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Bulletin

Are There Two Roads to Holiness?

Charles G. Finney and the Reinterpretation of Wesleyan/Holiness Origins: A Conversation between Allen Guelzo and Douglas A. Sweeney

Charles Grandison Finney has long been regarded as one of the greatest American evangelists, and as a key figure in breaking American revivalism out from the Calvinistic shadow of the Great Awakening toward an affirmation of free-will in salvation, perfection in spirituality, and general democratization of preaching.

Based on an intensive study of Finney's published and unpublished writings, Allen Guelzo has sharply disagreed with the by-now conventional interpretation of Finney and the origins of American Holiness.[1] Guelzo has argued that Finney adopted both the peculiar vocabulary of the New England Edwardseans (also known as New Divinity and the peculiarities of their theology extent of the atonement, and the ability to follow a 'perfect' obedience of Christian moral precepts). Therefore, on the one hand, Guelzo asserts that Finney's supposed quarrel with Calvinism is not an argument against Calvinism, but a 'taking sides' in an intramural argument within Calvinism, between New England Edwardseans and Princeton Old Schoolers; while on the other hand, Guelzo claims that Finney, relying on his New England sources, was able to construct a brand of holiness and perfectionist theology which was sharply demarked from the Wesleyan/Holiness model and which owes much of its inspiration to Jonathan Edwards.

Has the Holiness tradition misattributed much of its own origins to Wesleyanism rather than Calvinism?

This poses two critical questions: How shall Finney be located on the historical/theological map? And by misreading Charles Finney, has the Holiness tradition misattributed much of its own origins to Wesleyanism rather than Calvinism?

What follows are responses from both Douglas Sweeney and Allen Guelzo on Charles Finney and Wesleyan/Holiness origins.

Finney and Edwardsean Culture: A Response to Allen Guelzo

by Douglas Sweeney

Allen Guelzo is the most proficient historian at work on our early national religious thought. His book *Edwards on the Will: A Century of American Theological Debate* (1989), is widely regarded as the definitive work on the subject. And, in my view, his recent writings on Charles Finney are among the best sources available to those of us interested in understanding the historical significance of Finney's thought. By scrutinizing Finney's demographic and educational background, the cultural context of his early ministry, and most importantly, his theological allegiances, explications, and justifications – not to mention the perceptions of Finney shared by many of his closest friends – Guelzo has moved us beyond the shopworn Arminianization thesis and demonstrated that Finney took his primary intellectual identity from Edwardsean theological tradition in New England.

However, if I may offer a suggestion as one of Guelzo's journal colleagues, as one who stands on Allen's shoulders and sees things with his help, I would note that he would have an even more powerful historical argument if the connections he has drawn were not so thinly "genetic." It is useful to show that Finney appropriated characteristically Edwardsean "tag lines," forwarded key Edwardsean themes, and cited Edwardsean as his authorities.[2] But it would prove even more useful to American historians if Guelzo

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Finney and Edwardsean Culture: A Response to Allen Guelzo

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offered a fuller, thicker, more compelling explanation of the importance of these connections for understanding Finney's era. As it is, Guelzo portrays Finney's theological variations as but "the coda," a sort of swan song, of a dying New England theology.[3] As much recent scholarship has shown, however, the Edwardsean tradition was thriving at the height of Finney's career, indeed, throngs of people were appropriating Edwards' thought in Finney's day.[4] Finney took part in what I have called a uniquely Edwardsean theological climate, one that proved very extensive and influential throughout the antebellum northeast.[5] And his claims to Edwards' authority are best interpreted within the context of his culture and its significance in shaping antebellum Protestantism.

One place at which I am predisposed to object to Guelzo's genetic history lies at the intersection of Finney's thought with that of William Nathaniel Taylor. In keeping with an argument first made in *Edwards on the Will*, Guelzo interprets Taylor as the most potent symbol of Edwardsean decline in the 19th century. He grants that Taylor did share certain affinities with Edwardseans. But he contends that Taylor's theological work served to buttress a resurgent "Old Calvinism," a form of thought that emerged initially in opposition to the Edwardseans and which had purportedly gained such strength by Taylor's own day that it coopted the New England theology altogether. I have argued extensively that this interpretation of Taylor and the later history of New England theology simple does not hold water.[6] But it might be appropriate to note that Guelzo's interpretation of Finney appears inconsistent against the background of his portrayal of the demise of the New England Theology. In short, it is not very persuasive to argue that Finney drew much that was unique about his Edwardsean theology from the well of the Taylorites in New Haven,[7] while insisting simultaneously that neither the Taylorites nor any of the other self-proclaimed Edwardseans in Finney's day were true disciples of Jonathan Edwards after all. Whatever one thinks of Taylor, it would prove much more compelling historically if Guelzo would interpret Finney's pedigree much more squarely within the context of what Joseph Conforti and others have referred to as the widespread "culture revival" of Edwards' authority in the 19th century.[8]

A brief comment on the significance of Guelzo's work for our understanding of the Holiness Movement: Guelzo is right, I think, that the kind of perfectionism espoused at Oberlin College (at least by the early Finney) owed its origins far more to Edwards than to Wesley. And this means, among other things, that the call to holiness was not a uniquely Wesleyan phenomenon, even though it was rooted most firmly in the Methodist Episcopal Church. On the other hand, scholars have known this for years. As we have discussed the theological underpinnings of the Keswick Movement, or the Holiness roots of the Assemblies of God, for example, it has become clear that the Holiness-Pentecostal tradition has had plenty of Reformed roots. On the other hand, we have not understood these roots very well. Nor have we traced them to their source(s). As a result, we have encouraged non-specialists to assume that Timothy L. Smith was right (i.e. in *Revivalism and Social Reform*), that there really were no important, non-Wesleyan, perfectionist sources of the 19th-century social reform. Guelzo's work on Finney calls this common assumption into question, making it clear that much work remains to be done on the Edwardsean roots of the righteous empire.

Finally (and all too briefly), Guelzo's work suggests that Donald W. Dayton and others who continue to insist on a uniquely "Pentecostal" paradigm for the study of evangelical history – a radical alternative, Dayton argues, to the "Presbyterian" paradigm that has so long dominated the historiography[9] – need to account more fully for the fact that, not just modern, Anglo-American evangelicalism in general, but even the Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in particular, have always been grounded theologically in both Wesleyan and Reformed sources. Thus to follow Dayton and view evangelical history through a distinctly non-Reformed lens is to misapprehend a major part of the story. Indeed, insofar as Arminianism, Anglicanism, and Methodism themselves all have Reformed roots, one might add that to view Wesleyan-Holiness history through a distinctly non-Reformed lens is to misapprehend, even narrowly defined historical movements to the study of which this bulletin is devoted.

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Initially, funding for the *Wesleyan Holiness Studies Center Bulletin* was provided by the Pew Charitable Trusts. We are sorry to say that this is no longer the case and it has become necessary for us to begin charging a fee to cover the cost of printing and postage. For a one year's subscription (two issues), the cost will be $5.00, $10.00 for two years, etc. If you wish to continue receiving the *Bulletin*, please return this portion of the newsletter to the Wesleyan/Holiness Studies Center Bulletin, D. William Faupel, Director, Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, KY 40390-1199.

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Reply to Douglas Sweeney

by Allen Guelzo

Douglas Sweeney makes only one mistake of any serious order in his comment, and that is confined to the first paragraph (where, sad to say, not a single word of his irrationally generous statements about me will be confirmed by anyone one else living).

I think he is correct in wondering whether I have failed to do Finney the "fuller, thicker" service I gave the New Divinity Men. I came to the subject of Finney almost by accident in the late spring of 1982, when I was deeply enmeshed in Nathanael Emmons, and in the midst of some other work happened to turn over pages of Finney's *Memoirs*. I was struck by the stunning identity of vocabulary between the two, and it came on me almost palpably that Finney was not (as Whitney Cross, William McLoughlin and Gilbert Barnes had all led me to believe for years) an exotic Jacksonian Arminian, but rather a very conventional New England Edwardsean. Because I was preoccupied with the New Divinity itself, and because I found Finney more a retailer rather than a manufacturer of ideas, I mentioned his New England resemblance only in passing in *Edwards on the Will*. I have written fully about Finney since then, but more out of curiosity to test that thesis than to attempt a comprehensive reinterpretation of Finney in his times; that much I have been happier to leave in the hands of Charles Hambrick-Stowe. This has, perhaps, led me to treat Finney more as an interesting footnote to the Edwardsean story than anything else. But let me urge Douglas toward caution at two points. If the Edwardsean tradition was "thriving at the height of Finney's career," we should specify what height we mean. If in the mid-1830s, during Finney's spectacular arrival in New York City, perhaps; but within a decade Horace Bushnell had captured center stage in New England Calvinism, and by 1865 (and the Burial Hill Declaration) Edwardseanism in its home was a negligible intellectual force outside marginal institutions like Bangor and Hartford theological schools, and its tide was fast receding around E.A. Park at Andover. Finney was living and active through the Civil War, and still had enough venom in him to ignite a brief nostalgic flurry over Masonry afterwards, but this means that the entire latter half of Finney's career was played out against an Edwardsean vacancy. Joseph Conforti has suggested that an Edwardsean "culture" persisted well into the 1880s, but this is not the same thing as a coherent and living system of ideas, and I don't think means to suggest that either.

Second, it might be helpful if I specified in just what ways I think Finney borrowed from both Edwardseanism and N.W. Taylor without that meaning that Edwardseanism was somehow living happily in Taylor's hands. I believe, as Douglas notes and Taylor's friends and enemies often claimed, that Taylor represented an unrepentant established Calvinism which looked on Edwardsean come-outerism as a threat to the New England religio-social order, and that he was sufficiently canny to pull the fangs of a weakening and enfeebled New Divinity melange that offered the arms of Esau but the voice of Jacob. It seems to me reasonably clear that the Finney of upstate New York revivals has taken his Edwardseanism fairly straight from the New Divinity source, albeit without any polish or sophistication which a theological education or a long rustification in a parish might have given him. I suspect that part of Finney's gentrification in Rochester and New York, not to say his self-transformation into a theologian in Oberlin, was imbibing Taylor, which as Douglas has been at pains to point out, contained quite a great deal of the verisimilitude of Edwardseanism, but (and here is where I part company with Douglas) without a great deal of real substance. Thus, Finney can be said to be a perfect example of precisely what Bennet Tyler and Asahel Nettleton prophesied would happen to unwary Edwardseans who had grown weary of the isolation and intensity of Emmons or Hopkins or Burton and who thought N.W. Taylor offered a more easily defensible Edwardseanism. I don't think that Douglas has ever explained why, if Taylor was so decent an Edwardsean and if Edwardseanism throve on Taylor's teachings, why Nettleton and Tyler were so furious against him.

Still, I could not agree more with Douglas's warnings against the supposed uniqueness of a Holiness/Pentecostal "paradigm," which already has all the makings of a smug "otherness" which allows it to disclaim all association with the supposed gloomy intellectualism of Reformed thinking. In this, Donald Dayton and others only neatly recapitulate their own contradictory intellectual trajectory.

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Douglas A. Sweeney is associate professor of Church History at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

[1] Among Allen Guelzo's key writings are: "An Heir or a Rebel? Charles Grandison Finney and the New England Theology," *Journal of the Early Republic* 17 (Spring 1997); "Oberlin Perfectionism and Its Edwardsean Origins, 1835-1870," in *Jonathan Edward's Writings: Text, Context and Interpretation*, ed. by Stephen J. Stein (Indiana University Press, 1996); *Edwards on the Will: A Century of American Theological Debate* (Middletown, Conn.: 1989); and "The Making of a Revivalist: Finney and the Heritage of Edwards," *Christian History* 7 (December 1988).

[2] Allen C. Guelzo, "An Heir or a Rebel?: Charles Grandison Finney and the New England," *Journal of the Early Republic* 17 (Spring 1997): 64.

[3] Ibid., 94.

[4] For an historiographical assessment of recent scholarship on Edwards, see my "Edwards and His Mantle; The Historiography of the New England Theology," *New England Quarterly* 71 (March 1998): 97-119.

[5] Douglas A. Sweeney, "Nathaniel William Taylor and the Edwardsean Tradition: Reassessment, in Stephen J. Stein, ed., *Jonathan Edward's Writings: Text, Context, Interpretation* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1996).

[6] For my argument, see "Nathaniel William Taylor and the Edwardsean Tradition: Evolution and Continuity in the Culture of New England Theology" (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1995). Actually, this is one of Guelzo's arguments that I find quite persuasive, so long as we recognize that Finney promoted a very jumbled version of Taylorite theology.

[7] Joseph Conforti, *Jonathan Edwards, Religious Tradition, & American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

[8] See *Christian Scholar's Review* 23 (September 1993) and my analysis of Dayton's paradigm in "The Essential Evangelicalism Dialectic: The Historiography of the Early Neo-Evangelical Movement and the Observer-Participant Dilemma," *Church History* 60 (March 1991): 70-84.

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