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The Moral Theory of Charles Finney

by

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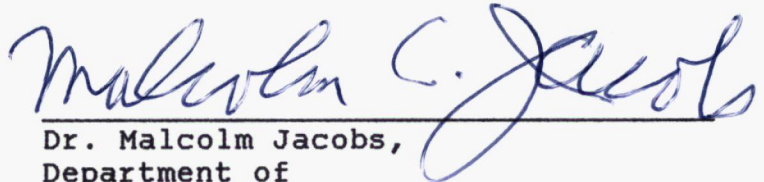
The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled, "The Moral Theory of Charles Finney" submitted by Phyl Good in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



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ABSTRACT

Charles Finney's theology grew in the midst of a ferment of theological and political ideas in New England in the nineteenth century. In this thesis I will briefly examine how Finney's teachings grew from the theological thought of Jonathan Edwards, and also how they are related to the teachings of the Enlightenment rationalism of the young American nation. Like the rationalists, Finney placed great stress on reason, and believed it was given not only to understand the world, but things relating to salvation as well. Hence he sought to understand God and people's relation to him from a rational standpoint.

I will examine Finney's Moral Government theory of morality and salvation rather than his theology as a whole. Particularly important was his rejection of the notion of Original Sin and people's sinful nature, doctrines which seem to rob people of freedom and accountability and make a travesty of God's love and justice. Finney believed morality resided in two Ultimate Choices open to human beings: to gratify themselves, or to seek the greatest good or well-being of all creation.

I will examine how this view affects interpretations of the atonement of Christ, and the sanctification of the

believer. I will discuss difficulties arising from Finney's notions of foreknowledge and election, and his claim that people remain physically depraved even though they have no inherent moral depravity. I will suggest possible refinements of his view, in order to correct these difficulties.

Finney's ideas have implications he himself did not deal with. For example, the problem of foreknowledge and his stance on rationality lead to interesting possibilities regarding God's relation to time. And his view of ultimate choices and man's freedom brings new answers to the question, "What about 'the Heathen'?"

Finally, since Finney has been accused of both Pelagianism and Utilitarianism, I will briefly compare his system of thought to each of these, and show that these "accusations" are largely accurate. However, it is an important question whether Finney's similarity to Pelagianism and Utilitarianism must continue to be regarded as a stroke against him.

This thesis is dedicated to
my brother,
Kel Good,
the real philosopher/theologian of the family,
the thongs of whose intellectual sandals
I am not worthy to untie.

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Chapter One: A Brief History of the New England Theology

THE CLIMATE OF THE TIMES

Charles Grandison Finney developed his theology near the end of the great theological ferment in New England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The ferment began with the writings of Jonathan Edwards, continuing through the theologians who followed, until the New England Theology, as it was called, took on a final character vastly different from the Calvinism from which it had sprung.

Frank Hugh Foster traces the development of this theology in his book, A Genetic History of the New England Theology.¹ Its growth was an organic process, each new development growing from the previous one in a logical and natural way until it reached a pinnacle in the thought of such men as Nathaniel W. Taylor and Charles G. Finney, and the teaching of schools such as Andover Seminary and Oberlin College. Foster describes this process as follows:

It is a growth, a development, which we have before us...A history of doctrine is not the same thing as a register of discordant and meaningless theories. Ideas grow. One writer is dependent upon another. A thought is found in one man as a

¹ Frank Hugh Foster, A Genetic History of the New England Theology (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1963). I will be using this book as the basis for the first section of Chapter 1, although I will be referring to other books as well.

seed, it germinates in another, it comes to form and fruitfulness in others.²

The political and social developments of the day also provided a context for the organic process which was the growth of New England Theology. Sidney Mead describes how the religious groups transplanted from Europe to America encountered a situation vastly different from that in the old world. An important factor was space; there were few geographical boundaries in the new world, which encouraged an attitude of freedom. The new Americans were no longer hemmed in by geography and boundaries of tradition and custom. Thus, cut off from many authority patterns in their past, they conceived the hope for a brighter self-determined future.³ Established groups like the Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Roman Catholics, maintained both religious and secular control over specific geographical areas and even suppressed dissent to some degree. Yet nothing prevented dissenters from settling in the next county and setting up communities whose example and influence were visible to all.⁴ Established churches could not maintain complete control because their people were spread out so

² Ibid., p. 10.

³ Sidney E. Mead, The Lively Experiment (New York, Evanston, & London: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1963), pp. 5, 6.

⁴ Ibid., p. 14.

widely.⁵ And if they attempted to punish people influenced by the dissenters' new ideas, they could find themselves destroying their own populations. What finally necessitated the enshrining of religious freedom in the American constitution in 1787 was the colonies' own self-interest: they did not wish to destroy their own people, and recognized that if they wanted the right to practise their own beliefs, they must grant the same right to all others.⁶

Other factors promoting the growth of new theological ideas, as identified by Mead, were the influence of Pietism, and the alliance of Enlightenment rationalism with sects teaching the notion of freedom. Rationalists such as Thomas Jefferson sided with these sects since their ideas were similar to many rationalist notions about humanity; they certainly believed religion was between the individual and God, without institutional intervention.⁷ Also, the basic beliefs held in common by different groups (a few intellectual propositions about God, immortality, and virtue) were sufficient to keep the peace. This meant that the centuries-old view that complete uniformity of belief was essential to public welfare was not correct.⁸ Later, when freedom had been established, the dissenting sects recog-

⁵ Ibid., p. 23, 24.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 14-24.

⁷ Ibid., p. 42.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 39, 40.

nized the insurmountable differences between their views and those of the rationalists, and re-allied themselves with the established churches. But up to that point the cause of freedom was given impetus in the newly-forming nation by the alliance of the rationalists and the dissenting sects.⁹

Though the established churches had agreed to religious freedom, it was only by grudging necessity, and they still claimed the right to suppress dissent in their own areas. According to Mead, "it took the prolonged upheavals associated with the great revivals to break the dwindling hold of the old patterns and give the new an opportunity to grow."¹⁰ These upheavals stemmed from Pietism, a movement seeking to revitalize Christian experience, restore unity, and escape the scholasticism and formalism into which the churches had fallen.¹¹ Pietists considered the experience of conversion the prerequisite for full communion, a reaction against a teaching called "Stoddardeanism."¹²

Foster, though tracing the intellectual branch of development rather than the social, also identifies this teaching as one starting point of the history, but he traces its roots farther back. He believes that the doctrine of God's total sovereignty had had drastic effects in the new

⁹ Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 27.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 29.

¹² Ibid., p. 33.

world. When the pilgrims first landed, fleeing persecution, they were sustained by this teaching, energized by the thought that they were the "elect," and that nothing could controvert God's will. Yet later generations, not forced to activity by persecution, were taught their own inability in salvation and waited passively for the gracious deliverance of God. As Foster says, "It has never been a good way to induce men to repent to tell them that they cannot."¹³

The result was a reduction in conversions and church members. To counteract this, churches began to debate "means" of salvation, and to institute measures to enable people to repent, though the actual change of heart was performed by God. Parents who did not profess conversion were allowed to be members of the church and to baptize their children as members also.¹⁴ It was proposed (by Solomon Stoddard in 1707) that the unconverted should be allowed to participate in the Lord's Supper, as a "means of grace."¹⁵ Previously, says Foster, the church was regarded as a fellowship of persons already converted and trained as Christians. But "now it was to perform the function of a school, and within its fold train up men to religion."¹⁶

¹³ Foster, p. 29.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 32, 36-39.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Unfortunately, these measures did not work. Further proposals were made, suggesting that conversion was not even necessary for involvement in ministry. Foster asks,

How, now, could such a position be for an instant maintained, had there not already been discussion among the churches upon this topic, which was called out by some patent and strange fact? How, unless there were already ministers who could not in honesty claim to be converted, and for whom some way of justification had been anxiously sought?¹⁷

These moves, however, did not stem the tide of increasing immorality and decreasing spirituality.

Thus Pietism reacted against the deadness of churches following "Stoddardean" practices, and against intellectual scholasticism. In fact, the movement tended toward a general disregard of doctrine and reason. While not denying the validity of traditional standards and practices, Pietists claimed that personal experience was more important than assent to creeds and forms.¹⁸ They also rejected rationalist, deist views, as these notions began to be associated with the atrocities of the French Revolution.¹⁹ This meant that there was no real discussion of natural versus revealed religion (since rationalists believed reason was sufficient to interpret God's revelation in Creation, while pietists believed in the necessity of special revela-

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁸ Mead, p. 29.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 50.

tion²⁰), and that pietistic revivalism "won the day" mainly through the force of religious experience. As Mead says, "Christianity won its first great battle with the forces of 'infidelity' and evil in America with practically no appeal to a rigorous discussion of intellectual issues."²¹ Thus Mead is led to endorse the claim that "no theologian or theology of first rank issued from the nineteenth-century Christianity of the United States."²²

Yet the New England Theology associated with Finney and Taylor, while it stemmed from the reaction against "Stoddardeanism," and while it was developed by revivalists, was somewhat different from the general revivalism of Pietism, and did not share its rejection of reason. This is recognized by Joseph Haroutunian in his book, Piety Versus Moralism. He, like Foster, agrees that the root of the development was the change in emphasis from God's sovereignty to man's ability although he, unlike Foster, does not believe this was a good thing.²³ He calls this change a "heavenly coup d'etat," and sees it as a "conflict between

²⁰ Ibid., p. 44, 45.

²¹ Ibid., p. 53, 54.

²² Ibid., quoting Kenneth Scott Latourette.

²³ Joseph Haroutunian, Piety Versus Moralism (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1964), p. 24.

Calvinism and the sentiments of the new age,"²⁴ which were essentially rationalist sentiments.

Haroutunian believes that Calvinism made an unnatural alliance with the commercial forces of the emerging modern age, "effected by their common enmity to the established order."²⁵ But once science, Renaissance humanism, discovery of new lands, and growth of commercial enterprise began, the more rational and individualistic view of man began to undercut this alliance.²⁶ Haroutunian sums up the atmosphere of the time as follows:

The quality of mind which grew out of such a social pattern had for its dominant traits the principles of the freedom of individuals, their right to happiness, their right to seek their own ends, for their own success and prosperity, in so far as they did not impede others from being similarly occupied. The greatest happiness of the greatest number became a basic principle of social and economic theory, and the autonomy and intrinsic value of individuals, the foundation of social justice and public law.²⁷

Haroutunian recognizes that "the social and political forces of the time gave rise to principles which were either inimical or irrelevant to the spirit of the Edwardean theology."²⁸ Consequently, questions were soon raised about

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., p. xiv.

²⁶ Ibid., p. xv.

²⁷ Ibid., p. xvi.

²⁸ Ibid., p. xxii.

the doctrines of original sin, election, the problem of sin in the world, and many other standard Calvinist doctrines.²⁹

Whether this re-evaluation of Calvinism was good or bad depends upon the individual's point of view. But there is no doubt that the unique situation of Christianity in the new world provided space and opportunity for swift development of new theological ideas. Many views of the dissenting sects and the rationalists, who were so influential in establishing the free religious climate of the new nation, found a parallel in the newly developing theology. Mead describes some of the images which shaped the climate of American opinion between the Revolution and the Civil War:³⁰

- 1.) the free individual - free to develop his possibilities and powers; this notion is found in every philosophy of the time.
- 2.) concept of perfection - the free individual who has developed all his potential; however, perfection was not measured against an absolute standard, but against the individual's own potential.³¹
- 3.) progress - the actual development of people's potential.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Mead, pp. 92-98.

³¹ This will be discussed more fully in the next chapter, since the possibility of Christian perfection is one of Finney's most famous beliefs.

- 4.) equality - not everyone is alike, but all have the equal right to become free individuals; this, says Mead, is not to be mistaken for post-Civil War individualism, which places the individual's rights in opposition to those of the community.
- 5.) voluntaryism (Mead's own word) - consent is the essence of human endeavor; people must be persuaded rather than coerced. But this does not imply inevitable progress. It does imply that any joint action depends on a contractual relation between free individuals.

THE INFLUENCE OF JONATHAN EDWARDS' IDEAS

Foster believes that the New England Theology originated in the thought of Jonathan Edwards, the seeds of which were taken by his successors and developed logically until they produced a theology much different from the Calvinism from which they had sprung. Edwards believed he adhered faithfully to the Calvinist system. Yet "though he may have had no thought of doctrinal change, his mind was too original and his studies too exact to permit him to remain where his fathers had been."³² It was his slight changes to, and slight departures from the Calvinist system which

³² Foster, p. 50.

set in motion several themes which were to grow into the distinct ideas of New England Theology.

The first "seed" concerned the will. Edwards believed in liberty, but only external liberty actually to perform what one willed to do.³³ Internal liberty, of will itself, did not exist. What determined the will were the motives presented to it, and the strongest motive produced the choice. Hence his famous claim: "The will is as the greatest apparent good."³⁴ Foster points out that thus "the choices of the will are as necessary as the events of the physical world."³⁵ An impression of liberty was given, but basic inability (and ultimately determinism) still resulted. Edwards' definition of will and motives introduced certain ambiguities which, according to Foster, made his whole system insecure. One very important ambiguity was his failure to distinguish between will and emotions.³⁶ Therefore he attributed all the necessity of the emotions to the will as well, and made no distinction between emotions and choices. This theory spurred revision and change in ideas about the will, and began the train of thought which

³³ Foster describes (p. 67) how Edwards was strongly impressed by the first edition of Locke's Essay on Human Understanding. His ideas on the will were essentially derived from this.

³⁴ Foster, p. 70.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 64.

led to the notion of total freedom, not only from external control by God or motives, but from internal control by original sin or depravity.

A more positive and influential "seed" of thought, with ramifications for the entire New England interpretation of theology, was Edwards' theory of virtue. He saw the universe as a "system," and the goal of all existence as "ideal harmony." This harmony was therefore "the reasonable and obligatory object of moral choice."³⁷ That it was obligatory was obvious, and written in human nature.³⁸ Thus, seeking the well-being or happiness of being in general was what constituted virtue, though most particularly of intelligent being.³⁹

These themes concerning the will and the nature of virtue were further developed by Edwards' successors. By the time they were finished, Edwards' major themes led to the notion that all sin is selfishness, the abandonment of the doctrine of arbitrary election, and the adoption of the "moral government" theory of the atonement rather than the interpretation of the atonement as satisfaction to justice.

By Finney's time, the changes that were made, step by

³⁷ Ibid., p. 95.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 96.

step, in the original Calvinist doctrine, can be summarized as follows:⁴⁰

<u>Original Idea</u>	<u>New Substitute</u>
- arbitrary will of God	- his character, love
- sinful nature of man	- a nature <u>occasioning</u> sin
- imputation of either sin or righteousness	- personal responsibility
- limited atonement	- general atonement
- bound will	- free will
- atonement a satisfaction to justice	- atonement a govern- mental example
- irresistible grace	- unresisted grace

THE LIFE OF CHARLES FINNEY

Charles Grandison Finney was born on August 29, 1792, in the village of Warren, Connecticut. His family soon moved to Brothertown, Oneida County, then relocated to Hanover (later named Kirkland) when he was eight.⁴¹ As a teenager he attended school and learned the normal subjects, which probably included reading, writing, grammar, arith-

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 282.

⁴¹ Robert Lynn Asa, The Theology and Methodology of Charles G. Finney as a Prototype for Modern Mass Evangelism (Ph.D. Thesis, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1983), pp. 39, 40.

metic, bookkeeping, dead languages, logic, rhetoric, composition, moral and natural philosophy, and French.⁴² He also learned to sing, sight-read music and play the violin and cello, and engaged in sports such as running, riding, and wrestling.⁴³ He was a man of many accomplishments. Later he added rowing, swimming, and sailing to his athletic skills,⁴⁴ and acquired some knowledge of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, although as he says, "I...never possessed so much knowledge of the ancient languages to think myself capable of independently criticising our English translation of the Bible."⁴⁵

Between 1808 and 1818, Finney spent time in Sackett's Harbor, attended an academy at Warren, Connecticut, and taught school in New Jersey for a few years.⁴⁶ In Warren he became editor of his academy's journal, earning a reputation for wit and oratory. He joined the Masonic lodge and attained the degree of Master Mason.⁴⁷ He debated going to

⁴² Finney claimed that he advanced far enough in common school that he was capable of teaching school himself, "as common schools were then conducted." The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1908), p. 4.

⁴³ Asa, p. 40.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 41, 42..

⁴⁵ Finney, Memoirs, p. 5.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 5; Asa, pp. 42-44.

⁴⁷ Asa, p. 43.

Yale, but his tutor advised him to learn the four-year curriculum in two years by private instruction.⁴⁸

In 1818, he entered the law office of Benjamin Wright as a student, in Adams, New York.⁴⁹ There is some debate about whether he was ever admitted to the bar, but he did argue some minor cases during his time in Wright's office.⁵⁰ As always, he was accomplished and popular with young people, known for his cello playing, athletic prowess, and dancing.⁵¹ Bernard A. Weisberger describes him as "a young Augustine in a provincial Carthage -- not dissolute, perhaps, but worldly for a provincial."⁵²

Until coming to Adams Finney claims he had had little exposure to religion. His family was not Christian, and where he grew up there were no regular religious meetings besides the occasional sermons of travelling ministers.⁵³ When he returned to New England for school, he attended a church whose preacher he describes as having "a monotonous, humdrum way of reading what he had probably written many

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 44.

⁴⁹ Finney, Memoirs, p. 5; Asa, p. 44.

⁵⁰ Asa, p. 45.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Bernard A. Weisberger, They Gathered at the River (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, Inc., 1966), p. 90.

⁵³ Finney, Memoirs, pp. 4, 5.

years before."⁵⁴ Robert Lynn Asa mentions that Finney's membership in the Masons would have exposed him to deism,⁵⁵ and quotes Hiram Mead's opinion that Finney would have encountered Puritan notions of law and penalty, living in areas governed by Puritan ideas.⁵⁶ So although he had no formal religious teaching, he could not have avoided some degree of religious influence in a country where religion was such a large part of the social structure.

While living in Adams, he attended George W. Gale's Presbyterian church. Although growing more interested in religion, he was still not convinced. Gale's preaching seemed too complex for non-theologians, since he seemed to "assume all the great and fundamental doctrines of the Gospel"⁵⁷ without explanation. Even during private discussions, Finney says, "I found it impossible to attach any meaning to many of the terms which he used with great formality and frequency...they seemed rather to stimulate my own mind to inquiry, than to satisfy me in respect to the truth."⁵⁸ The church's unanswered prayer, in contradiction to the promises of Scripture, was a "sad stumbling-block" to

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

⁵⁵ Asa, p. 46.

⁵⁶ Hiram Mead, as quoted by Robert Lynn Asa, note 13, p. 41.

⁵⁷ Finney, Memoirs, p. 7.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 8.

Finney.⁵⁹ He also felt he might be called to leave his profession and go into the ministry. He says, "I thought I had taken too much pains, and spent too much time and study in my profession to think now of becoming a Christian, if by doing so I should be obliged to preach the Gospel."⁶⁰

At last he decided that whatever problems existed, the Bible "was, nevertheless, the true word of God."⁶¹ Thus, he says, "I was brought face to face with the question whether I would accept Christ as presented in the Gospel, or pursue a worldly course of life."⁶² After two days of internal crisis, during which he began to feel that he was going to die and "sink down to hell,"⁶³ he said, "I will accept it today, or I will die in the attempt."⁶⁴ He was converted at last on October 10, 1821.⁶⁵

As a new convert, Finney almost exhausted himself with lack of sleep and food, and constant conversation about the Gospel. As Weisberger describes him, "he was apparently on the way to becoming a first-class mystic, complete with

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 10.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 25.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 11.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 13.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 14.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 13-18.

visions and trances."⁶⁶ However, this was "a passing phase" and eventually (and typically), "mind took over."⁶⁷ Not long after, he left his study of law to preach the Gospel.⁶⁸

From the first, he was theologically independent. Whether or not his views were initially as well-developed as he claims, he found it hard to accept the Calvinism which Gale tried to teach him. Benjamin Warfield complains that Finney "brought to Gale the unordered Pelagianism of the man in the street,"⁶⁹ which may explain why Finney spoke so intelligibly to the man in the street during his career. But it was true that for Finney, Gale was "an anvil on which to beat his own views into shape."⁷⁰

Finney's evangelistic career began to expand dramatically. He married Lydia Andrews in 1824,⁷¹ then spent the following six months separated from her, conducting revivals.⁷² Subsequent years passed eventfully, as Finney instigated revivals in many rural counties of New York.

⁶⁶ Weisberger, p. 94.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Finney, Memoirs, p. 24.

⁶⁹ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, Studies in Perfectionism (Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 1958), p. 18.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Asa, p. 54.

⁷² Finney, Memoirs, p. 113.

Finney's revivals were associated with "new measures" that became a source of controversy among revivalists. Considering his personality, it would have been surprising if he did not ruffle a few feathers on the way. Perry Miller claims most of the revivalists had traits that a "romantic" age "recognized as demonic." He describes Finney as "the most demonic of the whole fraternity, possessed of the shrewdness that enabled him to win such battles for the Lord as no other could match."⁷³ Some of the "new measures" included allowing prolonged meetings to halt all business in the town and exhaust the townspeople; allowing women to pray in public; praying for sinners by name in public;⁷⁴ and using the "anxious seat."⁷⁵ Finney was very theatrical in his presentation, which drew criticism as well.⁷⁶

Recalling Sidney Mead's summary of the rationalist images which shaped American opinion,⁷⁷ it is not hard to see why Finney used such measures and saw nothing wrong with

⁷³ Perry Miller, The Life of the Mind in America (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1965), p. 23.

⁷⁴ Weisberger, p. 109.

⁷⁵ Asa, p. 209. The anxious seat was the bench (often set in a prominent place in the meeting hall) where those laboring under conviction of guilt could come and search their souls and be counselled.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 197; Finney, Revivals of Religion (Fleming H. Revell Company, n.d.), p. 239.

⁷⁷ These were: 1) the free individual; 2) perfection; 3) progress; 4) equality; and 5) voluntaryism; Mead, pp. 92-98.

them. Since he disbelieved the notion of inability and a sinful nature, he viewed them as free individuals, and held to the principle of "voluntaryism."⁷⁸ Thus he used means of persuasion, and whatever accomplished the task was not only acceptable, but necessary:

Without new measures it is impossible that the Church should succeed in gaining the attention of the world to religion. There are so many exciting subjects constantly brought before the public mind...that the Church cannot maintain her ground without sufficient novelty in measures, to get the public ear.⁷⁹

In the summer of 1827, several revivalists attended a conference at New Lebanon, to discuss the new measures. Prominent at this conference were Asahel Nettleton, who disliked Finney's methods, and Lyman Beecher, who questioned them as well but hoped to play the peacemaker.⁸⁰ According to Weisberger, Nettleton expected the conference to rebuke Finney, while most of the others were reluctant to start something which might hurt the revival which they all wished to succeed.⁸¹ Ultimately, the attendees "hurried to agree to inoffensive generalities,"⁸² and passed a few very

⁷⁸ Weisberger, p. 111.

⁷⁹ Finney, Revivals, p. 309. Lecture XIV in Revivals of Religion is entitled "Measures to Promote Revivals," and explains the rationale behind most of the measures for which Finney was criticized.

⁸⁰ Weisberger, pp. 117-121.

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 119.

⁸² Ibid.

general resolutions. The subject of Finney's methods was never really touched upon. So Weisberger believes that the conference was essentially "a victory for Finney. The conservatives had let him escape unrebuked and an acknowledged leader of the revival men."⁸³ Asa says that Finney now had "an even higher profile than before."⁸⁴

Weisberger claims that Finney now "had a choice between continuing his itinerant ways in the rural counties of New York, or moving into the more challenging realm of the city. He chose the path of prominence, the road to the metropolis."⁸⁵ His move to the Chatham Street Chapel in New York City in 1832 began to change Finney's approach. He continued to conduct revivals for the rest of his life, but now that he faced a more sophisticated and educated audience, he began to reason more abstractly than emotionally.⁸⁶ When he left New York for a faculty position at Oberlin College he was, as Asa points out, "a more refined, more 'cultured,' more intellectual Finney."⁸⁷

His years at Oberlin solidified Finney's commitment to rationality, and saw the codification of many beliefs which till now had existed only in embryonic form during the more

⁸³ Ibid., p. 120.

⁸⁴ Asa, p. 68.

⁸⁵ Weisberger, p. 121.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 126.

⁸⁷ Asa, quoting Robert S. Fletcher, p. 81.

experience-oriented period of his life. He also carried many of these beliefs to their logical conclusions, participating in the development of such typically Oberlin doctrines as the unity of moral action, and entire sanctification. He was a revivalist who took part in some of the most tumultuous revivals of the time, yet he was also one of those who did not despise reason, and teaching at Oberlin enabled him to bring the emotional and rational sides of the revival into balance. His Systematic Theology came out of this time in his life, and illustrates that he was not only a revivalist, but was also a rational thinker whose ideas were very much in tune with the intellectual climate in which he lived.

Chapter Two: Charles Finney's Moral Theory

Finney's Systematic Theology was intended to comprise three volumes. He published the middle volume first, as he explains in the Preface, because it contained the points where he differed from "the commonly received views" of most Christians of his day.¹ The version primarily used in this thesis now comprises the second and third volumes, edited by J.H. Fairchild, who succeeded Finney as President of Oberlin College. It contains Finney's moral theory, which is indeed markedly different from typical Calvinist views on the subject. The book presently entitled The Heart of Truth contains outlines of his lectures on theology given at Oberlin, and thus exhibits the full structure which he intended to go into the Systematic Theology.

These books are not structured like most systematic theologies, to cover all of theology from God and creation through sin, salvation, and the church to final judgement and the future life. These things are of course referred to, and Finney's basic views on these matters become evident in passing, but his main concern in these works is his moral theory. Once the moral theory is established most other elements of theology flow naturally from it, and fit easily into place. As he says in the Preface to the Systematic

¹ Finney, Systematic Theology (Abridged), ed. J.H. Fairchild (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1976), p. xi.

Theology, "What I have said on 'Moral Law' and on the 'Foundation of Moral Obligation' is the key to the whole subject. Whoever masters and understands these can readily understand all the rest."²

Therefore, in dealing with Finney's moral theory, I will concentrate on the Systematic Theology and The Heart of Truth, rather than attempting to encompass all of his writings, although some of these may occasionally be referred to.

DESCRIPTION OF FINNEY'S MORAL THEORY

The Rationality of Theology

Finney taught from the perspective of Moral Government theology: a reasoned view based on the concepts of God as the Moral Governor of the universe, people as free agents, and God's wise maintenance of his moral government. Finney firmly believed human beings could use reason as a tool to discover the truth about God and the world, God's role as moral governor, and the nature of their own moral obligations. In fact, it was necessary for them to do so:

My brother, sister, friend -- read, study, think, and read again. You were made to think. It will do you good to think; to develop your powers by study. God designed that religion should require thought, intense thought, and should thoroughly develop our powers of thought. The Bible itself is written in a style so condensed as to require

2 Ibid.

much intense study...I do not pretend to so explain theology as to dispense with the labor of thinking. I have no ability and no wish to do so.³

Finney believed there were "laws of the mind," with which the methods of revivalism could harmonize to produce successful results.⁴ In his study of law, he undoubtedly encountered Sir William Blackstone, the great English jurist and legal historian; indeed, many of Blackstone's basic concepts can be found in Finney's theology.⁵ Blackstone believed that Common Law was an enactment of universal law, and claimed that the law of nature was dictated by God himself, and binding upon all.⁶ With this world view it is not surprising that Finney believed people could discover the truth about God by using their minds.

In his Systematic Theology, Finney accepts the division of theology into two parts, natural and revealed,⁷ and

³ Ibid.

⁴ John L. Hammond, The Politics of Benevolence (Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1979), p. 42.

⁵ Asa, p. 108. Asa lists some concepts shared by both Finney and Blackstone: "law as an inviolable 'rule of action'; freedom of the will; God's power tempered by His wisdom; 'eternal, immutable laws of good and evil, to which the Creator himself, in all his dispensations, conforms'; the supremacy of reason over the emotions; the ability of reason to discern universal laws of nature; and the need for 'public justice.'"

⁶ Miller, p. 164.

⁷ Finney, The Heart of Truth (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1976), p. 13.

accepts each as valid. Above all, he insists that the two parts must be consistent and non-contradictory. He says, "I regard the assertion, that the doctrines of theology cannot preserve a logical consistency throughout, as both dangerous and ridiculous."⁸ This makes his moral theory different from many "received views;" he attempts to correct what he considers the contradictory moral views held in most Christian circles. In describing his introduction to these views, he says,

I was often warned against reasoning and leaning to my own understanding. I found that the discriminating teachers of religion were driven to confess that they could not establish the logical consistency of their system, and that they were obliged to shut their eyes and believe, when revelation seemed to conflict with the affirmations of reason. But this course I could not take.⁹

For Finney, revelation and reason (i.e. revealed and natural theology) cannot contradict,¹⁰ and any system of thought which involves such contradiction cannot be the truth.

Physical and Moral Law

The Systematic Theology begins by making a distinction between physical and moral law. This, for Finney, is crucially important, since confusion of physical with moral law is a major culprit in many errors and contradictions

⁸ Finney, Systematic Theology, p. x.

⁹ Ibid., p ix.

¹⁰ Asa, p. 111.

which disfigure theology. He defines physical law as "all changes whether of state or action, that do not consist in the states or actions of free will."¹¹ Physical law applies to changes in matter which occur "under the law of necessity." This would consist in what is called the "laws of nature." All states of mind which do not involve free will also fall under this category. He says, "They cannot possibly be accounted for, except as they are ascribed to the law of necessity or force."¹² These states, too, are those which can be explained by "laws of nature."

Moral law, however, is defined as:

that rule to which moral agents ought to conform all their voluntary actions...the rule for the government of free and intelligent action, as opposed to necessary and unintelligent action...the law of liberty, as opposed to the law of necessity -- of motive and free choice, as opposed to force of every kind.¹³

The difference, therefore, between moral and physical law is that moral law involves voluntary action, while physical law governs involuntary. Finney's primary tenet is the free will of human beings, which is why his distinction between physical and moral is so crucial. Without freedom, a person cannot be a subject of moral law. Upon this claim all else is built: "Especially do I urge, to their logical conse-

¹¹ Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 1.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

quences, the two admissions that the will is free, and that sin and holiness are voluntary acts of mind."¹⁴

The Source of Moral Law, and God's Moral Nature

Further, according to Finney, moral law cannot originate in the will of God, since then it would be merely arbitrary. Rather, the moral principle must arise from the nature of the universe and the relations of moral beings; it must be intrinsically valuable in itself, and chosen for its own sake. Otherwise we are faced with the horrifying idea that God could have decreed murder or stealing to be right, and they would therefore be right. Instead, speaking of the foundational principle of moral law, Finney says, "Its own intrinsic value would, of itself, impose obligation on moral agents to choose it for its own sake, even had God never required it."¹⁵ Moral law is, therefore, objective rather than subjective, and is obligatory upon all moral agents.

Without such an objective standard, says Finney, "we [would] have no standard by which to judge the moral character of his [i.e. God's] actions, and [could not] know whether he is worthy of praise or blame."¹⁶ The implication of this, of course, is that God himself is a moral agent, and is praiseworthy because he has chosen to be holy.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. x.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁶ Finney, The Heart of Truth, p. 161.

Finney maintains this firstly because, as he claims, understanding, reasoning, and conscience are all implied in omniscience, and secondly because God has a will; "the whole power of mind to produce any effect without itself lies in the will."¹⁷ Indeed, the word "praise," applied to God in any other context, would be meaningless. One might just as well be praised for having blue eyes or being born with a head. Praise implies that the person could have been otherwise and chose to be what was good. This idea, that God himself is a moral agent with obligations to himself, the universe, and what he has created, is a crucial aspect of Moral Government theology.¹⁸

Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield objects to this view of God's character and relation to the universe. Apart from his reasons involving Finney's equating of the moral with universal benevolence, which will be discussed in the next section, Warfield criticizes this view because "we are

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁸ C.S. Lewis, though he rejects the notion of God's being obligated to moral law as are human beings, recognizes the difficulty of saying moral law is God's own creation. He, like Finney, sees clearly that once that position is granted, the word "good" as applied to God becomes meaningless. He says, "Are these things right because God commands them or does God command them because they are right? If the first, if good is to be defined as what God commands, then the goodness of God Himself is emptied of meaning and the commands of an omnipotent fiend would have the same claim on us as those of the 'righteous Lord,'" (from "The Poison of Subjectivism," in Christian Reflections, ed. Walter Hooper, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967, p. 79).

dealing with pure ethics, not religion,"¹⁹ since God has no religion yet is under moral obligation. We only obey God because his laws embrace the benevolent end which it is both his and our obligation to seek, instead of "because He is God, whom to obey is our primary obligation."²⁰

Both Finney and Nathaniel W. Taylor discuss the view that God has a right to rule and be obeyed simply "because he is God." Taylor considers two reasons often given for this right:²¹ 1) the fact of his having created the world; and 2) his power to execute law. Taylor says "The act of creation does not necessarily involve his goodness. The act of creation therefore, simply considered, cannot be an adequate basis for the right to govern." Nor is mere power to execute law an adequate basis, for this could mean that "the veriest tyrant with power to execute the sanctions of the law, combined with the most fell malignity, has a righteous claim for the submission of his subjects." For Taylor, God must manifest three attributes to have the right to govern the universe: he must have all knowledge and all power, which qualify him to govern; and he must be benevolent, which disposes him to govern well.²²

¹⁹ Warfield, p. 194.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 195.

²¹ Nathaniel W. Taylor, Lectures on the Moral Government of God (New York: Clark, Austin & Smith, 1859), p. 14.

²² Ibid., p. 85.

To Warfield's objection Finney would reply that God is not qualified to govern simply because he is the "biggest" or "mightiest" person in the universe. Finney argues that God has the attributes of eternity, omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, spirituality, and immutability,²³ but "his praise-worthiness does not depend upon the existence of his natural attributes, but upon the use he makes of them."²⁴ Otherwise, as Taylor says, we are left with a "might gives right" philosophy.²⁵

Robert Lynn Asa believes that Finney's view of the source of moral law was designed to "safeguard the cosmos from the arbitrary dictates of a capricious deity." However, says Asa, "by biblical definition...no such deity exists." Therefore "the need for an eternal moral law to restrain God's behavior is superfluous."²⁶ It is not clear, however, that Finney devised this theory simply to "restrain God's behavior." Rather, what both Finney and Taylor are really saying is that if there is any moral obligation at all, it must have an objective nature and be binding upon all moral agents. Moral law must restrain all moral agents' behavior. Asa claims that this theory is extra-biblical; yet for a "biblical definition" like "God is good" to have

²³ Finney, The Heart of Truth, p. 68.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 75.

²⁵ Taylor, p. 14.

²⁶ Asa, p. 238.

any meaning it must mean something more than merely "God is God." God supposedly meant to communicate something about himself by this definition, so the word "good" must refer to something which we know, whereby we can say "Ah, God is like that." Therefore we must bring an understanding of "good" to our reading of the biblical definition. In this sense, an understanding of morality is and must be "extra-biblical." This, however, does not undermine biblical authority; rather, it establishes it.²⁷

The Foundation of Moral Obligation

With the above details established, Finney's basic moral system can be easily described. "Obligation," he says, "must be founded on some good and sufficient reason."²⁸ The foundation of moral obligation is the good of being (which includes both God and the universe), which is intrinsically valuable and therefore must be chosen for its own sake. And "such is the nature of the good of being that it necessitates the affirmation, that benevolence is a universal duty."²⁹ Therefore what is right and moral is the kind of relation between moral beings that will promote the

²⁷ Lewis claims that "if we once admit that what God means by 'goodness' is sheerly different from what we judge to be good, there is no difference left between pure religion and devil worship" (p. 79).

²⁸ Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 27.

²⁹ Ibid.

greatest good of all being, and the ruling principle is universal benevolence. According to Finney this basic principle is self-evident, and "necessitates the rational affirmation, that it ought to be chosen for its own sake."³⁰ Thus the morally right is identified with the rational, which would of course equate the morally wrong with the irrational.³¹

Since moral law involves free choices, all persons must be free to choose to live benevolently and seek the good of being. In fact, there are only two ultimate choices open to any person: 1) to seek the greatest good of all being, i.e. benevolence; or 2) to choose to gratify herself at the expense of this greatest good, i.e. selfishness. All other choices (what Finney calls "proximate ends") are made to further the one ultimate end she has chosen. The principle of the Unity of Moral Action, which became particularly prevalent at Oberlin College, claims that a person cannot be

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ The great Roman Catholic philosopher, Bernard Lonergan, makes the same identification more clearly. In speaking of basic sin [i.e. "the failure of free will to choose a morally obligatory course of action or its failure to reject a morally reprehensible course of action"], he says, "All that intelligence can grasp with respect to basic sins is that there is no intelligibility to be grasped. What is basic sin? It is the irrational. Why does it occur? If there were a reason, it would not be sin...basic sin consists not in yielding to reasons and reasonableness, but in failing to yield to them; it consists not in inadvertent failure but in advertence to and in acknowledgement of obligation that, none the less, is not followed by reasonable response." Insight (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978), pp. 666, 667.

partly holy and partly selfish at the same time. If she makes benevolence her supreme choice, she cannot simultaneously perform subordinate choices that will work against this choice.³² If she does, she has changed her ultimate choice to selfishness.³³ Thus she is either entirely holy or entirely selfish at any given moment.

Nathaniel W. Taylor carries this view a few steps further. He claims that what he calls "subordinate actions" (the choices made to achieve the ultimate end) have absolutely no moral character. They can be judged "right" or "wrong" not in a moral sense, but only in the sense of being fitted or not fitted to achieve the ultimate end toward which they are aimed.³⁴ Thus he would say that any subordinate action which will further the ultimate end, "the highest well-being of all," is right, and no case can exist where an action achieves this end and is still wrong. Finney does not explicitly make this point, but his view of ultimate and proximate ends, combined with the theory of the Unity of Moral Action, leads logically to this conclusion.

The intention behind all of a person's actions constitutes the real morality of his choices. Recall that Finney defines moral law as "the rule for the government of free and intelligent action." This means that if the ultimate

³² Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 32.

³³ Ibid., p. 33.

³⁴ Taylor, p. 66.

choice is benevolence, then the person's action will be considered good even if he makes a genuine mistake or has a lack of knowledge which brings about a negative result. It cannot be either rational or just for a person to be considered immoral for making a genuine mistake, when he acts in accordance with all he knows, and seeks to act benevolently. As Finney says,

No moral being can possibly blame or charge himself with any default, when he is conscious of honestly intending, willing, or choosing, and acting, according to the best light he has; for in this case he obeys the law, as he understands it, and, of course, cannot conceive himself to be condemned by the law.³⁵

This naturally does not excuse a person from the obligation to seek all available knowledge. For example, if she knows there is more information available and deliberately chooses not to acquire it, she will be accountable for that neglect. As Finney says, obligation "must be conditional, also, upon the knowledge that there are conditions and means, and what they are, and also that executive efforts are necessary, possible, and useful."³⁶

Thus morality is made very simple:

- 1) the good of being is self-evidently intrinsically valuable and must be chosen for its own sake;
- 2) the only rational means to promote this end is universal benevolence;

³⁵ Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 41.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 28.

- 3) people are free to choose or they cannot be held accountable;
- 4) there are only two ultimate choices available to moral beings: benevolence or selfishness. All other choices are means to promote the ultimate choice;
- 5) people are obliged to act upon their present knowledge, and cannot be condemned if they lack knowledge;
- 6) Their ultimate choice (benevolence or selfishness) determines whether their subordinate choices and their results are considered morally good or bad. Note again that this refers only to the moral quality of the choice, and not the desirability of the actual outcome.

Warfield strenuously objects to Finney's interpretation of moral obligation, claiming that it is merely an exercise in relaxing people's obligation to the law.³⁷ Indeed, according to Warfield, "Law is replaced by benevolence,"³⁸ and "They [that is, the Oberlin perfectionists] defined the content of the law, obedience to which constitutes perfection, as just 'love.'"³⁹ Strangely, he believes that the reason behind this definition is a legalistic attitude on

³⁷ Warfield, p. 68.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 144.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 168.

the part of those who hold this view. Since they have, he says, reduced religion to a mere scheme of ethics, they can only speak in terms of perfect obedience to law. Thus they must devise some way of relaxing the requirements of law to make this obligation attainable.⁴⁰

It is ironic that Warfield could adopt this interpretation when it is remembered that according to both Finney and Taylor it is not the outwardly lawful act which is right, but rather the heart intention. Taylor claims that even the Decalogue may be either benevolent or selfish, depending upon the circumstances of its application.⁴¹ It is difficult to see how the basis for this claim could be a legalistic preoccupation with strict obedience to law. Warfield's statement is doubly ironic when one examines Finney's view of the atonement: Finney maintains that the atonement took place to satisfy public justice rather than retributive justice. It is retributive justice which demands exact reward and punishment for every act of obedience or disobedience, while public justice can dispense with this system of exact reward so long as the integrity and authority of God's moral government are not sacrificed. This view of the atonement will be discussed more fully below, but is mentioned here because it does not appear to conform to Warfield's claim that Finney is preoccupied with

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 68.

⁴¹ Taylor, p. 57.

strict obedience to the letter of the law. (And Warfield can only be speaking of the letter of the law and not the spirit; if one refers to the "spirit" of the law one begins to speak of the purpose of laws, and eventually must define this in terms of some good end to be achieved by them. This is exactly where Finney and Taylor stand. Yet Warfield clearly shows he does not define law in this way, by contrasting law with this good end: "Law is replaced by benevolence, and is fulfilled by willing the good of being as an ultimate end, chosen for its own sake."⁴²)

In reply to Warfield's accusation that "law is replaced by benevolence," Finney would say that according to the Bible, "love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:10).⁴³ He quotes a few verses of 1 Corinthians 13, dealing with charity [i.e., love], to show that understanding all mysteries, having all knowledge, having all faith, and giving up one's life and goods is considered nothing without love.⁴⁴ He might also have quoted Matthew 22:37-40, where Christ says,

"'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. And a second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets." (emphasis mine)

⁴² Warfield, p. 144.

⁴³ Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 52.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Other Scripture texts make the same point, such as Romans 13:8, which states that "he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law," and Galatians 5:14 which says, "the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" Obviously law and benevolence are not to be contrasted; rather, benevolence is the guiding purpose of the whole law, as is shown especially clearly in the text from Matthew.

Asa makes a valid point regarding benevolence as a moral obligation when he says, "how the moral law of love can be considered self-evident is problematic, since biblically it is a doctrine of revelation, not natural theology."⁴⁵ If this is so, did Finney really derive his theory from reason alone, or did he assume it from his biblical perspective and then claim that it was supported by natural theology? The difficulties encountered over the centuries in dealing with the problem of evil may suggest the latter.⁴⁶ Yet Finney abstracts from the individual's

⁴⁵ Asa, p. 236.

⁴⁶ That is, if the concept of universal benevolence as the ultimate moral law is derived only from the Bible, with no evidence in nature to support it, one might have reason to doubt that the God of love in the Bible is the same God who is behind nature, or to doubt that God exists at all. The problem of the existence of evil in the world, if there is no evidence that good is intrinsic to the world, may seem to outweigh biblical claims about a good God and his law. Thus it is an important question, whether Finney can derive his moral theory from the nature of existence itself, or whether he must go to the Bible for his theory and then try to read his claims about moral law back into nature.

own "constitutional desire for happiness" to the objective value of happiness, which may get around this problem. This move will be discussed in Chapter Five, in the section dealing with Utilitarianism.

Warfield does see, correctly, that in Finney's system people are obligated only so far as their knowledge and ability take them. Discussing Finney's account of the "moral idiot," he writes, "being a moral idiot, he has no moral obligation; when he has done nothing at all he has done all that he ought to do: he is perfect."⁴⁷ He believes Finney has reduced the law's requirements to fit the capacity of each sinner.⁴⁸ If this is carried to its logical conclusion, he says, "the acquisition of unconquerable habits of evil, by progressively destroying obligation, renders perfection ever easier," and "one of the surest roads to salvation is therefore to become incurably wicked."⁴⁹

Finney would reply by re-stating his claim that only voluntary states can be morally good or bad, a fact which cannot be escaped if rationality and justice are to be retained. "That man cannot be under a moral obligation to perform an absolute impossibility, is a first truth of reason," and "unless the will is free, man has no freedom;

⁴⁷ Warfield, p. 69.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 71.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

and if he has no freedom he is not a moral agent."⁵⁰ Thus a true "moral idiot," who cannot discern right and wrong or an obligation to moral law, cannot be obligated to it. Finney denies that God can justly require of people "just as high and perfect a service as if their powers had never been abused by sin."⁵¹ This would be equivalent to requiring that they undo all past sins so that they never happened, which is obviously impossible. And he says, "If this theory is true, I see not why it does not follow that the saints will be guilty in heaven of the sin of omission."⁵² The fact that sin has occurred is the whole point of the atonement, and is why repentance is required. If the person, by his own act, puts himself in the state of "moral idiocy" he will be responsible for that sinful act. But nothing done in his "idiotic" state can have moral character if he no longer has moral awareness. He can be no more morally responsible than can a slug, or a tree that falls on someone's house. This must be so for anyone presently in a state of moral non-awareness. However, this lack of responsibility does not apply to those simply in a state of ignorance; recall that each person is responsible for acquiring the light and information she can. Once it is known that further information is available, she must

⁵⁰ Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 15.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 293.

⁵² Ibid., p. 294.

attempt to acquire it or be guilty for her refusal. Taylor states that "the will of the lawgiver being clearly promulgated, ignorance of the law becomes voluntary, and can be no excuse for disobedience."⁵³

Warfield's criticisms stem in part from the difference between the ideal state of things, and the imperfect accomplishments of people in comparison. But neither Finney nor Taylor denies the necessity of continued growth into greater holiness, a process which, according to Finney, will extend into eternity.⁵⁴ This will be discussed more fully in the section dealing with sanctification.

Warfield also objects to the theory of the Unity of Moral Action described above, which states that a person is either entirely benevolent or entirely selfish at one time, and cannot be partly both. His main objection is that the person "is dissolved into a series of volitions. Each volition is looked at apart: and being treated as a bare volition, it is said not to be capable of a composite character."⁵⁵ He believes that in this theory the person essentially disappears. "As volitions are either good or bad, so then the man is."⁵⁶ But Finney in fact says the opposite: as the man is either good or bad, so is the

⁵³ Taylor, p. 17.

⁵⁴ Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 342.

⁵⁵ Warfield, p. 138.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 139.

volition. Moral character lies in "that intention, or design of the mind, that produce[s] the volition."⁵⁷ It is not easy to examine the morality of people's actions in any other way; for example, Warfield would be unable to explain how a person might aim at a good end, yet simultaneously take conscious steps to undermine this goal. Yet his view implies that one can do exactly that: one can be essentially holy and yet commit sin, which is subversive of holiness. Finney, on the other hand, would say that one can do no such thing. He uses the example of intending to go to New York as soon as possible, yet loitering needlessly along the way until the journey is delayed by an hour or a day, and says that this means the intention of going as soon as possible must obviously be relinquished.⁵⁸ One cannot intend to go to New York "as soon as possible" and simultaneously "loiter needlessly." Similarly, one cannot intend a good purpose and take conscious steps to prevent it.

It might be objected that Paul, in Romans chapter 7, contradicts Finney's claim about the unity of moral action, especially in verses 14 to 25 where he continuously speaks of wanting to do one thing, but finding himself doing the opposite. At first reading, this does not seem to suggest the unity of purpose that Finney speaks of. However, Finney reminds us that chapter 7 is connected both to chapter 6 and

⁵⁷ Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 43.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 45.

to chapter 8, and should be read with that in mind. Romans 6:14 tells believers that "sin shall not be master over you," and the rest of the chapter warns about committing oneself to the wrong master, yet chapter 7 describes someone over whom sin is indeed master. Chapters 7 and 8, says Finney, are written to contrast the influence of the law and of the gospel. Chapter 7 describes a person struggling with the flesh, whose knowledge of the law torments him, while Chapter 8 describes one who has been set free from the law of sin and death by "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (8:2). In fact, late in the chapter, Paul says, "In all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us" (8:37). This is hardly the same life described in Romans 7:14-24.⁵⁹

Recall that in Finney's system it is possible to do outwardly "good" acts with the wrong intention, and therefore be judged morally wrong. It is also possible to recognize the righteousness of the law and the fact of one's own sin, and even to feel remorse and sorrow for the breaking of law, but still be committed to self-service as the ultimate choice of one's life. The person described in Romans 7 is obviously in bondage to sin. Even though Paul uses the personal pronoun in both chapters 7 and 8, Finney believes the contrast is so clear that chapter 7 can only

⁵⁹ Finney's comments described in this paragraph and the one that follows are found in the Systematic Theology, pp. 364-366.

refer to a non-Christian or a Christian who has turned back to sin, and that Paul uses the personal pronoun only for convenience. But even if he refers to himself in both cases, chapter 8 presents a clear picture of victory and deliverance and chapter 7, far from being the normal picture of Christian life, is obviously that from which he was delivered.

Robert Lynn Asa brings elements into the discussion which Finney did not deal with, since they involve psychological views of persons developed since his time.⁶⁰ Asa says Finney views people dualistically, pitting reason against emotion.⁶¹ Modern psychology, on the other hand, views people as psychosomatic wholes. It is known that "human beings act out of conscious or unconscious emotional forces more often than they commonly recognize."⁶² It is true that modern views of persons are more complex than those held in Finney's time. Yet he would say that even if unconscious forces influence a person's choices, he is still only responsible for his conscious intention. He would

⁶⁰ Asa, p. 254.

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 132-135. He shows that while Finney claims the emotions have no moral character in themselves, in his actual treatment of them he equates them with "the flesh," which is biblically always represented as sinful. Emotions are almost always spoken of derogatorily, as the source of temptation, and something which must be rigidly controlled in order to lead a righteous life. The reason is always put in a position of primacy over emotion.

⁶² Ibid., p. 256.

reiterate that morality cannot be predicated of something beyond a person's control. Modern views of persons therefore do not change the basic nature of moral obligation, although the psychological nature of people is not nearly so black-and-white as Finney believed, and should be further investigated to understand all the factors involved.

Asa's criticism of Finney's treatment of the emotions is pertinent to the discussion of original sin, a doctrine which Finney rejects. Asa says that when Finney equates the emotions with "the flesh," he is committing the same error he ascribes to Calvinists: "attributing to God-created, innate human nature the drive to sin."⁶³

Original Sin

A corollary of people's freedom is that there can be no such thing as original sin, or a sinful nature prompting one to sin inevitably. If a person is free, she must really be free if she is to be judged by what she does. Moral depravity, Finney says, "cannot consist in any attribute of nature or constitution, nor in any lapsed and fallen state of nature; for this is physical and not moral depravity."⁶⁴ Sinfulness is not, to use Finney's term, a "constitutional" (that is, physical) property of human beings. Rather, "it

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 166.

is moral depravity, because it is a violation of moral law."⁶⁵ We are reminded again of Finney's initial distinction between physical and moral law. Moral law can only apply to voluntary states; anything outside the power of choice does not fall under moral law. Most importantly, Finney regards the concept of a sinful constitution as a slur on God's name: "To talk of a sinful nature, or sinful constitution, in the sense of physical sinfulness, is to ascribe sinfulness to the Creator, who is the author of nature."⁶⁶

Finney says that only once does the Bible intimate that Adam's sin somehow is linked to humanity's sins, citing Romans 5:12-19 (in such phrases as "through one man sin entered into the world...so death spread to all men, because all sinned," or "by the transgression of one the many died," or "by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one," or "through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners"). Everywhere else in the Bible, sin is accounted for by referring to people being tempted by, and voluntarily succumbing to, either the enticements of the world, or the lusts of their own flesh, or Satan. The reference in Romans does not explain how the subsequent sins of human beings are linked to Adam's sin; all we can conclusively say is that it claims "that Adam's first sin

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 172.

has in some way been the occasion, not the necessary physical cause, of all the sins of men."⁶⁷ Finney points out that the idea of "inherited" sin again confuses the physical with the moral:

But how came Adam by a sinful nature?...What ground is there for the assertion that Adam's nature became in itself sinful by the fall? This is a groundless, not to say ridiculous, assumption, and an absurdity. Sin an attribute of nature! A sinful substance! Sin a substance! Is it a solid, a fluid, a material, or a spiritual substance?⁶⁸

Expounding Jonathan Edwards' appeal to a "sinful nature" to explain sin, Joseph Haroutunian writes, "A sinful act is the act of a sinful nature. Therefore, where there is sin, there is sinful nature."⁶⁹ The claim, that sinful acts come from a sinful nature, is what Edwards seeks to prove, and he therefore cannot assume it in order to prove it. Finney maintains that one does not need a sinful nature to choose to sin; otherwise, how did Adam and Eve, or the angels, choose to sin the first time?⁷⁰ And of course it can be objected that it is not just, to impute the sin of Adam, or transmit its consequences, to his descendants. Haroutunian says, "Edwards replied that men are punished not merely because they inherit the sin of Adam, but because

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 189.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 186.

⁶⁹ Haroutunian, p. 16.

⁷⁰ Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 181.

they themselves are sinners."⁷¹ If so, why is it necessary to postulate a sinful nature? People's own sins bring condemnation, and a "sinful nature" is therefore superfluous. For people to be responsible for their actions, there cannot be any inevitability about their sin. Yet Edwards, says Haroutunian, would say that "The fact that a man's sinful choice is consequent upon his nature does not make it any less sinful,"⁷² and that these claims of injustice "'arise from absurd notions in vogue, concerning freedom of will, as if it consisted in the will's self-determining power, supposed to be necessary to moral agency, virtue and vice' [emphasis his]."⁷³ Yet freedom and self-determination, Finney says, are the very essence of morality. If the will is not free and sin is inevitable, the individual is as morally responsible as a rock.

Haroutunian says Edwards and others who hold the doctrine of original sin have a concept of the oneness of humankind, citing Edwards' illustration of several limbs all branching from the same tree, of which Adam is the root.⁷⁴ He does not explain what this "oneness" actually consists in. One possibility depends on the traducianist doctrine that people's souls as well as their bodies are derived from

⁷¹ Haroutunian, p. 19.

⁷² Ibid., p. 19.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 20, 26.

their parents. There has been much debate about traducianism as an explanation; Augustine wavered to the end of his life on the question, and many have disbelieved it entirely.⁷⁵ Yet if traducianism is the explanation, the origin of sin once again becomes essentially physical, having nothing to do with choice, and therefore leaving the realm of the moral.

If Edwards' oneness is a mystical "oneness of purpose" instead, this view will not work either. No one claims to have recollection of consciously acquiescing in Adam's choice, and therefore he or she cannot be held accountable for it. Each person is conscious only of being responsible for his or her own choices to sin.

Finney's view that people are free and that the doctrine of original sin is therefore false, carries some drastic consequences for which he and others at Oberlin took severe criticism. If a person's supreme preference is benevolence, then all her actions to promote that end will be morally good for as long as it remains her supreme preference. It is entirely possible for her to maintain that preference indefinitely, thus living a perfect life

⁷⁵ J.N.D. Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines, Revised Edition (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978), p. 345. Kelly says that Augustine leaned in the traducianist direction on the whole, "although with many hesitations." This view is associated with Tertullian, with hints of it in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa. The view of independent creation of the soul was held by Hilary, Ambrose, Jerome, and Pelagius.

(according to the knowledge she has) and being acceptable to God. The obverse of this is that at any time she is free to change her ultimate choice. She may choose against benevolence and make selfishness her supreme end, thereby bringing herself under condemnation. The implications for a Christian are obvious:

Whenever he sins, he must, for the time being, cease to be holy. This is self-evident...The Christian, therefore, is justified no longer than he obeys, and must be condemned when he disobeys... Until he repents he cannot be forgiven. In these respects, then, the sinning Christian and the unconverted sinner are upon precisely the same ground.⁷⁶

A Christian is different from an unconverted sinner since he has a Father-child relationship with God, and has had a foundation laid that provides greater incentive to return to God,⁷⁷ but essentially he endangers himself when he sins and continues on with the supreme choice of selfishness.

To the question whether a person could once be a Christian and then cease to be one, Finney answers, "If there were anything impossible in this, then perseverance would be no virtue."⁷⁸ The reason for the idea of "eternal security" for a Christian again involves confusion of the physical and moral. Those who see regeneration as a physical thing "done to" a person will believe it impossible

⁷⁶ Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 46.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 47.

for a Christian to be "un-regenerated." But if regeneration consists in "a change in the ruling preference of the mind, or in the ultimate intention...it is plain, that an individual can be born again, and afterwards cease to be virtuous."⁷⁹

Finney's view of freedom prompts the question why sin seems universal if people are free not to sin. This fact is taken by some to support the original sin hypothesis. His answer is that bodily impulses are powerful influences from the moment of birth, and people are already in the habit of physical gratification before the idea of moral obligation develops (this habit of gratification having no moral character at this stage). Once moral awareness develops, the habit must be abandoned or it becomes selfishness. However, unless the Holy Spirit illuminates the soul, they will not change their habit of self-gratification.⁸⁰

This view raises further problems, one being that if it were true, in practical terms its effect on the sinner's life would be hardly different from the effects that would result from original sin. This relates closely to Asa's claim that Finney's treatment of the emotions is no different from the Calvinists' error of attributing an innate sinful drive to man's God-created nature. The question whether Finney's explanation of sin's universality is

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 190.

sufficient, and whether it truly preserves his idea of man's freedom, will be discussed in Chapter Three.

The Atonement

Finney's system does not, as might seem, involve people "earning their way" into God's favor by being good. Such a system would preclude any necessity for atonement. If there were an atonement at all, it would be merely a matter of "moral influence," an attempt to prompt people to become good. But Finney sees the atonement as a necessity without which none can be forgiven their sins or see God.⁸¹

Writing from the Moral Government perspective, his main considerations have to do with wise government. It is not God's desire just to punish sinners mercilessly, to give them their exact deserts for sin. Rather, because God is benevolent, and therefore mercy is one of his attributes,

no atonement could be needed to satisfy any implacable spirit in the divine mind...he was sufficiently and infinitely disposed to extend pardon to the penitent, if this could be wisely, benevolently, and safely done [emphasis mine].⁸²

Note the emphasized words. For Moral Government theology, the main criterion for God's exercising mercy is what can be done wisely, so the highest principle (the greatest good of being) will be promoted and not sacrificed.

⁸¹ Finney, The Heart of Truth, pp. 212-214.

⁸² Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 199.

Finney divides justice into two types: 1) the giving of exact punishment in every case for every sin is "retributive justice;" and 2) the promotion and protection of public interest, and the upholding of the greatest good of being and God's governmental authority is "public justice."⁸³ Where forgiveness is concerned, "Retributive justice makes no exceptions, but punishes without mercy in every instance of crime. Public justice makes exceptions, as often as this is permitted or required by the public good."⁸⁴ Because the ruling moral principle is benevolence, God's highest wish is to pardon sinners and seek their good. However, according to Finney, this could not be done without something to reinforce the seriousness of sin and to uphold the authority of God's moral government, which was also an aspect of benevolence. The atonement was needed to accomplish this:

Public justice required, either that an atonement should be made, or that the law should be executed upon every offender. By public justice is intended, that due administration of law, that shall secure in the highest manner which the nature of the case admits, private and public interests, and establish the order and well-being of the universe. In establishing the government of the universe, God had given the pledge, both impliedly and expressly, that he would regard the public interests, and by a due administration of the law, secure and promote, as far as possible, public and individual happiness.⁸⁵

⁸³ Ibid., p. 195.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 201.

Finney claims that an atonement fulfilling public justice will prevent and deter sin better than a system of retributive justice. Simple punishment of sinning angels did not arrest sin's progress in the world; it promoted fear of God rather than love.⁸⁶ And even when the threat of punishment deters wrong-doing it does not change the heart, which is the source of sinful choices; he cites the apostle Paul, who writes that without the atonement the action of the law upon his heart only made his sin abound.⁸⁷ So an atonement was needed to show that God took sin very seriously indeed, and that it would be punished if it was not changed. But the fact that God himself was the sufferer also demonstrated his deep love, a fact which retributive justice could not demonstrate; further, Christ's sufferings showed that Satan's accusation made to Eve, that God was selfish in his law-giving, was utterly false.⁸⁸ This, of course, not only provides powerful incentives to change one's heart, but demonstrates both God's love and his determination to punish sin if the sinner remains impenitent.

The atonement does not, in Finney's view, involve imputation of any kind. Christ's righteousness is not imputed to the sinner. He was obligated to obey the law for his own sake and could not do more than his duty, and

⁸⁶ Finney, The Heart of Truth, p. 212.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 213.

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 213, 214.

therefore could not obey for anyone else.⁸⁹ Finney points out the problem with an imputational view:

The idea that any part of the atonement consisted in Christ's obeying the law for us, and in our stead and behalf, represents God as requiring:

- (1) The obedience of our substitute.
- (2) The same suffering as if no obedience had been rendered.
- (3) Our repentance.
- (4) Our personal obedience.
- (5) And then represents him as, after all, ascribing our salvation to grace. Strange grace this, that requires a debt to be paid several times over before the obligation is discharged!⁹⁰

Nor was the atonement, as Finney calls it, a "commercial transaction." Christ did not suffer the exact amount of punishment due to every sinner, because that would have necessitated that he suffer eternally for each sinner, and this Finney believes is obviously impossible.⁹¹ Further, it would simply be unjust for God to punish an innocent person instead of the guilty persons. As Finney says,

...it would not only be unjust, but it is impossible with God to punish an innocent moral agent at all. Punishment implies guilt. An innocent being may suffer, but he cannot be punished. Christ voluntarily "suffered, the just for the unjust." He had a right to exercise this self-

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 217.

⁹⁰ Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 206.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 207. Some who believe God exists "outside" of time, in an "eternal now," believe this makes possible Christ's suffering eternally for each sinner. The question of God's existence in or out of time will be dealt with in Chapter 5, in the section, "God and Time."

denial; and as it was by his own voluntary consent, no injustice was done to any one.⁹²

Therefore the sufferings of Christ were a vicarious substitute for those of sinners;⁹³ and this voluntary substitution, and the upholding of the authority of God's moral government, made it possible for God benevolently to forgive sinners without jeopardizing this authority, or the true spirit of moral law, which is the promotion of the greatest good of being.⁹⁴

Warfield believes Finney's theory of the atonement is nothing more than a moral influence theory. He believes that Finney's theory reduces Christ's only part in the atonement to revelation, since repentance and faith,

⁹² Ibid., p. 215.

⁹³ Finney, The Heart of Truth, p. 218.

⁹⁴ Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 207. It might be asked how Christ's voluntary suffering for the sake of sinners makes any difference; how could the voluntariness of his suffering in any way make up for sinners' offences against God? Finney would repeat that absolutely nothing will "make up" for these offences, since the fact that sins were committed can never be undone, and the offenders will always be guilty of having committed them. The voluntariness of Christ's suffering means that he was not being unjustly punished for what he did not do; it also meant God did not have to choose one sinner to exempt from his mercy, making him or her an example to make his point to other sinners. The authority of God's law was reinforced; the severity of the penalty for breaking it was demonstrated as well as his determination to enforce it; and he was able to extend the offer of mercy to all sinners, because of the voluntariness of Christ's sufferings. But this voluntary aspect in no way "makes up" for the original offences against God's law.

renunciation of rebellion, and obedience to God's laws are all done by the sinner.⁹⁵

Because Christ has secured men against a fatal misconception of God's character and designs, God can pardon and accept sinners -- provided that they reform. From all that appears Christ's work has nothing more to do with bringing about their reformation than it has to do with God's pardon and acceptance of them on their reformation...All that Christ has done is to secure them against walking in wrong paths and that only by making known to them that there are wrong paths. That they walk in the right path is their own doing. If they do, God then pardons and accepts them--for as long as they do.⁹⁶

It is easy to understand Warfield's interpretation of this theory as simply a moral influence theory. Indeed, Finney himself admits that part of the value of the atonement is the moral example it sets:

the value of the Atonement consists in its moral power or tendency to promote virtue and happiness...example is the highest moral influence that can be exerted by any being...the example of God is the highest moral influence in the uni-verse.⁹⁷

Yet in moral influence theories of the atonement there is no concern with upholding the authority of benevolent law and God's government. As Gordon Olson, a long-time student of Finney's teachings, writes, "the honor of the law was promoted by it [the atonement] as much as this honor would have been promoted by inflicting the legal penalty upon all

⁹⁵ Warfield, p. 161.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 162.

⁹⁷ Finney, The Heart of Truth, p. 224.

sinners."⁹⁸ The atonement was made, Finney would say, not to provide a means to "get away with" sin, but as a warning that if repentance did not occur, sin would indeed be punished. The cross showed that God took sin seriously. In fact, "fallen angels and the finally impenitent of this world will receive the full execution of the penalty of the divine law."⁹⁹ Therefore, as well as a powerful moral influence upon people's hearts, the atonement is a witness to the value of the good of being, and the authority of God's government.

Warfield objects to Finney's criterion of "public justice" to explain the atonement, saying that this means God was "compelled to subordinate -- as many less absolute governors have been compelled to do -- the law of absolute right to the demands of public interest."¹⁰⁰ He speaks of the "absolute imperative of pure conscience" and the "absolutely right,"¹⁰¹ and says that Finney's view sets aside the concept of expiation, which is "the heart of the heart" of the plan of salvation.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Gordon C. Olson, The Truth Shall Make You Free (2624 Hawthorne, Franklin Park, Illinois, 60131: Bible Research Fellowship, Inc.), p. "Historical Opinions - 4."

⁹⁹ Finney, The Heart of Truth, p. 222.

¹⁰⁰ Warfield, p. 164.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 165.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 165.

As to Warfield's objection about God's subordinating "absolute right" to "public justice," this has already been dealt with in the discussion of the nature of moral obligation. If the only "absolute right" is the greatest good of being and universal benevolence as the means to promote it, and if promotion of public justice will achieve greater good than the inflexible demands of retributive justice, then God is obligated to fulfill public justice. And in this view he is not "subordinating absolute right to public justice" at all. Rather, it is "absolute right" -- the greatest good of being -- which demands this fulfilling of public justice.

As to expiation, Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines it as follows: "1. (obsolete) to put an end to, 2.a: to extinguish the guilt incurred by, b: to pay the penalty for, c: to make amends for."¹⁰³ If Warfield is using the word in sense number 1, Finney would claim that one of the purposes of the atonement was ultimately to put an end to sin: "an immense good might be gained. The eternal happiness of all that can be reclaimed from sin, together with all the augmented happiness of those who have never sinned that must result from this glorious revelation of God."¹⁰⁴ Senses number 2.a and 2.c are related; the fact of guilt cannot be erased, since the sin did occur. He

¹⁰³ Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (Toronto: Thomas Allen & Son Limited, 1974), p. 403.

¹⁰⁴ Finney, The Heart of Truth, p. 215.

says, speaking in the context of satisfying retributive justice,

Strictly speaking, retributive justice can never be satisfied, in the sense that the guilty can be punished as much and as long as he deserves; for this would imply that he was punished until he ceased to be guilty, or became innocent. When law is once violated, the sinner can make no satisfaction. He can never cease to be guilty, or to deserve punishment, and no possible amount of suffering renders him the less guilty or the less deserving of punishment: therefore, to satisfy retributive justice is impossible.¹⁰⁵

This meaning of "expiation" rules out any theory of the atonement, since nothing can erase the fact of sin. Sense number 2.b, that of "paying the penalty," encounters the same difficulty, as previously discussed. There can be no "commercial" element involved, since among other things this would result in universalism; God cannot be so unjust as to demand that people pay the price of sin a second time, since Christ's death was already sufficient to pay it once.

Warfield particularly objects to the idea of God "looking around for a plausible excuse for forgiving sin."¹⁰⁶ Yet if God's motive is benevolence toward mankind, and he is "not willing that any should perish" (2 Peter 3:9), this is indeed the image presented. In fact, Nathaniel W. Taylor carries this image further than does Finney. He says that suffering and punishment are not right in themselves, even as responses to wrong-doing; they are

¹⁰⁵ Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 207.

¹⁰⁶ Warfield, p. 165.

only right if a good end can be achieved through them. To the idea that it could be right to inflict suffering for its own sake, even if no good whatsoever would come of it to the sufferer or any being, Taylor responds, "Could a being of perfect benevolence do this? Could any feeling short of unqualified malice prompt it?"¹⁰⁷ One might say that some good would result to God, even if no good resulted to any other being from this infliction of suffering. Yet it is not easy to see what "good" God could possibly attain from this, particularly if he did love people; if he derived some kind of satisfaction from it, how would that be different from merely "getting even"? If the redress, at any cost, of all offenses against him was his sole motive, this would be selfishness.

A very startling conclusion which may be drawn from this is that if there had been some way to uphold the greatest good and the authority of God's government without inflicting suffering on anyone, God would have done so. Neither Taylor nor Finney carries his theory this far, but this conclusion seems to follow directly from it.

One thing not dealt with satisfactorily in either the Systematic Theology or The Heart of Truth is the resurrection and its significance for the atonement. Asa says it "is not a mere appendix to Christ's death but its indispensable

¹⁰⁷ Taylor, p. 132.

[sic] concomitant."¹⁰⁸ Finney does not explain the importance of such verses as 1 Corinthians 15:13 where Paul says, "if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain," or verse 17, "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins." Obviously the resurrection is crucial; yet Finney does not give it more than passing mention.¹⁰⁹ This is a serious gap in his theory of the atonement.

However, from the Moral Government standpoint, Finney's understanding of the atonement makes sense, apart from his lack of treatment of the resurrection. It will not satisfy those who believe it gives God "nothing to do" and gives human beings "everything to do." Warfield's complaint that it puts everything in humanity's hands carries weight if one believes the glory and majesty and holiness of God suffers by this. It might be said that this theory makes the atonement completely subjective (the work is mostly done by the sinner, and varies depending on the sinner's abilities) rather than an objective transaction (all the work is done by God, based on a black-and-white, immutable standard).

¹⁰⁸ Asa, p. 275.

¹⁰⁹ He does recognize that somehow the atonement has "abolished natural death, by procuring universal resurrection," citing 1 Corinthians 15:22 ("For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive"), The Heart of Truth, p. 229. Yet he does not discuss how this was accomplished, and in context he attributes this to the atonement rather than specifically to the resurrection. If he is including the resurrection in his discussion of atonement, it is not clear.

Yet within the context of Finney's moral theory, sin itself is subjective when the objective concept of original sin is removed. Once again the issue revolves around free choice.

Sanctification

As a background to the discussion of sanctification, we must back-track to the nature of moral obligation, and what constitutes fulfillment of it. Recall that Finney says love is the fulfillment of the law.¹¹⁰ He asks if God can possibly accept one who does less than the law requires. This, he maintains, is taught by many Christians who claim that while perfect obedience is required, perfect obedience is neither possible nor necessary.¹¹¹ He asks, "How much sin may we commit, or how much may we, at every moment, come short of full obedience to the law of God, and yet be accepted and justified?"¹¹² It cannot make sense that we should be justified short of full obedience to the divine law. He says,

The theory in question is that Christians never, at any time, in this world, yield a full obedience to the divine law; that they always withhold a part of their hearts from the Lord, and yet, while in the very act of committing this abominable sin of voluntarily defrauding God and their neighbor, God accepts their persons and their services, fully forgives and justifies them. What is this, but pardoning present and pertinac-

¹¹⁰ Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 52.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 51.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 54.

ious rebellion! Receiving to favor a God-defrauding wretch! Forgiving a sin unrepented of and detestably persevered in! Yes, this must be, if it be true that Christians are justified without present full obedience. That surely must be a doctrine of devils, that represents God as receiving to favor a rebel who has one hand filled with weapons against his throne.¹¹³

He maintains that not only does God not pardon unrepented sin (and says the Bible nowhere recognizes such an act), but he has no right to do so, as the moral governor of the universe.¹¹⁴ Further, he denies that it is possible to repent only partially of sin, or to "really want" to obey while actually disobeying.¹¹⁵ This of course follows from the theory of the Unity of Moral Action, discussed above.

Thus perfect obedience is required if guilt is not to be incurred. He has ruled out the idea of Christ "obeying in our stead," discussed above in the section on the Atonement. He has also ruled out the idea of a natural inability to obey, discussed in the section on Original Sin. Therefore, if obedience is to be justly required of men, it must be possible for them to fulfill the requirement.

Sanctification, although it takes up six chapters in the Systematic Theology, is very simple on Finney's account. He speaks of it in two senses:

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 55.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 57, 58.

- 1) present, full obedience, or entire consecration to God; and
- 2) continued, abiding consecration or obedience to God.¹¹⁶

The first stage is a matter of changing one's ultimate moral preference from selfishness to universal benevolence, and all subordinate choices are directed toward that ultimate end. Three things are needed to become entirely sanctified:

- 1) Natural ability to do the whole will of God;
- 2) Sufficient knowledge to reveal one's whole duty; and
- 3) Sufficient knowledge or light to reveal the means of overcoming temptation. This is given through receiving the Holy Spirit.¹¹⁷

Sanctification in Finney's first sense is achieved day by day, with the aid of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Finney describes this as follows: "Entire sanctification, instead of implying no further dependence on the grace of Christ, implies the constant appropriation of Christ by faith as the sanctification of the soul."¹¹⁸ As this day by day living in holiness continues, it becomes a habit and lifestyle, and

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 341.

¹¹⁷ Warfield, p. 91.

¹¹⁸ Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 342.

ultimately stage two is reached, where sanctification is entire and continual.¹¹⁹

Finney never denies that a person is still free to sin at this stage, but "as a matter of fact, he does not, and will not sin."¹²⁰ This person will still meet temptation, as Christ did to the end of his life; and must still progress in holiness. After all, one is always able to progress further in knowledge, and this implies possible increase of holiness; "the saints will doubtless grow in grace or holiness to all eternity."¹²¹ But Finney maintains that it is possible for a person to develop a habit, under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit, of living a holy life according to all the moral understanding he or she has.

Warfield would agree with Finney that there is a connection between justification and sanctification. He discusses a person who is justified but not sanctified, and presents this scenario:

One would like to know what the state of such a man is. Being justified, his sins are all pardoned; he is accepted in God's sight; and the reward of eternal life is given him...But not having been sanctified, he must go to heaven a corrupt and polluted, though not guilty, wretch. And we are brought up short by the fundamental principle that without holiness no man shall see the Lord.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Warfield, p. 100.

It is unclear whether Warfield really means "corrupt and polluted, though not guilty," or whether this is sarcastic. It is difficult to know what meaning "guilty" could have if it does not apply to whatever made this man "corrupt and polluted." But Warfield's main point is precisely Finney's: "without holiness no man shall see the Lord."

However, although recognizing this, Warfield in effect criticizes Finney's conclusion that one must therefore be holy, practically speaking, in order to see the Lord. He holds to a passive view of sanctification, seeing it as something essentially "done to" the Christian. He says, "Corruption is the very penalty of sin from which we are freed in justification; holiness is the very reward which is granted to us in justification."¹²³ He does not say what the "reward" is for. Nor does he explain how a believing Christian can find herself making some of the same wrong choices, and still being subject to the same temptations, desires, urges, and habits that she had before she was "freed" from corruption. The word "freed" is obviously being used in an unusual way in this discussion.

Warfield appears to see holiness as a "state" rather than a choice. He discusses Finney's claim that upon exercising faith one is entirely sanctified, and interprets this to mean that, "immediately on exercising faith we have

¹²³ Ibid.

kept the whole law of God."¹²⁴ Finney would reply that no one can ever "have kept" the whole law, since a sin once committed can never be un-committed. Nor does the act of faith put one in a state of "imputed righteousness," since Christ cannot have obeyed on behalf of anyone but himself. Finney would revise Warfield's statement to say, "Immediately on exercising faith we are keeping -- that moment -- the whole law of God." Sanctification cannot be defined as a "position" or honorific title held by a person, with no basis in actual fact and no relation to his or her actual deeds; remember that morality can only deal with choice.

Many criticisms of Finney's theory derive from a "constitutional" view of sin. If one is handicapped by sinful inability, then change must be initiated by God. The sinner is necessarily passive. Of course no perfection is possible to a person with original sin. Asa comments that "the solution to the sanctification dilemma is not to hold up to the new convert the impossibly high standard of perfection."¹²⁵ Yet Finney does not advocate this. His point is that the impossible cannot be justly required, and that man is capable of doing all that is required. Asa criticizes Finney for a view he does not hold.

From the original sin viewpoint, which makes sin a matter of physical state as well as moral choice, God is

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 85, Footnote 199.

¹²⁵ Asa, p. 284.

absolutely required to be the initiator and changer. But from Finney's viewpoint, people are in fact able to choose, and to change their ruling preference. Warfield recognizes that once Finney rejects original sin, his system is consistent, while if original sin is retained, the Augustinian system is absolutely necessary:

"Constitutional depravity or sinfulness being once assumed, physical regeneration, physical sanctification, physical divine influence, imputed righteousness, and justification, while personally in the commission of sin, follow of course." This is all very true. Granted the Augustinian doctrine of sin and the Augustinian soteriology becomes a necessity, if sinners are to be saved...Rejecting "constitutional depravity," that is to say, a sinfulness which goes deeper than the act and affects the "nature" itself, he has no need of any "physical" regeneration, sanctification, divine influence, and accordingly rejects them too: and as there is no reason why the sinner who is a sinner only in act and is endowed with an inalienable plenary ability to do all that he is under obligation to do, should not under the motives brought to bear on him in the gospel, cease sinning at will, and do righteousness, so there is no need of a righteousness of Christ to supply his lack; and none is provided and none imputed"¹²⁶

Warfield points out, however, that Finney is not clear on what it means to have faith in Christ or rely on the Spirit to be sanctified. Finney speaks about faith and the work of Christ and the Spirit, but always when the point is pressed home it is people's own actions which do it all.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Warfield, p. 160.

¹²⁷ Ibid., pp. 84-100.

Christ and the Spirit become mere "revelators."¹²⁸ Warfield says, "Christ does nothing...except make Himself known to it [i.e. the soul]. We are sanctified by revelation, not by renewal: Christ brings instruction, not power."¹²⁹

These are valid complaints. Recall Finney's belief that physical nature is diseased, so people will not (though they can) turn from sin without the Spirit's help. The ramifications of this will be discussed in Chapter Three. But there is a clear tension in this view, whereby the soul is almost as limited as though tainted with original sin. Thus he wavers between asserting natural ability and admitting an inability which necessitates the intervention of Christ and the Spirit before a change can occur.¹³⁰ If consistent, he would have to say that a person can change, on the basis of the light he has, even without the Spirit's further illumination. That the Spirit provides illumination is an act of grace, and may speed the process of growth in knowledge, but it is not absolutely essential to one's sanctification. Warfield recognizes this, and cannot

¹²⁸ Ibid., pp. 88-90.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 90.

¹³⁰ Leonard I. Sweet notes this tension in Finney, pointing out that he "was forever swinging from one side of the pendulum to the other, on the one hand pushing human agency...and on the other hand pushing divine agency; "The View of Man Inherent in New Measures Revivalism," in Church History, Vol. 45, June 1976, p. 210. This stemmed, says Sweet, from Finney's view that all men had a common indisposition to obey God without the Spirit's influence (p. 209).

understand why Finney unsuccessfully attempts to hold a view not warranted within the framework of his moral theory.

Warfield also recognizes the most startling and disturbing conclusion to be drawn from Finney's system. Since God is under obligation as much as we are to promote the good of the universe, "God might be eliminated entirely from Finney's ethical theory without injury to it."¹³¹ God is the moral governor of the universe solely because of his qualification to rule, as both Finney¹³² and Taylor¹³³ argue, and if God's character changed or he became somehow disqualified, people would no longer be obliged to obey him.¹³⁴ But though enforcement of the law would cease, people's obligation to it would not. Thus God does not seem to be necessary to establish moral obligation.

Finney never draws this conclusion. He speaks always of obligation to God's law, even using a moral argument to prove God's existence.¹³⁵ Perhaps he bases his claims about obligation upon his contention that God qualifies as moral governor, so his law does promote the greatest good. But he does not address the fact that if there were no moral governor, the nature of right and wrong would not change.

¹³¹ Warfield, p. 194.

¹³² Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 8.

¹³³ Taylor, p. 12.

¹³⁴ Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 9.

¹³⁵ Finney, The Heart of Truth, p. 23.

Chapter Three: Difficulties with Finney's Moral Theory

FOREKNOWLEDGE AND ELECTION

For Finney, foreknowledge precedes election; but this is not the same as foreordination. As with virtually everything else in Finney's theory, election is essentially human-oriented. It is not "an exercise of arbitrary sovereignty,"¹ since God could not choose people arbitrarily and remain benevolent. Rather, the reason for God's election of some and not others is "their foreseen repentance, faith and perseverance."² God does not foreordain people to salvation; it is their own choices of holiness which prompt God to elect them. So while the choices of individuals determine their salvation, foreknowledge of these choices is essential to election. In addition, there is no uncertainty that those who are elected will be saved. God's foreknowledge and efficacy are absolute.³

The ultimate consideration is, as must be expected from the Moral Government viewpoint, the greatest good of the universe. When Finney discusses God's foreknowledge of the

¹ Finney, Lectures on Systematic Theology (London: William Tegg and Co., 1851), p. 774. [All notes which refer to the Systematic Theology without the date, 1851, will refer to the 1976 Abridged edition.]

² Ibid., p. 768.

³ Ibid., p. 768.

faith of the elect, he says that a condition of their election must be "the foreseen fact, that by the wisest governmental arrangement God could convert and sanctify and fit them for heaven" (emphasis mine).⁴

This is precisely where Finney's notion of election runs into difficulty. In his attempt simultaneously to preserve God's foreknowledge, God's election of each individual particularly, and God's moral government, Finney bogs down in a swamp of contradiction which threatens to destroy any notion of God's ultimate benevolence.

He believes people are saved by God's agency and not their own.⁵ Furthermore, the exertions God puts forth to secure any end are certain to succeed in achieving that end. Therefore, while God does things for the non-elect which ought to secure their salvation, since these things do not do so, they must have been done for some other purpose, aiming at some other end; for if God were actually aiming at the salvation of these people, they would be saved.⁶ And, in fact, despite the free will of these individuals, it would have been possible for God to arrange things differently so that they would have been saved. Finney says, "it

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 768, 770.

⁶ Ibid., p. 770.

is doubtless true that he could so vary the course of events as to save other individuals than those he does."⁷

Why, then, does God not arrange the course of events so these people are saved? As always the principle followed is universal benevolence, the greatest good of being. Benjamin Warfield describes Finney's reasoning:⁸ the government God has established is "the wisest possible government for God's end -- which is the good of being." The arrangement of this government determines who is savable and who is not. Those whom God foresees are savable he elects to salvation and exerts the appropriate efforts to save. Those who are not, he gives enough grace to show his willingness to save them and to leave them without excuse.⁹ But God cannot arrange to save them without harming the ultimate good.

This means that even the salvation of the elect is determined by the ultimate good of being. Finney summarizes the reasons for their election as follows:

As God does everything for the same ultimate reason, it follows, that the intrinsic value of their salvation was his ultimate end, and that their salvation in particular must have been of greater relative value in promoting the highest good of the universe at large, and the glory of God, than would have been that of others; so that the intrinsic value of the salvation of those elected in particular, the fact that by the wisest arrangement he could save them in particular, and

⁷ Ibid., p. 779.

⁸ Warfield, p. 169.

⁹ Finney, Systematic Theology (1851), p. 770.

the paramount good to be promoted by it, must have been the reasons for election.¹⁰

Warfield elucidates the same principle:

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.¹¹

As Warfield says, in essence Finney's view results in the notion that it is for some intrinsic property of the individuals themselves that they are elected,¹² and this approaches the notion that individual merit has some bearing after all, though Finney would deny this.¹³ But the most horrifying result of Finney's linking God's foreknowledge and election to wise government is that, inescapably, "men are left to perish solely for the enhancement of the happiness of others."¹⁴

Finney wants to deny this, but he cannot. Of course he insists that it is the individual's own choices, foreseen by God, which determines her election to salvation. Yet nowhere in his discussion of reasons for election does he

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 776.

¹¹ Warfield, p. 169.

¹² Ibid., p. 171.

¹³ Finney, Systematic Theology (1851), p. 768.

¹⁴ Warfield, p. 172.

mention these choices, or the good or happiness of the individual elected; he speaks only of how her election promotes the greatest good of the universe. The closest he comes to considering the individual's own good is to say that her salvation has some intrinsic value, which makes it best to elect her salvation for the greatest good.¹⁵ But this still considers only the value of her salvation, and not her own benefit.

This difficulty becomes clearer when Finney discusses the reprobate, or non-elect. He says without flinching that "it was benevolent in God to create men, though he foresaw that they would sin and become reprobate."¹⁶ The justification is that although God would prefer their salvation, "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."¹⁷ It is better for the universe that they not be saved than for God to make the changes in government necessary to save them. Warfield summarizes it plainly: "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

¹⁵ Finney, Systematic Theology (1851), p. 776.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 789.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 786.

-- that they perish."¹⁸ It is an understatement when he remarks that "it is here that the benevolence scheme is most severely strained."¹⁹ He adds that "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."²⁰

One is led to wonder if there might not be an individual somewhere who is ultimately savable, but whose salvation would somehow detract from the good of being in the larger scheme of things. Would God refuse to elect this savable person to salvation, for the sake of a "higher purpose?"

Deny it though he will, Finney essentially leads us to the conclusion that the elect are only elect because it promotes the greatest good of being, and the non-elect are non-elect for the same reason. He speaks of God's foreknowledge of the savability of individuals which prompts God to exert the effort necessary to save them. Yet we must remember that what God views in the future is the result of whatever efforts he makes in the individual's life at an earlier time (unless we are going to claim that the future he foresees can be changed so that something else occurs instead). So what he sees in the future is what he himself

¹⁸ Warfield, p. 172.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 173.

will produce, and ultimately the final savability he sees in people is in reality the result of his own actions.

Finney struggles desperately to preserve the doctrine of election, because it is a Biblical doctrine. But one source of the confusion of his teaching is an inherent contradiction for which others before him were criticized as well. Nathaniel Taylor teaches a theory of the real freedom of the will. But at the same time he tries to maintain that despite free agency, future moral events are certain; they must be so, if God's foreknowledge is also to be preserved. Yet Frank Hugh Foster says Taylor's theory of will is therefore defective, "the idea of freedom, so clearly and decidedly advanced, being left altogether unadjusted to the sovereignty and foreknowledge of God."²¹ If God knows in advance what a person will choose, how can that person be free to choose otherwise when the moment of choice arrives? Finney also, because he seeks to preserve both the freedom of individuals and God's foreknowledge in electing them to salvation, introduces a contradiction which begins to eat away at the foundations of God's benevolence, and thus of the righteousness of his government.

One apparent solution to this contradiction is to place God outside of time, in an eternal "now," so that he only sees people's choices as they are happening, and does not

²¹ Foster, p. 248.

know them "before." This solution raises further difficulties, which will be discussed in Chapter Four.

An alternative solution to all the difficulties raised by Finney's theory of election is to make election corporate rather than individual. So one might say that "the church" is elected to salvation, and individuals belong or do not belong to this group according to their choice. Thus "election is corporate primarily and only individual upon condition of association with the corporate body."²² This view preserves God's election without sacrificing his benevolence. We do not find God justifying the condemnation of anyone because it "benefits" the universe. Every person ever born could choose to belong to the corporate body which is the church, and it would not be a detriment to the highest good that there were not some people who remained sinners. The non-elect truly choose to be non-elect, despite God's many (sincere!) efforts to save them.

This notion of election also side-steps the tricky question of whether or not God's supposed foreknowledge robs human beings of their freedom. The question still remains (again, to be discussed in Chapter Four), but we are able to say that whether or not God knows in advance who will belong to his church, he has elected the church as a body to salvation. And whoever turns out to belong to that body

²² Kel Good, "Election and Predestination," unpublished paper, January, 1985.

will be saved, even if it happens that God does not know ahead of time who they will all be.

PHYSICAL DEPRAVITY AND THE UNIVERSALITY OF SIN

Probably the most serious difficulty in Finney's moral system stems from his explanation of the apparent universality of sin. As briefly described in Chapter Two, he does not ascribe this to a sinful nature which every person inherits by descending from Adam. Instead of the original sin hypothesis, Finney maintains that the impulses of a person's physical nature have such strong influence that by the time a child develops moral awareness he has already developed a habit of self-gratification. Until moral awareness develops, this habit pattern is not considered immoral, but once he acquires moral awareness he must abandon the habit or it will become selfish.

Finney does not maintain that the present world is identical to the world in which Adam and Eve lived and fell. He acknowledges that Adam did have an influence on the direction his posterity took, and that therefore his descendants are at some disadvantage in comparison:

His sin in many ways exposed his posterity to aggravated temptation. Not only the physical constitution of all men, but all the influences under which they first form their moral character,

are widely different from what they would have been, if sin had never been introduced.²³

Thus there has been a change in the physical world as a result of Adam's sin, and most notably a change in the bodies of human beings. The members of the human race now have a physically diseased system which "renders the appetites, passions, tempers, and propensities more clamorous and despotic in their demands."²⁴ Thus, as babies and then children, they develop the habit of gratifying these demands until, "when reason affirms moral obligation, it finds the will in a state of habitual and constant committal to the impulses of the sensibility."²⁵ Gordon C. Olson, an evangelical theologian who follows Finney's theology closely, summarizes this view in his Bible study manual, The Truth Shall Make You Free:

The universality of sin in the world is to be accounted for as follows:

- a. Hereditary physical tendencies tend toward softness and self-sympathy, beginning early in life...
- b. Physical consciousness and experiences through the five senses are cultivated prior to the dawn of moral accountability.
- c. Moral influences of our immediate and social environment lead us to choose similar habits of life by imitation and often persuasion...
- d. At the dawn of moral accountability as obligation to God and other beings is beginning to be perceived, moral enlightenment appears to make a dim impact because of our already established manner of living.

²³ Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 191.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 190.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 191.

- e. The will now determines to press on in this self-gratification against these new realizations, the habit of self-indulgence now becoming sinful and involves [sic] new concentrations in its pursuit...²⁶

Finney is attempting to avoid the original sin concept, which makes a person responsible (and condemnable) for that over which she had no control: a sin committed before her birth, which has created a nature that makes her own sin inevitable. Yet his answer also makes sin beyond the person's control: when she awakens to moral awareness she finds a habit already in place which makes sin virtually inevitable. Finney admits that "the demands of the sensibility have become more and more despotic every hour of indulgence," and that "unless the Holy Spirit interpose, the idea of moral obligation will be but dimly developed."²⁷ Thus the tendency to self-gratification is firmly and despotically established in her nature before she has ever made a conscious choice. Finney also admits that since the body is physically depraved and the world is full of things which will awaken appetite, one can predict accurately that all people will seek self-gratification unless the Holy Spirit intervenes.²⁸ In her philosophical novel, Atlas Shrugged, Ayn Rand's hero makes a speech which is essent-

²⁶ Gordon C. Olson, The Truth Shall Make You Free (2624 Hawthorne, Franklin Park, Illinois: Bible Research Fellowship, Inc., 1980), p. T-IV6.

²⁷ Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 191.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 176.

ially a criticism of original sin; yet his comments apply equally well to the practical results of Finney's concept of physical depravity:

A free will saddled with a 'tendency' is like a game with loaded dice. It forces a man to struggle through the effort of playing, to bear responsibility and pay for the game, but the decision is weighted in favor of a tendency that he had no power to escape. If the tendency is of his choice, he cannot possess it at birth; if it is not of his choice, his will is not free.²⁹

"If the tendency is of his choice, he cannot possess it at birth;" nor can he possess it, fully developed, before he is morally aware. And "if it his not of his choice, his will is not free."³⁰ It is hard to see the practical difference between Finney's view and the doctrine of original sin; the results of both appear to be the same.

Frank Hugh Foster discusses the teaching of Hosea Ballou, a New England Universalist who wrote a treatise on the atonement, and shows how ideas like Finney's on man's physical nature may lead to the idea that God, the author of

²⁹ Ayn Rand, Atlas Shrugged (New York: The New American Library, Signet, 1957), p. 951.

³⁰ It might be objected that this is not true unless the tendency is compulsive. Yet the very reason for introducing the idea of a "tendency" in people's nature was to explain not only the universality of sin, but also what was seen as its virtual inevitability. If sin is inevitable in all people, it is in fact difficult to see how this "tendency" is not compulsive, which reinforces my point that what is labelled a "tendency" is something far more than that, which ultimately removes real freedom of choice from the will.

nature, planned sin from the beginning.³¹ Ballou claims that the composition of people's bodies provides for "the rise of all manner of disorders," and that the same problem exists with their senses. When people have unsatisfied wants, and confusion enters their desires, they act to obey carnal appetites and sin is introduced. This is essentially Finney's view also. Ballou shies away from acknowledging that this makes God the author of sin, but admits it is the constitution of the individual physical natures authored by God which leads each individual to sin. Foster shows how Ballou must adopt strict determinism within this view: since the passions have such powerful influence, in making choices people will choose whatever most impacts their senses and judgement. He quotes Ballou as follows:

In order for a choice to take place, the mind must have the perception of two or more objects; and that object which has the most influence on the judgment and passions will be the chosen object; and choice in this instance has not even the shadow of liberty.³²

Critics of the doctrine of original sin have often accused it of containing a Manichean element which views everything material as evil, and everything spiritual as good. Pelagius and his followers claimed that if sin was somehow "transmitted" through the generations, it must be like a "substance" which is an evil component of man's

³¹ Foster, p. 320.

³² Ibid., p. 321.

nature.³³ Finney, as noted in Chapter Two, sees this also. Yet his physical depravity view, practically speaking, also carries an almost Manichean tinge. While Finney would deny inherent evil in the physical world, it is the physical world and body which build the habit-pattern regarded as sinful once a person's moral awareness develops. For all intents and purposes, the effect of the physical world on man's moral nature is negative. The claim that the physical is not actually evil, but simply has a negative effect, does not make a significant difference to the ultimate outcome.

As discussed in Chapter Two, Robert Lynn Asa recognizes this dualist tension in Finney's view of man's physical and psychological natures. Finney insists there is no inherent evil in the human constitution.³⁴ Yet Asa says, he "appears to have attached negative moral value to many natural emotional and physiological drives and needs."³⁵ Since the body is "diseased," and since the mind is largely dependent upon it, the "manifestations of mind" which come from this relationship will be "physically depraved manifestations."³⁶ This falls short of claiming that the body is evil, but it comes close. Finney's treatment of emotions reflects this:

³³ Robert F. Evans, Pelagius: Inquiries and Reappraisals (New York: The Seabury Press, 1968), p. 92.

³⁴ Asa, p. 129.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 254.

³⁶ Asa, p. 130, quoting Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 168.

they are part of man's "animal nature,"³⁷ and therefore associated with the physically diseased body, with its attendant problems. He claims they are not evil, yet in his discussions of emotion and reason he always speaks of subjugating emotion.³⁸ One assumes there might be an occasion when one's emotions may be righteously gratified, but Finney does not indicate when this might occur. He does not appear to allow that the emotional life may need development and expression as much as the rational. In fact, Asa points out that Finney's description of emotions is always given in terms of selfish impulse, and that he essentially equates the emotional self with the "flesh," described by Paul and others in the Bible.³⁹ Again one detects an almost Manichean flavor to his view of man's physical nature, of which the emotions are a part.

This demonstrates that most criticisms of the sinful nature view can also be made of Finney's physical depravity view. The most basic criticism is that it tends to remove real responsibility, the main reason Finney originally abandoned the concept of original sin. It puts ultimate responsibility for sin back on God, since he made man's nature such that it will lead inevitably to sin. Finney would deny that his view does this, but when he describes

³⁷ Asa, p. 133, quoting Finney, p. 14.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 133.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 134.

how the habit of self-gratification develops even before moral awareness, and claims that no one can overcome this habit without divine intervention, it is difficult to see how the individual can be held responsible for his condition, or how sin is anything but inevitable.

Pelagius, as will be described in Chapter Five, explains the prevalence of sin by the gradual obscuring of truth over the centuries, the increase of bad influences in society, and the build-up of sinful habits.⁴⁰ When it is remembered that man cannot be accountable for what he does not know, this can lead to the conclusion that the more truth is obscured over the centuries, the less guilty men are. There may be some support for this view, since there are scriptural passages like Romans 4:15 ("...where there is no law, neither is there violation") and Romans 7:8, 9 ("...apart from the Law sin is dead. And I was once alive apart from the Law but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died"). Yet there is no suggestion in the Bible that God regards men as progressively less guilty over the years. If carried too far, this view could lead to the belief that "one of the surest roads to salvation is therefore to become incurably wicked."⁴¹ This of course is an attitude vehemently condemned in the Bible: "Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase? May it never

⁴⁰ Evans, pp. 97-112.

⁴¹ Warfield, p. 71.

be!" (Romans 6:1, 2) So Pelagius' explanation, at least if taken to extremes, cannot be satisfactory.

Yet Finney, to be consistent with his views on freedom, responsibility, and the justice of God, should perhaps have explored the possibility of this kind of explanation. He says that the problem with those who advocate the original sin concept is that they are seeking something "back of choice, and that sustains to choice the relation of a cause."⁴² Yet although he would strenuously deny it, the effect of his physical depravity view is to create something else which is "back of choice," producing sin virtually inevitably. Physical depravity cannot explain the prevalence of sin and still maintain the responsibility of men for their choices.

⁴² Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 167.

Chapter Four: Further Implications of Finney's Moral Theory

Finney's theology was essentially man-oriented, approaching morality, sin, and salvation from man's viewpoint, and revising concepts about man such as original sin. If his ideas about God changed, it was usually in the context of these revised ideas about man. For example, since man must be free to choose if he is to be justly held accountable for his actions, the time-honored concept of the total sovereignty of God, even over men's wills, had to be changed. Even the notion of God's own moral agency was tied in with the whole question of the foundation of man's moral obligation.

Finney's stress on rationality and common sense, and his rejection of many traditional theological notions, open the door to an examination of other questions with which he himself never really dealt. Perhaps he did not address them because he was concerned with theological rather than philosophical issues. But the answers to the questions he did raise, and the logic he stressed, have laid a foundation for further questions, no longer about the nature of man, but about the nature and attributes of God himself.

In Chapter Three we saw that there are many difficulties involved in Finney's ideas about election. When Finney encountered such difficulties in the doctrine of original sin, they suggested to him that this doctrine might not be

true if it was so hard to reconcile with logic. Perhaps the problems in his view of foreknowledge and election should lead to a similar re-evaluation of those doctrines. The two matters which create the most difficulty are the concepts of foreknowledge, and the timelessness of God. This chapter will examine these ideas and suggest possible solutions to the difficulties they raise.

FOREKNOWLEDGE

Does God know the future? Or, perhaps more pertinently, can God know the future? That he can and does has long been the view of most of the Christian world, whatever other variations in doctrine and theology might hold between different churches. There have been different views of what it means for God to know the future, and the manner in which he knows it, but that he does indeed know the future in some fashion has been a belief largely accepted by Christianity for centuries. From this starting point, Christian theologians have then had to go on and deal with various implications of this doctrine, and different theologies have dealt with these implications in different ways.

One of the most crucial issues affected by the belief in God's foreknowledge is the question of the free will of men. If God knows the choices and acts of men in advance of their choosing and acting, are men in fact free to choose

and act otherwise, or would it be impossible for them to do other than what God already knows they will do? If God's foreknowledge eliminates the possibility of free will, this has far-reaching effects in theology. Free will plays a large part in most proposed solutions to the problem of evil. It is also crucial in many discussions of salvation, where theologians wish to claim that men are truly responsible for their sin and God is therefore just to condemn them. So whether God's foreknowledge eliminates the possibility of free will is not just an isolated question, but reaches tentacles into other very important questions.

And if, in the investigation of this question, we seem to encounter conclusions which contradict either what we know to be true about ourselves or what the claims of Scripture are, this is one of the surest signs that there are deeper problems that are not being recognized, or not being dealt with. Therefore if it begins to appear that God's foreknowledge contradicts our free will, this will be a sign that perhaps we should investigate a more basic question: is it even possible for God to know the future?

Free Will

If God knows in advance what I will do tomorrow, am I free not to do that thing tomorrow? The answer to this depends on what we understand to be the nature of God. Nelson Pike in his book, God and Timelessness, lists six

assumptions that are usually made about God if he can be said to know the future infallibly:¹

- 1.) "God is omniscient" is a necessary statement;
- 2.) If an individual is omniscient, he believes all true propositions;
- 3.) If an individual is omniscient, he believes nothing false. (Pike claims this does not follow from #2, for it is possible to believe all true propositions and one false one. I question this, for the fact that the last proposition is false would also be something known by an omniscient being. Pike also rejects the idea that the word "knows" requires both a true belief and evidence or grounds for belief. He mentions Calvin's claim that all things are before God's eyes all at once. This, however, does not show no grounds; rather, the fact of everything being before God's eyes all at once is the reason he knows about it, the ground of his knowledge. Another example mentioned by Pike is a crystal ball gazer who gets his prediction of the future right in every instance. This raises a further question of whether the events of the future exist somewhere already, with the crystal gazer having some

¹ Nelson Pike, God and Timelessness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 54-56.

special access to them. If these things do not already exist somewhere, then how can something which does not exist be known? Would the crystal gazer's alleged knowledge not, rather, be a series of very lucky guesses? This question will be dealt with in the next section, dealing with the supposed timelessness of God);

- 4.) Omniscience is an essential property of the individual who is omniscient;
- 5.) If the individual is God, he has always existed and always will;
- 6.) If the individual exists at a given moment in time, then to count as omniscient, he must hold any belief at that moment.

Pike goes on to give a simple example: Jones mowing his lawn on Saturday (J doing A at T2 [Time 2]). If God knew at T1, 80 years prior to T2, that Jones would be mowing his lawn on Saturday, the claim is that it was not in Jones' power not to mow his lawn on Saturday. For one thing, it would make God's belief at T1 false, which would contradict assumption #3. But since God is infallible, it is not possible for Jones to make one of God's beliefs false, and therefore it was not possible for him not to mow his lawn on Saturday. Jones could supposedly have acted so that God did not exist 80 years ago (i.e. acted so that God's belief

would have been false, and he therefore would not have been God), but this is absurd.²

Pike discounts the solution of both Cicero and Arthur Prior to the problem of the relation between freedom and divine foreknowledge. Cicero claimed that God could only know the future if all future events were the products of causes. Therefore if human actions were also products of causes, they were determined and God, knowing all the causes, would know in advance all human actions. But since human acts are not caused, said Cicero, God cannot know them in advance.³ Prior took the view that the statement "J does A at T₂" has to be true at T₁ for God to know the future. But if the statement is true at T₁, then there is nothing else J can do at T₂ but A! In other words, this leads to determinism.⁴ Both Cicero and Prior use an intermediate thesis which they claim leads to determinism.⁵ And ultimately, says Pike, the two are claiming the same thing, for Prior's idea of "J does A at T₂" being true at T₁ really

² Ibid., p. 58.

³ Ibid., p. 63 & 64.

⁴ Ibid., p. 66.

⁵ For Cicero it is the thesis that all future events are the products of causes, and since he claims human acts are not caused, he can say God does not know them in advance (Pike, p. 63, 66). For Prior, it is the thesis that propositions describing human acts are true prior to the time of those acts. Yet at time T₁, the claim that an act will be performed at time T₂ is neither true nor false; therefore, says Prior, there is no foreknowledge of that act (Pike, p. 65, 66).

involves the future action being "present in its causes"⁶ at T1. Pike claims that "the problem with which we are dealing requires nothing in the way of a comment about the cause of Jones's action. This 'solution' to the problem consists of denying a premise that is not part of the issue."⁷

But the cause of Jones' action is precisely the issue. Was he free to act or not act as he chose, independently, or was he somehow compelled? Could he have chosen not to mow his lawn at T2 if God knew at T1 that he would mow his lawn at T2?

Jonathan Edwards was quite willing to accept that if God truly knew it, Jones did not have the free will to do otherwise. Baruch A. Brody sums up Edwards' argument as follows:⁸

- (a) Everything that has occurred is now necessary;
- (b) Suppose that a man does A at some future time;
- (c) Then God already has known that he will do A;
- (d) So it is necessary that God has known that he will do A;
- (e) It is necessary that if God has known that he will do A, then he will do A;
- (f) Therefore, it is necessary that he will do A;
- (g) But then he did not do A freely and he had no free will concerning his doing A.

This coincides nicely with other Calvinist views which may be less strict, but still maintain the "sovereignty of God"

⁶ Ibid., p. 69.

⁷ Ibid., p. 70.

⁸ Baruch A. Brody, ed., Readings in the Philosophy of Religion: An Analytic Approach (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), p. 335 & 334.

above the "free will of man," and ultimately can result in the claims of predestination of only certain men to salvation (as mentioned previously, this question does carry many implications with regard to salvation and God's justice).

Edwards' view seems to involve God's existence in time; at least he appears to have believed that God's belief at T1 about an act at T2 is truly, somehow, in the past and therefore unchangeable. If it is unchangeable and God is infallible, then of course it would be impossible for anything other than God's true belief to come to realization at T2.

If God is actually a being who exists in time, it is difficult to see how his foreknowledge of human actions could result in anything except the elimination of free will, unless we are going to admit and accept that perhaps God could be wrong if I decide to do something other than what he "knew" I would do. This is almost universally unacceptable in the Christian world, so we are really left with determinism.

However, one method of trying to get around this is to place God outside of time altogether. This would appear to eliminate any question of the temporal relation of God's knowledge to the things he knows. Supposedly we cannot say that God knew "back then" what I would do now. To God, everything is present knowledge, and this, it would appear, removes the obstacle to my being free to choose. In fact,

we might even say that God knows all things as they occur in front of him, and not before that moment, but since there are no successive moments for God he knows it all -- for him -- now.

This has been a most popular solution to the problem of foreknowledge and determinism. God's knowledge is not really foreknowledge at all, in this view. And this answer is supplied by a great many people from Boethius⁹ to Thomas Aquinas¹⁰ to C.S. Lewis¹¹, as well as Nelson Pike himself.

But to my view, the timeless God actually worsens the problem of free will. If God is outside of time and views the entire panorama of history from beginning to end, it is as though the complete history of the world is a thing sitting somewhere in its entirety before the eyes of God. My future acts already exist -- somewhere -- frozen and completed, before I ever perform them. They may not be visible to me, but they are visible to somebody, and since he is infallible he could not be wrong about what I will do

⁹ Pike, p. 52.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

¹¹ "To Him [i.e. God] all the physical events and all the human acts are present in an eternal Now," C.S. Lewis, Miracles (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1978), p. 177.

in what is, to me, the future. The problem is not eliminated at all. We are still left with determinism.¹²

Perhaps, then, we are not investigating the right question. Since the assertion of God's knowledge of the future seems to deny me the free will I believe I have and which Scripture applies to me, then it may be that God does not know the future. One way to ascertain this will be to examine the alleged timelessness of God which is the supposed solution to the problem.

Does Scripture Claim God Knows the Future?

Many passages of Scripture are brought forth to support the claim that God knows the future. A large proportion of these are in fact prophecies which reveal what God himself plans to bring about, and do not properly constitute foreknowledge (for example, Isaiah 7:17 which says, "The Lord will bring on you...the king of Assyria;" or Jeremiah 20:4 which says, "Thus says the Lord,...'So I shall give over all Judah to the hand of the king of Babylon.'"). There are others which do appear to speak of foreknowledge,

¹² One might protest that the whole point is that my acts do not exist "before" I perform them; God's being outside of time is postulated to solve this contradiction and this restriction on my freedom. But my point is that for me it is indeed "before," and that for me, at this moment in time, there is already nothing I can do in that future moment except what God knows I will do. At my present moment, that future is already fixed because of God's infallible knowledge of it.

but which must be examined in light of the original languages.

However, certain Scriptures do appear to claim that God occasionally tests people for the specific purpose of finding out how they will react. At other times he seems to be looking for information. And on other occasions he seems surprised that people acted in a certain way when he expected them to behave differently. A very few examples follow, but similar passages can be found throughout the Christian Scriptures:¹³

- 1.) Genesis 18:20 & 21 "And the Lord said, 'The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know.'"

A case where God sets out to acquire information. The language used does not suggest God already knows, and in fact is strong enough to suggest that he really is looking to find out.

- 2.) Genesis 22:12 "And he said, 'Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.'"

¹³ All quotations from the New American Standard Bible; emphasis in all passages is my own.

Perhaps God knew and was only trying to show Abraham, but that is not what it says.

- 3.) Psalm 14:2 "The Lord has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God."

This may be merely poetic language to underline the lack of righteous men on the earth, but it is frequently repeated. For example:

- 4.) Isaiah 59:15 & 16 "...Now the Lord saw, and it was displeasing in His sight that there was no justice. And He saw that there was no man, and was astonished that there was no one to intercede..."

It sounds like God is actually surprised that there are so few righteous people. This is what the language suggests very strongly.

- 5.) Isaiah 5:4 "What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones?"

Here God is expressing bewilderment that Israel (his vineyard) responded differently than he expected after all he had done for them.

- 6.) Ezekiel 22:30 "And I searched for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the gap

before Me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one."

Again God is looking for someone. He may just be speaking figuratively to underline the lack of a man, but that is not what it says.

- 7.) Jeremiah 32:35 "And they built the high places of Baal that are in the valley of Ben-hinnom to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire to Molech, which I had not commanded them nor had it entered My mind that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin."

According to the strong language used, God is absolutely shocked at the extent of the evil into which Judah has fallen. It had not entered his mind that they could become so evil. (This could have further implications when investigating the Problem of Evil as well!)

These passages are not all conclusive by any means. But they at least indicate that perhaps the traditional understanding of God's character, particularly his alleged foreknowledge, may not even be strictly biblical. The question is worth a much more thorough examination than can be done here.

GOD AND TIME

We have seen in Chapter Three that Finney's view of divine foreknowledge encounters grave difficulties if one wishes to preserve the free will which is essential to moral responsibility. Genuine foreknowledge is hard-pressed to escape determinism, in the sense that God's knowledge could not possibly be mistaken, and therefore no man can be free to do other than what God already knows he will do.

A proposed solution to this problem has often been to put God outside time altogether, in some sort of "eternal Now." Finney himself holds such a view. As he says,

All eternity is to him now, or that point which is filled up by his present experience...eternity to us means all past, present and future duration. But to God it means only now.¹⁴

In this case God would not know men's choices in advance, but would see them as they happened. All their acts would simply be happening, for God, simultaneously. Yet this solution also encounters difficulties with determinism, since the future is still somehow "there," visible to God if not to the choosing person. God cannot be wrong about these choices, so that when the time of choosing comes there is still no other choice available than what God knows.

Clark Pinnock says, "One thing we ought not to do if we hope to make sense out of God's free agency and our own is

¹⁴ Finney, The Heart of Truth, pp. 69, 70.

to think of God as timeless."¹⁵ The concept of a timeless God seems to make determinism unavoidable and therefore may open the door to serious questions about God's love and justice. But does the timelessness concept even make sense? Recall Finney's stress on the rationality of theology. He rejects the concepts of original sin, passive sanctification and a host of other standard doctrines on the basis that they are not rational. If the concept of a timeless God is equally incoherent, perhaps by Finney's criteria there is reason to wonder if it can be accurate, particularly if an alternative explanation can resolve the difficulties encountered in his view of foreknowledge and election.

There are objections to the idea of God's existing in time. Besides his having foreknowledge only of those things he intends to bring about (and even this "foreknowledge" limited by people's freedom, which would affect the circumstances by which he would accomplish them), there is the claim that if God lives in time he must necessarily be a creature rather than the creator, subject to everything a creature is subject to. Norman Geisler believes that if God is temporal he must also be spatial, and subject to the same conditions as other spatial beings. He would be subject to entropy, or decay. His speed of thought would be limited by

¹⁵ Clark Pinnock, "God Limits His Knowledge," in Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom, ed. David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 146.

the speed of light, and he therefore could not give either general direction or specific providence. He could not comprehend the whole of the universe at once. And he as well as the universe must have had a beginning. Therefore he is a creature, rather than the creator.¹⁶

Geisler is here confusing God with the universe. If God and creation exist through the same time period, Geisler believes that the created universe would be the parameter for God's existence. This does not follow. From the moment a story is written, story and author exist in the same time period, but there was a time when the author existed and the story did not. There may be a time when the story no longer exists, but the author does. Sharing the same time period does not put the author inside the story or make him or her dependent in any way upon it, even though the story is dependent upon the author for its very existence.

The reason for this confusion is that Geisler inadvertently makes an assumption that begs the question:

If God created the whole temporal world, then God is beyond time. Conversely, if God is by nature temporal, then God did not create the whole temporal universe. He cannot create himself!¹⁷

The assumption is that time also is created. If so, then of course Geisler is correct; to say God exists in time would be equivalent to saying he is an item in the universe he

¹⁶ Norman Geisler, response to Clark Pinnock, in Predestination and Free Will, p. 170.

¹⁷ Geisler, p. 171.

created. It is not uncommon to view time as some kind of created thing. But how can this be so? Time may be seen simply as duration: God exists at one moment, exists at the next moment, still exists at the next, and so on. Time may be simply a condition of existence, and not something which was created and can be stepped into and out of at will.

If God exists in time, he need not be subject to decay or any other effect of time in his created universe. Those who make this objection confuse the effects of time with time itself. "Time instead is the duration of one moment after another."¹⁸ Why, as Geisler says, did God have to create "the whole temporal world?" Why could he not merely have created "the whole world?"

The very act of creation illustrates perhaps the most crucial point in the issue of the timelessness (or not) of God: that he is presented in scripture, and has been presented historically, as a person. Certainly this is Finney's view; Finney regards God as a person who is a moral agent and must be holy by choice. God is considered someone who acts, feels emotion, thinks, interacts with his creation, and who is capable of having a relationship with other persons, human or divine. This is certainly a scriptural picture: acting in history (to bring Israel out of Egypt), being angry or moved to compassion by suffering, acting upon

¹⁸ H. Roy Elseth, Did God Know? A Study of the Nature of God (St. Paul, Minnesota: Calvary United Church, Inc., 1977), p. 62.

inanimate creation (as in the parting of the Red Sea), and relating to individuals and reasoning with them (for example, when he discusses with Abraham his intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah).

How would timelessness affect these attributes? In the same way that God's timelessness and foreknowledge would remove men's freedom, it would seem to affect his own freedom also. Foreknowledge would include knowledge of his own actions, and therefore he would not be free to do other than what he already knows he will do. "[If] we think about it carefully we almost begin to wonder whether it is God or fate producing such acts which are inevitable."¹⁹

Of course it might be objected that God's only doing what he knows he will do is no difficulty. Yet any individual knows that in order to act she requires time. The word "act" is defined as follows:²⁰

As a noun:

- 1a: a thing done: deed.
- b: something done voluntarily.
- 2 : a state of real existence rather than possibility.
- 3 : the process of doing.

As a verb:

- 1 : to take action: move.
- 2 : to perform a specified function.
- 3 : to produce an effect: work.

Whether as a verb or a noun, the word "act" is inextricably bound up with the idea of time. Time not only to perform

¹⁹ Kel Good, in his unpublished book on God and Time, Chapter 4, p. 77.

²⁰ Webster's Collegiate Dictionary.

the act, but also to go through the thought process leading to the decision to act. The decision must precede the act; it is not simultaneous with it. Nor is the decision itself instantaneous. There is first the recognition of the need for action, then a decision about possible actions, an evaluation of which is more appropriate and desirable, and at last a process of decision about the steps necessary to implement the chosen act. There is a before and an after with respect to the decision process, as well as to the act itself. At one moment the act has not been performed; in the next it has.

To say that there is no before and after either in the thought process or the action itself is to make the "acts" of God an illusion. There is nothing separating God from his acts if there is no process he went through in order to act. God only does what he eternally does and there is no choice to do otherwise. Indeed, there is no "do" at all. The acts simply are. God is frozen.

There must be a moment when the thing caused by God's act did not exist, and then a moment when it did, due to his act. If one claims that time began with the creation, then there was never a "time" when there was no creation. But since there was no "before-creation" for God, this can only mean that the creation is eternal and co-existent with God. There would be no successive moments in which anything new was originated, whether that was a thought or a universe.

The universe itself, with God, must always have existed. This conclusion cannot be avoided without postulating at least a moment in which, for God, there was no creation. And as soon as we use a word like "moment," the concept of time is inevitably introduced. We have only two possible answers: 1) either there is an element very much like time in God's existence; or 2) the creation is co-existent with God. In fact, there would be no "creation" as an act at all, since the concept of action entails time.

One might say that God might always have chosen that the world would exist, but that this does not entail that the world itself has always existed. He might always have chosen that the world should come to be at a certain moment. Yet this again implies that there was a time when the world did not exist, followed by a time when it did. There would have to be something God did to bring it about that in that particular moment the world did indeed come to be. It could not have been merely God's choice from all eternity, for that choice always existed although the world did not. Something different happened to bring the world actually into being at that moment; something which made it more than simply eternally potential.

If God were frozen into an eternal "Now," he could have no thoughts at all. In fact, Finney actually makes this claim for God:

Succession cannot...be predicated of him, either in relation to his existence or mental states. He

always has the same mental state or consciousness. He can have no new thoughts, as there is no possible source from which to derive them. He can have no new affections or emotions, as he can have no new ideas or knowledge.²¹

Yet logical thought requires a succession of thoughts, as described above; again, a before and after. This, it seems, would be impossible for a timeless being, as Finney recognizes. But it is hard to imagine how God could qualify as a person, if he could not think and therefore could not act. Finney's own descriptions of God's moral agency and benevolent expression of himself in the atonement contradict the claim that Finney is making here.

God's timeless knowledge conceivably involves an almost infinite horde of contradictions. For example, he could simultaneously be aware that the universe did not exist, that he was creating it, that it now did exist, and presumably that it no longer existed (if this will one day be the case in what is, for us, the future).

How could the same being simultaneously know something both to be and not be? Such a conception is a complete denial of the law of identity upon which all reasoning is founded. A thing is what it is and is not something else. A is A. A is not non-A.²²

God's very acts would be involved in the same contradiction, since all his acts would be in the same moment, for him.

[God simultaneously] creates worlds and burns them up, creates souls and binds them into everlasting

²¹ Finney, The Heart of Truth, p. 70.

²² Kel Good, Chapter 4, p. 85.

chains, invites them into his love and fixes an impassable gulf between them and himself, and millions of other self-contradictory things.²³

Interpersonal relationships are equally problematic for a timeless being. Relationships require time, or they are not personal relationships; they would merely be a side-by-side existence, with no give and take. There was certainly give and take between God and Abraham in discussing Sodom and Gomorrah. God appears to have changed his mind, on the basis of Abraham's pleas to spare the city for successively (note the word) smaller numbers of righteous people. If God is timeless, this personal relationship with his creatures must be illusory. But in addition to this, there would also seem to be a consciousness of time among the members of the Godhead. Did not Christ pray that his followers would experience the same love he and his father had shared before the world was (John 17)?

The Incarnation and mission of Christ may also be problematic for a timeless being. There does seem to have been a time when Christ had not descended to earth and taken human form. Was, and is, Christ eternally in the womb, being born, confounding the elders, being crucified, rising again, and ascending into heaven? If he is always and eternally all these stages of the one person, can he (or we) really know who or what he is?

²³ Dr. L.C. McCabe, Divine Nescience of Future Contingencies (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1882), p. 43, quoted by Elseth, in Did God Know?, p. 99.

The concept of timelessness seems to make God's nature incoherent and raise more problems than it supposedly solves. Its main purpose appears to be to resolve the apparent contradiction between God's foreknowledge and humankind's retention of free will, but as we have seen, it does not actually preserve free will, and seems to make humans and God both determined in their acts. Indeed, it makes them incapable of any thought or action.

The concept of timelessness appears to result in the following concept of God:

Without time we said that God could do nothing, could have none of the mental experiences which would qualify him as a person. We can now see why in fact this is so. It is so because a timeless being is absolutely immutable. It cannot move, it is frozen solid. Its existence outside of time necessitates that it be an ingenerable, incorruptible, incorporeal, block of being. How could such an existent act, think, or know? It could not. But this is what God must be if he is timeless.²⁴

The Bible is full of the thoughts, emotions, reasonings, and acts of God, as Finney himself recognizes. To call these passages mere "anthropomorphisms" locks God into the frozen "block of being" described above. It also reads into those passages the presupposition of the timelessness of God which is supposedly derived from the passages.

One may claim that God's nature is beyond human finite understanding, and reason cannot be expected to comprehend an infinite God. This answer is considered satisfactory in

²⁴ Kel Good, Chapter 5, p. 120.

many theological circles, and is even the basis for some of Finney's answers to objections made against the concept of a timeless God.²⁵ Yet he has assumed rationality in theology, and that logic for God is the same as logic for man. From the beginning he explicitly rejects the idea that one must accept apparent contradictions in the name of man's finitude,²⁶ so he should not accept this solution if he is to be consistent. He in fact, as shown above, openly acknowledges many implications inherent in the concept of a timeless God, but does not carry them to a full logical conclusion. If he had realized the contradictions inherent in his view perhaps he would have revised it as he did other accepted doctrines, but this can only be conjectured.

One point Finney raises in support of his view is that no one can form a conception of infinity without perceiving it as unlimited.²⁷ Yet he himself has repeatedly described God's attributes in such a way that God is said to be one thing, and not another. In one sense this limits God, yet not in any important or damaging way, and it certainly does not make him finite. For example, to say that God loves rather than hates his creatures has limited God's attitude in one respect. But in another respect, it has not, for

²⁵ Finney, The Heart of Truth, pp. 71, 72.

²⁶ Recall his reaction when warned not to lean to his own understanding: "this course I could not take," Systematic Theology, p. x.

²⁷ Finney, The Heart of Truth, p. 71.

God's love itself can be infinite and never-ending. Even to say God exists rather than that he does not exist has put a kind of limit on him, yet it would be absurd to claim that this has made God finite. In the same way, to say that God has always existed (in the past), exists now (in the present), and will always exist (in the future) has not limited God or made him finite. Infinite duration is still infinite.²⁸

Finney also makes a mistake similar to one made by Geisler. He claims:

...we can see that succession in his existence and mental states, involves the absurdity, that he grows older -- that he was once young -- that he began to be -- that he never was and never will be an eternal being -- that he never was and never can be an infinite being -- that he never can, in the least degree, approach towards being eternal in his duration, or infinite in his knowledge or happiness.²⁹

Again we see confusion between the effects of time and time itself. If God by nature is incorruptible, time will not have the same degenerating effect on him as on created beings. The terms "older" and "younger" only apply to

²⁸ Alfred North Whitehead, in a different context, makes the same point. He rejects the idea that God, to be God, must be infinite in every respect. Whitehead says, "If He were, He would be evil as well as good. Also this unlimited fusion of evil with good would mean mere nothingness. He is something decided and is thereby limited," (from *Religion in the Making*, Cambridge University Press, 1926, p. 153). Thus, if we say anything at all about God we have immediately limited him in some respect. The question is whether any particular limitation robs God of anything really important.

²⁹ Finney, *The Heart of Truth*, p. 72.

beings upon whom time has such effects. It does not follow that if God exists in time he is subject to entropy. As to God's being "infinite in his knowledge or happiness," Finney does not explain why existing in time must prevent infinite happiness, or knowledge of everything which exists. To say God would be less happy if he didn't yet know the future or couldn't yet experience it is similar to the complaint of a child who is given all the candy there is but cries because he doesn't have all the candy there may yet be.

Scripture is full of implications both that God does not know the future, and that God exists in time, which would adequately explain this lack of foreknowledge.³⁰ This view as well carries weighty implications for the problem of

³⁰ Olson; on page T-III-4 he lists such passages as Psalm 102:24, 27 ("Thy years are throughout the generations"); Psalm 95:10 ("For forty years I loathed that generation"); Hebrews 13:8 ("Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever"). Other passages illustrate God's reasoning process: Genesis 1:26 ("Let Us make man in Our image"); Isaiah 1:18 ("Come now, and let us reason together"). Still others (page T-III-5) describe God's reacting emotionally to men's conduct: Genesis 6:6 ("And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart"); Ezekiel 16:42 ("So I shall calm My fury against you, and My jealousy will depart from you, and I shall be pacified and angry no more"); Micah 7:18, 19 ("Who is a God like Thee, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious act...He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in unchanging love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot"). Other passages show God changing his plans in response to men's actions: Exodus 32:11-14 ("Then Moses entreated the Lord his God...So the Lord changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people"); Jonah 3:10 ("When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it").

evil, at least removing the accusation that God knew in advance the terrible evils that would be done by men and still created them, thus being ultimately responsible for evil. It also makes men free to choose evil.

In light of the difficulties entailed by the concept of a timeless God, a rational course, and one compatible with the acting, interacting, and reacting God of the Bible, may be to abandon the concept of timelessness altogether.³¹

THE HEATHEN

Many who advocate views on the foundation of moral obligation which are similar to Finney's do not carry them beyond the context of traditional North American evangelism. When they call for repentance they are speaking to those who know the gospel and are not living by it. Yet Finney's view has drastic implications for the so-called "heathen," who have never heard the gospel or the name of Christ. These implications are so drastic, and so contrary to the tradit-

³¹ It is intriguing to note how often timelessness cannot be defended without using "time-words." For example, one may say, "God eternally willed that the temporal universe would come into existence at a particular moment." Yet the very word "moment" surreptitiously introduces an idea of time supposedly "before" time came into being. Most of the explanations of the contradictions inherent in this view rely on these borrowed time concepts. This reliance suggests that perhaps the idea of timelessness is not coherent without being based on hidden time concepts, which of course leads to the question whether timelessness is really a viable idea.

ional "received views," that perhaps those who hold Finney's theory are reluctant to voice them and become embroiled in a violent controversy. Finney himself does not deal with the issue of "the heathen" in the Systematic Theology, although he refers to it in other writings.

Finney's detractors are swift to exploit the logical conclusions of his moral views. Benjamin Warfield quotes part of Finney's assertion that the degree of faith required of men depends on their knowledge of God and divine things, and is predictably horrified at the sentence: "Perfection in a heathen would imply much less faith than in a christian(sic)."³² Warfield says, "This is not a slip. Finney fully means it. 'The heathen,' he explains, 'are not under obligation to believe in Christ, and thousands of other things of which they have no knowledge.'"³³ According to Warfield, this means Finney does not view perfection as a product of Christ in the believer's life; rather, it is the faith itself which makes men perfect, and the object of faith does not matter.³⁴ "The faith of a fetich-worshipper (provided it embraces all he knows) is as efficacious to produce perfection in him as the faith of a John or a

³² Warfield, quoting Finney, p. 86.

³³ Ibid., p. 87.

³⁴ Ibid.

Paul."³⁵ Warfield goes on to explain that this leaves us in the dark about how faith actually sanctifies people.

He clearly sees sanctification as something "done to" a person when he or she becomes a Christian (it is a "product of Christ" in the life); hence his complaint that we are not told how faith sanctifies. Finney would reply that Warfield does not understand sanctification; it is a process of choice and not a passive state, and therefore is not "done to" anyone by anything -- whether that thing is faith, or Christ himself. This again emphasizes Finney's most crucial point: that man is free and cannot be passive if he is morally responsible. And he would likely say that if the fetich-worshipper sincerely sought to promote the greatest good of being, according to all he knew, this would be "reckoned to him as righteousness."

Original Sin and Universal Condemnation

There have been many answers proposed for the question of the status of "the heathen" and the "unsaved" generally. The belief in original sin justifies the claim that there is absolutely no salvation if the gospel is not explicitly accepted. Since all people are guilty and deserve condemnation already, it is not unjust that anybody is condemned, whether reached by the gospel or not. It is sheer unmerited

35 Ibid.

mercy from God that some do have the chance to be saved, but not injustice that others do not.

Finney's rejection of the notion of original sin means believing that all people are not necessarily guilty just by virtue of being human. But his belief in physical depravity implies that all will inevitably become guilty; therefore the doctrine just described would be consistent with this view. But as we saw in Chapter Three, belief in physical depravity is inconsistent with belief in free moral agency. If we therefore disregard physical depravity and look at Finney's views on freedom and responsibility (his most basic and important views), we see that universal condemnation cannot be justified. Each person must be judged individually. And if the only criterion for salvation is explicit acceptance of Christ, then the one who never hears Christ's name is at a distinct disadvantage. In fact, under such circumstances it would be difficult to justify the claim that God loves all people, or that he desires all to be saved. Once again we are faced with his condemnation of those who could not help their circumstances, and God once again is open to charges of favoritism and injustice.

Original Sin and Universal Salvation

Another answer to the question of the status of "the heathen" is the universalist approach, which claims that all are saved, and it is the church's job to tell people so.

This view is also related to a belief in original sin. Since people are incapable of changing, and since they are born sinful (or born with a nature making sin inevitable), only God can save them. And since the Bible makes it clear that Christ died for all, this can only mean that all are saved, unless the work of Christ was not sufficient to accomplish his intention. Frank Hugh Foster shows how universalism grew out of the same New England theological ferment as did the thought of Edwards, Taylor, and Finney:³⁶ the doctrine stemmed from ideas such as God's benevolence and commitment to the greatest good. When this is combined with the doctrine of original sin, and the interpretation of the atonement as an exact payment, universalism would seem to be the only consistent view.

Finney himself recognizes this,³⁷ but rejects both the concept of original sin and the exact payment theory of the atonement, and without these two supports the universalist interpretation is not so compelling.

"All Roads Lead to God"

A third view regarding "the heathen" is that "all roads lead to God," and that all world religions ultimately aim at the same goal, merely taking different paths. At first glance this appears similar to Finney's theory that a

³⁶ Foster, pp. 206, 207.

³⁷ Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 217.

sincere, benevolent "heathen" can seek the greatest good of being and be acceptable to God. Yet Finney would never go so far as to say that all other religions are true and it does not really matter what one believes. Recall that he claims people are obliged to seek all the truth they can; he simply does not believe a sincere seeker can be justly penalized for not yet having found the truth. He would never be surprised to discover that other religions have true moral insights; this is exactly what one would expect if moral law is self-evident, as he claims.

Conclusion

If moral law is self-evident and people are responsible only for what they know, the ramifications are far-reaching. A person exposed to a Christian teaching which contradicts this understanding of right and wrong may be acceptable as long as her heart is inclined to the right, even though she rejects the Christianity she has encountered. A person from a wholly different religion may reject this objectionable Christian theology and remain within his own faith if he has never been taught Finney's rational Christian alternative, and be acceptable if he lives benevolently by the moral understanding he has. Even an outright atheist who recognizes moral truth may seek to promote the greatest good and be acceptable to the God in whom she does not believe. Obviously, this is a controversial conclusion, and it is

understandable that many, if not most, fairly evangelical theologians would react negatively to it.

Does this, however, undermine the objective truth of the gospel and the validity of Christian missions? At first this may appear to be so. Yet it is important to recall that this view and its surprising implications stem from a doctrine that there is only one truth, which is obvious to all, to which all are accountable, and by which all theological claims must be judged. It does not deny the literal truth of the gospel events; nor does it excuse any person from the responsibility to gain more knowledge of these, if possible. But it removes the ground of the accusation that God is unjust for condemning people for something they never knew, and avoids the necessity of denying the historical claims that evangelicals wish to make for the Biblical accounts, in order to "protect" God from this accusation.

Chapter Five: Finney's Theory - Utilitarian and Pelagian

UTILITARIANISM

Two Types of Ethical Systems

There are two basic types of ethical systems: teleological, and deontological.¹ Teleological theories determine moral obligation by what will produce good and/or avoid evil. There is a single, supremely valuable, end which is good and is the criterion of value and morality for all else. The idea of the right [i.e. moral] derives from the good, and virtue is a means to the good, rather than an end in itself.² As James Edward Hamilton says, "Teleology is the straightforward notion that moral terms are derivative from value terms."³ Deontological theories, however, do not base obligation upon the results of action. Generally, for deontologists there are two sources of information about the right: divine revelation or direct intuition.⁴ The right is primary, rather than the good, and obligation stems from

¹ Michael D. Bayles, ed., Introduction to Contemporary Utilitarianism (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1968), p. 3.

² James Edward Hamilton, A Comparison of the Moral Theories of Charles Finney and Asa Mahan (PhD dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo, 1972), p. 39.

³ Ibid., p. 114.

⁴ Bayles, p. 3.

an intrinsic characteristic of the act itself. Rightness or wrongness depends upon the intention of the agent.⁵

According to Michael D. Bayles, teleological theories may be divided into egoism and utilitarianism.⁶ Egoistic theories claim one is obliged to promote one's own good, while utilitarianism claims that one must promote the good of all, including oneself. Whether this means the general good of everyone, or the particular good of each individual, is a matter of discussion among utilitarians.⁷

Hamilton, comparing the moral theories of Charles Finney and Asa Mahan, shows that Finney's theory is teleological. There is a non-moral end with inherent value (the highest well-being of God and the universe), and the basis of moral obligation is the promotion of this end.⁸ Finney combines elements from both the teleological and deontological traditions in moral philosophy: his assertion that moral duty is based upon the intention to produce good results rather than the actual results is an element more commonly held by deontologists than teleologists.⁹

However, while Finney's theory is basically teleological, he denies it is utilitarian. If the only teleological

5 Hamilton, p. 45.

6 Bayles, p. 4.

7 Ibid., p. 5.

8 Hamilton, p. 58.

9 Ibid., p. 60.

alternatives are egoism and utilitarianism, as Bayles implies, Finney's theory must be utilitarian by default. Hamilton maintains that Finney's denial is based on a misunderstanding of William Paley's utilitarianism, and that when this is unravelled, Finney's theory is indeed seen as utilitarian.¹⁰ He illustrates this by comparing Finney with another utilitarian, John Stuart Mill. The following section is based upon Mill's work, Utilitarianism.

Comparison with John Stuart Mill

For John Stuart Mill there is one fundamental principle at the root of all morality, which should be self-evident.¹¹ Choices are actions taken for the sake of some end,¹² and all things are desirable either for something inherent in themselves, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the absence of pain.¹³ He says, "pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things desirable as ends,"¹⁴ placing them under the single description of "utility." So for Mill there is one ultimate end, utility, which is good to choose, while it is bad to choose the opposite. This end is variously

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 72.

¹¹ John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism, George Sher, ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1979), p. 3.

¹² Ibid., p. 2.

¹³ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁴ Ibid.

designated as "utility," "happiness," or the "greatest happiness" and is similar to Finney's "greatest good of being."

However, by happiness Mill does not mean simply pleasure; he does not believe any person capable of enjoying his "higher" faculties would wish to change places with a beast, even if the beast would be more satisfied with its lot than he.¹⁵ So it seems "happiness" includes not only pleasure and freedom from pain, but also the capacity for exercise of intelligence. Finney, with his emphasis on the rationality of holiness, would whole-heartedly agree. The highest good must be a conscious state, in which all the demands of one's being are met. Finney says, "Take away mind, and what can be a good per se; or what can be a good in any sense?"¹⁶

Mill also recognizes that choices used as means to achieve the ultimate end derive moral character from that end. He says, "Rules of action, it seems natural to suppose, must take their whole character and color from the end to which they are subservient."¹⁷ This is similar to Finney's theory, which implies that any means used to achieve a good end must be judged good, because of the character of the end to which they are directed.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁶ Finney, quoted by Hamilton, p. 59.

¹⁷ Mill, p. 2.

Nathaniel Taylor elaborates on this. He claims that what he calls "subordinate actions" (choices to achieve the ultimate end) have no moral character. They are judged "right" or "wrong," not morally, but only in the sense of being fitted or not fitted to achieve the ultimate end toward which they aim.¹⁸ Thus he would say that any subordinate action which will achieve the ultimate end, "the highest well-being of all," is right, and no case can exist where an action achieves this end and is wrong. Finney does not explicitly draw this conclusion, but his view of ultimate and proximate ends, combined with the theory of the Unity of Moral Action, leads logically to it.¹⁹

Finney's theory differs from Mill's regarding motive or intention. Mill considers these to be two different things, claiming that "motive has nothing to do with the morality of an action, though much with the worth of the agent."²⁰ He uses the example of a man saving another from drowning, calling this morally good even if his motives are selfish.

¹⁸ Taylor, p. 66.

¹⁹ This does not mean that in Finney's view an ill-intentioned or chance act which happens to lead to the greatest happiness is automatically a morally good act for that reason. Recall that moral quality can only be predicated of intention. Therefore an ill-intentioned act would be morally wrong even though it incidentally produced the greatest happiness (since the intention of the agent was actually to prevent the greatest happiness or the act would not be "ill-intentioned"). And a chance act would carry no moral connotation whatsoever, despite its beneficial outcome.

²⁰ Mill, p. 18.

Finney, however, says the morality of an action originates in the heart. A mere sequence of action is neither moral nor immoral; what makes it moral is the agent who performs it (Taylor claims that even obedience to the laws of the Decalogue may be benevolent or selfish, depending upon the circumstances of its application²¹). Therefore Mill's selfish rescuer, if he does not choose the good of the drowning man as an end in itself, recognizing its intrinsic value, is still morally reprehensible, even if he performs an outwardly desirable act. As previously mentioned, this is an element "borrowed" from the deontological view.

Mill also proposes two sanctions of the greatest happiness principle:²² 1) the favor or displeasure of one's fellow creatures or God; and 2) one's sympathy and affection for one's fellow creatures and God, whereby one does God's will independently of selfish consequences. Finney would say that sanction number one revolves entirely around the individual and his selfish considerations. Mill's second sanction, for Finney, is the only valid one, as it seeks the good of creatures and God, without selfish considerations.

Despite the similarities between Finney and Mill, there is a difference which perhaps puts Finney's system on a more solid footing. Mill begins with the desire of individual happiness and extrapolates to the happiness of others as the

²¹ Taylor, p. 57.

²² Mill, p. 27.

ultimate end.²³ He does not explicitly justify his extrapolation, but seems to consider it self-evident that if a person desires her own happiness she must recognize that she should seek others' happiness also. Hamilton says, "Whereas Mill offers some psychological facts which recommend the principle of utility as being reasonable, he nevertheless holds that the principle cannot be logically proven or metaphysically justified."²⁴

Finney draws similar conclusions but adds an intermediate step in his reasoning. People have what he calls a constitutional desire for happiness and a corresponding dread of misery, and he believes the experience of happiness results in the rational idea of the intrinsic value of happiness in itself.²⁵ This is the step Mill does not include: the objectifying of the value of happiness. The intrinsic value of happiness is the ground of obligation, and since reason affirms the obligation to choose the intrinsically valuable for its own sake,²⁶ a rational being must choose happiness as an ultimate end. If she could choose something less valuable it would make no sense, and she would in effect cease to be rational. This extra step, the objectifying of the value of happiness, makes it

²³ Mill, p. 12.

²⁴ Hamilton, p. 72.

²⁵ Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 14.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 19.

reasonable to claim that the happiness of others is equal in value to the individual's happiness, and must also be chosen for its own sake. Thus the happiness of all beings, including God, other persons, and oneself, is the ultimate end to which all other choices are to be directed.

Finney claims there is another important difference between his system and utilitarianism. He believes utilitarianism rests obligation only upon those things which will produce happiness. Therefore he says, "if it were certain that his [i.e. a moral being's] benevolence could do no one any good, the obligation would cease."²⁷ Finney contends that since happiness is a good in itself, willing it for its own sake is obligatory, whether or not the willing can in fact produce it.

Yet later he makes a point that undermines his claim about utilitarianism. He says it is possible to will the existence of happiness for all beings even when it is impossible actually to produce it. He has often maintained that no person is obligated to perform what is impossible.²⁸ Therefore it is entirely possible for a utilitarian to recognize the "greatest happiness principle," and still not be obligated to perform impossible acts. When Finney claims utilitarians would say benevolence is no longer obligatory if it will do no good, he is forgetting his own definition.

²⁷ Finney, The Heart of Truth, p. 163.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 164.

He has defined benevolence as "entire, universal, uninterrupted consecration" to the seeking of the "well-being of God, and of the universe of sentient existences."²⁹ Thus, surely, if an act will do no good to anyone, then it is not actually benevolence and cannot be obligatory.

Finney's Utilitarianism

As Hamilton points out, Finney's claim that he is not a utilitarian stems from a misunderstanding of the teaching of William Paley. Finney, says Hamilton, thinks that Paley teaches that the perceived tendency of an act, rather than its results, is the ultimate ground of obligation to perform it.³⁰ Finney believes that the perceived tendency is only a condition of obligation, and not the ultimate ground. Yet essentially Finney's and Paley's views are the same: the ultimate ground of obligation is found in the results of an action. The tendency of an action to produce good must be perceived as a condition of obligation, but this tendency is not the ultimate ground. "In both cases," says Hamilton, "this tendency determines the rightness of the act only, but never the goodness."

²⁹ Finney, Systematic Theology, p. 28.

³⁰ Hamilton, p. 67.

Conclusion

While Finney is quite obviously a teleologist, it seems equally clear that he is a utilitarian. As shown in the previous section, the differences between his moral theory and that of a utilitarian like John Stuart Mill are relatively minor. Finney puts his system perhaps on a more objective footing, but in practical terms the two theories would be lived out very similarly. Finney defines the ultimate end of happiness more in terms of spiritual well-being than does Mill, but since Finney's purpose was theological as well as philosophical this is not surprising.

Hamilton also claims that Finney is specifically a rule-utilitarian rather than an act-utilitarian.³¹ For act-utilitarians, utility is applied to each specific situation without reference to other cases. Rule-utilitarianism, on the other hand, applies utility to kinds of acts in types of situations, adopting as a general rule that type of action which has the greatest utility compared with other possible actions.³² Hamilton claims that Finney restates rule-utilitarianism in an unusual way, which is why he is unaware that he and Paley essentially hold the same position. Hamilton summarizes Finney's position as follows:

It would appear then that Mahan is right in his contention that Finney's theory is a thinly disguised version of utilitarianism. He is right,

³¹ Ibid., p. 119.

³² Bayles, p. 7.

first, because Finney is a teleologist, and every utilitarian is a teleologist. He is right also because Finney, like all utilitarians, advocates a universalistic rather than an egoistic version of teleology. Mahan is again vindicated in view of the fact that Finney analyzes good in terms of well-being or happiness. Finally, Mahan is right because Finney is even a utilitarian in the specific sense of being a rule-utilitarian.³³

PELAGIANISM

Discussing Finney's perfectionism, Benjamin Warfield calls him a Pelagian, and compares his teachings with Pelagianism.³⁴ He claims Finney "brought to Gale [Finney's first pastor] the unordered Pelagianism of the man in the street, strengthened and sharpened by the habits of thought picked up in the law-courts."³⁵ In fact, "Finney's thought ran not merely into the general mold of Pelagianism, but into the special mold of the particular mode of stating Pelagianism which had been worked out by N.W. Taylor."³⁶

The charge of Pelagianism is not an idle one; there are many similarities between Finney's teachings and what we

³³ Hamilton, p. 120.

³⁴ Warfield; see for example p. 60, where he says, "Finney was too good a Pelagian readily to homologate [i.e. approve or affirm] Quietistic conceptions;" or p. 84 where he speaks of Finney's "fundamentally Pelagian type of thinking;" or p. 135 where he describes Finney's system as a "Pelagian construction of salvation."

³⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

³⁶ Ibid.

know of those of Pelagius. It will be worthwhile to examine these, and perhaps re-evaluate what Pelagius taught. The following brief discussion will be based largely upon Robert F. Evans' book, Pelagius: Inquiries and Reappraisals.

The Rationality of Theology

As Finney stresses rationality and man's ability to understand God and his world, Pelagius claims that since man has a likeness to God, he is endowed with reason and can understand and use the creation for his own ends. He also is aware of the law of nature written on his heart; this is his conscience. He is able to distinguish the morally good from the morally bad, and is aware that he is called on to perform the good. As Evans says, "The law of nature then is given by reason applying itself to the concrete business of moral choice between good and evil."³⁷

Physical and Moral Law

Because man is a rational being in the natural world, according to Evans, Pelagius uses the word "nature" in two senses: 1) the natural world, ruled by necessity; and 2) man's nature, which is free to choose.³⁸ This capacity can be directed either toward sinlessness or sinfulness.³⁹

³⁷ Evans, p. 93.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 94.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 95.

Evans says that there is not enough extant material from Pelagius to know precisely how he contrasts will and natural necessity,⁴⁰ but his emphasis on freedom suggests that the only thing which can have moral quality is the free choice of man, rather than that which is ruled by necessity. The only kind of "necessity" imposed on the will is that man possesses freedom of choice.⁴¹ Evans quotes Pelagius as saying, "Whatever is bound by natural necessity is thereby lacking in the choice and deliberation proper to will."⁴²

This is distinctly reminiscent of Finney's emphasis on voluntary action as the only thing which can fall under the requirements of moral law.

The Source of Moral Law, and God's Moral Nature

It is unclear whether Pelagius reached the same conclusion as Finney about the source of moral law. For Finney, as seen in Chapter Two, the supreme moral principle must arise from the nature of the universe and the relations of free agents; it must be intrinsically valuable and chosen for its own sake. Moral law, says Finney, cannot originate in the will of God, or it will be merely arbitrary.

When Pelagius speaks of moral law, he often links it with nature. But it is not clear whether this means man is

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 94.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., p. 86.

able to derive an understanding of moral obligation simply by applying his reason to nature, whether God gives the law or not; or whether it means that man's original state was such that he knew the requirements of morality intuitively, by virtue of God's having placed that knowledge within him. Certainly Pelagius teaches that man is able because of his rationality to acknowledge God as Lord of the creation, and to know himself a servant of God. From this, man has the ability to know God's will, to distinguish good from evil, and to know he is responsible to choose the good.⁴³ But whether this moral law is intrinsic to existence itself, and God is also accountable to it, or whether it originates in God's will, Pelagius does not discuss.

Nor does he address the question of God's own freedom. Evans points out that Pelagius "disparages the wisdom of 'philosophers' who pry into matters obscure and unprofitable,"⁴⁴ in discussing speculation about the nature of God. Thus Pelagius, referring to knowledge of God, only speaks in terms of knowledge of his will and divine commandments.⁴⁵

However, while there is no clear statement of God's own moral agency, there is a hint of it in one place where Pelagius discusses human freedom. Evans says that Pelagius suggests "human 'capacity' to avoid sin is founded upon a

⁴³ Ibid., p. 93.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 52.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

divine 'capacity' which properly belongs to the nature of God but which God has bestowed upon man as a gift of grace."⁴⁶ Recall that Pelagius views the will of man as possessing the ability to choose either good or evil. If this capacity is founded upon a similar divine capacity, one might conclude that God's capacity to avoid evil must entail the possibility of choosing it as well. Evans rejects this interpretation, claiming that if Pelagius is claiming that God has an ability to sin he "could not possibly have been aware of what he was saying."⁴⁷

The Foundation of Moral Obligation

Pelagius' account of the foundation of moral obligation is even more obscure than his notion of the source of moral law. There survives from his writings no discussion of a supremely valuable end with all "subordinate choices" taking their moral character from the ultimate end chosen. Though Pelagius stresses that man's capacity to reason enables him to discern good from evil, when he discusses man's awareness of "the law of nature" it is usually in relation to knowing God's will rather than coming to a rational conclusion from viewing the world around him.⁴⁸ As Evans says,

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 51.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 95.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 93.

In Pelagius reason (ratio) has its proper place as the law of life in the sense that ratio is virtually an equivalent of that lex naturae by which man in the early days of the race was able naturally to acknowledge the Creator and to know the manner in which he should live.⁴⁹

Pelagius does not identify the only rational choice as being universal benevolence, as does Finney; again, he defines obligation in terms of divine commandment. In fact, he claims that the only thing which will liberate man's true nature is "law which comes from God."⁵⁰ As mentioned in the previous section, it is not certain whether moral law is supposed to come from the will of God, or is intrinsic to existence itself.

Pelagius' view of man's original and present states is worth mentioning here. He believes that man was originally created with his own nature in complete harmony with the natural world and moral law.⁵¹ Human nature itself was in fact sufficient to men as law.⁵² But time, moral corruption, and "the rust of ignorance" eventually overlaid man's original nature, so that revelation became necessary to remedy his situation.⁵³ It is for this reason that the "law

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 50.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 101.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 96-98.

⁵² Ibid., p. 98.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 99.

which comes from God" is necessary to liberate man's nature, but again it is not clear what the source of this law is.

One area where Pelagius and Finney completely agree is man's freedom. When Pelagius speaks of man's "natural goodness" he is speaking of "the rational creature's capacity both to act in accord with the law of nature and to reject that law."⁵⁴ Furthermore, Evans mentions Pelagius' "insistence that God cannot be thought to command the impossible."⁵⁵ This is not elaborated, but it certainly echoes Finney's contention that God could not justly or rationally command man to do what is impossible.

Elsewhere, Evans describes how Pelagius says it is "one's first and indispensable task to learn what one is to do before attempting to do it."⁵⁶ This initially sounds like Finney's belief that man is only accountable for acts which are wrong according to knowledge he has, but Pelagius probably does not mean this. For Pelagius, "It is 'as knowledge increases' that our salvation is nearer than when we first believed."⁵⁷ And again, "'Difficult' is it that anyone should be saved without 'knowledge of the divine law.'"⁵⁸ This implies that he believes man is accountable,

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 93.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 31.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 50.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 112.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 113.

and held guilty, even if he does not know the law. Evans quotes a sentence from his book of testimonies which seems clear on the point: "No man is able to be without sin unless he has acquired knowledge of the law."⁵⁹ Finney, on the other hand, would say that no man is considered sinful unless he has knowledge of the law.

Original Sin

Pelagius defines sin as a deed wrongly done, proceeding from the will.⁶⁰ There is no "necessity" to sin imposed on the will -- not even from one's own flesh. If there could be, one would be dealing with the natural world, ruled by necessity, and leaving the realm of the moral, ruled by freedom.⁶¹ Again we see the distinction between the physical and the moral, made by both Pelagius and Finney.

Evans discusses Augustine's treatise against Pelagius' work, On Nature, and lists the positions of Pelagius on original sin that Augustine notes:

an infant dying unbaptized is not condemned; if a man were of such a character that he could not possibly be without sin, he would be free of blame; our human nature has been neither crippled nor transformed by sin because sin is not a "substance"...the commission of more sins cannot be thought to be punishment for sin; no evil may be the cause of any good, and therefore it is absurd to posit sin as the cause of God's mercy or

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 113.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 97.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 94.

as the necessary precondition of there being no sin; there is no sin that is not pride, and there is no guilt from a sin that is not one's own voluntary sin; we are said to sin "in Adam" because of our imitation of Adam's sin.⁶²

Some of these issues are not addressed by Finney, but on the whole this teaching is similar to Finney's arguments against original sin. Once again we see the emphasis that sin must be voluntary, and that if a man cannot help but sin he cannot be held guilty.

Pelagius claims that if sin is transmitted through the generations it must be a necessary part of human nature, a "substance" of some kind which is passed on. This idea is typical of Manicheism,⁶³ which teaches that spirit is good, and matter evil. The original sin hypothesis, says Pelagius, is subject to the same criticisms as Manicheism, the most pertinent being that again it casts responsibility for man's state back on the one who created man's nature as it is. Pelagius looks at Romans 5:18 and 19:

So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.

He claims that according to this passage, if the sin of Adam harms all his descendants, so they are doomed to condemnation en masse, the work of Christ should bring salvation to

⁶² Ibid., p. 83.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 97.

all as well.⁶⁴ The word "all" is used in both cases; is there any warrant for the claim that the first "all" is all-inclusive, while the second really only means "some?"

Pelagius does not accept traducianism⁶⁵ (the teaching that the human soul is somehow derived from its parents' souls in a way analogous to how its body is derived from their bodies), but he believes instead that the soul is newly created by God; therefore there can be no connection between this new soul and Adam's long-ago choice.⁶⁶ He does not deny that Adam played a role in the entrance of sin into the world, but the role was that of example. As Evans describes it, "The injury which Adam worked upon his descendants was the injury of being both the first man and the first disobedient man, and this injury takes its effect through man's fateful living by the model of that disobedience."⁶⁷

As with Finney, it seems necessary to explain the prevalence of sin, if man is free not to sin. Recall that Finney explains this by reference to "physical depravity," in which man's physical nature is diseased and builds habits of self-gratification before moral awareness develops. One may also infer, from his belief in man's accountability for

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 73.

⁶⁵ Kelly, p. 345.

⁶⁶ Evans, p. 73.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 97.

the knowledge he has, that if knowledge of God's law has been obscured over the centuries people are less accountable, since complete knowledge is less available even to the diligent seeker. Pelagius does not teach physical depravity, but explains the prevalence of sin by the gradual obscuring of truth over the centuries, the increase of bad influences in society, and the buildup of sinful habits.⁶⁸ Evans quotes him as saying that these habits become so powerful they hold a man by "a certain necessity."⁶⁹ This is similar to Finney's claim that even though man is free he will not turn from sin without the Spirit's help, and it encounters many of the same difficulties as Finney's theory. According to Evans, Pelagius takes this position because of a controversy over whether there is room for grace if man is completely free.⁷⁰ Yet it is not entirely consistent with his claim that the capacity for sinlessness is a gift of God's grace.

Sanctification

As described in Chapter Two, Finney's belief in man's freedom and his rejection of original sin lead naturally to a belief that it is possible for a person to lead a sinless life. According to Evans, Pelagius also recognizes this

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 97-112.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 105.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

consequence. In fact, Pelagius appears to realize that sanctification is a requirement to "see the Lord," and does not hold the view that one may be saved without further sin affecting his salvation. As Evans says, "For Pelagius it means nothing to be directed toward the final goal of Christian life unless that direction is being continually validated by concrete choices in which the individual wills not to sin."⁷¹ If one is a son of God, this entails the responsibility to imitate God, always conducting oneself with this in mind.⁷² He frequently speaks of the futility of offering sacrifices and ritual without a pure and holy heart.⁷³ In fact, he claims that "the nature of the Church here and now is to be without spot or wrinkle,"⁷⁴ and appears to take this claim of absolute moral purity literally rather than symbolically.

Pelagius does not explicitly divide the concept of sanctification into present and future sanctification, as does Finney, but this division is implied. He speaks of developing appropriate habits of mind and action in striving for the heavenly reward,⁷⁵ and his belief in man's ability to be sinless implies that anyone can reach the point where

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 29.

⁷² Ibid., p. 54.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 55.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 76.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 55.

he is entirely sanctified. In fact, he maintains that in the time between Adam and Moses we do indeed have examples of people who lived according to the law of nature and were sinless.⁷⁶ According to Evans, some of the examples were Abel, Noah, Melchizedek, Abraham, and Job.⁷⁷ Pelagius only makes this claim for the period between Adam and Moses, however, since by Moses' time man's true nature had been so obscured by corruption, habit, and ignorance that revealed law was necessary to restore him to his original state.⁷⁸ On the other hand Finney, as we have seen, would say that any person in any time period can be considered righteous if he lives according to what understanding he does have.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that Finney's theory is both utilitarian and largely Pelagian. While Pelagius does not deal with purely philosophical questions like the foundation of moral obligation, John Stuart Mill does not touch upon theological

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 98.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 98. We may also wonder about the meaning of such intriguing verses as, "Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him" (Genesis 5:24). "Walking with God" is often a way of describing obedience to God, and perhaps Pelagius would have interpreted this verse to mean that Enoch was sinless. If it refers merely to a man who had close fellowship with God and then simply died, it is odd that such specific mention of it should be made, when the Bible is full of other such individuals.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 96.

matters to any significant extent. Of course Finney does not deal with subjects such as the implications of infant baptism for the doctrine of original sin, or celibacy, which were important issues for Pelagius. Yet if we were to mesh Mill's and Pelagius' systems together the result would be very close to Finney's moral theory. He takes the philosophical and theological and combines them into a coherent theory which goes a long way toward answering some of the "big questions" theology has been struggling with for many years.

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