have a good meaning; but not in the sense which Finney puts on them, for in Finney’s sense “drawing” means just teaching. Referring to John 6:44, he says: “As the Father teaches by the Holy Spirit, Christ’s plain teaching, in the passage under consideration, is that no man can come to Him, except he be specially enlightened by the Holy Spirit.” Beyond the presentation of motives to action he will not permit the Spirit to go in the way of securing man’s salvation. “The power which God exerts in the conversion of the soul,” he says,<sup>367</sup> “is *moral* power.” “It is that kind of power,” he proceeds in explanation, “by which a statesman sways the mind of a senate; or by which an advocate moves and bows the heart of a jury.” “All God’s influence in converting men,” he says again,<sup>368</sup> “is moral influence. He persuades them by his word and his Spirit.” And then he adds, “If men will not yield to *persuasion*, they must be lost”; and phrases his conclusion thus: “Sinners can go to hell in spite of God.” It is certain, he declares in another place,<sup>369</sup> “that men are *able* to resist the utmost influence that the truth can exert upon them; and therefore have ability to defeat the wisest, most benevolent, and most powerful exertions which the Holy Spirit can make to effect their sanctification.” They can resist the divine influence designed to save them because it is only of the nature of persuasion. But the same ability which is adequate to resisting it, is adequate also to following it; and if it “secures” their salvation, it is only by this, their free following of it. “The fact is,” says Finney,<sup>370</sup> “the actual turning ... is the sinner’s own act”; “the sinner that minds the flesh, can change his mind, and mind God.” In all this Finney was but repeating the teachings of the New Divinity of which this very conception is declared by Lyman Beecher to have been the core. “Our doctrine,” says he,<sup>371</sup> describing the essence of the Taylorite contention, “was that GOD GOVERNS MIND BY MOTIVE AND NOT BY FORCE.” “Edwards,” he adds, “did not come up to that fair and square, Bellamy did not, and, in fact, nobody did until Taylor and I did.” Finney did also—“fair and square.”

This construction of “the way of life,” simple with true Pelagian simplicity, is nevertheless complicated with some serious difficulties. It deals throughout with a will to which the “power to the contrary” is passionately vindicated; and yet at two several points it asserts a certainty in the determination of the will which appears to be on this ground inexplicable. How shall we account for the asserted fact that the will, inalienably able to turn at its option from its sins to God, in point of fact never does and never will so turn, except under the persuasive action of the Holy Spirit? A universal will-not, like this, has a very strong appearance of a can-not. A condition in which a particular effect follows with absolute certainty, at least suggests the existence of a causal relation; and

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<sup>366</sup> P. 757.

<sup>367</sup> “Sermons on Important Subjects,” p. 30.

<sup>368</sup> *The New York Evangelist*, August 25, 1835, quoted in *The Literary and Theological Review*, March, 1836, p. 16.

<sup>369</sup> *The Oberlin Evangelist*, Lect. 21, p. 193, quoted by John C. Lord, *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*, April, 1841, p. 234; cf. John Woodbridge, *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*, 1842, pp. 426–472.

<sup>370</sup> “Sermons on Important Subjects,” pp. 20, 38.

<sup>371</sup> “Autobiography,” ii. pp. 156–157.

the assertion of the equal possibility of a contrary effect, unsupported by a single example, bears the appearance of lacking foundation. And when now we are told that this contrary effect, unexampled otherwise, nevertheless follows with invariable certainty, whenever the persuasive action of the Holy Spirit is exerted to that end—how can we help suspecting that the action of the Spirit in question is something more than persuasive? Let it be borne in mind that all the elect without exception are brought to God by the persuasive action of the Spirit, although many of them, it is affirmed, are much more difficult to convert than many of the non-elect would be; while on the other hand the non-elect are without exception, despite all the suasive influences which may be expended on them, left in their sins. Surely the action of the Spirit on the elect has the appearance of having a character more causal in nature than is expressed by the term persuasion. A persuasion which is invariably effective has at least as remarkable an appearance as the uncaused unanimity of action which it alone breaks, and which, it is affirmed, it alone can break. It is at least an arresting phenomenon that the human will, inalienably endowed with an equal power to either part, should exhibit in its historical manifestation two such instances of absolute certainty of action to one part—in one instance affecting the whole mass of mankind without exception, and in the other the whole body of those set upon by the Spirit with a view to their salvation. If this illustrates “the sovereign power of the agent,” “the proper causality of moral agents,” “the power of self-determination,”<sup>372</sup> in the sense put on these phrases—entirely satisfactory in themselves—by Finney and his

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<sup>372</sup> “Lectures on Systematic Theology,” pp. 493–494. On p. 490 the phrase “the will or agent” drops from Finney’s pen. He identifies the will with the agent, and that accounts for his misunderstanding of Edwards (p. 489) as if Edwards argued that it is the motive and not the agent which is the cause of voluntary action. He conceives of the motive as always “objective,” intruding into the mind from without and determining the will, not as the mind itself, that is the agent, in a given state of preference. “Edwards,” says he (p. 491) “assumed that no agent whatever, not even God himself, possesses a power of self-determination. That the will of God and of all moral agents is determined, not by themselves, but by an objective motive.” Leave out the word “objective” and remember that the motive is just the present self and see what becomes of that statement. Self-determination with Finney, means arbitrary self-determination, independent of or in contradiction of the present preference, which is what other people mean by motive. How far he was prepared to go, we may see from a remark he makes in the course of his reply to George Duffield (p. 970). Duffield had written as follows: “His own glorious nature, His own infinitely exalted excellence, and not anything conceivably existing apart from, independent and irrespective of God, is that which determines His will.” The actual meaning of that sentence is that God is self-determining or a free agent. Finney, however, comments as follows: “What does the Doctor mean? Does he mean that God is a necessary as opposed to a free agent? That His will is necessarily determined by His self-existent nature? If He means this, what virtue is there in God? His nature is necessarily self-existent ... God is not praiseworthy for having this nature, but for the voluntary use or exercise of it.” This comment invites remark at more than one point. It is enough for the moment to say that it would be difficult more pointedly to assert that the will is entirely independent of the nature—something which uses the nature, by which the nature is exercised, not the instrument of the nature’s self-expression.



New Divinity colleagues, we do not see that anything may be said to be illustrated by anything. It speaks volumes meanwhile for the strength of Finney's conviction that man is quite able to save himself and in point of fact actually does, in every instance of his salvation, save himself, that he maintained it in the face of such broad facts of experience to the contrary. How can man be affirmed to be fully able and altogether competent to an act never performed by any man whatever, except under an action of the Spirit under which he invariably performs it?

Of course this extravagant assertion of plenary ability is correlated with Finney's doctrine of sin. Naturally he scouts the very idea of "original sin," whether in its broader or narrower application. There is no imputation; no transmitted corruption of heart. Indeed, there is no heart to be corrupted: "heart" with Finney means just "will."<sup>373</sup> All sin is sinning—and sinning is a purely personal business. It would not be quite exact to say that Finney permits to Adam no influence whatever on the moral life of his descendants. He is willing to allow that they may have received a certain amount of moral injury through the physical deterioration that has come to them by evil inheritance. He even suggests that could this physical deterioration be corrected—say through a wise dietetic system—the sin into which they have fallen partly through its influence might in a generation or two disappear too.<sup>374</sup> Nevertheless physical deterioration and moral depravity are different things, different in kind, and must not be confused with one another. The one we may receive from our progenitors, the other can be produced only by our own moral action. It is true that in point of fact all of us suffer from moral depravity, all of us without exception. Moral depravity is with Finney as universal a fact as it is with the Augustinian doctrine. "Subsequent to the commencement of moral agency, and previous to regeneration, the moral depravity of mankind is universal."<sup>375</sup> And it is no less "total" than universal; it manifests itself in the entirety of humanity "without any

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<sup>373</sup> The course of reasoning by which Finney arrives at the conclusion that "the heart" in the Bible usage, "when represented as possessing moral character," means just a volition (p. 409), affords a very good example of his method. Its substance is that this must be so, since nothing but volitions possess moral character: "The very idea of moral character implies, and suggests the idea of, a free action or intention." It is plain, therefore, that in its Biblical usage, the heart "can be nothing else than the supreme ultimate intention of the soul." And it is equally plain that "regeneration" which in its Biblical usage, is a radical change of the heart, is "a radical change of the ultimate intention"—that and nothing else.

<sup>374</sup> It was a matter of course that S. B. Canfield, "An Exposition, etc.," 1841, pp. 23 ff., should fall foul of Finney's amazing representation that by "the flesh" the Scriptures mean bodily appetites, and that therefore the flesh may be overcome by physiological reform, under the influence of which we may look forward to a time in a few—very few—generations when "the human body" may be "nearly, if not entirely, restored to its primitive physical perfection"—and so "the flesh" will cease from troubling us. Canfield slyly remarks that the works which Paul enumerates as works of the flesh, in great part, "exist in a far greater degree in *fallen spirits* than among *men*,"—and the fallen spirits have no bodies!

<sup>375</sup> P. 374.

mixture of moral goodness or virtue.”<sup>376</sup> All men without exception are morally depraved through and through. It will repay us to attend to Finney’s account of the origin and nature of this universal total moral depravity, with which mankind is afflicted.

It will have already been observed that it is denied of the first stages of infancy. It accordingly does not belong to mankind as such, as at present existing in the world; it is not a racial affair. It is picked up for himself by each individual in the process of living. An infant when he comes into the world, is just a little animal. He has no moral nature. If he dies, he dies as the brutes die; and his death argues no more than the death of a brute argues.<sup>377</sup> “Previous to moral agency, infants are no more subjects of moral government than brutes are”; that is to say, apparently, they cannot be moved to action through inducements addressed to their moral judgment. Therefore, “their sufferings and death are to be accounted for as are those of brutes, namely, by ascribing them to physical interference with the laws of life and health.” We suppose this is the proximate cause of the sufferings and death of adults also; but Finney appears to think that, in saying it of infants, he is denying that sin has anything to do with their dying—despite Rom. 5:12. He has as much trouble with their salvation as with their dying. He wishes to find a place for them in the grace of Christ;<sup>378</sup> but it is not easy to do so, since, Paul being witness, it was to save sinners that Christ came into the world—and they are not sinners. And does not Finney himself say:<sup>379</sup> “The fact that Christ died in the stead and behalf of sinners, proves that God regarded them not as unfortunate, but as criminal and altogether without excuse”? No doubt, in saying this he had adults only in mind—but, is it not a proposition of universal validity, and, then, how can infants be partakers of this grace of Christ? Is it not true, as Augustine urged to Finney’s prototype, that in this view, Jesus cannot be “Jesus” to infants, because “Thou shalt call his name Jesus, for it is He that shall save His people from their sins”? Finney is reduced to arguing<sup>380</sup> that if Christ does not save them from “a sinful constitution,” He does save them “from circumstances which would certainly result in their becoming sinners, if not snatched from them.” A kindly proleptic salvation, it seems, may at least be theirs. But, very naturally, he does not seem wholly satisfied with this. He adds in a tone which may appear a little petulant: “All that can justly be said ... is, that if infants are saved at all, which I suppose they are, they are rescued by the benevolence of God from circumstances that would result in certain and eternal death, and are by grace made heirs of eternal life. But after all, it is useless to speculate about the character and destiny of those who are confessedly not moral agents. The benevolence of God will take care of them....” That sounds like very cold comfort to sorrowing parents. And in view of the fact that half of the human race die in infancy, it offers a trying puzzle to the philosophical thinker. And can we acquiesce without protest, when we are told that infants are “confessedly not moral agents”? Perhaps if we press the word “agents”—but let us substitute “beings.” Are infants not moral beings? Does a man cease to be a moral being every time he goes to sleep? Are we moral beings only when we are acting, but become unmoral and only brutes whenever we are quiescent? We are

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<sup>376</sup> P. 375.

<sup>377</sup> Pp. 388–389.

<sup>378</sup> P. 390.

<sup>379</sup> P. 393.

<sup>380</sup> P. 390.

told with extended explication how the infant picks up sin in the course of living: it is connected, we see, with its picking up a moral nature, too, in the course of living—though how it accomplishes this greater feat, we are not so explicitly told. At all events this is Finney’s doctrine: infants are at first just little animals; after a while they pick up a moral nature; at that very moment they pick up sin also. Thus all men become depraved from the very first moment when moral agency begins with them.

Adam has nothing to do with it—despite Rom. 5:12 ff. No, not quite that. Adam has something to do with it, but nothing decisive. What happens is this. These little brutes of babies, like other brutes, of course follow their impulses. These, being constitutional, have no moral quality. Following them, the babies form habits of action in accordance with their impulses. This action has no moral quality. But one fair day the babies awake to moral values, and then their whole habitual activity at once becomes sin. Their new knowledge comes too late to save them from this sin. Their habits of action are too strong to be reversed by it. They are inevitably persisted in, and thus the poor babies become totally depraved because of habits formed before they knew any better. What Adam has to do with it is this—because Adam sinned, and because all after Adam have sinned—they all would inevitably have sinned whether Adam had sinned or not—the physical nature inherited by babies is to a certain extent disordered, and this makes their impulse to self-gratification perhaps somewhat more clamant than otherwise it would have been.<sup>381</sup> In any case this impulse would have been strong enough to carry the day against the new ethical knowledge which comes to them when they become moral agents. But perhaps because of Adam’s sinning—and because of the sinning of all since Adam—it carries the day, not with more certainty—it would certainly have carried it anyhow—but with a more energetic effect than it otherwise would have done. Here is the way Finney himself puts it:<sup>382</sup> “The sensibility acts as a powerful impulse to the will, from the moment of birth, and secures the consent and activity of the will to procure its gratification, before the reason is at all developed. The will is thus committed to the gratification of feeling and appetite, when first the idea of moral obligation is developed. This committed state of the will is not moral depravity, and has no moral character, until the idea of moral obligation is developed. The moment this idea is developed, this committal of the will to self-indulgence must be abandoned, or it becomes selfishness, or moral depravity. But, as the will is already in a state of committal, and has to some extent already formed the habit of seeking to gratify feeling, and as the idea of moral obligation is at first but feebly developed, unless the Holy Spirit interferes to shed light on the soul, the will, as might be expected, retains its hold on self-gratification.” And again:—“A diseased physical system renders the appetites, passions, tempers, and propensities more clamorous and despotic in their demands, and of course constantly urging to selfishness, confirms and strengthens it. It should be distinctly remembered that physical depravity has no moral character in itself. But yet it is a source of fierce temptation to selfishness.

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<sup>381</sup> “Lectures on Systematic Theology,” p. 381: “We can also predict, without the gift of prophecy, that with a constitution physically depraved, and surrounded with objects to awaken appetite, and with all the circumstances in which human beings first form their moral character, they will seek universally to gratify themselves, unless prevented by the illuminations of the Holy Spirit.”

<sup>382</sup> p. 397.

The human sensibility is, manifestly, deeply physically depraved; and as sin, or moral depravity, consists in committing the will to the gratification of the sensibility, its physical depravity will mightily strengthen moral depravity. Moral depravity is then universally owing to temptation.”

We have here of course only the familiar construction of the old *Rationalismus Vulgaris*; and no more here than there is the implication of God in bringing the human race into a condition of universal depravity escaped. It was God, no doubt, who made the human race after such a fashion that its selfish impulses should get the start of its reason in the development of the child, who should therefore be hopelessly committed to sin before it knew any better. We are told of Lyman Beecher,<sup>383</sup> that “in commenting on the sentiment or opinion which seeks to account for the fact that everyone sins, not by alleging natural depravity, but by saying that ‘the appetites and passions are developed faster than reason; that is, in the nature of things which *God* has constituted, the appetites and passions *necessarily* obtain the ascendancy over reason,’ Dr. Beecher said, ‘It is by this theory as if God had placed a man in a boat with a crow-bar for an oar, and then sent a storm on him! Is the man to be blamed if in such a case he is drowned?’ ” All that is accomplished by this explanation of how it comes about that man is morally depraved, is that God and not man is made inexcusable for it. God betrays mankind into depravity wholly arbitrarily, with no excuse, not to say justification, for His act. All that can be said is that this is the way God has chosen to make man. No reason is assigned, none is assignable, for His making him in such a manner that he must at the first dawn of moral agency become totally and hopelessly depraved. If anyone supposes that an exoneration for God is supplied in the circumstance that He does not directly create depravity in the human heart, but produces it only indirectly, through the operation of the laws of human development which He has ordained, we are happy to say that Finney is above such a subterfuge. He knows perfectly well that the maxim *facit per alium facit per se* is as valid here as elsewhere. “To represent the (human) constitution as sinful,” he argues,<sup>384</sup> “is to represent God, who is the author of the constitution, as the author of sin. To say that God is not the direct former of the constitution, but that sin is conveyed by natural generation from Adam, who made himself sinful, is only to remove the objection one step farther back, but not to obviate it; for God established the physical laws that of necessity bring about this result.” Well, God established the physical laws which bring it about that every

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<sup>383</sup> “Autobiography,” ii. p. 573. Nevertheless this view is taught not only by Finney but also by Beecher’s friend, N. W. Taylor (*The Quarterly Christian Spectator*, June, 1829, p. 366). A child, says Taylor, enters the world with a variety of neutral appetites and desires. These are rapidly developed, and each advancing month brings them new objects of gratification. “*Self indulgence* becomes the master principle in the soul of every child, long before it can understand that this self indulgence will ever interfere with the rights, or trench on the happiness of others. Thus by repetition is the force of constitutional propensities accumulating a bias towards self-gratification, which becomes incredibly strong before a knowledge of duty of a sense of right and wrong, can possibly have entered the mind.” Under the influence of this bias, the child, when at length the commencement of moral agency arrives, sins with a uniform certainty as great as if “the hand of Omnipotence were laid upon the child to secure the result.”

<sup>384</sup> p. 391.

child of man becomes totally depraved at the first dawn of moral agency, and, according to Finney, He did it arbitrarily, and in full knowledge of the effect and therefore with the intention that that effect should follow. On the other hand, though God is supposed in the doctrine Finney is criticizing to have attached the communication of sinfulness to Adam's posterity descended from him by ordinary generation, He is not represented as having done so arbitrarily but in a judicial sentence; so that a ground is assigned for His act and a ground in right—and Finney has not shown that this ground did not exist, or that existing, it was not a compelling ground in right. What Finney does is merely to substitute another account of universal sinfulness for this one—the Rationalistic account for the Augustinian one—and in doing so, to use a coarse expression, to jump from the frying pan into the fire. He leaves God equally responsible for human depravity, and deprives Him of all justification for attaching it to man. We do not assert that the Rationalistic account of human depravity which Finney exploits must necessarily leave God without justification for inflicting it upon man. It might conceivably be presented merely as an attempt to explain the manner in which man actually acquired a depravity to which he has been justly condemned on account of the sin of his first parents. It would still be open to fatal objections, but no longer to this one—that it represents God as arbitrarily creating the human race after a fashion which made it inevitable that every member of it should fall into hopeless moral depravity—at the first dawn of moral agency—as if the kind of humanity which He desired, intended and provided was a totally depraved humanity. But Finney does not set his theory forward as indicating the manner in which God brings a deserved punishment upon a guilty race. He energetically denies that the race on which this depravity is brought is a guilty race, or that it can be conceived as a punishment. He presents it as the account of how the human race—in all the length and breadth of it—becomes in the first instance sinful, in any sense of that word. And his object is to represent it as becoming so voluntarily—with a voluntariness, which, although embracing every individual of the race, is repeated in each individual's case in the completest isolation of distinct personal action.

A tendency is exhibited at times to neglect this more elaborate explanation of universal depravity, and to represent it as sufficiently accounted for by the formula of freedom plus temptation. All men are free agents, and all men are tempted; therefore all men sin. The formula is obviously inoperative in this crude form of its statement, unless free agency is supposed to carry with it, *per se*, helplessness in the face of temptation, and always to succumb to temptation if it is addressed to it in an enticing form. Finney is near to this crude form of statement when he writes:<sup>385</sup> “Sin may be the result of temptation; temptation may be universal, and of such a nature as uniformly, not necessarily, to result in sin, unless a contrary result be secured by a Divine moral suasion.” He is still near it when he writes:<sup>386</sup> “Sin may be, and must be, an abuse of free-agency; and this may be accounted for, as we shall see, by ascribing it to the universality of temptation, and does not at all imply a sinful constitution.... Free, responsible will is an adequate cause in the presence of temptation, without the supposition of a sinful constitution, as has been demonstrated in the case of Adam and of angels.... It is said that no motive to sin could be a motive or a temptation, if there were not a sinful taste, relish,

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<sup>385</sup> P. 380.

<sup>386</sup> P. 387.

or appetite, inherent in the constitution, to which the temptation or motive is addressed.... To this I reply,—Suppose this objection be applied to the sin of Adam and of angels. Can we not account for Eve’s eating the forbidden fruit, without supposing that she had a craving for sin? “Finney has permitted it to slip from his mind as he wrote that the problem he has in hand is to offer an account not of individuals sinning, but of the universality of sin. Free agency plus temptation may account for the possibility of sin, and may lay a basis for an account of the actual occurrence of sinning in this or that case. It will not account for universal sinning. For that, nothing less than a universal bias to sin will supply an adequate account. That is the meaning of the statement which Finney quotes in order to repel, but so quotes as to empty it of its meaning. Probably no one of those whom Finney had in mind ever intended to say just that “no motive to sin could be a motive or a temptation, if there were not a sinful taste, relish, or appetite, inherent in the constitution, to which the temptation or motive is addressed.” What was intended to be said was, no doubt, that no motive to sin can be a temptation with universal—that is, invariable—effect, unless there is something in those tempted which constitutes a bias to sin. That is true; and one of the proofs that it is true is, that Finney, abandoning the simple formula of free-agency plus temptation, is himself compelled in the end to assume a bias to sin in order to account for the universality of sin. The child, he teaches—that little brute—must be supposed to have acquired habits of action which his moral sense, so soon as moral agency dawns in him, pronounces to be sinful, if we are to account for his universally succumbing to solicitations to what he now perceives to be sin. He has acquired a bias to what is objectively sinful, before he faces temptations to these very things, now by his newly obtained knowledge of right and wrong, become also subjectively sinful. That is Finney’s account of universal sin. It posits a bias to sin as distinct as that posited by the Augustinians. The difference is that the Augustinians posit a bias brought by every man into the world with him; Finney a bias created invariably for himself by every man in his first essays at living.

Finney’s repulsion of the Augustinian doctrine of original sin does not turn, then, on its attributing a bias to evil, to man, as at present constituted. He himself attributes total depravity to man from the first moment of his becoming a free agent, and that is the same as to say from the first moment of his becoming man. It turns in the first instance on the tracing by the Augustinians of the bias to evil back to Adam—despite his own recognition of an effect of Adam’s fall, through “physical depravity,” on humanity, increasing its liability to sin. And it turns secondly on the nature of the depravity attributed by the Augustinians to man. Finney will not hear of the predication of moral depravity to anything but “violations of moral law” and the “free volitions by which these violations are perpetuated.”<sup>387</sup> “All sin,” he declares,<sup>388</sup> “is actual, and ... no other than actual transgression can justly be called sin.” He knows and will know nothing therefore of a sinful “nature,” or “constitution” as he likes to call it, embodying his argument in a word. It is his psychology which is at fault. The soul, to him, consists of its substance and its acts; there is nothing more, and there is room for nothing more—for such things, for example, as permanent, though separable, dispositions. “We deny,” he says,<sup>389</sup> “that the

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<sup>387</sup> P. 372.

<sup>388</sup> P. 395.

<sup>389</sup> P. 391.

human constitution is morally depraved ... because it is impossible that sin should be a quality of the substance of soul or body. It is, and must be, a quality of choice or intention, and not of substance.” He will not allow that *tertium datur*. If sin, he declares,<sup>390</sup> “be anything, it must be either substance or action.” He will allow no other than these two categories. His psychology compels him thus to reject any and every doctrine which appears to him to imply anything permanent in the soul, permanently affecting its actions, except the bare soul itself. He therefore constantly speaks as if the Augustinians thought of the sinfulness of the soul as a modification of the soul itself in its very substance, or else as the addition of another substance to the soul; as if, in a word, they were all Flacians. To him on the contrary, everything which is not the substance of the soul is one of its acts; and as he cannot attribute sinfulness to the soul itself, he therefore confines all sin to actual sinning. The tree is not good and its fruit good: we are to be content with the good fruits. The agent is lost in his acts, and the practical result is pure activism. The question comes to be, Is the man good or bad, or only his acts? Leonard Woods, in a passage characterized by great force and simplicity of language, at once points out and determines the exact issue. “Holiness or unholiness,” says he,<sup>391</sup> “belongs primarily and essentially to *man himself*, as an intelligent, moral being, and to his *actions* secondarily and consequentially.... The connection between the character of the actions and the character of the agent is invariable. Take an unrenewed sinner.... It is necessary that he should be born again. *He*, the *man*, must be created anew; and if he is created anew, it will be *unto good works*: not that *good works* must be created, he himself remaining unchanged; but that *he* must be created anew, and then, as a matter of course, good works will be performed.... To say that regeneration *consists in* good moral exercises, that is, in loving God and obeying his commands, seems to me to be an abuse of language. It is as un-philosophical and strange, as to say, that the birth of a child consists in his breathing, or that the creation of the sun consists in his shining.”

The affiliations of Finney’s notion here are obviously with that Pelagianizing doctrine of concupiscence which infested the Middle Ages and was transmitted by them to the Roman Church. It differs from that doctrine at this point only in its completer Pelagianism. Like it, it conceives of man as persisting, under whatever curse it may allow the fall to have brought upon him, *in puris naturalibus*; and, in order to sustain this position, it denies moral character to all the movements of the human soul, deliberate volitions in view of moral inducements alone excepted. It was natural that the attention alike of Finney in sustaining and of his critics in assailing this contention was focused in the first instance on its bearing on those affectional movements—love, hate, malice, compassionateness—in the manifestations of which the man in the street is prone to see moral character especially exhibited. Having the courage of his convictions, Finney boldly proclaimed these affectional movements without any moral character whatever; and thus fell into a body of startling paradoxes which made him the easy mark of ridicule. John Woodbridge expounds his teaching in the following fashion:<sup>392</sup> “Concupiscence is reduced to the blameless, though, when they become excessive, somewhat dangerous cravings of physical appetite. Supreme self-love is declared to be an essential

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<sup>390</sup> P. 392.

<sup>391</sup> “Works,” 1851, ii. pp. 537–538.

<sup>392</sup> “Theological Essays Reprinted from the Princeton Review,” 1846, p. 436.

characteristic of intelligent moral agency, against which there is no law; which is the spring of all virtue as well as of vice; and to which no more blame can be attached than to the pulsations of the heart, or the vibrations of a pendulum. Affections, as such, have no character; they are but the innocent susceptibilities of our nature, and their most violent workings are innocent, except so far as they are produced or modified by a previous deliberate act of will. In all other cases, they are passive emotions, like the involuntary impressions made upon the brain by the bodily senses. It follows, on this principle, that love to God and hatred of him, are equally indifferent things; and that they become praiseworthy or criminal, solely in consequence of their connection with some previous purpose of the mind.” What the moral man above everything has to do, is, recognizing the purely “constitutional” nature of his affectional movements, to abstract himself from them altogether, and to determine all his activities by voluntary choices made in view of the perception of the supreme intrinsic value of the good of being. To be governed in any action whatever by our constitutional affections, whatever they may be—whether what in the common estimation would be called wicked or what in that estimation would be called good, alike—is in view of the supreme obligation that rests upon us to direct our activities to the one end of the good of being, no longer merely unmoral but in the highest degree immoral. It is preferring self-gratification to that benevolence which is the sum of virtue. There is no more telling page in Charles Hodge’s very telling review of the first volume of Finney’s “Lectures on Systematic Theology,”<sup>393</sup> than that in which he develops the consequences of this position. “The sin does not lie,” in Finney’s view, he reminds us,<sup>394</sup> “in the nature of the feeling, but in the will’s being determined by any feeling.” “It matters not what kind of desire it is,” Finney declares, “if it is desire that governs the will, this is selfishness,” and therefore, “the choice of anything because it is desired is selfishness and sin.” “Mr. Finney is beautifully consistent in all this,” comments Hodge,<sup>395</sup> “and in the consequences, which of necessity flow from his doctrine. He admits that if a man pays his debts from a sense of justice, or feeling of conscientiousness, he is therein and therefore just as wicked as if he stole a horse. Or if a man preaches the gospel from a desire to glorify God and benefit his fellow men, he is just as wicked for so doing as a pirate. We may safely challenge Hurtado de Mendoza, Sanchez, or Molina to beat that.” The illustrations which Hodge employs in this extract are not his, but Finney’s own,<sup>396</sup> and they may help to indicate to us the thoroughness

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<sup>393</sup> *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*, April, 1847, pp. 268 ff.

<sup>394</sup> P. 271.

<sup>395</sup> P. 272.

<sup>396</sup> “Lectures on Systematic Theology,” 1851, p. 266: “He may be prevented” from committing commercial injustice, “by a constitutional or phrenological conscientiousness, or sense of justice. But this is only a feeling of the sensibility, and, if restrained only by this, he is just as absolutely selfish as if he had stolen a horse in obedience to acquisitiveness.” So, page 295: “If the selfish man were to preach the gospel, it would be only because, upon the whole, it was most pleasing or gratifying to himself, and not at all for the sake of the good of being, as an end. If he should become a pirate, it would be for exactly the same reason.... Whichever course he takes ... with the same degree of light it must involve the same degree of guilt.” By the “selfish man” in these extracts, there is not meant a man unusually selfish: “selfishness” is only the mark



with which he cleansed our affectional movements from all moral character. Pure will plus external inducement—which may be in the way of temptation to evil, or may be in the way of incitement to good—that is all that comes into consideration in our moral judgments.

One of the gains which Finney felt himself to obtain from his denial of all “constitutional depravity,” was that there was nothing left in man after his “conversion” which could act as *fomes peccati*, and sways his volitions sin-ward. He was perfectly free to admit that we must begin by denying the sinfulness of “concupiscence,” if we are to end by affirming “entire sanctification.” “Those persons,” he says, “who maintain the sinfulness of the constitutional appetites, must of course deny that man can ever be entirely sanctified in this life.” From this point of view also, he is eager to show “not only that sanctification implies merely ‘present obedience,’ ‘right volitions now,’ and produces ‘no change of our nature so that we become good in ourselves,’ but that there is nothing ‘in us,’ antecedent to moral action, operating as the occasion of sinful exercises, which *needs* to be eradicated or *changed* in order to our being in a state of ‘entire sanctification’ ”; and “to *refute* the doctrine, that apart from present transgressions, ‘there might be that in a person which would lay the foundation for his sinning at a future time.’ ”<sup>397</sup> If there is nothing in us from which we need to be saved except our “commitment to self-gratification as the end of our being,” and nothing to be in us to which we are to be saved except a like “commitment to the good of being as the end of our being,” it is easier to believe that the passage from the one to the other—being only a passage from one purpose to another—may be made absolutely at once; must be made, indeed, if made at all, absolutely at once. It is according to Finney, thus, only our purpose which “needs to be radically changed.” What we call a “wicked heart” is only a purpose; what we call a “good heart” is only a purpose; and therefore Joseph I. Foot calls this theology “the heartless theology”—the theology, that is, which goes no deeper in its conception of salvation than a simple change of purpose, which conceives that all that happens to a man when he is saved, absolutely all that happens to him, is a change of purpose. A change of purpose is, naturally, an act of our own, and Finney therefore not only identifies regeneration and conversion, but polemicizes against all attempts to erect a distinction between them.<sup>398</sup> We regenerate ourselves: only the man himself can “change his choice,” and if he will not do it, “it is impossible that it should be changed”—“neither God, nor any other being, can regenerate him, if he will not turn.”<sup>399</sup> It is we ourselves then who make ourselves holy, and that at a stroke. For regeneration “implies an entire present change of moral character, that is, a change from entire sinfulness to entire holiness.”<sup>400</sup>—a “present entire obedience to God.”<sup>401</sup> After this it is only a question of maintenance—of the maintenance of that “radical change of ultimate

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in Finney’s nomenclature of the imperfect, as “benevolence” is of the perfect man. To act on selfish motives means with him to act on any other motives than the good of being as supreme end.

<sup>397</sup> The quotation is from Canfield, “An Exposition, etc.,” pp. 17 ff.

<sup>398</sup> P. 408.

<sup>399</sup> P. 413.

<sup>400</sup> P. 413.

<sup>401</sup> P. 994.

intention,” that change from a selfish ultimate choice to benevolent ultimate choice, which we may call indifferently repentance,<sup>402</sup> or faith,<sup>403</sup> or conversion, or regeneration, or sanctification.

It is quite clear that what Finney gives us is less a theology than a system of morals. God might be eliminated from it entirely without essentially changing its character. All virtue, all holiness, is made to consist in an ethical determination of will. “What is virtue?” he asks, and answers: “It consists in consecration to the right end; to the end to which God is consecrated.”<sup>404</sup> And “all holiness,” he defines,<sup>405</sup> consists in “the right exercise of our own will or agency.” The supreme ultimate end to which in the right exercise of our will we must direct ourselves, if we would be virtuous or holy—these things are one—is the good of being. God is of course included in this being, but only as part of the whole—Being—to which our benevolent purpose is directed. And He is just as much subject to this universal ethical law as we are. He too must make the good of being His supreme ultimate end, on pain of becoming, as we would in like circumstances become, instead of as holy as He can be, as wicked as He can be. We are all, He and we, members of one ethical body, governed by one ethical law, and pursuing a common ethical course. But since the same law governs God and us, it is clear that we are dealing with pure ethics, not religion. God has no religion. And since this ethical law sets the good of being, interpreted as happiness, as distinguished from our own happiness, described as self-gratification, or selfishness, as the supreme ultimate end, the choosing of which includes all virtue—God cannot be held to be the sole or even the chief object included under the term, “Being,” the good of which is our supreme ultimate end. For God at least to choose His own good—or happiness—solely or chiefly as His supreme ultimate end—would not that be that selfishness which is declared to constitute us as wicked as we can be, instead of as holy as we can be? Finney constantly employs the double phrase, “God and the universe” as the synonym of Being in this reference; and we may think it possible that he wished the two elements in the composite idea to be distributed differently in our case and in God’s—that in our case it should be God along with the universe, in God’s, the universe along of course with Himself—as even we include ourselves in the Being whose good we seek. But can we even imagine God taking this subordinate place in His own eyes, attributing “greater intrinsic value”—which Finney says is the reason why we are to seek the happiness of the universe above our own—to the universe than to His own all glorious Being? Must not His own glory be to Him also, as it must be to us, His supreme ultimate end? We said that God might be eliminated entirely from Finney’s ethical theory without injury to it: are we not prepared now to say that He might be eliminated from it

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<sup>402</sup> P. 593: Repentance “implies a return to full obedience to the moral law”; “regeneration and repentance consist in the heart’s return to full obedience, for the time being, to this law.”

<sup>403</sup> P. 537: “Present evangelical faith implies a state of present sinlessness.... Its existence in the heart must be inconsistent with present sin there. Faith is an attitude of the will, and is wholly incompatible with present rebellion of the will against Christ.”

<sup>404</sup> P. 46.

<sup>405</sup> P. 693.

with some advantage to it.<sup>406</sup>

“True religion,” says Finney, in one of his numerous brief summaries of his general views,<sup>407</sup> “consists in benevolence, or in heart obedience to God.” This identification of “benevolence” and “obedience” does not appear obvious to the uninstructed mind and requires some explication. Finney discovers the intermediating idea in the following consideration. “It,” that is, religion, “consists essentially in the will’s being yielded to the will of God”—that is, no doubt, in “obedience.” But he continues epexegetically: “in embracing the same end that he embraces”—and this adoption of His end as our end (how that sounds like Albrecht Ritschl!) may possibly be considered “benevolence.” We read on: “and yielding implicit obedience to him in all our lives, or in our efforts to secure that end.” “This,” he now adds, “constitutes the essence of all true religion.” In that case the essence of religion is obedience; and it can be benevolence only as obedience may be construed as rendered, not because it is due, but out of good will; as if we obeyed God, not because He is God, whom to obey is our primary obligation, but because we are good and glad to subject ourselves to another for His pleasing. Religion being obedience, it is distinctly a matter of will, and also of conduct, the product of will. Voluntary subjection is its form, although the form of this subjection is described as the adoption of the Divine end as our own and the prosecution of it (always under the Divine prescription) with all our might. The adoption of the end of God as our end, and obedience to the will of God, are not quite the same conception: they are assimilated to one another by the requirement that we shall prosecute this end when adopted in implicit obedience to the Divine prescription. Clearly this is a religion of law, and the heart of it is obedience: and these are ethical conceptions. Having thus made religion to consist “essentially in yielding the will to God in implicit obedience”—that is, an affair of will—Finney now represents the emotional life of the religious man as, not a part, but merely a consequence of his religion. “The feelings or affections, or the involuntary emotions, are rather a consequence, than strictly a part of true religion.” Faith itself can be thought of as “an essential element of true religion,” only because it is “not an involuntary, but a voluntary state of mind”; that is, an act of will. Religion is thus conceived as through and through an affair of the will. “It should never be forgotten,” we read,<sup>408</sup> “that all true religion consists in voluntary states of mind, and that the true and only way to attain to true religion, is to look at and understand the exact thing to be done, and then to put forth at once the voluntary exercise required.”<sup>409</sup>

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<sup>406</sup> G. F. Wright devotes an article in *The Bibliotheca Sacra*, April, 1876, pp. 381–392, to “Dr. Hodge’s Misrepresentations of President Finney’s System of Theology”—referring only to the remarks on Finney made by Hodge in his “Systematic Theology.” The first of his complaints is that Hodge in one way or another represents Finney as “putting the universe in the place of God.” Hodge of course does not mean that Finney makes this substitution expressly, but only virtually. We think that is not an unfair statement of the logical results of some elements of his system.

<sup>407</sup> P. 716.

<sup>408</sup> P. 630.

<sup>409</sup> Cf. Walter E. C. Wright, *The Bibliotheca Sacra*, July, 1900, p. 431: “The religion of Oberlin from the first was intensely ethical: it concerned actions far more than feelings.”

In the preface of his “Lectures on Systematic Theology,” Finney declares<sup>410</sup> that the subject of the book is “Mind in its relations to Moral Law,” and that what he has said on “Moral Law,” and on the “Foundation of Moral Obligation” is the key to the whole. This remark seems to have a narrower reference as it appears in the first edition of the “Lectures,” but clearly it refers to the whole treatise as it is repeated in the second. It may be taken as revealing Finney’s own consciousness of the essentially ethical character of his treatise. It is a system of teleological ethics which he presents to us; or, to be more precise, we may perhaps say in modern phraseology, that it is a system of hedonistic as distinguished from eudaemonistic ethics, that is to say a system in which “happiness” rather than “welfare”—although of course the two ideas readily run into one another—is the ethical end, the ultimate object to be achieved by action and conduct, the standard and final criterion of what ought to be—by their tendency to achieve which therefore the ethical character of actions is to be estimated. Of course it is not “individualistic” hedonism which Finney teaches, not even merely “altruistic,” to continue to use the phraseology of the modern schools, but “universalistic.” The doctrine which he inculcates is that moral conduct consists in actions directed towards the happiness of all sentient being; from which it follows, to put it briefly, that happiness is the chief good and benevolence the comprehensive virtue, and actions are good or bad according as they do or do not manifest the one and promote the other.<sup>411</sup> If we ask what has become of the “right,” in the sense of the morally excellent, conceived as good *per se*, it can only be said that it has dropped out of sight altogether. The “good” has become the “happiness”—or the “welfare”—of the whole body of sentient beings; and the “right” that which tends to this. We cannot define “happiness”—or “welfare”—so as to include the idea of the “right,” except at the cost of self-contradiction. If there is any such thing as the “right” *per se*, then the right is not what tends to an end, conceived as the supreme good, but just the end itself: we cannot say that the right is what tends to the right. Thus all obligation is reduced strictly to the single obligation to choose the good of being as our supreme ultimate end. The ground of obligation is accordingly declared to be that in this ultimate end which makes it incumbent on us to choose it, namely its intrinsic value to being. “The ground of obligation,” says Finney,<sup>412</sup> “is that reason, or consideration, intrinsic in, or belonging to, the nature of an object, which necessitates the rational affirmation, that it ought to be chosen for its own sake.” There is some appearance of logomachy in this reasoning. We choose the good of being as our ultimate end: the ground of our choice of it is that it is worth choosing; that in it which makes it worth choosing is the ground of our obligation to choose it. We do not seem to be told how we know that the good of being, in the sense of its happiness, is the supremely valuable thing in the universe. That is “a first truth of reason.” Finney’s polemic against what he calls barbarously, “rightarianism”<sup>413</sup> is very sharp. He takes us back to the primary sense of the word “right” and seeks to reduce even the connotation of the word itself to the “fit,

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<sup>410</sup> Ed. 1, i. 1846, pp. iv.–v.; ed. 2, 1851, pp. viii.–ix.

<sup>411</sup> Finney is even able to say (“Lectures on Systematic Theology,” p. 951): “Were it not for the relation that virtue is seen to sustain to happiness in general, no moral agent would conceive of it as valuable.”

<sup>412</sup> P. 42.

<sup>413</sup> Pp. 54 ff.

suitable, agreeable to the nature and relations of moral agents.” This representation, however, is only partially correct, although there is of course a sense in which right and wrong express what is straight and what is crooked. “Right” has the form of a past participle, and it is not overpressing its suggestion to say that it expresses not so much the straight as the straightened: behind it lies the idea of rule, regulation, government: it is cognate not only with regular but regal—in short it expresses “conformed to rule,” with a subaudition of authority. The atmosphere out of which it comes is that of theism, not of naturalism; and the righteous man is accordingly not the man whose conduct is suitable to his nature but the man whose conduct is in accordance with law. The ethics of right is accordingly justly spoken of as “authoritative morality,” the ethics which imposes itself as obligatory *per se*, and not merely on the ground of expediency calculated from its tendency to an end presumed to be a good, supposedly the supreme good. The right is not a means to something else conceived of as the supreme good, but is itself the supreme good imposed on us as our duty by an adequate authority.

This seems to Finney fundamentally wrong, and he endeavors to reduce it to absurdity. “If the rightarian be the true theory,” he reasons,<sup>414</sup> “then disinterested benevolence is sin. According to this scheme, the right, and not the good of being is the end to, and for which, God and all moral agents ought to live. According to this theory, disinterested benevolence can never be duty, can never be right, but always and necessarily wrong.... If moral agents ought to will the right for the sake of the right, or will good, not for the sake of the good, but for the sake of the relation of rightness existing between the choice and the good, then to will the good for its own sake is sin. It is not willing the right end. It is willing the good and not the right as an ultimate end. These are opposing theories. Both cannot be true. Which is the right to will, the good for its own sake, or the right? Let universal reason answer.” Undoubtedly these are opposing theories; and universal conscience might well be left to decide whether we should will the good because it is right to do so, or will the right because it tends to a good result. And in this lies the answer to the over-strained logic which Finney is plying. That we are to do the right because it is right, and not because of any tendency we perceive in it to advance the good of the universe, by no means makes the practice of “disinterested benevolence” a sin. It may be right to will the good for its own sake. But, you cry out, you cannot will the good because it is right and for its own sake at the same time. Why not, if it is right to will the good for its own sake? The universal ground of moral obligation is that we must do right. The particular ground of this special obligation lies in the value of the object chosen. The value of the object chosen—but, mind you, its *moral* value—indicates the rightness of its choice. The category of the right is not an empty category, it has content: the notion is not a purely formal one, it is concrete. One of the things which is right is benevolence. When we choose benevolence as a rule of life we do right; and it is a very twisted logic which declares that he who chooses benevolence as a rule of life must do wrong—because he ought to choose right as his rule of life. He ought. That is the very reason why he ought to choose benevolence as his rule of life. It is right.

Finney having endeavored to reduce “Rightarianism” to absurdity Charles Hodge is doubtless justified in retorting with a happier attempt on his part to reduce Finney’s

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<sup>414</sup> P. 57.

teleological ethics to absurdity.<sup>415</sup> He says it belongs to the same mintage with Jesuit “intentionalism”—“the means are justified by the end”—and recommends Pascal’s “Provincial Letters” as a good book to be read at Oberlin. When stated in an abstract form the observation made by Hodge is so immediately obvious, as not to require argument for its justification. It is the very essence of a system of teleological ethics that the means acquire all the moral quality which they possess from their relation as means to their end. It was the taunt that this involved, as truly as Jesuit “intentionalism,” the contention that it is right to do evil that good may come, which stung Finney to his unavailing answer.<sup>416</sup> The point of the comparison lies in the principle common to both Jesuit “intentionalism” and Finney’s teleological ethics that “whatever proceeds from right intention is right.” From this the Jesuits proceeded to infer that it is therefore right to do evil that good may come. Can Finney escape the same inference? Everybody, of course, understands that a right intention is necessary to the rightness of any action. The point raised is whether that is all that is necessary. Is it true that if your intention is right, your action is right? This is the Jesuit doctrine: the rightness of the intention makes the action right. It is Finney’s doctrine also. Does he not teach that all that makes any conduct right is the end to which it is directed? What Hodge wishes to carry home to the mind is that this is really a vicious principle: everywhere and in all applications vicious. While the rightness of the intention is essential to the rightness of the action, it does not of itself make the action right. The “matter” of the action, as the Schoolmen express it, must be right, too. The act must be right for “the matter” of it, as well as in the intention of it. Intrinsically good ends must be sought by intrinsically good means: neither does the good end make an evil means good, nor does a good means make the evil end good. Francis of Assisi had a good end in view when he gave alms: he wished to relieve distress. When he stole the money from his master’s till to give the alms, he used bad means for his good end. The goodness of the end does not sanctify the means. The goodness of the end, in point of fact, never transmits its goodness to the means used to attain it: And this destroys at once all schemes of teleological ethics.

In reply to Hodge, Finney says a great deal which is wholly ineffective because not to the point. The one thing which he says to the point is that in his system the choice of the end includes in it the choice of the means. There is but one system of means which is adapted to achieve the good of being. This system of means and its appropriate end are bound together in an indissoluble unity. To choose the end is at the same time, and by the same act, to choose this system of means. We cannot do anything we will and call that a means to that end. We must do just the things which are the real means to that end, in order to secure it. The rightness of these means is given to them by their inherent relation as means to this supreme ultimate end, to which they are related as its only means. It is their inherent relation to the end with which they form one system which makes them right; and the only definition that can be given of them is that they are the fit means to the supreme ultimate end, chosen for its own sake and organically related as the supreme good to the fit means for securing it. The effect of this representation is to shift the whole matter from the subjective to the objective sphere. It amounts to saying that he acts rightly who does the things which in point of fact tend to the supreme good, not he whose

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<sup>415</sup> *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*, April, 1847, pp. 259 ff.

<sup>416</sup> “Lectures on Systematic Theology,” pp. 929 ff.

actions are governed by the intention of subserving the good of God and the universe. And in thus shifting the matter from the subjective to the objective sphere, the whole character of the scheme is altered. It is no longer the supreme ultimate intention which gives its moral quality to all subordinate choices and executive volitions—which is the very essence of Finney’s morals—but the intrinsically good end which cannot be secured except by the intrinsically good means in organic union with it. The good end is no longer conceived as making the means chosen to secure it good; it is conceived as related to a system of means which are themselves good and which form with the end a good system. Finney is obviously floundering here. In his system things—whether means or other things—are not good in themselves: they receive their goodness for their relation—as means or otherwise—to the supreme ultimate end, which is defined as the good of being. He cannot subintroduce here an attribution of intrinsic goodness to them: what makes these means good is in his system solely their relation as means to the supreme ultimate end. He can, no doubt objectify the whole system of ends and means, and bid us conceive them—the end as the final term and all the means leading to it—as an objective entity which as a whole is good; a whole made up of its constituent parts all of which are good, standing off in a sort of conceptual reality to our contemplation. And he can then say, See, there is the end; and see, here are the means leading up to it—appropriate means, good as the end itself is good; and see, he that chooses the end must choose with it the whole concatenated system of means and ends; they cannot be separated; they form one whole. But, doing so, he is merely objectifying for the sake of visualizing it, a system which is really subjective: no such objective system exists, in his view, in fact. He deceives himself, if he imagines that he thus gives the means in his system any actually independent goodness, and can properly speak of them as “good as the end itself is good.” They seem thus good only as they stand in this objectified system, which is a purely mental construction. Out of this objectified system they have no goodness: they acquire goodness only by being brought into, and as they are brought into each man’s actual subjective system. It remains true that any means, any whatever, which are brought into a system of means looking towards the indicated end, is in Finney’s view made good by its relation as means to this end. That is intrinsic to any system of teleological ethics. And that is “intentionalism.” What he teaches is, not that our good intention cannot be secured unless we employ good means, but that our good intention makes the means requisite for securing it good.

As the end of his long life drew near, Finney published a tract—called the “Psychology of Righteousness”—in which he repeats in popular language the teaching of his lifetime, thus certifying us that it remains his teaching to the very end. Here he propounds afresh his fundamental ethical theory and erects on its basis anew his Pelagian doctrine of salvation. Righteousness here too is discovered only in our ultimate choice, from which all the righteousness of subordinate choices, volitions, actions derives. And our ultimate choice is righteous only when it is the choice of the good of universal being. “The moral quality, then, of unselfish benevolence is righteousness or moral rightness.” “This ultimate, immanent, supreme preference is the holy heart of a moral agent. Out of it proceeds, directly or indirectly, the whole moral or spiritual life of the individual.” A sinner is *ex vi verbi* a selfish moral agent: how can he attain to the righteousness which consists in his contradictory, in universal benevolence? Why, of course, by a change in his ultimate choice. “The first righteous act possible to an unregenerate sinner is to

change his heart, or the supreme ultimate preference of his soul.” If this is the first act, it is also the last—for it is the whole thing. The only thing that has moral character is the ultimate choice, and, the ultimate choice having become benevolence, the sinner has wholly ceased to be a sinner, and become altogether righteous. This great change is effected by the sinner “taking such a view of the character and claims of God as to induce him to renounce his self-seeking spirit and come into sympathy with God.” You see, nothing but better knowledge is required; better knowledge leads to a better life. The ministrations of the Holy Ghost are, to be sure, not excluded; but the whole work of the Spirit is reduced to the mode of illumination. All that the Spirit does is to give the sinner a better view of the claims of God. “A sinner attains, then, to righteousness only through the teachings and inspirations of the Holy Spirit.” “It is by the truths of the gospel that the Holy Spirit induces this change in sinful man.” “This revelation of divine love, when powerfully set home by the Holy Spirit, is an effectual calling.” The effect of the change thus brought about is that the sinner ceases to be a sinner, and becomes, at once on the change taking place, perfect. “A truly regenerated soul cannot live a sinful life.” “The new heart does not, cannot sin. This John in his first epistle expressly affirms. A benevolent, supreme ultimate choice cannot produce selfish subordinate choices or volitions.” A perfectionism is asserted here of every true Christian, from the inception of his Christianity; a perfectionism resting absolutely on the sinner’s own ultimate choice.

But now we are told, to our astonishment, that this perfect Christian may *backslide*. How he manages it remains unexplained, if “the new heart does not, cannot sin,” as John is said to teach—if the benevolent supreme ultimate choice which he has made cannot produce selfish subordinate choices or volitions. Finney, however, asserts it and argues it. If the change wrought in the sinner, he says, “were a physical one, or a change of the very nature of the sinner,” this backsliding would indeed be impossible. But as nothing has happened to the sinner himself—as he has only been induced by better knowledge, to change his ultimate supreme purpose—there is no reason why he may not change it back again. This is of course making himself again a new heart—this time a bad one, as Adam and Eve did. Indeed, a man may “change his heart back and forth.” Otherwise “a sinner could not be required to make to himself a new heart, nor could a Christian sin after regeneration.” When a man has backslidden, there is nothing for him but to begin afresh and do his first work over again. In point of fact he has not “backslidden” but apostatized. And now to make the appearance of contradiction complete, we are told that “righteousness is sustained in the human soul by the indwelling of Christ through faith and in no other way”; and “purposes or resolutions” are spoken of which are not “self-originated”; but are due to the Spirit of Christ. Fortunately this antinomy, left unresolved in this brief popular tract, is abundantly resolved in Finney’s earlier and more extended writings. In these writings all that is good in the whole sphere of Christian activity is ascribed without reserve both to the indwelling Christ and to the human agent; and the antinomy is resolved by the explanation that the action of the Spirit of Christ is purely suasive and the whole execution is the work of man himself in his active powers.

Take the following passages together. “It”—that is the doctrine of entire sanctification—“ascribes the whole of salvation and sanctification from first to last, not only till the soul is sanctified, but at every moment while it remains in that state, to the indwelling Spirit, and influence, and grace of Christ. A state of entire sanctification can never be attained ... by any works of law, or works of any kind, performed in your own



strength, irrespective of the grace of God. By this I do not mean, that, were you disposed to exert your natural powers aright, you could not at once obey the law in the exercise of your natural strength, and continue to do so. But I do mean, that as you are wholly indisposed to use your natural powers aright, without the grace of God, no efforts that you will actually make in your own strength, or independent of his grace, will ever result in your entire sanctification.<sup>417</sup> “By the assertion, that the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of Christ, is received by faith, to reign in the heart, it is intended, that he is actually trusted in, or submitted to by faith, and his influence suffered to control us. He does not guide and control us, by irresistible power or force, but faith confides the guidance of our souls to him. Faith receives and confides in him, and consents to be governed and directed by him. As his influence is moral, and not physical, it is plain that he can influence us no farther ... than we trust or confide in him.”<sup>418</sup> “The Holy Spirit controls, directs, and sanctifies the soul, not by a physical influence, nor by impulses nor by impressions made on the sensibility, but by enlightening and convincing the intellect, and thus quickening the conscience.”<sup>419</sup> Everything that the Spirit does for us is thus reduced to enlightenment; everything we receive from Him to knowledge. We are exhorted, it is true, to renounce our own strength and rely on, draw on, live by the strength of Christ. But the term “strength” here is only a figure of speech. When an attempt is made to explain what precisely is meant by such exhortations,<sup>420</sup> what we are told is that in the first place they are not meant “in the antinomian, do-nothing, sit-still sense” of the words. It is not to “sit down and do nothing,” leaving it to Christ to do it for us. This is, so far so good. But it is not so well said when we hear next, that what we are to do is to lean “upon Christ, as a helpless man would lean upon the arm or shoulder of a strong man, to be borne about in some benevolent enterprise.” A kind of coöperation is depicted here which makes Christ merely our helper. The intention is to exploit our “natural ability,” and accordingly we read soon: “This renunciation of his own strength is not a denial of his natural ability.... It is a complete recognition of his ability, were he disposed to do all that God requires of him.” “Strength” then is distinctly the wrong word to use in this connection. We do not need Christ’s strength: we have enough of our own. We need from Christ only an adequate inducement to use our own strength aright. The soul has “been too long the slave of lust ever to assert or to maintain its spiritual supremacy, as the master, instead of the slave of appetite”; and we need help in asserting ourselves. The idea of strength here intrudes again and we read that “the will or heart is so weak in the presence of temptation, that there is no hope of its maintaining its integrity, unsupported by strength from Christ,” and it must therefore renounce its dependence on its own strength and cast itself on Christ. We cannot forget, however, that Christ acts on the “will or heart” only by instruction. And even here the conception continues to be only that of the use of Christ to supplement defects. The illustration employed is that of a lame man with his crutches. Christ is the believer’s crutches; and we are exhorted to make these crutches, that is Christ, so much ours that we use them instinctively and can no more forget them when we essay to walk than we can forget our own feet. This is what it is to walk in Christ.

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<sup>417</sup> “Lectures on Systematic Theology,” p. 629.

<sup>418</sup> P. 306.

<sup>419</sup> P. 307.

<sup>420</sup> Pp. 667–668.

More illuminating still is a passage<sup>421</sup> in which Finney is attempting to discriminate his view of “the means and conditions of sanctification” from that of the “New Divinity”—from which he felt himself to have come out, or to have been thrust out. The New Divinity, he notes, like himself, rejects “the doctrine of constitutional moral depravity”—that is, of “original sin”—and consequently the doctrine of “physical regeneration and sanctification”—that is of “making the tree good” rather than the fruit only. But, having rejected these doctrines, its adherents, says he, have unfortunately lost sight of Christ as our sanctification also. They accordingly “have fallen into a self-righteous view of sanctification, and have held that sanctification is effected by works, or by forming holy habits.” Over against this very reprehensible drift of doctrine—a drift, let us say frankly, very natural in the adherents of the New Divinity—Finney wishes to reassert our dependence on Christ for sanctification. The precise thing he asserts is that sanctification is by faith as opposed to works. And then he explains: “That is, faith receives Christ in all his offices, and in all the fulness of his relations to the soul; and Christ, when received, works in the soul to will and to do of all his good pleasure, not by a physical, but by a moral or persuasive working.” He cannot assert that Christ works in the soul without adding this limitation! It is in point of fact the key to his entire teaching. It too is the assertion that since Christ’s only working in the soul is suasive in character, the sanctification of the soul is effected by itself. So that the only conceivable distinction between the rejected view of the New Divinity and Finney’s own must be thought to lie in the answer to the question whether the works, done in both views alike by the soul itself and only by the soul itself, are done under persuasion from Christ or not. “Observe,” says Finney now: “he influences the will.” That is all that Christ does: He influences the will. “This,” Finney continues, “must be by a moral influence, if its”—that is the will’s—“actings are intelligent and free, as they must be to be holy.” “That is, if he influences the will to obey God, it must be by a divine moral suasion.”

Is there, really, anything, then, which distinguishes this view of the relation of sanctification in Christ from that ascribed to the New Divinity? Nothing. For the New Divinity did not at all deny that the soul was influenced in its sanctifying walk by the persuasions of the Holy Spirit. That was rather one of its contentions, the only rag of Christian doctrine it had left at this point to cover its nakedness. With all Finney’s devout references to the indwelling Christ, dependence on the strength of Christ, and the like, he means nothing more. The only even apparent distinction between the two views lies in Finney’s calling his view a sanctification “by faith,” and setting it over against the other as a sanctification “by effort.” And as he expounds his view, that is a distinction without a difference. He now goes on to say, however, after his chosen fashion of speech, that the soul, never in any instance obeys God “in a spiritual and true sense,” “except it be thus influenced by the indwelling Spirit of Christ.” And he hints that when we receive Christ in any relation, He is full and perfect in that relation—so that, we suppose, if we receive Him for sanctification, we are perfectly sanctified. This, however, is thrown in incidentally. The main thing in this exhortation is the staring Pelagianism of the whole construction. We believe in Christ for our sanctification; He then acts persuasively in our souls for sanctification; under this persuasion we act holily; that is our sanctification. It is all a sanctification of acts. We are not ourselves cleansed; but then there is no need of

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<sup>421</sup> Pp. 683–684.

cleansing us, since we were never ourselves unclean. We were only a bundle of constitutional appetites, passions, and propensities, innocent in themselves, which we have been misusing through a bad will. What needs correcting is only this bad will into a good one. And the appropriate, the only, instrument for the correction of our willing is persuasion. Moved by this persuasion we “make ourselves a good heart”—we “change our mind,” as the phrase goes—and that is the whole of it. It is to this that Finney reduces Christianity. And as this ready making for ourselves a new heart, makes us a perfectly holy heart, it is with this ease and despatch that according to Finney’s form of perfectionism we become perfect. That is in brief the final form which Oberlin Perfectionism took.

The preaching of perfectionism with such energy and persistency by men of such intellectual force and pulpit power as Mahan and Finney and their coadjutors, of course had its effect. Oberlin naturally—college and community—became a perfectionist center. The majority of the students, perhaps also the majority of the inhabitants, were more or less deeply moved by the propaganda: many definitely adopted the new teaching and endeavored both to live it themselves and to communicate it to others. The surrounding country, especially that most closely affiliated with Oberlin in its general type of thinking—the Western Reserve of Ohio, and to the east, Western and Central New York, to the west Michigan and the North Western country—became so far infected that scattered groups of “Oberlin Perfectionists” appeared here and there through it.<sup>422</sup> The aggressions of the Oberlin propaganda, the threat of a wider extension of its teachings, the nature of the doctrine itself, naturally called out intense opposition. The whole region affected became the scene of violent controversy. The local periodical press of course reflected the state of feeling of the several communities. And soon the ecclesiastical courts were drawn into the debate. Presbyterian Presbyteries and Congregational Associations vied with one another in reasoned condemnations of the new doctrine. One of the remarkable circumstances connected with these official condemnations was, that as they came largely from the region of Finney’s, and to a less extent of Mahan’s, early ministry and revivalistic triumphs, or from regions bound closely to it by ties of common blood and feeling, they were often penned by men who had been associated with them or had at least strongly sympathized with them, in their work hitherto. They were being wounded, they complained, in the house of their friends. S. C. Aiken, who had been a pastor at Utica during Finney’s great revival there and one of his chief supporters during the whole course of his revival campaigns in Central New York, was a signatory along with its actual author, S. B. Canfield, of the able refutation of Oberlin Perfectionism put out by the Presbytery of Cleveland in 1841. N. S. S. Beman, with whose collaboration Finney’s remarkable revival at Troy had been carried on, was the actual author of the uncompromising refutation put out in the same year by the Presbytery of Troy. George Duffield prepared the “Warning against Error,” meaning Finney’s system of teaching, which was sent forth by the Presbytery of Detroit in 1847, with the approval of the Synod of Michigan; and perhaps we may add here, although it was a private publication, that

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<sup>422</sup> Cf. P. H. Fowler, “Historical Sketch of Presbyterianism within the Bounds of the Synod of Central New York,” 1877, p. 137: “‘Oberlin Perfectionism’ had considerable currency for a time, and Chenango and Cortland and other Presbyteries condemned it, and Onandaga Presbytery published an able refutation of it.”

Lyman Beecher printed about 1844 a letter against perfectionism, which was thought important enough for John Morgan to answer it in *The Oberlin Quarterly Review*.<sup>423</sup> In the fateful year of 1841, the Presbyteries of Huron and Grand River in the Western Reserve, and of Richland near by, also passed condemnatory actions: and decided action in the same sense was taken soon afterward by the New York Presbyteries of Chenango, Cortland, Onondaga, Rochester. Further afield the Presbytery of Newark had been led to early action, and soon the Presbytery of North River; and it was not long before the Synods of New York and New Jersey<sup>424</sup> and of Genesee were compelled by appeals to act in the same sense. Similar action was taken by the General Association of Connecticut in 1841, by the General Association of New York in 1844, by the Genesee Association in 1844, by the Fox River Congregational Union of Illinois in 1845. The Cleveland Convention in 1844, and the Michigan City Convention of 1846 were organized on an anti-Oberlin basis; and in 1848 the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions discharged two missionaries in Siam for holding the Oberlin doctrines. Oberlin very naturally felt itself persecuted, and its historian designates the conflict into which it was drawn as its “baptism of fire.”<sup>425</sup>

Meanwhile, at Oberlin itself the doctrine was making a history which began with enthusiastic acceptance, and passed forward rapidly into indifference and decay. The originators of the doctrine never lost their hold upon it or their zeal for it. Finney was still teaching it up to the end of his long life (died 1875), the whole of which was spent at Oberlin. Mahan, whose connection with Oberlin was severed in 1850, after an unfortunate venture at Cleveland (1850–1854) and a more successful one at Adrian, Michigan (1855–1871), had yet fifteen years or so to spend in England in active propaganda for his favorite doctrine (died 1889). But the vogue of the doctrine at Oberlin was not very long-lived. James H. Fairchild gives us a very illuminating sketch of its fortunes there.<sup>426</sup> “The visible impulse of the movement,” he says, “to a great extent expended itself within the first few years.” Men sought and found with decreasing frequency the special experiences—“the blessing,” “the second conversion”—which were connected with it as first preached. Those who went out to preach “under the

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<sup>423</sup> A letter of Beecher’s printed in his “Autobiography,” ii. p. 435, bearing on perfectionism and showing no sympathy with it, may be consulted. It is interesting to observe that Beecher’s son George appears to have shown, apparently in 1836, some leanings to perfectionism (“Autobiography,” ii. pp. 411–415).

<sup>424</sup> Leonard, as cited, p. 256. Cf. Asa Mahan, “Out of Darkness into Light,” p. 191, where we are told that “the Presbytery of Poughkeepsie, by a special order from the Synod of New York, deposed from the ministry two of its members, Messrs. Hill and Belden, for no other cause than the one fact that they had embraced the Oberlin error.” Leonard puts the incident in 1843; Mahan dates it vaguely as somewhere about 1845: 1843 seems to be right and the Presbytery was, as Leonard gives it, North River. On the incident see further, R. Wheatley, “The Life and Letters of Mrs. Phoebe Palmer,” 1876, p. 267, and for Henry Belden, see the “Princeton Theological Seminary Biographical Catalogue,” 1909, p. 128. For William Hill, *ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>425</sup> D. L. Leonard, as cited, pp. 242 ff. The facts recited above are drawn from Leonard, pp. 256 ff.

<sup>426</sup> *The Congregational Quarterly*, April, 1876, pp. 244 ff.

influence of this fresh experience” came ultimately to permit it to drop into the background. “So far as I am informed,” says Fairchild, “not one among them all continued for any length of time to be recognized as a preacher of these special views.” They did not repudiate their former views; but they found that “they could preach the truth as it is in Jesus more effectively than by giving to their doctrine the odor of Christian perfection, or the higher life.” Whatever their motive was, they ceased to be propagandists of perfectionism. A similar decay of interest in the doctrine was working itself out at Oberlin itself. Confidence “in the style of Christian culture, involving a special experience, which the movement introduced” grew progressively less clear and firm. This special experience—the “blessing”—was not found to be always associated with an advance in Christian attainment and character. On the contrary, it was observed that those who obtained it were apt to be among the less balanced characters of the community. Others who had not sought or found the experiences were not obviously less earnest and effective in Christian work than those who had enjoyed them. Thus the peculiar ideas and experiences connected with the “entire sanctification” movement gradually lost their appeal. Fairchild does not mention them, but there were also scandals to accentuate the decreasing sense of the value of the doctrine. The most shocking of them was probably the lamentable fall from virtue in 1842 of H. C. Taylor, “who had held prominent stations in both church and business affairs, had been a leader in ‘moral reform (social purity),’ and had also been numbered among the ‘sanctified.’”<sup>427</sup>

A tendency has developed itself among recent Oberlin writers, as for example, D. L. Leonard,<sup>428</sup> to represent the whole history of Oberlin Perfectionism as only a temporary aberration which befell the institution in its early days. Leonard speaks of “the perfection episode,” and is happy to say it is altogether a matter of the past. Oberlin has heard nothing of it for years and years—for a generation, he says, writing in 1898. He even goes so far as to suggest that perfectionism was never anything more than a “foible” at Oberlin; a “foible” like its early tendency to Grahamism, and its manual laborism and its temporary misprision of the classics. It may be condoned in those early leaders as their other foibles were condoned; it was a product of the earnestness of their purpose and of the strong determination of their high characters to holy living. Experience has shown, however, that it was a delusion. There were those who received “the blessing” and could not keep it; lapsing speedily into their old “earthy” conditions. There were those who had it, and did not seem to have profited anything by it. It was not “the best, the truest-hearted, the most reliable and useful disciples” who had it; they might on the contrary be “the weak-minded, the shallow, the merely sentimental.” This has been the experience at Oberlin, according to Leonard. Leonard writes confessedly under the influence of Fairchild, and can scarcely be taken as bearing independent witness to anything beyond the attitude toward its early perfectionism which modern Oberlin takes. Changes have befallen Oberlin. The modern Oberlin is not the old Oberlin, and it is not merely the perfectionism of the past that has faded away.

But if, as we are told, its early perfectionism has left no trace of itself at Oberlin, that cannot be said of it elsewhere. There are great religious movements still in existence in which its influence still makes itself felt. Finney’s doctrine of “the simplicity of moral

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<sup>427</sup> D. L. Leonard, as cited, pp. 261 f., cf. p. 38.

<sup>428</sup> As cited, pp. 236–241.

action” continued to be enthusiastically taught even by his successor in the Presidency, J. H. Fairchild, although Fairchild found a way—not a very convincing way—to separate it from the “perfectionism” with which it was inseparably bound up by Finney. Mahan’s lifelong propaganda of the earlier form of Oberlin Perfectionism was not barren of fruit. The “Higher Life Movement” which swept over the English-speaking world—and across the narrow seas into the Continent of Europe—in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, was not without traits which derived from Oberlin. And Mahan lived to stand by the side of Pearsall Smith at the great Oxford Convention of 1874, and to become with him a factor in the inauguration of the great “Keswick Movement,” which has brought down much of the spirit and many of the forms of teaching of Oberlin Perfectionism to our own day. If Oberlin Perfectionism is dead, it has found its grave not in the abyss of non-existence, but in the Higher Life Movement, the Keswick Movement, the Victorious Life Movement, and other kindred forms of perfectionist teaching. They are its abiding monuments. Perhaps as the old Egyptian monarchs, in taking over the structures of their predecessors, endeavored to obliterate the signatures of those from whom they had inherited them, these later movements would be glad to have us forget the sources out of which they have sprung. But as the names of the earlier Egyptian kings may still be read even in their defaced cartouches, so the name of Oberlin may still be read stamped on movements which do not acknowledge its parentage, but which have not been able to escape altogether from its impress.<sup>4292</sup>

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<sup>429</sup> *Literature*. I. BOOKS BY FINNEY:—“Sermon Preached in the Presbyterian Church at Troy, March 4, 1827,” 1827. “Sermons on Various Subjects,” 1835 (several of these sermons were issued previously, as separate publications; and the collection was enlarged and republished in 1836 as: “Sermons on Important Subjects”). “Prevailing Prayer,” 1865. “Lectures on Revivals of Religion,” 1835 (many subsequent editions). “Lectures to Professing Christians” (delivered in the city of New York, 1836 and 1837), 1837 and many subsequent editions. “Skeletons of a Course of Theological Lectures,” 1840. “Views of Sanctification,” 1840. “Letters on Revivals,” 1845. “Lectures on Systematic Theology,” i. 1846; ii. 1847 (a new edition enlarged and largely rewritten was published in London, 1851; and a condensed form of the London edition was issued by James H. Fairchild in 1878). “The Reviewer Reviewed, or Finney’s Theology and the Princeton Review,” 1847 (incorporated in the “Lectures on Systematic Theology” of 1851). “Reply to the ‘Warning Against Error,’ written by the Rev. Dr. Duffield,” 1848 (also incorporated in the “Lectures on Systematic Theology” of 1851). “Guide to the Savior,” 1848 (other editions). “Sinners’ Excuses Condemn God. A Sermon,” 1849 (other editions). “Freemasonry: its Character, Claims and Practical Working,” 1869. “Memoirs,” 1876 (other editions). “Sermons on Gospel Themes,” 1876. “Sermons on the Way of Salvation,” 1891. A number of Tracts, n.d. II. BOOKS BY MAHAN:—“Principles of Christian Union and Church Fellowship,” 1836. “Scripture Doctrine of Christian Perfection,” 1839 (ed. 2, of same year, stereotyped, from which many subsequent issues). “Abstract of a Course of Lectures on Mental and Moral Philosophy,” 1840. “Doctrine of the Will,” 1844. “A System of Intellectual Philosophy,” 1845. “The True Believer,” 1847. “Science of Moral Philosophy,” 1848. “A System of Intellectual Philosophy,” 1854 (revised and enlarged). “Modern Mysteries Explained and Exposed,” 1855. “The Phenomena of Spiritualism Scientifically Explained and Exposed,” 1855. “The Science

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<sup>2</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield: Perfectionism, Part Two*, vol. 8 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 166–214.