

Graduate Research Symposium Proposal

True Virtue Theology: Abolitionist Rhetoric from Edwards to Finney

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After the Revolutionary War, the United States as a new republic experienced a remarkable period of change and struggle. Unsurprisingly, one of the most defining issues at hand was the increasing tension regarding slavery. With both civic and political language becoming more egalitarian, the evils of slavery were made more apparent. Perhaps the strongest language used in this ideological battle came from preachers during the religious revivals and Second Great Awakening. As one of the most dynamic revivalists in the United States, Charles G. Finney had a profound impact on American society during this transformative period. His widespread ideology helped to not only spread Christian values throughout the nation, but also a strong rhetoric for abolition. However, where did this abolitionist rhetoric come from? What were the theological roots that contributed to it? What did this theology actually mean?

Often seen as a controversial and unorthodox figure among Christian circles, Charles G. Finney's abolitionist rhetoric can actually be traced to the theological roots most profoundly expressed by New England preacher Jonathan Edwards. Using a doctrine of "disinterested benevolence," Edwards' theology was able to transcend the chains of time and provide a firm foundation from which later abolitionist preachers could attack the practice of slavery.