

THE LEGACY OF THIS PLACE: OBERLIN, OHIO

Barbara Brown Zikmund, Ph.D.

[This paper was prepared for a conference celebrating the 50th anniversary of Faith and Order in the United States "On Being Christian Together," July 19-23, 2007 in Oberlin, Ohio. It is based on my doctoral dissertation: "Asa Mahan and Oberlin Perfectionism: 1835-1850" completed in 1969 at Duke University.]

Beginnings

Oberlin owed its beginning to a man named John Jay Shipherd; a Congregational minister with a keen desire to evangelize the West. Shepherd was working in Elyria, Ohio when he began dreaming of a religious colony where, as he put it, "consecrated souls could withdraw to Christian living in the virgin forest." One of his students, named Philo Penfield Stewart, encouraged him and together Stewart and Shipherd conceived of a plan for a utopian colony and school. They proposed to name the colony after "John Frederic Oberlin," a pious European pastor who was very popular with missionary minded American Christians, because in 1830 the American Sunday School Union published *The Life of John Frederic Oberlin, Pastor of Waldbach*.

Shipherd and Stewart were dreamers. In a providential sequence of events they obtained a tract of land southwest of Elyria and began convincing families to move to Oberlin. By March 1833 a small group began to clear the woods. Oberlin's first resident, Peter Pindar Pesse, moved his family into a new log cabin a month later. By the end of 1833 approximately a dozen families called Oberlin home. [Robert Samuel Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College* (Oberlin: Oberlin College, 1943) 101-06.]

About the same time Shipherd contracted with some teachers and made plans for a school. He was impressed with the success of the Oneida Institute in upstate New York, which operated on a manual labor plan. In such a school students worked the land to pay for their studies. The only other educational institution in the area, Western Reserve College in Hudson, Ohio, did not have enough land to support manual labor. Soon, what began as an innocent common school mushroomed into an ambitious plan for higher education. On February 28, 1834 the Ohio legislature granted the Trustees of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute a state charter. [Robert Samuel Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College* (Oberlin: Oberlin College, 1943) 117-124.]

Things did not go well. Some teachers decided not to come; the school's president fell ill; the students did not understand the manual labor scholarship system; and Shipherd was inept at handling funds. Although classes began on December 3, 1833 with 30 students living and working in the colony, by the end of the year the financial situation was serious.

Faith and luck led Shipherd to Cincinnati, Ohio, a booming metropolis at the southern edge of Ohio. In Cincinnati a drama had been unfolding that was to have major consequences for Oberlin.

Lane Theological Seminary

Lane Theological Seminary had been chartered in 1829 in Cincinnati, Ohio to train clergy for various forms of Protestant ministry on the expanding Western frontier. Its early years had been characterized by a battle between “New School” Presbyterian/Congregational leaders deeply committed to revivalism and abolition and “Old School” Presbyterian/Congregational leaders just as passionate to protect the doctrine and practices of classic Calvinism.

During these years, Arthur Tappan, a wealthy Eastern abolitionist philanthropist, began talking about starting a “New School” theological seminary on the manual labor plan. He was convinced that such a work-study system was the only way to provide affordable education on the western frontier. To that end, Tappan commissioned Theodore Weld, a radical activist who had felt a call to ministry through revivalism and who had been a student at the Oneida Institute, to determine where this seminary might be located.

Weld listened to many suggestions and eventually recommended that Tappan’s dream seminary build on the foundations of Lane Theological Seminary, where a “New School” takeover was already in progress. With Tappan’s support, Lyman Beecher, a well-known New England “New School” Congregationalist, became president of a revitalized Lane Theological Seminary. Beecher was well-known and brought prestige to the school; he was theologically progressive and positive about frontier revivalism; and most importantly, Arthur Tappan was ready to pledge a great deal of money to Lane if Beecher was president.

After Beecher arrived in Cincinnati, so many students flocked to Lane that by 1833 it had one of the largest seminary enrollments in the country. Tappan was pleased, but wanted more. As an abolitionist he asked Weld to discuss immediate emancipation with the students. Therefore, early in 1834, although the faculty did not think it was prudent, the students held a debate on the question: “Ought the people of the slave-holding states abolish slavery immediately?” and whether the idea of repatriating slaves to Africa should be supported by the churches? Cincinnati is just across the river from Kentucky and the debate was very controversial. At its beginning most students agreed that slavery was wrong, but they did not consider immediate emancipation reasonable. By the end of the debate most students had experienced a change of heart and fervently believed that Christians should work for immediate emancipation. [Huntington Lyman, “Lane Seminary Rebels,” in *Oberlin Jubilee*, edited by William Gay Ballantine (Oberlin: Goodrich, 1884), 62.]

Cincinnati was a river town bordering a slave state (Kentucky). Following the debate the students formed an Anti-Slavery Society and immediately began working to elevate the plight of blacks in the area. They established reading rooms, libraries and schools. Predictably the mingling of students with the black population aroused bitter antagonism among many town citizens. Almost overnight, what was happening at Lane became national news. [*New York Evangelist*, V (April 5, 1834), 54.]

As the school year came to an end the faculty asked the students to disband their anti-slavery organization and to refrain from public discussion and activities. Their principles were right and their intentions good, but “they should not move so far in advance of public sentiment.” These

patronizing words incensed the students, who became even more zealous in their anti-slavery activities during the summer break. [Reported many years later in Asa Mahan, *Out of Darkness into Light* (New York and Boston: Willard Tract Repository, 1876), 116.]

The Lane Board of Trustees became increasingly alarmed. In August a committee reported to the board that “no seminary should stand before the public as a partisan, on any question upon which able and pious Christians differ.” It proposed a set of regulations forbidding students to organize societies without faculty permission and to not hold meetings except for worship or study purposes. [Minutes of the Prudential Committee, August 20, 1834.]

The students were outraged. When the seminary reopened in the fall the students refused to cooperate and were promptly dismissed. Although Beecher returned from his summer vacation in the East and tried to put the pieces back together, it was too late. Many documents, debates and stories circulated, while the students tried to decide what to do. They were dismayed not only by the racist attitudes of the city, the faculty and the administration; they were extremely upset by the arrogant misuse of power exhibited by the Lane Board.

Not surprisingly, when John Jay Shipherd arrived in Cincinnati in late 1834 and promptly invited the students to come to Oberlin, the Lane Rebels were receptive. Shipherd told them that Oberlin was ready; all it needed was students. The students were flattered but shrewd. They wanted Asa Mahan (a Cincinnati pastor and the only member of the Lane Board of Trustees to side with the students) to be elected president of Oberlin Collegiate Institute; and they wanted John Morgan (the only Lane faculty member who had sided with the students) to be appointed to the Oberlin faculty. Furthermore, the students, Mahan and Morgan stated that they could not come until the Oberlin Board of Trustees passed a resolution guaranteeing “that students shall be received into this Institution irrespective of color.” Shipherd had no problem with their request. [Letter from John J. Shipherd to N. P. Fletcher, December 15, 1834 (Oberlin College Archives).]

Unfortunately the earliest settlers of Oberlin were not of one mind about slavery. There had been no agreement on this issue when people were invited to settle in Oberlin. Nevertheless, when Shipherd discovered that many Oberlin residents opposed immediate emancipation and the idea of the school admitting blacks, he was astonished, arguing that such an egalitarian policy was “under God’s blessing.” Shipherd was sure that things would work out and with Mahan he promptly set off to raise money to support the revitalized Oberlin Collegiate Institute. While he was gone the question of race and the school admissions policy was hotly debated.

Mahan and Shipherd raised a lot of money. They convinced wealthy abolitionists in the East that there was a weak revival spirit on the Western frontier and that religious heresies were threatening to “undermine the foundations of pure religion.” They persuaded the famous revivalist Charles Grandison Finney to come to Oberlin to teach. Finney, exhausted from his itinerant life as a revivalist, found the idea of Oberlin attractive. He supported the student requests that the faculty be given control over the “admission of students” and the “internal management” of the institution. He endorsed the election of Mahan as president and Morgan to the faculty. For the students the issues were bigger than race. At its core, the Lane crisis was a conflict between trustee power and student-faculty power. Shipherd, Mahan, Morgan and Finney insisted that the Oberlin Collegiate Institute had to give the faculty control over its destiny.

[Letter from H. B. Stanton and G. Whipple to C. G. Finney, January 10, 1835, Finney Mss. (Oberlin College Archives) and Robert Samuel Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College* (Oberlin: Oberlin College, 1943) 185-86.]

The Oberlin Collegiate Institute

Things moved quickly, but not without moments of suspense. In December 1834 the Oberlin Board of Trustees elected Mahan and Morgan, but tabled the motion to admit blacks. Finally in February they met again. Shipherd and Mahan were still traveling in the East raising money for the school, but Mrs. Shipherd and a group of women prayed in a nearby room. The eight trustees, all men, cast ballots and the outcome was deadlocked, forcing John Keep, the chair of the Board to break the tie. Keep's leadership and vote, as much as the ideological commitments of Shipherd, Mahan, Morgan, Finney, and the Lane students, set the stage for Oberlin to become a new kind of place. Keep was a strong supporter of "new measures" revival thinking, an advocate of female education, committed to total abstinence and a recent convert to "immediate emancipation." By early 1835 Oberlin had built a national reputation as a hotbed of reformist and progressive education. [Minutes of the Board of Trustees, February 10, 1835.]

Hundreds of students flocked to the newly famous school. Only thirty of the students came directly from Lane. Others came from the Oneida Institute and some from Western Reserve College. To handle all of the people, especially those from Lane, a simple barracks building was built, variously nicknamed "Slab Hall," "Cincinnati Hall," or "Rebel Shanty." The Lane students were not in a majority, but their maturity, their passion for immediate emancipation, and their desire for theological education, forced Oberlin to take political and theological issues seriously. Furthermore, the manual labor plan opened education to poor students, allowing them to "work their way through their education." [Robert Samuel Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College* (Oberlin: Oberlin College, 1943), 185.]

The Oberlin Collegiate Institute garnered impressive financial support from many well-known northern abolitionists. As a consequence it did not need the support of the more conservative local Western Reserve citizens and churches. Indeed, the fact that its students, faculty and funds came from all over the country, gave Oberlin an independence that was lauded, envied and condemned.

Some observers believed that Oberlin's obsession with abolition before 1840 was excessive. In 1837 a student who could not go along with immediate emancipation was expelled and promptly authored a book entitled *Oberlin Unmasked*. He wrote that Oberlin abolitionists were not satisfied with the standard of abolitionists generally, but sought to "steal slaves from their masters and colonize them in Canada." The school, he railed, was promoting "amalgamation" and openly flouting the law. [Delazon Smith, *Oberlin Unmasked* (Cleveland: S. Underhill and Son, 1837), 59-60, 65-66.]

Early Oberlin Passions

In addition to immediate emancipation and interracial education, seven other passions shaped the culture of early Oberlin. It is not possible to rank them, but along with racial equality they

nurtured a unique campus culture. Parts of that legacy, albeit in new forms, still are visible in twenty-first century Oberlin through its abiding commitment to:

- (1) manual labor, or educational access for people who are not rich,
- (2) physiological reform, or concern for the health of body and spirit,
- (3) moral reform, or overcoming patterns of immoral behavior,
- (4) joint education of the sexes, or co-education,
- (5) curricular reform, or providing an education that is practical and useful,
- (6) non-sectarian revivalism, or religious cooperation,
- (7) the scripture doctrine of Christian perfection, or openness to new religious perspectives.

These seven passions, combined with a deep concern for racial equality, made Oberlin, Ohio a place that was willing to risk. Oberlin students and faculty “thought outside the box.” They pushed beyond business as usual and encouraged people to dream in new ways. Seven short descriptions of these passions illustrate my point.

Manual Labor: The manual labor economic system was fundamental to early Oberlin because it enabled many poor students from all over the country to get an education. Typically students spent four or more hours a day working on the farm or in the maintenance of the college buildings. It was compulsory, not merely because it paid the bills, but because the leaders of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute believed that a combination of work and study would give students needed outlets for their “animal energies.” Oberlin considered the combination of manual and mental labor crucial to the moral education of the whole person. [L.F. Anderson, “Manual Labor School Movement,” *Educational Review*, XLVI (November, 1913) 369-386.]

Unfortunately, farming in northern Ohio swamps was not always profitable. The manual labor system might have been successful at Oneida in upstate New York, it might have been good for the students, but it never was able to cover the costs of the Institute. Jobs could not be manufactured unless there was some demand for the products of student labor. Furthermore, critics felt that the hours spent in the fields cut into study time and undercut academic standards.

One graduate looking back admitted that the transition between study and work was not always smooth. Moving from the metaphysical to the physical, “from Greek roots to oak roots, from chopping logic to chopping cord-wood, from logarithms to log-rolling” was only relaxing for a time. Several attempts were made to make it economically profitable. For example, the school planted mulberry trees and tried to grow silkworms, but the trees and the worms did not survive northern Ohio winters. Oberlin held fast to the idea of manual labor longer than most schools, and it did allow some students access to education when other doors remained closed, but it was not sustainable. [H.L. Hammond, “The First Decade,” in *Oberlin Jubilee*, edited by William Gay Ballantine (Oberlin: Goodrich, 1884) 195.]

Physiological Reform: A second special passion of early Oberlin was its commitment to health reform. Consistent with evangelical enthusiasm about the important relationship between body and soul, Oberlin settlers abstained from the use of strong drink and tobacco. Tea and coffee were also suspect. Very early Oberlin embraced a particular philosophy of health that regulated all community and campus life – Grahamism.

During the cholera epidemic of 1832 the philosophy of Dr. Sylvester Graham became very popular. People flocked to hear Graham lecture about personal hygiene and disease prevention. Graham argued that gluttony was more dangerous than drunkenness and that cleanliness was next to Godliness, “Graham principles” were enthusiastically embraced at Oberlin.

Graham’s teachings were simple; and not very different from contemporary understandings of health and diet. Clothing should be adequate, but never too warm or too tight. Lacing and corsets were dangerous. Sleep should be for seven hours at night in ventilated rooms, never after meals. Beds should be hard, no popular featherbeds. Regular bathing of the whole body with water year round was important. Meals should be small and consist of foods as near to their natural state as possible. No stimulating drinks, small amounts of meat and fish, plenty of vegetables, fruits and bread made with unbolted wheat. Fats, gravies, sweets, condiments and spices were unnecessary. Exercise in the open air was crucial. [*Graham Journal of Health and Longevity*, I (April 18, 1837), 17.]

Most of us think of the Graham cracker as a snack for kids and a sweet treat when combined with marshmallows and chocolate. The Graham cracker, Graham breads and thick Graham crusts cradling unsweetened apple pies were staples of the early Oberlin diet. Later when whole wheat flour was baked into crackers and broken into small pieces, it was called “Granula.” And much later in 1876, John Kellogg picked up the idea and started marketing a cereal he called “Granola.” Shortly thereafter Kellogg’s competitor, Charles Post, processed graham flour another way to produce a cereal he called “grape nuts.” It is astonishing to realize that when we eat our breakfasts we are part of a long theological and physiological history.

During Oberlin’s early years most Oberlin faculty and students enthusiastically supported Graham’s health conscious regimen. They believed that there was a close relationship between health and faith. If people injured their health, they diminished their “power of doing good” and therefore sinned against God. People needed to be as concerned about the sacred laws of their constitution as their moral obligations. [Asa Mahan, “The Intimate Relation between Moral, Mental and Physical Law,” *Graham Journal of Health and Longevity*, III (May 11, 1839), 153-158.]

Grahamism faded by the mid-1840s, but Oberlin’s abstinence from stimulating drink persisted. Oberlin consistently pushed for prohibition, arguing with the apostle Paul that one should not drink or eat anything that might make one’s brother or sister stumble. Drinking alcohol, even in moderation, could be a source of temptation to others and undermine the power of the church to spread the Gospel. [Asa Mahan, “Temperance and the Christian Church” a sermon delivered December 23, 1849, Southwark, England (Tract collection 7466.59, Boston Public Library), #10, 33-40.]

Moral Reform: In keeping with Oberlin’s enthusiasm for clean healthy living was its involvement in the moral reform movement. “Moral Reform” in nineteenth century literature meant many things. Basically it focused upon all activities that Christian believers considered “immoral” – especially sexual and frivolous pleasures.

Oberlin students were wary of the temptations of the theater, the novel, and the waltz. The theater corrupted people by allowing them to “witness the lewd conduct of impure women.” Novels “broke down all barriers of virtue,” The newest dance craze, the waltz, condoned such personal familiarities (the hand of the lady on a gentleman’s shoulder, while his arm encircled her waist) that it was a wonder that any young lady retained her virtue. Even attending a circus or a racecourse was dangerous.

The Oberlin Female Moral Reform Society began in 1835. Women, more than men, took moral reform seriously in keeping with emerging Victorian ideas of women’s role in family and society. Later many Female Moral Reform Societies sought to end prostitution and to rescue young women from the sex trade. [*Advocate of Moral Reform*, IV (January 15, April 1, November 15, 1838), 10, 51-52, 169.]

Joint Education of the Sexes: Oberlin was assertive and proud of its admission of blacks to its programs, but its decision to admit women to the regular collegiate arts course happened almost by accident. John Jay Shipherd said from the beginning that the Oberlin Collegiate Institute was committed to the “elevation of the female character.” He did not anticipate co-education, but his commitment supported the idea that women should be able to receive the type of instruction that they needed. Therefore, when women asked permission to take collegiate courses, their request was granted.

By 1835 about a fourth of the students attending the Oberlin Collegiate Institute were women. They were not doing college studies, but the college grew accustomed to their presence. In 1836 the Trustees evaluated the success of the “joint education of the sexes,” concluding that the mental influence of the sexes upon each other was decidedly happy. Having women and men in classes together corrected “the irregularities, frivolities and follies common to youth.” They concluded that the policy resulted in no serious evil and the regular association between the sexes was basic to the very idea of human society. [Minutes of the Board of Trustees, March 9, 1836].

Gradually the women were ready for the collegiate curriculum and continued their studies alongside male classmates. Finally, in 1841 several Oberlin students became the first women in the English speaking world to earn their bachelors college degrees by completing a program of studies identical with that required of men, in the same classes and for the same degree. In elementary and secondary schools girls and boys received instruction together, but at that time it was considered improper at the college level. Oberlin’s “joint education of the sexes,” was an informal experiment, not an aggressive campaign, but it worked.

Many people found it difficult to accept the idea. Male and female instruction together was not considered delicate or proper. Furthermore, if women were supposed to be silent in public, how could they recite in class? Oberlin faculty members were flexible and they did not force the ladies. Although they were convinced that the good manners and social graces produced by the mixing of the sexes was an important benefit, they really did not treat women students equally. During the 1840s they required women graduates to sit mute at commencement while a male classmate read their final papers to the audience. A few radical women students, like Lucy Stone, objected; but most of the women were happy with the arrangement. People generally thought

that it was “disagreeable to both sexes to see a woman in a public character.” [James H. Fairchild, *Women’s Rights and Duties* (Oberlin: James Fitch, 1849), 19.]

Curricular Reform: Mixing the sexes was not the only controversial issue at early Oberlin. There were also great debates about the mixing of old and new subject matter in the collegiate curriculum. In 1828 a Yale report *On the Course of Instruction* set forth guidelines for collegiate education on the Western frontier. The report upheld the teaching of “dead languages” (Greek and Latin) and defended the traditional liberal arts curriculum.

Professors and clergy in Christian colleges like Oberlin became increasingly uncomfortable with this classical focus of collegiate education. President Mahan argued against dangerous pagan authors and advocated the study of biblical languages. Reading Greek and Latin classics was better adapted to educate heathens, not Christians. The mind, he asserted, might be disciplined by studying the Greek and Latin, but scripture would purify the heart and protect it from corruption. Students ought to acquire “knowledge of the natural sciences, of American law, of history, of men and things.” Colleges should fill their minds with truth, facts, practical and available knowledge.” [Asa Mahan, *Ohio Observer*, IX (July 9, 1835), 3.]

To this end, the professors at the Oberlin Collegiate Institute promoted a curriculum that was practical and useful, in keeping with a new American spirit in education. Western collegiate education was self-consciously critical of Easterners, sure that if the West depended on eastern seminaries or eastern views of education, it was destined to become a “great moral wasteland.” Yet, because Oberlin faculty wanted their school to be competitive and maintain high academic standards, they continued to require Greek and Latin, making sure that the texts studied were “pure in morals and valuable for sentiments as well as style.” Philosophical and speculative topics remained central to the curriculum, stressing independent and self-reliant thinking. Oberlin students to this day embody that intellectual legacy. [A.B. Rich, “Collegiate and Theological Education in the West,” *Congregational Quarterly*, XI (1869), 543-57.]

Non-sectarian Revivalism: In the 1830s revivals were considered a necessary part of an Oberlin “education.” Charles Grandison Finney, the most famous revivalist in the country, arrived in Oberlin in 1834 with a big tent that could seat two to three thousand people for religious meetings. At the top of the center pole was a large blue flag proclaiming in bold letters HOLINESS UNTO THE LORD. Finney celebrated the continuous “outpourings of the Spirit” that characterized early Oberlin. Looking back in his later years, he reported that “gales of divine influence swept over us from year to year, producing abundantly the fruits of the Spirit.” [Charles Grandison Finney, *Memoirs of Charles G. Finney* (New York: A.S.Barnes, 1876), 348.]

Finney published a series of lectures, soon issued in book form [*Lectures on Revivals* (New York: Leavitt, Lord and Co., 1835)] explaining his controversial understanding of revivals. Finney applauded the spontaneous work of the Holy Spirit, but he also insisted that revivals should be intentionally and carefully promoted where natural stimulus was lacking. Like a scout handbook, Finney’s lectures spelled out in fine detail a recipe for “how to make a revival.” Revivals kept Christians awake and drove sinners to repentance. Revivals channeled student religious energy in constructive ways.

More than anything else, revivalism transformed Oberlin into a center of non-sectarian Christianity. Oberlin professors were all products of schools, congregations and organizations connected to the 1805 Plan of Union—an agreement between Congregationalists and Presbyterians to streamline their work on the Western frontier by minimizing competition. The Plan downplayed theological and governance differences, allowing clergy in both denominations to become pastors in either Congregational or Presbyterian congregations. At Oberlin, Plan of Union thinking prevailed, scorning Christian divisions, downplaying denominational loyalties, embracing “New School” theologies, and supporting antislavery politics.

In May 1836 Mahan published a sermon on Paul’s admonition that “there be no divisions among you” (I Corinthians 1:10). Mahan promoted Christian union and fellowship, maintaining that according to the Scriptures if we require some things from some people we are bound to require the same things of all people. If a person attempts to limit demands on others, she or he is “guilty of being more select than God.” The only requirement which Scripture demands for Christian fellowship is “repentance towards God and faith towards the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Therefore, Mahan argued, each Christian ought to demand no more and no less. The problem with most Christians, according to Mahan, was that they set up their opinions as Divine will. Naturally, all opinions are not equally true; therefore, honest Christians need to “allow party zeal to bow to universal truth.” Instead of dwelling upon creeds, churches should open membership to all people who meet God’s requirements. If all Christians adopted the true principles of fellowship and church union, then the discordant elements that hang over the denominations might vanish, [Asa Mahan, *Principles of Christian Union and Church Fellowship* (Elyria, Ohio: A. Burrell, 1836).]

Revivalism at Oberlin was also non-sectarian for very practical reasons. The Oberlin community thought that it was sinful when churches limited the work of revivals by arguing over who would get the new converts and dividing people into camps. Oberlin leaders felt that the Spirit was “grieved” and the “bands of wickedness strengthened” when this happened. In fact, according to Mahan, nothing was ever gained to balance all that evil. Because Mahan believed that there was always a mixture of truth and error in each religious group, he tried to sustain a non-partisan stance. He was delighted when a critic faulted him by saying that Mahan “would never act his party,” and that Oberlin revivalism cultivated religious cooperation and intellectual hospitality. [Asa Mahan, *Oberlin Evangelist*, II (April 22, 1840), 71 and *Autobiography* (London: T.Woolmer, 1882), 71-72.]

The Scripture Doctrine of Christian Perfection: Revivalism actually pulled Oberlin in two directions. On the one hand it united Christians of diverse backgrounds and cultivated what today we might call a non-sectarian or “ecumenical spirit.” At the same time, revivalism created a unique religious environment that became preoccupied with Christian living as well as salvation, and that in turn led to the development of the Oberlin “scripture doctrine of Christian perfection,”—a way of thinking that raised great fears of sectarian heresy.

The Oberlin revival of 1836 was a “religious awakening of unusual power.” At that revival a recent graduate stood up and asked “what degree of sanctification” the scriptures promised? He wanted to know whether Christ could save them from all sin, so that they would be sanctified

wholly and “in this present life?” Initially this question filled Mahan with surprise and horror. He was concerned that students “would rush to perfectionism,” associated with the radical ideas of John Humphrey Noyes at the Oneida Institute, where claims of “perfection” led to promiscuous behavior and notoriously immoral beliefs and acts.

Mahan and Finney struggled with the question, and soon thereafter Mahan reported that he had an answer. Initial salvation or justification by faith alone did not always lead converts to a full Christian life. After careful Bible study, Mahan asserted that the scriptures promised more than justification. He cited many biblical texts to make his point. “The very God of peace sanctify you wholly, and your whole spirit, soul and body be preserved blameless into the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” [1 Thessalonians 5:23] “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father, which is in heaven is perfect.” [Matthew 5:48] Mahan decided that Christians should take these words (and others like them) to heart. Christians can expect perfect, not partial, holiness. After all, scripture says that Christ’s redemption is full and finished. [Asa Mahan, *Scripture Doctrine of Christian Perfection* (Boston: D.S. King, 1839), 232-33.]

For many of the students and faculty at Oberlin such knowledge of God’s perfecting work in Christ was reassuring. Sinners are saved from their sins by faith in Christ (justification), and a second blessing (also a gift like the first—sanctification) assures Christians that a “higher and more stable form of Christian life is attainable and is the privilege of all Christians.” [Charles Grandison Finney, *Memoirs of Charles G. Finney* (New York: A.S.Barnes, 1876), 340-41.]

Mahan and Finney recognized that John Wesley preached a similar message, but they insisted that their thinking about Christian perfection had its origins only in their reading of scripture. They were Calvinists and could not embrace Wesleyan ideas of free will and gradual sanctification. Furthermore, to keep their thinking from being confused with Oneida “perfectionism,” they insisted that although scripture promises that one can escape from sin (as a matter of the will), it does not release Christians from ethical restraints and moral law. The “scripture doctrine of Christian perfection” was totally different from popular antinomian understandings of Christian “perfectionism.”

Perfection in holiness did not give a person perfect wisdom, because only God was all wise. Yet human holiness might be perfect in kind, while imperfect and finite in degree. Christians disagreed about whether they might, in their present life, “attain to perfection in holiness,” and whether it was proper for them to anticipate attaining holiness, but Mahan believed no evil could result from believing what God had promised. [Asa Mahan, *Scripture Doctrine of Christian Perfection* (Boston: D.S. King, 1839), 9-20.]

In the 1960s I wrote a 360 page dissertation on Mahan and Oberlin ideas of Christian perfection which cannot be revisited here. Suffice it to say, however, that Oberlin thinking was a creative blend of ideas from Scottish philosophy, neo-Calvinism, and Wesleyan theology. It rested on a clear distinction between will and action. It presupposed “New School” Calvinism’s confidence in human ability and it agreed with Wesley’s emphasis on grace. The Oberlin “scripture doctrine of Christian perfection” focused on perfection of the will, not action; on perfection actually attained, not something theoretically attainable; and on perfection as instantaneous, not progressive.

I share a bit of my analysis of the debate over Christian perfection at early Oberlin, because I think it illustrates an important and ongoing dimension of Oberlin as a place where religious or spiritual zeal and intellectual rigor have existed side by side for almost 175 years. Mahan and Finney thought that beliefs were ultimately more important than knowledge or mental discipline, because education alone could never prepare someone to preach the Gospel. Yet they refused to lapse into anti-intellectualism and naïve assumptions about morality and the law. The intellectual rigor of Oberlin was never compromised by its religious enthusiasm or conviction.

Oberlin and the Faith and Order Movement

As the announcement for this gathering says, the Faith and Order Movement began in the early twentieth century when Christian leaders sought a setting where churches could come together to engage their differences in understanding the Christian faith and in discerning God's intention for the right ordering of Christian churches. In 1957 when the decision was made to hold the first gathering of the Faith and Order Commission in the United States here in Oberlin, Ohio, those who knew the history of Oberlin understood why. Issues of faith and order, and issues of life and work permeated early Oberlin.

I have presented a quick overview of how eight passions shaped and influenced early Oberlin. Those passions are still relevant as we gather here today to celebrate 50 years of "Being Christian Together." Many years ago in the 1830s many streams did indeed come together in this place (Oberlin, Ohio).

- (1) The zeal of the Lane rebel students for immediate emancipation forced Oberlin into a radical experiment in interracial education.
- (2) Oberlin's early efforts to finance the school following the manual labor philosophy reflected its desire to make sure that education was accessible for all people.
- (3) Oberlin's recognition that good health (body and spirit) depended upon wholesome food and exercise made for unconventional food, drink and campus life.
- (4) Oberlin's openness to providing educational opportunities for women moved beyond cultural stereotypes to embrace co-education when most people felt that only same-sex schools were acceptable.
- (5) Oberlin's concern for cultivating a morally upright society encouraged students not to be distracted by frivolous or questionable activities.
- (6) Oberlin's conviction that education needed to meet the real needs of people on the frontier produced needed curricular reform.
- (7) Oberlin's enthusiasm for revivalism led to a gracious openness to religious diversity instead of sectarian competition. And

(8) Oberlin's commitment to the controversial scripture doctrine of Christian perfection showed how one school could embrace unconventional thinking to enrich religious faith.

It is fitting that a place with this history hosted the Faith and Order meeting in 1957, and it is fitting that we are gathered here today.