

RETHINKING FINNEY: THE TWO SIDES OF CHARLES GRANDISON FINNEY'S DOCTRINE OF ATONEMENT

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Abstract: *Charles Grandison Finney remains America's most controversial revivalist. However, despite a range of analysis in recent decades, his doctrine of atonement is still not completely understood in its entirety. Tailoring every facet of his thinking toward the goal of revivalism, Finney drew elements from different Protestant traditions in America in order to combine moral governmental and moral influence theories of atonement. It is the purpose of this article to articulate how Finney synthesized these two models, which occupied the more dominant space in his thinking, and why his view can best be described as a "governmental and influential substitution."*

Key words: *Charles Finney, atonement, substitution, moral government, moral influence, revivalism, public justice*

Charles Grandison Finney was a reformer. As an abolitionist, an advocate for women's rights, and an early champion of the temperance movement, Finney has long been recognized as a pivotal figure in American culture.¹ From anxious benches to protracted meetings to any one of his "new measures," Finney also left his progressive mark upon American revivalism and evangelicalism at large. However, for all of his influence upon American religion, Finney's theological legacy is by no means a settled debate. With the rise of the phenomenon known as "Finneyism," many contemporary evangelicals now look upon Finney's innovation with a degree of suspicion and even scorn. When Finney declared that a revival "is not a miracle," so the narrative goes, he opened the door to gimmicky, prop-laden, means-oriented decisionism bereft of the simple and saving gospel.² Labeling Finney a "wolf in sheep's clothing," Michael Horton opines, "No single man is more responsible for the distortion of Christian truth in our age than Charles Grandison Finney."³ According to Horton, "Finney is not merely an Arminian, but a Pelagian. He is not only an enemy of evangelical Protestantism, but of historic Christianity of the broadest sort."⁴ Finney undoubtedly remains America's most controversial revivalist.

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¹ Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe contends, "Elizabeth Finney voiced a more radical feminism than her husband ever publicly espoused" (Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 286).

² Charles G. Finney, *Revivals of Religion* (Ada, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 1868), 5.

³ Michael Horton, "The Disturbing Legacy of Charles Finney," <https://www.monergism.com/disturbing-legacy-charles-finney>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Regardless of background or religious affiliation, the only point of consensus among scholars is that Finney's theological innovation, or what Allen Guelzo has called his "sui generis Arminianism," was tailored to suit his revivalist enterprise and social reform.⁵ Finney's Oberlin perfectionism, a blend of Edwardsean Calvinism and Wesleyan holiness doctrines, was grounded in the idea that every aspect of the Christian life was subject to Christ's saving work.⁶ In 1833, when the progressive Oberlin Institute was branded as "the best education of the whole man," it captured well Finney's practical approach to theology. "Religion is the work of man," he wrote in his *Revival Lectures*. "It is something for man to do."⁷ In many ways, Finney extended this same logic to the atonement itself. Recording his conversion narrative in his *Memoirs*, Finney described "justification by faith as a present experience," foreshadowing his life's work of preaching the gospel as a *lived* reality.⁸

With Finney's revivalism, doctrine of sanctification, and social reform tied directly to his view of Christ's work, it is surprising that Finney's doctrine of atonement has not received any kind of concentrated treatment from scholars or theologians. On the other hand, for such a titanic figure in American evangelicalism, Finney has not been without his commentators. For instance, while conceding a moral governmental system to his thinking, Horton has also maintained that the moral influence theory of the atonement was Finney's "chief way of understanding the cross" and that he "explicitly denied the substitutionary atonement."⁹ However, Charles Hambrick-Stowe has simply posited that "Finney in essence put forth a version of the moral-government theory of the atonement."¹⁰ Still, Douglas Sweeney has cautiously labeled him "a rather unusual and inconsistent New Haven-style Edwardsian preacher."¹¹ One of the many reasons Charles Finney remains arguably the most polarizing historical figure in evangelicalism is due to the fact that his most fundamental beliefs about the nature of Christ's atonement are so difficult to define. As a result, Finney's basic theological commitments are often misunderstood by his critics while, conversely, his supporters are inclined to misread him through their own contemporary lens. What in fact was Charles Finney's

⁵ Allen C. Guelzo, "Foreword," in *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), ix; according to James Johnson, Finney sought to develop a theology "patterned to fit his career as a revivalist. . . . Since his theological system was designed to complement his career as an evangelist, his theology often assumed strange shapes in order to accommodate to the revivalistic milieu" (James E. Johnson, "Charles G. Finney and a Theology of Revivalism," *Church History* 38 [1969]: 338).

⁶ Hambrick-Stowe insists, "Oberlin's commitment to moral and social reform was based not on any secular ideology but on the doctrine of sanctification" (Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism*, 178).

⁷ Finney, *Revivals of Religion*, 1.

⁸ Charles G. Finney, *Memoirs of Reverend Charles G. Finney* (New York: A. S. Barnes & Co., 1876), 23.

⁹ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 505–6; Horton, "The Disturbing Legacy of Charles Finney," <https://www.monergism.com/disturbing-legacy-charles-finney>.

¹⁰ Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism*, 34.

¹¹ Douglas A. Sweeney, *Nathaniel Taylor, New Haven Theology, and the Legacy of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 151.

view of the atonement? Can his beliefs even be categorized? If so, how did he integrate so many different elements? It is the purpose of this article to define the Finneyite atonement as a synthesis of moral governmental and moral influence theories, to elucidate how he combined these two views, and to identify which occupied the more dominant space in his system. By understanding Finney's view of the atonement, something we might describe as a "governmental and influential substitution," evangelicals can make better sense of their own tradition, its origins, and the reason for further reformation in the church today.

I. MORAL GOVERNMENT

If Charles Finney was a man possessed with the spirit of revival, he found spiritual kinsmen in the New Divinity, the theological tradition of Jonathan Edwards's New England successors. Finney's "burned-over district" in upstate New York was the product of local revivals that had reverberated from the New Divinity awakenings of Northwest Connecticut, the epicenter of the Second Great Awakening in New England.¹² While Finney tenuously enshrined Jonathan Edwards as the true author of his "new measures," it was in fact the Edwardseans who exercised the greatest influence upon Finney's doctrine of atonement. Almost everyone agreed. New and Old School Presbyterians alike identified Finney with the "Hopkinsian" school or some version of it.¹³

According to the Edwardsean-Finneyite scheme, Christ did not endure the actual penalty of the law nor did he exchange his own righteousness with believers. In this view, the atonement and the act of salvation constitute two separate events. In his *Systematic Theology*, Finney went so far as to claim that "the atonement, of itself, does not secure the salvation of any one; but the promise and oath of God, that Christ shall have a seed to serve him, provide that security."¹⁴ Just as Finney repudiated the idea that sinners could be accounted guilty on the basis of Adam's sin, so he also objected to the idea of Christ's merits being personally imputed to believers. In Finney's mind, "the atonement was not a commercial transaction" whereby merits and penalties are traded in a *quid pro quo* sense.¹⁵ Instead, on the cross, Christ suffered the agonizing "equivalent" of what sinners would endure in hell in order to display God's displeasure with sin, to vindicate his moral governance, and to make salvation both possible and just.¹⁶ In Finney's words, the

¹² For a profile of these New Divinity revivals, see David W. Kling, *A Field of Divine Wonders: The New Divinity and Village Revivals in Northwest Connecticut 1792–1822* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).

¹³ Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism*, 76, 125; Samuel Hopkins, one of Jonathan Edwards's two chief disciples, reformulated Edwards's ideas. These reconfigurations were often condemned as "Hopkinsianism" or "New Divinity." For a brief overview of Hopkinsianism, see Peter Jauhainen, "Samuel Hopkins and Hopkinsianism," in *After Jonathan Edwards: The Courses of the New England Theology* (ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Douglas A. Sweeney; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 107–17.

¹⁴ Charles Finney, *Finney's Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1976), 217.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 200.

atonement preserves “the government of a sin-hating God.”¹⁷ This expression of the divine hatred for sin was fundamental to the governmental scheme such that Horace Bushnell, a contemporary of Finney and an adherent of moral influence theory, described it simply as “abhorrence theory.”¹⁸ Finney labeled Christ’s death a “governmental transaction” because, in his view, the essence of the gospel is not the inherent value or worth of Christ’s sufferings (since nothing is transferred to the believer), but rather that Christ’s death became the “most illustrious exhibition” of the wisdom, benevolence, and character of the divine government.¹⁹

The Edwardsean concept of the atonement as a divine drama performed before the moral universe is what appealed most to Charles Finney, who viewed the work of Christ and his own highly public ministry in terms of the theatrical. He conceived of the atonement as an “exhibition” rather than an exchange because he believed that the *display* of Christ’s work, not its distribution, provided the greatest incentive to faith and virtuous living. The cross was an exhibition of divinity and an exhortation to godliness, a penal example that inspired the same “disinterested benevolence” it portrayed to the world.²⁰ In an 1834 sermon from Ezek 18:31 later published as “Sinners Bound to Change Their Own Hearts,” Finney concluded, “Now this is the case with the sinner; God has established a government, and proposed by the exhibition of his own character, to produce the greatest practicable amount of happiness in the universe.”²¹

Bequeathed to them in works like *The Freedom of the Will* and *Original Sin*, the Edwardseans coopted many of Jonathan Edwards’s principles in order to fashion a moral governmental doctrine of atonement that emphasized the personal responsibility of faith and the sovereignty of God in salvation. These two principles appealed greatly to Finney, and like the New Divinity, he rejected “the theological fiction of imputation” and the concept of retributive justice because they appeared to diminish divine grace and human agency.²² For Charles Finney, the traditional penal substitutionary understanding of the atonement was simply not practical for the Christian life. Finney’s first defense of his doctrine of atonement came in the early years of his ministry when he debated an adherent of Universalism, an old New Divinity foe. Like the Edwardseans, Finney’s primary objection to the Universalist idea of the atonement as a commercial payment was that it framed salvation

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁸ Horace Bushnell, *The Vicarious Sacrifice: Grounded in Principles of Universal Obligation* (New York: Charles Scribner & Co., 1866), 368.

¹⁹ Finney, *Systematic Theology*, 213, 215.

²⁰ “Disinterested Benevolence” was a practical Hopkinsian concept in response to Jonathan Edwards’s metaphysical and more abstract idea of “love to being in general” in *The Nature of True Virtue*. In this view, true benevolence did not seek its own good, but the good of others. Oliver Crisp has called the moral governmental view a “penal example” (Oliver D. Crisp, “The Moral Government of God: Jonathan Edwards and Joseph Bellamy on the Atonement,” in *After Jonathan Edwards: The Courses of the New England Theology*, edited by Oliver D. Crisp and Douglas A. Sweeney [New York: Oxford University Press, 2012], 86).

²¹ Charles G. Finney, “Sinners Bound to Change Their Own Hearts,” in *Sermons on Important Subjects* (3rd ed., New York: John S. Taylor, 1836), 3–42.

²² Finney, *Memoirs*, 57.

as something owed instead of something gifted, as if the sinner could presumptuously demand salvation at judgment instead of pleading for it. Finney sounded remarkably like Jonathan Edwards Jr. decades earlier when he insisted that Christ's death "rendered the salvation of all men possible" while inveighing against the idea that God is "under any obligation to save anybody."²³ In an effort to highlight human responsibility and divine sovereignty, Charles Finney applied an Edwardsean hermeneutic which interpreted the Bible's pecuniary language of "ransom," "redeem," and "debt" as strictly metaphorical.

Moral government was the most fundamental doctrine in Charles Finney's theological system because it punctuated the moral agency of God and man, both of which fit nicely into his revivalistic system. Early in his *Revival Lectures*, Finney was careful to define these two ideas. According to Finney, God is not an "arbitrary" being who arranges events without cause and effect. Instead, as a rational being, "God has connected means with the end, through all the departments of His government, in nature and in grace."²⁴ Likewise, as moral agents, humans "are not mere instruments in the hands of God," but instead are voluntary beings with the freedom to use these means at their disposal.²⁵ That which Charles Finney eschewed most was the capricious god of Old School Presbyterians who seemingly saved and damned sinners according to his mercurial and indecipherable will. In his place Finney described a God who was not only rational but also a bit predictable, who could be influenced and even summoned if the proper means were utilized. In fact, as Finney saw it, sparking a revival was about influencing both God and man in the right way: "There are two kinds of means requisite to promote a revival: the one to influence men, the other to influence God."²⁶ These were, in Finney's mind, the two most basic axioms of God's moral government. He declared, "There is one fact under the government of God worthy of universal notice and of everlasting remembrance; which is, that the most useful and important things are most easily and certainly obtained by the use of the appropriate means. This is evidently a principle in the Divine administration."²⁷

Moral government was therefore the dominant lens through which Charles Finney interpreted the atonement and theology as a whole, albeit with a heavy voluntarist twist. For instance, the first three chapters in Finney's *Systematic Theology* are "Moral Law," "Moral Government," and "Moral Obligation." Finney wrote and

²³ In Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism*, 34. According to Edwards the younger, who contended against Universalists John Murray and Charles Chauncy in his own day, "Suppose any one of you, my auditors, owes a certain sum, he goes and pays the full sum himself personally. Doubtless all will agree, that the creditor, in this case, when he gives up the obligation, performs a mere act of justice, in which there is no grace at all." (Jonathan Edwards Jr., "Grace Consistent with Atonement," in *The Atonement: Discourses and Treatises by Edwards, Smalley, Maxcy, Emmons, Griffin, Burge, and Weeks* [ed. Edwards Amasa Park; Boston, MA: Congregational Board of Publication, 1859], 16).

²⁴ Finney, *Revivals of Religion*, 14.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

spoke about moral government often because it encapsulated both the work of Christ and the duty of man. In an 1839 issue of *The Oberlin Evangelist*, Finney provided his readers with “a series of sermons on some doctrinal topics, especially the Moral Government of God, including the Atonement, and the Influences of the Holy Ghost, in the administration of that government.”²⁸ In the winter of 1842–1843, Finney even delivered an entire lecture series that was later published by his friend and benefactor Lewis Tappan entitled “Moral Government of God.” However, strictly speaking, this in no way means that Finney rejected penal substitution, as Horton has asserted. Like the Edwardseans and like many others during his era, Finney simply redefined these terms to suit his own revivalistic scheme. In his view, Christ’s “atonement is the governmental substitution of the sufferings of Christ for the punishment of sinners.”²⁹ In other words, Christ suffered *instead* of sinners, but not in their individual place. He was a substitute for punishments, not people. Christ’s atonement was a substitution to uphold the integrity of God’s moral government—a “governmental substitution”—but not in a one-to-one swap of merits and demerits. His was, one might say, an indirect substitution and not a direct exchange.

Nevertheless, Finney conceived of Christ’s work on the cross as a legitimate substitution. He explained, “As a governmental expedient it is easy to see the great value of such a substitute; that on the one hand it fully evinced the determination of the ruler not to yield the authority of his law, and on the other, to evince his great and disinterested love for his rebellious subjects.”³⁰ Although Christ’s substitution itself did not save, Finney believed it opened a way for the pardon of sins upon faith. “The atonement was the exhibition of a merciful disposition,” Finney insisted. “It was because God was disposed to pardon that he consented to give his own Son to die as the substitute for sinners.”³¹ Daniel Cooley and Douglas Sweeney’s description of the Edwardsean atonement as a “non-distributive form of penal substitution” is also appropriate for Finney’s view.³² Although Finney objected to the idea that Christ was “punished,” due to the idea that punishment implies guilt, Christ’s death was nonetheless “penal” in the sense that he endured a penalty upon the cross.

II. PUBLIC JUSTICE

But how could Charles Finney insist that Christ endured the “penalty” for sinners when he did not fulfill retributive justice under the law itself? As Horton himself has rightly shown, there is a logical distinction between the demonstration

²⁸ Charles G. Finney, *The Oberlin Evangelist* 2.1 (1 January 1839): 9.

²⁹ Finney, *Systematic Theology*, 197.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 208.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 215.

³² Daniel W. Cooley and Douglas A. Sweeney, “The Edwardseans and the Atonement,” in *A New Divinity: Transatlantic Reformed Evangelical Debates during the Long Eighteenth Century* (ed. Mark Jones and Michael A. G. Haykin; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), 122.

of justice and the fulfillment of justice.³³ And if Christ's sufferings were merely an "exhibition," how did Finney avoid the charge that his version of atonement was merely a subjective showcase before the world and not an objective satisfaction of real justice before God? The Finneyite atonement answered these critiques and fused moral governmental and moral influence themes with the critical concept of public justice. "By public justice is intended," Finney explained, "that due administration of law, that shall secure in the highest manner which the nature of the case admits, private and public interests, and establish the order and well-being of the universe."³⁴ Charles Finney believed that the truest sense of justice was the public welfare. More important in the will of God than allotting just deserts is the promotion of the highest degree of happiness for all. Therefore, in light of sin's public contempt for the law's impeccable character, God is less concerned with the punishment of sin itself and more concerned with gaining back what sin has stolen. "Public justice, by which every executive magistrate in the universe is bound, sternly and peremptorily forbids that mercy shall be extended to any culprit, without some equivalent being rendered to the government; that is, without something being done that will fully answer as a substitute for the execution of penalties."³⁵

Finney did not deny the existence of retributive justice in hell; he simply objected to the idea that retributive justice could ever truly be fulfilled, much less on behalf of someone else. By contrast, public justice allowed for a moral alternative by which God's wrath could be meted out, an act of "equivalent" suffering that reaffirms God's commitment to the cosmic good. Finney did not believe concepts like "good" and "wellbeing" to be completely subjective because they were derived in divine glory, an idea, if any, that qualified Finney as an Edwardsean in the vaguest sense.

One of the primary reasons Charles Finney's doctrine of atonement often appears so enigmatic to contemporary minds is owing to the fact that he did not place aesthetic ideas like "good" and legal ideas like "justice" in separate theological corners. The idea of public justice, a concept since lost in modern theological discussion, did not recognize a significant distinction between what is best and what is right. (In fact, instead of dismissing the concept of public justice, one of Finney's Southern Baptist contemporaries simply referred to it as goodness.³⁶) Therefore, when considering that God does all things for himself, Finney could boast, "This is wise and right in him, because his own glory and happiness are infinitely the greatest good in and to the universe. He made the atonement to satisfy himself."³⁷ Such statements demonstrate how Finney could seem to plant his feet in both penal satisfaction and moral influence theoretical camps while not truly standing in either.

³³ Horton, *Christian Faith*, 515.

³⁴ Finney, *Systematic Theology*, 201.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 200.

³⁶ John L. Dagg explains, "As this government tends to the greatest good of the universe, there appears to be no reason to deny that it originates in the goodness of God; and if it be ascribed to his Public Justice, that justice may be considered a modification of his goodness" (*Manual of Theology* [Harrisonburg, VA: Gano, 1982], 85).

³⁷ Finney, *Systematic Theology*, 210–11.

God intended good for himself and for others. In other words, Christ's death was also an exhibition to the Moral Governor himself. In his 1827 sermon "Blessedness of Benevolence," Finney preached, "Although multitudes of things connected with the Atonement were in themselves painful, yet, upon the whole, the great work was the source of infinite satisfaction to the Father and the Son."³⁸ In this semi-Anselmian sense, Christ satisfies a form of divine justice. As a trained lawyer, Finney was virtually incapable of framing the atonement in non-judicial terms. The Finneyite atonement was not simply an example to sinners and thus not a pure moral influence model. However, using the public elements endemic to the Edwardsean system, Finney retrofitted the moral governmental atonement with Abelardian themes in order to suit his revivalist purposes.³⁹

Where Charles Finney departed from the New Divinity concept of public justice, and where he began to incorporate moral influence themes, is in the relationship between the atonement and the law itself. In contrast with Edwardseans like Joseph Bellamy and Samuel Hopkins and Jonathan Edwards Jr., who accentuated the honor of the law, Charles Finney almost never spoke of divine honor in the context of the atonement. Instead, true to his pragmatic way of thinking, Finney believed that Christ's sufferings were aimed chiefly at demonstrating the *influence* of the law. "The thing required by public justice is, that nothing shall be done to undermine or disturb the influence of law."⁴⁰ If God's glory and the public good were the two chief goals of the moral governmental atonement, Charles Finney clearly emphasized the latter over the former, and he accomplished this by insisting that the law's purpose was just as pedagogical as it was doxological. In Finney's mind, Christ's death was performed to "effectually secure the influence of law."⁴¹ Without individual obedience to the law, something Finney believed was critical to justification, there could be no salvation. Therefore, Christ's death is a persuasion to all of the subjects in his moral universe that God will not allow his moral government to be subverted by sin. "The influence of law," Finney averred, "as might be expected, is found very much to depend upon the certainty felt by the subjects that it will be duly executed."⁴² Charles Finney effectively dramatized the moral governmental atonement as something which needed to convince the cosmos of God's goodness, his hatred of sin, and his worthiness to be followed. For the New Divinity, the authority of the law, once established by Christ's death, was its own virtuous incen-

³⁸ Charles Grandison Finney, "Blessedness of Benevolence," *The Oberlin Evangelist*, Lecture XII (June 3, 1840).

³⁹ Peter Abelard (1079–1142), a medieval French theologian, is often attributed with founding the moral influence theory of the atonement in response to the satisfaction theory of Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109). In Abelard's model, the purpose of Christ's death is to motivate mankind toward moral improvement.

⁴⁰ Finney, *Systematic Theology*, 197.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁴² *Ibid.*

tive.⁴³ However, for Charles Finney, the authority of the law and its ability to change someone's behavior were two very distinct ideas.

III. MORAL INFLUENCE

As Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe has observed, "Above all, Finney understood preaching as persuasion."⁴⁴ In some sense, Charles Finney understood *all* of theology as persuasion. In the Finneyite scheme, salvation is a three-part persuasion: (1) Christ persuades the world to obey through the cross; (2) sinners are persuaded to believe through the gospel; (3) and believers persuade God to send revival through prayer. This triangular theology of revival formed the bedrock of Finney's entire system and served as the impetus for the other half of his doctrine of atonement: moral influence. "An atonement was need to promote the glory and influence of God in the universe," Finney claimed. "An atonement was need to present overpowering motives to repentance."⁴⁵ While moral influence was not the primary lens through which Finney viewed the atonement, it was fundamental to his understanding of the Christian life. Finney unequivocally stated, "The atonement would present to creatures the highest possible motives to virtue. Example is the highest moral influence that can be exerted. If God, or any other being, would make others benevolent, he must manifest benevolence himself. If the benevolence manifested in the atonement does not subdue the selfishness of sinners, their case is hopeless."⁴⁶ Christ was not simply showing God's hatred of sin; he was wooing the American public toward a better life.

In many ways, Charles Finney stands as a transitional figure in American religion, and his doctrine of atonement is no different. Soteriologically speaking, Finney had one foot in the past and the other in the future. If moral governmental theory was the product of Great Awakening New England revivalism and moral influence theory the child of post-Calvinistic American liberal theology, Finney can be considered just as Bushnellian as he was Edwardsean. Both he and Horace Bushnell were shaped by or exhibited theological similarities with Yale's professor of didactic theology Nathaniel William Taylor, the controversial founder of the so-called New Haven Theology.⁴⁷ In fact, the two shared much more than a connection to Taylorism or an aversion to traditional Calvinism. In 1852, while traveling through the Midwest in order to improve his health, Bushnell stopped in Oberlin to visit Finney. Despite their disagreements regarding revivalism (Bushnell's *Chris-*

⁴³ Jonathan Edwards Jr. asserted, "By atonement I mean that which, as a substitute for the punishment which is threatened in the law, supports the authority of that law, and the dignity of the divine government." (Jonathan Edwards Jr., "Inferences and Reflections," in *The Atonement: Discourses and Treatises by Edwards, Smalley, Maxcy, Emmons, Griffin, Burge, and Weeks* (ed. Edwards Amasa Park [Boston, MA: Congregational Board of Publication, 1859], 31).

⁴⁴ Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism*, 35.

⁴⁵ Finney, *Systematic Theology*, 201.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁴⁷ For a comprehensive treatment of Taylor's theology, see Douglas A. Sweeney, *Nathaniel Taylor, New Haven Theology, and the Legacy of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

tian Nurture condemned revivalism as inimical to Christian community and order), the two got along remarkably well. According to Robert Bruce Mullin, Bushnell's biographer, "Both men were fascinated by the power of the Spirit, and each felt more comfortable speaking of religious experience than of fine points of doctrine."⁴⁸ In Bushnell, Finney found someone after his own practical heart. The two sat and talked, "agreeing in their aims and burning desires and in their belief that Christians might claim and receive far higher blessings than were usually supposed to be any part of our earthly inheritance."⁴⁹ The encounter was enough for the Congregationalist to conclude they were kindred souls. "I find God with him," Bushnell recorded satisfactorily.⁵⁰

With such a shared focus on religious experience and spiritual living, the fact that the two theologians shared a common emphasis on the moral influence of Christ's atoning work is fitting. In fact, moral influence became one of the most significant themes in Charles Finney's doctrine of atonement. Finney asked,

Who does not know that the natural tendency of manifested love is to excite love in return? Those who have the most cordially believed in the atonement, have exhibited the purest morality that has ever been in this world; while the rejecters of the atonement, almost without exception, exhibit a loose morality. This is, as might be expected, from the very nature and moral influence of the atonement.⁵¹

Still, the critical difference between Finney and Bushnell is that Finney could not conceive of the moral influence of Christ's atonement without the moral government of God. Robert Caldwell is correct to identify an "Edwardsean superstructure" that informed nearly every aspect of Finney's theology.⁵² Indeed, Finney's version of moral government was a government of influence. Finney had so democratized the Edwardsean idea of moral government that rectoral justice was just as dependent upon human free will as it was on the character of the Moral Governor. According to Finney,

Moral government presides over and controls, or seeks to control the actions of free will: it presides over intelligent and voluntary states and changes of mind. It is a government of motive, as opposed to a government of force – control exercised, or sought to be exercised, in accordance with the law of liberty, as opposed to the law of necessity. It is the administration of moral as opposed to physical law.⁵³

⁴⁸ Robert Bruce Mullin, *The Puritan as Yankee: A Life of Horace Bushnell* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 181–82.

⁴⁹ Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 532.

⁵⁰ In Mullin, *Puritan as Yankee*, 182.

⁵¹ Finney, *Systematic Theology*, 216.

⁵² Robert W. Caldwell III, *Theologies of the American Revivalists: From Whitefield to Finney* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 171.

⁵³ Finney, *Systematic Theology*, 6.

If moral government formed the backbone of the Finneyite atonement, motives and motivations were its lifeblood. As a result, Charles Finney's doctrine of atonement was a conscious synthesis of both moral governmental and moral influence theories, with the former serving as the theological scaffolding for the latter. In Finney's mind, even personal holiness was an extension of God's moral government.⁵⁴ Therefore, by dispensing with Edwards's notion of moral inability and the traditional Calvinistic doctrine of justification, and by stressing the moral influence of the atonement, Finney found a way to tether the work of Christ with the work of the sinner under the banner of God's moral government.⁵⁵ The result can best be described as a "governmental and influential substitution."

IV. A GOVERNMENTAL AND INFLUENTIAL SUBSTITUTION

Charles Finney was a reformer. Therefore, despite his innovation, he was not creating a doctrine of atonement *de novo*. Just as Edwards bequeathed his own theological DNA to the Edwardsean system, the New Divinity provided the basic contents to Finney's doctrine of atonement. In his *True Religion Delineated*, Joseph Bellamy explained that Christ died "so that the law is honored, and sin is embittered, and the sinner humbled, and grace glorified, all at once. As in the external revelation God has made in his word, the law is before the gospel; so it is in internal influences and operations of the Holy Spirit upon the elect; and that for the same reason, that the law might be a school-master to bring men to Christ."⁵⁶ Bellamy and the Edwardseans were also concerned with divine influences and the moral outcome of the atonement. However, holding fast to the doctrine of moral inability, the New Divinity believed that it was the *Holy Spirit* who served as the principal influencer of sinners, not Christ or the law. Christ suffered for the honor of the law, not for its immediate influence. In his sermon "Grace Consistent with Atonement," Jonathan Edwards Jr. insisted, "If it be said that Christ's obedience only honors and magnifies the law, I answer, no more is done by the sufferings of Christ."⁵⁷ In the New Divinity scheme, the law plays no significant role in the salvation of the sinner beyond its restoration in the death of Christ and its impetus toward faith in the Savior. The crucified Christ is the object of faith and the ground of salvation.

The Edwardseans were not traditional Calvinists, but they were Calvinists nonetheless. As a result, due to their firm adherence to the doctrine of unconditional election, these "Consistent Calvinists" made a firm distinction between the work of Christ and the work of the Spirit, a distinction not as concrete in the mind of Charles Finney. Once again, persuasion is key. Just as Christ's death is a persuasion, the Holy Spirit's role is to persuade the sinner of the law's influence for which

⁵⁴ Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism*, 188.

⁵⁵ Sean Michael Lucas, "Charles Finney's Theology of Revival: Moral Depravity," *Master's Seminary Journal* 6.2 (Fall 1995): 197–221.

⁵⁶ Joseph Bellamy, *True Religion Delineated*, in *The Works of the Rev. Joseph Bellamy, D.D., Late of Bethlem, Connecticut*, Vol. 1 (New York: Stephen Dodge, 1811), 125.

⁵⁷ Jonathan Edwards Jr., "Grace Consistent with Atonement," 25.

Christ died: "The Spirit takes of the things of Christ and shows them to the soul. The truth is employed, or it is truth which must necessarily be employed, as an instrument to induce a change of choice."⁵⁸ Whereas the New Divinity were concerned with maintaining human freedom for the goal of faith in Christ, Finney was decidedly committed to the idea of choice for the sake of obedience to the law. For Finney, "present, full, and entire consecration of heart and life to God and his service, is an unalterable condition of present pardon of past sin, and of present acceptance with God." Conversely, Finney objected to the idea of one act of faith that "obtains for him a perpetual justification."⁵⁹ In order to allow for an Arminian doctrine of justification, Finney fashioned a doctrine of atonement concerned just as much with human ethics as it was the divine ethic. Even Finney's idea of justice was oriented toward human behavior more than divine honor. According to Finney, "The great design of penalties is prevention, and this of course the design of executing penalties."⁶⁰ For the Edwardseans, the law was the instrument of faith and Christ its object. For Charles Finney, Christ was the instrument of faith, and the law its object. However, each developed their respective systems with the glory of God as their chief end.

The greatest difference between the Edwardsean and the Finneyite doctrines of atonement, and where Charles Finney offered his most original insights into the nature of Christ's death, is regarding the audience of the atonement. Unlike the traditional penal substitutionary theory, in the moral governmental model, Christ's death is a truly triangular event. As opposed to a sacrifice between Christ the Son and God the Father *on behalf* of the elect, the moral governmental atonement conceives of the cross as something between Christ the Son and God the Moral Governor *in front of* the world. The Edwardsean atonement is a soteriological matter between three parties in a cosmic room, each intimately involved in the spectacle at Calvary. While Christ is satisfying the personal wrath of the Moral Governor, it is a *public* justice to which he offers himself, and therefore the eyes of the moral universe give eternal weight and meaning to his atonement. In other words, without a cosmic audience, Christ's atonement would mean virtually nothing to a God whose reputation has been tarnished by sin. Therefore, the crucifixion, according to the Edwardseans, is performed *to* the Moral Governor *before* the moral universe. Charles Finney, however, seemed to reverse the divine triangle in the moral governmental atonement. In his mind, because the moral influence of the law is paramount in the moral government of God, Christ's death is primarily performed *to* the moral universe *before* the Moral Governor. In this way, without dispensing with public justice or blatantly diminishing the glory of God, Finney operated according to the Edwardsean scheme but in a different order. The terms are the same but the goal is very different. The denizens of the moral universe are no longer merely spectators to the atonement; they are, in some ways, participants in the event ac-

⁵⁸ Finney, *Systematic Theology*, 224.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 328–29.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 200.

completed for their good. In this sense, the Finneyite atonement remains an Edwardsean atonement, but with much different revivalistic priorities when it comes to glory and goodness: "In establishing a government and promulgating law, the lawgiver is always understood as pledging himself duly to administer the laws in support of public order, and for the promotion of public morals, to reward the innocent with his favor and protection, and to punish the disobedient with the loss of his protection and favor."⁶¹ In some sense, by molding God even further into the image of American public servants, Charles Finney engineered a way to stress the importance of human choice and to maintain the glory of the Moral Governor, but at the expense of divine sovereignty, at least in the Calvinistic sense.

As evangelicalism passes into the twenty-first century, the finer points of Charles Finney's theology will likely appear increasingly rudimentary and perplexing. In truth, Finney's system of thought was not nearly as consistent or meticulous as his Northampton hero. However, despite his role as a trailblazer of American revivalism, Finney's doctrine of atonement stands as a reminder that he was also a man of his own time, drawing from multiple Protestant traditions and reforming them for his own modern brand of revivalistic theology. On one hand, the Finneyite atonement combined the dramatic presence of *Christus Victor*, the satisfaction theme of Anselm, the substitutionary elements of penal substitution, the rectoral framework of moral government, and the ethical focus of moral influence, all into one. On the other hand, Finney's version resembled none of these historical theories of the atonement. Perhaps the reason contemporary evangelicals can make so little sense of Finney's theology is the fact that they still have much to learn about the movements that have shaped their own history. Indeed, Finney embodies several. While the Finneyite atonement was certainly an eclectic doctrine, it can best be summarized as a governmental and influential substitution, bringing together the evangelical past and future, and still forcing today's evangelicals to choose which side of themselves they wish to become.

⁶¹Ibid., 195.