



*"You will know them by their fruits." Mt. 7:16*

## The Sanctification Series

by J. Sidlow Baxter

### Vol. 3. **Our High Calling**

*"Practical and Devotional Thoughts on Personal Sanctification" by J. Sidlow Baxter*

*This volume offers devotional and practical studies to affirm the need for personal sanctification, pointing to the New Testament's emphasis on the call to sanctification as one of the most ringing of its "imperatives."*

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### The Trouble with Finney (1792-1875)

Verily, there is nothing so true, that the damps of error have not warped it;  
Verily, there is nothing so false, that a sparkle of truth is not in it.  
For the enemy, the father of lies, the giant Upas of creation,  
Whose deadly shade hath blasted this once green garden of the Lord,  
Can but pervert the good, but may not create the evil ;  
He destroyeth, but cannot build; for he is not another deity  
Mighty is his stolen power, yet is he a creature and a subject;  
Not a maker of abstract wrong, but a spoiler of concrete right:  
The fiend hath not a royal crown; he is but a prowling robber,  
Suffered, for some mysterious end, to haunt the King's highway;  
And the keen sword he beareth, once was a simple ploughshare;  
Yea, and his panoply of error is but a distortion of the truth  
The sickle that once reaped righteousness, beaten from its useful curve,  
With axe, and spike, and bar, headeth the marauder's halbert.  
Seek not further, O man, to solve the dark riddle of sin;  
Suffice it, that thine own bad heart is to thee thine origin of evil.

Martin F. Tupper's  
*Proverbial Philosophy.*



## SANCTIFICATION AND HEREDITY

IN OUR reflections on sanctification according to orthodox Calvinism we encountered what I can only call the deadly dogma that the very *guilt* of Adam is imputed to all his posterity, the fearful concomitant of which is, that thousands of millions have been divinely predestined to a never-ending damnation through a transgression of which they are innocent. Let these boast such Calvinism who will; as for myself, it contradicts all that is most natively human in me.

I knew that such teaching can be set forth with seemingly compelling logic, especially by masters of theological polemics like these two former Princeton giants, Charles and Alexander Hodge. Yet ironically enough I find myself protesting in the very words used by Charles Hodge himself against Finney: "a remarkable product of relentless logic . . . conclusions which are indeed logical deductions, but which shock the moral sense, and prove nothing but that *the premises are false.*"

However, while I deny the Scripturalness of the supposition that Adam's *guilt* is imputed to his descendants, I am equally sure that Calvinism is soundly Scriptural in teaching hereditary *sin-infection* from Adam throughout the race. We are sinners, not only through our own volitional malfunctioning, but by a communicated moral perversion which we inherited at our birth, as members of Adam's fallen race. In this there is nothing judicial or penal: it is a permitted natural consequence of racial unity and heredity. The traditional theological name for that transmitted malady is "original sin", though it is far from the best phrase to hang on it.

You whom I new address are not the kind to be gulled by modern evolutionary

speculations which treat sin as an interim peculiarity in the "upward march" of mankind. Nor, if we believe the Bible, will any of us give credence to the "new psychology" equivocation that sin is merely "the under-side of the good", or that moral evil is merely a matter of relativity. But when some outstanding Evangelical leader or school ably propounds an erroneous view of "original sin" or of heredity, in a system of teaching which otherwise is excellent, then even Bible-believing Christians can be in danger. One thing will be clear to all of us: a defective view of heredity must always certainly lead to a wrong doctrine *of sanctification*. That is what we are concerned with here.



## ORIGINAL SIN DENIED

Ever *since* the monk Pelagius, in the early fifth century, there have been periodic denials of "original sin". Pelagius and his disciples, Caelestius and Julian of Eclanum, taught that there was no such thing as an inherited sin-bias in human nature. All who are born into this world are the same in moral nature as Adam before the Fall. Instead of a sin-ward imbalance there is an absolute equipoise of the will.

Perhaps the most powerful pen against "original sin" in recent times was that of Charles G. Finney who died in 1875, but whose monumental work, *Systematic Theology*, still powerfully speaks for him in many an evangelical minister's study. What Finney *was* greatly augments the wide influence of what he taught. Undoubtedly in the "holy war" he was a "mighty man of valour". Never was there a more dynamic evangelist, and certainly never one whose itinerations were more consistently accompanied by supernatural visitations. He was famous by what he wrought as a preacher before ever he became famous by what he taught as a tutor, As an evangelist he was a veritable Elijah (greatest of the *preaching* prophets). At Oberlin he became their Isaiah (greatest *of the writing* prophets). Both by voice and pen he was a Christian leader of great stature. It was that which made his teaching against "original sin" seem the more trustable.

In that peculiarity, however, he was surely wrong ; and, with his large volume now laying before me, I counsel all who would know what a truly Scriptural sanctification is to reject the denial of "original sin". If we accept such arguments as Finney's against "original sin" we are easily lured into false ideas of sanctification such as his own well meant but erroneous doctrine of *perfectionism*, i.e. that sanctification is sinlessness. Let no one think that the consideration which we here devote to his teaching is tedious or out-of-date. I frequently meet people (some of whom know little about Finney himself) who have been sidetracked into delusion by hand-down of his theory. What, then, are Finney's main arguments against "original sin"?

*(Finney was a "Taylorite" - a backwoods theology with a small following developed after the Revolutionary war in isolated and sparsely settled upstate New York where he grew up. See more on Finney on the "Ichabod page)*

On pages 249 and 250 of his *Systematic Theology* we find the centre-point around which the whole scheme of his thinking revolves. He claims that sin cannot be an inhering duality *of* the soul because sin consists entirely in an *activity of the will*. In other words, sin is something which *I do*, not something which I *am*. Here is his own statement:

"We deny that the human constitution is morally depraved, because it is impossible that sin should be a quality of the *substance* of soul or body. Sin is, and must be, a quality of

*choice* or intention, and not of substance."

That is an outright denial of all hereditary sin-bias; but Finney thinks he has Scriptural reason for it, as his further words explain:

"To make sin an attribute or quality of *substance* is contrary to *God's* definition of sin. 'Sin,' says the apostle, *is anomia*, a transgression of, or want of conformity to, the moral law. That is, it consists in a refusal to love God and our neighbour, or, which is the same thing, in loving ourselves supremely."

The big fault here is that Finney blinks at all those Scripture passages where the word, "sin", is used to describe, not only an activity, but *a proclivity*. One such is Romans 7. "The evil that I would not do, that I do. Now if I do that which I would not, it *is* no more I that do it, but *sin that dwelleth in me*." Paul's words indicate a disorder deeper down and further back than the *will*; a strange disorder issuing in active evil *despite* the will to do otherwise. Finney may refuse to call it sin *because in itself it is not actual transgression*, but that does not alter the fact that the inherited disposition is *there*, nor does it rub out those places where Scripture *calls* it "sin".

The fact is, Finney's definition of sin as being solely "transgression" **is not really a definition of sin at all, but only of sinning**. Paul distinctly tells us, in Romans 5: 12-14, that even between Adam and Moses, when there was *no* "transgression" of the Law (because the Law was not yet given) "*sin was in the world*" (i.e. sinfulness both in condition and in conduct). However, Finney now presents a further argument "To represent the [human] constitution as sinful is to represent God, who is the author of the constitution, as the author of sin. To say that God is not the direct former of the constitution, but that sin is conveyed by natural generation from Adam who made himself sinful is only to remove the objection one step further back, not to obviate it ; for God established the physical laws which of necessity bring about this result."

Such reasoning ill becomes a Finney. It is tantamount to arguing that because God allowed Lucifer to turn himself into the devil through wrong exercise of free-will, God is the author of sin ; or that because God permitted the Jewish leaders to crucify Christ, God Himself is the real perpetrator of the Crucifixion. But now comes a third arrow from the stalwart's quiver:

"How came Adam by a sinful nature? Did his first sin **change** his nature? Or did God change it as *a penalty* for sin? What ground is there for the assertion that Adam's nature became in itself sinful by the Fall? This is a groundless, not to say ridiculous, assumption, and an absurdity. Sin an attribute of nature! Sin a substance! Is it a solid, a fluid, a material, or a spiritual substance?"

Finney's over-confidence here cannot hide his strange ignoring of plain Scripture, that the Fall *did* bring a chronic change in Adam's nature. Hitherto there had been joyful fellowship with God, but now Adam and Eve, instead of eagerly hastening to Him as before, slink away, and hide from Him "*afraid*". Instead of communion there is now fear and alienation. Instead of innocence they now "know good *and evil*". Their "eyes are opened" (i.e. their inward eyes). Nakedness must now be covered, for from now onward they are a danger to each other. Strange new susceptibilities have suddenly awakened. Also, they must now be expelled from that paradise, and debarred by a "flaming sword", lest they get to the "tree of life". All this *does* indicate a serious inward change, especially so in the light of Paul's comment in Romans 5: 12, "By one man *sin* entered into the world". Paul certainly did not mean merely that by the one man "*transgression*" entered into the world ; for if (as Finney argues) Adam's children are all born sinless, then "transgression" enters fresh into the world by millions, not just "by one man".

But Finney presses his case still further. Not only does he reduce sin to no more than a

wrong activity of the will, he denies that the will itself is depraved. He says, "Moral depravity is the depravity of free-will, not of the faculty itself, but only of its free action". In other words, depravity is only functional not constitutional. What he nowhere satisfactorily explains, however, is *why* the will (which is only the executive of desire, not the originator) so malfunctions. How *can* there be continuous wrong volition unless there is some wrong activation in the *nature*? If Finney's idea is right, then even the devil does not have moral depravity in himself ; his trouble is not sinful motive, but only a faulty mechanism.

Next, on page 231, Finney says that moral depravity "cannot consist in anything back of choice". What, then, about sinful *desires* which lie behind choice? Are not *they* moral depravity? No, says Finney, because they are never desires for sin as such, but only for what gratifies the self. When Eve desired the forbidden fruit it was not a craving for *sin* but for something "pleasant to the eyes" and "to make one wise". Agreed, but when Finney makes that his basis for saying, "All men sin in precisely the same way", he is miles astray. What about Cain's fratricide soon afterward? Did *that* spring from a purely non-moral desire? Was there not jealousy and hate? And are not *they* sinful emotions or predispositions?

Finney is utterly wrong in saying that whatever lies behind choice is non-moral because involuntary. Every desire for something which is *known* to be sinful is *sinful desire*, even though its urge may be for self-gratification. Cain's desire to kill Abel was itself sinful before ever there was "choice" or "will" or "act". Similarly, *every* desire for what is *known* to be evil is evil desire. Finney may refuse to call it "moral depravity" or "sin", but at that point Finney and Scripture part company. Indeed our Lord Himself says that lecherous *desire is sin* in heart even where there is no immoral act ; also that unprovoked anger is sin even though it does not physically smite (Matt. 5: 22, 28). Finney says that those involuntary states are *not* sin, or "moral depravity". Our Lord says they *are*.

But now, finally, if (as Finney avers) there is no hereditary sin bent, how does he explain the continuous *universality* of sin? He says it is because our inborn "sensibilities" mislead the will from birth onwards.

"Sensibility acts as a powerful impulse to the *will* from the moment of birth, and secures the consent and activity of the will to procure its gratification, before *reason is* at all developed. . . . This committed *state* of the will is not moral depravity, and has no moral character until a sense of moral obligation is developed. The moment this [i.e. our awaking to moral consciousness] is developed, this committal of the will to self-indulgence must be abandoned, or it *becomes* moral depravity. But as the will is already in *a state* of committal, and has to some extent already formed the habit of seeking to gratify feeling ... the *will retains its hold* on self-gratification.... This selfish choice is the wicked heart- the propensity to sin- which causes what is generally termed actual transgression. This sinful choice is properly called indwelling sin. It is the latent, standing, controlling preference of the mind." (Italics ours.)

Finney's self-refutation here is bold. He says that from birth innate "sensibility" captures the will for self-gratification; then he slips into the very reverse and says it is the *will* which "retains *its hold* on self-gratification"! Which, then, is it? The answer is: Neither, because Finney ignores what is deeper than either "sensibility" or "will", namely, inborn *desire*.

Again if, according to Finney, it is "ridiculous" to say that Adam's sin "changed his nature", how can he now say that this "self-gratification" *does* change the nature in all Adam's children? He says it produces a "wicked heart", a "propensity to sin", a "controlling preference of the mind", all of which are *qualities*, ingrained characteristics, not just a poise of the will. In reality, Finney has now rebutted his own dictum, that

"moral depravity" is only in "volition" (function) and not in "substance" (nature), and that sin is *only* "transgression".

His attempted explanation leaves untouched the stubborn mystery of inborn *predisposition*- for instance juvenile desire to inflict pain on an animal while the child is still in the period Finney describes as "before reason is developed". During that period, so he says, there cannot be moral depravity, but only "gratification of the *self*". But (we reply) if that "self" urges gratification through what is intrinsically cruel, then plainly the "self" (more accurately referred to as the "persona") is originally corrupt. Other such early dispositions- deceit, stealing, and so on, all denote the same thing.

Finney's case gets weaker the more we pry it open. He is obliged to admit that we everywhere see hereditary defects transmitted through human *physical* nature (form, features, etc.), and through our *mental* nature (aptitudes, tempers, etc.); yet he denies that there is any such transmission in our *moral* nature; surely a strange inconsistency.

Moreover, he has to admit that the universal temptation which causes universal sin arises from *within our nature itself* : "The human sensibility is, manifestly, deeply depraved"! He even says, "The representations of Scripture are, that the *body is* the occasion of sin"- which strongly savours of the Gnostic error that matter itself is evil.

And yet again, in denying that the universality of sin proves "*original sin*", he asks, "If sin necessarily implies a sinful *nature*, how did Adam and Eve sin? Had *they* a sinful nature? How did angels sin? Had *they* a sinful nature?" The fact is, that the vast majority of the angel myriads did *not* sin; therefore no conclusion about *all* can be drawn from only *some*; but in the case of our human race, if there is not "*original sin*" why *is* it that among all the billions born from Adam downwards there has not been *one* without sin?-except, of course, our Lord Jesus, whose birth was immaculate.

Could anything be more self-contradictory than the following paragraph? Note carefully the words which we italicize.

"Why is sin so natural to mankind? Not because their nature is itself sinful, but because the *appetites* and passions *tend* so strongly to self-indulgence. These are *temptations to sin*, but sin itself consists not in these appetites and *propensities*, but in the voluntary committal of the will to their indulgence" (257).

So the "nature itself" is not "sinful", yet its innate "appetites" are "*temptations to sin*". But how *can* they be so, unless innately perverse? If the very propensities of the new-born self lead to sin, then there is indeed "*original sin*".



## SANCTIFICATION: A WRONG WAY

Here, of course, our special interest in this denial of "*original sin*" is its bearing upon our subject, *sanctification*. Eighty pages are devoted to this in Finney's *Systematic Theology*, but the following few excerpts are sufficient to show his main idea.

"Holiness consists, not at all in the *constitution of* body or mind; but it belongs, strictly, "only to the *will* or heart", and consists in *obedience of will* to the law of God, as it lies revealed in the intellect. It is expressed in one word, love ; this love is identical with the entire consecration of the whole being to the glory of God." (p. 403, italics ours.)

Observe here the ambiguous equation of "will" and "heart"; holiness belongs "only to the

will or heart". That is a confusion. Both in Scripture and in common usage "heart" means the human "self". There are 958 occurrences of "heart" in our King James Version ; and almost invariably when used in its figurative sense, it represents either the whole mental and moral being, or the centre-point of thought, desire, feeling. On page 411 Finney actually *says* that the "heart" is the *soul*.

Yet elsewhere Finney *denies* that there can be sanctification of heart and soul. In the foregoing quotation he says that sanctification consists "in *obedience of will* to the law of God". In another place (405) he says, "Sanctification, then, is nothing more nor less than entire *obedience*, for the time being, to the moral law". In other words, when our will is fully obeying the moral law we are sanctified, for sanctification is not an interior state, but an activity of the will.

What then is *entire* sanctification? Finney's limping "explanation" is that it means no more than *continuous* obedience. To quote his own words on page 452, it is "entire, in the sense of *perpetual* sanctification". Or, more fully, "Sanctification may be entire in two senses: (i) in the sense of present, *full obedience*, or entire consecration to God ; and (2) in the sense of *continued* consecration or obedience to God". So even *entire* sanctification, according to Finney, does not extend beyond the will: it is full and continuing obedience or yieldedness ("consecration"). There *is no* renewal of heart, mind, soul, nature. He says: "Sanctification does *not* imply any constitutional change, either of soul or body"(404). It consists in an *act* of the will, which becomes *a set* of the will, then a *state* of the will; but nothing more (405).

So, in sanctification, according to Finney, the big thing is somehow to get the *will "established"* in obedience; and (I gather) intense was the effort, agonizing the struggle, exhausting the repeated failure, and pathetic the eventual recoil of Finney's disciples who prayed and groaned and wept and strained to "establish" or "confirm" their will in utter obedience, minute by minute, to "the law of God as revealed in the intellect". Poor souls ! Some of them, it would seem, suffered shipwreck of faith through it. Sad irony, that Finney of all men, the fiery Elijah who himself had such transforming experience of God should so misteach it in the attempt to give it dogmatic expression !

A cardinal error is his concept of the will as "the *controlling faculty* of the mind", which it certainly is not. The will is the executant only, not the originator of thought and desire. *Behind* the will is impulse, thought, desire, motive, urge. Because that is so, the big refutation of Finney's theory is the stubborn fact of human *consciousness*. Universal experience is that you cannot make the will act morally right when the heart behind it is morally wrong. Also, the more truly we penetrate our human consciousness to its first glimmerings in infancy, so the more do we confirm that the sin-bias in our nature is *not* something which we merely *acquire* on reaching years of so-called "discretion". Nay, there was a prior disposition which *caused* later transgression. Does not the phenomenon that every duck takes to water as soon as it is hatched, prove that by its nature it is an aquatic fowl? And does it not prove something by parallel, that we human beings, without exception, from our earliest moral beginnings, show proneness to wrong despite all protest of hereditary good within us?

Another cardinal error of Finney is his confusing of holiness with *sinlessness*. He says, "It is nonsense to speak of a holiness that consists with sin". "Entire sanctification consists in perfect obedience to the law of God." "Nothing is holiness shot of full obedience to the moral law." At a glance, such statements may *seem* to be true, but they are not so. There *can* be holiness of *motive* even though there remain cross-currents of wrong urge in the nature. Indeed, such holiness of motive is the more commendably holy because it *overcomes* all temptation to the contrary. Not flawless legal perfection, but thorough purity of motive is the holiness to which God now calls us; not faultlessness but

*blamelessness* (Eph. 1: 4).

Finney's teaching on sanctification issued in what became known as the "alternation" theory of sanctification. Note the italicized words in the following quotation: "Sanctification, then, is nothing more or less than entire obedience, for the time being, to the moral law." This means that there can be one moment of "entire obedience", (i.e. entire sanctification) followed immediately by a moment of defective conformity, (i.e. de-sanctification). That is because sanctification (according to Finney) consists exclusively in will-conformity to the moral law. It is not an inward state, but a suspense or poise of volition. By turns, a hundred times a day, one may be all-sanctified and non-sanctified. By a momentary lapse we are altogether unsanctified; by another moment of contrition and return to obedience we are *re-sanctified*! Hence the emphasis on getting an "established" will, and a "permanent" self-consecration.

Dr. Asa Mahan, Finney's colleague at Oberlin, thus refers to this tantalizing concept of sanctification:

"No individual, I believe, ever disciplined believers so severely and with such intense and tireless patience as my Brother Finney.... His most earnest efforts were put forth to induce among believers *permanence* in the divine life. In accomplishing this he knew of but one method : absolute and fixed renunciation of sin, consecration to God, and purpose of obedience."

"When he came to Oberlin, and entered upon the duties of his Professorship, he felt that God had given him a blessed opportunity to realize in perfection his ideal of a ministry for the churches. He had before him a mass of talented and promising theological students, who had implicit confidence in the wisdom of their teacher, and with equal sincerity would follow his instructions and admonitions. Accordingly, for months in succession, he gathered together those students at stated seasons, instructed them most carefully in regard to the nature of the *renunciation of sin, consecration to Christ and purpose of obedience*, required of them. Then, under his teachings and admonitions, they would renew their *renunciations, consecrations and purposes of obedience*, with all the intensity and fixedness of resolve of which their natures were capable. The result, in every case, was one and the same: not the new life of joy and peace and power which was anticipated, but groaning bondage under the law of sin and death."

Oh, let me urge the following recommendations upon all whose heart-longing is to live in the experience of entire sanctification.

Stay with the Bible doctrine of original sin, or hereditary sin proclivity ; for to imagine a false immunity from that inherited condition prevents any of us from understanding how sanctification in Christ *deals* with it. Stay with the New Testament doctrine that true sanctification really *does* something deep down in our moral nature, breaking the power of inherited depravity by a thorough "renewing" of the mind.

Yes, stay with that New Testament doctrine, for it is God's own answer to a pained heart-cry which we find in the *Old Testament*. Remember: the same David who groaned, "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity" (Ps. 51: 5) was inspired to pray (verse 10), "**CREATE IN ME A CLEAN HEART, O GOD, AND RENEW A RIGHT SPIRIT WITHIN ME**".

The above is comprised of pages 118 to 128 of J. Sidlow Baxter's "**Our High Calling-Practical and Devotional Thoughts on Personal Sanctification**"

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