**Round Top Church Christian Fellowship**

Ekklesia Sermon Series

*But, “I Walked the Aisle!”*

*Pastor ~ Matthew Diehl*

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(Unless otherwise noted, NAS is quoted.)

Before we move forward from the Second Great Awakening, we need to highlight the ministry of Charles Finney.

**Charles Grandison Finney** (August 29, 1792 – August 16, 1875) was an American [Presbyterian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presbyterian_Church_in_the_United_States_of_America) minister and leader in the [Second Great Awakening](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Great_Awakening) in the United States. He has been called *The Father of Modern*[*Revivalism*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_revival).[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Grandison_Finney#cite_note-1) Finney was best known as an innovative revivalist during the period 1825–1835 in upstate New York and Manhattan, an opponent of Old School Presbyterian theology, an advocate of [Christian perfectionism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_perfection), and a religious writer.

Together with several other evangelical leaders, his religious views led him to promote social reforms, such as [abolition](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abolitionism) of [slavery](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery_in_the_United_States) and equal education for women and African Americans. From 1835, he taught at [Oberlin College](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oberlin_College) of Ohio which accepted students without regard to race or sex. He served as its second president from 1851 to 1866, during which its faculty and students were activists for abolition, the [Underground Railroad](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Underground_Railroad), and universal education.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Grandison_Finney>





Finney was a powerful preacher. Finney taught that people could be moral, if they chose to be moral. God gave them the ability to choose a moral life. This moral life had nothing to do with God’s Holy Spirit at work in them. Under this teaching, “Lost” souls responded to the Gospel. They became convicted by his sermons. At the end of the sermons, people were so moved, they came forward and wanted to talk to someone about what they were experiencing. So, they sat on the first row of seats or the first bench and waited until Finney or someone could pray with them and talk to them about their experience. This bench became known as the “anxious” seat or bench.

 There is a dividing point to be made here. **One** - a person is convicted by God’s Holy Spirit; their heart is cut/circumcised (Duet. 30:6). They humble themselves to God and cry-out, “what must we do?” (Acts 2:37). At this point, they have surrendered. They know there isn’t any action or thought of their own making that can save them. In Acts, Peter tells them to repent (turn) and witness their turning ~~in~~ by water-baptism. They then can receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Remember, and this is crucial, we can only receive the gift of the Holy Spirit after we surrender to the conviction of the Holy Spirit. Note here that after their hearts were cut, they had nothing to offer from themselves to attain right-standing with God, hence salvation.

 Or, **two** - The preacher makes good points. I am going to make a moral decision to be a Christian. I will walk down the aisle and talk to the minister about what I want to do.

 We see this today in many Evangelical churches. After a person comes forward, there is a church leader there to greet them. The church leader then inquires of the person what is happening to them. At this point, a determination is made as to the motives of the person who came and walked down the aisle. In one respect, this is a genuine way to publicly profess a person’s God-given faith. Millions have been sincere and genuinely were convicted by God’s Holy Spirit, professed their heart-change and became born-again.

 However, others misunderstood. They thought that conforming to the tradition of “walking the aisle” was the mechanism or part of the mechanism producing salvation. Many attest to their salvation pointing to the day they “walked the aisle” as proof of their salvation.

 Where is “walking the aisle” in the New Testament or anywhere in the Bible? It is true that we are to publicly witness and confess God. This can be accomplished in many ways. To funnel our public witness down to one point in time to get our ticket punched is not consistent with the Biblical model of witnessing. The Biblical model is a day-to-day witness. This public profession of God is accomplished by word or deed in our daily life.

"Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven.

 33 "But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 10:32-33)

Even though Finney was a Presbyterian, the practice of people coming forward after the sermon caught-on in other traditions. Finney pulled away from the strict adherence to Calvinistic predestination which taught that people didn’t have any choice whatsoever in being a Christian. God either chose you or He did not, and there was nothing you could do. Finney pulled away from the Reformed churches of his day that had formed their own institutional traditions that created a deadness in church life. He preached against the Augustinian theology of original sin and rejected infant baptism. During the reformation, many had pulled away from infant baptism and practiced believer’s Baptist for sound biblical reasons. However, denying original sin was considered heresy by all groups and is today. The idea that fallen human kind is not totally depraved is against Scripture (Ecclesiastes 7:20; Romans 3:10).

 12 Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned-- (Romans 5:12)

 Basically, Finney taught that all people are capable “on their own” to choose to be a Christian and live a moral life. There wasn’t any need to be convicted by God’s Holy Spirit. Becoming a Christian did not start with the sovereign God. Becoming a Christian starts with the individual making an intellectual decision. People can make a decision to save themselves without God. No need for God to make the first move. Additionally, Finney published his Systematic Theology. Therein, he detailed his teachings that centered around Pelagianism.

Pelagianism – Pelagian Heresy: theological theory named after the British monk Pelagius (c. AD 360 – 418), although he denied, at least at some point in his life, many of the doctrines associated with his name. Pelagius taught:

1. Original sin did not taint human nature.
2. Mortal man’s will is still capable of choosing good or evil without special divine aid or assistance. In other words, no conviction of God’s Holy Spirit is needed.
3. Human will, as created with its abilities by God, was sufficient to live a sinless life, although he believed God's grace assisted every good work.
4. Pelagianism has come to be identified with the view (whether taught by Pelagius or not) that human beings can earn salvation by their own efforts.

Under Finney’s preaching and teaching, there was an anticipation of people to respond to the Gospel. It became customary for people to “Walk the Aisle” and publicly state their conviction. This was the moment for many to publicly profess their newly found faith. This new tradition soon became part of other groups like the Baptist. The problem was people relied upon their own actions and not the movement of God’s Holy Spirit.

Finney pushed people into thinking that their good work of “walking the aisle” was their part in salvation. He called for them to live a life of good works, but the emphasis was not that it was God at work in you; it is you at work in you. This goes against Scripture. The first part of salvation starts with God.

1. God loved us first (1 John 4:19). This is God’s first move.
2. God’s Holy Spirit gives us spiritual gifts; we do not claim them (1 Corinthians 12:11). The use of our God-given gifts manifest as works. These gifts/works do not originate in us. Apart from God, we do not have any good works on our own.
3. God has planned our works beforehand, and it is God at work in us (Ephesians 2:10).
4. Faith in God produces acceptable works not faith in yourself. Good works by themselves are spiritually empty. Work does not produce faith. God’s Faith stirring in us produces works.
5. In John 5:19,30, Jesus clearly states He can do nothing without the Father. We are to be the same. All of our work is to originate in the Father. We are not to act on our own. Like Jesus, we are not to do anything on our own without the Father.

The bottom line is that many people believed that their work of “walking the aisle” added to God’s work of salvation, and the two came together to attain salvation.

I have shared before that attending a conference at “The Cove” which is the Billy Graham center in Ashville N.C. I learned that Mr. Graham decided early in ministry to work with other churches. Graham would send teams of workers into cities months ahead of a planned crusade. There was a coordinated effort working with many churches, across denominational lines, to evangelize their family, friends, neighbors, co-workers and classmates. This witnessing effort came together at the crusade. The plan was for Billy Graham, as a God-called evangelist, to “seal the deal.” Therefore, these decisions for God were not only more thought-out, they were encompassing a large body of the Church. The idea is that a person walking the aisle was not spontaneously and emotionally caught-up in a group dynamic that everyone had to walk the aisle. God’s spirit had moved through the body of Christ working together to produce salvation in individuals. Not to say that some who attended a Billy Graham crusade were not instantly convicted by God’s Holy Spirit, cutting their hearts in humility toward God.

Where does this lead us today? Where is the fruit of salvation? How can we tell the difference? We do not want to be judgmental. Another person’s salvation is really God’s business. We are responsible to carry-out God’s Spirit witness in us. This rarely consists of performing miracles. However:

12 So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; 13 **for it is God who is at work in you**, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. 14 Do all things without grumbling or disputing; (Philippians 2:12-14)

 “Work out your salvation” does not mean that we have to meritoriously earn our salvation. This process in directly contrary to Ephesians 2:8. “By no works are we saved.” So, considering the whole biblical context there must be another understanding. Who is really at work in our saved lives? God. Salvation is a one-time event. Salvation is also lived-out by God at work in us.

**Third Great Awakening** (c. 1855–1930) Social Gospel movement, Postmillennialism, Mary Baker Eddy & Christian Science, Charles Taze Russel & Jehovah’s Witness, Salvation Army, Holiness Pentecostal Movements.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pelagianism>