Christian Perfectionism and American Idealism 1820-1900

by Timothy L. Smith

In keeping with one of the principle strains of nineteenth century American thought prominent at Oberlin College, the so-called “common sense” philosophy of Scottish realism, I wish in this paper to take a common-sense approach both to the doctrine of Christian perfection and to American idealism. Both seem to me more pragmatic and earthy than Perry Miller’s phrase, “the idea of the sublime” suggests, and more spiritual than William McLoughlin’s sketch of Charles G. Finney’s idea of natural ability.¹

A common-sense analysis requires a determined effort to deal with nineteenth century preachers on their own terms. We must resist the temptation to bend what they did and said to make them seem more relevant than they actually were to issues now current in popular religious culture. By no stretch of reasoning or evidence can I make either nineteenth century Methodist perfectionists or the Oberlin theologians Finney and Asa Mahan answer to the quests of Zen or other forms of oriental spirituality. None of them offer aid or comfort to the modern charismatic movement, even though they all adopted in one usage or another the Biblical terminology celebrating the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Nor does the history of radical Wesleyanism in nineteenth century America sustain those critics who assume the flight of modern Christians into pietistic mysticism, or of the youthful revolutionaries of the 1960’s into transcendental meditation, is the cop-out from social responsibility which they suppose the search for union with God inevitably produces.

Finney’s generation of perfectionists embraced the idea that the Spirit of the Lord was at work in the world because they believed the Christian millennium, the kingdom of God on earth, was to begin in the

Dr. Smith is Professor of History at Johns Hopkins University where he is responsible for a doctoral program in American Religious History. He is author of Revivalism and Social Reform on the Eve of the Civil War.
hallowing of America. Such a reign of God's justice, peace, and love required the sanctification of individuals. They nurtured the hope for its emergence in the Biblical promise that the faithful would receive power in the last days — power both to escape personal sin and to conquer social evil. Like the Unitarians William Ellery Channing and Andrew S. Norton, the Christian perfectionists affirmed that the ethical renewal of persons was indispensable to social righteousness; but in their eyes, that renewal depended not only on the human will's response to Biblical truth but on the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

A point which should be obvious to historians, but hasn't been, requires laboring: although the nineteenth was the most future-conscious of all centuries, and American culture, of all cultures, the major conceptions of faith and duty which men and women argued about were rooted in the past which had nurtured them. The future which they dreamed of never came. Its outlines, in their dreams, stemmed from memories of the past, memories which they charged up, reordered, and thrust forward in what proved a vain hope of controlling their tomorrows. Charles G. Finney and Methodist Bishop Matthew Simpson did not foresee anything like the real future of *homo Americanus* in the twentieth century. The violence, the welter of class and ethnic and occupational and psychic commitments dividing urban peoples, the secularism, and the despair — especially the despair — would have been even more confusing to their dreams than they have been to the conscious experiences of us who are not dreaming at all, but suffering them.

The primary role of the nineteenth century perfectionists was not to underwrite the future but to pay the psychic and intellectual debts of their past. The ground of their thought was either Hopkindsian Calvinism, Wesleyan evangelicalism or continental pietism, not Hegelian idealism or Transcendentalism. Their internal controversies revolved around the definition of the Biblical law of holiness which Christians must obey, the extent to which natural ability or a "gracious" ability which God bestowed was the source of their power to obey it, and the way in which the Holy Spirit worked through faith in Christ to hallow both individual lives and the believing community.

Moreover, the general mood in which they discussed these issues was the immense social optimism which was typical of the nineteenth century and quite untypical of the twentieth. A grand view of both the American and the Christian future began pervading American popular
Christian Perfectionism and American Idealism
culture during the revolutionary era. During the two decades following
the end of the War of 1812, both political and religious expectation
flowered luxuriantly. In the 1830’s its “secular” expressions were de-
mocracy and manifest destiny. Its religious basis was millennialism. Christian perfectionism broke out of what had been primarily Method-
ist structures and inspired a widespread search for that personal and
social holiness which promised to usher in Christ’s rule on earth, and a
thousand years of peace. Those who believed that search was realistic
forged an ideology which dominated American Protestantism until the
end of the century.

The following paragraphs amount, in part, therefore, to a restate-
ment and elaboration of the general argument I made long ago, that
their several presentations of a doctrine of Christian holiness was the
crucial point at which the Oberlin theologians and the Methodist per-
fectionists diverged from the radical puritan and pietist traditions which
had until that era dominated American religious life. This fact seems
plain to me from Finney’s account of the nature of the opposition
which he and Mahan endured in their early years at Oberlin. The do-
ctrines of natural ability and the simplicity of moral action, which Wil-
liam McLoughlin recently and President James H. Fairchild long ago
declared were the central points at issue, were in fact secondary. They
would have meant little to nineteenth century Oberlin had they not reflected the fundamental controversy over the doctrine of sanctification. What sets this essay in a new direction is my growing
awareness that the combination of the millennial with the American
dream was the prime catalyst of the perfectionist awakening and a
central theme of the controversies it provoked.

Methodist interest in the teaching and experience of what Wesley
had called “perfect love” picked up around 1820, particularly in New
York and New England. In 1819. a “select company” of Methodists in
New York City decided to form small bands and organize prayer
meetings “composed only of such as have experienced the blessing of
perfect love, or those truly awakened to feel the necessity of it and
who are steadily seeking for clean hearts.” Interest spread rapidly
throughout the city. When one enthusiastic group withdrew from the de-
nomination and built their own house of worship, those in charge of
the prayer meetings arranged for the publication of Wesley’s Plain Ac-
count of Christian Perfection and distributed it free to every Methodist
class leader in the area. The pioneer of this awakening, N. C. Hart, a
businessman, later went bankrupt and, in a pattern now familiar, ended
his life conducting a house of refuge for juvenile delinquents. A little earlier, Timothy Merritt became an influential exponent of entire sanctification, especially at Methodist camp meetings in New York and New England. In 1819, Wilbur Fisk, later president of Wesleyan University, entered upon a remarkable experience of what Wesley had called "perfect love" at the Wellfleet camp meeting, Cape Cod, after listening to Merritt preach. From that point on, Fisk proclaimed steadily the doctrine of Christian holiness and professed to experience it. In 1824, George Peck, who by 1842 was Methodism's most prominent editor, preached on the experience of sanctification at the first quarterly meeting at which he served as presiding elder, and thereafter went from camp meeting to camp meeting seeking this "second blessing" until he was satisfied he had found it.

Meanwhile, Charles G. Finney's direct and powerful preaching that men and women were able and responsible to obey God's commands had set the towns of New York state afame with revivals and quickened hopes for an early onset of the millennium. In 1832, Finney settled in a pastorate in New York City, first at the Chatham Street Chapel and then at the Broadway Tabernacle. At that point, he became deeply interested in the idea of Christian perfection. He examined briefly but laid aside the teachings of the Methodists on the subject, he tells us in his autobiography written forty years later, chiefly because "their idea of sanctification seemed . . . . to relate almost altogether to states of the sensibility." Two of the Lectures to Professing Christians which Finney delivered at the Broadway Tabernacle in 1835 and 1836 reflected his own search for holiness. In them, he defined what in his view perfection is — absolute obedience to the law of God — and declared it attainable in this life. He was moved to restraint on the subject, however, by the widespread publicity surrounding an outburst of what was alleged to be antinomian perfectionism at New Haven and Albany. This movement eventuated in John Humphrey Noyes' establishment of the Oneida community. Nevertheless, during his last winter in New York, Finney wrote, "the Lord was pleased to visit my soul with a great refreshing . . . . Sometimes, for a considerable period, I could not refrain from loud weeping in view of my own sins, and of the love of God in Christ." The result, he continued, was a "great renewal of my spiritual strength, and enlargement of my views in regard to the privileges of Christians, and the abundance of the grace of God." Clearly, the evangelist's personal needs were breaking through the stern resistance to emotional excess which he thought had characterized his life and preaching; but he was not yet a perfectionist.
Christian Perfectionism and American Idealism

During these same years, Sara Lankford organized for Methodist women in New York a Tuesday afternoon meeting for the promotion of holiness. Her sister, Phoebe Palmer, the wife of a homeopathic physician in the city, soon professed the experience of perfect love and the meetings, moved to her home, began to attract the attention of many who were not Methodists. After Thomas C. Upham, Professor of Philosophy at Congregationalist Bowdoin College, in Maine, professed "the blessing" there in 1839, the two sisters opened the gathering to men. Upham spent the rest of his life writing books on Christian perfection, using terms and concepts drawn from the Catholic mystics. Methodist leaders warmly received them, although Mrs. Palmer became increasingly wary. Widespread discussion of these events, especially in Merritt's new monthly, The Guide to Holiness and the publication of scores of Mrs. Palmer's articles on the subject in The New York Christian Advocate was going on during the years between 1838 and 1843, just when criticism of Finney and Mahan, and the new college at Oberlin, focused sharply upon the pursuit of Christian holiness there.16

The idea of sanctification thus became a central preoccupation of American religious thought, and remained so almost to the end of the century. The public discussion of it in the two decades after 1840 sheds much light upon the nature of popular idealism in American culture. I wish to discuss three issues which a recent re-reading of the literature prompted me to conclude were crucial in that discussion: (1) the nature of the law of righteousness which Christians are expected to obey in order to fulfill the commands of the Gospel; (2) the extent to which emphasis upon divine agency in the Christian's experience of sanctification ran counter to the stress upon the free exercise of the human will which was dominant in both theology and evangelistic preaching during the century; and (3) the question whether stressing the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification diminished or contradicted rational and Biblical approaches to ethics and experience.

Finney's dominant position in the arguments over Christian perfection helped to make the first question, that of moral law, central. His preaching, always fiercely logical, championed an exalted view of man's duty, even though from the point of view of the party of conservatives who were called Consistent Calvinists he had long since departed from any proper doctrine of God's sovereignty. In his early writings on the subject of personal holiness, both before and after he began spending most of each year at Oberlin, Finney urged that Christians must obey the moral law of God in all of its rigor. Anything less
The Asbury Seminarian

contradicted the plain sense of Scripture and undermined the foundation of God’s moral government. Princeton theologians who opposed him took his declaration at face value, but denied the attainableness of any such perfect obedience. Christians remained sinners, saved by grace. 17 Both Finney and President Asa T. Mahan soon explained that God’s “absolute” law was suited to the human condition. The past experience of the race in disobedience, one’s own immaturity, or the consequences of the believer’s past sins as well as the sins of others made it unreasonable of the heavenly Father to require perfect obedience beyond what each person’s circumstances and understanding allowed. In reply, the Presbyterian Synod of Genesee and Princeton Professor W. D. Snodgrass then accused Finney and Mahan of “letting down the law of God,” and scorned the whole notion of perfection. Professor Leonard Woods of Andover, the major congregationalist theological seminary, also criticized them, but on different grounds. He agreed that the law of God was suited to the human condition, but denied that anyone could attain a state of perfect obedience to it in this present life. 18

Methodist theologians seemed somewhat bemused by all this, in part because from the beginning John Wesley had taught his preachers to distinguish between the Mosaic covenant of works and the Christian covenant of grace. Before the rigors of the law which the Old Covenant required, all human beings had been and were sinners. But the covenant of grace was fulfilled [as in fact both Moses and Jesus had declared] in “loving God with all the heart, mind, soul, and strength.” 19 For Wesley, the experience of such love was, like forgiveness, the work of God’s grace—a work so thorough that “no wrong temper, none contrary to love, remains in the soul,” and so powerful that “all the thoughts, words, and actions” were thereafter governed by “pure love.” This experience, which Wesley said was properly called “entire sanctification,” did not, however, imply freedom from mistakes, errors of judgment, and involuntary transgressions of the laws of God, whether known or unknown. He declared that such human imperfections would never be overcome as long as a sanctified soul inhabited a mortal body. The Atonement of Christ, however, freed the believer from the penalty of damnation which such involuntary transgressions of God’s perfect law otherwise merited. 20

Both Wesley and his trusted colleague John Fletcher had explained that because of the Atonement, Christians would not be judged by what Fletcher called the “Christless law of innocence and paradaisical perfection” but by “the law of Christ,” which is, like Jesus—“full of grace and truth.” 21 To Wesley and to his followers who kept the
Christian Perfectionism and American Idealism

Methodist conscience in nineteenth century America — George Peck, Wilbur Fisk, Nathan Bangs, Phoebe Palmer, Gilbert Haven, John C. McClintock and Matthew Simpson — any lessening of the demands of God’s perfect law would diminish the continual dependence of Christians who professed “entire sanctification” upon the Atonement of Christ, and make it inconsistent for them to pray with all their brethren, “forgive us our trespasses.” On the contrary, Wesley wrote in his Plain Account of Christian Perfection,

None feel the need of Christ like these; none so entirely depend upon him. For Christ does not give life to the soul separate from, but in and with himself . . . . We have this grace, not only from Christ, but in him. For our perfection is not like that of a tree, which flourishes by the sap derived from its own root, but . . . . like that of a branch which, united to the vine, bears fruit, but severed from it, is dried up and withered . . . . The best of men still need Christ in his priestly office to atone for their omissions, their shortcomings, . . . their mistakes in judgment and practice, and their defects of various kinds. For these are all deviations from the perfect law, and consequently need an atonement . . . . Now, mistakes, and whatever infirmities necessarily flow from the corruptible state of the body, are no way contrary to love; none, therefore, [is] in the scripture sense, sin.21

Steeped in such doctrines, Wesley’s followers in America found it strange that Finney and the Old School conservatives should have quarreled over how to preserve the rigor of the perfect law. And George Peck declared it “grossly absurd” that Finney should have insisted in 1842 that to love God perfectly one must be willing to be damned for his glory. Christ had redeemed men from the curse of the old law, Peck believed, satisfying its claims in his crucified body, and graciously enabling those wholly consecrated to him to keep his new law of love.23

What does this broad preoccupation with divine law among those who were the most innovative and popular nineteenth century religious reformers signify? I think it represented a continuation of that essentially moralistic argument among the founding fathers over how to keep the unrestrained passions of the common people from destroying the order and security necessary to a republican commonwealth. The
profound concern for virtue the founding fathers had bequeathed to the new nation was no mere exercise in social control, but an effort to deal with the central problem of self-governing democracy: maximizing self-control. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the leaders of the evangelical revivals were fully committed to the democratic experiment in government, and believed themselves responsible to promote a parallel democratization of Christian Faith and order in this country. Free will and free grace were their watchwords. Neither the political nor the religious outcomes of these doctrines could in their view be hopeful unless law — moral law rooted in the teachings of the Old and New Testaments — could be internalized in the personal and corporate experience of Christians.24

Little wonder that Charles G. Finney, famous for his pulpit logic, should have year by year enlarged his sense of the significance of his own training to be an attorney. And little wonder that the response to his preaching in 1842 by the members of the legal profession in Rochester should have been the basis of his astonishing impact on the business and professional elite of that city. The evangelist’s preoccupation with the nature and moral basis of law in a democratic society mirrored theirs. When he made law and gospel somehow one, his preaching seemed the answer not only to their desire for order, justice, and liberty, but to the nation’s as well.25

For the hundreds of pastors who shared with Mahan, Finney and the Methodists the growing consensus on the attainability of Christian holiness, a second pervasive issue was the nature and extent of divine intervention necessary for an individual believer, or a company of believers, to reach this state of inward or “perfect” obedience to God’s law. Did their eventually unanimous stress on God’s agency in sanctification contradict, or complement, the idea of free will?

Although clear differences in the form of doctrinal statements of this point appeared — those on the Oberlin side stressing natural ability and on the Methodist, atoning grace — contemporaries were never sure that the meanings of the formulas were as divergent as the words.26 Moreover, on all sides, individual preachers followed the light of their own experience and altered the views which once had distinguished them from others. In these discussions, the way in which believers exercised faith when seeking Christian perfection, and the role of what came to be called the Baptism of the Holy Spirit in rewarding that search, were at first thoroughly confused. By the close of the Civil War, however, conflicting views were remarkably harmonized, though on a level of moral expectation almost incredible to modern minds.
Before Finney accepted his professorship at Oberlin, he and a few of the New School Presbyterian and Congregationalist preachers who accepted his brand of revivalistic Calvinism had insisted that sinners could and must choose to serve the Lord, and that it was nonsense to suppose that the Fall had deprived them of the ability to do what God’s command required. “Wash you, make you clean,” Finney cried, quoting the New Testament where it quoted the Old; “make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit”; “cleanse yourself from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit.” If God had called men to repent and be holy, common sense argued that they were able to obey. Not only New England’s Consistent Calvinists but many whose views had been moderated by their participation in the mounting revival movement drew back from this position. The conservatives called it heretical in two particulars: it denied total depravity and lessened the Christian’s practical dependence upon divine grace.

Once at Oberlin, both Finney and Mahan replied to these criticisms directly. Mahan affirmed, in the volume he published in 1842 entitled *Scripture Doctrine of Christian Perfection*, that all of God’s commands “are based upon the provisions of divine grace.” The sinner is able to obey them because he has come to understand the good news that the blood of Jesus Christ “cleanseth all from sin.” He therefore “purifies himself by obeying the truth through the Spirit.” Later on in the same volume, Mahan declared:

> I have forever given up all idea of resisting temptation, subduing any lust, appetite, or propensity or of acceptably performing any service for Christ, by the mere force of my own resolutions. If my propensities, which lead to sin, are crucified, I know that it must be done by an in-dwelling Christ. If I overcome the world, this is to be the victory, “even our faith.” If the great enemy is to be overcome, it is to be done “by the blood of the lamb.”

Methodist theologian George Peck found these statements a satisfyingly clear declaration of “entire dependence on divine influence for the efficiency in the great work of sanctification.”

Finney, however, determined at first to stick by his position on “natural ability,” and, in fact, to unite the doctrine of Christian perfection to it. Writing in *The Oberlin Evangelist*, he declared “the atonement and divine influence were not necessary to make men able to do their duty, but to induce in them a willingness to do it.” What he called a “divine moral suasion,” was at work “exerting influence over
mind by and through the presentation of truths to the mind.” He scorned those who charged that confining God’s role to that of persuasion was “to deny the divine agency altogether.” Finney had long held to the essential features of what one of the students at Oberlin had advanced as the doctrine of “the simplicity of moral action.” Following this doctrine, he affirmed in theory, at least, that to become a Christian at all was to make a complete response to God, to be wholly consecrated to his will and, hence, both in will and fact to live in perfect conformity to the moral law. Since Finney interpreted that moral law to include the doctrine of “disinterested benevolence,” which required one to be willing to be damned for the glory of a just and loving God, the burden he laid upon the believer’s will was immense.

Methodists, as we have seen, rejected the notion that man’s hope for salvation rested on obedience to such a “Christless” view of God’s absolute moral law. And they thought it an outrageous judgment upon all those who were seeking holiness to declare that a person was not a Christian at all unless he were a perfectly sanctified one. They believed that sinners overwhelmed with guilt and seeking to repent of their evil thoughts and deeds were simply unable, until after their conversion and experience of a new life in Christ, to make the whole consecration to God’s will which they agreed the Bible required. The Methodists insisted, then, on the doctrine of “gracious ability.” Through Christ’s Atonement, God had granted all men and women the ability to respond to his love, confess their sins, and be saved. This experience of grace, this warming of their hearts by loving assurance, prompted them to seek and enabled them to believe God’s promise that their hearts might be made perfect in love.

Despite his formal assertions, however, Finney remained a seeker after entire sanctification, if his Memoirs written three decades later are indeed a trustworthy account of those years. The first awakening of Christian perfectionism at Oberlin in 1837, he recalled, had begun when, during a revival, President Mahan asked Finney to comment on the former’s sermon. Finney rose to press upon the congregation the distinction between desire and will. Wishing had no merit; they must choose. “When this distinction was made clear,” he wrote, “I recollect the Holy Spirit fell upon the congregation in a most remarkable manner . . . . It cut up the false hopes of deceived professors on every side. Several arose on the spot, and said that they had been deceived, and that they could see wherein.” As a result, Finney said, “a very grave and important change came over the whole community. President
Mahan . . . came manifestly into an entirely new form of Christian experience at that time.” A few days afterward, when one of the students arose to ask “whether the gospel did not provide for Christians, all the conditions of an established faith, and hope, and love, . . . in short, whether sanctification was not attainable in this life; that is, sanctification in such a sense that Christians can have unbroken peace, and not come into condemnation, or have the feeling of condemnation, or a consciousness of sin,” Mahan immediately answered, “Yes.” Finney did not, however, indicate in his Memoirs that he had himself at that time professed such a state of grace. His writings of the next two or three years, which linked sanctification with true conversion through the doctrine of the simplicity of moral action, argue strongly that he did not then think out clearly the question whether Mahan had experienced what Methodists would have called “a second work of grace.”

Finney could hardly be the one to say, however, that President Mahan had not been truly converted before that event.

Against this confusing background we must place Finney’s account of his own experience during the winter of 1843-44 while preaching at Marlborough Chapel, in Boston. This newly-organized Congregationalist group was “composed greatly of radicals,” as he put it, most of them holding “extreme views” on such subjects as non-violence, women’s rights, or anti-slavery. “During this winter,” Finney wrote, “the Lord gave my own soul a very thorough overhauling, and a fresh baptism of His Spirit.” He had always felt “greatly drawn out in prayer” when preaching in Boston, but during this winter, he declared, “my mind was exceedingly exercised on the question of personal holiness.” After many weeks of Bible reading and prayer during which he kept himself largely closeted away from visiting with individuals, Finney began asking “what if, after all this divine teaching, my will is not carried, and this teaching takes effect only in my sensibility? May it not be that my sensibility is affected, by these revelations from reading the Bible, and that my heart is not really subdued by them?” The issue was the same one he had raised at the revival in Oberlin in 1837: desire versus will, sentiment versus choice. During that winter in Boston, he continued, “I had a great struggle to consecrate myself to God, in a higher sense than I had ever before seen to be my duty, or conceived as possible.” In particular, he felt unable to give his wife up “unqualifiedly to the will of God.”

One memorable day, however, the evangelist found himself able, as he put it, “to fall back, in a deeper sense than I had ever done before,
upon the infinitely blessed and perfect will of God.” Then, in a classic case of consecration according to the terms of Hopkinsian Calvinism, Finney wrote, “I recollect, that I went so far as to say to the Lord, with all my heart, that He might do anything with me or mine, to which His blessed will could consent; that I had such perfect confidence in His goodness and love, as to believe that He could consent to do nothing, to which I could object,” including “the salvation or damnation of my own soul, as the will of God might decide.” Indeed, a part of his consecration was to give up his former assurance of salvation and to rest everything upon a “new foundation.” From that day forward he took it for granted that he would be saved, as he put it, “if I found that He kept me, and worked in me by His Spirit, and was preparing me for heaven, working holiness and eternal life in my soul.”

Looking back at this experience when writing his *Memoirs* thirty years later, Finney declared:

As the great excitement of that season subsided, and my mind became very calm, I saw more clearly the different steps of my Christian experience, and came to recognize the connection of all things, as all wrought by God from beginning to end. But since then I have never had those great struggles, and long protracted seasons of agonizing prayer, that I had often experienced. It is quite another thing to prevail with God, in my own experience, from what it was before. I can come to God with more calmness, because with more perfect confidence. He enables me now to rest in Him, and let everything sink into His perfect will, with much more readiness, than ever before the experience of that winter. I have felt since then a religious freedom, a religious buoyancy and delight in God, and in His word, a steadiness of faith, a Christian liberty and overflowing love, that I had only experienced, I may say, occasionally before . . . . Since then I have had the freedom of a child with a loving parent.

This testimony to the fruits of a second work of grace would have suited any Wesleyan. Certainly it was not couched in the terminology of natural ability or of obedience to God’s absolute moral law in which Finney’s theological statements had been, up to that time at least, composed. The full cooperation of man with God, a conjunction of divine and human agency, had become for him, as for the Methodist perfectionists, the way to peace and spiritual triumph.
Christian Perfectionism and American Idealism

Subsequently, Finney's preaching, like the later sermons of Asa Mahan which were summarized in the volume entitled, *The Baptism of the Holy Ghost*, seems frankly to have promoted a divinely wrought "second experience" of entire sanctification. In the winter of 1852, for example, Finney went with his second wife to conduct a revival in Syracuse. His reminiscences describe how a merchant's wife of great beauty and refinement who had heard of the doctrine of sanctification "became very much convicted for a deeper work of grace in her soul," and asked him "how she should obtain it." In response, Finney remembered, "I directed her attention especially to the necessity of a thorough and universal consecration of herself and of her all to Christ. I told her that when she had done this, she must believe for the sealing of the Holy Spirit." She got up and left hastily, he continued, and in the afternoon "she returned as full of the Holy Spirit, to all human appearance, as she could be . . . . She had made a full and complete resignation of herself and everything into the hands of Christ." 40

Although John Wesley had not ever referred to sanctification as a "baptism of the Spirit," nineteenth century Methodists did, especially after about 1842, and without apology for the innovation. The use of this term magnified divine agency, and constituted one part of a two-fold effort to help reluctant Methodists dare to believe that they should and could press on at once into the experience of perfect love. The other part, of which I have written elsewhere, was Phoebe Palmer's elaborate stress upon faith in the Atonement as the way to holiness. Both in her controversial "altar phraseology," in which the key phrase was, "the altar sanctifies the gift," and in her constant appeals to "the cleansing blood," she aimed to make dramatically persuasive Wesley and Fletcher's call to sanctification by faith — to an inward perfection in love which was at the hour of one's sanctification and at every subsequent moment dependent upon the grace of the crucified Lord. 41

George Peck, editor of the *New York Christian Advocate*, and Daniel Wise, who in 1852 became editor of the Boston Methodist weekly, *Zion's Herald*, employed the term "baptism of the Spirit" well before Phoebe Palmer began to do so, not only as a means of helping seekers trust God for "the blessing" but with theological purposes also in mind. In an early editorial, Wise asked whether sanctification resulted from "the mere effect of truth acting on the faculties" or "the direct influence of the Holy Spirit." His answer was that although truth might make Christians conscious of impurity and aware of the promise of holiness and of the means of its attainment, the work of heart cleansing
belongs to the Holy Spirit, the one who brings "Power from on high —
to purify their hearts." 42

In this and subsequent statements, Wise revealed the effects of con-
troversy in driving Methodist leaders to closer study of the New Testa-
ment. One result was increased reliance upon the language of the Bible, 
especially of the Gospel of John and the Book of Acts, to validate 
Methodist doctrine. The "Comforter" whom Jesus on the eve of his 
crucifixion had promised to his disciples seemed on any common-
sense reading of these Scriptures to be the same Holy Spirit whose bap-
tism the risen Lord urged them to await in Jerusalem. The Book of 
Acts seemed clearly to declare that baptism — received at Pentecost, re-
peated in the experiences of Samaritan and Ephesian converts, and 
urged upon believers in Paul's letters — to be the means by which the 
followers of Jesus became partakers of his holiness. It was God's way 
of writing his law on their hearts. All of this Asa Mahan seems to have 
seen in the early days of his experience of the Baptism of the Holy 
Spirit. 43

Certainly the growing use among both Methodists and Oberlin 
preachers of the terminology describing such experiences as a "bap-
tism of the Holy Spirit" departed from the previous confinement of 
that term to moments when a revival had broken out, or to some special 
manifestation of God's presence among a body of Christians. The pas-
tor who in 1834 proposed that a Pittsburgh presbytery launch "a ten 
days prayer meeting for a Pentecostal effusion of the Holy Spirit" 
was using the term in a sense by then traditional among revivalistic 
Calvinists. He was sure such an outpouring would bring to an end the 
"strife about doctrine" between Old and New School preachers. 44 
Baptist Henry Clay Fish, however, in a famous volume published in 
1854, called for a national awakening of the "primitive piety" of Pente-
cost — and made it personal. 45

The revival of 1857-58 set even Old School Presbyterians to talking 
about the Spirit's baptism, and made familiar among many denomina-
tions the use of the term to denote the experience by individual Chris-
tians of a divine gift of sanctifying grace. 46 In 1862, for example, the 
Protestant Episcopal Bishop of Ohio, Charles P. McIlvaine, urged upon 
his pastors the continual declaration of "Jesus in his grace to help, his 
righteousness to clothe, and his power to sanctify." He deplored ser-
mons which affirmed only "the strictness and holiness of the law" 
without also proclaiming the grace which enables men to obey it. 
The gospel establishes and honors the law, McIlvaine wrote, by "pro-
viding a deliverance [from sin] so complete that to the believer there is no condemnation." That deliverance came from "Christ the abiding Comforter," the sanctifier who destroys the carnal mind. For Christians to receive such a deliverance, he continued, pastors must teach "the power and office of the Holy Ghost, the Sanctifier, the Spirit of Christ, and all-comprehending Gift of God." At the height of the revival Frederic Dan Huntington forsook the Unitarian ministry and his professorship as preacher to Harvard’s Appleton Chapel to become an Episcopal pastor. The decision came after the fulfillment of his long quest for the experience of personal holiness, a quest to which Phoebe Palmer gave some aid. Huntington announced it in his sermon on "The Promise and Assurance of Sanctification." He declared that the "one strong and ruling desire" of many Christians is to be like their Lord, but they are uncertain and anxious about fulfilling it until they see and believe God’s promise that they may be sanctified now, through the "love-gift" of the Father to Christ’s disciples — a "personal comforter," the Holy Spirit, who comes to abide.

Faith in the promises of what Christians of all persuasions were certain was the word of God, therefore, and faith in the power of Christ’s sacrifice at Calvary to make these promises come true, was what Phoebe Palmer called The Way to Holiness. The Bible itself gave these nineteenth century idealists persuasive assurance that the Christlikeness for which they prayed could be realized through a personal baptism of the Holy Spirit.

What was the meaning of this long and many-sided argument over the relationship between divine and human agency? Why were the religious leaders of the nineteenth century so preoccupied with the doctrine of free will? A traditional explanation, that revival preachers had to weaken the doctrine of unconditional election in order to persuade sinners to repent and be converted, seems too narrow for the case. It will hardly account for Nathanial W. Taylor’s labored incorporation of the idea of free will into the Calvinist scheme of salvation he taught at Yale. Nor does it explain how a preacher at once so Biblical and ethical as William Ellery Channing should have been the leader of the Unitarian revolt against New England Calvinism. Finney’s radical appeals to human ability won their largest response from a generation teethed on Calvinistic preaching of total depravity and unconditional election. Methodists could hardly be expected to refrain from cheering, even while trying to instruct both Finney and the entire Christian community that the Bible taught gracious, not natural, ability.
The Asbury Seminarian

The impulse to evangelical Arminianism seems to me to have reflected the broadening outlook of Christians for whom democracy in both government and religion implied a new way of relying on God's grace, not a denial of it. The doctrine that the sovereign God had granted his children the ability to keep a holy covenant with him, and that he rested their final salvation on their choosing to do so, fit precisely the aspirations of a people who believed the nation could be both free and Christian. "The new covenant is a covenant of grace," George Peck declared, "its provisions are gracious provisions; - the ability to avail ourselves of these provisions is gracious ability; - the whole superstructure, from the foundation to the head-stone, is grace - grace!"51 By comparison with the starker forms of Calvinism, this reconciliation of divine and human agency may in retrospect seem to us, as it did at the time to the Princeton faculty, a compromise with secular culture, a reshaping of religion by political ideals. The Methodist and Calvinistic revivalists who led the way in working free will into the doctrines of grace thought the contrary. They believed that they were recovering the wholeness of the gospel, freeing it from distortions which centuries of feudal, monarchical and ecclesiastical privilege had imposed upon it.52

This new understanding of the interplay of divine and human agency permeated all of American thought, not simply theology. The presidents of Christian colleges, nearly all of whom taught moral philosophy to upper-classmen, put an Arminian and, hence, a progressive stamp upon every field of academic inquiry. What a later generation called their "academic orthodoxy" was, in essence, an enlarged doctrine of human freedom.53 At Oberlin, both Mahan and Finney taught their students that a higher law than the constitution sustained the nation - a law of holiness and freedom which called every citizen to moral action to rid the nation of its sins against justice and love. A generation of Oberlin graduates and other revival preachers made that doctrine popular before William Seward built a political career in New York state upon it.54 Likewise, in science, the early reconciliation of Christianity with geology paved the way for a doctrine of theistic evolution, not only in biology but in human history, well before Charles Darwin's Origin of Species appeared. Grace and nature were hastening progress toward a perfect society. The Christian millennium would come about through the exercise of human efforts sustained by the grace of God.55 During the Civil War, Gilbert Haven, editor of Zion's Herald, spelled out the political theory which this perfectionist reconciliation of human and
Christian Perfectionism and American Idealism
divine agency sustained in a Boston fast day address on "The State, A
Christian Brotherhood — The Mission of America." Horace Bushnell
gathered the whole consensus together in an extended series of sermons,
published in his volume called Nature and the Supernatural. At about
the same time Walt Whitman wrote his "Song of Myself," celebrating
humaness. Professor Sholim Kahn of Hebrew University has recently
suggested that Whitman set the narration in something like a prayer
meeting devoted to testimonies. But in the prayer meetings of real
life, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists alike sang not only of them-
selves, but of amazing grace. God was working in man, as St. Paul had
written to the Philippians, "both to will and to do of his good plea-
ure."

The broad turn toward millennial Arminianism in the nineteenth cen-
tury may seem like romantic idealism to moderns, but those who led it
thought themselves realists. Like the founding fathers of the nation,
they were keenly aware of the threat that the masses of ordinary per-
sons, including the great company of church people, would make their
political and economic and social choices in response to worldly and
greedy impulses. If the emerging dream of a truly Christian nation were
really to come about, the Christians in the nation must become a holier
lot.

At precisely this point the perfectionist restoration of the principle
of divine agency to a central place through the doctrine of sanctification
found its mark. Seeing everywhere the need of a piety which would sus-
tain a higher morality, and finding everywhere Christians believing in
God for eternal salvation but unable to commit their lives to justice and
love in earthly affairs, the preachers of holiness brought divine agency
to bear in a new way. Grace alone could purify the inner springs of
character and so make possible the creation of a righteous society. That
sanctifying grace came in the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Not simply popular romanticism, but the realistic commitment of
two generations of Americans to what we now imagine was an impos-
sible social dream inspired this immense intellectual and moral effort.
The quest of Christian perfection, along parallel Wesleyan and Oberlin
paths, lay at its center. The civil religion of the American people thus
came to rest not on the faith the Enlightenment had awakened in
man’s moral powers, as Sidney Mead and others argue, but on revival-
istic, reform-minded, and millennial Christianity. The function of
perfectionism was to preserve that faith at least partially from prostitu-
tion to the political and economic interests of the dominant elite. The
spiritual offspring of the Methodist perfectionists in New York and New England, like the graduates of Oberlin, believed that the sword of the Spirit was unsheathed in both church and society, cutting away the moral compromises and releasing the moral impulses which contended for the soul of the nation. The spread among the populace of the experience of entire sanctification, of whole-hearted devotion to the gospel law of love, seemed to them the way to keep evangelical Christianity, which they were determined to make the culture religion of a free nation, from serving merely as a sanction to the customs, the structures, and the policies which selfish interests preferred.63

One final issue remains. Did the proliferation of Pentecostal language in fact sustain a mystic flight of the Christian imagination away from the rational and the realistic ethical concerns which since Wesley had characterized the proponents of sanctification? Did it, then, set moving the currents which sustain today’s “charismatic” movement, with its stress upon the “spiritual gifts” of speaking in unknown tongues, power to heal the sick, and special prophetic insight about men and demons? Not so far as one can tell from the three mid-nineteenth century volumes whose terminology was most uncompromisingly Pentecostal: Asa Mahan’s *Baptism of the Holy Ghost*, Phoebe Palmer’s *Promise of the Father for the Last Days* and Methodist William Arthur’s *Tongue of Fire*.

Mahan’s volume was in fact a close exposition of the Scriptural promises of a Baptism of the Spirit in the King James version of the Scriptures, especially in Jesus’ meditation following the Last Supper, in the record of Pentecost, and in Paul’s teachings concerning the Holy Spirit.64 Clearly, the discussion of divine agency had prompted him to a fresh reading of these Scriptures; and the devotional approach to the experience of the Holy Spirit’s sanctifying power diminished his interest in the traditional categories of logic and doctrine in which the discussion of human and divine agency had been carried on. But just as clearly Mahan’s book declared the chief work of the Baptism of the Spirit was to bring believers “moral and spiritual power” in precisely those areas of personal and social righteousness which not only the Oberlin faculty but a large company of New School pastors had long been arguing was necessary if Christians were to help America fulfill God’s purposes.65 Mahan heartily denied that any miraculous attestations of the Spirit’s baptism such as happened at Pentecost, including especially the gift of languages, were to be expected in this second work of grace. Instead, he declared that the gift which in every case accompanied the experience was that of prophecy, that is, the power to bear clear and effective wit-
Christian Perfectionism and American Idealism

ness to God’s saving and sanctifying love so that others might truly believe it. The tone of the volume suggests that Mahan was oblivious to the existence of any modern claim to a gift of glossalalia, or to heavenly language, involving the ecstatic utterance of connected syllables which made neither words nor sentences of any earthly tongue. In his exposition of St. Paul’s first Corinthian letter he underlined the power to “speak unto men to edification.” Clarity of language and perception, then, not mystery, was the outcome of the Spirit’s baptism. God’s work in sanctifying his people aimed at both ethical uprightness and rational understanding.

Phoebe Palmer embraced the same pentecostal terminology during the summer and fall of 1856, while conducting a series of powerful revivals at campmeetings and churches in Western New York and Ontario Province. She seems at that time to have experienced an enlargement of her sense of consecration so significant as to cause her to grapple briefly with the notion of a third blessing and with the need for a new terminology to fit it. But by fall, her exhortations in Canada clearly integrated this deepened experience and the new terminology into her general preaching of the second work of grace. Thereafter, she regularly referred to the latter as a Baptism of the Spirit. Her subsequent volume, Promise of the Father, was in fact a long exposition of women’s right and duty to preach the gospel. Mrs. Palmer grounded her argument on the promise of the prophet Joel which Peter quoted at Pentecost, and used precisely the same reasoning about the gift of prophecy, of power to bear clear and effective witness to the promises of the Gospel, as Mahan employed in his sermons of the next few years.

William Arthur’s volume, which became and remained for thirty years the most popular handbook of holiness teaching among American Methodists, was in fact designed as a thoughtful and Biblical effort to clear up the confusion over glossalalia and other spiritual gifts which he thought the Irvingite movement had introduced into British perfectionist thought. Arthur used the symbolic phrase “tongue of fire” interchangeably with “the baptism of the Spirit.” He insisted that the miracle of speech at Pentecost was but an incident; the essential reality was the illumination of the minds of consecrated Christians. This divine illumination enabled them to proclaim with deep understanding the truth of God’s sanctifying love. Arthur claimed, as Mahan did a few years later, that the gift of prophecy was the sign of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. And it was a gift which simple laymen as well as learned men would share, enabling them to speak the truth in such love and
power as to convince an unbelieving world. The gift was a miracle, he said, but not a mystification.72

I conclude, then, that Finney became a key spokesman of American religion, and the Methodists became the most powerful American denomination, not simply by exalting popular idealism and laying upon it novel religious meanings, but by bringing to American culture a highly sophisticated system of theology aimed at the perfection of men and social institutions. Wesleyan Christianity proved for the mid-century decades, at least, better suited than any other system of religious thought to incorporate and reinforce the social and psychic aspirations of the nation. No one of the successive restatements of Calvinist doctrine offered as satisfying and consistent an alternative. Indeed, the combination of rational and existential elements in Hebrew and Christian faith found fuller expression among perfectionist Methodists than among Calvinists, even perfectionist ones, who were wrestling to reconcile divine sovereignty with free will. The key element, logically, in Methodist teaching was the doctrine of God's prevenient grace—that the Atonement had given every human being the power to respond affirmatively to God's call. The key element, existentially, was the assurance of grace sufficient to sustain them in carrying out the implications of that response in their subsequent lives. The key element, ethically, was the call to radical consecration and perfect love. Scripture, reason, and common sense all seemed to the nineteenth century perfectionists to enforce the view that divine grace to hallow human life was available, and available now.

A second conclusion has to do with the structure of the perfectionist movement. As Luther Gerlach has recently explained, a social movement which refuses to accept confinement in either one or several institutions has more ideological resilience than one which reflects in either dogma or structure a single tradition. The unorganized character of the perfectionist awakening, even within Methodism, the ability of the movement to spawn new sectarian forms without deserting the larger community, its openness to communication if not communion with persons of many religious traditions, were all mirrored in the essentially nonsectarian character of the Oberlin community. This structure, or lack of it, combined with the sparsity of the ideology itself to facilitate a penetration of American culture at many levels, thus reinforcing the popular idealism, the soaring social aspiration, which Finney's revival banner, "Holiness to the Lord," had long symbolized.

Finally, the holiness movement in America illustrates afresh the re-
Christian Perfectionism and American Idealism

sistance of Hebrew and Christian structures of faith to any untangling of the web of ideas and feelings which interweave personal with corporate experience, spiritual with social concerns. The crisis moments of revelation and covenant renewal in those faiths always came at points when historical processes had brought the community of the chosen to a time of decision. And in those moments of intersecting crises, as the Hebrew and Christian founders perceived it, the spirit of the eternal God broke in to secure the renewal of his people in righteousness. This peculiar sense of divine and human cooperation in the determination of the destiny of persons and societies held both Judaism and Christianity back from the path to esoteric mysticism on one side, or to pragmatic humanism on the other.

FOOTNOTES


2 This reverses the sequence of developments which appears in my book, Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America (Nashville, Tenn., 1957); I owe the reversal initially to the persuasive essay of Garth M. Rosell, "The Millennial Roots of Early Nineteenth-Century Reform: An Examination of Charles Finney's Theology of Social Action," presented to the Hopkins-Harwichport Seminar in American Religious History, August, 1974.

3 Daniel W. Howe, The Unitarian Conscience: The Harvard Moral Philosophers, 1805-1861 (Cambridge, Mass., 1970); William R. Hutchi-


8 Smith, *Revivalism*, 103-134.


and Davidson were post-doctoral fellows in the Program in American Religious History at Johns Hopkins in 1973-1975.


20 The same, 62-64, 67-68, 203-204.

21 John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (N.Y., 1789, printed with *A Form of Discipline for the . . . Methodist Episco-
The Asbury Seminarian

pal Church in America), 97-98; John Fletcher, Checks to Antinomianism . . . (2 vols; N.Y., 1837), II, 329-332, quoted in Peck, Scripture Doctrine, 67-68.

22 Wesley, Plain Account, 75-76, quoted in Peck, Scripture Doctrine, 64.

23 Peck, Scripture Doctrine, 240-241.


26 Peck, Scripture Doctrine, 236-238.

27 Charles G. Finney, Lectures on Revivals of Religion (N.Y., 1835), 21, 102, 190, 197.

28 Peck, Scripture Doctrine, summarizes the opposition to the “Oberlin Heresy,” 226-231.

29 Mahan, Christian Perfection, 91-92, 189-190.

30 Peck, Scripture Doctrine, 238-239 fn.

31 Finney’s article in The Oberlin Evangelist, IV, no. 18, (August 31, 1842), quoted in Peck, Scripture Doctrine, 239; Mahan, Christian Perfection, 163-164 ff.
Christian Perfectionism and American Idealism

32 See Peck’s comments, Scripture Doctrine, 236-237 fn., and his summary of the arguments on natural ability in the same article cited above.


34 Finney, Memoirs, 340-341.

35 Finney, Memoirs, 350-351, and Mahan, Darkness Into Light, 133-136, 140, 146, are closely parallel accounts, though both were written nearly forty years later. I believe Mahan’s personal testimony in his Christian Perfection, 185-187, tells substantially the same story, and that his account of a question from “a brother in the ministry” which provoked a winter’s study by him and Finney, the same, 188-189, refers to a different though related issue. Cf. Asa Mahan, Doctrine of the Will (Oberlin, Ohio, 3rd ed., 1847), 228, quoted in Madden, Civil Disobedience, 45, for contemporary evidence of the crucial nature of the distinction between will and sensibility in the form of Mahan’s attack upon Jonathan Edwards.

36 The quotations are from Finney, Memoirs, 373-375.

37 The same, 375-376.

38 The same, 381.

39 Charles G. Finney, Sermons on Gospel Themes (transcribed by B. J. Goodrich; Oberlin, 1876), of which I have seen a N.Y. [n.d.] edition, contains, pp. 406-410, a passage which replicates all the teachings of Phoebe Palmer on the experience of sanctification.


41 Smith, Revivalism, 125-127. Cf., on John Fletcher’s limited use of the term, Peck, Scripture Doctrine, 67, 417.
42"Faith an Element of Power," Zion's Herald, XXV (September 8, 1852), 2. Cf. "How Souls are Purified," the same (August 25, 1852), 4; Peck, Scripture Doctrine, 416; and editor Fletcher Harper's use of the term as a synonym for sanctification in Harper's Monthly, XVIII, no. 109 (June, 1859), 841.

43Mahan, Darkness Into Light, 156, 169-170, 172-173.

44Alexander Blaikie, The Philosophy of Sectarianism; or, a Classified View of the Christian Sects in the United States (Boston, 1855), 168.


48Frederic Dan Huntington, Christian Believing and Living (Boston, 1859), 427-428. Cf., the same, 424, 430-434, for passages echoing the heart of Phoebe Palmer's teaching.

Christian Perfectionism and American Idealism


51 The same; cf. Wallace, Entire Holiness, 93-95.

52 Madden, Civil Disobedience, 45-48; Smith, Revivalism, 91-92.


54 Smith, Revivalism, 205-206, 220-222; Madden, Civil Disobedience, 70-77.


56 William B. Gravely, Gilbert Haven, Methodist Abolitionist: A Study in Race, Religion, and Reform, 1850-1880 (Nashville, Tenn., 1973), 114-121; Mahan, Baptism of the Holy Ghost, 72-73, 81, 92-93, 130, 141-142.

57 See Gilbert Haven, National Sermons . . . on Slavery and Its War . . . (Boston, 1869), 317-360, esp. pp. 340-341, 359; Smith, Revivalism, 189-190, 220-222; Gravely, Haven, 112-114; and William R. Hutchison, The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), 2, 4, 24, 98-107 passim, and 121, showing the persistence of at least in language of this evangelical view among those to whom he attributes the impulse to a fully developed cultural immanence.

58 Horace Bushnell, Nature and the Supernatural, as Together Constituting One System of God (N.Y., 1858); cf. Mahan, Darkness Into
Light, 164-171. Hutchison, Modernist Impulse, 44-47, puts Bushnell's idea in its evangelical setting.

59 Professor Kahn has shared with me his yet unpublished essay.


62 Sidney E. Mead, The Nation with the Soul of a Church (N.Y., 1975), 117-123.

63 William Arthur, The Tongue of Fire; or, The True Power of Christianity (N.Y., 1856), 74-105, is the strongest Wesleyan statement. Cf., on "Oberlin Reform," Madden, Civil Disobedience, 70-84.

64 Mahan, Baptism of the Holy Ghost, 26-33, 37-44, 46-49.

65 The same, 16, 44, 92-93.

66 The same, 46-49, 93.

67 The same, 199-207.


69 Phoebe Palmer, Promise of the Father, or a Neglected Specialty of the Last Days . . . (Boston, 1859).

70 Arthur, Tongue of Fire, 47.

71 The same, 30-34, 47-61.

72 The same, 61-71, and passim.