

CHARLES FINNEY REJECTED VITAL EVANGELICAL DOCTRINES

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Finney's Revivalism [cp. [Characteristics of Revivalism](#) and special article [Evangelicalism, Revivalism, and the Second Great Awakening](#)] is a key to understanding his view of the Gospel and the New Birth. His brand of revivalism grew out of at least seven critical theological errors. First, In contrast to the revivals of the Great Awakening, Finney, and others (Lyman Beecher and Francis Asbury) viewed revival through a **naturalistic philosophy**:

There is nothing in religion beyond the ordinary powers of nature. A revival is not a miracle, nor dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means—as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means. . . . A revival is as naturally a result of the use of means as a crop is of the use of its appropriate means"¹

This naturalistic understanding is the cause of his confidence in human nature to contribute to the work of salvation. The titled of one Finney's sermon epitomizes this: "Sinners Bound to Change Their Own Hearts." He also **rejected original sin**:

Finney believed that human beings were capable of choosing whether they would be corrupt by nature or redeemed, referring to original sin as an "anti-scriptural and nonsensical dogma"²

This tragically, it lead him to reject the orthodox view of **justification by faith**. Instead he subscribed to a Pelagian form of salvation, that is, one is capable of contributing one's own righteousness for one's salvation:

[Subhead:] *Foundation of the justification of penitent believers in Christ. What is the ultimate ground or reason of their justification?* 1. It is not founded in Christ's literally suffering the exact penalty of the law for them, and in this sense literally purchasing their justification and eternal salvation³

He defined saving **faith as obedience** to God rather than trust (*fiducia*) in God for what he did to save us:

Whenever he sins, he must, for the time being, cease to be holy. This is self-evident. Whenever he sins, he must be condemned; he must incur the penalty of the law of God ... If it be said that the precept is still binding upon him, but that with respect to the Christian, the penalty is forever set aside, or abrogated, I reply, that to abrogate the penalty is to repeal the precept, for a precept without penalty is no law. It is only counsel or advice. The Christian, therefore, is justified no longer than he obeys, and must be condemned when

he disobeys or Antinomianism is true ... In these respects, then, the sinning Christian and the unconverted sinner are upon precisely the same ground.⁴

Since Finney's doctrine of justification was not by faith but by personal obedience, he had no place for the Scriptural teaching of imputed righteousness. (There are [groups today](#) which perpetuate the exact same understanding as Finney taught.) It is clear that his definition of justification by obedience directly related to his **rejection of the idea of imputed righteousness**:

The doctrine of an imputed righteousness, or that Christ's obedience to the law was accounted as our obedience, is founded on a most false and nonsensical assumption; to wit, that Christ owed no obedience to the law in his own person, and that therefore his obedience was altogether a work of supererogation, and might be made a substitute for our own obedience; that it might be set down to our credit, because he did not need to obey for himself.⁵

These and similar passages are relied upon, as teaching the doctrine of an imputed righteousness; and such as these: "The Lord our righteousness" (Phil. 3:9). . . . "Christ our righteousness" is Christ the author or procurer of our justification. But this does not imply that He procures our justification by imputing His obedience to us. . .⁶

Finney spends a considerable amount of time in several of his works arguing against "that theological fiction of imputation" [Memoirs, 58]. Those who have any grasp of Protestant doctrine will see immediately that his attack at this point is a blatant rejection of the doctrine of justification by faith alone (*sola fide*). It places him outside the pale of true evangelical Protestantism. The doctrine of imputed righteousness is the very heart of the historic difference between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. The whole doctrine of justification by faith hinges on this concept. But Finney flatly rejected it. He derided the concept of imputation as unjust: "I could not but regard and treat this whole question of imputation as a theological fiction, somewhat related to our legal fiction of John Doe and Richard Roe" [Memoirs, 60].⁷

Although most devotees of Charles Finney do not know this, all the errors listed above led him to the **rejection of the substitutionary atonement of Christ** on the Cross. He predicated this rejection upon his naturalistic philosophy and his confidence in natural human ability to obey God. Finney is famous for the statement, "religion is the work of man, it is something for man to do." As a result of this assumption, Finney was inclined to disdain the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement of Christ.

These statements place Charles Finney at odds with the most fundamental tenets pertinent to the Protestant view of salvation. It also places him under the indictment of heresy as to the Scriptural teaching of salvation. His views concerning religion and salvation led him and others - such as John Morgan - into the fatal error of failing to properly discern the distinction between [Law and Gospel](#). This, in and of itself, could have prevented the tremendous misunderstanding of the Gospel, into which he and his followers have led many sincere Christians.

ENDNOTES

1. Charles Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, n.d.), 4-5.
2. Charles Finney, *Systematic Theology*, 1851, Online: accessed 12-21-2000, Available at: <http://www.gospeltruth.net/1851%20Sys%20Theo/st56.htm>
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Phillip R. Johnson, "A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing," Online, Accessed December 21, 2000, Available at: <http://www.gty.org/~phil/articles/finney.htm>