

# What a revival is

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY L. MAREN WOOD

Charles Grandison Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (Leavitt, Lord & co., 1835), pp. 9–15.

## As you read...

### CHARLES GRANDISON FINNEY

Charles Grandison Finney (1792–1875) was an influential minister in the Second Great Awakening. He lived and preached mainly in New York and Ohio. His revivals welcomed all participants. Finney preached in ordinary language, allowed women to pray in mixed public meetings (which was unusual for the time), and was an abolitionist, preaching openly against slavery.

In this excerpt from one of his books, Finney explains what a revival is and why it is necessary. Some more conservative ministers criticized Finney for raising people's emotions too much and for preaching in common or "vulgar" language. Here, he explains why it is necessary to raise people's emotions in a communal setting like a revival, and how the emotional outpouring leads to their salvation.

Finney was known for his innovations in preaching and religious meetings, such as having women pray in public meetings of mixed gender, development of the "anxious bench" (a place where those considering becoming Christians could come to receive prayer), and public censure of individuals by name in sermons and prayers. He was also known for his use of extemporaneous preaching.



Figure 1. Charles Grandison Finney (1792–1875) was a Christian revivalist preacher who played an influential role in the Second Great Awakening.

Almost all the religion in the world has been produced by revivals. God has found it necessary to take advantage of the excitability<sup>1</sup> there is in mankind, to produce powerful excitements among them, before he can lead them to obey. Men are so sluggish, there are so many things to lead their minds off from religion, and to oppose the influence of the gospel, that it is necessary to raise an excitement among them, till the tide rises so high as to sweep away the opposing obstacles. They must be so excited that they will break over these counteracting influences, before they will obey God....

[A revival] presupposes that the church is sunk down in a backslidden state,<sup>2</sup> and a revival consists in the return of the church from, her backslidings, and in the conversion of sinners.

1. A revival always includes conviction of sin<sup>3</sup> on the part of the church. Backslidden professors<sup>4</sup> cannot wake up and begin right away in the service of God, without deep searchings of heart. The fountains of sin need to be broken up. In a true revival, Christians are always brought under such convictions ; they see their sins in such a light, that often they find it impossible to maintain a hope of their acceptance with God. It does not always go to that extent; but there are always, in a genuine revival, deep convictions of sin, and often cases of abandoning all hope.<sup>5</sup>
2. Backslidden Christians will be brought to repentance. A revival is nothing else than a new beginning of obedience to God. Just as in the case of a converted sinner, the first step is a deep repentance, a breaking down of heart, a getting down into the dust before God, with deep humility, and forsaking of sin.
3. Christians will have their faith renewed. While they are in their backslidden state they are blind to the state of sinners. Their hearts are as hard as marble. The truths of the Bible only appear like a dream. They admit it to be all true; their conscience and their judgment assent to it; but their faith does not see it standing out in bold relief, in all the burning realities of eternity. But when they enter into a revival, they no longer see men as trees walking,<sup>6</sup> but they see things in that strong light which will renew the love of God in their hearts. This will lead them to labor zealously to bring others to him. They will feel grieved that others do not love God, when they love him so much. And they will set themselves feelingly to persuade; their neighbors to give him their hearts. So their love to men will be renewed. They will be filled with a tender and burning love for souls. They will have a longing desire for the salvation of the whole world. They will be in an agony for individuals whom they want to have saved; their friends, relations, enemies. They will not only be urging them to give their hearts to God, but they will carry them to God in the arms of faith, and with strong crying and tears beseech God to have mercy on them, and save their souls from endless burnings.<sup>7</sup>
4. A revival breaks the power of the world and of sin over Christians. It brings them to such vantage ground<sup>8</sup> that they get a fresh impulse towards heaven. They have a new foretaste of heaven, and new desires after union to God; and the charm of the world is broken,<sup>9</sup> and the power of sin overcome.
5. When the churches are thus awakened and reformed, the reformation and salvation of sinners will follow, going through the same stages of conviction, repentance, and reformation. Their hearts will be broken down and changed. Very often the most abandoned profligates are among the subjects. Harlots, and drunkards, and infidels,

and all sorts of abandoned characters, are awakened and converted. The worst part of human society are softened, and reclaimed, and made to appear as lovely specimens of the beauty of holiness.

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## Notes

1. People who are *excitable* can have their emotions raised by inspirational preaching. Finney suggests that God (and preachers) must use peoples' emotions to inspire them to reform.
2. Ministers believed that churches would go through cycles. At one point, people would be attentive to religion and matters of spirituality, but inevitably they would stop progressing. They would “backslide” into a state of sinfulness. The minister had to hold a revival to bring his congregation back to a state of righteousness.
3. A belief that they are truly sinful and need to pray to God for forgiveness.
4. People who *profess*, or admit, that they are backslidden — that is, sinful. Finney says that sinners cannot reform instantly.
5. People who had a conversion experience would often spend a period of time believing that they were damned and that God would not save them because they were too sinful. You can read an example of that feeling in this account from the eighteenth century.
6. People will no longer look at others with indifference.
7. You can see an example of this feeling in this letter from a recently-converted brother to his sister.
8. “Vantage ground” would be a place from which you could see something, so Finney is saying that a revival gives people a new point of view.
9. The “world” or “worldly” means that a person wants wealth, or they desire sinful things such as alcohol.

## About the author

### L. MAREN WOOD

Maren Wood is a research associate with LEARN NC's North Carolina History Digital Textbook Project. She is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, having received a B.A. from the University of Lethbridge (Alberta, Canada) and an M.A. in British History from Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada). Her dissertation is titled *Dangerous Liaisons: Narratives of Sexual Danger in the Anglo-American North, 1750 to 1820*.

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