Is Your All on the Altar?  
The Quest for Wesleyan Perfection in Campus Revivals at Oberlin and Wheaton Colleges  

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INTRODUCTION

Now let me gain perfection's heights  
Now let me into nothing fall!  
Be less than nothing in my sight  
And feel that Christ is all in all.  

Charles Wesley, The Promise of Sanctification,  
London, England, January 27, 1767

On January 1, 1733, John Wesley delivered a sermon to parishioners and university students at Oxford’s St. Mary’s Church on the “circumcision of the heart” where he directly implied that Christians could be perfectly cleansed from sin and challenged his parishioners to be “perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect” (Wesley, 1767, p. 203). His sermon was delivered a year before he would land in Savannah, Georgia and most churchmen and scholars are aware of the impact that his ministry has had in the United States and around the world. What many do not realize, however, are the numerous ways his doctrine of Christian perfection was interpreted and spread throughout college campuses in New England, the Midwest and Upper South (Sprague, 1832). My focus in this paper is to trace aspects of Wesleyan “perfectionism” by examining revivals at two radical reformatory colleges in the Midwest where institutional leaders were well-known preachers, professors, abolitionists and political activists who embraced much of the Wesleyan doctrine on sanctification. I am referring to Charles Grandison Finney, second President of Oberlin College (and without doubt this country’s commanding revivalist of the mid-nineteenth century).

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and Jonathan Blanchard, the second President of both Knox and Wheaton Colleges in Illinois, professor, preacher, political activist and an infamous crusader against secret societies. Both men were heavily influenced by the Wesleyan-Holiness Movement and their campuses impacted in different ways by their interpretations of holiness and "perfection."

In 1994 I was asked by Don Dayton, an eminent Wesleyan scholar, to trace those Wesleyan-Holiness roots for a Pew-funded project entitled: Methodism and the Fragmentation of American Protestantism. The ensuing conference was held here at Asbury Seminary in the Fall of 1995 and, according to Garth Rosell, a church historian at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, I was the first researcher to write about the eight year existence of the Wheaton Seminary (1881-1889) that was sponsored and funded by the Wesleyan Church. That was not my only discovery. While perusing the Wheaton College archives, I came across a limited edition diary of the first recorded female of Wheaton College ordained by a main-line denomination (Baptist) on April 2, 1885. Rev. Frances Townsley was a traveling preacher to the western borders of the United States and an infrequent speaker at revival services at Wheaton College (Townsley, 1908). By the time I finished my year long search for those lost Wesleyan roots, I made some rather strong connections (not only to the Wesleyan church's influence on Wheaton College, but, more lastingly), to the doctrine of Christian perfection that pervaded the ethos and institutional sagas of both Oberlin and Wheaton Colleges (Gallien, 1995).

**Oberlin College**

As many historians have noted, Oberlin College was founded more as a Cause than a college (Zikmund, 1969). It began in 1833 in the northern frontier of Ohio by John Shipherd and a motley crew of New England Congregationalists seeking to establish a colony of believers whose lives centered on complete surrender to God's word and undergirded by strict behavioral, dietary and social guidelines. The First Congregational Church was founded at the same time as the college and campus activities were intertwined between Tappan Hall and the church. And, most, if not all, of the early professors and students attended this campus church where Finney preached on countless and memorable occasions (Fletcher, 1943).

The early causes of Oberlin College were not much different from the causes championed by the college at present: the continuing emancipation and commitment to full societal rights of African Americans and women. Oberlin was unique among liberal arts colleges in that their first college charter stated that the college would enroll both women and blacks—a first for any educational institution in the country. This came in direct defiance to societal norms and, at that time, regional laws that forbade the formal education of blacks and women. As a result, the college has retained a "radical" image and ethos since its founding. However, the "radical" agenda of the college took a slow and sure turn during the Progressive Era from a preoccupation with saving souls to a strong commitment to the Social Gospel. It is clear from any recent visit to the campus that the tokens of the college's strong evangelical commitment to personal salvation, revivals and Christian perfection have long been stored in the archives of Mudd Library or regulated to the religious artifacts in the extant First Congregational Church. But, what remains from the nineteenth century is the reputation Oberlin nourished as an institution that attracts bright, studiously-
committed and activist-oriented students. As an Oberlin proverb states: You can always tell an Oberlin graduate, but you can't tell her much. One only needs to read the accomplishments of Oberlin graduates in any of their alumni magazines in order to gain glimpses of their continuing commitments to social and political change. An Oberlin colleague of mine once proclaimed, “Our causes run deeper than our careers” (Barnard, 1969).

WHEATON COLLEGE

Wheaton College was first established as Illinois Institute in 1853 by a group of Wesleyan Methodists who had established themselves as a distinct denomination at Sixth Presbyterian Church in Cincinnati, Ohio where Jonathan Blanchard was a preacher in 1843. Like Oberlin, the Institute began with many of the same causes established by Oberlin twenty years previously: open admissions to blacks and women, anti-slavery, anti-masonry and strict behavioral codes for students. While it was never established like a Christian colony (since the town of Wheaton had preceded the college’s beginnings), it did maintain strong "town-gown" relationships among the former New Englanders that founded the village a few decades earlier (Bechtel, 1984). The College Church of Christ, which met in the first college building, contained most of the college’s professors and students and the resident preacher was also the College President. This established the three languages that members of the college still refer to today as the conjoined and conflicting language patterns of church, college and business. This all-encompassing community was reinforced by codes of behavior that exist to this day (Conversely, Oberlin’s contemporary code of behavior may be summed up in a word: tolerance).

By 1859 the institution was near-bankrupt and the reins of leadership were handed over by Charles Winship, an Oberlin graduate, to a proven Presidential leader, Jonathan Blanchard, who had recently fled Knox College after bitter rows with the founding Gale family and the “liberal” Presbyterian church in Galesburg, Illinois. Blanchard left Knox with a $100,000.00 endowment and a relatively new College Hall which was one of the locations for the Lincoln Douglas Debates years earlier. Blanchard had hoped that the near-by Congregational Churches in the Chicago area would sponsor the college as one of their own, since he had burned his bridges with the Presbyterians and, clearly, the Wesleyans were too poor to continue to financially sponsor the college. Eventually, Blanchard would lead the college to a permanent interdenominational future as would be Oberlin’s eventual path, since no one denomination could compete either with Blanchard’s or Finney’s egos or coalesce around their idiosyncratic political and social agendas (Kilby, 1959, Askew, 1969, Taylor, 1977).

Utilizing the same methods that Oberlin had established years ago, Wheaton College began attracting a very similar student body to Oberlin’s: a visionary, “martyr-ague” group of men and women who were fueled by the postmillennial vision of Finney and Blanchard’s “perfect state of society.” Thus, it was the quest for perfection that drove (and still drives) a perfectionist-oriented group of students at both institutions (K.Cumings, J.G. Haworth, O’Neill, 2001). If one examines the college’s alumni magazine, one would think one were reading from the same pages of its counterpart at Oberlin—a rarified group of committed graduates who are steeped in religious, political and social causes. The same is true for its current student body. The office of student affairs has over fifty student-run organizations
that reach out to diverse communities such as prison ministries and tutoring to the inner-city children in Chicago. As of equal importance is their relationship to God. While the college “pledge” no longer contains the exhaustive list of social restrictions it once had, there are just enough for students to have a challenging mental list of guidelines to govern their four years in residence. Coupled with careful admissions selection, or, admissions officers looking for a “fit”, the college tends to replicate the drive for perfection through mandatory chapel services, bible courses and countless extra-curricular spiritual activities. Taken together, these programs perpetuate an ethos of doctrinal and personal “purity” among its constituents. However, in the Progressive Era (as Timothy Smith and George Marsden have chronicled so well), the college became immersed in the fundamentals movement and rarely engaged the intellectual forces of the day (i.e. Darwin, Marx, Freud, biblical criticism) as it went decidedly “underground” in American higher education for decades (Dayton, 1976, Smith, 1980, Marsden, 1982).

DOCTRINE OF CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

In relationship to Wesley’s Doctrine of Christian Perfection, we have two intensely reform-oriented educational, social and religious communities that are ripe for Wesley’s call for entire sanctification. For the Oberlin community, the quest for Wesleyan perfection began during the revival in the Fall of 1836, when a student asked Asa Mahan, Oberlin College’s first President (with Charles Finney attending as a professor) if it were possible for a Christian to live a morally sanctified life. While Mahan declared, “yes”, he knew in his heart that he had not attained to such a spiritual state. After deliberating on Scripture and relying on prayerful guidance, Mahan concluded that a “second baptism” of the Holy Spirit was necessary for a believer to experience a life of full sanctity. At the time, Mahan did not realize that this crisis was very close to Wesleyan terminology of the “second blessing” (Madden and Hamilton, 1982). He began, with Finney, a three year examination of working his way through the covenant of holiness and the Wesleyan doctrine of perfection. Coincidentally enough Jonathan Blanchard, a Presbyterian minister at the time (and, a recent seminary graduate of Lane Seminary, a radical abolitionist institution that was filled with Oberlin graduates), spoke to the 1839 Commencement crowd of nearly a thousand on “A Perfect State of Society” where he outlined a postmillennial vision that challenged the graduates to perfect their lives and callings. Blanchard stayed on in Oberlin for two weeks and later declared:

The commencement seemed like one sweet and holy protracted meeting...they [graduates] exhibited an acquaintance with the languages, not a whit inferior to the corresponding classes in Middlebury College and Andover Theological Seminary, in both institutions I have been a student...what strikes a stranger most on visiting Oberlin, is the simplicity of their confidence in Christ and the singleness of their fear of God...it is that childlike trust in Christ...while I was there, seemed the pervading spirit of the place... (Blanchard, 1839).

As Roger Green explained, Finney’s later belief that Wesleyan sanctification, while experienced by the individual, had social ramifications (and this is where Blanchard could
extrapolate Wesleyan perfection with Finney): Only a holy people, whose moral character manifested itself in holy actions, could do a holy work. And that work demanded a reconstructed society (Green, 1993).

The idea that a completely sanctified community was needed to bring about the larger millennial society held enormous appeal for Finney and Blanchard. What Blanchard struggled with, however, was the idea that the second experience—promoted by Mahan and later Finney, of the baptism of the Holy Spirit—directly led to entire sanctification and the lessening of the will to sin in one’s life. Blanchard wrestled with this doctrine for the rest of his life to no definitive conclusion. However, his particular brand of “perfectionism” was rooted in social and political reforms coupled with strict behavioral standards, replacing the act of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, with a code of behavior as a visible measure of one’s commitment to holiness. The various political reforms were written into the church’s ordinances, so there could be no mistake regarding the political and social stands of the church, and thus, implicitly the college, since most were members of the College Church of Christ (Gallien, 1995).

**Early Campus Revivals at Oberlin College**

The really effective agency of religion in the life of the colleges was the revival, that almost unexplainable combination of confession, profession, joy and tears which brought many young college men into the ministry. Most college presidents and college faculties of this era felt that they—or God—had failed a collegiate generation if once during its four years in college there did not occur a rousing revival (Rudolph, 1962, p. 77-78).

Beginning with a strict behavioral code of discipline (and, in Finney’s colony, dietary guidelines as well), both men sought to mold collegiate reformers through a classical education, frequent revivals and a burning commitment to social and political reform. Revivals in the Wesleyan tradition were for the purposes of leading men and women into a closer walk and identification with Christ, either for the first time, or as a renewed public commitment away from a life of sin into Christian perfection through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Finney stated in his *Memoirs* that he “had known considerable of the view of sanctification entertained by our Methodist brethren” (Rosell and DuPuis, 1989, p. 391). As Dupuis writes:

The development of holiness at Oberlin was just part of a much wider perfectionist movement that emerged out of the New Measures revivals of the 1830’s, which eventually largely gathered round John Humphrey Noyes. One of the earliest people to come out as a perfectionist in New York in about 1828, was James Latourette, who had been a Methodist…Finney knew many of these people and had met Noyes himself (DuPuis, 2002).

The 1836 Oberlin Revival was led by Asa Mahan and Charles Finney. While Mahan preached, Finney actually took mental notes and later elaborated on Mahan’s address to the students in First Church and their reactions:
...I recollect the Holy Spirit fell upon the congregation in a most remarkable manner. A large number of persons dropped down their heads, and some of them groaned so that they could be heard all over the house. It cut up the false hopes of deceived professors on every side. Several of them arose on the spot, and said that they had been deceived, and that they could see wherein; and this was carried to such an extent as greatly astonished me, and indeed produced a general feeling of astonishment... However, it was reality, and very plainly a revelation of the state of the heart of the people made by the Spirit of God. The work went on with power; and old professors either obtained a new hope or were reconverted in such numbers, that a very great and important change came over the whole community. (Rosell and DuPuis, 1989, pp. 407-408).

Both Finney and Blanchard viewed revival as a personal and corporate commitment to action and the Oberlin community was set on fire with political activism as a result of the revival. The colony attacked not only slavery but racism in the state of Ohio as they condemned unjust laws against black citizens. Community leaders denounced male exploitation of women and their exclusion from the ministry and formal education. They also lobbied against unnecessary foreign wars and invasions for nationalistic purposes. And, Finney was especially insistent on stopping land speculation that so many Mid-western farmers were engaged (Smith, 1978).

It was during this era that a student exclaimed: "if you threw a rock in any direction of Oberlin's campus, you would hit a prayer meeting." (Crunden, 1982). The search for perfection was not limited to the church; it was also demanded in the classroom. As Garth Rosell points out:

...Finney's classes were enormously demanding. The expectations which he placed upon his students were heavy. "Do not suppose that you can run about without study or reflection during the week—that you can engage in light reading and frivolous conversation, and for any length of time, interest your people on the Sabbath. You must be deeply studious men. You must think much, think correctly, and see that you are master of every subject, before you present it to your people (Rosell, p. 64).

Not all students were enthralled by the perfectionist environment that Finney engendered. While I was doing research in Special Collections, I uncovered a letter from a Wheaton, Illinois townsperson named Lemira Langille, an Oberlin graduate, where she reminisced about her college days at Oberlin. In one paragraph regarding Finney she wrote:

...One windy day I was passing the house of President Finney, he was in the front yard. Just then my veil (which she was wearing to shield her face from the sun) blew up exposing my face. He called out "Sinners hide their faces!" It was a long time before I forgave him for that impertinence (Langille, 1933).

These revivals, however, fueled the drive for perfection in ALL areas of life that led Finney, Blanchard and their students to nervous and physical exhaustion, (not to mention
the exhaustion of Finney's three wives!). In this regard, Wheaton College and her president mirrored the same revival methods and personal characteristics of Finney and the Oberlin community (Sweet, 1983).

**Wheaton College Revival—Early Years**

While neither the commanding revivalist as Finney, nor the convinced second-baptized "perfectionist" as Mahan, Jonathan Blanchard, nevertheless, followed similar patterns of revival from Oberlin College. During his first years in office, Blanchard personally led spiritual revivals during each academic year. It must be remembered that neither Wheaton nor Oberlin insisted that admission to the college be tied into a student's profession of faith. So, it was always assumed that there were a certain number of students who did not possess a personal faith in Christ. Revival, then, was also another method of evangelization and if the Presidents were fortunate, students would also commit to "Christ as Lord" of their lives and thus move towards, as Blanchard stated, "holiness". After Blanchard's several physical break-downs (the first one in 1867 necessitated, under doctor's orders, a prolonged trip out west with his eldest son and eventual Presidential successor, Charles Albert), Blanchard made it a point to invite Wesleyan-Holiness evangelists and speakers to hold student revival meetings. One of the more memorable ones was held by a former Wheaton student, Frances Townsley, who received Blanchard's total support for her eventual ordination to the ministry (Kilby, 1959).

By 1866 Wheaton sponsored a week of prayer that had been propagated earlier by religious institutions across the state of Illinois and almost every church-sponsored college held these weeks of prayer at the beginning of their academic years. Blanchard also had professors at the college lead such meetings:

This gracious work is of a quiet, permanent character, and it is more interesting since it is carried on without the leadership of a pastor or evangelist, the professors of the College and other members of the church conducting all the meetings as well as the Sabbath services (Blanchard, 1879).

There was also a noticeable tie to the College Church, which would be surprisingly revisited in the Revival of 1995.

As an outgrowth of these revivals, Wheaton Seminary began in 1881 by one of the college's first graduates, L.N. Stratton, an influential Wheaton College Board Member, Wesleyan preacher and the editor of the American Wesleyan and President of the Wesleyan Educational Society. At least one-third of the seminary students were women who were committed to political and social activism as was evident in their graduation orations. Many centered their speeches on women's rights, women's suffrage, and, women's sphere of influence in the church. When the seminary had to close in eight years due to financial hardships and the "collapse" of L.N. Stratton, three women alumnae had been ordained in main-line denominations (Gallien, 1995).

The revival patterns at both colleges were very similar: 1) The college administration sponsored the initial gathering; 2) It was led by members of the college and/or church staffs; 3) It began with conversions; and, afterwards; 4) led to confession, repentance and
forgiveness—all done in an open and public environment in church buildings that were similarly designed after Finney’s Broadway Tabernacle in New York City. This oval design effect was dramatic, especially in regards to revival meetings, as any speaker from the pulpit could clearly see each member of the congregation.

A kindred spirit to Finney’s fiery style, Blanchard was not universally admired as a revivalist:

…I don’t like Dr. Blanchard’s preaching. He is very rigid and unyielding in his teachings, and inclined to press and coerce by fulminating the terror of the law, those whose belief differs from his own. He is at the opposite extreme from liberal Christianity as represented by Beecher… I don’t like to hear a man declare himself authoritative and send to Hell all who differ from him. The iron bedstead is an instrument of the past… (Maas, 1996, p. 37).

As the Progressive Era neared, revivals in the Wesleyan Holiness tradition at Wheaton and Oberlin waned and were replaced by chapel speakers who emphasized “spiritual renewal”. As Oberlin continued its turn towards Social Gospel issues and farther away from evangelicalism, the religious tone and tenor differed sharply from Wheaton’s. Concurrently, as Wheaton grew in number and denominational diversity (and developed more rigorous academic standards), the college’s revivals evolved into more inclusive events with titles like Spiritual Emphasis Week. The era of revivals lasting for unabated days were numbered and from 1945-1995, the College sponsored no revivals of any significance.

The closest assemblages that Oberlin could rally around in the twentieth century (that could be compared to revivals at Wheaton) were the numerous student demonstrations, sit-ins and teach-ins that were part and parcel of the Civil Rights/Vietnam/Women’s Rights Era of the Sixties and Seventies in “protest-friendly” college and university communities. Indeed, if one would throw a rock in any direction in that era on campus, one may well have hit one of those assemblies. Oberlin is proud of their continuing heritage of societal and political activism that was born in the Finney era and the college can be counted on as a “safe” harbor for dissent and dissenter (Blodgett, 1972).

REVIVAL IN A POSTMODERN CONTEXT: THE 1995 WHEATON REVIVAL

On March 19, 1995, World Christian Fellowship, a student organization that meets every Sunday night on the campus of Wheaton College to sing, pray and hear a speaker with an emphasis on global evangelization, experienced a Wesleyan revival for four consecutive days and nights. Students from Howard Payne University were the featured guests on that Sunday night. A WCF student leader, Matt Yarrington, introduced them as students who had recently experienced an outpouring of God’s grace several weeks ago. After the students testified to their experiences in Pierce Chapel, (the building where the last revival of 1950 had taken place), microphones had been set-up on either side of the aisles in order for students to ask questions of the Howard Payne students. Those two student representatives from each addressed final words to the 800-900 students in attendance. One young lady stated: “I don’t know what Wheaton wants or needs. I have no idea what God is doing here, but I do pray that you all can experience the tremendous
blessing we received at Howard Payne.” After she finished, her male counterpart spoke about his experience of confession, reconciliation with God, inner peace from the Holy Spirit and a sense of heightened relationship with his fellow students. He prayed that Wheaton students would receive the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. With open microphones awaiting them, students came one by one to confess sins that ranged from pride to sexual deviation. Some students formed prayer groups, others left to tell others what was happening at Pierce and the revival began to “take hold” (Beougher and Dorsett, 1995, pp. 75-83).

I was a professor at Wheaton at the time and I remember clearly hearing of the revival the next morning. I made no attempt to go over to the old chapel as I did not want to hear some of the more horrific confessions, especially by students who could have been in my classes. The revival went on until Thursday night and by then I felt I had to experience the “wrap-up” session. The interesting historical footnote to the four day event was that the crowds became so large that they had to ask permission to hold the event in the neighboring, newly-constructed chapel of the historic College Church. Ironically, the design of the chapel closely resembled both Broadway Tabernacle in New York City and First Congregational Church in Oberlin, Ohio, both edifices inspired by Finney’s “New Measures” of revival and evangelism. The oval sanctuary was a perfect location to end the revival as all eyes were riveted to the platform and the music and confessions taking place there. To me, the last night was a page out of a traditional Wesleyan-inspired revival with a lot of singing and testifying.

The ensuing discussions on campus became the greatest source of controversy regarding the event. It became clear to me that there were multiple interpretations of what students and professors thought transpired. While the Wesleyan-Holiness theme and involvement of professors and students who were from those or other Pentecostal traditions held a dominant hermeneutical perspective, many students from different denominational groups held very different views on the meaning of revival and the “role” of the Holy Spirit. My personal, anecdotal synopsis from some of those classroom (and out of class) discussions and analyses are: 1) For most Baptists and Methodists, the revival coincided with the springtime, a season that is historically synonymous with their respective denominational revivals. Students from the South were especially comfortable with the events. 2) Pentecostal/Charismatic groups were pleased that a revival had manifested itself on campus, but, there was no direct evidence of student’s receiving the supernatural gifts of the Spirit; neither did any of the platform leaders display such gifts. Therefore, the revival did not go far enough. 3) The most amusing evaluation came from a Reformed student who stated that the revival was a result of a collective nervous breakdown among type-A students who long ago needed some emotional release. Revivals need not be normative for a Reformed Christian. 4) Sacramentalists asked: What is a revival? 5) Anabaptists replied that only people who were steeped in a wicked world would need reviving. 6) For the vast majority of those who were not directly involved in the revival, or, those who were from non-denominational backgrounds, there response was one of “let’s wait and see” which was, by far, the majority view of most students at Wheaton College, including its President.

The aftermath was clearly a turning point in Wheaton’s history of revivals. The fact that many were not sure if it was Spirit-led or Man-contrived, led to some interesting discus-
visions regarding the face and nature of revival in the twentieth century. Indeed, one student was so upset that he talked a senior administrative official into allowing him to address the faculty at our next meeting. The ensuing meeting was a particularly embarrassing event as the student upbraided the faculty on our lack of support for the revival and even called into question our spiritual commitments. Since many faculty members held the same conflicted views as previously described by students, it would have been close to impossible for professors to view the events any differently from their student counterparts.

The students who participated in the revival were very clear about its significance in their lives. The most ubiquitous comment I heard was the sense of relief they felt in unloading their “closeted” sins. Many of them felt as though they were living in an environment that would quarter no public confession of sin or wrongdoing, thus, they would have to either wear a façade or go “underground” in some of their activities that were considered neither spiritual, Christian oriented or those antithetical to the campus behavioral codes. This was not a new dilemma for a college that was born into an era of Wesleyan-Holiness revivalism. The quest for perfection in every area of their lives was demanded by the first President, professors, evangelists and students themselves and had been passed down to five generations of Wheaton students. Thus, for many of the participants, the revival represented a legitimately Christian form of public confession accompanied by relief that their lives, for at least one night, could be perfectly clean.

References
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