

# Did Charles Finney Preach the Gospel?

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## An Examination and Critique of Finney's Theology of the Atonement

This paper is an attempt to answer the question, "Did Charles Finney preach the gospel?" It is important because the Apostle Paul wrote that "if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:9). We must heed Paul's warning and seriously consider whether Finney's gospel is the same gospel delivered to us in the Scriptures. If Finney's gospel is different from Paul's, then we must declare it a false gospel and pronounce him outside the bounds of protestant, evangelical Christianity.

The doctrine of the atonement is central to the gospel. By examining Finney's theology of the atonement, we will be able to conclude if he preached and believed the true gospel of salvation. This paper will proceed to answer the posed question in three steps. It will provide an overview of the basis for Finney's theology of the atonement, examine the substance of Finney's view, and conclude with a critique of Finney's theology of the atonement.

The basis of Charles Finney's theology of the atonement was in his understanding of moral government. Thus, before discussing his view of the atonement, it is important to understand his view of moral government. In Finney's view, happiness is an ultimate good and the ultimate end of government. All moral agents are obliged to do good simply because good is good. Moral government is the means used to promote the highest good. A moral government is "the influence of moral considerations over the minds of moral agents."

The right to govern a moral government goes to the moral agent who "possesses such attributes, such a character, is so circumstanced, and sustains such relations as to be both able and willing to secure the highest good of the whole." God does not govern because the moral law proceeds from His will. He governs because He fits the above definition.

Moral law, Finney argued, is not founded in “the mere arbitrary will of God or of any other being, but has its foundation in the nature and relations of moral agents.” Since no moral agent creates moral law, “no moral agent may repeal or alter moral law.” At this point, Finney drew a distinction between the letter and spirit of moral law. The letter deals with outward acts and may have exceptions at certain points, which the spirit of the law allows. The spirit of the law is that portion that may never be disregarded or violated. While the letter of the law states “the soul that sinneth, it shall die” (Ezekiel 18:20), the spirit of the law “admits and requires that upon certain conditions...the soul that sinneth shall live.” This distinction will be part of what makes the atonement possible in Finney’s view.

Since the moral laws work toward the greatest good, they are “public property in which every subject of the government has an interest.” Each violation of the law injures every subject of the government, so each subject has a right to expect the execution of the penalties of the law when it is violated. The governor, because of his qualifications to govern, has pledged himself to “duly administer the laws in support of public order, and for the promotion of public morals, toward the innocent with his favor and protection, and to punish the disobedient with the loss of his protection and favor.”

Finney distinguished between retributive and public justice. Moral government deals with public justice, the spirit of the law, and not retributive justice, the letter of the law. Retributive justice involves treating every subject of government according to his character, according to his intrinsic merit or demerit, making no exceptions, punishing each violation without mercy. Public justice consists of the promotion and protection of public interests, using the legislation and administration of the law that is required by the highest good of the public. In public justice, exceptions to penalties of the law are allowed so long as something else is done to secure the public interests as effectually as the penalty would. When this is done, pardon is demanded. This “something else” is the atonement.

Exceptions to legal penalties in public justice are possible because “the design of legal penalties is to secure obedience to the precept.” The penalties express the attitude of the lawgiver toward the importance of the law. The execution of the penalties evinces “his sincerity in enacting, and his continued adherence to, and determination to abide by, the principles of his government ...his regard to the public interests; and his unalterable determination to carry out, support and establish the authority of his law.” If the governor does not uphold and display his unswerving commitment to the highest good, it would encourage sin. This makes the free dispensing of mercy dangerous. Mercy without atonement “weakens government, by begetting and fostering a hope of impunity in the minds of those who are tempted to violate the law.” Such an attitude would be contrary to morality and the highest interests of the public. Pardon of sin threatens the stability of the government. “Since God is the lawgiver, public justice demanded either that He should execute the law when it was violated, or provide a substitute that would as effectively sustain the government as the execution would.”

In order to pardon sin, God must do something to sustain the influence of the law and make fall satisfaction of public justice. Full satisfaction requires Him to evince His “regard for the law, His determination to support it, His abhorrence of all violations of its precepts,” and to “guard as effectually against the inference, that violators of the precept might expect to escape with impunity, as the execution of the penalty would do.” Once these conditions of public interest are met, though the violator still deserves punishment, public justice operates by “the spirit of the law of love, spares and pardons him.”

Finney defined atonement in this way: “Atonement means substitution. The atonement is the governmental substitution of the sufferings of Christ for the punishment of sinners, a covering of their sins by his sufferings.” Finney argued that we could expect atonement based on a priori affirmations of reason. First, we know that man is fallen. Second, we know that the atonement is not a state of retributive justice, but a state of trial or probation, because the providence of God is plainly disciplinary, and intended to reform humankind. From here, we can reason that because God is benevolent, He will display His benevolence in the pardon of sin. However, God is only able to exercise His benevolence if it can be done with safety to moral government, that is, while satisfying public justice as described above.

Finney was quick to point out “no atonement could be needed to satisfy any implacable spirit in the divine mind.” In other words, Finney did not believe that God or His wrath needed to be satisfied in any way. God was “sufficiently and infinitely disposed to extend pardon to the penitent, if this could be wisely, benevolently, and safely done.” In this sense, God could have and would have freely extended pardon to all sinners. There was nothing in His nature preventing Him from doing so. However, it was a danger to moral government to do so without satisfying the demands of public justice. Something must be done to discourage “hope of impunity in the commission of sin.” There must be “an administration of divine government as to secure the fullest confidence throughout the universe, in the sincerity of God in promulgating His law with its tremendous penalty, and of His unalterable adherence to its spirit, and determination not to falter in carrying out and securing its authority at all events.”

The pardon of sin without a satisfaction of public justice would result in the virtual repealing of the divine law, by encouraging the hope of pardon of sin and decreasing the understanding of God’s sincerity as a moral governor. Therefore, a substitute must be provided that reveals and impresses the lessons taught by execution as effectively as the actual execution itself would do. The execution of penalties is designed for prevention. Therefore, the substitute must serve as a preventative to disobedience. It must also display God’s sincerity to satisfy public justice, since He is pledged to do so as a head of the government.

Finney defined public justice as “that due administration of law that shall secure... private and public interests, and establish the order and well-being of the universe.” Since these demands must be met, public justice requires either atonement or the execution of penalties upon every offender.

Atonement, Finney argued, was preferred to execution of penalties for a number of reasons. It would be a fuller satisfaction of the necessities of government, prevent sin more efficiently, more powerfully persuade to holiness, than the execution of the legal penalty would. Atonement would surpass the infliction of penalties in the promotion of God's glory and influence, in the presentation of overpowering motives to repentance, in the display of God's sincerity in legal enactment. Atonement would allow for "the safe promotion and promise of pardon" and yet avoid making the offer seem like "connivance at sin."

Finney is careful to clarify what constituted the atonement. He begins by arguing that Christ's obedience to the moral law did not constitute the atonement in any way. He offers four arguments against Christ's obedience being part of the atonement. First Christ as God and man, owed obedience to the moral law. Supererogation, doing more to fulfill its obligations, is impossible, so Christ could not obey for us. Second, if Christ obeyed in our place, then He would not have needed to suffer in our place. He did not need both to fulfill the law for us and to suffer the penalty of the law for us. Third, if His obedience were substituted for ours, then there is no reason that our personal obedience is a *sine qua non* of our salvation. Finally, if "any part of the atonement consisted in Christ's obeying the law for us, and in our stead and behalf," then God requires 1) our substitute's obedience, 2) the same suffering, as though obedience had not been rendered, 3) our repentance, 4) a return to personal obedience. Finney argues that our salvation cannot be ascribed to grace if this is true, since it seems to require multiple payments of the debt.

He follows this by arguing that the atonement "was not a commercial transaction." It was not the simple "payment of a debt, the purchasing of the elect for the Father." It is impossible for this to occur since it would require a satisfaction of retributive justice. Retributive justice, Finney argues, can never be satisfied because the guilty one deserves to be punished until he ceases to be guilty or becomes innocent. However, once the offense is committed, the guilty one can never cease being guilty or deserving of punishment for no amount of suffering decreases his guilt. Therefore, it is impossible to satisfy retributive justice because it is impossible for a sinner to cease being guilty. Since sin deserves eternal death, Christ would have had to suffer eternal death if retributive justice were to be satisfied. Finney implies it would not be possible to redeem sinners in retributive justice because it would require Christ suffering eternal death multiplied by the number of those saved. Finney argues that "neither wisdom nor enlightened benevolence could consent that an innocent being should suffer, as a substitute for a guilty one, the same amount that was justly due to the guilty."

Finney argued that the intent of the atonement was a satisfaction of public justice. The execution of the penalty of the law may not be set aside, unless something is done that secures the same effect. He argued that Romans 3:24–26 "assigns the reason, or declares the design, of the atonement, to have been to justify God in the pardon of sin, or in the dispensing with the execution of the law." This

statement clearly reveals that for Finney, the atonement was not the execution of our penalty upon Christ, but something that secured the same effect as the execution of the penalty and allowed God to set aside the actual execution of the penalty.

Three problems present themselves when attempting a critique of Finney's view of the atonement. First, Finney's views on moral government, human freedom, justification, imputation, etc. all influence and control his views on atonement. To provide a complete critique of his view on atonement would require a critique of the whole of his theology. This paper does not afford the space for that. However, there are significant areas where Finney departs from the protestant, evangelical view of atonement that warrants comment.

A second difficulty is Finney's terminology. He makes statements such as the atonement is "the substitution of Christ's sufferings for the punishment of sinners, a covering of their sins by his sufferings." This seems close to an evangelical definition of the atonement, such as "God's work on sinners' behalf to reconcile them to himself." Upon examining what Finney actually means, it becomes obvious that when Finney said Christ's sufferings were a substitute for us he meant something very different from Martin Luther, John Calvin and Billy Graham.

Third, the New Testament does not contain a concise definition of the atonement. Although "atonement" is not a New Testament word, it is clearly a central concept.

Finney denied that retributive justice is an issue in the atonement, arguing that retributive justice could not be satisfied since a guilty party cannot cease to be guilty. Further, Christ could not bear infinite death for all those redeemed. In stating this, he seems to neglect the importance of the incarnation. The infinite nature of the incarnate Christ would make possible the bearing of God's wrath in a way not possible for sinful humans.

Finney's denial of the possibility of satisfying retributive justice stems from his view of moral government and denial of imputation. The imputation of our sin to Christ and His righteousness to us, so that God sees it as ours, has always been at the core of the protestant understanding of atonement. Calvin argued that our curse was transferred to Christ, our stain was no longer counted to us; Christ took our shame, we took His purity. Furthermore, we were imputed, on the basis of Christ's work, a right standing before God.. Jonathan Edwards saw this as the glorious manner in which God found a means of punishing sin and not the sinner. Edwards argues that this "retributive justice" can be satisfied because of the unity of Christ and the believer. God counts Christ and the redeemed as one, so that what Christ did and suffered, the redeemed did and suffered. Thus, the law and its penalty are satisfied, the demand on the sinner is fulfilled by Christ's obedience and His righteousness becomes that of the

redeemed.[35] Edwards argues that this is the clear teaching of Scripture, such as Romans 5:19. Here it is shown that the many were made sinners through Adam's sin, since Adam was the representative of humanity. It follows by stating that through the obedience of the One, the many will be made righteous.

Finney cannot accept this teaching not only because he denies imputation, but also because he denies that Christ's obedience has "any part" in the atonement. Such a statement is clearly contrary to Romans 5:19 (ESV), where it states the righteousness of the believer is "by the one man's obedience." Christ's obedience is an essential aspect of the atonement. Without it, He would deserve death and could not suffer in our place.

A disturbing and dangerous aspect of Finney's theology of the atonement is his clear denial of its necessity for the forgiveness of sins. He does state that the atonement is necessary, but not for the forgiveness of sins. It is necessary to forgive sins safely, by demonstrating that God does uphold public justice. Finney states outright that the atonement was not needed "to satisfy any implacable spirit in the divine mind." That is, there is nothing within God himself that needed to be satisfied in order to forgive sins. In Finney's view, God could have pardoned sins without atonement, it was only the wisdom of doing so that prevented Him. The idea that God's wrath did not need to be satisfied is contrary to the teachings of Scripture.

Finney seems to present God as being obliged to wipe away sin when the importance of the moral law is upheld and the sinner repents. Christ's sufferings, he states, cover our sins, by displaying God's sincerity toward the law, therefore Christ satisfied public justice for us. Here Finney falters because of a deficient view of propitiation. Scripture plainly declares that God's wrath burns against the wicked (Psalm 7:11) and that He will not simply clear the guilty (Numbers 14:18). God's justice demands a penal or forensic consequence; a penalty in adequate proportion to the crime committed. His wrath needs to be propitiated, to be removed by the offering of an appropriate sacrifice that covers the sin.

Leon Morris has effectively argued that simple expiation, or wiping away of sin, is not a sufficient understanding of what Christ accomplished in His death. This is because sin affects our relationship with God on a personal level as opposed to a mere moral governmental level. While Finney states Christ's death was substitutionary, he cannot say it is propitiatory in the true sense of the word as Paul used it. For Finney denies that the atonement is a "commercial transaction" or "payment of debt" in the purchasing of the redeemed for the Father. While the atonement is certainly more than a mere "transaction," it is certainly not less than this.

When Christ died on the cross, He “bore our sins in his body” (1 Peter 2:24). In the Old Testament to “bear” another’s sins was to suffer the penalty of their sins (Ezekiel 18:20). Yes, we may say that the atonement is expiatory, in that it serves to wipe away sin. However, we must go further and say the inescapable teaching of the New Testament is that Christ’s death is a propitiation, a turning away of wrath and reconciling sinners to God. Scripture states that Christ paid the wages of sin, died the death deserved by the sinner and bore the curse of the sinner.

Finney’s denial of the propitiatory nature of Christ’s sacrifice, through his rejection of the substitutionary view of the atonement, has disastrous consequences. First, Finney’s view of the atonement fails to meet its own objectives. Finney argues God must punish Christ in order to uphold God’s sincerity toward the moral government and its law. Finney states that God may pardon sin without atonement. If a sinner repents upon the display God’s attitude toward sin, the sin is forgiven. God never actually deals with the sin. We must conclude that God does not really take sin seriously if no penalty is finally needed for sin.

Finney’s view of the atonement minimizes the work of Christ. Christ did not actually earn our forgiveness, so it would theoretically be possible without Him. This view removes the objective aspect of the atonement. The sinner cannot be exhorted to trust in Christ, since Christ’s work does not accomplish salvation.[46] One wonders how Finney can call Christ “Savior” at all.

Finney’s denial of the penal-substitutionary atonement, the propitiatory nature of Christ’s sacrifice, the obedience and sufferings of Christ as the grounds for justification, the necessity of the atonement for the forgiveness of sins constitutes a fundamental denial of the gospel. Charles Finney did not preach or believe the true gospel as taught in the Scriptures. His teachings are dangerous, heretical and pose a threat to the health of American evangelicalism. Finney should not be used as a model for evangelism, for one who rejects the evangel cannot evangelize.