

# The Stewardship of Story: Charles Finney

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Third Presbyterian Church  
October 15, 2017  
Matthew 22:1-14

Have you ever noticed a large rock between the chapel and sanctuary entrances with a weathered plaque on it? Any idea what it says? “In honor of Charles G. Finney: evangelist, educator and Christian statesman...who by his spiritual ministry in Rochester in 1830, 1842 and 1855 transformed the lives of thousands and made this a better city for all time...”

In this year of stewardship, I have been thinking a great deal about how we are stewards of our stories, both our own stories and the stories of community in this place. How do we nurture stories so they can have important meaning for us as we move ahead, not just nostalgia, but crucial source material as we live into our future? And as we mark 190 years of ministry as Third Presbyterian Church, I have been thinking a great deal about those who have gone before us, whether they have their names on plaques on in session minute books, or whether their contributions included singing an alto line or teaching a child or washing a dish.

So, this is not a history lecture about Charles Finney, which might not even be of sustainable interest to me. Yet Finney’s legacy is part of the story we steward, woven into the fabric of Third Church’s DNA and the DNA of our region.

Some years back Third Church hosted a Finney festival, and the organizers presented us with this portrait. Perhaps you’ve seen it – he’s not exactly a guy you’d want to share wings and a Bills game with. Which is part of the point.

Finney was a leader, if not *the* leader, of a moment in American history, roughly 1825-1835, called the Second Great Awakening, represented by massive revivals. Our region became labelled as “The Burned Over District,” signifying the intense fire of conversion that the Holy Spirit delivered across upstate New York. Rochester was the national epicenter of this religious and cultural movement; historian Charles Hambrick-Stowe writes that “Finney and Rochester acquired symbolic power as news of...revival reached far and wide.” (*Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism*, page 113)

Remember your high school history classes. So many things were happening at one time: the Jackson presidency and a new nation finding its legs and identity, westward expansion, industrial development, the increasing democratizing and popularizing of American religion, the ongoing plagues of racism and sexism. Finney was a Presbyterian who never fully embraced

Presbyterianism, either its, to him, stodgy style, and equally as important its stern Calvinist emphasis on grace that felt to him as if it let us off the hook.

For six months, in 1830, he was this congregation's preacher, and while here led daily revivals in the city and region that drew and converted thousands. He was invited by church and civic leaders who felt that the city needed the moral cleansing that only Finney could deliver.

That six months got us the Finney rock. It also gets us a steady stream of researchers and devotees who are often disappointed to learn that this (pulpit) was not Finney's actual pulpit, nor even the building where he actually preached, or that we have no extensive archives on him. They are even more distressed to learn that when given the opportunity to invite Finney back to Third Church in the 1850's, the Session declined, very wary of his revivalist approach.

We might be wary as well. Finney helped launch a new, distinctively American form of religion, evangelicalism. Evangelicalism was personal. It was emotional. It called for individual conversion. It reached beyond the wealthy who established congregations to the laborers, the workers, those of more modest means. Paul Johnson's classic volume on this era summarizes this well.<sup>1</sup> The revivalists believed that the "unregenerate," their term, not mine, the unregenerate who had yet to have a religious experience were just waiting for the right moment. They drank too much and smoked too much and did other things too much. But if they would find their way to a revival, watch out.

Two things were going on at the same time. One was stylistic – the use of emotion, in a very public setting, including something called an "anxious bench" or "anxious seat" upon which the unconverted sat until the enormity of their sin became fully understood and they converted, on the spot, often collapsing in tears. Literally, Finney and his fellow evangelical revivalists sought to "scare the hell" out of you by putting the "fear of God" into you.

That stylistic approach was undergirded by a new kind of theology, sometimes called Christian "perfectionism." Holy living, yes. Maturing in faith, yes. Walking closer and closer with God each day, yes. But the rub came for more traditional Calvinists, Presbyterians, who believed that Finney and others were promoting doctrine and behavior that contradicted the notion of "salvation by faith alone," a hallmark since Luther espoused it 500 years and 15 days ago. Anything that smacked of a person doing anything to achieve their own salvation, seeking unduly to influence God in eternal matters, was a red flag, and certainly Finney's anxious bench and calls to conversion did that, at least to them.

Paul Johnson writes that "Finney's revival techniques aroused controversy because they transformed conversion from a private to a public and intensely social event." (page 97) I tend to think the problem was at least as much about style as substance – that Old School Presbyterians in Rochester and elsewhere were simply put off by emotional worship, and probably also jealous of the crowds Finney attracted.

The issue of salvation by faith vs. salvation by works was not a new one then, and is somewhat mixed even in the Bible. I believe we all need conversion, conversion that's not primarily about moral behavior, conversion that in general is not a one-time and done and certainly not a public deal, but rather an ongoing process of being called and called again back to God. And, after all, some personal spiritual response can only be a good thing, as long as it is framed in an intentional way. But conversion calls us to response, and faith is never a solely individualized endeavor, a gap in the evangelical approach, critics say.

Finney was not unlike any iconic historical figure, never fully what he was made out to be and more complex than any one interpretation allows. He professed deep appreciation for Calvinist theology even as he was labelled anti-Calvinist. He was a pastoral and relational and a faithful colleague among colleagues even as it appeared from his demeanor that he was drilling right into your soul. And one important thing more.

But first a detour. We have just heard another Jesus parable from Matthew's gospel, the well-known story of a wedding banquet. The king invites so many of the usual suspects, the rich and famous, to his son's wedding; they do not come. So he sends his workers out into the city, to the "main streets" of the city, to invite others to come. They gathered all they find, both "good and bad," we are told. The story takes an odd and troubling turn with a guest deemed not to be dressed properly.

But this morning can we focus on that initial act – the act of going into the streets and inviting all. For the king, the walls were permeable, between his royal court and the main streets of the city, between the so-called "good" and the so-called "bad." Permeable walls, for the king. Permeable walls for Charles Finney, and hopefully permeable walls for us.

Because despite our skepticism about the style and substance of revivalism and perfectionism, despite so many things we would consider now in our interpretation of Finney and his ministry, despite our own understanding of what "evangelical" and "evangelicalism" means, despite this and despite that, this is part of the story as well. That Finney believed in permeable walls. That Finney came to Rochester not only to save souls, but to change lives. That he reached out to the working poor when the upper class churches wouldn't. That his list of ethical concerns mattered – temperance and Sabbath observance. We rarely talk about either anymore, but alcohol consumption and the seven-day work week were social and ethical problems, adversely affecting the life of Rochester's working class.

And Finney's permeable walls extended even to our concerns. He was an early abolitionist, and when he went to teach and then serve as president of Oberlin College, the college became a stop on the Underground Railroad. Oberlin was the first mixed-gender college in the U.S., women and men learning together. Perhaps even more importantly, when he was in Rochester, women provided much of the leadership for his revivals and even prayed publicly in mixed-sex gatherings. That was radical, socially and religiously.

As I noted, decades later, the Session of this congregation declined to invite Finney back to Rochester to speak at Third Church because they were wary of his revival techniques. I think that was a mistake, probably not the only mistake a Third Church Session has made in 190 years. But what I also like to remember is that litany – race, gender, poverty. All those examples of permeable walls that insist that the church is not just, as Thairu Kamau, our Kenyan partner, reminded us last week, “a museum for the saints,” and not even a “hospital for the sinners,” but a gathering place *and* launching pad.

Our concerns might not be temperance or Sabbath observance, but they certainly include race and gender, and newer articulations, war and peace, LGBTQ rights, poverty, hunger and housing, public education. Finney and his era might be bewildered by how some of this looks, but I pray they would resonate with what our ministry represents, its vision and commitments.

And I hope we are discerning enough to make connections, to embrace the helpful and to leave behind the unhelpful, to connect the dots, from the earliest moments of our history when we realized that the king does not invite only the royal court, but the whole kingdom, to a moment some 190 or so years ago when we sought to do the same with this unique and iconic figure, to our moment, when we think about walls, and the community that exists beyond these walls, and on our best days, erases any understandings between “them” and “us,” between “good” and “bad.”

I was trying to envision a conclusion. Maybe a musical: “Charles Grandison Finney. My name is Charles Grandison Finney.” Maybe not. Maybe a simple prayer of gratitude for Finney and all the saints who have gone before us, the giants on whose shoulders we stand – warts and all – as we re-commit ourselves now to be the church that invites all people, *all people*, to a glorious and spectacular wedding banquet. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> “With one arm evangelicals attacked the bad habits and tawdry amusements of unregenerate workingmen. With the other they offered redemption. They invited humbler men into their churches. They poured money into poor congregations, financed the establishment of new churches in working-class neighborhoods, and used their wealth and social position to help poor but deserving brethren. *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York: 1815-1837*, page 116