To grasp what is happening in the church today we need to be historically aware. We must be willing to examine the development of ideas and doctrines. Without knowledge of the past, we will fail to understand the present. Most of us have read about revivalist campaigns and seen inquirers come forward during a crusade, after the invitation to "decide for Christ" had been extended. How many are aware that many of the current crusade methods have their origin in the nineteenth century teachings of Charles G. Finney?

Finney is an immensely important figure in American history by any standard of treasure. He became the most widely read theologian of his time through his lectures and writings. In many ways Finney is the "father" of modern high pressure revivalism and many evangelistic philosophies. Many evangelicals today acknowledge their indebtedness to him. Dr. Oswald Smith, the founder of Canada's most famous evangelical church, the People's Church in Toronto, discovered as a theological student the autobiography of Finney. It made a powerful impact on his life and ministry. His comment was, "This is the most helpful and inspiring book outside of the Bible. It has been wonderfully used of God to awaken me and has taught me to lay the very greatest stress upon prayer and the Holy Spirit to convert men." Finney left his mark. He stands, says Drummond, "significantly as the watershed, between revivalists like Jonathan Edwards and mass evangelists like D.L. Moody, Billy Sunday and Billy Graham."

**Finney's Background**

Finney had a great natural talent, with a logical mind and a magnetic personality, and was mainly self-taught. He entered a law office after limited formal training, and was later admitted to the bar. He had a dramatic conversion experience in 1821, which he said brought him "a retainer from the Lord to plead his cause." Turning from law, he began to preach, though he refused formal theological training, and was ordained in 1824 in the Presbyterian church. For the next eight years he conducted revivals in the eastern states. He gained nation-wide attention through his spectacular evangelistic meetings. His speech was tough, direct and forceful. His ministry became extremely divisive. In 1832 he became pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church in New York, but soon afterwards left the presbytery. He rejected Calvinism because, according to him, it did not make rational and logical sense. His brand of Arminianism, combined with perfectionism, was a reaction to the dead orthodox scholasticism and hyper Calvinism prevalent in his day. Yet Finney was a Calvinist when in prayer, as he pleaded with the Lord for mercy and blessing upon his work. In 1835 he became a professor at a new college in Oberlin, Ohio. He served it as president from 1851 to 1866.
However, throughout most of those years he remained active in evangelistic work devoting part of his time to revivals.

**Finney's Theology**

Finney did not believe in total depravity. He considered the idea of an inherited sinful nature an "abomination" and "a relic of heathen philosophy." People are not to blame for what Adam did. Drummond suggests that he rebuked people primarily for their own wilful, deliberate rebellion against God, not Adam’s. Finney would never say you cannot, but you will not receive Christ. He stressed people’s ability to make their decision for or against Christ. He firmly held that "when the Spirit of God convicts an unbeliever of his or her need of salvation, that person makes a free decision. All the Christian can do is to point them to God's forgiveness in Christ." In his meetings he pleaded with those, who would renounce their sins and receive Christ, to come forward to publicly declare their decision. Drummond comments, "Giving a public invitation to respond to Christ was by now one of his reasonably regular 'new measures' ".

Finney seemed to imply that if the right methods were used God would be duty bound to send a revival. He declared that revival is not a miracle, but a purely philosophical (i.e., scientific) result of the right use of constructed means. A preacher, therefore, was not only a proclaimer of the gospel, he was also a persuader of the people, trying to change their wills in the right direction.

Finney’s understanding of regeneration (rebirth) was rather peculiar. He saw rebirth as a moral change. It is a change of choice and by its very nature choice can be changed more than once. If this is so, how can one be ever sure of his salvation? Regeneration is not a change of heart through the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit, it is a choice to value the interests of God supremely and the interests of others as our own.

In Finney’s theology man was capable of growing toward perfection, although not absolutely perfect. Society itself was perfectible. Moral or religious perfection was not only an ideal toward which to strive, but a goal obtainable in this life. Since sin was a voluntary act and theoretically avoidable, holiness was a human possibility. In his thinking on perfectionism he was strongly influenced by Wesley’s *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*.

Finney didn’t divorce himself from the social issues of his day. He combined evangelism with social action. But his approach rested on faith in individual conversion as the key to social justice. He viewed the encroaching secularization of America with alarm. He was a committed abolitionist. His revivals were a powerful force in the rise of the anti-slavery movement.

As I read Finney’s life story and an outline of his theology I felt compelled to compare Finney’s thought with Calvinism. Over against his Arminianism the rightful claims of the sovereign and electing God should be proclaimed. The Bible teaches a very pessimistic view of man. He is fallen in Adam (Rom. 5:12). He is dead in his sin (Eph. 2:1). Only God can raise him from his spiritual death. We may not neglect the great doctrines of
grace. But our Reformed orthodoxy also be combined with a warm piety. Man is not perfectible. Yet we must stress holiness. The doctrine of sanctification may not be put on the backburner. Calvin said, "Scripture contains the perfect rule of a good and happy life." And we confess with the Heidelberg Catechism, "the longer we live the more we may come to know our sinfulness and the more eagerly look to Christ for forgiveness of sins and righteousness . . . so that, while praying for the grace of the Holy Spirit, we may never stop striving to be renewed more and more after God's image, until after this life we reach our goal: perfection" (L.D. 44.a.115). I suggest that a few books on Finney should be in the library of our Reformed people. It is good to know the background of revivalism. Ideas have roots, They make a difference in faith and practice.

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