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by

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**A Faith Performed:**

**A Performance Analysis of the Religious Revivals Conducted by  
Charles Grandison Finney at the Chatham Street Chapel, 1832-1836**

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**A Faith Performed:  
A Performance Analysis of the Religious Revivals Conducted by  
Charles Grandison Finney at the Chatham Street Chapel, 1832-1836**

by

**Bradley Wright Griffin, B.A.; M.A.**

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For her love and, more importantly, her patience,

I dedicate this dissertation to Linn.

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Charles Grandison Finney was a self-trained Presbyterian minister whose career spanned the greater part of the nineteenth century. From the date of his ordination as an evangelist in 1824 until his death in 1875, Finney preached an unorthodox gospel that privileged the performance of Christianity in everyday life as the chief indicator of one's faith. After holding a successful series of revival meetings in the winter of 1830-1831, he gained national prominence and received invitations to preach revivals all across the eastern United States and even in Great Britain.

In 1832, Finney was installed as pastor of the Chatham Street Chapel in New York City. Located on Manhattan's lower east side, the chapel had been built eight years earlier as the Chatham Garden Theatre. At a cost of \$7000, the theatre was leased and converted into a church. Standing on a proscenium-arch

stage and preaching to packed houses of 2,500 spectators, Finney developed and perfected a style of worship performance that would forever change the course of revivalism. While scholars in the field of religious studies have written extensively about Finney, my research approaches his ideas and practices from a performance perspective and asks the following question: “How did Charles Finney reconstruct the performance of public worship through the preparation and enactment of his revivals in New York City, from 1832 to 1836?”

To answer this question, I have adapted a methodology of performance analysis first articulated by performance theorist and practitioner Richard Schechner in his essay, “Drama, Script, Theater, and Performance.” Schechner deconstructs the elements of the performance event in order to understand how the fluid line delineating performers and spectators is so often and so easily crossed. In my work, I have adapted Schechner’s four-fold model to examine Finney’s theology, performance style, venue, and audience. Using Finney’s lectures and memoirs, his personal correspondence, and the recorded memories of colleagues and former students, I have reconstructed a typical Finney revival. My work positions Finney’s career within the theatre culture of the early nineteenth century and puts his revivals in conversation with the performance traditions of his day.

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## Chapter 1

### Of Pulpits and Performances, an Introduction

In early nineteenth-century America, church-going Christians were instructed explicitly *not* to attend the theatre. Period. No question. End of discussion. The dangers of theatre attendance were proclaimed from the pulpit and by religious organizations such as the American Tract Society, whose members annually distributed millions of pamphlets containing warnings like the following:

If you call yourself a *Christian*, or have any desire worthily to bear that hallowed name – can you ever again be seen within the walls of a theatre?...Every time you go to that scene of temptation and vice, you sin against your family, if you have any; against the purity and order of civil society; and against God; as well as against your own soul.<sup>1</sup>

Half a century before London theatre critic Clement Scott derided Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* for taking audiences into the moral sewer, and a century before Antonin Artaud touted the therapeutic benefits of "drain[ing] abscesses collectively" in his "Theatre of Cruelty" manifesto, Christian reformers were already protesting theatres as houses of vice and moral corruption.<sup>2</sup> And indeed, as theatre

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<sup>1</sup> "Tract No. 130: Theatrical Exhibitions," *Publications of the American Tract Society*, vol. V. (New York: American Tract Society, 1827-1833), pp. 17-28. See p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> Clement Scott, Review of *Ghosts*, *The Illustrated London News*, March 21, 1891. Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, Mary Caroline Richards, trans., (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 31.

historian Claudia D. Johnson has written in “That Guilty Third Tier: Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century American Theaters,” such accusations were not ill-founded.<sup>3</sup> It seems that the play was not the only thing to catch the conscience of the moral watchdogs. In the theatre one routinely found audience members engaged in drunkenness, prostitution, and generally disreputable behavior.

This dissertation began as an exploration of an event that brought a community of church-going Christians into direct contact with the American theatre of the early nineteenth century. In April 1832, the doors of New York’s Chatham Garden Theatre were closed, only to reopen six weeks later as a Presbyterian church that would be known as the Chatham Street Chapel. Journalists, theatre critics, and religious clerics had never witnessed such a transformation, and the result created a public sensation. Adding to the excitement surrounding the transformation was the appointment of Charles Grandison Finney to pastor the new congregation. A young, enterprising minister from upstate New York, Finney had already raised the ire of orthodox Presbyterians throughout the country with his questionable evangelical methods and ideas. Given its morally-suspect venue and celebrity pastor, the theatre/church in Chatham Street became famous almost overnight. New members joined the congregation in a steady stream. Under Finney’s careful tutelage, the enthusiastic congregation quickly set about re-writing the rulebook for conducting revivals of religion. For the first few months it was in operation, the

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<sup>3</sup> Claudia D. Johnson, “That Guilty Third Tier: Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century American Theaters,” *American Quarterly*, v. 27, no. 5 (December 1975) pp. 575-584.

chapel's doors were open almost as frequently as those of its theatrical predecessor; Finney held services nearly every night and encouraged audiences to return for subsequent performances with the understanding that he would deliver new feats of faith nightly. I will examine Finney's methods at length in the following chapters.

My interest in Charles Finney is two-fold. First, as a performance scholar, I am fascinated by the ways in which Finney overhauled the practice of conducting religious revivals. He discarded the long-held belief that revivals were unpredictable, divinely-appointed occurrences. Instead, he popularized a pragmatic approach: Finney situated religious revivals as the expected result of a carefully executed plan. Second, as the worship leader of the University Avenue Church of Christ in Austin, Texas, I also identify with Finney as a fellow "worship practitioner." Week after week, I participate in the service, enabling individuals, transformed by architecture and common belief, to become a congregation engaged in public worship. In an era when many churches are throwing out traditional worship styles in favor of updated, technology-laden, user-friendly approaches, the quest for the next new thing has unwittingly led them back to some of the same methods Finney developed. I am struck by the ways in which Finney's impact on worship performance continues to reverberate in the twenty-first-century, Protestant, evangelical landscape. My dual interests in Charles Finney and the performance of public worship form the framework of this dissertation and have led me to the following research question: "How did

Charles Finney reconstruct the performance of public worship through the preparation and enactment of his revivals in New York City, 1832-1836?”

While it is my express purpose in the chapters that follow to answer this question in detail, I must first answer three smaller questions surrounding this study. First, why examine Charles Finney, and why study this period and locale of his ministry in particular? Second, what do I mean by the performance of public worship? Third and finally, why am I focusing exclusively on revivals?

### **Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875), The Consummate “Pulpit Actor”<sup>4</sup>**

The name Charles Finney first appeared on my scholarly radar screen several years ago while I was researching an entirely unrelated subject. In an essay by historian Peter Buckley on nineteenth-century American paratheatrical entertainments, I encountered a brief description of Finney’s career, his performance techniques, and the buildings in which he conducted his services.<sup>5</sup> Knowing the animosity between church and stage that had persisted throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, I was surprised to discover the deliberate conflation of the two in the form of the Chatham Street Chapel/Chatham Garden Theatre.

I discovered, to my initial disappointment and chagrin, that there is no dearth of scholarship about Finney’s life, theology, and career. “Few individuals,”

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<sup>4</sup> William G. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York: Ronald, 1959), p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Peter G. Buckley, “Paratheatricals and Popular Stage Entertainment,” *The Cambridge History of American Theatre: Beginnings to 1870, Volume I*, Don B. Wilmet and Christopher Bigsby, eds., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 424-481.

notes historian Charles Sellers, “have left as deep a mark on American culture.”<sup>6</sup> And as the preface to the first edition of Finney’s *Memoirs* declared, “few men have better earned the right to utter their own thoughts, in their own words.”<sup>7</sup> The more I read, however, the more I realized that the deep marks and utterances left by Finney had been analyzed primarily from theological and religio-historical points of view. My own reading, to echo Sellers, was leaving quite a different mark. Instead of seeing Finney as a prominent evangelist or renegade theologian, I thought of him in nineteenth-century performance terms: playwright, virtuoso, actor-manager, star. The language of the stage made Finney come alive for me. In this dissertation, therefore, I have treated Finney as a performer, his worship services as the dramatic construction of his virtuosity. And I have summarized his theological arguments in ways that are intended to provide sufficient clarity to performance scholars without being overly reductive.

In 1821, Charles Grandison Finney was a lawyer practicing in upstate New York when he had a profound conversion experience that changed the course of his entire life. With a quickness that might have made a tort lawyer sue for whiplash, Finney abandoned his legal career and began studying to be ordained as a minister in the Presbyterian Church of America. His path to the pulpit was hardly conventional. Instead of attending Princeton seminary, Finney studied under a private tutor, the Rev. George Gale (1789-1861), who was only

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 225.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Grandison Finney, *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text* (hereafter, “*Memoirs*”), Garth M. Rosell and Richard A. G. Dupuis, eds., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) p. xv.

three years Finney's senior. A resistant pupil, Finney debated long-accepted points of Presbyterian doctrine with his mentor, and by his own admission, he never bothered to learn some of the foundational truths held by the denomination – an oversight that would foment controversy in years to come. So recalcitrant was Finney in his refusal to accept the Calvinist tenets of Presbyterianism that after hearing him preach his first sermon, Gale remarked, "I shall be very much ashamed to have it known, wherever you go, that you studied theology with me."<sup>8</sup> And yet, despite his different opinions and the gaps in his knowledge of Presbyterian doctrine, Finney was ordained as an evangelist in 1824.

After his ordination, Finney worked as an itinerant evangelist for the first seven years of his ministry, and he and his first wife, Lydia (1804-1847), followed the call to preach wherever it led. Unencumbered by many of the finer points of Presbyterian thought and burning with a zeal to make religion relevant to his audiences, Finney first made a name for himself conducting revival meetings throughout the western regions of New York state. His reputation for achieving tremendous numbers of conversions spread, and he was soon inundated with requests to preach in places as far west as Ohio, and as far south as North Carolina. In the winter of 1830-31, Finney received national attention for the overwhelming success of his revival work in Rochester, New York. This success, in turn, brought invitations for him to conduct revivals in more high-profile, metropolitan areas. Finney spent the winter of 1831-32 preaching in Boston,

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<sup>8</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 54.

before going to New York to accept the pastorate of the Chatham Street Chapel, formally known as the Second Free Presbyterian Church of New York City.

I have restricted the scope of my study to the years 1832-1836 to correspond with the time Finney preached in New York City at the Chatham Street Chapel. The four years he spent there marked the longest sojourn to date of his young career. For the first time since he had been ordained, Finney found himself serving a congregation of familiar faces. His tenure at the chapel was remarkable for the ways in which he challenged notions of acceptable “worship performance,” a term I will define in greater detail. Finney also faced several incredible personal and professional difficulties there. First, on the very day of his installation as pastor, he contracted cholera, and although he did not die of the disease, his health would never fully recover. Second, friends and opponents alike frequently questioned the efficacy and ethics of Finney’s theatrical revival techniques. Third, the chapel itself became the site of racially-fueled violence as groups with opposing views on abolition clashed there and nearly destroyed the building. Amid these difficulties, Finney’s personal dissatisfaction with the Presbyterian Church, its theology, and its leadership became so pointed that he ultimately severed ties with the denomination in 1836. He then became the pastor of the Broadway Tabernacle, a Congregational church in New York City that met in a new amphitheatre-style building designed by Finney himself.<sup>9</sup> His

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<sup>9</sup> Finney’s renunciation of Presbyterianism and subsequent adoption of Congregationalism was not as dramatic a shift as it might appear. The two denominations shared many of the same beliefs; Calvinism was the main sticking point that divided them. See chapter 2.

tenure at the Tabernacle was brief; he left New York in 1837 to teach theology at the fledgling Oberlin College, in Oberlin, Ohio, where he served as president from 1851 until 1866.

At the request of Oberlin's Board of Trustees, Finney recorded his memoirs, although he refused to have them published until after his death. Written at the end of his life, the memoirs reveal Finney's revisionist tendencies in the way he recalls events and disagreements, while also underscoring his preoccupation with social class (despite his public claims of egalitarianism). Following Finney's death in Oberlin on August 16, 1875, at the age of eighty-two, Oberlin President J. H. Fairchild prepared and published the original 1876 edition of the memoirs. Fairchild liberally edited the manuscript, which did not shy away from the theological controversies that had accented Finney's lengthy career. He felt it necessary to omit, or at least soften, some of the more incendiary incidents recorded in his friend's tome, despite its posthumous publication. Apart from the original handwritten manuscript housed in the Oberlin College Archives, Fairchild's was the only version of the memoirs available for more than a century. In 1989, historians Garth Rosell and Richard Dupuis published a new version of the memoirs, subtitled "The Complete Restored Text." Going back to the handwritten manuscript recorded by Finney's amanuensis, the Rev. Henry Matson, Rosell and Dupuis reinserted all of the comments that Fairchild had either deleted or altered. In addition, they provided detailed footnotes to illuminate the myriad names, places, and events to which Finney alludes in the text.

Although it occasionally reveals minor contradictions, Finney's personal correspondence, now cataloged and microfilmed in the Oberlin College Archives, largely corroborates his recollection of life events as they were recorded in his memoirs. I have relied heavily on these letters to capture the tenor of Finney's experience in New York City. Of particular importance are the letters exchanged between Finney and Lewis Tappan (1788-1873), whose tireless work and personal financial support made the Chatham Street Chapel a reality. Lewis Tappan, in partnership with his elder brother, Arthur, was a prominent silk merchant in New York City and a vocal supporter of abolition, temperance, and other benevolence causes. His zeal to convert the Chatham Garden Theatre into a church seemed, at times, even to outweigh Finney's own investment in the cause. Finney and Tappan were effusive correspondents. The Finney archives contain only the letters Finney received, and not those he sent. Other sources, such as historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown's biography of Tappan and the collected correspondence of prominent abolitionist Theodore Dwight Weld, contain letters from Finney.<sup>10</sup> By piecing these sources together, I have been able to construct a composite picture of their relationship.

One would naturally expect written sermons to provide a rich vein of primary source material when researching a minister, but Finney made a point of differentiating himself from the "droning" style of his Presbyterian brethren by

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<sup>10</sup> See Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Lewis Tappan and the Evangelical War Against Slavery* (Cleveland, OH: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1969), and *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimke Weld and Sarah Grimke, 1822-1844* (hereafter, *Letters of TDW*), edited by Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, Incorporated, 1934).

preaching extemporaneously. It was not until late in his career that he began to make complete outlines of his sermons. During the early years of his ministry, he frequently entered the pulpit empty-handed, or at most carried a brief outline of ideas that he called a “skeleton.”<sup>11</sup> He had little need for a Bible in the pulpit since he had committed much of scripture to memory. There is, however, a collection of Finney’s lectures on how to conduct and promote revivals that has been crucial to my analysis. These were serialized in *The New-York Evangelist*, a religious weekly published by Finney supporter Joshua Leavitt (1794-1873), who attended the lectures, recorded them in short-hand, and immediately transcribed them for publication. The interest in these lectures translated into record newsstand sales that rescued Leavitt’s failing *Evangelist* from bankruptcy.<sup>12</sup> Following the completion of the series, the speeches were bound and sold as *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, a veritable how-to manual for anyone seeking to replicate Finney’s trademark style.<sup>13</sup>

Popular in the United States and Great Britain, the *Lectures* established Finney as a worship authority. Following their publication, requests to preach came even more frequently than before and spanned the Atlantic. By the end of his life, Finney had participated in two series of revival meetings in Great Britain, in addition to his ceaseless work in the United States. Like a magician revealing

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<sup>11</sup> *Memoirs*, pp. 94-95.

<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, sales of the *Evangelist* had declined because of Leavitt’s use of the paper as a mouthpiece to promote abolition. Finney had warned Leavitt to steer clear of the topic, but the editor failed to heed the advice. See Chapter 6 for a more detailed discussion of the events that led to the paper’s financial difficulties.

<sup>13</sup> See Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (hereafter, *L.R.R.*), William G. McLoughlin, ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960).

his secrets, Finney lays bare the process of promoting, organizing, and sustaining revivals in his *Lectures*. His pragmatic approach, so important to this study, focuses almost exclusively on the human element of revivals and downplays the spiritual influence.

Quoting extensively from both the Fairchild edition of the *Memoirs* and the *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, George Frederick Wright's 1891 biography of Finney uses the minister's own words to situate the development of his theology in the context of the events of his life.<sup>14</sup> Wright's was the first, book-length biography of Finney, and although the reliance on first-person reminiscences by friends and colleagues occasionally allowed for blatant eulogizing, it remained the only comprehensive, popular treatment of Finney for nearly one hundred years.

In 1987 historian Keith J. Hardman provided a much-needed update to Finney scholarship with the publication of a comprehensive biography that made use of primary source materials that had been unavailable to Wright a century before.<sup>15</sup> Hardman's work addresses one of the great paradoxes of Finney's career: Finney purported to preach an apolitical gospel in a highly political climate. In particular, Hardman notes the personal and political tension between Finney and Lewis Tappan. The former wanted nothing to do with any cause that would take him away from the work of revivals. The latter's outspoken

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<sup>14</sup> G. F. Wright, *Charles Grandison Finney* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1891).

<sup>15</sup> Keith J. Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney, 1792-1875: Revivalist and Reformer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987).

commitment to benevolence causes brought ridicule and even mob violence to him and his family. As Hardman notes, Tappan grew increasingly frustrated with Finney, who refused to take an active role in the abolition debates.

Two recent book-length studies of Finney assess the minister's career from decidedly different viewpoints. Written as part of the Library of Religious Biography series published by W. B. Eerdmans, Charles Hambrick-Stowe's 1996 biography draws heavily from the insights of Hardman and Rosell and Dupuis.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, the conscious omission of footnotes or any other attribution aids renders the book nearly useless as an academic reference. True to the goal of the series, however, it succeeds in depicting Finney's life in a highly readable format, provided that the reader is not disturbed by the supporting quotations that appear unattributed. Published in 2002, David Chesebrough's *Charles G. Finney: Revivalistic Rhetoric* provides a brief overview of Finney's life as a preamble to the author's true purpose of analyzing the rhetorical devices Finney employed in his sermons.<sup>17</sup> A slim volume, Chesebrough's work nevertheless reveals the difficulty of recapturing Finney's performance style when both Finney and any eye-witnesses who may have attended his revivals are long dead. Relying on the only sermons known to have been written by Finney in his own hand, Chesebrough searches the development of Finney's argument for clues to the minister's style of delivery.

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<sup>16</sup> Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996).

<sup>17</sup> David B. Chesebrough, *Charles G. Finney: Revivalistic Rhetoric*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002).

No twentieth-century scholar has written more eloquently or thoroughly about revivals than William G. McLoughlin. His name appears repeatedly in any article or book on the subject. McLoughlin edited the 1960 annotated edition of Finney's *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, correcting many of the errors from previous versions. In fifty pages, his introduction to the *Lectures* crystallizes the serpentine progression of Finney's theological development while also providing useful background material on Finney's contemporary ministers, including those who supported him and those who opposed him outright. McLoughlin's *Modern Revivalism* posits Finney as the father of the modern revival movement that had, at the time of McLoughlin's writing in 1959, found its apotheosis in the massive "crusades" then being conducted by Billy Graham.<sup>18</sup> He has helped me to articulate the ways in which Finney's worship performance techniques revolutionized the practice of conducting revivals, a revolution whose repercussions one can still witness today. McLoughlin's work focuses on the theological and social criteria that have made the United States ripe for wave upon wave of revival movements, and his knowledge of the field has provided a sturdy platform on which to build my own project.

### **Public Worship as Worship Performance**

A nineteenth-century evangelical revival. A Catholic mass. A Jewish Seder. A non-denominational Promise Keepers' rally. Regardless of faith tradition

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<sup>18</sup> William G. McLoughlin, Jr., *Modern Revivalism: Charles G. Finney to Billy Graham*, (New York: Ronald Press Co., 1959).

or time period, any act of public worship is performance. In this dissertation, I have deliberately chosen to conflate these terms into the phrase *worship performance*. Interpreted broadly, worship performance is not so different from a work of performance art. Both rest on the premise that the process constitutes the performance. Both encourage their audiences to do things freely, collectively, and openly that they might not do otherwise. Indeed, both seek to break down the distinction between performers and audience, or insiders and outsiders. Each hopes to create, if only temporarily, a community that holds the promise of being more than the sum of its parts. It is the act of participating in a worship performance that makes a congregation out of a group of individuals. And while public worship contains many ritual elements, the worship performance does not succeed or fail on the basis of how these rituals are performed. The process need not be perfect in order to be efficacious. Despite those who take pleasure in rating sermons the same way film critics rate new releases, worship performance transcends the sermon or any other single element of the service to encompass the entire event. And the effects of worship performance linger. Even after the congregation has dispersed, they carry remnants of the performance with them, traces that continue to stir the emotions, the mind, or even – as Artaud predicted – the viscera.

Worship performance, in this sense, rejects the Wagnerian concept of the *gesamtkunstwerk* in which all extraneous influences – those not relevant to the “show” – are carefully pruned in order to reveal the work of art in its “intended”

form. By contrast, worship performance invites happenstance, welcomes intrusions, and feeds on the accidental. Art historian and performance scholar Henry Sayre notes that, in performance, “the potentially disruptive forces of the ‘outside’ ...are encouraged to assert themselves.”<sup>19</sup> While Wagner turns in his grave whenever someone claps at an inappropriate moment during the *Ring*, “it is ... upon the dynamics of such intrusions,” continues Sayre, “that performance has come to focus its attention” (94). This explanation dovetails with performance theorist Richard Schechner’s definition of performance as “the whole constellation of events, most of them passing unnoticed, that take place in/among both performers and audience from the time the first spectator enters the field of performance...to the time the last spectator leaves.”<sup>20</sup> For both Sayre and Schechner, and for me, too, the “performance” encompasses more than what happens on the stage.

A reading of public worship as performance thus seeks to understand the worship event in its widest possible context. The theology of Finney’s sermons formed the core of the revival. He expressed his theology through his trademark style. In the space of the Chatham Street Chapel, his style was augmented by the physical trappings of the building and by its former existence as a theatre. Finney’s audience experienced his sermons as part of a carefully-planned worship service, but they could never forget that the service occurred in a space

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<sup>19</sup> Henry Sayre, “Performance,” *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, eds., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) pp. 91-104. See p. 94.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Schechner, “Drama, Script, Theater, and Performance,” (hereafter, “D.S.T.P.”) *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988) pp. 68-105. See p. 72.

that boasted a proscenium arch instead of a cross, an immense stage instead of an elevated pulpit. As I will demonstrate, Finney's worship performance traded heavily in the currency of popular culture. While he sought control over both the form and content of his revival services, he framed his work in the language and location of the theatre. Audiences were drawn to worship at the Chatham Street Chapel with the same anticipation that would have accompanied an evening at the Bowery or the Park Theatres.

### **Revivals: The Most Performative Public Worship**

I am interested in revival services, in particular, because of the way they functioned as self-contained performance events. Each evening offered audience members the possibility of witnessing intensely personal, emotional displays not only from the minister, but also from each other. In her book, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre*, Gay McAuley cites a study of eighteenth-century audience behavior from which she concludes "that displaying one's emotional response [during a performance] was as much part of the pleasure of the theatre as displaying one's person."<sup>21</sup> Just as theatre audiences expected to be emotionally moved by the experience of theatregoing, revival audiences could be assured that a revival meeting would explore the emotional peaks and valleys of the human experience.

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<sup>21</sup> Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making meaning in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), p. 248.

In the early nineteenth century, revivals consisted of “protracted meetings,” gatherings that were typically held at least four nights in a row and occasionally stretched into nightly sessions that continued for weeks at a time.<sup>22</sup> In their composition, revival audiences tended to reflect the socio-economic status of the congregations that sponsored the events. It was not anomalous for wealthier congregations to host revival meetings, but it was rare. It was so rare, in fact, that whenever wealthy, socially prominent individuals responded to one of Finney’s revivals, he made special note of the event. In Rochester, for example, Finney discovered excitedly “that the Lord was aiming at the conversion of the highest classes of society.”<sup>23</sup> In his *Memoirs*, he claimed that his main goal had always been to preach the gospel to the poor (362), but that goal never precluded him from noting those converts who came from more affluent circles. At the Chatham Street Chapel, which was located in the ethnically-diverse, economically-depressed area of Five Points on Manhattan’s lower east side, Finney preached to an audience comprised primarily of the lower and working classes.<sup>24</sup> While the congregation had a small percentage of African-American members, Finney’s revival services attracted a predominantly Caucasian audience.

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<sup>22</sup> McLoughlin writes that Finney’s use of protracted meetings began with the Rochester revival of 1830-31. See *Modern Revivalism*, p. 57.

<sup>23</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 306.

<sup>24</sup> Tyler Anbinder’s recent book on Five Points provides an incredibly thorough and well-researched analysis of this area that Finney considered “the heart of the most irreligious population in New York” (*Memoirs*, p. 354). See Anbinder, *Five Points: The 19<sup>th</sup>-Century New York City Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World’s Most Notorious Slum* (New York: The Free Press, 2001).

The goal of the revival was to “awaken” people to their need for God, and revivals were often as much about reaching in as they were about reaching out. Prior to Finney, most ministers believed revivals could only be appointed by God, not manufactured. For these ministers, “revival” defined a state of emotional and spiritual awareness among members, rather than a particular type of meeting. Ministers prayed for revival to rekindle enthusiasm and spiritual dedication among the members of their congregations. As McLoughlin has written, they believed revivals were “prayed down,” whereas Finney maintained that they were “worked up.”<sup>25</sup> Finney believed this type of spiritual rekindling could be achieved through pragmatic, human means, and he saw no need to wait for God’s providence. He expected audience members to work for the revival effort. Their re-awakening would come through spiritual and physical labor.

Once the members were properly awakened and filled with revival spirit, the meetings were then focused on outsiders, individuals who either professed no Christian faith or had “backslidden” from their once-faithful church attendance. While numeric growth was not the only goal of revival meetings, it was – and still is – one of the easiest ways to document the success of these events. Successful revivals could occasionally yield enough new members to spin-off, or “birth,” an entirely new congregation. Shortly after Finney’s revival took hold at the Chatham Street Chapel, in fact, attendance increased until it became

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<sup>25</sup> *Modern Revivalism*, p. 11.

expedient to send a group of thirty-five members off to form a new congregation. They became the city's Fourth Free Presbyterian Church.<sup>26</sup>

Revival meetings, as Finney and his emulators conducted them, were intentionally emotional. Taking their cue from the camp meetings that were popular along the western frontier of the United States at the turn of the nineteenth century, revivals used intensely personal prayers and lengthy sermons to wear down an audience's spiritual resistance. Finney used the revival format to stress the importance of making an immediate decision for Christ. He repeatedly emphasized the tenuousness of human life and contrasted it with the eternal security afforded by the Christian life. To leave his meetings without professing the Christian faith was not only irresponsible, but damnably foolish. In a Finney revival, there was literally no time like the present.

Audiences attended revivals for many reasons. Active, involved members attended the service out of a sense of obligation to support the work of the church. Inactive, backslidden members were implored to attend and to reconnect with the faith they had abandoned. Those who were not members were invited, and occasionally harassed, to attend because they professed no faith and openly engaged in social activities such as drinking and carousing.<sup>27</sup> Still others were attracted to Finney's revivals because of his techniques which borrowed heavily from popular performance.

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<sup>26</sup> *Memoirs*, pp. 358-359.

<sup>27</sup> Church members sought to make converts of people in the last category in order to score a simultaneous victory in the temperance movement.

## Methodology

In this dissertation I have adapted a model of performance analysis created by Richard Schechner to arrive at a methodology that will prove useful in reading not only Finney's revival performances, but also other worship performances, whether modern or historical. Schechner's work fascinated me throughout my years in graduate school. Perhaps my own ideas resonate with his work because I, like Schechner, am a visual learner. My research notebooks are filled with flow charts, Venn diagrams, and equations, each aspiring to attain a measure of "Schechnerian" complexity and grace. I admit that I am also attracted to Schechner because of the way he continually revisits the topics of religion, spirituality, and performance. While still a master's student, I used Schechner's efficacy-entertainment braid to untangle the complexities of a church service at the Promiseland World of Pentecost here in Austin.<sup>28</sup> His work has given me a language to analyze worship performance.

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<sup>28</sup> The service began as a full-tilt rock concert, complete with laser lighting and OSHA-approved fog. It was a tightly-braided event, conscious of the crucial interplay between the need to entertain and the need to be efficacious. The rock music, special lighting, creative staging, and theatrical effects were intended to collapse the audience's preconceived, and presumably negative, notions of "church," while simultaneously ushering them into deeper levels of spiritual connection. As the worship performance wore on, however, the braid began to unravel. Entertainment was abruptly laid aside in favor of overtly emotional appeals that bore the stamp of traditional Pentecostal efficacy. It was then I realized that other stereotypical notions of "church" were also being upheld by the overtly religious architecture of the building and even the Christian-themed lyrics of the playlist. Thanks to Schechner, I was able to mark these moments of braiding and unraveling.

See Schechner, "From Ritual to Theater and Back: The Efficacy-Entertainment Braid," *Performance Theory*, (New York: Routledge, 1988) pp. 106-152.

In his essay, "Drama, Script, Theater, and Performance," Schechner constructs a four-pronged performance analysis with which he investigates the seriousness of human play.<sup>29</sup> He builds his argument on personal performance experiences which he then refracts through anthropological and sociological theories of ritual and play. Using anecdotes drawn from his environmental theater company, The Performance Group (hereafter, "TPG"), and from first-hand observations of ritual performance in Bali and Sri Lanka, Schechner arrives at an explanation of the function, or the "survival value," of performance in cultural systems. Performance, he writes, is "*ritualized behavior conditioned/permeated by play. [sic]...Art may be considered a specific coordination of play and ritual.*"<sup>30</sup> If art, or more specifically, if theatrical performance exists on a continuum between the axes of play and ritual, then it ought to be possible, Schechner argues, to dissect a performance into its constituent parts. This dissection will yield a fuller understanding of how the components of any production affect all the other components in a vibrating web of actions and reactions.

The four components that form the crux of Schechner's argument are the four elements comprising the title of the essay. These components, he admits "are loaded," that is, they have different meanings for different practitioners (71). Indeed, the terms *drama*, *script*, *theater*, and *performance* come to us as "names already filled," historiographer Michel DeCerteau's phrase to describe the

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<sup>29</sup> Schechner uses the *-er* spelling of *theater* throughout his work. I will follow Schechner's spelling preference whenever I am quoting from his work or talking about the concept of *theater* as one of the four elements of the performance event. At other times, however, I will employ the *-re* spelling.

<sup>30</sup> D.S.T.P., p. 95.

challenge of writing about individuals whose identities are already firmly embedded in their respective historical moments.<sup>31</sup> In order for these terms to serve the purposes of the essay, Schechner's first task is to sort through the referential language surrounding them. In an endnote to the essay in the 1988 edition of *Performance Theory*, he notes that his original use of the terms "script," "drama," and "text" in the 1977 edition have been challenged by Jacques Derrida's and others' subsequent scholarship on the notion of textuality. Had he the opportunity to go back and re-write the essay, he would now lean toward a deconstructionist approach, replacing his terms with "performance text," "dramatic text," "movement text," etc.<sup>32</sup> As it stands, Schechner's essay employs the terms comprising its title in ways that continue to be useful, even if they differ from the ways in which the same terms have been employed in more recent critical work.

Given his penchant for visual schematics, Schechner depicts the terms in a series of concentric rings (Fig. 1.1). As he says, "the larger the size [of the

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<sup>31</sup> Michel DeCerteau, *The Writing of History*, Tom Conley, trans., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 95.

<sup>32</sup> D.S.T.P., p. 104. Of course, in preparing the 1988 edition for publication, he had precisely that opportunity, but he elected to use the original wording.

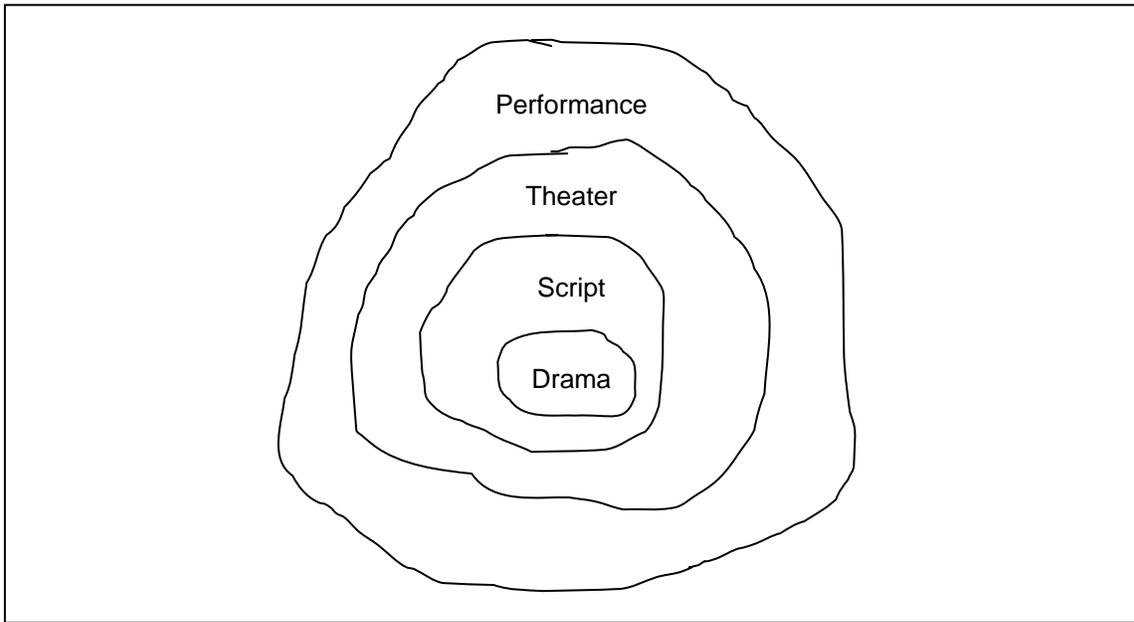


Figure 1.1: Schechner's concentric model of the performance event

ring], the more time and space covered and the broader the ‘idea area’ occupied” (71). By breaking performance down into its constituent parts, Schechner’s model allows me to look at Finney’s services differently. It allows me to focus independently on what was said/done, how it was said/done, where it was said/done, and to whom it was said/done. This model, however, is more than a formula for a newspaper article. It makes it possible to ask questions such as: “to what extent ought the *drama* determine the *script*, *theater*, and *performance*?” (77). How did the space of the Chatham Street Chapel influence Finney’s message and delivery? How did the performance environment affect the audience’s response to the message?

The overall effect of this analytical approach to the performance event is similar to “Cablecam,” the new camera technology that has recently been introduced to televise professional football games.<sup>33</sup> Using a sophisticated web of cables and pulleys, the cameras are able to swoop over the field, just a few feet over the heads of the players, taking viewers into the middle of the action. With a push of the button, however, the cameras instantly pan out to offer a wider view of the playing field. Schechner’s model is similar in that it allows me to swoop in for a close look at Finney’s *drama* – his theology – and just as easily to pan out for a look at how his theology affected the entire worship performance experience. The result of all of this zeroing in and zooming out is a heightened understanding of the ways in which Finney’s services functioned as popular

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<sup>33</sup> Richard Sandomir, “Camera Keeps Rare Company With Soaring Passes and Scrambling Players,” *The New York Times*, February 7, 2005.

performance in the 1830s, and the ways they continue to influence the shape of modern worship performance in the twenty-first century.

At the same time, Schechner pairs the four elements into oppositional binaries – drama-script in juxtaposition to theater-performance. This pairing could seem to tend toward a more traditional analysis of the performer/audience or stage/house divide. From this pairing, however, Schechner seeks elision, not division. He sees drama “as a specialized kind of script” and theater “as a specialized kind of performance” (71). While Schechner believes the more traditional drama-script pairing still dominates western performance, his real interest centers on those places “where the presumed unified event is broken open” (73). He explains his fascination with examining the performance event this way:

Instead of being absorbed into the event the spectator is invited (or forced) to experience where the event is weak and disjunctive. This breaking apart is analogous to the process of defiguration and abstraction that happened earlier in painting, and which has left a permanent mark on all the arts. (73)

The process that Schechner describes is similar to the revival phenomenon. In that setting, individuals responded to the message by confessing their own weakness; they publicly exposed those parts of their lives that were spiritually disjunctive. God, they believed, would strengthen and repair their lives. Since God was not physically present, the audience, or congregation, received the

confession of weakness and became a human manifestation of the assurance of pardon. In the pages that follow, I will explain more fully the ways I have adapted Schechner's methodology to my project.

## **Drama**

In dividing the performance event into four discrete elements, Schechner must necessarily define these elements as they pertain to his work. He begins by saying "the *drama* is the domain of the author, the composer, scenarist, shaman; the *script* is the domain of the teacher, guru, master; the *theater* is the domain of the performers; the *performance* is the domain of the audience" (71). For Schechner, the *drama* is the written text. It is, he says later, "what the writer writes" (86). The drama is the tangible document that contains the dialogue or scenario for actors to follow. But the drama is not sacrosanct. In "Drama, Script, Theater, and Performance," Schechner focuses on TPG's production of Sam Shepard's play *The Tooth of Crime*. Contractual agreements prohibited Schechner from omitting or re-ordering the dialogue in Shepard's text. Nevertheless, Schechner found ways to get around the stipulations of the contract and created a production that provoked Shepard's pronounced displeasure (76). For Schechner, the written text is merely a point of entry that makes it possible to create a performance event.

The more I studied Finney's revivals, the more I began to equate his theology with Schechner's concept of *drama*. Just as Schechner and TPG used

Shepard's play text as the starting point for the creation of their performance, so Finney built his revivals on the text of his own theology. Lacking formal seminary training, he created his theology by cobbling together those parts of Presbyterian doctrine that he understood and approved. He augmented those beliefs with ideas drawn from his own study and interpretation of the Bible. To his detractors he said defiantly, "Show me the *fruits* of your ministry; and if the fruits of your ministry so far exceed mine as to give me evidence that you have found out a more excellent way than I have, I will adopt your views."<sup>34</sup> Whenever his method or style was challenged, Finney supported his choices on the strength of his theology.

## **Script**

Schechner's concept of *script* diverges from the more common usage of the term. He is not referring to the copies of a play that actors use to learn their lines. For Schechner, that written document is simply the *drama*. *Script* incorporates ideas more commonly associated with stage direction. It is "the interior map of a particular production" (85). At the beginning of the rehearsal process, the script is not a *fait accompli*, but a gradual unfolding – a series of steps and missteps that eventually coalesces into the kind of map Schechner describes. *Script* becomes the common language performers develop to transfer the *drama* from the page to the stage.

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<sup>34</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 83.

In the Chatham Street Chapel, the *script*, as I have adapted it, describes Finney's carefully-groomed performance style which he used to communicate his theology to his audiences. Surrounded by a small choir (his supporting cast), he was the star of the revival, and he maintained firm directorial control over the events that occurred during his service. At the same time, he borrowed heavily from theatrical performance traditions of his day to create a service that would speak to the broadest possible audience, regardless of their familiarity with him or even with Christianity in general.

## **Theater**

“To some degree,” Schechner writes, “the theater is the visible aspect of the script, the exterior topography of an interior map” (91). It is “the specific set of gestures performed by the performers in any given performance” (85). *Theater* is the series of planned or orchestrated actions that occur throughout the course of the performance event. By the time the performers have prepared it and have arrived at the moment of performance, the *theater* may bear little, if any, resemblance to the *drama*. In each of his productions, Schechner writes that he and his company routinely dismantled the play's “scaffolding” – any concept of authorial intent – to develop a *script* and a *theater* that served the needs of the particular production (77). In *Tooth*, for example, the actors deliberately broke character to comment on the action. They also repeated whole scenes and

encouraged the audience to gain a new perspective by moving to a different part of the playing space.

Standing on the stage of a former playhouse, Finney dismantled the “scaffolding” of nineteenth-century revivalism to create a worship performance unlike anything his audience had ever experienced. My analysis of Finney’s *theater* examines the ways in which the physical, architectural structure of the theatre/church in Chatham Street changed not only the way he conducted revivals, but also the way he constructed his theology.<sup>35</sup> In the chapel, Finney discovered the thrill and the power of the solo performer. The sheer size of the stage, combined with his close proximity to such a vast audience, gave Finney a new appreciation for the affective power of live performance and reinforced his anthropocentric approach to the business of conducting revivals.

## **Performance**

Of the four elements that comprise the performance event, *performance* is the most fluid and wide-ranging. It is, Schechner says, “the widest possible circle of events condensing around theater” (91). In his concentric model, he positions *performance* in the outermost ring (See Fig. 1.1). By virtue of its position, it encompasses “the whole constellation of events, most of them passing

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<sup>35</sup> Architectural historian Jeanne Halgren Kilde has provided an excellent analysis of the conversion of the Chatham Garden Theatre in her book, *When Church Became Theatre*. I have supplemented her work by providing a brief performance history of the theatre, prior to its use as the Chatham Street Chapel. See Kilde, *When History Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

unnoticed, that take place in/among both performers and audience from the time the first spectator enters the field of performance...to the time the last spectator leaves” (72). Schechner’s most famous experiment with the concept of *performance* was a series of “real time” performances. Audience members were invited to arrive at the performance site at the same time as the performers. They observed the performers’ pre-show routine, watched the “regular” audience enter, watched the production, and stayed to witness the space shut down. “For the ‘real time’ audience,” writes Schechner, “the ‘regular’ audience was part of the theater, as were a number of events not normally included in the production” (85).

Schechner’s *performance* is built on a level of flexibility that allows the audience’s reception to change the course of a production as it unfolds. He recalls an argument between a performer and an audience member – occurring as the production was in progress, no less – that nearly led to violence. “I don’t recommend resolving a performance by fisticuffs, but I do say that this event was definitely part of the performance...for that night” (83). Schechner mentions the nightly conversations that often took place between performers and spectators after the production had ended, but he does not clarify his own methodology for assessing reception. He claims that TPG’s audiences learned to “control the performance” by switching seats and interacting with performers (83), but he rarely lets us hear from the audience directly. We gauge their response by what he chooses to tell us.

In my effort to analyze the *performance* of Finney's services, I have come to sympathize with Schechner's methodological challenge. Other than Finney's own writings, there are no extant, detailed accounts of his revivals services. What audience observations we do have are contained in Finney's *Memoirs*. One must ask, therefore, on what basis, or according to what criteria, were these responses deemed worthy of mention? Did Finney include them because they were favorable to his mission? Possibly. Having never kept a journal or diary throughout his career, did he include these responses in his *Memoirs* simply because they were the ones that came most readily to mind? Almost certainly. Did his retelling color the way the responses had actually occurred, years before? Absolutely. To temper his accounts, I have made use of the "speeches and sketches" delivered at Oberlin College at a memorial service on the anniversary of Finney's death and later compiled as *Reminiscences of Rev. Charles G. Finney*.<sup>36</sup> These recollections provide the opportunity to hear from voices other than Finney's, yet the bias of these narratives is also readily apparent: the speakers were undoubtedly close enough to Finney as friends or former students to have been invited to participate in his memorial service.

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<sup>36</sup> *Reminiscences of Rev. Charles G. Finney. Speeches and Sketches at the Gathering of His Friends and Pupils, in Oberlin, July 28<sup>th</sup>, 1876. Together with President Fairchild's Memorial Sermon, Delivered before the Graduating Classes, July 30, 1876* (hereafter, "Reminiscences") (Oberlin, OH: E. J. Goodrich, 1876).

## **Chapter Outline**

In this dissertation, my project is to analyze Finney's revivals in the Chatham Street Chapel as performance. Each of the chapters advances my project either by providing an historical context or by using Schechner's model as a tool to analyze Finney's work.

"What did worship performance look like, prior to Finney?" In Chapter 2, I will analyze the two predominant worship performance traditions that had arisen in the Presbyterian Church by the time Finney began to attract national attention. These traditions were divided over the incorporation of emotion into the experience of worship performance, and the opposing factions became known as the Old and New Schools. Supporters of the Old School eschewed emotional pleas to sinners and pulpit histrionics and maintained a Puritan ethos in their worship performance. Members of the New School embraced the excrescent nature of emotion-filled worship and borrowed heavily from the rural camp meetings that occurred along the western frontier beginning at the turn of the nineteenth century. Finney was claimed by the New School, but he rarely aligned himself strongly with either faction. His revivals were unique in that they borrowed performance elements from both the Old and the New Schools. I will argue that this unlikely combination contributed to the wide appeal of his services.

Chapter 3 asks, "What did Finney's revival service look like?" Using primary source materials as well as contemporary secondary sources, I will

provide a brief performance history of the Chatham Garden Theatre, a record of its conversion into the Chatham Street Chapel, and a detailed reconstruction of a typical Finney revival. In order to grasp the cultural magnitude that a conversion like this would have had, one must be able to see the space as a fully-functioning theatre before seeing it as a church. The reconstruction of the revival service demonstrates the spiritual urgency that connected Finney's *drama* to the larger *performance*. While Finney was every bit a pulpit performer and a spiritual showman, he was equally a religious visionary and a passionate seeker of lost souls. These attributes combined to create a performance event that was both theatrical and, in the religious sense, pastoral.

I begin using Schechner's model in Chapter 4, where I will ask, "How did Finney's *script*, his methods of communicating with his audience, affect the creation and revision of his theology, the *drama*?" It seems best to treat these aspects of Finney's worship performance, *drama* and *script*, together, since they form two distinct sides of the same coin. As the central performer in the worship performance at the Chatham Street Chapel, Finney bore the responsibility for communicating (or *scripting*) his theology (or *drama*) to the audience. I have glossed his *drama* as a gospel of self-creation that he built on the trinity of self-empowerment, self-improvement, and self-respect. Intent upon helping his followers achieve these goals, he developed a *script* that unapologetically made full use of all the dramatic devices available in his new, unquestionably dramatic sphere.

This chapter positions Finney's theology and style parallel with the pervasive influence of melodrama on American popular culture. As he taught his listeners how Christianity could improve their lives, he echoed the story-lines of contemporary plays that featured characters whose determination and sheer goodness helped them surmount countless obstacles. In his preaching, Finney embodied performance traits that I have traced to the popular theatre of the nineteenth century. His penchant for plainspeaking and his skillful use of body language reveal astute readings of popular performance. Finney turned the "sinful" pursuits of theatricality to his spiritual advantage.

In Chapter 5, I address the question, "In what ways did the physical space of the Chatham Street Chapel influence the *theater* of Finney's worship performances?" Using the theories of anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep, performance theorist Marvin Carlson, and Schechner, I provide three responses. First, the process of converting the theatre into a chapel situated the building itself as an initiate being groomed for the transition from adolescence into maturity, from spiritual laziness into Christian responsibility, and literally from the profane into the sacred. Second, Finney had to adapt his preaching style to the chapel's vast stage/pulpit. The persona he had perfected preaching in smaller, more confined Presbyterian churches no longer sufficed. His performances, I will argue, were ghosted not simply by the actors who had performed there, but also by the artists who had inscribed themselves and their influence into the very architecture of the space. Third, I will use Schechner's concept of "strips of

behavior” to discuss the ways in which Finney took strips of audience behavior from earlier moments in the history of revivals and recoded them according to the performance context of the Chatham Street Chapel.

The question of audience reception, or *performance*, is the focus of Chapter 6: “How did Finney interpret the aftermath of his revival services in the Chatham Street Chapel, and how did his interpretation influence his later revivals?” *Aftermath* is Schechner’s term for the “long-term consequences or follow-through of a performance,” and it occupies the last position in his seven-part “performance sequence” that includes training, workshops, rehearsals, warm-ups, performance, cool-down, and aftermath.<sup>37</sup> The concept of aftermath is a useful tool to consider the ways in which Finney’s audiences represented many different interpretive communities. While they attended the worship performances as a unified congregation, their treatment of one another outside the context of worship was radically different. In this chapter, I will examine the riot that erupted between members of the American Anti-Slavery Society and the New York Sacred Music Society in July 1834, when both organizations were accidentally slated to use the Chatham Street Chapel for meetings on the same evening. During these riots and the unrest that followed, the members of these organizations demonstrated radically different understandings and applications of the gospel they had heard Finney preach. Although Finney could control the

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<sup>37</sup> Schechner, “Points of Contact Between Anthropological and Theatrical Thought,” *Between Theater & Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), pp. 3-33. See p. 19.

*drama, script, and theater*, the audience, ultimately, controlled the *performance* and determined its meaning(s).

To conclude this analysis, I will ask, “How does the legacy of Finney’s *drama, script, theater, and performance* continue to shape American Protestant worship performance in the twenty-first century?” I will argue that the trajectory of Finney’s influence, first proposed by McLoughlin in *Modern Revivalism*, has continued to affect modern worship in the five and a half decades since Billy Graham’s first Crusade in Los Angeles, in 1949. To continue this link, I will briefly analyze the worship performances currently offered at the Chicago-based Willow Creek Community Church. Over the last twenty-nine years, Willow Creek has expanded the definition of worship performance in an ongoing effort to reach ever wider audiences. In a new, state-of-the-art auditorium that seats more than seven thousand people, the church holds three services every weekend that draw a combined seventeen-thousand attendees.<sup>38</sup>

It is my hope that the ideas I have articulated will advance the study of religious worship as performance. This dissertation situates worship performance in a historical context, and it provides both a theoretical and a practical model for analyzing other such performances, whether current or historical. While the scale and scope of services at the Willow Creek Church differ radically from Finney’s services in the Chatham Street Chapel, the methodology I have employed here can be applied to both.

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<sup>38</sup> Kimbriell Kelly, “Church to Open 7,200-seat Sanctuary,” *Chicago Daily Herald*, September 16, 2004.

My research also contributes to the field of performance as public practice by further expanding the borders of performance scholarship. In Chapter 4, I note that Finney turned faith, an intangible concept, into a quantifiable system based on performance. In the course of working on this project, I have faced the similar challenge of turning an examination of Finney's theology, his ideas, into an analysis of his pulpit performance. This challenge has required me to negotiate the line dividing theology and performance. But the more I have studied Finney's beliefs and practices, the more I have come to realize that his theology, at its root, was nothing if not a way of performing one's faith in everyday life. It seems paradoxical that I should have to focus on separating theology from performance while also recognizing that his theology was, itself, an act of performance. And yet, from my own experience as a worship leader in a congregation of five hundred members, I encounter this paradox almost every week. There are as many ideas about how to perform one's faith as there are people in the pews (and many more, when you consider all the people not in the pews). In the space of more than one hundred seventy years, the critics of worship performance are no less vocal now than they were in Finney's day.

## Chapter 2

### Opposing Schools: Performing Presbyterian Worship in Early Nineteenth-Century America

The differences dividing the Presbyterian Church in 1832 were largely theological, rooted in conflicting opinions regarding doctrinal policy and scriptural interpretation.<sup>1</sup> While these opinions mattered greatly to the ministers and leaders of the denomination, issues of doctrine and interpretation had considerably less influence on church members as a whole. If the members were uninformed about or uninterested in the minutiae of the theological wrangling, however, there was one area of the conflict in which they held strong opinions—ideas surrounding the performance of public worship.

Known as the “Old School” and the “New School,” the warring parties within the church held radically different understandings of how to engage in worship performance. The Old School eschewed emotional pleas to sinners and pulpit histrionics. Their stoic approach to worship had a puritan ethos, and their influence was strongest among mainline churches in the urban centers of the

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<sup>1</sup> Most of these opinions were circulated in response to increasing dissatisfaction with the strong Calvinist tone of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the written document that functioned as the touchstone of the denomination. Calvinism, the system of Christian belief created by French theologian and reformer John Calvin (1509-1564), placed man’s eternal destiny squarely and completely in God’s hands. Even before the creation of the world, according to Calvin, all human beings were predestined either to salvation or damnation; humans were thus incapable of free will and could do nothing to alter their standing with God. Finney’s theology openly rejected Calvinism in favor of the idea that God created free will in order to give individuals the opportunity to accept or deny salvation. For a fuller description of Calvinism, see *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed., F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

east, including Philadelphia, the birthplace of Presbyterianism in the United States, Boston, and New York City. The New School comprised a range of Presbyterian groups whose theological ideas often differed substantially in the details, but they were united by their opposition to the Old School. In a move that heralded the future not just of Presbyterianism, but of most Protestant denominations, proponents of New School Presbyterianism arrived at their beliefs by co-opting theological tenets from other denominations, particularly the Methodists and Baptists. Staunch supporters of the Old School deemed this practice as heretical to the faith.

In this chapter, I will analyze the worship performance traditions of the Old and New Schools to advance my argument that Finney's worship performance techniques transformed Presbyterian worship into a form of popular entertainment. Drawing freely, but judiciously, from the logical austerity of Old School worship and from the boundless emotionalism of New School worship, Finney's worship performance emerged as a controversial blending of the two forms that was less concerned with the theological propriety of the message and more concerned with the emotional connection between the heart and the head. He continually de-emphasized the differences between the clergy and the laity, challenging the members of his congregation to prove their faith by performing their Christianity in public, beyond the walls of the Chatham Street Chapel.

## The Old School Paradigm: Decency + Order = Faith

Let all things [concerning worship] be done decently and in order.

1 Corinthians 14:40

Ministers ought, in general, to prepare their sermons with care; and not to indulge themselves in loose, extemporary harangues; nor to serve God with that which cost them naught.

from *The Directory for the Worship of God in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*<sup>2</sup>

Worship performance, as practiced among Old School Presbyterian churches in the urban centers of the United States in the late eighteenth century, happened very much “by the book.” The book in question was *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, first ratified and adopted in 1788. Contained within this compendium of denominational law and doctrine, *The Directory for the Worship of God* spelled out the ways in which “proper” worship performance ought to occur.

From the amount of scripture to be read – “in each service, [the minister] ought to read, at least, one chapter [of the Bible]; and more, when the chapters are short, or the connection requires it” – to the solemnity appropriate for receiving the congregation’s monetary offering, the *Directory* left no part of the

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<sup>2</sup> *Constitution*, p. 426.

worship service to chance (421, 424). Following the apostle Paul's dictum in 1 Corinthians to conduct worship services decently and in order, the Presbyterian church approached the worship of God with extreme caution. The sections of the *Directory* that dealt with scripture reading, singing, public prayer, and preaching each concluded with an admonition to be mindful of proportionality. No single act of worship was supposed to dominate the others. Church leaders clearly preferred equanimity over excitement.

Old School revival services typically began with a short prayer offered by the minister, "humbly adoring the infinite majesty of the living God" (422). The congregation then engaged in singing several hymns. Literacy was a requirement for worship since the hymns were selected from printed hymnals furnished to each worshipper. The former practice of call-and-response singing, popularized "in times of ignorance, when many in the congregation could not read," was discouraged (422). Following the singing and before the sermon, the minister led "a full and comprehensive prayer" that began by praising God, then moved to the confession of sin and assurance of pardon, and concluded with intercession for the needs of others (423). The sermon, the centerpiece of the service, was almost always read from a prepared manuscript and consisted mainly of scriptural exegesis, or interpretation. At the end of the sermon the minister worded another prayer relating "to the subject...treated of in the discourse," following which the congregation was dismissed (423).

Throughout the service, the congregation was expected to respond in ways that met Old School standards of dignity and respectability. To that end, the success or failure of a worship service could be measured by the degree of solemnity that settled over the congregation during the sermon. The containment of emotional and physical displays was itself a manifestation of intense spirituality and deep faith. If a person were moved to tears by a sermon, the service was deemed moderately successful. If a person were immobilized by the sermon, however, so that tears were forestalled by the onset of spiritual catatonia, then the service had achieved its intended aim. In a first-hand account of a meeting in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1798, revival attendee Edward Griffin noted that many individuals who were affected by the service “were often too deeply impressed to weep. . . the aim [of the sermon] was to come at the conscience.”<sup>3</sup> Old School Presbyterians equated emotionalism with theatricality and falsehood, solemnity with true religion.

Having pushed emotion aside, Old School worship thus became a celebration of the intellect. The Age of Reason had quietly infiltrated Presbyterian doctrine, and for some members of the Old School—especially those within the academic setting of Princeton Seminary, which in the early nineteenth century

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<sup>3</sup> Edward D. Griffin, “An Account of a Revival of Religion in New Hartford, Conn., in the years 1798 and 1799,” in *New England Revivals as They Existed at the Close of the Eighteenth and the Beginning of the Nineteenth Centuries, Compiled Principally from Narratives First Published in the Connecticut Evangelical Magazine*, Bennet Tyler, ed., (Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts, [1846] 1980), pp. 63-82. See pp. 65-66.

remained the principal training ground for Presbyterian ministers—Enlightenment thinking had all but replaced religious faith.<sup>4</sup> Retaining one’s composure in worship was one of the external products of this way of thinking. In the minutes of the 1803 meeting of the Presbyterian General Assembly, it was reported that “in most of the northern and eastern Presbyteries, revivals of religion, of a more or less general nature have taken place....*without any remarkable bodily agitations or extraordinary affectations*” (original italics).<sup>5</sup> The expression “bodily agitation” was Old School shorthand for any behavior that was out of keeping with its expected decorum. Bennet Tyler, a frequent revival attendee and the compiler of a collection of anecdotes drawn from late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century revivals, demonstrates the ubiquity of this phrase by setting it apart in the following sentence taken from his recollection of a revival in South Britain, Connecticut, in 1812: “There were no outcryings – no bodily agitations – but a solemn, awful stillness, which indicated the presence of God.”<sup>6</sup> The connection between intellectualism and physio-emotional containment produced a solemnity that could be codified and documented, but the orderly response to the gospel message held even more significance for Old School doctrine.

By exhibiting, in Tyler’s words, “the naked truths of the gospel” to their congregations, Old School ministers sought to reify the divine power and

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<sup>4</sup> At the turn of the nineteenth century, notes Hardman, college students in America were enamored of rationalism and were more likely to call one another by nicknames such as Rousseau and Voltaire, than by their given names (12).

<sup>5</sup> “General State of Religion: Extracted from the Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America,” *The New-York Missionary Magazine and Repository of Religious Intelligence*, July, 1803, pp. 265-267.

<sup>6</sup> Tyler, p. 350.

inspiration of the Bible. He continued by saying that, unlike their less sophisticated, rural counterparts, these ministers made no attempt “to work upon the passions and imaginations of the people” (350). By performing dispassion or, put another way, by performing a performance that was not recognized as such, Old School ministers advanced their agenda of not appearing to have an agenda. The holy scriptures, they claimed, spoke for themselves with ministers serving as mere mouthpieces. Therefore, it was up to each individual member – blessed as he or she was with the gifts of reason and intellect – to hear these truths and incorporate them into his or her own life. When, in the course of the service, seeds of scriptural truth began to take root in their hearts, members were expected to respond by drawing these ideas inside. The truth of God’s word sank in; it was each member’s responsibility not to let it leak out.

The top-down management of Old School worship services can also be seen in their use of pew rental fees to control the composition and seating arrangement of the congregation. A long-established practice in Britain, the origins of which date from the sixteenth century, pew rental fees had been levied by American churches since at least the early part of the eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Ostensibly collected to offset the working expenses of the church, pew fees had deeper ramifications, as Charles C. Cole, Jr., has noted in “The Free Church Movement in New York City.”<sup>8</sup> One’s social rank was made manifest through

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<sup>7</sup> Alfred Heales, *The History and Law of Church Seats, or Pews, Book I. – History*, (London: Butterworths, 1872), p. 86.

<sup>8</sup> Charles C. Cole, Jr., “The Free Church Movement in New York City,” *New York History*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 1953, pp. 284-297.

church attendance and pew position. Pew owners came to think of themselves as share-holders in the church and increasingly demanded their opinions be heard and acted upon. Historian Callum G. Brown adds that “in the nineteenth century the renting of pews became a device for creating and sustaining social exclusivity.”<sup>9</sup> A memorandum dated March 28, 1769, to “the Owner of Pew No. 71 in Christ Church,” Boston, stated, “We have accordingly Valued your Pew, and laid a Tax upon it of *five shillings old tenor* [handwritten] per Week, which Tax Commences the first Sunday after Easter 1769” [sic].<sup>10</sup> Pews were rented to church members at prices that increased in accordance either with demand or with the goal of creating greater demand. It was presumed that those who could afford the pew fees possessed the intelligence necessary to engage fully in Old School worship and the spiritual depth required to respond with the proper solemnity. By the same logic, those who could not afford their own pews necessarily lacked the sophistication needed to make a solemn response to the revival message. This reasoning effectively barred African-Americans and members of the lower classes from attending church altogether. In the Chatham Street Chapel, Finney would challenge these presumptions.

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<sup>9</sup> Callum G. Brown, “The Costs of Pew-renting: Church Management, Church-going and Social Class in Nineteenth-century Glasgow,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 38, No. 3, July 1987, pp. 347-361.

Brown explains how these fees affected the city of Glasgow during its transformation from port town to industrial center. Bowing to the pressure of the growing Glaswegian middle class, officials eliminated the once-mandatory free seats for the poor and implemented new, higher pew fees that were prohibitively expensive for the lower class. The lower echelons of society were relegated to churches in less desirable areas of town at a time, notes Brown, when “the developing fashion for refinement in manners...required the disaggregation of the ‘rough’ and the ‘respectable’” (361).

<sup>10</sup> Broadside, Boston, 1769. University of Texas at Austin. Microfiche 16,675, #41915.

## **The New School Paradigm – Impassioned Praise**

Social sophistication, wealth, and intellect had little, if anything, to do with worship in the New School paradigm, although race and the subject of integrated worship continued to be a factor. Instead of looking east to Princeton and other strongholds of Enlightenment thinking, the members of the New School looked west to the phenomenon of camp meeting revivals. Instead of suppressing emotion, New School worship encouraged impassioned display as a gauge of the depth of one's religious conviction.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, camp meeting revivals flourished all along the western frontier of the United States. Beginning in Kentucky in 1800, the meetings spread south into Tennessee and north into Ohio, Pennsylvania, and eventually western New York. For fledgling societies on the outskirts of settled territories, these meetings offered intense, palpable spirituality to those who sought it, and spectacular entertainment to those who came to watch and/or to scoff. The meetings fostered an environment where emotional, spiritual, and bodily abandon were not only acceptable, but expected. According to Robert Davidson, the first historian in the nineteenth century to analyze the camp meeting phenomenon, they also attracted hordes of spectators who brought along their own sorts of abandon, specifically alcohol and prostitution.<sup>11</sup> Liquor-

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Davidson, *History of the Presbyterian Church in the State of Kentucky; with a Preliminary Sketch of the Churches in the Valley of Virginia*, (New York: Robert Carter, 1847). Davidson offers a colorful description of those who came to the camp meetings to scoff and gawk: "Among the motley crowd collected from all quarters by curiosity, might be seen the

sellers were present in abundance, and “dissolute” men, fueled by the spirits they had consumed, preyed on emotionally-spent women.<sup>12</sup> Long after the white-hot intensity of the meetings had cooled and the crowds had dispersed, the effects of the camp meeting performance lingered. By 1804, camp meetings had become so popular that manuals outlining how to hold a meeting in the “Kentucky style” were printed and made available to would-be organizers who wanted to guarantee the success of their own meetings.<sup>13</sup>

The first camp meeting was organized by James McGready (1758-1817), a Presbyterian minister who moved from North Carolina to Kentucky in 1796 to pastor three frontier congregations. Over the next few years, these congregations grew both in numbers and zeal. In 1800, in response to the interest shown by the congregations at the prospect of joining together in a meeting that would continue over the course of several days (the prototype for the “protracted meeting” favored by New School evangelists), McGready arranged for an area of land in Logan County, Kentucky, to be cleared and tents erected. His intended audience for the meeting was believing Christians who would assemble from far and near to gain encouragement and renew their spiritual convictions. He sent invitations to churches as far as one hundred miles away, and to his

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blackleg, the cut-purse, the prostitute, and all the disorderly and dissipated classes of society” (160).

<sup>12</sup> In his diary, the Rev. John Lyle, a Presbyterian minister who opposed the camp meetings, records the names of at least four women who became pregnant at the meetings of 1800 and 1801. Qtd. in William Warren Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier, Vol. II, The Presbyterians: 1783-1840, A Collection of Source Materials*, (New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1936), p. 89.

<sup>13</sup> Sweet, *Revivalism in America: Its Origin, Growth, and Decline*, (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1965), p. 131. See also Ellen Eslinger, *Citizens of Zion: The Social Origins of Camp Meeting Revivalism*, (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), pp. 236-237.

astonishment, many of them accepted.<sup>14</sup> Numeric estimates of the size of the crowd that gathered at that first meeting do not exist, but in describing the event, McGready said that the crowd “exceeded anything his eyes had ever beheld on earth.”<sup>15</sup> Following the Logan County meeting, a spirit of inter-denominational cooperation came to characterize these events. Davidson wrote that, “although each denomination sometimes operated apart, the customary method was to hold their meetings conjointly; ... all Christian denominations, *in general*, were at liberty to participate.”<sup>16</sup> While Davidson’s narrow definition of “all Christian denominations” includes only Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians, these three, plus the Congregationalists to the north, were the primary participants in the camp meeting movement.<sup>17</sup>

As successful as the Logan County meeting was, the history of camp meeting revivals really begins later, in 1801. Barton Stone (1772-1844), who had been trained by McGready in North Carolina, witnessed the power of the revival in Logan County and set about planning his own meeting, to be held in Cane Ridge, Kentucky. By late August 1801, revival fever was high, and people flocked

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<sup>14</sup> Sweet, *Religion*, p. 85.

<sup>15</sup> This quotation comes from Sweet’s paraphrase of a letter McGready wrote to the *New York Missionary Magazine* in April 1803. Sweet, *Religion*, p. 85.

<sup>16</sup> Davidson, p. 136.

<sup>17</sup> Catholic worship, comprising a performance vocabulary entirely its own, is outside the bounds of my study and will not be considered here. I should also note that the Presbyterian and Congregational denominations came to an official agreement of cooperation under the Plan of Union, a document signed by officials of the two denominations in 1801. The intended purpose of the Plan was to permit ministers of either denomination to preach in rural Presbyterian and Congregational churches so that both denominations might grow in sparsely populated areas. The blending of worship performance styles between the two quickly became one of several unforeseen problems with the Plan.

to the meeting in droves “from Ohio and other distant parts.”<sup>18</sup> Estimates of the size of the crowd that participated at Cane Ridge vary widely between ten and twenty-five thousand.<sup>19</sup> The impression created by such an immense gathering would most certainly have astounded any casual observer. Crowds of this magnitude formed temporary cities that rivaled even the largest settlements on the frontier. The following eye-witness description offers a glimpse of the meeting, the crowd, the noise, and the carnival atmosphere that pervaded the entire scene:

The spectacle presented at night was one of the wildest grandeur. The glare of the blazing camp-fires falling on a dense assemblage of heads simultaneously bowed in adoration, and reflected back from long ranges of tents upon every side; hundreds of candles and lamps suspended among the trees, together with numerous torches flashing to and fro, throwing an uncertain light upon the tremulous foliage, and giving an appearance of dim and indefinite extent to the depth of the forest; the solemn chanting of hymns swelling and falling on the night wind; the impassioned exhortations; the earnest prayers; the sobs, shrieks, or shouts, bursting from persons under intense agitation of mind; the sudden spasms which

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<sup>18</sup> Barton W. Stone, *A Short History of the Life of Barton W. Stone: Written by Himself, Designed Principally for His Children and Christian Friends*, in James R. Rogers, *The Cane Ridge Meeting-house*, (Cincinnati: Standard, 1910), pp. 113-204. See p. 158.

<sup>19</sup> Sweet wrote that estimates of the Cane Ridge crowd ranged from ten to twenty thousand, but he does not attribute the source of these estimates (*Religion*, 87). Davidson reported a crowd of twenty thousand, an estimate reached “by a revolutionary officer, who was accustomed to estimate encampments” (137). Rev. James B. Finley, a first-hand witness, described seeing a “vast crowd” of twenty-five thousand. Qtd. in Rogers, p. 60.

seized upon scores, and unexpectedly dashed them to the ground; – all conspired to invest the scene with terrific interest, and to work up the feelings to the highest pitch of excitement.<sup>20</sup>

Historians continue to point to Cane Ridge as the quintessential example of the camp meeting phenomenon in terms of its sheer size, as well as its emotional and spiritual impact.

Practically every element of the camp meeting encouraged the performance of excessive or excrescent behavior. As the meetings unfolded over the course of four to six days, three distinct modes of performance invariably emerged: first, torch-lit preaching began in the late afternoon as the sun was setting and continued into the night; second, “seasons of prayer” erupted toward the conclusion of the sermon and usually persisted into the early morning; and third, light-of-day testimonials provided converts from the night before an opportunity to perform their own stories of salvation and belief.

### Impassioned Preaching

The camp meeting sermon demonstrated the artistry of the minister as a solo performer. The sermon began slowly and deliberately; there was no need to rush straightway into an emotional harangue, since the sermon would build in intensity as the minister continued speaking over the course of two to three

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<sup>20</sup> Davidson, p. 138.

hours. From the moment he appeared in the pulpit, however, the minister set the dramatic tone of the evening.<sup>21</sup> Looking over the crowd from a makeshift pulpit that stood anywhere from five to six and a half feet high, he began by quoting a passage of scripture, sometimes as little as a single verse, that would serve as the sermon's point of departure. He then launched into a brief explanation of the Biblical context surrounding the passage before applying the point of the passage to the audience. The bulk of the sermon was concerned with making application after application, until no one remained outside the scope of the passage. Despite the length of the sermon, the minister avoided the use of notes or a written text in order to emphasize the spontaneity of his performance.<sup>22</sup> Without notes to occupy his hands, he was free to gesture, point at listeners, reach to heaven, and clap his hands. The extemporaneous aspect of the performance strengthened the preacher's legitimacy as one who had received divine inspiration from the Holy Spirit.

As the sermon gathered momentum, the minister shifted his approach from the general to the specific. Instead of talking abstractly about "sinners," he spoke directly to his audience, switching to the more accusatory second person

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<sup>21</sup> While female converts preached extemporaneously as part of the light-of-day testimonials that I will discuss later in this chapter, the historical records of these camp meetings speak only of male preachers.

<sup>22</sup> In *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), Laurence Moore writes, "The spontaneity appropriate to revival preaching required the minister to discard his notes before he mounted the pulpit," but such enforced spontaneity "did not preclude memorization and repetition of words that reliably aroused a crowd" (52).

Daniel Nash (1775-1831), who worked briefly with Finney, continued the tradition of preaching without notes and warned his friend in a letter of the spiritual danger of using notes in the pulpit: "If you wish to look at them at home, to refresh your memory, do it: but when you preach, throw yourself entirely on God." November 26, 1831, Finney papers, O.C.A.

pronoun. Only the physical barrier of the pulpit kept the minister from laying an accusing hand on the shoulders of the spiritually guilty, and that barrier, too, would soon be overcome. Knowing that the minister would soon emerge from the pulpit to confront each of them directly, the audience was transformed from a state of general to acute anxiety about the condition of their souls. James B. Finley, who became a Christian at the Cane Ridge meeting and later enjoyed a lengthy career as a Methodist minister, recalled how, during the sermon, “some of the people were singing, others praying, some crying for mercy in the most piteous accents, while others were shouting most vociferously.”<sup>23</sup> The preaching left few people indifferent to the message; even so, the sermon was not the dramatic climax of the evening.

### Impassioned Prayer

As long as the minister stood in the pulpit, the audience remained separated from him. No matter their personal reactions to the message, they were caught in a liminal state between thought and action. The minister had made them aware of their sin, but he had not yet offered their souls any relief. Sensing that he had worked his listeners into a state of excitement necessary to produce conversions, the minister ended the sermon by stepping down from the pulpit to initiate the second phase of the evening, the “season of prayer.” This part of the evening was marked by the cacophonous outpourings of people in the

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Rogers, p. 60.

crowd, as they asked God to spare them from the fires of hell, to forgive their sins, and to save their souls. While the minister's movement away from the makeshift pulpit signaled the beginning of the prayer time, there were no parameters to mandate its length. Religious historian Dickson Bruce, Jr., describes the minister's descent from the pulpit into the surrounding throng as the moment when "the power of God was made manifest among the people."<sup>24</sup> In the act of stepping down from the place of locution to the place of communion, the minister signaled that the sermon was over for the night—there would be no further opportunity to hear the gospel message that evening. But his movement away from the pulpit simultaneously emphasized his similarity to and difference from the masses of people who had gathered to hear him. The congregational space now became his liminal space, the place where he, as one who had already confessed Christ and received the Holy Spirit, stood among and apart from those who had not yet become Christians. At the same time, the approach of the minister into the congregation allowed listeners to move beyond the liminal realm that had constrained them during the sermon. The juxtaposition of this spiritual release and containment heightened the sense of urgency among audience members. If someone were contemplating whether or not to accept the salvation of which the preacher had spoken, now was the time to release his or her inhibitions and give in—spiritually and physically—to God's transforming power.

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<sup>24</sup> Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., *And They All Sang Hallelujah: Plain-Folk Camp-Meeting Religion, 1800-1845*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1974), p. 86.

The season of prayer thus witnessed the transfer of dramatic power from the minister to the congregation. Throughout the sermon, the crowd remained attentive to the minister, though he was occasionally upstaged by members of the crowd who fell to the ground, weeping, overcome by the gravity of his words. During the prayer time that followed the sermon, people raised their voices in mournful sobs, their wails having been precipitated by the fiery accusations of the sermon. These pleas to God were issued simultaneously and increased in volume as each penitent sought to make his or her prayer heard over the other voices. Davidson recalled an 1803 camp meeting where, “after the sermon, the people broke out in a loud burst of prayer, hundreds raising their voices at the same time, one voice confounding another.”<sup>25</sup> Through the performance of penitent chaos, the people demonstrated not only their newfound faith, but also their holy fear of God and of his divine power. It was during the season of prayer that involuntary physical movements, known collectively as “the exercises,” commonly occurred.

The exercises included the practice of falling to the ground either in a faint or a paralyzing stupor; the jerks, in which sinners’ bodies would be tossed to and fro like a rag doll without their awareness and, remarkably, without sustaining any injuries; barking, a series of utterances that were produced by the flailing body and were really a by-product of the jerks; uncontrollable laughing “that excited

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<sup>25</sup> Davidson, p. 156.

solemnity in saints and sinners”; dancing; and singing.<sup>26</sup> No one was exempt from the sudden, unexpected onset of these forces. Witnesses have recounted seeing men, women, and children succumb to the exercises. Sweet adds that “even those who came to scoff were afflicted.”<sup>27</sup> Davidson refused to accede that these physical manifestations were the work of the Holy Spirit, and he stressed that “the theories which imply ... superhuman agency must be abandoned. The only correct and satisfactory solution [to explain the phenomenon of the exercises] is found in *the influence of the imagination on the nervous system*” (original italics).<sup>28</sup> The season of prayer continued into the night, occasionally stretching until four o’clock in the morning (159). Once those who had been afflicted by the exercises had regained control of themselves and after those seeking God’s forgiveness and mercy had been consoled, the crowds dispersed to their tents, wagons, or whatever form of temporary lodging they had brought. Physically, mentally, and spiritually exhausted, they slept until morning light ushered in the third phase of the meeting.

#### Impassioned Proof

As day dawned on the camp, those who had been exercised the night before—whether by the Holy Spirit or by their heightened nervous systems—began describing their experiences to anyone who would listen. Groups clustered excitedly around the men, women, and children who were sharing their

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<sup>26</sup> Stone, pp. 159-162.

<sup>27</sup> Qtd. in Winfred Ernest Garrison, *Religion Follows the Frontier: A History of the Disciples of Christ* (New York: Harper, 1931), p. 53.

<sup>28</sup> Davidson, p. 172.

testimonies, and listeners traveled around the campground from one witness to another. While there were no female ministers in the Presbyterian church in the early nineteenth century, Davidson made special mention of the women who shared their testimonies with bystanders “in the most passionate manner. Sometimes it happened that these exhortations [by women] affected the people more than all the preaching” (158). It appears that the societal norms of defined gender roles were set aside in the context of the camp meeting in order to savor the experience of being in the presence of the Holy Spirit. As a member of the Old School, however, Davidson may have mentioned the participation of women as another indicator of what was wrong with the camp meetings. In either case, light-of-day testimonials were intended to confirm the experiential presence of the Holy Spirit in the previous evening’s meeting. These testimonials offered further “proof” of God’s power to those who had not yet chosen to accept salvation.

The acts of declaring and listening to these testimonies occupied the better part of the day. Taking their cue from the minister’s extemporaneous style, the speakers used their testimonies as a starting point before launching into spirited lay sermons that frequently left them overcome with exhaustion, until they required the physical support of friends in order to avoid a total collapse.<sup>29</sup> In the larger scheme of the camp meeting, these testimonials were more than simply an opportunity to share sensational stories; they were crucial in preparing

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<sup>29</sup> One of the more colorful stories Davidson records concerns a twelve-year-old boy who addressed the crowd while standing on a log. “He continued to exhort for an hour, supported by two men, till his strength was exhausted. Raising his little hand, and dropping his handkerchief, wet with tears and perspiration, he cried: ‘Thus, O sinner, shall you drop into hell, unless you forsake your sins and turn to the Lord!’” (158)

the crowd for that evening's sermon. The three-part cycle of preaching, prayer, and testimonials continued nearly around the clock for four to six days, and it helped maintain the high intensity that would come to characterize all camp meetings.

### Bringing the Camp Indoors

The New School brought the emotion and excitement of the camp meeting phenomenon indoors. Some elements they adapted; some they rejected; still others they borrowed wholesale. They called their revivals "protracted meetings," which typically occurred over the course of four successive evenings. Conducted by a single minister inside the confines of the church building, the principal purpose of the meeting, according to McLoughlin, "was to arouse a new interest in religion among church members and to get a revival started within the churches which would attract non-church members."<sup>30</sup> Recognizing that longtime churchgoers needed a spiritual re-awakening as badly as, if not more than, hardened sinners, New School ministers endeavored to make these services exciting and interesting by delivering soul-searching sermons according to performance guidelines that had been tested and perfected on the western frontier.

As the influence of the camp meeting spread from the frontier back toward the country's urban areas, broad categories of religious experience emerged

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<sup>30</sup> McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, p. 93.

quickly, ultimately coalescing under the name of “new measures.” Related specifically to the ways in which revival services ought to be conducted, new measures included unorthodox methods of praying, preaching, and involving members in the evangelical process. New School advocates of new measures eschewed written, “hollow” prayers, and opted for “particularity in prayer,” or the act of praying for people by name in public assemblies and exposing them as “sinners,” or “hardened enemies” of God.<sup>31</sup> Pulpit preaching, as a new measure, changed from generalized discourses on abstract sin to pointed examinations of sins present in the congregation there assembled. Still another tactic used to arouse excitement was “the promiscuous praying of women, in these assemblies, --a measure eminently adapted to ‘arrest attention’” (229). The vocal and visible participation of women in New School services directly challenged Old School notions of worship decorum. Finney embraced all of these new measures. He praised the work of his wife, Lydia, who taught and prayed with groups of men and women who gathered at the Chatham Street Chapel during the day.<sup>32</sup>

Despite vocal opposition by the Old School, the New School continued to use and even expand the scope of new measures throughout the first quarter of the nineteenth century. By 1827, their revival tactics were creating so much strife that a special meeting of leading Presbyterian ministers, representing both

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<sup>31</sup> Samuel J. Baird, *A History of the New School and of the Questions Involved in the Disruption of the Presbyterian Church in 1838*, (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen, & Haffelfinger, 1868), p. 229.

<sup>32</sup> Hardman notes that Lydia Finney’s role in her husband’s ministry occurred during a moment when “the part played by women in the nation was broadening significantly.” Together the Finneys modeled a new way for women to find their voices in a changing society. See Hardman, pp. 100-103.

schools, was held in New Lebanon, New York, to discuss the issue. The heated meeting lasted five days and ultimately came down to a vote that advocates of new measures won by a single ballot. While the outcome of the vote required the church's General Assembly to grant official sanction to the use of new measures, they did so grudgingly, their displeasure apparent in a "Pastoral Letter" that was appended to the minutes of their annual meeting in 1827. "There is no value in religious feelings," warned the letter, "unless they are excited by distinct views of divine truth."<sup>33</sup>

The New School paradigm, as embodied in the structures of camp meetings and protracted meetings, positioned audience members' worship performances in a space between containment and excrescence, a space that I call "contained excess." Neither wholly prescribed, nor wholly without form, the meetings provided a place where behaviors ordinarily deemed transgressive were performed in a contained environment. To detractors, these same behaviors appeared excrescent – abnormal, uncontained, and unable to be sanctioned under any circumstances. Camp meetings overflowed the rigidly established, societal boundaries of the late eighteenth century and brought people into closer emotional, spiritual, physical, and even geographical proximity. Protracted meetings challenged the emotional boundaries of church members with the goal of creating a renewed energy in religious work that would spill over into the larger, unchurched community. The effect of all this boundary-breaking

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<sup>33</sup> "Pastoral Letter," in *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1827*, (NP: NP, ND). Pagination begins on page 107. See pp. 160-164.

was to create a transformance, Schechner's term for an experience of lasting spectator transformation that occurs through the efficacy of performance.<sup>34</sup>

Finney understood the transformative power of this kind of worship. Through the use of theatrical techniques, he harnessed the emotionalism of the New School paradigm to produce in his followers spiritual experiences that took them to new heights of religious feeling without releasing them to the perceived vagaries of the camp meeting exercises.

#### Opposing Paradigms, Similar Problems

Worship, as construed by proponents of the New School, ran counter to the Old School's Enlightenment beliefs by equating emotional expression with religious conviction—the greater the intensity of the emotion, the stronger the conviction. Even after the New Lebanon Conference of 1827, the members of the Old School maintained their commitment to spiritual decorum. They thought it better to suffer the searing heat of the Gospel message in spirit-filled silence than to give vent to the corporeal emotions in ungodly, heathenish displays. While the two sides could not have been more opposed in their views, both believed their particular ways of expressing or suppressing emotion were divinely inspired.

By the time he arrived at the Chatham Street Chapel, Finney understood both sides of the debate, and as a good lawyer, he came down squarely in favor of neither. Instead, he coupled the order and intensity of the Old School with the

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<sup>34</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 117-120, and pp. 166-175.

bodily response of the New. He challenged his followers to perform their faith in the church setting and in the larger community.

In January 1832, Finney received a letter signed by a group of New York City ministers and church leaders inviting him to preach in New York City. Their letter promised that the time was ripe for a revival:

The state of things in our churches is very interesting and God has in mercy again visited [New York] City. And now Br[other] we write to assure you that we will welcome you to our pulpit and cooperate with you in labouring to save sinners if you will make us a visit. The winter season is favorable to a work here, and you will be sustained by the prayers and sympathies of hundreds of Christians.<sup>35</sup>

Finney, by this time, had become a nationally known evangelist. Following the response to his Rochester, New York, revival in 1830, his reputation as a minister who could make converts of even the most hardened sinners spread quickly.<sup>36</sup> It was not unusual for him to receive three to four similar preaching requests per week. Scheduling conflicts, travel arrangements, and prior commitments dictated that he refuse most of these invitations, but the letters continued to pour in, each one courting Finney by declaring him the only minister suited for the job. In a letter dated April 4, 1831, for example, the Rev. Joel Parker had written that “The brethren [in New York City] are...under conviction

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<sup>35</sup> January 24, 1832, Finney papers, Microfilm Roll 3, Oberlin College Archives (hereafter, O.C.A.)

<sup>36</sup> For Finney’s detailed account of the Rochester revival, see *Memoirs*, pp. 299-327.

and know they have got to repent if you come.”<sup>37</sup> From Boston came a similar plea: “the very fact of your being here & cooperating with other friends of revivals will...promote the cause of truth in this community” (*sic*).<sup>38</sup> In cities large and small, congregations begged Finney to grace them with his presence; they were confident that great things lay in store if he would come.

Only a few years earlier, his sphere of influence had been considerably smaller. In 1829, following a lukewarm reception to his ideas and methods of worship in Philadelphia, Finney’s first experience working in New York City had been a qualified success. Wary of Finney’s methods, Dr. Gardiner Spring, the most prominent and influential Presbyterian minister in the city during the early nineteenth century, was not anxious to invite the young minister for an extended stay. Nevertheless, “The Association of Gentlemen,” a group of businessmen who attended the Brick Presbyterian Church where Spring was the pastor, procured a vacant church building and invited Finney to conduct a revival there.<sup>39</sup> In so doing, they thwarted Spring’s objections and circumvented the General Assembly’s rule that “no person be introduced to preach in any of the churches under our care, unless by the consent of the pastor or church session.”<sup>40</sup> At the Association’s request, Finney labored in the city for several

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<sup>37</sup> Finney papers, O.C.A.

<sup>38</sup> Starkweather to CGF, 5 August 1831, Finney papers, O.C.A.

<sup>39</sup> *Memoirs*, pp. 284-290; Hardman, pp. 180-189.

<sup>40</sup> *The Directory for the Worship of God in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, Adopted, 1788. Amended, 1789-1886*, in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America: Being Its Standards Subordinate to the Word of God, Viz. The Confession of Faith, The Larger and Shorter Catechisms, The Form of Government, The Book of Discipline, And The Directory for the Worship of God. As Ratified and Adopted by the Synod of*

months, and his preaching drew large crowds, but its long-lasting effect was minimal. Without any official support from the Presbyterian Church, the revival blazed brightly only to fade quickly. A few months after Finney left the city, Herman Norton, the minister who attempted to galvanize the new congregation created by the revival, wrote that the fledgling band of converts was in disarray, their initial excitement “entirely dissipated” (*sic*).<sup>41</sup>

In the intervening months since that revival, Finney’s interest in returning to the city had grown. The success in Rochester had buoyed his spirits, and he was more confident about the prospects of bringing his streamlined revival process to New York City. Indeed, as Hardman has written, the city “exerted an irresistible pull on him” (175). After numerous letters, countless conversations, and much prayer, Finney accepted the offer to preach in the Chatham Street Chapel. His installation as pastor of the chapel in 1832 was a milestone not only in his career—he had never held a prolonged position as the full-time minister to a single congregation—but in the denomination, as well. In short, his approach to the performance of public worship catalyzed the dissent that had been growing steadily within the Presbyterian Church since the turn of the nineteenth century.

Being appointed to a pulpit in New York City would have been a significant milestone for any young Presbyterian minister in the early nineteenth century, but for Finney the appointment paled in comparison to the venue. Unlike any other

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*New York and Philadelphia in the Year of Our Lord 1788, And As Amended in the Years 1805-1903, Together with The Constitutional Rules Adopted in 1893-1901, And Administrative Acts of the Assembly of a General Nature* (hereafter, *Constitution*), (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1904), pp. 419-442. See p. 426.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Hardman, p. 191.

church of its day, the Chatham Street Chapel would test Finney's abilities not only as a minister, but also as a performer.

## Chapter 3

### Salvation, Live on Stage!

#### Reconstruction of a Finney Revival Service

For much of the nineteenth century, the sixth ward on Manhattan's lower east side was considered by many the "most depraved few acres in North America."<sup>1</sup> The ward was home to Five Points, the notorious slum that occupied the area now known as Chinatown. Irish immigrants dominated Five Points in the early part of the century, but there were also African-Americans, Germans, and Italians living in the area. By 1829, living conditions in Five Points were among the most horrific in the country, and the area continued to deteriorate for the next fifty years. In his recent history of Five Points, Tyler Anbinder cites an article from the May 18, 1833, edition of *The Mirror*, a New York newspaper, that described the ward as a "loathsome den of murderers, thieves, abandoned women, ruined children, filth, misery, drunkenness, and broils."<sup>2</sup> Sewage backed up in the streets; families lived together in filthy, windowless rooms; children wandered the streets scavenging food and stealing coal. When Abraham Lincoln visited the area in 1860, he was so shaken by the poverty he witnessed that he is said to have commented, "I shall never forget this as long as I live" (236).

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<sup>1</sup> Carroll S. Rosenberg, "Protestants and Five Pointers: The Five Points House of Industry, 1850-1870," *The New-York Historical Society Quarterly*, Vol. XLVIII, 4 (October 1964), pp. 327-347. See p. 327.

<sup>2</sup> Anbinder's thoroughly researched account of life in Five Points focuses primarily on the latter half of the nineteenth century, but he locates the beginning of the area's demise in 1829. See Anbinder, p. 22.

With good reason, Finney expressed serious concerns about Lewis Tappan's proposal to purchase the Chatham Garden Theatre in 1832: "Is not the location too filthy, etc., for decent people to go there?"<sup>3</sup> Although Chatham Street was not technically located in the infamous sixth ward, it ran just one block to the east. The smell of Five Points (Anbinder describes it as an "olfactory nightmare"<sup>4</sup>) would have been inescapable, even if the images of dereliction were not directly visible from the church. Given this description, it is hard to imagine that any part of Chatham Street could have been described as a "pleasant retreat" as recently as 1822, but those are the words theatre historian Joseph Ireland used to describe the Chatham Garden in his history of New York theatre, first published in 1866.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Delightful Seasons, 1822-1824**

A decade before Finney began preaching at the Chatham Street Chapel, French theatre manager Henri Barriere opened his "Pavillion [*sic*] Theatre" in Chatham Garden to great acclaim.<sup>6</sup> It was located on Chatham Street between Duane and Pearl Streets, and extended the length of the block to Augustus Street (later re-named City Hall Place) which ran parallel (Figure 3.1). The garden was surrounded by buildings on all four sides. Paying customers entered

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<sup>3</sup> Tappan repeats Finney's question in quotation marks in a reply letter dated 16 March 1832, Finney papers, Microfilm roll 3, O.C.A.

<sup>4</sup> Anbinder, p. 85.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph N. Ireland, *Records of the New York Stage from 1750 to 1860, Vol 1*. (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1966 [1866]), p. 405.

<sup>6</sup> George C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage, Volume III (1821-1834)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927) p.75.

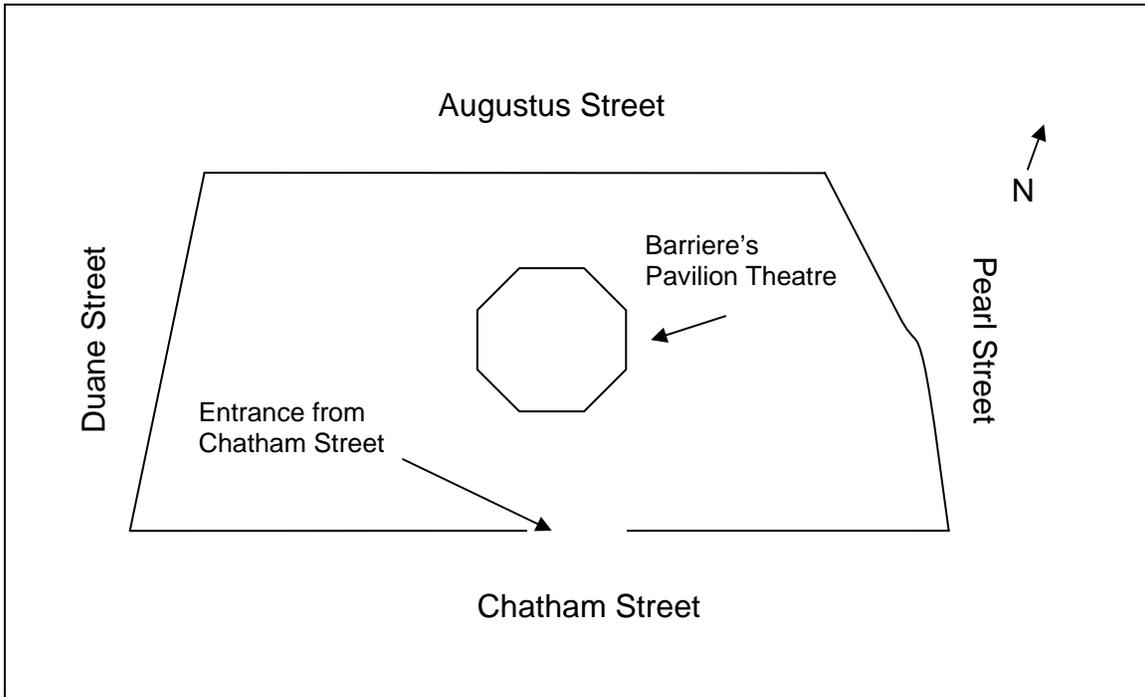


Figure 3.1: Henri Barriere's Pavilion Theatre in Chatham Garden, 1822

from Chatham Street through an opening flanked by private dwellings on both sides and above. These dwelling were likely of the same tumbledown, two-story wooden variety that proliferated throughout Five Points.<sup>7</sup>

Under a “broad expanse of white canvass which will protect the audience from the evening dews,” Barriere’s company sang songs, presented operettas, and performed “light comedy and farce” throughout the summer of 1822.<sup>8</sup> In the summer of 1823, however, Stephen Price, manager of the rival Park Theatre, forced the pavilion out of business by invoking a municipal fire ordinance against temporary theatres. In response, Barriere built a permanent theatre at the same location and named it for the garden that had sparked the controversy. The Chatham Garden Theatre opened May 17, 1824.

Built in haste to recoup the financial losses he had suffered, Barriere’s theatre did not boast especially impressive architecture. A preview of the structure in the May 15, 1824, edition of *The Mirror* described it blandly as “an oblong square,” measuring sixty-five feet wide by one hundred feet long (Figure 3.2).<sup>9</sup> In a letter to Finney, Tappan included a rough sketch of the theatre’s placement within the garden. Although there is no evidence that his drawing was to scale, the sketch indicated that the theatre ran parallel to Chatham Street, with

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<sup>7</sup> At Finney’s memorial service in Oberlin, Ohio, Dr. Arthur Tappan Pierson commented that he was born in “the very house beneath which, by an archway, the throngs poured into the [Chatham Street] chapel” (*Reminiscences*, p. 29). In 1832, Tappan noted with optimism that new brick houses were planned for Pearl and Augustus Streets, a change that promised to improve “the whole aspect around the theatre” (LT to CGF, 16 March 1832, Finney papers, O.C.A.). Anbinder writes that it was not uncommon for tenement owners to replace wooden buildings with brick structures, since the latter could be built much higher and could thus generate more revenue (74-75).

<sup>8</sup> Odell, pp. 76-77.

<sup>9</sup> Qtd. in Odell, p. 119.

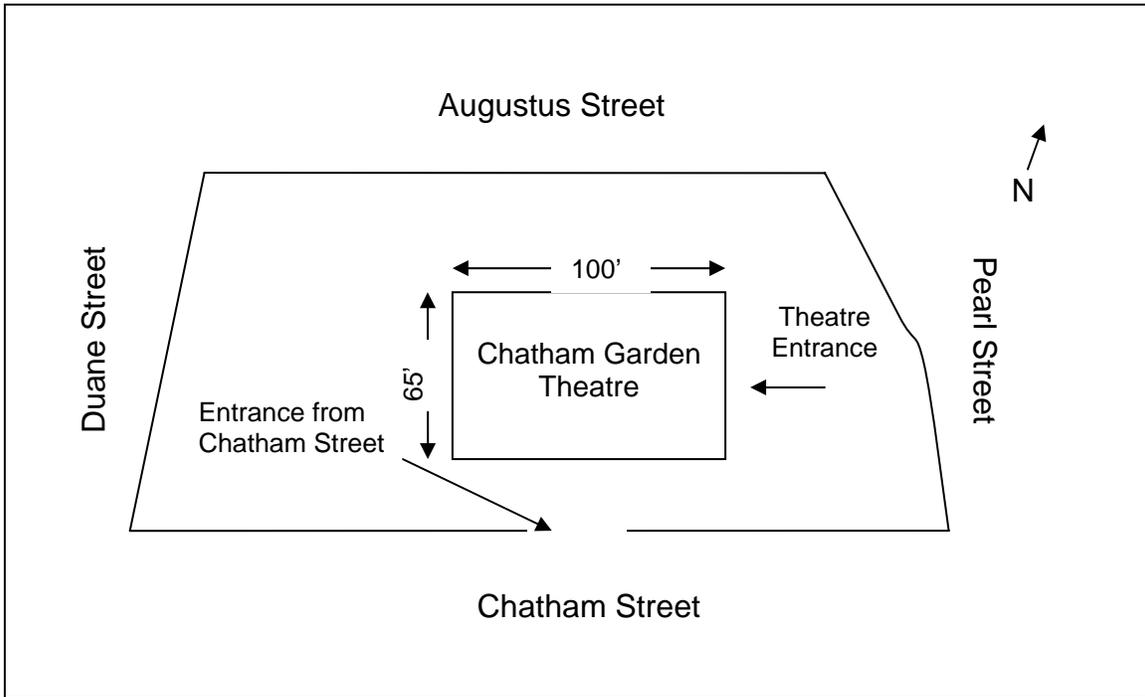


Figure 3.2: Barriere's Chatham Garden Theatre, 1824, taken from a sketch by Lewis Tappan

its front facing east toward Pearl Street. In other words, as patrons came through the entrance off of Chatham Street, they faced the side of the building, not its front. Tappan's drawing also indicated the presence of a garden in front of the main entrance to the theatre.<sup>10</sup>

Moving inside, the reviewer from *The Mirror* described the auditorium as follows:

On gaining the interior of the house, you find it comprising two circles of boxes, and a pit, capable of containing thirteen hundred persons; four hundred of whom may be comfortably seated in the pit. The area of the auditory is a semi-circle of forty-five feet span, from one side of the stage to the other, and thirty-one feet deep, from the centre box to the stage.<sup>11</sup>

Notably absent from the reviewer's description is any mention of a gallery or third tier, even though Tappan specifically mentions three tiers of boxes in his description of the space (Figure 3.3). The third tier is also visible in an 1825 engraving of the theatre's interior (Figure 3.4). Theatre historian Claudia Johnson has written that, in their efforts to attract a respectable clientele, nineteenth-century theatre owners actively "erased" the presence of a third tier in their advertising, since the space was inextricably linked with prostitution.<sup>12</sup> The gallery was also the only seating open to African-Americans who attended the theatre.

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<sup>10</sup> LT to CGF, 16 March 1832, Finney papers, O.C.A.

<sup>11</sup> Qtd in Odell, p. 119.

<sup>12</sup> Johnson, p. 575.

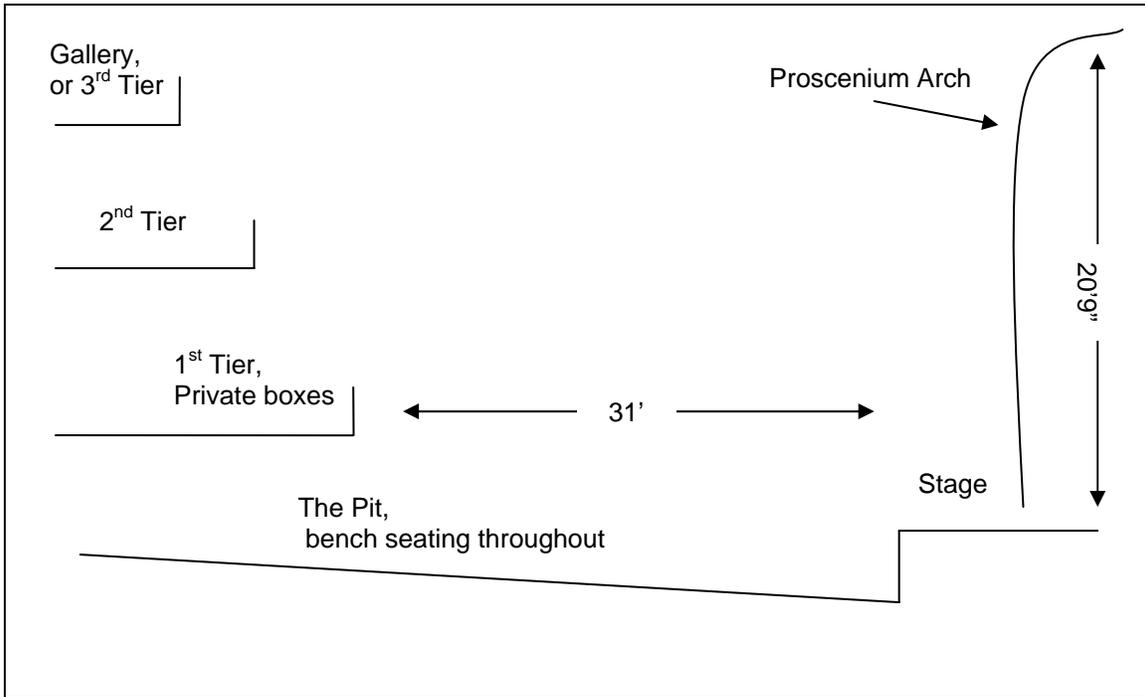


Figure 3.3: Side view of Chatham Garden Theatre interior, 1824

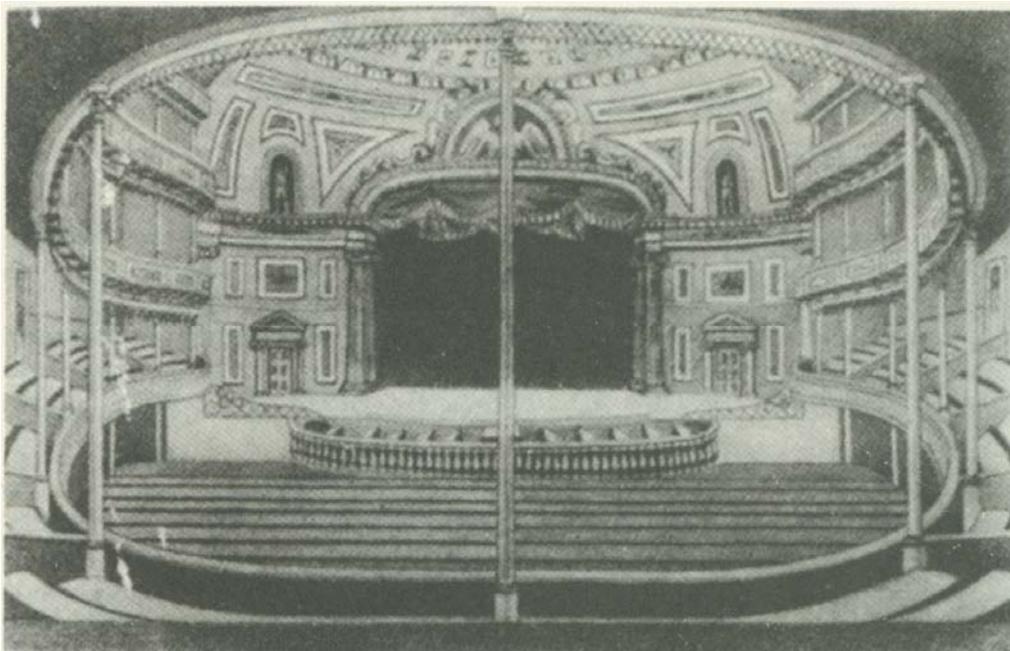


Figure 3.4: The interior of the Chatham Garden Theatre, 1825. This is the only extant drawing of the theatre. (Engraving in Odell, opposite p. 120)

Despite its lackluster design, the theatre was hugely popular. Even a century later, theatre historian George Odell would describe the Chatham Garden's first summer as "one of the most delightful seasons of dramatic performance ever given in New York."<sup>13</sup> The season's delight was the result of Barriere's commitment to theatergoers to offer a diverse repertoire that showcased prominent British and American performers of the day. "The company engaged here," wrote Ireland, "had never been surpassed in merit in a New York theatre."<sup>14</sup> While actor-manager Henry Wallack is one of the only Chatham Garden performers from the inaugural season whose name has been preserved in subsequent histories of American theatre, the other artists who performed there "were already favorably known to the public" of early nineteenth-century New York (443).

The unqualified success of the first season notwithstanding, the Chatham Garden "never quite recaptured the fine careless rapture of the summer of 1824."<sup>15</sup> After Barriere's untimely death in 1826, the theatre played host to a far less-fashionable clientele. Prior to its conversion into the Chatham Street Chapel, the theatre had been in steady decline, playing host to cheap, equestrian circus entertainments.<sup>16</sup> Gone were the fashionable crowds who had briefly flocked to

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<sup>13</sup> Odell, p. 107.

<sup>14</sup> Ireland, p. 443.

<sup>15</sup> Odell, p. 152.

<sup>16</sup> George Blanchard, "the great Circus man" (LT to CGF, 22 March 1832, Finney papers, Microfilm roll 3, O.C.A.), held the lease to the Chatham Garden Theatre when Tappan acquired it for the Second Free Presbyterian Church.

the theatre. In its latter days, the Chatham Garden was “a sunken venture, socially and financially.”<sup>17</sup>

### **The Church in the Garden**

Accessible only through the arched entrance off of Chatham Street and hidden from pedestrian view by the buildings on all four sides, the Chatham Garden Theatre was effectively cut off from the outside world. Tappan and Finney could not have failed to see the religious symbolism of the theatre’s location. Finney’s invitation to sinners to leave their “wicked ways” and enter the spiritual seclusion of God’s love was reinforced by the chapel’s literal seclusion from the city. It would be presumptuous to say that audience members recognized the space as “holy ground,” but as they approached the entrance to the building, they would have marked the retreat of the neighborhood beyond. Entering the doors of the Chatham Street Chapel, revival attendees found themselves in a rather cramped, gas-lit lobby.<sup>18</sup> Stairs to the right and left led audience members upstairs to the main floor of the auditorium, or sanctuary. Inside the auditorium, one of the most significant changes was the new configuration of seating in the pit and first tier. Originally divided into a series of private boxes, the first tier was now an open semi-circle of pews.<sup>19</sup> The theatre’s pit had been effectively eliminated by raising the pit floor to stage-level, filling it

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<sup>17</sup> Odell, p. 469.

<sup>18</sup> According to Odell, p. 161, the Chatham Garden Theatre used gas lighting before the Bowery Theatre.

<sup>19</sup> *The Mirror*, 15 May 1824, qtd. in Odell, p. 119.

with pews, and raking the new floor so that the back of the pit joined the front row of the first tier (Figures 3.5 and 3.6). A central aisle led from the back of the first tier, through the pit, all the way to the stage.<sup>20</sup> These changes enabled Finney's personal connection with the audience. Earlier in his ministry, he had eschewed the use of the elevated pulpits that were common in most protestant churches. Instead, he preferred to stand in "the broad aisle" where he could speak directly to his audience.<sup>21</sup> The seamless connection of the first tier, pit, and stage in the Chatham Street Chapel foregrounded Finney's peer relationship with listeners. The creation of a center aisle was also fundamental in establishing this relationship since Finney concluded each service with an invitation for people to come down the aisle to the front of the church. Although audience members seated in the second and third tiers lacked direct access to the stage, they were encouraged to descend the stairs at the back of each level and make their way to the front.

There were other architectural changes, as well. The original proscenium arch still framed the stage-cum-pulpit, but much of scenographer Hugh Reinagle's original ornamentation around the proscenium and reaching up into the dome had been removed or painted over, its subject matter of semi-nude,

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<sup>20</sup> LT to CGF, 22 March 1832, Finney papers, Microfilm roll 3, OCA.

<sup>21</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 83.

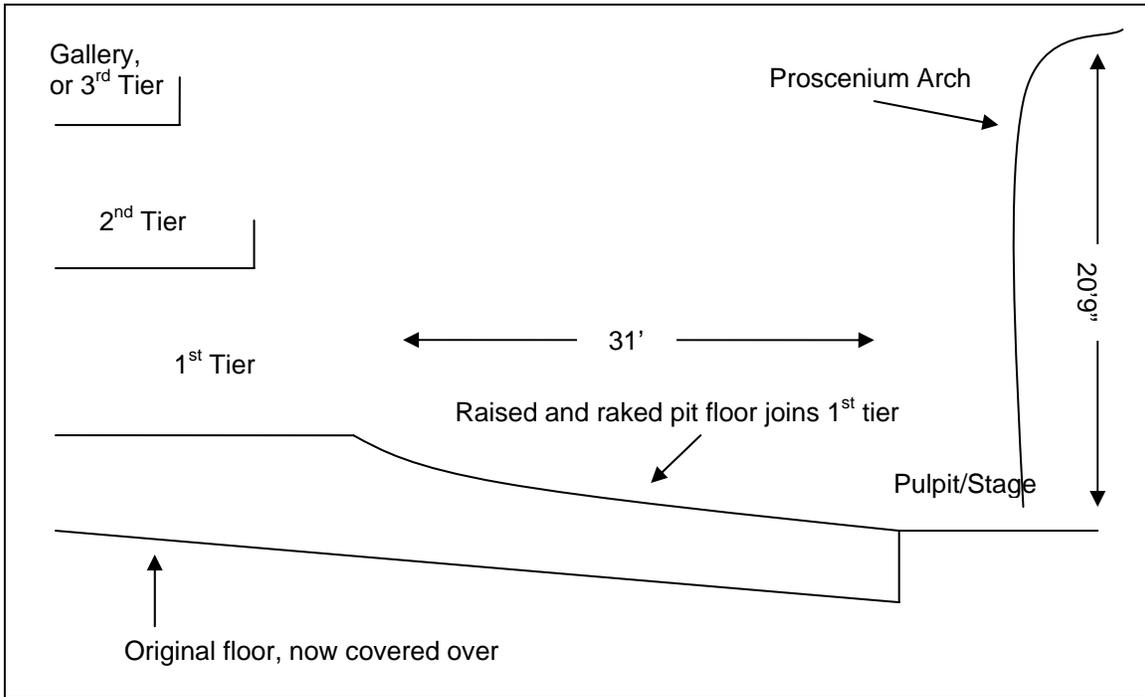


Figure 3.5: Side view of Chatham Street Chapel interior, 1832

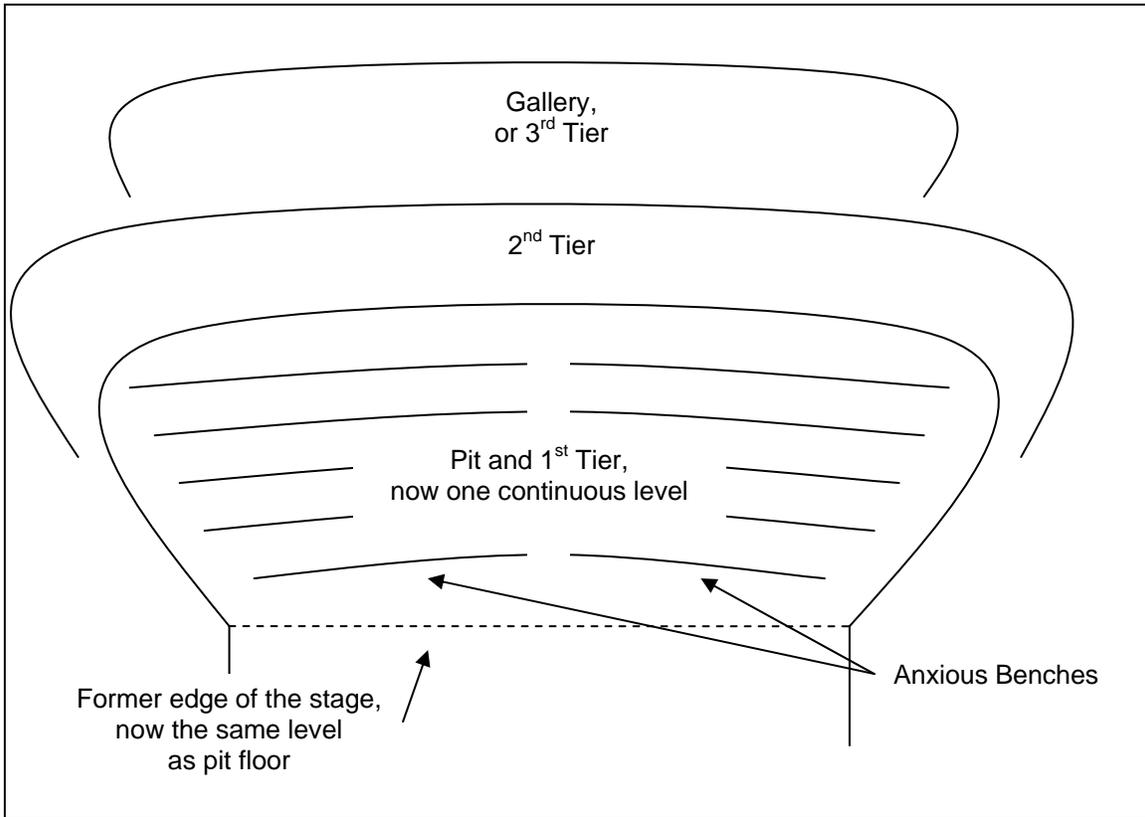


Figure 3.6: Overhead view of Chatham Street Chapel interior, 1832

Greek figures having been deemed inappropriate for a religious environment.<sup>22</sup> Another change was the addition of windows in the sanctuary. Tappan had sensed the gloom of the darkened theatre on his very first visit and had written to Finney that “[l]arge windows can be put in West & East, the whole made airy so as to admit sufficient light.”<sup>23</sup> It is unclear whether Tappan was using the designations “west” and “east” to indicate installing windows on either side of the seating area, or whether he was referring to literal compass points, which would have meant putting windows at the rear of the auditorium and in the upstage wall behind Finney. In either case, Tappan’s comment signaled the need for more natural light in the space. The bright light of (spiritual) day would dispel the forces of darkness in the theatre.

By the time it was opened to the public, the Chatham Street Chapel had been renovated to seat two thousand, five hundred people. In his memoirs, Finney noted that the chapel almost always hosted a capacity crowd, but in 1835, Lewis Tappan recorded the membership of Finney’s congregation at just four hundred twenty-six people.<sup>24</sup> Apparently, then, visitors outnumbered members more than five to one at any of Finney’s services. One reason the chapel may have attracted so many visitors was that it contained no assigned or reserved seating. From the beginning, the Chatham Street Chapel was designated a “free

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<sup>22</sup> Reinagle served as head of the scenic department at the Chatham Garden Theatre from 1824-1829. See Robin Thurlow Lacy, *A Biographical Dictionary of Scenographers 500 B.C. to 1900 A.D.* (New York: Greenwood, 1990) pp. 506-507.

<sup>23</sup> LT to CGF, 16 March 1832, Finney papers, Microfilm roll 3, OCA.

<sup>24</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 359; LT, “History of the Free Churches in the City of New-York,” *The New-York Evangelist*, 1 February 1835, Vol VI, No. 8, pp. 29-30.

church,” meaning that visitors and members were welcome to sit wherever they pleased without paying any prohibitive pew rental fees. African-Americans, however, were the exception to this rule. Despite pressure from Lewis Tappan and famed abolitionist Theodore Dwight Weld to be more vocal in support of abolition, Finney was relatively silent on the topic while working in New York City.<sup>25</sup> While he openly declared that slavery was a sin, he refused to make abolition “a hobby, or to divert the attention of the people from the work of converting souls.”<sup>26</sup> The only concession Finney made toward African-Americans in his church was moving their designated seating area from the uppermost gallery to a special section of pews on the bottom level.<sup>27</sup>

None of the floors in the theatre were carpeted, including the new, elevated floor that connected the first tier to the pit and the stage. The sound of people moving to their seats was likely quite distracting. Following the opening of the chapel, a reporter in the *Evangelist* opined, “Measures, we hope, will be taken to prevent, in future, such a degree of noise and disturbance near the doors, and particularly in the galleries, as was made by the coming in of such crowds of persons after the exercises had commenced.”<sup>28</sup>

With its rows of pews and central aisle, the house of the Chatham Street Chapel had been remodeled to bear more resemblance to a church than a theatre. The stage, however, was unlike any other pulpit in America. Measuring

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<sup>25</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld to LT, 17 November 1835, *Letters of TDW*, p. 242.

<sup>26</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 362.

<sup>27</sup> In Chapter 6, I will discuss the disastrous ramifications of Finney’s attempts to avoid open discussions of abolition in his congregation.

<sup>28</sup> *The New-York Evangelist*, 12 May 1832, qtd. in Hardman, p. 252.

thirty-two feet wide, nearly thirty-three feet high, and seventy feet deep, the enormous stage had been left largely intact. The proscenium arch still framed the space; the fly loft, the cavernous space above the stage where scenic elements, backdrops, and scrimms could be stored when not needed on stage, was still operable even though Finney never used it. A crucial part of Tappan's plan to meet the terms of the lease was to rent the chapel to religious societies and benevolence organizations on those evenings when Finney was not conducting services. Tappan was, therefore, hesitant to remodel the stage into a more traditional pulpit configuration.<sup>29</sup> As a result, there was no permanent choir loft on stage, nor was there a permanent lectern.

When people entered the sanctuary, the stage was bare, save for a semi-circular arrangement of chairs behind the lectern that had been placed downstage center. There is no evidence to state, emphatically, that Finney's services featured a choir. He did, however, employ Thomas Hastings (1784-1872) as the director of music at the chapel. Hastings was a prolific hymn-writer and choral conductor whom Finney had met during a revival in Utica, New York, in 1826. Hastings' presence in the Chatham Street Chapel indicates the use of religious music throughout the service, and while it remains unclear whether this music was sung by a choir or by the entire congregation, I have included the presence of a choir in my reconstruction. In any case, Finney's opinion about church music was clear: "When singing is introduced in a prayer meeting, the

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<sup>29</sup> LT to CGF, 11 April 1832, Finney papers, Microfilm roll 3, OCA.

hymns should be short, and so selected as to bring out something solemn;...not that joyful kind of singing, that makes every body feel comfortable, and turns off the mind from the object of the prayer meeting.”<sup>30</sup> Whatever role music played in Finney’s services, it was clearly subordinate to the preaching.

Services in the chapel were lengthy, almost always exceeding two hours and occasionally extending to nearly three hours. By nineteenth-century standards, however, Finney’s services were not considered overly long. His sermons “seldom fell short of an hour and a half in length, and often extended to two hours.”<sup>31</sup> The length of the sermon aside, one must bear in mind that the plays and performances presented at the Chatham Garden Theatre had lasted as long as, if not longer than, Finney’s services. Any audience members who had been to the theatre in its former incarnation would likely have been prepared for an all-evening event.

Finney’s revivals can be divided into three sections – the devotional, the sermon, and the altar call – each one playing an important part in making the service efficacious. Finney, not surprisingly, was intimately involved with all three sections. The first lasted approximately twenty-five minutes; the second averaged ninety minutes. The length of the third section varied, depending on the response of the audience, but typically lasted between fifteen and thirty minutes.

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<sup>30</sup> *L.R.R.*, p. 133.

<sup>31</sup> Oberlin President J. H. Fairchild, speaking at Finney’s memorial service, noted that Finney continued to preach lengthy sermons until the very end of his career. Qtd in *Reminiscences*, p. 80. See also Henry Fowler, *The American Pulpit: Sketches, Biographical and Descriptive, of Living American Preachers, and of the Religious Movements and Distinctive Ideas Which They Represent* (New York: J. M. Fairchild, & Co., 1856) p. 37.

## The Devotional (25 minutes)

The service began with the singing of a hymn. The sound of singing in the auditorium filtered down the stairs, and individuals who were still congregating in the lobby quickly made their way upstairs. With the auditorium nearly full, finding a seat was difficult, and latecomers created considerable noise on the wooden floors. The writer in the *Evangelist* complained that the cacophony of the congregation had not subsided by the conclusion of this first hymn; in fact, he wrote that the noise continued until the beginning of the sermon.<sup>32</sup>

Following the hymn, Finney rose from his seat and stood at the lectern. He was tall, and his imposing figure commanded attention without his having to say a word. Finney's blue eyes were particularly striking; no physical description of the man ever fails to mention them. Blue in color, they have repeatedly been called "prominent," "piercing," and "penetrating," as well as "sparkling," and even "glittering."<sup>33</sup> Standing at the pulpit, he looked at the various sections of the sanctuary as though silencing each whispering voice and echoing footfall by sheer force of will. Almost without blinking, Finney's eyes seemed to absorb the entire audience. When the room was sufficiently quiet, he asked the members of the congregation to bow their heads, and he offered the invocation, or opening prayer.

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<sup>32</sup> See Hardman, p. 252.

<sup>33</sup> [George W. Gale], *Autobiography of Rev. George W. Gale* (New York: n.p., 1964), p. 183. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, p. 17. See Hardman, pp. 35, 201, and 352 for additional citations.

The tone of Finney's voice signaled the seriousness with which he expected the congregation to respond. While his comments were directed to God, the divine, unseen audience of Christian worship, he never lost sight of his human audience. Like his sermons, his prayers were direct, unflinching in their acknowledgement of sin, and almost wholly extemporaneous. They were also terrifyingly specific. Finney believed in praying for a "definite object" as opposed to spiritual generalities.<sup>34</sup> In fact, the directness of his prayers was so revolutionary that it constituted one of the "new measures" frequently attacked by his critics. More than once during a prayer, Finney would refer to the entire audience as sinners. Furthermore, it was not uncommon for him to cite individuals by name and to pray for the specific sins with which they were currently struggling. Nor did these sins have to have been confessed by the individuals beforehand. Finney took aim at pride, vanity, self-righteousness, idleness, and general "worldliness" wherever he found it. "You cannot prevail in prayer," he reminded them, "without renouncing all your sins" (64). Hardly a sermon went by in which he failed to include at least a passing reference to the dangers of intemperance, tobacco, and working on Sundays – the "Christian Sabbath" – and these topics almost certainly found their way into his prayers, as well. By the time he arrived at the "amen" in the invocation, the audience was fully alert, unsettled, and wondering what would happen next.

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<sup>34</sup> *L.R.R.*, 54.

At the conclusion of his prayer, the members of the audience raised their heads tentatively. Finney had delivered the prayer standing behind the lectern; he now returned to his seat, and Hastings stood, motioning for the choir to do the same. Turning toward the audience, he invited everyone to stand for congregational singing. The most common method of congregational singing that had been practiced at camp meetings and revivals throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was called “lining,” in which the leader sang the hymn one line at a time, pausing after each for the congregation to repeat what he had just sung.<sup>35</sup> Finney disliked this method and preferred for the congregation to have a printed copy of the hymns so that everyone could sing together.<sup>36</sup> Using either hymnals they found in the pew or printed sheets they had received as they entered the chapel, the congregation (or at least those members of the congregation who could read) joined Hastings and the choir in singing several hymns.

The words to these hymns did nothing to alleviate the angst created by Finney’s prayer. With titles like “The Judgment Hymn” and “Trust and Obey,” the hymns’ lyrics reinforced the dangers of sin that Finney had enumerated in his prayer moments before (133). At the conclusion of the hymns, Hastings motioned for the congregation to be seated. The devotional period had come to an end. In the space of only twenty-five minutes, the congregation had been rendered emotionally and intellectually vulnerable to the sermon to follow.

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<sup>35</sup> *Constitution*, pp. 421-422.

<sup>36</sup> *L.R.R.*, p. 255.

### **The Sermon (90 to 120 Minutes)**

As Hastings, the choir, and the congregation took their seats, Finney once again stepped forward. This time, however, he bypassed the lectern and stood down center on what had been the apron of the Chatham Garden stage. He was directly in front of the anxious benches, the first pews on either side of the center aisle. These seats would remain empty until he issued the altar call at the end of the sermon. Finney frequently preached without any notes and even without a Bible, so he had merely to step forward and look at the audience before launching into his sermon.

Unlike the arrangement of the pit and stage in the Chatham Garden Theatre, there was no longer any height or distance barrier separating Finney from his audience in the Chatham Street Chapel. The edge of the stage now melded seamlessly with the raised pit floor. From the same position where actors commonly stood to deliver their most powerful monologues, he cast his spell-binding gaze around the house and waited for complete silence. After the briefest of introductions, he launched into his sermon. As he preached, Finney employed the whole width of the stage to connect with as many individuals as possible. Rev. Charles P. Bush recalled one of Finney's performances:

He stood at his full height, tall and majestic...; his clear, shrill voice rising to its highest pitch, and penetrating every nook and corner of the vast

assembly. People held their breath. Every heart stood still. It was almost enough to raise the dead.<sup>37</sup>

Bush's ebullient comment suggests that Finney's gestural vocabulary and overall stage presence were large – his hand motions were broad enough to be seen from the uppermost gallery. The Hon. William E. Dodge was another New Yorker who remembered attending revivals in the Chatham Street Chapel. Describing the effect of Finney's style, he said, "It seemed at times as though we were brought almost in view of the eternal world! At other times, the impressions were so deep that sobs were heard all over the house" (34). Like any good actor, Finney explored his entire vocal and emotional range during the sermon, exhorting one minute and whispering the next.

Whether preaching in a revival meeting or in a regular Sunday morning worship service, Finney always began by quoting a passage from the Bible that would become the theme of the sermon. He then offered only the briefest of contextual comments before launching into the heart of the message. Finney's scriptural selections were notoriously brief, and the phrases or sentences he selected were often taken from the Old Testament, or from New Testament passages that were less familiar than others. He used this obscurity to his advantage; instead of addressing how his proof texts functioned within the larger story of their Biblical contexts, he used the passages to support his own arguments.

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<sup>37</sup> *Reminiscences*, p. 12.

Finney's training as a lawyer served him well in the pulpit. Scholars have consistently noted the structural similarities between his sermons and closing arguments in a legal case. In *The American Pulpit*, first published in 1856, Henry Fowler enthusiastically claimed that Finney was unequalled in the area of "impressive argument," that he presented biblical truth "in its completeness and clearness" so that "skeptic, infidel, and apathist [*sic*] alike" were reduced to "broken-hearted submission to the power of God."<sup>38</sup> After reciting the Biblical text and situating listeners in the context of the sermon, Finney quickly enumerated his main ideas in concise, rapid-fire succession. This verbal outline, typically consisting of three to seven key points, gave listeners a sense of the general direction of the sermon, and immediately after he had finished listing these, he returned to the first point to elaborate further.

With each of his main points, he followed a basic, systematic formula. After reiterating the point, Finney offered further scriptural evidence to support his claim. Biblical precedent thus established, he then launched into a connected series of anecdotes to elucidate the point. When recounting personal experiences, Finney frequently employed the thin veil of attributing the experience to "a friend" or even "a preacher" of his acquaintance. Between these stories of sinners transformed, he liberally interspersed metaphors to highlight the audience's sinful condition. Of the faults found in his sermons, contemporary critics were especially perturbed by the frequency with which Finney repeated

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<sup>38</sup> Fowler, p. 37.

these spiritual comparisons, but Finney made no apology for this technique. “Preaching,” he believed, “should be *repetitious*” [*sic*].<sup>39</sup> Knowing the value of repetition in implanting an idea of guilt or innocence in the minds of a jury, he relied on a trusted handful of metaphors that had proven effective over the years. From night to night, and sometimes twice within the same sermon, he referenced them in order to advance his argument.

After building a stockpile of these anecdotes and metaphors, Finney would suddenly reverse course, shifting the focus away from himself to the audience, from the general to the specific, from vague comments to pointed critique. As his invocation had aptly demonstrated, he had no qualms about pointing an accusing finger at specific individuals in the audience, but he was not mean-spirited in singling out individuals for public rebuke. One witness said that “even a look from his great searching eyes” could break through the heart’s “secret recesses of wrong and deceit.”<sup>40</sup> Having indicted the audience for being guilty of the sin currently under discussion, Finney abruptly shifted to the next point of his sermon, leaving those whom he had just confronted to wrestle with their own consciences. “It is of great importance,” Finney said, “that the sinner should be made to *feel his guilt*” (*sic*).<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *L.R.R.*, p. 210. Ralph Waldo Emerson heard Finney preach and said that he “extolled God’s heart at the expense of his head” (*Memoirs*, p. 546n.41).

<sup>40</sup> *Reminiscences*, p. 16; Finney’s goal in bearing down on specific individuals at this point in the sermon was to make them uncomfortable without taking them all the way to the breaking point. Earlier in his career, he had experienced difficulty discerning this breaking point, and his preaching had caused people to fall in the aisles. See *Memoirs*, p. 134.

<sup>41</sup> *L.R.R.*, p. 205.

After listening to Finney work his way through the key points of his sermon, first-time visitors may have assumed that the sermon had nearly come to an end, but he was just getting started. After completing his discussion of the key points, he moved into the second portion of the sermon known simply as “Remarks.” As the Rev. R. L. Stanton, speaking at Finney’s memorial service, recalled, “the first three-fourths of his sermon was in a colloquial style; and in the latter part he would make such appeals as I never listened to anywhere.”<sup>42</sup> In fact, these “appeals” were frequently as long, if not longer, than the key points. Unlike the first portion of the sermon, however, Finney never gave the congregation a preview of his remarks. Here, according to Finney historian David Chesebrough, “Finney changed his manner of preaching from the logical lawyer to the emotional preacher.”<sup>43</sup> Even though Finney had already planned his remarks, his style in the second half of the sermon seemed more improvisatory. The second portion of the sermon took the audience into a deeper contemplation of the key points while the free-form style of the remarks kept them vigilant. His remarks drew the threads of his sermon together and put that evening’s comments in conversation with the larger themes of the ongoing revival. He made his audience keenly aware of the changes that needed to take place in their own lives, and he then challenged them to join him in leading New York City to accept Christ, and from there, to spread the gospel to the world.

### **Spiritual Catharsis: Answering the Call (15 minutes)**

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<sup>42</sup> *Reminiscences*, p. 27.

<sup>43</sup> Chesebrough, 97.

When Finney sensed that he had led the members of the congregation to their emotional breaking point, he issued an invitation for individuals who wanted to accept God's offer of salvation to make their way to the front of the chapel. This invitation remains a regular feature of many protestant worship services and is commonly known as the altar call. By its very nature, Finney's altar call was an emotional experience akin to the idea of catharsis in drama; the physical act of coming forward alleviated or purged the mental pressure that had been building in the audience throughout the sermon. Those who responded were making a public declaration of their sinfulness and their need for God's salvation.

Finney organized his entire sermon around the call. After exposing the sins of various individuals and helping the audience see themselves in their spiritually lost condition, he concluded his remarks as abruptly as he had begun and issued the altar call with "ardor and fervor."<sup>44</sup> The following call, taken from a sermon entitled, "Blessedness of Benevolence," is typical of his cursory style: "If you do not have this benevolence and the whole of religion, come seek God now; for you are a sinner if you have it not and you know it; seek God now for if you have not God's love in this life you cannot dwell with Him after death."<sup>45</sup> For those who were engaged in or entrapped by the sinful behaviors Finney had articulated, the command to "seek God now" promised immediate relief.

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<sup>44</sup> Dr. Arthur Pierson, quoted in *Reminiscences*, p. 66.

<sup>45</sup> Chesebrough, p. 126.

Finney stood in the center aisle between the empty pews, or anxious benches, to issue the call.<sup>46</sup> Immediately thereafter, Hastings and the choir stood to sing a hymn encouraging people to consider their spiritual standing with God. Hastings wrote new hymns and occasionally added verses to existing hymns specifically for this moment in the service. “Come, Ye Disconsolate” was one of Finney’s favorite hymns because it emphasized the feeling of spiritual renewal that accompanied the physical act of coming forward: “Come, ye disconsolate, where’er ye languish / Come to the mercy-seat, fervently kneel; / Here bring your wounded hearts, here tell your anguish; / Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal.”<sup>47</sup> Whether convicted by their guilty consciences, by Finney’s words, or by the music, individuals came forward, often weeping and feeling physically weak. Religion scholar George M. Thomas has noted the importance of isolating individuals at the front of the sanctuary:

A person sat on the ‘anxious bench’ away from kin and friends as an individual. A person that [*sic*] did sit with saved kin (parent, spouse, aunt, or uncle, who might have cajoled the person into attending) went forward alone as a public display.<sup>48</sup>

When the response was great, the altar call could stretch on at length, sometimes occupying up to thirty minutes.

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<sup>46</sup> Finney’s preference for preaching in the centre aisle began even before he became the pastor of the Chatham Street Chapel (*Memoirs*, p. 83).

<sup>47</sup> Qtd. in Hambrick-Stowe, p. 140.

<sup>48</sup> George M. Thomas, *Revivalism and Cultural Change: Christianity, Nation Building, and the Market in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 69.

Sensing that everyone who was going to come forward had come, Finney signaled to Hastings, who drew the singing to a close. Finney then explained that he would accompany these repentant individuals to the prayer room at the rear of the auditorium. This room was located upstairs, on the same level as the second tier. During the days of the Chatham Garden Theatre, the room had been a saloon, and it featured French doors that opened onto a balcony overlooking the garden in front of the main entrance to the theatre.<sup>49</sup> Here Finney held his “Inquiry Meetings,” and in this smaller gathering, he talked privately with each person who had come forward to inquire after the state of his or her soul. Technically, the revival service was over once Finney left the auditorium to meet with anxious inquirers, but members were often encouraged to stay and pray on behalf of the individuals in the prayer room.

### **The Service Ends, The Work Begins**

In the aftermath of Finney’s departure from the auditorium, the congregation went to work. Pre-arranged volunteers went to assist Finney in the prayer room. Other church members lingered at their seats, on the lookout for visitors who appeared anxious about the state of their souls. If a member spotted someone fitting this description, he or she approached the person and engaged in conversation. Finney’s training had taught the members to be tenacious. They were to encourage the individuals to go to the prayer room, and, if necessary, to

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<sup>49</sup> Odell, p. 120.

accompany them. Other members of the congregation staffed the exits, inviting people to return for the next revival service and providing tracts for them to share with their friends and family.

The atmosphere in the prayer room was quiet and intense. Closed off from the rest of the theatre, the space was much more private than the auditorium setting and more conducive to the emotional environment of Finney's inquiry meetings. Once the noise of the exiting crowd dissipated, the room was almost completely silent, save for the sounds of people weeping and whispering their confessions to Finney or his assistants. Unlike his gregarious stage persona, the Finney who now worked his way from person to person was comforting, soft-spoken, and reassuring. According to Bush, Finney "allowed no confusion, no loud talking, no moving about, except as he passed quietly from one to another, asking a few questions in a subdued tone of voice, and addressing to each a few words of instruction and admonition."<sup>50</sup> In this setting, the threat of hellfire had been vanquished by the promise of God's salvation, so Finney was able to smile and rejoice with each person who made the choice. Unhurried, he took the time he needed with each individual, and only after everyone had been cared for did he dismiss the group with a short prayer of blessing. By this point, it was easily after eleven o'clock, sometimes closer to midnight.

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<sup>50</sup> Qtd in Frank Grenville Beardsley, *A Mighty Winner of Souls: Charles G. Finney, A Study in Evangelism* (New York: American Tract Society, 1937), p. 169.

Finney's formula for his worship performances varied little from night to night. Unlike Barriere, who had relied on an ever-changing bill of plays and performers to entice paying customers to return to the Chatham Garden, Finney built an audience through his consistency. In the renovated space of the Chatham Street Chapel, he perfected the intensely personal prayers of the devotional, the incontrovertible logic of the sermon, and the emotional invitation of the altar call. There were few surprises in the structure of his revivals. And yet the impact of his services never ceased to be surprising. Working within such a rigid structure, Finney nevertheless managed to present his theology in ways that captured not only the hearts, but also the imaginations of his listeners. Perhaps even more than he was aware, the theatrical traditions of Finney's day found their way into his services. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, he modeled his faith by performing it, and he charged his congregation to do the same.

## Chapter 4

### Drama and Script: Finney's Theology and Performance Style

Preparations [for a performance event] may begin anywhere from minutes before a performance...to years before. However, wherever the boundaries are set, it is within the broad region of performance that theater takes place, and at the center of the theater is the script, sometimes the drama.

Schechner, "Drama, Script, Theater, and Performance"<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, I will use Schechner's concepts of *drama* and *script* to analyze Finney's theology and performance style. Schechner sees *drama*, the written text, as the starting point of the performance event. As "the domain of the author, the composer, scenarist, shaman," the drama provides the performers with a particular point of entry into a particular subject (71). In the process of bringing the drama to life on stage, the performers must decide how/if this point of entry corresponds with their production's point of view. Schechner says that the result of this decision, or series of decisions, is the *script*, or "the interior map of a particular production" (85). As the scripting process unfolds, the meaning of the drama changes. Even in the Chatham Street Chapel, where Finney was both

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<sup>1</sup> D.S.T.P., p. 71.

the author and the central performer, his theology (or *drama*) changed as his performance style (or *script*) evolved to meet the needs of his audience.

In his revivals at the Chatham Street Chapel, Finney presented a vision of Christian endurance that mirrored the persevering spirit and American pluck of matinee heroes. In both their structure and their message, his services relied on a series of organizing principles that had been popularized on the Chatham stage throughout its short life as a theatre. Like an adept playwright, he could mount problem upon problem and sin upon sin until his audience was practically begging for resolution to the rising action. He understood the value of dramatic timing and the usefulness of the staged aside as thoroughly as any seasoned actor of his day.

Finney's theology and performance style occupied the same liminal space that theatre historian Rosemarie K. Bank identifies as the locus of nineteenth-century melodrama. In *Theatre Culture in America, 1825-1860*, she argues that the melodrama was "a scenario of self-creation open to those who believe[d] in the way things ought to be," a space that created "that middle range for self-exposure between the unreachable and the unacceptable, an enabling rather than a controlling scenario."<sup>2</sup> Read through Schechner's model of performance as restored behavior, Bank's definition positions melodrama as a type of theatrical entertainment ideally suited to help audiences differentiate the "not me" from the "not not me." Similarly, Finney's scripted performances helped

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<sup>2</sup> Rosemarie K. Bank, *Theatre Culture in America, 1825-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 118.

audiences understand how to apply the drama of his theology to their own lives. In short, his sermons turned faith, an otherwise immeasurable, internalized system of belief, into an externalized, quantifiable system based largely on performance.

Finney's theology was at once unorthodox, unsophisticated, and undeniably successful, but to what extent was its unconventional appeal a product of the performance tradition of the Finney revival? Asked differently, is it possible to analyze Finney's theology apart from the performance context in which he embodied his ideas? By separating the drama of his theology from the script of his worship performances, one gets at the root of Schechner's question about the extent to which a production ought to be governed by the rules of the dramatic text. Or, in this case, the extent to which a worship performance should be governed by the rules of theology.

In the first half of this chapter, I will analyze Finney's theology as a gospel of self-creation that he built on the trinity of self-empowerment, self-improvement, and self-respect. As he taught his listeners how Christianity could improve their lives, he echoed the story-lines of contemporary plays that featured characters whose determination and sheer goodness helped them surmount countless obstacles. In the second half of the chapter, I will examine the ways in which Finney's performance style both affirmed and, on occasion, challenged his theological views. In his preaching, Finney embodied performance traits that I have traced to the popular theatre of the nineteenth century. His penchant for

plainspeaking and his skillful use of body language reveal astute readings of popular performance. In the Chatham Street Chapel, Finney turned the “sinful” pursuits of theatricality to his spiritual advantage.

### **Finney’s Drama: The Theology of Self-Creation**

“It is not the design of preaching to make men easy and quiet, but to make them ACT.”

Finney, “How to Preach the Gospel”<sup>3</sup>

From Finney’s perspective, an effective church had no room for unproductive people. Busyness in the name of Christian duty was one of the best ways, in his estimation, to develop Christian character. Individuals learned Finney’s theology as they practiced what he preached. Just as apprentice actors of that time learned their craft by appearing in bit parts alongside actors who had perfected particular lines of business, so Finney instructed the members of his church to mentor recent converts.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, Old School Presbyterians required new converts to study the church’s theology, in the form of a catechism, before they were permitted to participate actively in the life of the church. In Schechner’s terms, they had to be thoroughly versed in the *drama* before they could participate in the *script*. In the Chatham Street Chapel, these activities occurred concurrently. By beginning to do the work of the church

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<sup>3</sup> *L.R.R.*, p. 199

<sup>4</sup> *L.R.R.*, p. 421.

immediately after their conversion, new Christians learned Finney's theology through application. They learned how to act the role of a Christian by performing it.

Once outside the relative safety of the chapel, Finney's congregation worked, literally, to remain in "Christian" character. His goal was for them to conflate, in Erving Goffman's language, the "expression given" with the "expression given off." In other words, he expected the outward manifestation of their Christian persona to become so natural that it would eventually meld with their "non-verbal, presumably unintentional" displays of Christian belief.<sup>5</sup> If they followed his teachings, Finney assured followers that they would become self-empowered Christians; they would not be afraid to act on their spiritual impulses. "If you have any feeling for a particular individual," said Finney, "you have reason to believe the Spirit of God is moving you to desire the salvation of his soul, and that God is ready to bless your efforts for his conversion" (159). Achieving this level of confidence was proof that Finney's converts had fully adopted their new Christian personas. As they employed their heightened powers of spiritual awareness, ordinary events suddenly became, in the words of performance theorist Geoff Pywell, "elevated in [their] minds to be substantially different from others that exist ordinarily, without the slightest alteration in physical properties, without, as it were, a decisive removal from the territory of the natural."<sup>6</sup> Under

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<sup>5</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), pp. 2, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Geoff Pywell, *Staging Real Things: The Performance of Ordinary Events* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1994), p. 25.

Finney's influence, almost any act of daily business could become a moment of spiritual instruction, an opportunity for his followers to test the usefulness of his drama in the unfolding context of their script . Given sufficient dedication, effort, and perspicacity, what began as a halting, faltering performance of faith would become a natural, assured persona of Christianity. As these changes occurred, the individuals became, in Finney's view, "Christians that you can depend on."<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the course of his long career, Finney came to embrace perfectionism, or the idea that it was possible for a Christian to live a sinless life. To attain perfection, however, he believed that Christians had to work diligently toward improving themselves. As his followers grew more empowered to act on their spiritual impulses, they also grew in the area of self-improvement. In the theatre culture of the nineteenth century, Finney's message resonated strongly with themes that had long been popular on the stage.

In the fifth act of George Lillo's domestic tragedy, *The London Merchant; or, the History of George Barnwell*, for example, the virtuous Thorowgood extols the joys of righteous living as his friend, the pitiable Barnwell of the play's title, prepares to be executed.<sup>8</sup> In his speech, Thorowgood imagines himself a minister and notes the minister's disdain for riches and the "lust of power;" instead of money in the bank, he says, the man of God "counts for wealth the souls he wins" (V.ii.43, 45). Originally published in 1731, a century before Finney

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<sup>7</sup> *L.R.R.*, p. 426.

<sup>8</sup> George Lillo, *The London Merchant; or, the History of George Barnwell*, William H. McBurney, ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), V.ii.33-50.

began preaching on the Chatham stage, Lillo's play espoused the same sort of action-oriented theology Finney promoted, albeit in a decidedly secular context. In contrast to the avaricious and easily misled Barnwell, Thorowgood is a merchant more concerned with winning souls than making sales. He is, in fact, just the sort of person Finney hoped either to recruit or to create from the pulpit of the Chatham Street Chapel. Like the redeeming coda found in Lillo's play, Finney's theology offered hope for anyone to get to heaven, but getting there required work.

Thorowgood's attempt to redeem his friend improves his own strength of character. Similarly, the members of the chapel were eager to improve themselves, and they readily took Finney's gospel to the streets of New York. His theology spurred them into action, and they responded with boundless, sometimes over-zealous, enthusiasm. George Cragin, who was converted during one of Finney's revivals in the Chatham Street Chapel, wrote:

We had been daily and diligently instructed by Mr. F., that the way to keep our hopes bright and our souls happy, was to labor constantly for the salvation of sinners, and not hesitate for a moment to go out into the streets and lanes of the city, and lay hold of every sinner we met and tell him he must repent and give his heart to God, or he would go to hell.

Willing to *do* anything to keep bright hopes, not a few followed his advice.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 359n.16.

Cragin's special emphasis on the word *do* typifies the mindset of Finney's ideal convert, who would have undertaken almost any task in return for the promise of "bright hopes" and a "happy soul." Finney described his Christian community in language reminiscent of a utopic spiritual factory, where each new convert had "a place to fill, and something to do, and knowing where he belongs, and what he has to do, and how to do it."<sup>10</sup> To have the faith that Finney preached was to do the work that he assigned. In the process of performing these tasks, his followers learned new skills and obtained new-found confidence in themselves. For Finney, these signs of self-improvement were tangible proofs of the power of the gospel, or at least the gospel as it functioned in his drama.

The third tenet of Finney's theology was self-respect. Here again, he placed heavy emphasis on the "self." His theology positioned the sinner as the one who chose God, the new convert as the one who purposed to live differently, the Christian as the one who aimed at perfection. Respecting oneself was important for Finney's converts, because frequently their spouses, families, and friends did not share their faith. He often told stories of Christians who lived in unbelieving, unsupportive communities, and yet they believed in themselves enough to persevere in the Christian faith. In one example, a Christian wife was held at knifepoint by her unbelieving husband, who did not want her to go to church. Falling to her knees, she prayed aloud for God's mercy. "Arrested" by God's power, her husband "dropped his dagger, and fell upon the floor and cried

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<sup>10</sup> *L.R.R.*, 329.

for mercy himself....From that moment, he was a wonderfully changed man.”<sup>11</sup>

As he created images like this, Finney’s audiences would have had little trouble envisioning the scene. Here again, his ideas resonated in the theatre culture of the day.

In *The People’s Lawyer*, J. S. Jones’ nineteenth-century melodrama, the corrupt Hugh Winslow fires his employee, Charles Otis, for refusing to lie under oath to protect Winslow’s firm. After the sacked Otis has collected his few belongings and left the office, Winslow wonders aloud whether the young man will change his mind and do his employer’s bidding:

I thought Charles Otis had been more pliant to my will; if I cannot have his testimony, I must make sure he's not used against me. His good name is his pride, his honesty his great defense; I must find means to blast this airy fabric.<sup>12</sup>

As could only be the case in a play dripping with poetic justice, Otis’ good name and honesty remain intact even after being dragged through the mud. His “airy fabric” proves to be much stronger than Winslow had ever dreamed. Otis’ self-respect cannot be bought or sold. Finney charged the members of his congregation to prize and protect their self-respect as resolutely as Jones’ young hero. In the story of the unbelieving husband, for example, Finney had previously advised the wife that “she was undoubtedly under obligation to obey His [God’s]

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<sup>11</sup> *Memoirs*, pp. 252-254.

<sup>12</sup> J. S. Jones, *The People’s Lawyer* (New York: Samuel French, 1856), p 7. *The People’s Lawyer* was first performed in 1839, but it is representative of the types of melodramas that were already popular by the time Finney began preaching at the Chatham Street Chapel.

commands, even if they conflicted with the commands of her husband.”<sup>13</sup> He promised that this kind of boldness would not go unrewarded. In return, he told followers that “you will not find yourselves distressed, and galled, and worried, when people speak against you.”<sup>14</sup> The taunts they received in the name of Christian service were thus transformed from negative experiences into positive reinforcements of their Christian performances.

As the co-equal of self-empowerment and self-improvement, self-respect played an important part in helping new converts solidify their Christian identity. The sinless life was not without its challenges, and Finney warned new Christians that “they must *learn to say, No*” [*sic*] to the worldly influences of their former, sinful lives (406). Christian perfection happened not by accident, but by applied effort and careful aim. “If it is not [the young convert’s] *purpose* to live without sin, he has not yet began [*sic*] to be religious” (419). His drama used humanist language to position men and women in roles formerly considered God’s exclusive province. To inculcate in his followers the sense of empowerment that he envisioned, Finney presented the gospel message as a thing not merely to be grasped, but also owned, protected, and most importantly, performed.

### **Finney’s Script: Playing the Part**

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<sup>13</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 253.

<sup>14</sup> *L.R.R.*, p. 120.

I perceive now by the papers that you have become a play actor & I hope & pray that in your new sphere you may play your part so well as to make those once polluted walls echo with the penitential cries of convicted sinners, & the heartfelt joy of all those who are instructed in the grand drama of “Redeeming love.”

James Schaffer to Finney, 28 May 1832<sup>15</sup>

James Schaffer’s jab that Finney had traded his career as a minister for the opportunity to become “a play actor” at the former theatre-cum-chapel was clearly intended in jest, but Schaffer’s comments provide insight into the way that Finney’s peers and supporters perceived his new position. The use of theatrical phrases indicates that Schaffer marked the new pastorate differently from the churches where Finney had spoken in the past. Instead of merely preaching in a church, Finney was “playing a part” in a “new sphere.” Unlike the deeply reverent audiences associated with Old School worship services, Schaffer assumed that audiences in Finney’s chapel would exhibit behaviors more commonly associated with the theatre, crying so loudly or celebrating their “heartfelt joy” so vociferously that the walls, “polluted” by years of theatrical debauchery, would “echo” with the noise. Sermons preached from the proscenium arch stage of the Chatham Street Chapel were not simply expositions on Biblical truths; in their new setting they functioned as part of the “grand drama of ‘Redeeming love’.” Indeed, Schaffer’s

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<sup>15</sup> Finney papers, O.C.A.

language unwittingly reinforces Finney's connection with melodrama by framing his comment in unmistakably dramatic terms. Schaffer could never have guessed the prophetic nature of his words.

As the central performer in the worship performance at the Chatham Street Chapel, Finney bore the responsibility for communicating (or *scripting*) his theology (or *drama*) to the audience. Schechner says that the script transmits the drama "as immediate circumstances reveal it," and pays little, if any, attention to the author's previous vision.<sup>16</sup> He encourages his actors to approach the script as a fluid entity that necessarily changes from one performance to the next. The drama, he adds, may survive "through successive sociocultural transformations," but the script remains inseparably rooted in the moment of its creation. There is no guarantee that what worked to communicate the drama effectively to one audience will work with another. Like Schechner, Finney understood the importance of adapting the script to fit the audience, and while he reiterated his drama of self-creation in nearly every sermon, he maintained a flexible approach to the script. Intent upon helping his followers achieve self-empowerment, self-improvement, and self-respect, he unapologetically made full use of all the dramatic devices available in his new, unquestionably dramatic sphere. In this section, I will examine Finney's script by analyzing three eye-witness accounts of his preaching. Using these accounts, I will demonstrate how Finney approached public and private performances differently, and I will also connect Finney's

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<sup>16</sup> D.S.T.P., p. 77.

performance style to theatrical practices of the early nineteenth century, influences that shaped his worship performances even as he sought to dissociate the Chatham Street Chapel from its theatrical past. If Finney believed that it was his duty to make people think seriously about the state of their souls, he also believed it his duty to employ any and every method that proved helpful toward meeting this goal. “Wherever a sinner is entrenched,” he said, “unless you pour light upon him *there*, you will never move him.”<sup>17</sup> Finney’s willingness and ability to adapt his style to the needs of his listeners demonstrated his understanding of his role as the conduit through which his drama was communicated.

### **Performing Common Ground: Bringing the Prodigal Home**

One of the themes upon which he loved to dwell was the story of the Prodigal Son. In describing the anxious longing of the father he would shade his eyes with his hand as if to look for the home coming of his boy. Then he would feel for his glasses, which he did so naturally and so pathetically as to awaken no thought of the anachronism. To illustrate still further the anxiety of the waiting parents he would walk to the edge of the platform and, peering into the distance, would exclaim: “Ma, don’t that look

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<sup>17</sup> *L.R.R.*, p. 200.

like our James?” The pathos of his voice, his manner, and gestures were such as to make the story indescribably touching and impressive.

Frank Grenville Beardsley, *A Mighty Winner of Souls*<sup>18</sup>

Imagine the moment Beardsley recounts in this passage. Finney has probably been preaching for an hour or more. He has completed his points and has moved into his remarks. The Chatham Street Chapel is quiet; it is warm in the theatre, and people are perspiring. Those assembled have heard warning after warning about the reality of hell if they choose to reject God’s gift of salvation. Finney has left little room for confusion on this issue; they understand the enormity of what is at stake. Even so, they have become slightly immune to Finney’s voice, and their minds have started to wander. Sensing that his audience’s attentiveness is waning, Finney employs the revival equivalent of the “eleven o’clock number” in musical theatre. Without calling attention to the change, he switches from the declamatory mode to the exclamatory. Instead of explaining another story, he performs the story. With the simplest of costume changes, he becomes the humble father anticipating the return of his son. The effect is electrifying, all the points of his sermon focused and revealed in a single moment.

Beardsley describes how Finney shades his eyes with his hand at the beginning of this performance. This movement marks an important transition

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<sup>18</sup> Beardsley, p. 187.

between the declamatory and exclamatory modes. The shadow created by Finney's hand in front of his face foregrounds the use of theatrical lighting in the chapel, an element that could have been overlooked or forgotten, since the houselights remained on throughout the service. He further underscores the theatricality of this moment by peering into the distance. The audience was accustomed to have Finney look at them directly; his specific prayers and first-person examples had disabused them of any notion that they were somehow invisible, nameless faces in the crowd. Now, instead of looking for another victim to expose, Finney employs the fourth-wall and peers into the theatrical distance.

In the silence following this gesture, Finney reaches for his glasses. Beardsley makes special mention of the way he employed the glasses "as to awaken no thought of anachronism" (187). I doubt that many, if any, audience members stopped to think that Finney was portraying a Biblical character who would not have had access to eyeglasses. Indeed, Finney's countrified, vernacular language dispels any notion that he is attempting to act the part of a person living in "Bible times." The glasses are clearly used as a costume prop that helps solidify the transition from one character to another, from minister to anxious father. Beardsley notes that Finney "would feel for his glasses," a description that implies Finney's conscious choice to adopt the character of the father (187). Whether the action of searching for his glasses was done absent-mindedly or fretfully, slowly or quickly, the action itself put dramatic distance between Finney and the character he was portraying. As with the gesture of

shading his eyes, the deliberate acts of searching for, finding, and putting on his glasses allowed Finney to effect a character change in front of the audience. By adopting this character so effortlessly, however, he inadvertently called attention to the character of his preaching persona; the minister everyone saw on the stage of the Chatham Street Chapel was as carefully rehearsed as the character of the father, if not more so.

With his new character established, Finney walks to the edge of the stage and peers into the distance. In the reconfigured seating arrangement of the chapel, Finney's forward movement brings him into extremely close proximity with the audience. He is literally too close for comfort. Finney is aware of the effect this closeness has on the audience, and he uses it to his advantage. The rhythm of the sermon has been disrupted by the adoption of this character, and his movement toward the edge of the stage emphasizes the commonality this father shares with the audience. Finney's height and commanding presence seem even larger when compared to those seated around him. At the same time, his proximity to the audience leaves open the question of the audience's identity in this scenario. Are they the faithful parents waiting for the return of the wayward child, or are they the children who have refused to accept the father's forgiveness? Finney intentionally leaves the question open in order for the audience to identify with his character whatever their circumstance.

Anticipating the audience's needs, Finney changes his body positioning to come down to their level as he peers into the theatrical distance. In this moment,

the tall, lanky preacher focuses his movement forward and horizontally. De-emphasizing his vertical dominance helps Finney, who was in his early forties, create the illusion of advanced age – the elderly father bent over from years of toil. The forward movement communicates the earnestness of the father’s vigilant search.

Having set the scene by changing his placement on the stage, donning a pair of glasses, coming to the edge of the stage, and altering his posture, Finney finally speaks. His words, “Ma, don’t that look like our James?,” are disarmingly simple and, according to Beardsley, delivered with great pathos. The use of “Ma” is especially telling as it underscores Finney’s awareness of his audience. He eschews proper grammar and adopts a rough sentence structure more associated with members of the working class. He has inverted his own worship performance paradigm by setting up a moment of pure theatre before uttering the words that drive the point home.

#### Finney’s Prodigal: The Evangelical Yankee

To members of the audience who were already Christians, the story of the Prodigal Son would have been rich, familiar, scriptural soil that had been ploughed time and again. To those unfamiliar with Christianity, but familiar with theatrical conventions of the day, Finney’s performance would have resonated just as strongly, but for different reasons. The type of character Finney evokes in Beardsley’s anecdote bears a striking resemblance to the stage Yankee, a

character type that first appeared on the American stage in the late eighteenth-twenties.

By 1830, the public appeal of Yankee plays was on the rise in New York City. Essentially melodramas, these plays had the added benefit of a comic subplot provided by a new character type. A plain-spoken man whose frequent malapropisms created the impression of his being slow-witted, the Yankee did not affect fancy dress, nor did his manners display any aspirations to appear a man of fashion. Described by Bank and by performance historian/theorist Joseph Roach as a liminal figure who tended to remain at the border of the main plot, the Yankee nevertheless appealed to audiences because of his uniquely “American” traits.<sup>19</sup> He did not cower before authority. He did not hesitate to state the facts as they were. While not overly virtuous, he was unquestionably good-hearted. In short, he had a keen understanding of who he was, what he wanted, and how he could get it. By the end of the play, the Yankee would have unwittingly, or sometimes accidentally, gained the upper hand. His slow, methodical, highly pragmatic approach would always win the day over wily “Brits” and scheming dandies.

In the pulpit of the Chatham Street Chapel, Finney’s revival message echoed many of the sentiments expressed in Yankee plays, but with a spiritual

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<sup>19</sup> Joseph Roach, “The Emergence of the American Actor,” *The Cambridge History of American Theatre, Volume 1: Beginnings to 1870*, Don Wilmet and Christopher Bigsby, eds., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) pp. 338-372. See p. 345.

While Yankee characters played a liminal role on stage, the actors who portrayed them occupied a central place in American popular culture for a period of nearly thirty years, from the late 1820s through the 1850s. George Handel “Yankee” Hill (1809-1849) was the most famous performer ever to debut on the Chatham Garden stage (Ireland, p. 31).

bent. Like the father who forsook his daily chores in order to peer into the distance to look for his son, Finney's ideal Christian sought cultural difference instead of assimilation. The goal of Christian living, he said, was to be so different from the rest of the world that one's behavior would appear peculiar, if not "deranged," to those who had not yet come to faith in Christ.<sup>20</sup> In this way, the Finney Christian fit Goffman's definition of a "renegade," one who takes a moral stand by "saying that it is better to be true to the ideals of the role than to the performers who falsely present themselves in it."<sup>21</sup> The story of the prodigal son allowed Finney to make all of these points in a simple, yet powerful, theatrical moment.

### **Rattling the Gates of Hell: Scripting the Spiritual Other**

In 1831 at a church in Andover, Massachusetts, Finney preached a sermon that used theatrical conventions to explicate a theological concept much more difficult than the ideas contained in the story of the prodigal son. Delivered in a church building that featured an upper gallery ringing three sides of the room, the sermon and Finney's dramatic delivery of it were harbingers of the type of preaching he would perform in the Chatham Street Chapel. The sermon was intended to refute the concept of purgatory – that special area of hell where, many believe, the souls of sinners must endure a spiritual jail-sentence before

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<sup>20</sup> In *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, Finney explained that "we judge men to be deranged when they act differently from what we think to be prudent and according to common sense, and when they come to conclusions for which we can see no good reasons" (115).

<sup>21</sup> Goffman, p. 165.

being admitted to heaven. Finney thought this concept was preposterous, and to demonstrate his point he enacted an imagined heavenly scene between the residents of heaven and a group of souls whose sentences in hell had just ended. While it was intended to poke holes in the “far-fetched” notion of purgatory, Finney’s performance seemed terrifyingly real. The electricity of the moment was witnessed by a man identified only as “Rev. Park,” whose recollections are recorded in G. F. Wright’s 1891 biography of Finney.<sup>22</sup>

Before recounting the performance, Park observes that “it was too earnest to be called theatrical, but in the best sense of the word it was called *dramatic*” (71). The distinction between the “theatrical” and the “dramatic” had been a common feature of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century manuals devoted to the art of preaching. In his *Lectures on Systematic Theology and Pulpit Eloquence*, George Campbell (1719-1796) had warned preachers to avoid a “theatrical and too violent manner” in the pulpit, because “it suits not the gravity of the subject; and to appear destitute of all command of one’s self doth not benefit one who would teach others to obtain a perfect mastery over their passions.”<sup>23</sup> Park’s reticence to link Finney’s sermon with the theatre echoes the lighthearted concern in Schaffer’s letter that the minister had become a “play-actor.” Park’s description, however, dispels any notion that Finney had less than a perfect mastery of his passions. In the throes of an apparent spiritual ecstasy

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<sup>22</sup> Wright, p. 71.

<sup>23</sup> George Campbell, *Lectures on Systematic Theology and Pulpit Eloquence* (Boston: Wells and Wait, 1810), p. 202.

and uttering words from scripture in tones “sweet and musical,” Finney suddenly takes his audience to the edge of heaven and gazes at an unseen throng who have just burst free from the gates of hell:

No sooner had he uttered the word ‘blessing’ than he started back, turned his face from the mass of the audience before him, fixed his glaring eyes upon the gallery at his right hand, and gave all the signs of a man who was frightened by a sudden interruption of the divine worship. With a stentorian voice he cried out: “What is that I see? What means that rabble-rout of men coming up here? Hark! Hear them shout! Hear their words: ‘Thanks to hell-fire! We have served out our time. Thanks! Thanks! WE HAVE SERVED OUT OUR TIME. THANKS TO HELL-FIRE!’” Then the preacher turned his face from the side gallery, looked again upon the mass of the audience, and after a lengthened pause, during which a fearful stillness pervaded the house, he said in gentle tones: “Is this the spirit of the saints? Is this the music of the upper world?”...During this dramatic scene five or six men were sitting on a board which had been extemporaneously brought into the aisle and extended from one chair to another. I was sitting with them. The board actually shook beneath us. Every one of the men was trembling with excitement.<sup>24</sup>

Finney has scripted this moment so carefully that his audience is not immediately aware that they are witnessing either an ironic or a dramatic scenario. In “starting

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<sup>24</sup> Wright, p. 71.

back,” he literally retreats, likely drawing his arms in toward the center of his body, his movement no longer free and open, but tightly bound and rigid. As with his portrayal of the father, he once again shifts his focus from the space of the sanctuary to a theatrical space, located on this occasion near the house left gallery. In this moment, he suspends his role as minister and becomes a citizen of heaven witnessing the hellish scene. Park’s description of Finney as “a man who was frightened by a sudden interruption” is too general to determine any of Finney’s specific movements, but it implies that in a matter of seconds the minister’s physical presence in the pulpit has radically changed. Whether he conveyed his fright by leaning back, shielding his face with his hands, or causing his body to shake visibly, his body language communicates an abrupt break in the flow of the sermon, and the audience immediately becomes aware that something is terribly wrong.

Park’s description of Finney’s vocalizations provide some of the richest detail of the entire passage. Preaching to a packed house of several hundred people, Finney has changed the pitch and rate of his delivery from his typical, lawyerly approach to a softer, slower, and more melodic way of speaking. He quotes from the Revelation, saying “Worthy is the Lamb that hath been slain...” (71). In a rising crescendo, he throws himself into the passage, speaking “with a great voice,” his confidence and joy apparent. At the moment of his interruption, however, his vocal quality, like his posture, changes. Park depicts Finney on the verge of hysteria and makes liberal use of exclamation points and capital

lettering to communicate the speakers' increasingly stentorian tone. The audience, of course, hears nothing but the sound of Finney's voice. They see nothing but Finney starting back in fright.

Using silence to his dramatic advantage, Finney allows the echoes of the imagined crowd to dissipate, and he turns back to the audience. This literal turn indicates his figurative return from the world of the apocalyptic scene to the world of the sermon. In the silence, the audience readjusts their own way of seeing Finney. By this point, they could only have been in a state of confusion, if not mild panic. While visions and imagined scenarios were the common coin of theatrical amusements, the congregants are sitting in a church, the place where one sees by faith, if not by sight. Is it possible that Finney has really seen this vision? Has he witnessed a prophetic moment? This state of confusion is Finney's aim, and as the scene concludes, he uses rhetorical questions to make his point. "Is this [the shouting, unruly crowd] the spirit of the saints?" he asks in a voice once again gentle and reassuring; "Is this [the clamor created by their noisy entrance into heaven] the music of the upper world?" (71). The implied answer, of course, is no on both counts, but instead of answering the question, Finney quotes another passage of scripture. By moving back into scripture, he reclaims the role of preacher, a role meant to reassure the audience not only that order had been restored in the moment, but also that the order of God's salvation dispelled the possibility of purgatory. If we take Park's experience as representative of the entire audience, then we see a group of people completely

spellbound by Finney's scripted behavior. In a house crowded to the walls, where the center aisle is congested with boards acting as makeshift pews, the heat of the moment and the heat of compressed bodies has reduced the audience to a state of emotional agitation reminiscent of the rural worship paradigm.

### **Behind Closed Doors: Finney the Spiritual Physician**

Recalling the preparations for TPG's production of *The Tooth of Crime*, Schechner notes that two distinct playing areas emerged during the rehearsal process, areas he describes as the public side and the private side. While he had no set agenda for staging particular scenes on one side or the other, he allowed the company to experiment until most scenes found their "right place."<sup>25</sup> On the public side, he writes, "the feeling was of a gathering: an athletic event, a party, a contest of some kind. The public was *meant to be there, judging what happens.*" The private side, by contrast, "was rehearsal for what happened on the public side. In moving from one side to the other, spectators and performers shifted their mode of experiencing" (81). Similarly, Finney employed two completely different dramatic approaches to his work in the revival services held in the sanctuary of the Chatham Street Chapel and in the meetings for anxious inquirers held in the chapel's prayer room at the back of the second tier. The following eye-witness description by the Rev. Charles Bush highlights the radical shift in Finney's performance when he entered the prayer room:

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<sup>25</sup> D.S.T.P., p. 79.

Mr. Finney's method of conducting an inquiry meeting is worthy of special mention. He allowed no confusion, no loud talking, no moving about, except as he passed quietly from one to another, asking a few questions in a subdued tone of voice, and addressing to each a few words of instruction and admonition. He did not commit this most difficult and delicate business to all alike; although he did sometimes call to his aid a few well-chosen friends, of ripe Christian experience.

When he met a case of peculiar interest, he might, indeed, stop and call attention to it before going further; might make it the occasion of exact and definite instruction, and then commend the individual to God in special prayer. But the solemnity of eternity always brooded over those meetings. Common talk was excluded. All felt that God was there; and that immortal souls were in peril and anguish; and Mr. Finney moved about as the thoughtful physician moves in the room of the sick and the dying.<sup>26</sup>

Bush's description confirms that, while Finney allowed and expected the members of his congregation to participate actively in the worship performances that occurred in the auditorium, he restricted the role of volunteers in the meetings for anxious inquirers.

When people responded to the sermons and came forward during the altar call, their submission to God was only partly complete. By separating themselves from the rest of the congregation, they had identified themselves as

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<sup>26</sup> *Reminiscences*, pp. 18-19.

individuals who were openly concerned about the state of their souls. To complete the process of accepting God's salvation, they were directed to the smaller, more intimate setting of the inquiry meeting. In this private setting, Finney turned the tables. While individuals had to approach *him* during the altar call, he approached *them* in the inquiry meeting. He tailored his comments to each individual. Gone were the logical arguments, the interconnected points, the direct, convicting address. If his sermons were designed to draw individuals out of the sinful crowd, the purpose of the inquiry meeting was to usher individuals into the crowd of the saved.

Bush's account of the inquiry meeting begins and ends by noting the orderly, quiet, and incredibly still atmosphere of the room where "common talk was excluded."<sup>27</sup> By ushering the individuals into a smaller space, Finney focused their thoughts inward. Here, they contemplated their own sins and their need for salvation. Finney, notes Bush, was the only figure in motion against a background of bodies bent over in prayer and mental anguish. Moving through the room, Finney repeated the acts of kneeling beside each inquirer, listening intently, and whispering words of assurance. He became the focal point of energy in the room. Following each encounter, having heard words of hope directly from his lips, the individuals appeared strengthened by Finney's energy. Over and over, he enacted these private scenes, slowly transforming a disparate band of desperate individuals into the newest members of his congregation.

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<sup>27</sup> *Reminiscences*, p. 19.

When Finney addressed the group of inquirers collectively, his tone was solemn, yet compassionate. He exhibited no personal connection to these individuals, but tended to their spiritual needs as a “thoughtful physician” among “the sick and dying” (19). In the setting of the inquiry meeting, he played the role of teacher, comforter, and healer, roles also attributed to Christ. In his vocal and kinesthetic relationship to his audience, Finney intentionally called to mind images of Christ interacting with individuals in public gatherings and stopping occasionally to teach a lesson or perform a miracle.

In the private setting of the inquiry meeting, Finney’s script continued to enact the drama of self-empowerment, self-improvement, and self-respect. Instead of offering anecdotes about other people who had resisted or succumbed to the temptation of sin, Finney offered himself as the best example of Christian perfection. Though still very much in control of the performance, he appeared more vulnerable in this setting where individuals were allowed to interact with him on a personal level. In such close proximity, these individuals believed they had been allowed a glimpse of Finney that others had not seen. In truth, of course, the Finney whom they saw was the product of yet another carefully groomed performance.

Finney’s drama of self-creation and his careful scripting of the entire worship performance reveal his intricate understanding of the power and practicality of a theatrical theology. In the context of a traditional church building, his methods and ideas would likely have met with moderate or even significant

success. In the context of the Chatham Street Chapel, however, he achieved nothing short of spiritual superstardom. As he learned to use the auditorium to his advantage, his own performance style was shaped by the theatricality of the space. He led followers from the familiar world of the longing father to the fantastical realm of the saved and the damned. And in each instance, his performances encouraged audiences to act on his theology, whether out of a feeling of kinship or abject fear. In the Chatham Street Chapel, he encouraged them to step out on faith into the center aisle, and to try their own hand at the performance of Christianity.

## Chapter 5

### Theater: Finney Creates Holy Ground

There is a tendency in orthodox theater to segregate actors from audiences in order to maintain an illusion of, paradoxically, fictional actuality. The need to foster such an illusion is diminishing.

Schechner, "Drama, Script, Theater, and Performance"<sup>1</sup>

In the environmental theatre that was home to TPG, Schechner systematically "desegregated" actors and audience members. In place of "fictional actuality," he strove to create an environment more akin to the ritual services and ceremonies he had witnessed in Bali, Java, and New Guinea. He was not content for audiences to function as mere receivers of the *theater*, the series of planned or orchestrated actions that would occur throughout the course of the performance event. By blurring the line separating the stage space from the seating area, he made the audience complicit in shaping the event. In TPG's production of *The Tooth of Crime*, for example, audience members were invited into the very center of the performance space, even onto the bed that was part of the set while a scene occurred there (81).

The decision to blur the line separating the congregation from the stage/pulpit in the Chatham Street Chapel was not made with any theoretical

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<sup>1</sup> D.S.T.P., p. 82.

goals in mind. The changes were a matter of practicality: Finney needed to be on the audience's level in order to greet individuals who responded to the altar call. Raising the pit floor to the stage level, however, created a fundamental shift in the way Finney related to his audience.

In 1832, the same year that Victor Hugo's romantic drama *Hernani* made its American debut in Philadelphia, Finney made his debut in the newly renovated Chatham Street Chapel. Unlike Hugo's romantic stage with its often overwhelming, site-specific scenery, the vast stage of the Chatham Street Chapel was bare, except for a lectern and a grouping of chairs for the members of the choir. In this empty space, Finney celebrated the grandeur of God's earthly creation in all its variety and wonder, envisioned the gaping maw of a fiery hell, and toured the heights of the heavenly home awaiting the saved. By virtue of its neutrality, the stage functioned as a site rife with transformative potential. Finney used the stage to tease out a similar potential for Christian transformation in each of his listeners.

I find it useful to position Finney's ideas and techniques in the midst of an American theatre culture that was hungrily appropriating European ideas and ideals of romanticism. As theatre historian Richard Moody notes in his work on romanticism in American drama, "The full flood of the romantic outburst ... followed almost immediately the rise of French romanticism in the plays of Hugo and Dumas," and yet, he continues, American romanticism lacked the immediate, political impetus that was the driving force behind its European counterpart.

“There were in America no traditional artistic canons against which the romantic artist was rebelling,” but instead, says Moody, the artist “responded to the romantic spirit in the life around him, the romanticism of the growing democracy.”<sup>2</sup> Finney’s theology stressed similar romantic notions. In his *drama*, the individual exercised free will in accepting God as her/his savior. Finney also required sinners to signify their own independence from the slavery of sin by stepping forward to claim God’s forgiveness. And in its new incarnation, the Chatham Street Chapel also participated in the romanticism of growing democracy by functioning not only as a church, but also as a meeting space for benevolent groups and Christian organizations.

In this chapter, I will argue that the physical environment of the Chatham Street Chapel influenced the *theater* of Finney’s worship performances by forcing him to recognize the audience’s need for a holy site in which to worship, by assisting him in the performance of romantic images drawn from contemporary theatre and art, and by giving him a custom-made environment that would ensure the success of the altar call. My argument hinges on three different understandings of the theatrical space. First, using the framework articulated by Arnold van Gennep, I will discuss the physical space of the theatre and the rites of passage that facilitated its conversion from the Chatham Garden Theatre into the Chatham Street Chapel. Second, I will discuss the ways in which the chapel was haunted, in the words of Marvin Carlson, both by its former life as a theatre

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Moody, *America Takes the Stage: Romanticism in American Drama and Theatre, 1750-1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, [1955] 1977), pp. 193, 234.

and by the popularity of paratheatrical entertainments en vogue in the early nineteenth century. Third, I will consider in Schechner's terms the ways in which the architecture and physical location of the building affected the *theater*, or the actual "doings" inside the space and in the adjoining neighborhood.

### **A \$7,000 Conversion Experience<sup>3</sup>**

The sensation that will be produced by converting the place, with slight alterations, into a church will be very great; and curiosity will be excited, in the city & out of it, to visit a place thus appropriated. I would preserve the form etc. of a theatre as much as possible. [*sic*]

Lewis Tappan to Finney, 16 March 1832<sup>4</sup>

"Conversion," in the larger context of this dissertation, most often refers to the spiritual change that took place when a member of Finney's audience made the decision to accept God's gift of salvation by declaring his or her faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In the context of the Chatham Street Chapel, however, the word also resonates with an architectural meaning. Before Finney and the members of the Second Free Presbyterian Church could use the building as a place of worship, its former existence as a theatre had to be thoroughly expunged. Even as renovations to the physical structure were underway, the

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<sup>3</sup> Tappan "History of the Free Churches in New York City," p. 29. Tappan reported a cost of \$7,000 to convert the Chatham Garden Theatre into the Chatham Street Chapel.

<sup>4</sup> Finney papers, O.C.A.

space was consecrated to the glory of God in a spiritual rededication of the property. As Lewis Tappan had predicted, the newly renovated Chatham Street Chapel created a sensation, but not simply by virtue of its history as a playhouse.

In *The Rites of Passage*, Arnold van Gennep focuses first on the “territorial passage” of the threshold as a way of emphasizing the commonalities that link initiation rituals and ceremonies the world over.<sup>5</sup> In the context of an initiatory rite, the act of crossing a threshold, or portal, can transport the initiate into another world where the former rules of behavior, and even those of time and space, no longer obtain. In such a moment, he argues, “a rite of spatial passage has become a rite of spiritual passage” (22). This link between the spatial and the spiritual is useful in discussing the ways in which the chapel, in this instance, performed not as the *site* of initiation, but as the *initiate*, itself. While typically applied to human agents going through social, psychological, or biological initiation rites, I will use van Gennep’s categories of separation, transition, and incorporation to describe the ways in which the theatre was transformed from the profane to the sacred.

## Separation

From the outset, the project to renovate the Chatham Garden Theatre was a work of redemption. Clerical condemnation of the American theatre was resoundingly and consistently harsh in the nineteenth century; the evils of the

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<sup>5</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960). See pp. 15-25.

stage were firmly entrenched in the minds of American Christians. The lure of the theatre, however, was strong—so strong, in fact, that a contemporary religious tract entitled “Theatrical Exhibitions” fretted that the “criminal and pestiferous” act of theatergoing “has come to be considered by many, as an amusement lawful for christians!” [sic].<sup>6</sup> The opportunity to shut down the Chatham Garden Theatre would not only eliminate one of the few theatres in operation in New York City in the early 1830s, but would also, in tract language, keep Christians away from this “school of vice and profligacy” (20). Such an opportunity was too great for Tappan and Finney to ignore, and as Charles Cole has noted, nothing was more pleasing for them than seeing “Satan overthrown as the doors of another theatre are closed and a new church rises in its place.”<sup>7</sup>

The physical act of closing the theatre’s doors for the last time was crucial to Tappan’s plan. In response to Finney’s question about whether they might not be able to purchase the Bowery Theatre instead of the Chatham Garden, Tappan wrote that the Bowery was too expensive, and “besides, it is shut up half the time. It has been closed during all the past winter, so that it is a less object to suppress this place of dissipation.”<sup>8</sup> As Fowler records in *The American Pulpit*, Tappan, having reached a complicated lease agreement for the use of the Chatham Garden, marched into the theatre

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<sup>6</sup> “Tract No. 130: Theatrical Exhibitions,” *Publications of the American Tract Society*, vol. V. (New York: American Tract Society, 1827-1833), pp. 16-28. See p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> Cole, p. 291.

<sup>8</sup> LT to CGF, 16 March 1832, Finney papers, O.C.A.

at the close of a morning rehearsal...and announced to the actors that on a following Sunday, and thereafter on every evening, there would be preaching in that place, the scenery would be removed, the pulpit placed in the centre of the stage, an 'anxious seat' would front the footlights, and all were invited to be present.<sup>9</sup>

With that, the theatre was closed for renovations; the actors found themselves unemployed, and the sparse crowds who had comprised the Chatham Garden audience were forced to find another entertainment venue.

#### Transition

As the work progressed inside, access to the building was denied to all outsiders. Tappan focused his efforts on raising both money and interest in the project. Except for the workmen who entered and exited the space throughout the course of the renovation, he maintained tight control over who was allowed to cross the threshold to witness the transition in progress. At least twice during this period, he took small groups of Christian businessmen who were interested in supporting the work into the space for a personal tour.<sup>10</sup> By permitting only a core group of supporters to enter the space, Tappan raised interest in the project through word of mouth. In the minds of individuals who had not yet been allowed

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<sup>9</sup> Fowler, p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> LT to CGF, 7 April 1832, Finney papers, O.C.A. Tappan writes that he took "a dozen brethren" into the space, and then took another group of "about 20 persons" into the theatre approximately a week later. Only five members of the second group had been present for the previous tour, so at least twenty-seven individuals witnessed the theatre in its transition stage prior to the consecration ceremony (see below).

into the space, the building began to take on a different identity as they listened to these eye-witnesses describe the changes they had seen and the potential they had observed.

As with any remodeling project, the work inside the theatre involved considerable destruction before reconstruction could begin. Tappan elevated these changes to a spiritual plane as he wrote, "It is true we shall break up a place admirably located for the destruction of souls; & what is more we shall have a place equally well located for convicting them."<sup>11</sup> In the same letter, he twice describes the conversion as an act that will "strike a great blow" to Satan's power and influence in New York City. Among the blows that were struck in the Chatham Garden Theatre: raising the pit floor to stage level, adding windows to the stage space, re-painting the auditorium, and converting the saloons at the rear of the auditorium into prayer rooms.<sup>12</sup>

### Incorporation

As the work continued, it became apparent that renovations to the physical edifice would not be enough to effect the conversion of the space into a church. In order to be used for holy purposes, the space had to shed its theatrical taint. Among the many religious organizations that would meet in the Chatham Street Chapel, the New York Sacred Music Society was particularly disturbed by

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<sup>11</sup> LT to CGF, 16 March 1832, Finney papers, O.C.A.

<sup>12</sup> Tappan's talk of "striking a great blow" is reminiscent of van Gennep's observation that the whipping or striking of initiates is often an integral part of the initiation process. The act of striking crosses the liminal border to serve as an act both of separation and of incorporation. See van Gennep, pp. 78-79.

the chapel's theatrical past. The members of the society informed Tappan that their group could not "occupy the Chapel until there has been some religious service" in the space. Tappan complied with their request, though he later complained to Finney that "they did not think of this when they used to meet at the City Hotel."<sup>13</sup> To appease the members of the society, Tappan placed advertisements in two newspapers announcing that a consecration ceremony would occur inside the theatre at 5:30 a.m. on Monday, April 23, 1832.

Renovations to the pit floor had been completed less than a week prior to the ceremony. While all of the pews had not yet been installed, Tappan arranged to provide seating for three hundred people.<sup>14</sup> He must have been surprised, then, to observe the crowd that gathered for the event. Eye-witness estimates of the size of the crowd ranged from eight hundred to two thousand.<sup>15</sup>

Fowler notes that the ceremony consisted mainly of prayers dedicating the building to the glory of God, a short address, and a benediction, or blessing, on those who had assembled to witness the event. The texts of the prayers and the address were not recorded, but a similar speech survives from the dedication of Burton's Theatre in New York for use as a church in 1858. In that ceremony, the Rev. T. L. Cuyler noted the connection between Burton's and the Chatham Garden:

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<sup>13</sup> LT to CGF, 19 April 1832, Finney papers, O.C.A.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Fowler reports that, "to the surprise of all, eight hundred persons were present at that hour" (36). Joshua Leavitt wrote to Finney that the crowd was between one and two thousand (28 April 1832, Finney Papers, O.C.A.).

Today, for the second time in the history of New York, we set apart a disused playhouse for a temporary house of worship. Oh, what fearful soul-tragedies may have been enacted in this very building! From yonder “pit” how many a ruined young man may have gone down to the pit of endless despair! Let our services here be as solemn as eternity. May no false fire be kindled on God’s altar! May the Holy Spirit be here, and may this former habitation of the Tempter be the very habitation of Immanuel — the house of God — the gate of heaven to souls seeking after Jesus!<sup>16</sup>

By accentuating the contrasts between the sacred and the profane, Cuyler verbally razed Burton’s Theatre and re-built a house of worship. With the articulation of each opposing pair – virtue vs. vice, prayers vs. profanity, real tears vs. fictitious grief, etc. – he helped his listeners see the theatrical space with new eyes. Both the Chatham Street Chapel and the church at Burton’s Theatre held new significance and purpose for those who would enter their doors, but the buildings would always be imbricated with theatrical meaning.

If, as Victor Turner has written, “‘meaning’ in culture tends to be generated at the interfaces between established cultural subsystems,” then the consecration of the Chatham Street Chapel was a moment of profound meaning-

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<sup>16</sup> Qtd. in William C. Conant, *Narratives of Remarkable Conversions and Revival Incidents: Including a Review of Revivals, From the Day of Pentecost to the Great Awakening in the Last Century — Conversions of Eminent Persons — Instances of Remarkable Conversions and Answer to Prayer — An Account of the Rise and Progress of the Great Awakening of 1857-8*, (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1858), pp. 237-238.

making.<sup>17</sup> While Tappan “blamed” the need for such a ceremony on the Sacred Music Society, one can assume from the number of people who attended the ceremony that this verbal cleansing was not simply a *pro forma* exercise, but was, in fact, desperately needed. For the members of the Second Free Presbyterian Church to be fully invested in the work of the Chatham Street Chapel, they had to “hear” the purification of the building while also seeing the changes taking place. On a cool, dark April morning, the crowd assembled inside the Chatham Garden Theatre, but in the bright light of the sunrise they left the Chatham Street Chapel.

Tappan believed his plan to co-opt a profane performance space by remodeling it into pious submission would radically upend cultural hierarchies. For his part, Finney believed the church would put him back in touch with a class of people who were hungry to hear his message. After a lukewarm reception among upper class congregations in Boston, he was ready once again to “preach the Gospel...to the poor.”<sup>18</sup> In the theatrical space of the Chatham Street Chapel, both men accomplished their goals, but they also had to deal with other, unforeseen challenges. The contextual, resonant meanings of the Chatham Garden Theatre would infiltrate and thoroughly suffuse the enterprise of the Chatham Street Chapel.

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<sup>17</sup> Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), p. 41.

<sup>18</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 362.

## On Ghosts, Holy and Theatrical

The notion that the stage is a place where the invisible can appear has a deep hold on our thoughts.

Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*<sup>19</sup>

Converted, consecrated, and cleaned up, the Chatham Street Chapel nevertheless remained a place that appealed to the theatrical imagination. Even as audiences listened to Finney, they did so from a theatrical vantage point sitting in tiered seats that offered unobstructed sightlines in a room oriented to focus their attention on the stage. The specific cultural and contextual markers of the space complemented Finney's penchant for story-telling and role-playing. When he dropped into the character of the father searching for the prodigal son or envisioned the damned being released from hell, he did so on a proscenium arch stage. While his Christian message differed from the secular plays formerly presented there, his stage presence hailed not only the performers who had plied their trade on the Chatham boards, but also those actors who were currently performing on the stages of the Park and the Bowery. Marvin Carlson accounts for this phenomenon in *The Haunted Stage*. He notes how theatre spaces are "particularly susceptible to semiotization, since they are almost invariably public, social spaces already layered with associations before they are used for

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<sup>19</sup> New York: Atheneum, (1968) 1984. See p. 42.

theatrical performance.”<sup>20</sup> These associations, he writes, defy containment and have “the potential, often realized, of ‘bleeding through’ the process of reception,” a process Carlson calls “ghosting” (133). A single case study will suffice to examine the process of ghosting in the Chatham Street Chapel and to demonstrate Finney’s awareness of his own performance as well as his connection with theatrical currents of the time.

Finney’s command of language and his ability to think on his feet were traits that remained with him from his earlier career as a lawyer. As Fowler put it, Finney “deal[t] much in convincing argument.”<sup>21</sup> His stable of convincing stories, metaphors, and examples had its limit, however, and he was prone to repeat his favorites with considerable frequency.<sup>22</sup> One tale he loved to repeat centered on a man standing on the edge of a cliff overlooking Niagara Falls. He first used the story in the sermon, “Sinners Bound to Change Their Own Hearts,” and he employed it again in “How to Preach the Gospel,” a lecture he delivered on the Chatham stage. While the anecdote is too long to reprint its entirety, the following excerpt captures the mood of the whole:

Suppose yourself to be standing on the bank of the Falls of  
Niagara. As you stand upon the verge of the precipice, you behold a man  
lost in deep reverie, approaching its verge unconscious of his danger. He

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<sup>20</sup> Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), p. 133.

<sup>21</sup> Fowler, p. 37.

<sup>22</sup> Rosell and Dupuis record the reaction of Methodist minister James Everett, who complained, after hearing Finney speak, that “repetitions occupied, at least one third” (*sic*) of the sermon (*Memoirs*, p. 612n.96).

approaches nearer and nearer, until he actually lifts his foot to take the final step that shall plunge him in destruction. At this moment you lift your warning voice above the roar of the foaming waters, and cry out, *Stop*. The voice pierces his ear, and breaks the charm that binds him; he turns instantly upon his heel, all pale and aghast he retires, quivering, from the verge of death. He reels, and almost swoons with horror.<sup>23</sup>

Finney's words created a romantic vision that captured the visual splendor of the sweeping vista, the noise of the endless falls, and the hypnotic motion of the cascading water.

Compelling as his words were, however, audiences in the Chatham Street Chapel needed little assistance picturing this scene at the edge of the falls. The work of imagining had already been accomplished for them in the widespread popularity of theatrical dioramas that depicted manifold views of Niagara Falls. Dioramas, as they were used in playhouses, were massive, painted backdrops that were spooled across the width of the stage to create the sensation of movement while the actors downstage remained in place.<sup>24</sup> William Dunlap's play, *A Trip to Niagara*, premiered at the Bowery Theatre in November 1828, and was intended, by the playwright's own admission, "as a kind of running accompaniment to the more important product of the Scene-painter."<sup>25</sup> The play showcased a 25,000 square foot diorama that took audiences on a trip from New

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<sup>23</sup> *L.R.R.*, p. 196.

<sup>24</sup> Moody, p. 255n.22.

<sup>25</sup> William Dunlap, "Preface," *A Trip to Niagara; or, Travellers in America. A Farce, in Three Acts. Written for the Bowery Theatre, New-York* (New York: E. B. Clayton, 1830), n.p.

York City to Buffalo along the Hudson River and the Erie Canal. So realistic were the scenes, according to Moody, that “persons who had not made the journey were permitted to do so vicariously, and those who had could recall each scene as it was exhibited to them.”<sup>26</sup>

The popularity of these images transcended playhouses. Special venues for viewing dioramas were built in the nineteenth century, venues that had no theatrical associations, and were thus morally “safe” for Christian spectators. In addition, Niagara Falls was a popular subject for nineteenth-century landscape painters, including Thomas Chambers and Thomas Cole in the early part of the century, and Frederick Edwin Church and William Morris Hunt in the latter. The magnitude of the falls was romantic in its own right and was made even more so by the juxtaposition of human figures standing on its edge, as in Cole’s painting from 1829 (see Figures 5.1 and 5.2). The lone figure, dwarfed by the enormity of the falls as he stands at its very edge, could have been the very figure Finney envisioned while describing the scene.<sup>27</sup> As Finney’s words transported the audience to the falls, the ghosts of these paintings and displays filled the enormous, empty stage. Finney’s listeners were able to substitute his presence on stage for the man on the precipice.

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<sup>26</sup> Moody, p. 217.

<sup>27</sup> David Carew Huntington, *Art and the Excited Spirit: America in the Romantic Period* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Museum of Art, 1972). Huntington writes that Niagara led Thomas Cole to contemplate his own demise as, in the artist’s own words, “the eye marks the process of its sinking decay.” Huntington notes that the artist equated the falls with “his personal sense of frustration with life on earth” (13).



Figure 5.1: Thomas Cole, *Niagara Falls*, c. 1829-1830



Figure 5.2: Detail of lone individual on the precipice, from Cole's *Niagara Falls*

This particular instance of ghosting becomes more complicated by the ghostly presence of Hugh Reinagle, the scenographer who designed the original interior of the Chatham Garden Theatre and served as head of the theatre's scenic department from 1824 until 1829. Reinagle's reputation as a painter of dioramas was built on his involvement in Dunlap's production of *A Trip to Niagara*. Telling the Niagara story in a space so strongly associated with Reinagle's personal style and direct influence only reinforced Finney's presence as a performer on the larger stage of the divine drama. In addition, his use of the second person pronoun brought the members of the audience into the scene with him. Later in the story, he envisions a moment when the man who had been in danger of falling turns and "ascribes the work [of saving his life] to you; and certainly there is a sense in which you had saved him."<sup>28</sup> Here again, Finney made the Christian faith accessible by framing it in performance terms. He helped his audience understand how they, too, could participate in the divine drama by performing doable human tasks.

The architectural changes in the Chatham Street Chapel were also ghosted by the popularity of panoramas. Panoramas differed from dioramas in that they positioned the audience on a stationary circular platform surrounded by a painted canvas on all sides. Because of their encompassing size, panoramas could only be exhibited in specially constructed venues; unlike dioramas, they could not be exhibited in proscenium arch theatres. Moody describes how the

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<sup>28</sup> *L.R.R.*, p. 196.

panorama exhibition hall offset the actual painting several feet behind a railing at the bottom and a canopy at the top of the canvas. From the audience's vantage point, the image appeared to float in front of them, without definite borders. As they took in the images around them, audience members had the sensation of looking out a window onto a limitless landscape. Panorama exhibitors occasionally provided patrons with binoculars so they could explore the details of the scene "up close"; this way of seeing further heightened the sensation of observing the scene in its natural, romantic environment.<sup>29</sup>

Having raised the pit floor to stage level, ostensibly for the purpose of facilitating audience response to the altar call, Tappan had removed the bottom edge of the proscenium frame. Audiences seated in the upper galleries of the chapel could no longer distinguish where the pit seating ended and the stage began. The seating on the lower level melded seamlessly with the stage space. There were no visual or physical boundaries to separate the audience from the stage. When Finney invited members of the audience to come forward during the altar call, he was literally inviting them into the world of the stage. They would leave their seats to join him at the front of the stage, a physical move that paralleled the feeling of being swept up into the world of the romantic drama or into the immense landscape of a panorama.

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<sup>29</sup> Moody, p. 219.

## **From Theatre to Chapel, A Moving Experience**

When strips of behavior are taken from one context and played in another does it make any difference if, in the replaying, the strip means something entirely different from what it meant “originally”? These transformations of meaning are inevitable if context determines meaning. But it’s not so simple, because every strip, no matter how small, brings some of its former meanings into its new context. That kind of “memory” is what makes ritual and artistic recombinations so powerful.

Richard Schechner, “Magnitudes of Performance”<sup>30</sup>

Finney’s experience in the Chatham Street Chapel personifies Schechner’s concept of contextual recombinations. A self-taught minister performing a theological melodrama in a pulpit built on a romantic scale, Finney functioned not only as the principal actor in the worship performance, but also as the contextual focal point of the theatrical event. Everyone who attended a service at the Chatham Street Chapel had an experience mediated by and through the figure of Charles Finney. They expected him to perform the labor of making sense of the strips of behavior attached to the physical environment of the chapel. Finney fulfilled their expectations, but in return, he placed expectations on them, for his recombination of theatrical artistry and religious ritual would only succeed if they learned to play their part in the worship

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<sup>30</sup> *Performance Theory*, p. 281.

performance. Throughout his memoirs, his *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, and even in private correspondence, Finney never shrank from advocating the use of dramatic techniques, provided that they were appropriate to the setting.

Standing on the stage of the Chatham Street Chapel, Finney's relationship with his audience changed radically. No longer hemmed in by the physical constraints of the cramped, elevated pulpits so prevalent in traditional church buildings, he could roam the width of the stage, all the while making direct eye contact with listeners. By employing overtly theatrical techniques in his sermons, Finney turned the condemnation normally reserved for the evils of the theatre on his audience, so that the technique proclaimed the audience's sinful guilt without his having to say so directly. Architectural historian Jeanne Halgren Kilde writes that "The space of the Chatham Street Chapel served to enhance Finney's power by intensifying his performance and authoritarian strategies – by underscoring and enhancing his charisma."<sup>31</sup> Finney used the proscenium arch to magnify the power of his message.

The creation of a central, longitudinal aisle running from the last row of the first tier all the way down to the stage also enhanced Finney's dramatic appeal. The raked seating arrangement in the Chatham Street Chapel made it possible for sinners not only to "come to Jesus," but also to come to Finney directly. In moving toward the anxious bench that was on the same level with Finney, they left the safety of their seats and exposed themselves by descending to the stage.

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<sup>31</sup> Kilde, pp. 36-37.

The walk down the central aisle spatially reinforced their spiritual commitment to walk the straight and narrow path leading to salvation and to leave behind the crooked paths leading to spiritual destruction.

Raising the pit floor to the height of the stage removed the traditional performer-audience separation found in most proscenium arch theatres, but it also changed the way people who were accustomed to traditionally-arranged churches perceived themselves in relationship to the minister. Instead of lowering the pulpit to their level, the Chatham Street Chapel had effectively elevated the audience to the level of the pulpit. This reversal placed the audience in a position of spiritual power that they had never before experienced. Kilde writes about this acquisition of power:

The design of the space announced that the audience's needs – to see, to hear, to participate – were of the highest priority. In the theatre, of course, paying patrons had always expected spaces that catered to their desires and enhanced their interaction with the performances. In the church, however, such audience sovereignty was new. (34-35)

The position of the audience prompted them to believe that Finney was there to meet their needs. Enticed by Finney's reputation for superior pulpit showmanship, individuals who did not normally attend church came to experience his performance, much as they might have come to see the latest circus act touted by Blanchard or Hamblin in the last days of the Chatham Garden Theatre.

In Schechner's terms, Finney never lost sight of the "theater," the prepared actions involved in the worship performances at the Chatham Street Chapel. He took strips of audience behavior from earlier moments in the history of revivals and recoded them according to the orderly system of his worship performances. His preaching could reduce his listeners to quivering, as Park remembered from Finney's "Thanks to Hell-fire!" sermon, but those who responded had to maintain sufficient self-control to come forward at the appropriate moment. Even though all of his sermons were oriented toward the altar call, his use of the space in the chapel allowed him to maintain control of the audience response. Once all the respondents had come forward, Finney led them out of the auditorium and into the prayer room. There, prompted by the change in venue and by Finney's tonal shift from defense lawyer to pastoral counselor, the respondents were permitted to indulge their emotions. In this private space, they performed their repentance for one another by weeping, collapsing, and eventually "coming to themselves" once they had wrestled with the weight of their own sinfulness.<sup>32</sup> These experiences initiated new converts into the category of "the saved," and provided them with models for how to perform their newfound faith.

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<sup>32</sup> Finney recalled an inquirer's meeting in Rome, New York, at which "the feeling was so deep that there was danger of an outburst...that would be almost uncontrollable [*sic*]." Amid the weeping, labored breathing, and "loud shrieking," Finney had difficulty dismissing the group because many of them had fainted from spiritual "agitation" (*Memoirs*, pp. 158-159).

## Chapter 6

### Performance: What Happened After the Amen

It is hard to define “performance” because the boundaries separating it on the one side from the theater and on the other side from everyday life are arbitrary.

Schechner, “Drama, Script, Theater, and Performance”<sup>1</sup>

According to Schechner, when life meets art in the realm of *performance*, the former emerges from the shared experience bearing the imprint of the latter. This imprint, he says, is the basis of “transformance,” a shift in the audience’s “mood and/or consciousness” which is usually temporary, but which can, under the right conditions, become permanent.<sup>2</sup> For however long this shift remains, the *performance* continues, and Schechner thus describes *performance* as “the widest possible circle of events condensing around theater.”<sup>3</sup> This definition is deliberately open-ended because of its reliance on the interaction of the audience with the performers, the performance space, and one another. The audience, in Schechner’s view, shapes the experience by sanctioning it with their presence and their participation.

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<sup>1</sup> D.S.T.P., p. 85.

<sup>2</sup> Schechner, “Toward a Poetics of Performance,” in *Performance Theory*, pp. 153-186. See p. 170.

<sup>3</sup> D.S.T.P., p. 91.

Writing about audience experience and response, however, poses a challenge for any scholar, and Schechner is not immune. He realizes the limitations of his project since he, as the writer, must voice the responses of an audience that is no longer present. Performance theorist Anya Peterson Royce empathizes with Schechner's predicament. She says that, as writers, whether professional or scholarly, we must realize that we can only see performance "through the lens of our own experience and the larger cultural context."<sup>4</sup>

Committed to the principles of environmental theater, Schechner naturally reads audience response through that particular lens. In doing so, he hopes to find indications that the audience has prolonged the experience of the *performance* even after they have left the performance space.

In his essay "Points of Contact Between Anthropological and Theatrical Thought," Schechner articulates a seven-part performance sequence that traces the arc of a production from its inception ("training" and "workshops") through its legacy ("cool-down" and "aftermath").<sup>5</sup> While much critical attention has been given to the *theater*, he notes that little attention has been given to the equally important elements leading up to and following it. Coming at the end of the sequence, *aftermath* receives perhaps the least attention of any of the elements. He defines it as "the long-term consequences or follow-through of a performance," and he articulates four of these consequences:

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<sup>4</sup> Anya Peterson Royce, *Anthropology of the Performing Arts: Artistry, Virtuosity, and Interpretation in a Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004), p. 239n.3.

<sup>5</sup> Schechner, "Points of Contact," p. 16.

the changes in status or being that result from an initiatory performance; or the slow merging of performer with a role he [sic] plays for decades; or the reviews and criticisms that so deeply influence some performances and performers; or theorizing and scholarship (19).

At a basic level aftermath seems to be Schechner's way of examining audience response, but his definition is also reflexive. It incorporates the ways in which audience response shapes subsequent performances. By including the fourth category ("theorizing and scholarship"), he suggests that the aftermath of a performance can continue indefinitely, as long as discussions of the performance persist.

I find *aftermath* a useful term for thinking about not only the ways in which Finney's revival audiences responded to his worship performances, but also the ways in which their responses challenged and changed his own theological ideas and his subsequent way of preaching. From a spiritual viewpoint, the aftermath may, in fact, be the most important part of the performance sequence. Similar to Schechner's idea of a "slow merging" of performer and role, Finney intended for the individuals who became Christians during his revivals to remain so for the rest of their lives.

Writing about the *aftermath* of Finney's revivals, however, is doubly difficult. First, I must rely primarily on Finney's version of events as he has remembered and recorded them. Second, I must recognize the presence of the twenty-first century lens that I am using to read a series of nineteenth-century

events. With those parameters in mind, in this chapter I will ask the following question: How did Finney interpret the aftermath of his revival services in the Chatham Street Chapel, and how did his interpretation influence his later revivals?

### **The Aftermath of Interpretive Communities**

The response to Finney's revivals was not as unified or homogeneous as he would have preferred. Within the congregation that worshipped and worked at the Chatham Street Chapel, there were many different interpretive communities that employed his teachings toward different ends. Literary theorist Stanley Fish first developed the concept of *interpretive communities* in 1975 and said that they were:

made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around.<sup>6</sup>

While Fish refers specifically to strategies for approaching written texts, one can just as easily discuss interpretive communities that share strategies for writing

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<sup>6</sup> Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 171.

and interpreting performance texts like TPG's *The Tooth of Crime* or Finney's revival services.

Fish writes that it should not be the job of speakers or authors to hand over “ready-made or prefabricated meanings” of texts, but to allow “hearers and readers the opportunity to make meanings (and texts) by inviting them to put into execution a set of [interpretive] strategies” (172). For his part, Finney believed it his responsibility to provide audiences with the sort of “ready-made meanings” Fish detests. In “The Necessity and Effect of Union,” for example, Finney denounced those ministers who “have acted as *mysteriously* about revivals, as if they thought Christians were either incapable of understanding how to promote them, or that it was of no importance that they should know.”<sup>7</sup> To a large degree, Finney's commitment to deliver a plainspoken and demystified gospel is what attracted audiences to his preaching. He made the message clear, simple, and above all else, logical. What is more, he assured audiences of their salvation. He did not leave their eternal destiny in doubt, as did the Old School Presbyterians who relied on the idea of divine “election” to sort out the saved and the lost.

Finney's insistence on communicating his own interpretive strategies to his audience indicates that he thought of them less as an audience capable of making their own choices and more as a group of apprentice actors under his training. This is ironic, given his belief that individuals had to choose to accept salvation, that it could neither be thrust upon them against their will, nor withheld

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<sup>7</sup> *L.R.R.*, pp. 330-331.

if freely chosen. If he had had no expectations of *aftermath*, he would have had no reason to conduct revivals. Throughout his career, he stated repeatedly that a revival was not a miracle, but “a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means.”<sup>8</sup> His goal in holding revival meetings was thus to employ the proper techniques, the right means, to coax sinners down the aisle during the altar call. Once they had taken this step, he had a system in place (ushering them into the prayer room, meeting with each person individually) to guide the respondents through the conversion experience. And following their conversion, he would set them on the course of a carefully plotted, *scripted* aftermath, one that included plans for them to become involved right away in doing the work of the church. In the aftermath, then, Finney was still attempting to choreograph audience behavior just as he had done with the other phases of the performance sequence.

Finney took such pains to control the audience’s behavior because he recognized, even from the outset of his ministry in 1824, that the audience was the deciding factor in the success or failure of any revival, and by extension, that they were also a deciding factor in the success or failure of his career. Preach as he might, if he failed to connect with listeners and inspire them to act, his work was for naught. In Schechner’s language, Finney needed for the audience’s *transformation* to be permanent. Finney staged his revivals in an environment where he was as aware of his audience as they were of him, where the line

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<sup>8</sup> *L.R.R.*, p. 13.

delineating stage and house dissolved with every altar call, and where the whole event was brought to life by the performer-spectator interaction.<sup>9</sup> The goal of the revival was to inspire and animate the audience into performing an immediate and lasting response. The burden of effecting this change did not fall to the minister alone; the enterprise required work on both sides of the anxious bench. The end of the service may have signaled the conclusion of the evening's *theater*, or rehearsed actions, but Finney intended for the *performance* to continue.<sup>10</sup>

Here again, Finney had a system in place to ensure the *performance's* continuation. With the assistance of his wife, Lydia, Finney held meetings at the chapel during the day, meetings that were similar to the light-of-day testimonials that occupied camp meeting attendees as they waited for the evening preaching to begin. Together, Finney and his wife used these meetings to offer biblical instruction to recent converts and to organize and train members in the art of evangelism. In the latter category, Finney was particularly successful training teams of female volunteers to conduct Bible studies in the homes of people who had attended one or more of his revival services.<sup>11</sup> He praised his congregation's willingness to work for the good of the revival and marveled at how "the house

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<sup>9</sup> Schechner uses the same categories to define environmental theater in "Points of Contact Between Anthropological and Theatrical Thought," *Between Theater & Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982) pp. 3-33. See p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> D.S.T.P., p. 72.

<sup>11</sup> L.R.R., p. 250, *Memoirs*, pp. 174-175.

could be filled any evening of the week” through their commitment to distributing handbills and offering “oral invitations” to the citizens of Five Points.<sup>12</sup>

As Finney supplied audiences with his ready-made interpretations of scripture and theology, he was also teaching them to execute their own interpretive strategies. He encouraged this sort of boldness by empowering audiences to take control of their spiritual lives. His dramatizations (for example, telling the stranger on Niagara’s precipice to “Stop!”) repeatedly emphasized the role of the individual in spreading the gospel and in reinforcing one’s own salvation by preaching it to others. This kind of self-confidence removed fear and uncertainty about the material future and inspired the boldness required to attempt to convert those who believed differently. In an article written for *The New-York Evangelist*, Lewis Tappan boasted that because of the willingness of church members to seek out and invite non-believers to the revival services, “new circles of religious influence are thus formed, and the gospel...is carried to hundreds of families which otherwise might have continued to live as heathens in a Christian land.”<sup>13</sup> Despite its paternalistic tone, Tappan’s report indicates that Finney’s congregation was attempting to put his plan into action.

## **Defining the Frames: Interpretive Communities and the Horizon of Expectations**

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<sup>12</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 359.

<sup>13</sup> Tappan “History of the Free Churches,” pp. 29-30.

Wherever they were, attending a meeting inside the Chatham Street Chapel or working outside in the surrounding neighborhoods, Finney's congregation worked within a series of cultural frames that shaped their expectations for the work Finney had given them. This two-tiered frame, as described by Susan Bennett In *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, shapes the horizon of expectations for each interpretive community:

The outer frame contains all those cultural elements which create and inform the theatrical event. The inner frame contains the dramatic production in a particular playing space. The audience's role is carried out within these two frames and, perhaps most importantly, at their points of intersection.<sup>14</sup>

Bennett's description of this double frame suggests that audience members are always already aware of their participation in audience-stage and spectator-spectator relationships. What audience members may not realize, however, is that the ways in which these relationships intersect can create vastly different meanings for the interpretive communities within a single audience.

At the Chatham Street Chapel, the inner frame of Finney's worship performance was built on a particular set of expectations stemming from the audience's knowledge of Finney's style and temperament. For example, audiences who attended a revival service could expect to hear Finney rail against

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<sup>14</sup> Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 139.

Old School Presbyterians. Throughout the sermon, he would likely tell many stories and embody characters with virtuosic flair. They anticipated the moment when he would publicly confront members of the audience about their sins, and they were willing to risk being singled out themselves for the opportunity to witness this event. The members of the audience awaited Finney's invitation for sinners to come forward to the anxious bench.

The outer frame of Finney's revivals was more complex. It included the church's location on the border of Five Points, the articles printed in *The New-York Evangelist* in support of Finney, and the history of displeasure evinced by the Presbyterian Church's General Assembly toward Finney and his revival methods. During Finney's tenure at the Chatham Street Chapel, the subject of abolition became one of the most significant aspects of the outer frame surrounding his revivals. Connected to this subject, Finney's insistence on a separate seating area for African-Americans pleased some church members and offended others. Tappan's plan to use the chapel as a meeting site for many of the city's religious societies further complicated this subject.

### **Unscripted Aftermath: The Abolition Riot of 1834**

In his memoirs, Finney claims that he had already made up his mind against slavery prior to his installation at the chapel and that he was "exceedingly

anxious to arouse public attention to the subject.”<sup>15</sup> At the same time, however, he feared that focusing too heavily on abolition would needlessly “divert the attention of the people from the work of converting souls” (362). Within his own congregation, members were divided on the issue; both abolitionists and “some slaveholders of professed piety” attended Finney’s services.<sup>16</sup> Although he did not allow slaveholders to participate in the rite of holy communion, Finney was reluctant to bar them from attending services since he saw slavery as a sin neither more nor less damning than the sins of pride or intemperance.

Despite his professed belief in the sin of slavery, Finney was conflicted over what to do with African-Americans who attended his services. Tappan was adamant that *all* members of the congregation, regardless of race, be allowed to sit wherever they pleased “so that they [African-Americans] might feel that Christians imitate their Heavenly Father, in some degree at least, not being respecters of persons.”<sup>17</sup> Finney, however, feared that the “promiscuous” seating of black and white members of the audience would distract from the revival. As a compromise, African-Americans were not relegated to the chapel’s uppermost gallery, as was the customary practice in theatres and churches at the time, but they were required to sit together in a special seating area on the lower level. Lewis Tappan would later write that Finney’s refusal “to abolish the [seating] distinction altogether” was more than he could bear. “Finding nothing could be

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<sup>15</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 362.

<sup>16</sup> Finney, *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 18, 1852, qtd. in *Memoirs*, p. 362n.29.

<sup>17</sup> Tappan “History of the Free Churches,” p. 29.

done in a matter so dear to my heart," wrote Tappan," I left the church."<sup>18</sup> In effect, Finney had abolished the "slave gallery" only to reconstitute it on the bottom floor.<sup>19</sup>

In January 1834 on the advice of his doctor, Finney had to leave his work at the chapel to seek an extended rest-cure in the Mediterranean. He had been struggling to recover from cholera for more than a year, and his health remained poor.<sup>20</sup> Finney hated to leave at such a critical point, and he encouraged the congregation to stay focused on the revival mission during his absence. In particular, he warned Joshua Leavitt, an abolitionist and the editor of the pro-Finney *New-York Evangelist*, "to be careful and not go too fast in the discussion of the Anti-slavery question; lest he should destroy the paper."<sup>21</sup> Upon his return in late July, however, his worst fears were realized. In his memoirs, he recalls his discovery:

there was a great excitement in New York. The members of my church, together with other abolitionists in New York, had held a meeting [in the

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<sup>18</sup> Lewis Tappan to S. D. Hastings, April 11, 1841, qtd. in Charles C. Cole, Jr., "The Free Church Movement in New York City," *New York History*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 3, pp. 284-297. See p. 295.

<sup>19</sup> See also, The Slave Galleries Restoration Project Case Study, [http://www.artsusa.org/animatingdemocracy/resources/st\\_augustines\\_LESTM\\_case\\_study.pdf](http://www.artsusa.org/animatingdemocracy/resources/st_augustines_LESTM_case_study.pdf) (accessed 19 February 2005).

<sup>20</sup> During the summer of 1832, the same year Finney started preaching at the Chatham Street Chapel, a cholera epidemic broke out in New York City. At its height in late July, the epidemic claimed over one hundred lives each day. According to New York historian Edward Robb Ellis, one-third of all the city's cholera cases that summer occurred in the crowded slums of Five Points, only a few blocks from the chapel. Finney himself contracted the disease on the same day that he was installed as pastor of the chapel. With his revival ministry in a nascent phase, he pushed himself unmercifully after he was able to return to work, but he never fully recovered. See Ellis, *The Epic of New York City* (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1966), p. 240.

<sup>21</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 371.

Chatham Street Chapel] on the fourth of July, and had had an address on the subject of slaveholding. This had excited a mob; & this was the beginning of a series of mobs that spread in many directions whenever and wherever there was an Anti-slavery gathering.<sup>22</sup>

The New York Anti-Slavery Society had been founded at the chapel in October, 1833, with Lewis Tappan's elder brother, Arthur, elected to serve as president. The formation of a national society dedicated to abolition followed in December that same year. Arthur Tappan was again elected president, and Lewis was elected to the society's Executive Committee. Because of his own involvement with the renovation of the chapel, Lewis Tappan frequently and freely offered it as a meeting location for the new organization which was headquartered in New York City.<sup>23</sup>

On July 4, 1834, Tappan had organized a special service at the Chatham Street Chapel in celebration of New York State Emancipation Day. Before a racially mixed audience, Tappan read the American Anti-Slavery Society's Declaration of Sentiments, and afterward, a mixed chorus of African-American and white voices began to sing a hymn newly commissioned for the occasion. By the time the singing began, a mob of pro-slavery supporters had filled the upper tiers of the chapel, and they proceeded to throw hymnals and anything else they

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 366. For a detailed description of the riotous summer of 1834, see Hardman, pp. 262-265.

<sup>23</sup> See Wyatt-Brown, pp. 105-111.

could find at the performers (117). The meeting was abruptly adjourned, and the participants disbanded.

Following the explosive meeting on July 4, the American Anti-Slavery Society again rented the Chatham Street Chapel for a meeting on the evening of July 7. When members of the New York Sacred Music Society arrived at the chapel believing that they had booked the space for a rehearsal, a riot erupted.<sup>24</sup> This time the confrontation continued for four days, during which time an angry mob looted and burned Lewis Tappan's home.

The deadly riots scattered the members of the Chatham Street Chapel, and as Edmund Watts, a young member of the congregation, later recalled, when Finney returned to the pulpit following his voyage, he found "but the remnant of a congregation that crowded the church when he left."<sup>25</sup> In short, Finney returned to New York to find his revival in total disarray.

### **Finney's Performance: Re-Shaping the Audience Response**

In *The Audience*, performance theorist Herbert Blau reflects on the ways in which he has come to interpret what happens when groups of people convene as theatre audiences. "The audience...is not so much a mere congregation of people as a body of thought and desire. It does not exist before the play but is

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<sup>24</sup> The New York Sacred Music Society had been involved with Lewis Tappan and the Free Church movement prior to Finney's arrival in the city. As Tappan worked to secure funding for the building's purchase and renovation, he received a sizeable, open-ended pledge from the Music Society of \$1000 per year. In return, the society requested the use of the building when revival services were not being held. See LT to CGF, 22 March 1832, Finney papers, O.C.A.

<sup>25</sup> Edmund Watts, letter dated 16 June 1876, in *Reminiscences*, pp. 37-38.

*initiated or precipitated* by it; it is not an entity to begin with but a consciousness constructed.”<sup>26</sup> The audience that Finney had worked so diligently to construct had been almost totally dismantled. The performance of abolitionism had replaced Finney’s revival performance, and the audience had adapted quickly to the new *script*. Finney faced a dilemma. First, he had to entice members of the congregation who had been scared away by the riots to return. Second, he had to diffuse the powder keg of emotions that had taken control of those members who had remained at the Chapel.

In “Drama, Script, Theater, and Performance,” Schechner argues that it is in and through performance that we discover “a means of continually testing the boundaries between play and ‘for real.’”<sup>27</sup> This enterprise of discovery, then, is the ultimate “survival value” of performance. The transformation from revival to riot frighteningly underscored the real ways in which Finney’s theology of self-creation, his *drama*, could be performed to serve radically different ends. For those who opposed slavery, the fight for abolition would take on the feeling of a holy war, but supporters of slavery felt equally justified in their beliefs. During Finney’s extended absence, the interpretive communities of the Chatham Street Chapel discovered the truth of Schechner’s observation that the audience “can *control the performance*, even if the performers *control the theater*.”<sup>28</sup> In using the Chatham Street Chapel as the site of abolition meetings, the members of

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<sup>26</sup> Herbert Blau, *The Audience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 25.

<sup>27</sup> D.S.T.P., p. 100.

<sup>28</sup> D.S.T.P., p. 83.

Finney's church changed and enhanced the performance of revivalism in that place.

Finney's solution to this crisis was to refocus the congregation on issues of salvation, but he could not ignore the events that had identified the chapel as a site of controversy. In one of the lectures that he delivered upon returning from his trip abroad, he addressed the subject of slavery directly:

Perhaps no church in the country has had a more severe trial upon this subject, than this. They were a church of young and for the most part inexperienced Christians. And many circumstances conspired, in my absence, to produce confusion and wrong feeling among them. But...the Lord has blessed us, the Spirit has been distilled upon us, and considerable numbers added to our communion, every month since my return.<sup>29</sup>

In this statement, one sees plainly Finney's project to recuperate the Chatham Street Chapel congregation for the purpose of revivalism, while downplaying the political differences that divided them. Those responsible for the riots were "young" and "inexperienced." And the riots, according to this passage, were not even riots, but events born of "confusion and wrong feeling."

While Finney had preached a liberating theology, he seemed unprepared to confront an aftermath that departed from his expectations. After his return he became more vocal in his denunciation of slavery, even to the point of calling it

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<sup>29</sup> *L.R.R.*, p. 300.

the preeminent “sin of the church,” but he nevertheless remained moderate in outlining a solution to the problem. Instead of creating more division, he focused the congregation on common goals. By focusing on spiritual theory instead of social practice, he resurrected the revival. Church member Edmund Watts writes that “it was but a short time [after Finney returned]...before the scattered flock was gathered, the meetings were crowded, the church was revived, and the Holy Spirit blessed his labors in the salvation of souls.”<sup>30</sup> To Tappan, Finney’s reluctance to enter fully into the abolition debate was maddening. In a letter to fellow abolitionist Theodore Dwight Weld, Tappan said as much and called Finney a coward. Weld refuted Tappan’s accusations of Finney’s cowardice, and he reminded him that Finney had never shared their focus or passion for abolition:

The truth is Finney has always been in revivals of religion. It is his great business, aim and *absorbing passion* to promote them. He has never had hardly anything to do with Bible, Tract, missionary, Education, Temperance, moral Reform and anti slavery societies. . . . Finney feels about revivals of religion and the promotion of the church and ministry in doctrines and measures, just as you and I do about anti slavery. . . . God has called *some* prophets, *some apostles*, *some teachers*. All the members of the body of Christ have not the same office.[sic]<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Reminiscences*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>31</sup> Weld to Lewis Tappan, 17 November 1835, *Letters of TDW*, p. 242.

In Bennett's terms, Weld realized that Finney was best suited to maintain the inner frame of the worship performance, while his audience took his message and used it to shape the cultural elements that comprised the outer frame. Having exercised their newfound boldness and spiritual freedom, whether for good or ill, the members of Finney's congregation returned to the Chatham Street Chapel with an awareness of themselves as agents of social change.

## Conclusion

### Revival Performance in a Modern Pulpit

[For modern churches,] the ability to adapt to an ever-changing society is the key. Evangelism at the start of this [the twenty-first] century differs greatly from outreach 100 years ago...or even 10 years ago.

Paul Braoudakis, *An Inside Look at Willow Creek Community Church*<sup>1</sup>

Located in the Chicago suburb of South Barrington, Illinois, the 17,000-member Willow Creek Community Church is a phenomenon among twenty-first century Protestant churches. The church, started in 1975 with one hundred members, has grown with the focus and strategy of a carefully-managed company. In fact, the church has become just that. Since 1992, the Willow Creek Association has been packaging the church's evangelical model and making it available for purchase to other churches around the world. In the introduction to *An Inside Look*, which is a cross between an instruction manual and a catalog of product services, statistics tell the story. Reminiscent of Lewis Tappan's graph charting numeric growth among New York's Free Churches from 1834 to 1835, the book reports an average weekly church attendance of five hundred eighty-seven members in each of the more than five thousand churches belonging to

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<sup>1</sup> *An Inside Look at Willow Creek Community Church*, 5th ed., Paul Braoudakis, ed. (Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Association, 2000), p. 24.

the Willow Creek Association. Compared with the national average among all churches, a mere ninety members each, the Association uses this figure as evidence that its model has been effective.<sup>2</sup> Association President Jim Mellado also uses these figures to entice other churches to join the organization. By becoming a “Member Church,” congregations are promised a host of “benefits and services,” as well as a challenge. Mellado says it is time for churches “to step up to their potential to influence and provide training to other churches” (26).

Paul Braoudakis, the editor of *An Inside Look*, states emphatically that methods of evangelism have changed radically over the last century. And yet, in many ways, the methods espoused by the Willow Creek Association seem similar to those employed nearly two centuries ago in the Chatham Street Chapel. In the remaining pages, I will briefly explore some of the connections I have found between the worship performances in the two churches. Many of Finney’s ideas remain in circulation, despite radical changes in the technology used to promote them.

The central figure in the history of Willow Creek is Bill Hybels, the senior pastor and one of the church’s founders. Hybels’ story reads like a modern version of Finney’s personal narrative. For example, in *Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church*, Lynne Hybels’ describes her husband’s conversion experience, which occurred while he was on a beach trip: “Bill was overwhelmed by the absurdity of [the rat race]...He

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<sup>2</sup> These figures were current as the book’s printing in 2001. See p. 23.

returned to his room, fell on his knees, and said, ‘God, there has got to be more to my life than this.’ He was twenty years old.”<sup>3</sup> The image of the young man toiling in prayer on his knees is reminiscent of the forest clearing where Finney fell on his knees and promised God, “If I am ever converted, I will preach the Gospel.”<sup>4</sup> She also recalls the following image of her husband in the early days of Willow Creek, when the church was still meeting on Sunday mornings in a local movie theater:

The music was loud, the drama was raucous (sometimes crossing the line of acceptability), and Bill walked onto the stage with no notes, no pulpit – just a Bible, and an outline engraved in his mind. But those services were electric with the power of God and our earnest desires.<sup>5</sup>

A church that met in a theater. An impassioned, young minister who preached without notes. A commitment to innovation in worship. Finding no existing church that shared their vision for an updated, energized gospel, the Hybels formed the Willow Creek Church to combat the failures they saw in traditional denominations. They wanted to create an environment in which they could model the performance of faith for “seekers,” individuals who were not members of any church, but who were seeking a church where they could comfortably fit in. Their zeal to reach the population of the “unchurched” mirrors Finney’s and Tappan’s commitment to the Free Church movement, which sought to reach populations of

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<sup>3</sup> Lynne and Bill Hybels, *Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> *Rediscovering Church*, p. 62

people who had been excluded from other churches because of excessive pew fees.

In *Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way*, Kimon Sargeant argues that Willow Creek is now in the process of becoming the definition of the “postmodern denomination.” He describes the Association as “a practical, pragmatic, task- and training-oriented organization” that has used its influence to create “a homogeneity of form and congregational culture closely resembling older types of denominational identity.”<sup>6</sup> Instead of requiring strict allegiance to all of its teachings and ideas, the Association encourages Member Churches to use those parts of their performance model that are helpful and to ignore others that seem less helpful.

When Finney left the Chatham Street Chapel to become the pastor of the Broadway Tabernacle, he also left the Presbyterian Church and its rigid denominational structure. Like Bill Hybels, Finney desired unity among churches, but his own experiences had helped him recognize the impossibility of complete agreement. In 1835, he noted that while cooperation among churches is preferable, “in all cases where there cannot be a cordial agreement in labor, it is better that each denomination should labor by themselves.”<sup>7</sup> Together or separate, Finney believed, churches had to keep working. Willow Creek has

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<sup>6</sup> Kimon Howland Sargeant, *Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), p. 138.

<sup>7</sup> *L.R.R.*, p. 327.

followed Finney's advice; the church seeks evangelical progress over denominational unity.

One important difference between the worship performances at the Chatham Street Chapel and at Willow Creek is the attitude toward the *script*. While Finney continually had to defend himself against attacks that his performance style demeaned "the dignity of the pulpit," Willow Creek showcases its style and openly advertises its performance elements as part of its "sales pitch."<sup>8</sup> *An Inside Look* offers a step-by-step overview of a typical seeker service. The service begins with music, and audience members are invited to join in. "This gives them a chance to see other Christians experiencing God and worshipping him."<sup>9</sup> Following the music is a dramatic performance, the purpose of which is "to introduce a topic, and to provide a point of identification for the audience." Next comes a period described simply as "Scripture," and it is at this point in the service when "a biblical perspective on the program's theme is introduced." At every service, the church collects a monetary offering, but they circumvent the criticism that they are only after people's money by informing seekers that they are not expected to participate. The offering is for "those who call Willow Creek home." While this designation may be helpful, it also highlights the fact that, for the seekers who have attended, the church is *not* their home, at least not yet. The next to last element of the service is the sermon. As the focal

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<sup>8</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 83.

<sup>9</sup> *An Inside Look*, p. 81. All of the parts of the service that are described in this paragraph are from p. 81.

point of the worship performance, it occupies nearly half the length of the entire service.

Following the sermon comes something Willow Creek calls the “process and apply time.” Braoudakis writes that “we are increasingly finding that it’s effective to use this time to encourage people to take a step toward God” (81). Although it goes by a different name, the altar call lives on at Willow Creek. The use of the word “increasingly” seems to indicate that the church has only recently discovered what Finney perfected in the 1830s. Following the “process and apply time,” the service ends. As people leave they auditorium, they encounter church members who “are then available to guide new believers as they being their walk with God.” Like the members of the Chatham Street Chapel, members of Willow Creek have been well trained to perform their respective tasks as the service concludes and the *aftermath* begins.

Seeker churches have come to recognize that worship performance makes a difference in their rate of success at attracting and retaining new members. But Sargeant warns that these churches may have underestimated the effects of changing the style of their worship performance: “Changing the *method* can not only change your results; it can also change your *message*.”<sup>10</sup> In his essay, “Historiography and the Theatrical Event: A Primer with Twelve Cruxes,” theatre historian Thomas Postlewait makes a similar statement. He argues that applying different theoretical models to the same pieces of historical evidence will

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<sup>10</sup> Sargeant, p. 130.

inevitably yield different conclusions. He says simply, “Change the model, change the meaning.”<sup>11</sup> In effect, Willow Creek Church has followed Postlewait’s advice while heeding Sargeant’s warning. The Hybels and their creative teams have reinterpreted Finney’s worship performances through new lenses. In the process, they have discovered that new meanings can be drawn from old forms. Their *drama* borrows from Finney’s gospel of self-creation. Their *script* expands on his now familiar “new measures.” Their *theater* ghosts Finney’s techniques while also ghosting the performance culture of the twenty-first century, and their *performance* is a continuation of the aftermath of Finney’s revivals.

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Postlewait, “Historiography and the Theatrical Event: A Primer with Twelve Cruxes,” *Theatre Journal* 43 (1991), pp. 157-78. See p. 159.

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## **Vita**

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