

“New Revivalism” Charles Finney, D.L.Moody, and a Man-Centered Gospel



D.L. Moody preaching.

This is the next chapter of the book, [The Foundations Under Attack: The Roots of Apostasy – By Michael de Semlyen](#)

This is all interesting history, but the author doesn't like the "altar call" way of bring souls into the kingdom. In my case I don't think I would be doing what I am doing today if I had not obeyed the altar call in January 1971 at an evening service in a church in Sacramento California. I was under the conviction of the Holy Spirit. I felt then that if I don't obey the altar call, I may never have another chance to be saved.

Chapter 13 “New Revivalism” Charles Finney, D.L.Moody, and a Man-Centered Gospel

“Revivals changed into revivalism as subjective experience was emphasized above objective truth.” – Alan Morrison, Diakrisis Ministries

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the Holiness Movement swept through both America and Europe. This new revivalism was a victory of pragmatism over the authority of scripture. It was a further erosion of earlier Calvinistic beliefs, especially the doctrines of election and predestination. The so-called “Second Great Awakening,” which sprang out of the Holiness Movement in the late 1820s and the 1830s, was, as author Michael Bunker has suggested, “really just a Jesuitical backlash against the staunch Grace doctrine focus of the real Great Awakening.”

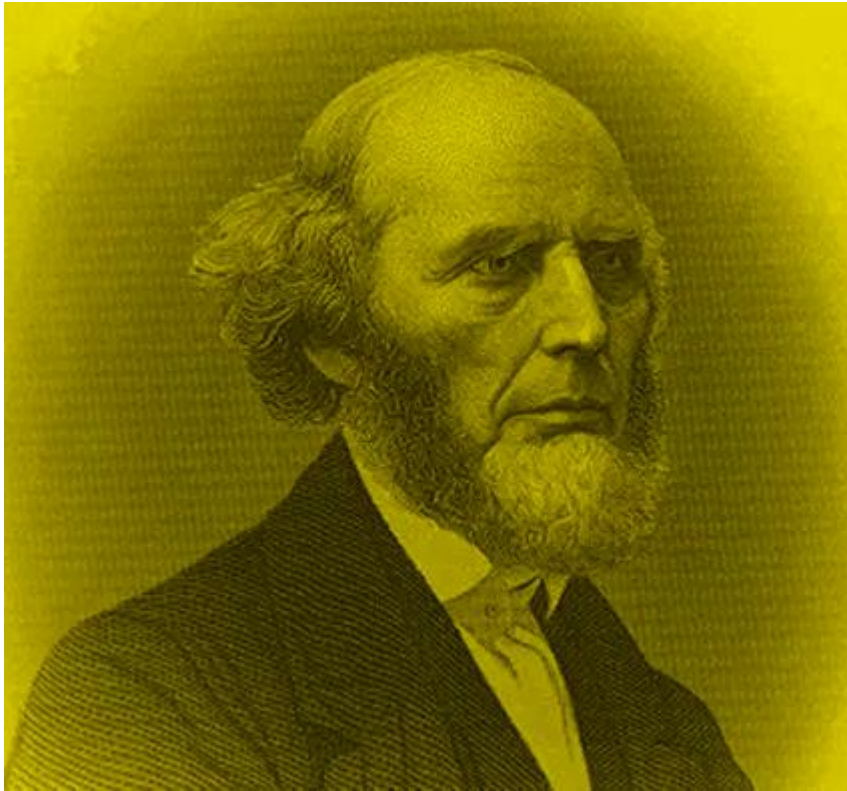
“Reacting against the pervasive Calvinism of the Great Awakening, the successors of that great movement of God's Spirit turned from God to humans (to a man-centered gospel) from the preaching of objective content, namely Christ and Him crucified, to the emphasis on getting a person to 'make a decision.'”

Charles Finney

Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875) was the man who created the “decisionism” concept in evangelism, where a person is led through an “altar call” and is pressured to “decide for Christ.” There are no “altar calls” and

there is no “decisionism” to be found in the New Testament. The Bible merely declares that after the preaching of the true Gospel, “many believed.”

In his day, Finney was extremely influential. He still is. He has been described as “the icon of modern evangelicalism.” Moral Majority leader Jerry Falwell said that Finney “was one of my heroes and a hero to many evangelicals, including Billy Graham.”



Charles Finney

Finney ministered in the wake of the “Second Awakening” and began conducting revivals in upstate New York. One of his most popular sermons was “Sinners Bound to Change Their Own Hearts.” This was the theological understanding from which he developed his new methods. One result of Finney’s revivalism was the division of Presbyterians in Philadelphia and New York into Arminian and Calvinistic factions. His “New Measures” brought about a whole new era of Christian evangelism. They included the “anxious seat” and “mourner’s bench,” which led to the “invitation” or “altar call”, the now common practice of calling sinners to come to the front to receive Christ. He instituted emotional tactics that led to fainting and weeping, and other “excitements,” as Finney and his followers called them. A sermon preached by Pennsylvania Pastor Fred Zaspel, focusing upon the impact of Finney and his new revivalism, provides a solemn warning about what is happening in the Arminian-dominated church today.

“He could work a crowd to fever pitch and to fanaticism (‘excitements’) of various forms—faintings, shakings, weepings and so on; and all for good reason! Decisions for Christ were made! Sinners made profession of faith!..... This is the foundation of Finneyism, which lives today.

Revival can be brought to town in a briefcase. It is not a supernatural work of God; it is simply the right use of the constituted means. And this is the fountain of his 'new measures' which are so well known to us today. But again it does work. It gets results. It gets people to make 'decisions.' And so how could it possibly be wrong? Should we allow some tradition and prescribed ideals to interfere with success? Finney himself writes with considerable embarrassment shortly after these 'Western revivals' were over. The results, it turned out, were not what they appeared. Few contacts 'stuck.' The area where Finney had been and where such excitement had been generated was now 'burnt ground'— unable to be burned by the gospel again. People were turned off like never before. Their 'decisions' were spurious, and now they were more hostile to the gospel than they had been before.

"This then is the fountainhead of much modern Christianity. Today's 'church growth' seminars insist that theology gets in the way of seeing sinners saved. Instruction is given in 'the art of appeal' and 'the effective altar call' and 'how to get decisions' and 'the use of story in preaching', sad stories, emotional manipulation, seventeen stanzas of the invitation hymn. In all this we reflect our debt to Charles Finney. In some circles it is the 'barking' and screaming and roaring and laughing, the gibberish of tongues, and other rather strange things that work. All this is the outgrowth of Finney, whose theology of manipulation 'got results'. With him, a new era of Christian evangelism was born which lives strong today."

As Michael Horton wrote of the revivalist in *Modern Reformation*,

"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.' In clear terms Finney denied the notion that human beings possess a sinful nature. Not only did the revivalist abandon the doctrine of justification, making him a renegade against evangelical Christianity; he repudiated doctrines such as original sin and the substitutionary atonement, that have been embraced by Roman Catholics and Protestants alike. Therefore Finney is not merely an Arminian, but a Pelagian. He is not only an enemy of evangelical Protestantism, but of historic Christianity of the broadest sort."

Let us just pause here. We do know that "there is no new thing under the sun." -Ecclesiastes 1:9 Here we are back again to the denial of original sin and the Sovereign grace of God, the exaltation of the free will of man amounting to the rejection of the entire Reformation view of Christianity. That "Sovereign Drug Arminianism" can be seen to have become the potent and all pervasive potion coursing through the veins of the professing churches, seemingly with no antidote short of another Reformation.

J.H. Merle d'Aubigne, theologian and preacher, 'the People's Historian' (1794-1872) stated in his *History of the Reformation in England*:

"To believe in the power of man in the work of regeneration is the great heresy of Rome, and from that error has come the ruin of the Church. Conversion proceeds from the grace of God alone, and the system which ascribes it partly to man and partly to God is worse than Pelagianism."

Dwight Lyman Moody

Whilst Finney was Pelagian in his teachings, D.L. Moody, the American Evangelist, was the great apostle of the Arminian gospel in the nineteenth century. In 1873-74 he and Ira D. Sankey (the gospel singer and hymn writer) conducted a major evangelistic campaign in Scotland, in the course of which thousands professed to have believed in Christ. They held campaigns throughout all of Britain. Although most were impressed with the many thousands of "conversions"—there were many "Reverend" gentlemen who sat quietly at Moody's feet to be lectured by the great Revivalist—there were a small few that opposed what was going on. One who did was James Kidwell Popham (1847-1937), a pastor in Brighton in England who expressed his concern passionately:

"Disclaiming the bigotry, I am bound to say I am opposed to the religious movement of which Messrs. Moody and Sankey are the leaders. I am opposed to it because I fail to see what Mr. Moody so confidently asserted at Birmingham—that the present work is God's. Every religious movement must be judged more by its doctrines than by what we usually see paraded—results. The teachings of its leaders must be brought to God's word, and tested by it. 'To the law and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.' 10.....It is truly awful to see the dishonour done to Christ by the preaching and singing of these 'evangelists.' Where are the scripture evidences that Christ is knocking, and 'has knocked many times already,' at the heart of every person to whom Messrs. Moody and Sankey may speak or sing? If He desires to dwell in this or that particular heart, what shall hinder?.....Assuming that it is the will of God that every creature should be saved, which is not true, men have made the conversion of sinners an art, and have resorted to all sorts of unscriptural methods to compass their end. 'Sadly forgetful' of him who said *I kill and I make alive,*' Deut. 32:39 they are 'madly bold' in their efforts to wrest God's special work out of His hands. We have the new doctrine of Regeneration by faith, singing theology, sudden conversions, the enquiry room, sensational advertisements such as 'February for Jesus, Liverpool for Jesus, body and soul for Jesus, etc.' And when these new appliances have completed the task allotted them, we have an exhibition of the work done! ...The parable of the sower is not applicable to this religious movement, since Mr. Moody has no good seed to sow. To be sure he reads the Word of God, but then he endeavours to expound it, and this exposition is nothing less than a fouling of the pure waters of truth." (Ezekiel 34:19)

Later, describing Moody and Sankey's evangelism, Popham wrote, "By the galvanising apparatus these men are using, they succeed in evoking 'mere emotion,' and this is called conversion, and these galvanised, but dead souls, are then called Christians. Oh, horrible profanity! A shocking caricature of a true Christian of God's living army." (Ez. 37:10).

The concerns of Pastor Popham were shared by the Reverend Dr. John Kennedy of Dingwall, a well-respected evangelical leader in Scotland at the time of the campaign. He felt that the preaching made light of sin and wrote a tract, "Hyper-Evangelism, Another Gospel, Though a Mighty Power," which listed his objections to Moody's movement.

- That no pains were taken to present the character and claims of God as Lawgiver and Judge, and no indication given of a desire to bring souls in self-condemnation to “accept the punishment of their iniquity.”
- That it ignored the sovereignty and power of God in the dispensation of His grace.
- That it afforded no help to discover, in the light of the doctrine of the cross, how God is glorified in the salvation of the sinner that believes in Jesus.
- That it offers no precaution against tendencies towards Antinomianism on the part of those who professed to believe.

Warnings given about the “great” revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries equally apply today. One such warning was given by American theologian Robert Lewis Dabney at the end of the nineteenth century.

“American Protestantism is characterized by a peculiar evil which I may describe by the term ‘spurious revivalism.’ The common mischief resulting from all its forms is the over-hasty reception into the communion of the churches of multitudes of persons whom time proves to have experienced no spiritual change. In most cases, these mischievous accessions are brought about by sensational human expedients. It is an unpopular thing for a minister of the gospel to bear this witness. But it is true. And my regard for that account which I must soon render at a more awful bar than that of arrogant public opinion demands its utterance.”

Another more recent warning has been given by The Trinity Foundation.

“There was too little discrimination between true and false religious feeling. There was too much encouragement given to outcries, faintings, and bodily agitations as probable evidence of the presence and power of God. There was, in many, too much reliance on impulses, visions, and the pretended power of discerning spirits. There was a great deal of censoriousness and of sinful disregard of ecclesiastical order. The disastrous effects of these evils, the rapid spread of false religion, the dishonour and decline of true piety, the prevalence of erroneous doctrines, the division of congregations, the alienation of Christians, and the long period of subsequent deadness in the church stand up as a solemn warning to Christians, and especially to Christian ministers in all times to come.”

Charles Spurgeon, fighting the downgrade controversy, expressed his concern too.

“A very great portion of modern revivalism has been more a curse than a blessing, because it has led thousands to a kind of peace before they have known their misery; restoring the prodigal to the Father’s house, and never making him say, ‘Father, I have sinned.’ How can he be healed who is not sick, or he be satisfied with the bread of life who is not hungry? The old-fashioned sense of sin is despised... Every thing in this age is shallow. ... The consequence is that men leap into religion, and then leap out again. Unhumbled they came to the church, unhumbled they remained in it, and unhumbled they go from it.”

Those who encourage visions, dreams, faintings, slaying in the “spirit” and bodily agitations are, in effect, advocating a return to Roman Catholic mysticism. Revival can be characterised by mysticism, and it was carried directly into Protestant thinking through the revivals of John Wesley in eighteenth-century England. Wesley was very well versed in the writings of Roman Catholicism’s mystics. He was not reticent in speaking of them fondly and was instrumental in publishing a great number of them. Although Wesley identified the Papacy as the Antichrist of scripture, this adopted mysticism stayed with him all his life. It is to be observed today in revivalism.

“The emphasis on visions and dreams, special extra-Biblical revelations, and the guidance of the Spirit through these revelations all belong to the tradition of mysticism. Indeed there is a striking resemblance between revivalism and the modern Charismatic movement. Yet, mysticism is contrary to the Scriptures – it is a theology of feelings, emotions, and imagination with scant regard for doctrine. Of course we would not include all revivalists in this. George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards are notable exceptions. However, in most instances revivalism pays little attention to doctrine, and at worst, is an enemy of the truth.”

Continued in [The Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements](#)

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