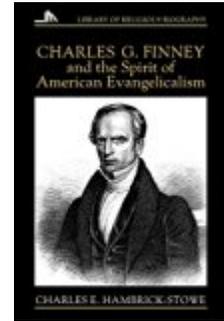


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe. *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996. xvii + 317 pp. \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8028-0129-6.

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## Searching for Charles Grandison Finney

Charles Grandison Finney holds a place among the greatest of American evangelists. Born in Connecticut in 1792, trained as a lawyer, Finney redirected his energies after his conversion in 1821. "I have a retainer from the Lord Jesus Christ to plead his cause," (19) he is supposed to have told an erstwhile client, and plead he did. Finney preached across the northeastern states and achieved remarkable success in inspiring conversions in New York City, Boston, Rochester, and elsewhere. A preacher more than a theologian, Finney nonetheless participated in the modification of Calvinism already in process before his birth. A leader who crossed denominations, he associated himself first with the Presbyterians and later with the Congregationalists. A well-read man without a college degree, he became a professor and later president of Oberlin College.

In spite of his prominence during his lifetime and his significance in the larger course of American religious history, Finney has rarely attracted the attention of scholarly biographers. George Frederick Wright's 1891 *Charles Grandison Finney* was followed by partial biographies or special pleading for the greater part of a century. In 1987, Keith Hardman finally published *Charles Grandison Finney, 1792-1875: Revivalist and Reformer* (Syracuse University Press). Certainly there was room for further treatment of the powerful evangelist.

Hambrick-Stowe's intention is to offer a biography based in scholarly research but accessible to a broad audience. Joining Harry Stout's *Divine Dramatist*, Edith

Blumhofer's *Aimee Semple McPherson*, and other works in the Library of Religious Biography series, Hambrick-Stowe's work will show up in undergraduate classes as well as in the libraries of ministers and others interested in the history of American religion. Evaluation of this version of Finney's life must, therefore, take into account the purpose of the series.

Hambrick-Stowe offers some consideration of every phase of Finney's life, from youth through the Oberlin years, but dwells most heavily on the years of his greatest impact, from his conversion in 1821 through his leadership of significant revivals and his growing advocacy of holiness/Christian perfection to about 1850. The author places Finney in the religious context of the age, tracing the emergence of the evangelist out of the preaching and teaching of early-nineteenth-century New York state. Hambrick-Stowe is judicious in his use of Finney's own accounts of his life, and in particular makes good use of the new edition of Finney's autobiography published by Garth M. Rosell and Richard A.G. Dupuis as *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989). The result is a Finney who is perhaps less miraculous—he did not invent his religion single-handedly out of the Bible alone—but surely more true to actual experience than even the Finney sketched by Hardman. Hambrick-Stowe touches on a variety of issues so that a reader coming to this work without extensive background may at least learn what some of the questions scholars have raised about Finney might be. For example, Hambrick-Stowe discusses briefly

how Finney could hold to the concept of total depravity and yet believe that sin was voluntary, and, similarly, how Finney reconceived of election so that it was consistent with his notions of free agency. The author's understanding of Finney hews more closely to Finney's own sense of what he believed than do the interpretations of those who would have Finney throwing all of Calvinist tradition aside in the process of embracing the means to bring people to conversion. Hambrick-Stowe also gives brief summaries of the social and economic context of revivalism and of the political culture of the 1830s and 1840s so that the reader has a glimpse into contexts that scholars may see as significant for the understanding of Finney and his revivalism.

In an effort to strike a casual tone and to engage the non-specialist, Hambrick-Stowe sometimes goes too far. He may lose serious readers from the beginning when he declares that the name Charles Grandison held a place in the culture of the 1790s equivalent to Bruce Springsteen or Michael Jordan today (3), or later when he says that Finney called the North Country the equivalent of a "bummed-out district" (39). If he seeks to address an audience that responds to such references to popular culture, on the other hand, Hambrick-Stowe may not go far enough in the direction of bringing his subject to an introductory level. His first mention of the Westminster Confession, for example, comes with a very brief explanation that will require most students in a History of American Religion class—or those in The New Nation or Antebellum United States—to turn to the textbook for help. Specialists will also bridle at the breezy identification of a certain kind of religion as "American," as when Hambrick-Stowe notes that Nathaniel W. Taylor and Finney both "attempted in their theologies to carve out a position that was simultaneously within the Calvinist tradition and progressively and evangelically American" (32).

An interpretive problem that may be rooted in the temptations of biography is Hambrick-Stowe's accepting stance toward Finney. In particular, the author seems reluctant to probe Finney's refusal to commit more fully to abolitionism and the evangelist's inability to achieve a full measure of racial egalitarianism. Students need to be given the material through which to examine Finney's assumptions and his choice to focus on conversion and holiness rather than abolition; students should ask why Finney chose not to follow colleagues and students into

more radical reform. Hambrick-Stowe is, at least, willing to allow that Finney took ocean voyages in part to avoid conflict over such issues as abolitionism; would that he had taken that point a step further to explore why Finney chose to run rather than confront such conflict.

In a larger sense, Hambrick-Stowe's work suffers from a problem that seems to arise from the sources on Finney: that is, there is little Finney there. Finney's writings are formal—lectures, sermons, theology—and some were not even committed to paper by Finney himself. The Finney papers are full of letters to Finney and about Finney, but we would all wish to have more by Finney. The memoirs focus on the public record of revivalism. Finney left little that reveals an interior life. How did he respond to the rush of admiration of hundreds of Americans in the 1820s and 1830s? Hit by attacks on his ideas, his methods, and even his person, did he feel hurt, did he calculate his response, did he turn to his wives, especially Lydia and Elizabeth, for advice? Similarly, how did he reach certain conclusions about his ideas and his commitments? Why would a man who opened himself up to public scrutiny and criticism year after year find it necessary to run to Europe to avoid conflict? It is a relief to come to the death of Lydia Finney and to discover in that scene some sense of the man responding at a deep level. Much of the rest of this work, like other works on Finney, leaves the reader with an odd sense that one is reading about turmoil swirling around Finney and not quite reaching Finney himself.

Beyond the difficulties posed by Finney, Hambrick-Stowe is to be congratulated for offering an accessible book that is reasonable in length (two-thirds the length of Hardman's work), manageable in price (the only paperback biography in print at this time), and directed to an audience of non-specialists. Although the end product will perhaps prove most suited to non-historians with a background in religion, including ministers, many professors will be thankful for a full-length introduction to Finney for their students as well. Questions about Finney await further scholarly exploration; perhaps in another generation we can look forward to another effort to synthesize that scholarship for a wider readership.

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