Between Whitefield and Finney: The Evangelism of Asahel Nettleton

by Mark Sidwell[1]

Christians sometimes think of "worldview" in terms of how Christianity applies to cultural issues in such areas as economics or the fine arts. But a true biblical worldview must be centered on understanding what the Scripture both teaches and emphasizes. For example, however one views the Christian's cultural mandate that many Christians espouse, it is more important for a Christian to fulfil the gospel mandate stressed in the NT. Part of this gospel mandate is evangelism. This article is the second in a series on noted evangelists in American history—their work, methodology, and philosophy—a series that is intended to deepen understanding of the successes and failures, strengths and weaknesses, of historic American evangelism.[2]

Anyone wanting to trace the history of American evangelism could do so by lining up its notable figures who—for better or worse—have stood above their fellows. Imagine the story of American evangelism as a chain of mountains. One can easily discern the highest peaks: George Whitefield at the furthest distance, succeeded by Charles Finney, D. L. Moody, Billy Sunday, and finally Billy Graham.

One peak is obscured, however. Between Whitefield and Finney stands that of Asahel Nettleton (1783–1844). To his contemporaries, Nettleton was the heir to Whitefield, the leading evangelist of his age. And, significantly, he was one of the fiercest critics of Finney, who rose to fame in Nettleton's later years. Although comparatively forgotten, Nettleton may well be a model for modern evangelism.

From Halfway Christian to True Believer: Nettleton's Early Years

The chief source of information about Asahel Nettleton is a biography by his friend Bennet Tyler written shortly after Nettleton's death. Following the style of the biographies of his era—and fortunately for the historian—Tyler loads his work with extensive extracts from primary sources: Nettleton's own writings, contemporary periodical articles, and correspondence from those who knew

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[2] For the first installment in this series, see Mark Sidwell, "George Whitfield and the Rise of American Evangelism," *JBTW* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2023): 53–75.

the evangelist.[3] From this trove and a few additional sources, one may reconstruct Nettleton's career. Yet Tyler's purpose went beyond memorializing to setting Nettleton's career in opposition to Finney's, an objective that shaped Tyler's selection and presentation of his material.

Nettleton was born in North Killingworth, Connecticut, in 1783. A member of a nominally religious family, Nettleton gave little thought to God or religion until he was in his late teens. The nominalism of Nettleton's parents, and therefore of Nettleton himself, may be rooted in the fact that they had become members of the church under provisions of the famed "Half-way Covenant," a compromise of the ideals of America's Puritan forefathers. The Puritans of New England stressed the idea that every church member must "own the covenant," that is, give testimony and evidence of salvation for church membership.[4] At the same time, these Puritan Congregationalists practiced infant baptism. What happened if a child was baptized as an infant but did not profess conversion when he or she came of age? Could such people present their own children for baptism? A majority of the New England pastors devised a solution: those who could not own the covenant could still present their children for baptism and maintain a "half-way" membership.

Under the provisions of this agreement, Nettleton's parents, who were not in full communion with the church, submitted formally to the church covenant in order to present their children for baptism in this "half-way" manner. It is not surprising, then, that young Nettleton did not possess what that era called an "experimental [experienced] religion." He recalled that his first serious thoughts about life and death occurred one evening as he watched the sun set and meditated on the fact that one day he would die. This event initiated a long struggle with a perceived burden of sin. He sought relief in reading the Bible, attending church, and praying as he wandered in the fields or lay in bed at night, and he was finally converted during a revival at North Killingworth in 1801.[5]

After his conversion, Nettleton began to consider whether God was calling him to be something more than a farmer, as the rest of his family had been. Stirred by reading articles about foreign mission work, he determined to become a missionary. He saved his money for three years until, in 1805, he

[3] Bennet Tyler, *Memoir of the Life and Character of Rev. Asahel Nettleton, D.D.,* 2nd ed. (Boston: Doctrinal Tract and Book Society, 1852). All quotations are from this edition. This work is most familiar to modern readers through the version edited by Andrew Bonar, originally published in Britain in 1854 and reissued by Banner of Truth in 1976. Bonar notes that he omits "some parts of the documents" Tyler cites, inserts excerpts from Nettleton's sermons, and includes a few comments of his own. A short sketch of Nettleton, also by Tyler, is found in William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit* (1857; reprint, New York, Arno, 1969), 2:543–54. A good modern biography is John F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening* (Welwyn, England: Evangelical, 1977). Also very helpful is George Hugh Birney, Jr., "The Life and Letters of Asahel Nettleton" (PhD diss. Hartford Theological Seminary, 1943). Birney gets behind Tyler more than most writers on Nettleton by investigating Tyler's primary sources. His view is somewhat more liberal (cf. "dreadful doctrines of New England Calvinism," 19, and his contrast of Nettleton and Tyler with Nathaniel Taylor, 176–77), but his perspective is distinctive. Perhaps the most useful feature of Birney's work is that he includes extensive appendices (236–459) containing transcriptions of primary works from Nettleton (mostly correspondence) that are not readily available elsewhere. A more recent study of some value is Sung Ho Kang, "The Evangelistic Preaching of Asahel Nettleton and Charles G. Finney in the Second Great Awakening and Applications for Contemporary Evangelism" (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2004).

[4] See Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1963).

[5] Tyler preserves a lengthy extract by the young Nettleton describing his conversion but adds that Nettleton told him that a pastor had edited the account and changed a few details (13–16).

was able to enroll at Yale College. Although Nettleton was only an average student there, he read deeply in theology. Furthermore, he was personally affected by a campus revival that broke out during the 1807–8 school year.

College revivals were one of the chief features of the Second Great Awakening in the East. Although almost invariably established on religious foundations, many Eastern schools had become spiritually lukewarm or even openly hostile to orthodox religion. Nowhere had this tendency been more evident than at Yale College, until the ministry of President Timothy Dwight (1795–1817), a grandson of Jonathan Edwards, when Yale experienced a series of revivals that transformed its spiritual landscape.

One can see, perhaps, the seeds of Nettleton's later ministry in his college years, because at Yale he underwent another lengthy struggle with conviction before finding peace with God. Later as an evangelist Nettleton's usual course was to offer prolonged counseling for those under conviction and wait for them to reach a crisis rather than press for an immediate decision. Nettleton had followed this course in dealing with his college classmates. Jonathan Lee, Nettleton's roommate during the revival of 1807–8, describes Nettleton's concern, prayer, and counsel not only to Lee himself but also to underclassmen, an attention unusual for upperclassmen of the period.[6]

Preaching and Counseling: Nettleton's Ministry and Methodology

The Second Great Awakening lent impetus to the first great foreign missions movement in American history. Among the leaders of this movement were Samuel Mills (instrumental in founding the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, America's first mission board), Adoniram Judson (heroic pioneer missionary to Burma), and Luther Rice (leading organizer of Baptist mission efforts). Nettleton desired to be part of this effort.

When illness prevented Nettleton from going to the mission field, however, he still refused to become the pastor of a church, hoping to be free to go overseas when his health improved. Nettleton also decided not to marry because he believed, like Samuel Mills, that marriage could be a hindrance in mission work.[7] Inadvertently, then, he took steps toward an evangelistic career. He decided, as Tyler phrases it, "to confine his labors to waste places, and destitute congregations."[8] Nettleton began to preach either for small congregations that had no pastor or in places where he thought he could help a struggling minister, working primarily in New England and the upper mid-Atlantic states with forays into the South. Nettleton ministered primarily in Congregationalist and Presbyterian churches, because the two denominations were at that time cooperating in missionary and evangelistic efforts under the Plan of Union (1801). Because his evangelistic preaching was church based, he never participated in interdenominational efforts, like those of Whitefield earlier and those of Finney, Moody, and others later on.

[6] Tyler, 32–33.

[7] Ibid., 334.

[8] Ibid., 51.

In 1815 the preaching of Nettleton sparked a revival at Salisbury, Connecticut. Before Nettleton came, the church was without a pastor and was reduced to seventeen men. In these circumstances, the congregation "felt a deep conviction of the necessity of the effusions of the Spirit, to strengthen the things that were ready to die."[9] The allusion to the words of Christ to the church at Sardis ("strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die," Rev 3:2) provides a theme for Nettleton's evangelistic career. His work was mostly among the churched, in contrast to the western preachers during the Second Great Awakening, where the circuit-riders and camp meetings often sought to reach those outside the church. Nettleton targeted nominal Christians in a society where churchgoing was proper, even if conversion was not.

Nettleton's admirers believed he was well qualified for such a ministry because he supported pastors, practiced restraint in his ministry, and eschewed undisciplined enthusiasm. The Congregationalist churches of New England feared the wildfire extremes of some itinerant evangelists during the First Great Awakening, chief among whom was James Davenport, who precipitated exceptional disorders and who reminded Nettleton's supporters of Charles Finney.[10] Tyler could well have had both targets in mind when he described Nettleton's heritage: "These revivals exerted a most benign influence upon the churches. They did not divide churches, and dissolve the relation between pastors and their flocks. On the contrary, they built up churches—healed divisions, where they had previously existed—promoted union and brotherly love among the members, and greatly strengthened the hands of pastors."[11] When the Congregational Association of Connecticut in 1820 offered to establish a regular order of paid evangelists, Nettleton not only turned it down for himself but also successfully argued against the entire idea.[12] Despite his own experience, Nettleton apparently shared a common wariness about itinerant evangelists.

Unlike later evangelists who held campaigns lasting several weeks with daily services, Nettleton limited his preaching to a few times a week, even when he spent months in a single location. Tyler says, for instance, that during his most active years (1811–22) Nettleton "preached, generally, three sermons on the Sabbath, and several during the week besides spending much time in visiting house to house, and conversing with individuals on the concerns of their souls."[13] Relating Nettleton's work in Farmington, Connecticut, in 1821, the local pastor describes what seems to be the typical pattern: "Public meetings . . . were not very frequent. They were so appointed, as to afford opportunity for the same individual to hear preaching twice a week, beside on the Sabbath. Occasionally there were also meetings of an hour in the morning or at noon, at private dwellings, at which the serious in the neighborhood were convened, on short notice, for prayer and conference. The members of the church

[9] Tyler, 72.

[10] Tyler provides no less than a four-page footnote describing Davenport and warning against his extremes (45–49).

[11] Ibid., 234.

[12] Ibid., 53–54.

[13] Ibid., 148. Tyler relates an anecdote of a man who confronted Nettleton because he opposed religious meetings other than on Sunday (321).

also met weekly, in convenient sections, for prayer, and commonly on the evenings selected for the meetings of the anxious."[14]

Nettleton was not an eloquent preacher. H. Humphrey of Amherst College noted that there "was nothing particularly captivating in his voice, in his style, or his delivery—nothing to make you admire the man, or his writing, or his speaking."[15] Yet his published sermons show a simplicity and directness that is not without its own eloquence.[16] One minister in Taunton, Massachusetts, said that during a meeting in 1825 "an intoxicated Universalist stepped within the door and cried out with a stentorian voice, and with a horrid oath, 'that's a lie,'" but that "scarcely an eye was turned from the speaker toward the door."[17]

Without doubt Nettleton's most unusual quirk is what one writer calls "the case of the missing preacher."[18] Always sensitive that people might look to him rather than to God as the instrument of their salvation, Nettleton sometimes simply packed his bags and left without telling anyone. Congregations often did not realize he had gone until they appeared for a service, and the preacher did not.

Significantly, the inquiry meeting was at least as large as—if not larger than—the preaching service. Ministering to inquirers was central to Nettleton's work. His inquiry meetings involved a "short address," solemn in nature, followed by a prayer. Then he spoke briefly with everyone present, unless the numbers were so large that he had to have assistants talk with some. After speaking to the concerned, he gave another address and another prayer and then urged listeners to leave and engage in private prayer and meditation.[19] In the course of his counseling, he would advise inquirers to read the Bible, meditate, and pray. He would offer no hopeful words about their condition of conviction but would stress the necessity of repentance and press the uselessness of all good works for salvation.[20]

Nettleton recalled one meeting on May 21, 1820, that spilled over into several rooms in a "public house" in Nassau, New York: "They were crowded so closely together, that I could not pass among them to converse. So I spoke to one and another here and there at a distance, as I could catch their eyes as they lifted them streaming with tears. All were utter strangers whom I addressed, and not a name could I call. My only method of designation was, by pointing and saying, I mean you, and you,

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[14] Tyler, 128.

[15] Ibid., 357.

[16] There is a published collection of Nettleton's sermons: William C. Nichols and Bennet Tyler, eds., *Asahel Nettleton: Sermons from the Second Great Awakening* (Ames, Iowa: International Outreach, 1995), hereafter *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening.* There are actually two sets of sermons in this volume. Those in the first half were edited and compiled by Nichols from manuscripts in the Hartford Seminary Library. Those in the other half were originally published by Tyler shortly after Nettleton's death; Nichols notes that Tyler edited these sermons for publication and that, to his knowledge, the manuscripts of these sermons no longer exist.

[17] Tyler, 158. He identifies the minister as "the Rev. Mr. Cobb."

[18] Thornbury, *God Sent Revival,* 73.

[19] Tyler, 214–15.

[20] Ibid., 208. Tyler says Nettleton's "uniform practice" in counseling was as follows: "He never told persons that they had reason to hope. He would set before them with great plainness, the distinguishing evidences of regeneration, and enjoin it upon them to be faithful and honest in the application of these evidences to themselves" (116–17).

or this sinner, and that sinner."[21] A pastor in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, describes inquiry meetings in 1820 that seem to be typical: "Nearly twenty attended, and some of them were found to be under very serious impressions. No professor of religion was invited or expected to attend. It was a meeting exclusively for those who were beginning to realize their exposure and their guilt."[22]

Some meetings left a profound impression on those present, including the preacher himself. Nettleton describes an inquiry meeting held in a Masonic Hall during a revival around Saratoga Springs and Malta, New York, in 1819:

> This evening will never be forgotten. The scene is beyond description. Did you ever witness two hundred sinners, with one accord in one place, weeping for their sins. Until you have seen this, you can have no adequate conceptions of the solemn scene. I felt as though I was standing on the verge of the eternal world; while the floor under my feet was shaken by the trembling of anxious souls in view of a judgment to come. The solemnity was still heightened, when every knee was bent at the throne of grace, and the intervening silence of the voice of prayer, was interrupted only by the sighs and sobs of anxious souls.[23]

In New Haven in 1820 Nettleton held meetings gathered at designated times with groups ranging from ten to up to thirty people. Nettleton would "speak a word to all in general, pray and pass on to another circle." The meetings were "generally short,"[24] though one afternoon of August 25 lasted three hours as a group of twenty included several under conviction of sin. Nettleton advised them to go home and pray, but a woman named Emily came back saying, "O, I cannot go home, I dare not go" and then threw herself into a chair with her head on a table. A few minutes later, she raised her head and said, "O, I can submit, I can love Christ. How easy it is; why did I not do it before." She began quietly to exhort the others and soon several others professed conversion, a total of nine altogether.[25]

One can see how the elements of Nettleton's ministry combine in an account by Joab Brace, pastor in Newington, a parish in Wethersfield, Connecticut, describing Nettleton's work there in December 1820. Nettleton preached on the text "Behold I stand at the door and knock," and then, Brace says,

> The discourse was closed with surprising effect, by repeating the hymn, "Behold a stranger at the door." When prayer was ended, while the people were standing, he made a very close application of the subject to their hearts, in a short address, which was very silently and solemnly heard. He requested them to retire without making a noise. "I love to talk to you, you are so still. It looks as though the Spirit of God were here. Go away as still as possible. Do not talk by the way, lest you forget your own hearts. Do not ask how you like the preacher; but retire to your closets, bow

[21] Tyler, 108. Birney says of this Nassau revival that it is the only one of Nettleton's revivals "of which so minute an account is preserved" (75).

[22] Tyler, 132.

[23] Ibid., 97.

[24] Ibid., 114.

[25] Ibid., 114–16.

> before God; and give yourselves to him this night." After the benediction, he inquired of many persons individually, "have you made your peace with God? Do you calculate to attend to this subject?" Many promised that they would try to make their peace with God immediately—that they would repent that night—and a permanent impression was made. From this, the flame spread over the parish.[26]

In October 1822 Nettleton contracted typhus, which forced him into inactivity for two years and to scale back his labor even after he recovered. Although he continued to preach whenever his health allowed and, according to Tyler, saw some remarkable meetings, his intensive period of evangelistic work ended after only about a dozen years.

Foundation for Evangelism: Nettleton's Theology

Asahel Nettleton was a Calvinist,[27] an heir to what was known as the New England Theology. From the fountainhead of Jonathan Edwards (for whom it is sometimes called "Edwardsean Theology"), the New England Theology later took forms that Edwards himself might only dimly have recognized.[28] Under names such as the New Divinity School (or Hopkinsianism, after Samuel Hopkins) and the New Haven Theology, later versions of the New England Theology took on distinct, even eccentric, forms. A distinguishing tenet of Hopkinsianism was its stress on disinterested benevolence so that a mark of piety was wishing oneself damned for the glory of God. Some proponents of the New England Theology, notably Nathaniel Taylor, modified the doctrine of inherited depravity to eliminate any imputation of Adam's guilt in original sin and to insist that sin is only voluntary. With some curiosity, then, one notes Tyler's comment that Nettleton's standard was "the system of doctrines maintained by Edwards, [Joseph] Bellamy, Dwight, and other standard theological writers of New England,"[29] theologians who did not precisely agree with one another.

By no means were all New England divines followers of theologians such as Nathaniel Taylor. Bennet Tyler, Nettleton's biographer and close friend, was in fact a staunch opponent of Taylor.[30] Later in life, Nettleton and Tyler launched an offensive against Taylor and his teachings,[31] though all

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[26] Tyler, 124.

[27] Tyler quotes extensively from Nettleton to demonstrate his Calvinistic orthodoxy (273–301). See Kang, 94–122, for a survey of Nettleton's evangelistic preaching with its theological underpinnings.

[28] The standard histories of the New England Theology have long been George Nye Boardman, *A History of New England Theology* (New York: A. D. F. Randolph, 1899), and Frank Hugh Foster, *A Genetic History of the New England Theology* (1907; reprint, New York: Russell and Russell, 1963). Another valuable source is Joseph Haroutunian, *Piety Versus Moralism: The Passing of the New England Theology* (1932; reprint, New York: Harper and Row, 1970). A fresher interpretation is found in Douglas A. Sweeney, *Nathaniel Taylor, New Haven Theology, and the Legacy of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[29] Tyler, 273.

[30] In light of Tyler's view of Taylor, it is curious that he quotes a letter of appreciation from Taylor for Nettleton (350).

[31] See Thornbury, *God Sent Revival,* 189–94, and Sweeney, 129–36. Birney devotes a chapter to the "Taylor-Tyler controversy," 155–94, and transcribes some extensive notes by Nettleton on Taylor's views, 416–56.

claimed allegiance to Jonathan Edwards and his brand of Calvinism. Nettleton fell within the broad outlines of orthodox Calvinism,[32] and, while an opponent of innovators such as Taylor, he clearly bore the Edwardsean stamp. For example, he made the standard New England distinction that traced back to Edwards between moral inability and natural inability. "Inability" means that human beings, apart from divine grace, lack the capacity to do what is spiritually pleasing to God. Inability is said to be "natural" in that it is inherent in all humans by nature; it is "moral" in that humans reject the spiritual good as a result of their own willing, conscious choice.[33] Nettleton, like Edwards, affirmed moral inability but rejected natural inability.[34]

But Nettleton does not fall neatly into any particular school of the New England Theology. Against the New Divinity, which stressed passivity to the extent of almost making inaction a virtue, Nettleton specifically stressed the danger of waiting for an impression or moving of God.[35] At the same time, against New Haven, he appears much stronger on the nature of inherited depravity. In his sermon "Total Depravity," Nettleton states "that all men, by nature, are destitute of love to God, and consequently wholly sinful."[36] The president of Amherst College wrote of Nettleton, "A full believer in the total depravity of the human heart, he arraigned sinners, whether young or old, as rebels against God, and made the threatenings of the law thunder in their ears, as but few preachers have power to do."[37]

On a point more typical of all Reformed theology, Nettleton asserted that regeneration precedes conversion, despite the paradoxes this fact presented to evangelism. In the sermon "Genuine Repentance Does Not Precede Regeneration," he notes the challenge of some who see "inconsistency and absurdity" in calling people to repent, while saying repentance is a gift of God, and in telling people to come to Christ, then saying they cannot come. He replies, "We are guilty of all this absurdity; and the Bible talks just so too," going on to cite Christ's words in Matthew 11:28 ("Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden") and John 6:44 ("No man can come to me, except the Father .

[32] Robert E. Grossmann, although admitting certain irregularities from a Calvinistic point of view among the Calvinists of the Second Great Awakening, nonetheless asserts that they were fundamentally Calvinistic and that Nettleton was a model of Calvinistic evangelism. "The Calvinistic Ground of True Evangelism," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 3 (Fall 1987): 223–28.

[33] Kling says the New Divinity followed Edwards in distinguishing natural and moral ability and in the need for immediate repentance, emphases that characterized Nettleton. See David W. Kling, "Edwards in the Second Great Awakening: The New Divinity Contributions of Edward Dorr Griffin and Asahel Nettleton," in Oliver D. Crisp and Douglas A. Sweeney, eds. *After Jonathan Edwards: The Courses of the New England Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 130–41. For a good discussion of Edwards' views on this point and their ramifications, see Gerald L. Priest, "Andrew Fuller's Response to the 'Modern Question'—A Reappraisal of the Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation," *Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary Journal* 6 (2001): 58–63.

[34] Nettleton says, for example, "It is not for want of power to alter your disposition or make you willing to repent. You have all the faculties that Christians have. The true penitent has no more natural power than the impenitent." *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening,* 17. See Alan Cairns, "Inability," in *Dictionary of Theological Terms,* 2nd ed. (Belfast and Greenville, SC: Ambassador-Emerald, 1998), 190. The implication of the New England position would seem to be that God need not change the nature of the sinner but only his will.

[35] Tyler gives a lengthy excerpt from a sermon to this effect (209–12).

[36] *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening,* 395.

[37] Tyler, 363.

. . draw him") as manifesting the same "absurdity." Rather than attempting to reconcile such texts, he simply accepted them.[38]

Nettleton followed his Puritan/Congregationalist heritage on an issue that may have affected his methodology. The first generation of Reformers had viewed saving faith as entailing assurance of salvation. The Puritans and their descendants tended to make assurance a subsequent, or even an uncertain, aspect of the Christian experience. Nettleton followed this line of reasoning, viewing assurance of faith as separate from saving faith: "A person may be a christian [*sic*], without certainly knowing it."[39] Christians "may arrive at the full assurance of hope," he says, and adds "that some actually have attained to this assurance in the present life" though it "may not be common."[40]

This point in Nettleton's theology explains his surprising comment, "I have never allowed myself to be very confident of arriving at heaven, lest the disappointment should be the greater. I know that the heart is exceedingly deceitful, and that many will be deceived. And why am not I as liable to be deceived as others?"[41] Even more, this belief highlights the fact that Nettleton's ministry was not only to preach to the unregenerate but also to counsel with those who might very well be saints but who had not come to assurance of faith. Since most of his hearers had been "churched" in New England Congregationalism, they were rarely open scoffers. Rather, his ministry involved a constant sifting to discern among congregations the hypocritical from the troubled but genuine believer. Nettleton's consistent stress on inquiry meetings may rise in part from his need to reassure saints as well as to awaken sinners.

Nettleton had no formal "theology of revival," but he affirmed the need for revivals, their utter necessity for the health of the church. In this emphasis he was fully the heir of Edwards and other New England theologians. In revivals the truths of Christianity become fully evident. "*If genuine religion is not found in revivals,*" Nettleton wrote to Lyman Beecher in May of 1822, "*I have no evidence that it exists in our world.*"[42] Revivals were gifts of the sovereign God for the vindication of his name and his own glory. Yet Nettleton did not, as one might think from his later opposition to Finney, oppose the use of means in revival. A sovereign God may choose to use human instruments in such work, allowing one to discern—at least on occasions—a pattern in revival. In a letter written in 1823, Nettleton says,

> A revival *begun,* is likely to subside, without the constant pressure of gospel motives on the consciences of the awakened. It is obvious from experience, that God generally blesses, far more extensively, the means for extending his work, than he does for commencing it in the midst of surrounding darkness. As the conversion of one sinner is often the means of wakening every

[38] *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening,* 64.

[39] Ibid., 323. He does hasten to add "that we do not assert that a person can be a christian, and yet know nothing about it. He who is a christian has been born again—he has passed from death unto life—he has been called out of darkness into marvelous light. That a person can experience all this, and know nothing about it, is plainly impossible" (324).

[40] Ibid., 326.

[41] Tyler, 306.

[42] Ibid., 218 (emphasis original).

> member of the family, and the impulse is again felt through every kindred branch, and through the village and town; so one town may be the means of a revival in another, and that in another.[43]

The controversy with Charles Finney was not about the use of means but about what means were used and what the preacher saw as their purpose.

"Civil War in Zion": Controversy over the New Measures

On January 13, 1827, after a second unhappy interview with fellow evangelist Charles Finney, Nettleton wrote to a Rev. Mr. Aikin of Utica and said, "As we now have it, the great contest is among professors of religion—a civil war in Zion—a domestic broil in the household of faith."[44] Many leading ecclesiastical figures in the Northeast took part in the controversy, notably Boston pastor Lyman Beecher—the dominant personality among New England preachers—who first supported Nettleton against Finney and then switched sides.

Charles Finney emerged in the 1820s as America's most popular evangelist, just as Nettleton's career was declining because of ill health. Finney was a sensation, a fact which alone would have worried Nettleton and his supporters, to whom sensation was not a commendable quality. In their eyes, Finney was something of a James Davenport returned from the grave. The clash between Nettleton and Finney centered on methodology. Finney was the evangelist of the "New Measures," the most controversial of which are described by Tyler as he describes the sort of work Nettleton did *not* do:

> Dr. Nettleton never adopted the anxious seat, nor any of its kindred measures. He never requested persons to rise in the assembly to be prayed for, or to signify that they had given their hearts to God, or that they had made up their minds to attend to the subject of religion. He never encouraged females to pray and exhort in promiscuous assemblies. He never held his meetings to a late hour in the night; nor did he encourage loud praying and exhorting. He did not encourage young converts, and others who had more zeal than discretion, to take the charge of religious meetings, or to go forth as public exhorters. He was never personal in his prayers and exhortations, nor did he countenance it in others. He did not allow himself to denounce ministers and professors of religion, as cold and dead, and as the enemies of revivals. He entirely disapproved of all such measures, and considered them as suited to mar the purity of revivals, and to promote fanaticism and delusion.[45]

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[43] Tyler, 201 (emphasis original).

[44] Contained in *Letters of the Rev. Dr. Beecher and Rev. Mr. Nettleton on the "New Measures" in Conducting Revivals of Religion with a Review of a Sermon by Novanglus* (New York: G. &. C. Carvill, 1828), 11.

[45] Tyler, 213–14. The contrast between Nettleton and Finney is a major theme of Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism, 1750–1858* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994). Murray regards Nettleton as representing the traditional view of revival as a divine initiative apart from human effort. Finney, on the other hand, is for Murray the embodiment of "revivalism," religious efforts relying on human effort and calculation to produce spiritual results.

Some of these methods are familiar to modern Christians. The "anxious seat" (or "anxious bench") was a form of the altar call, or "invitation system," as some critics called it. Finney called on those under conviction to come forward during a service and sit in a special section in the front to show their concern for their souls and to receive special prayer. Other measures, such as loud or pointed praying and late services, may seem odd without being necessarily offensive to modern believers. Still others, such as opposition to women praying in public (or in mixed, "promiscuous," assemblies of men and women), may appear merely quaint. The point, however, seemed to be not just the measures themselves but the psychological purpose behind them. Nettleton also used "measures" in his services, but he "held no protracted meetings; nor did he adopt any new measures apparently *for effect.*"[46] To Nettleton, Finney seemed to substitute psychological devices for the work of the Holy Spirit.

During this "civil war in Zion," Nettleton launched his offensives in letters, later gathered and published in pamphlet form.[47] He took Finney to task for his methods: "This talking to God as a man talks to his neighbor, is truly shocking—telling the Lord a long story about A or B, and apparently with no other intent than to produce a kind of stage effect upon the individual in question, or upon the audience generally."[48] All of these methods, said Nettleton, reflected "*the awful irreverence of the manner!*"[49] Furthermore, Nettleton professed to be troubled by the lack of warnings against false conversions or the dangers of hypocrisy,[50] concerns that lay at the heart of his own approach.

In later years, Finney said he was unconcerned by these attacks, that they did not deter him at all.[51] Finney challenged his critics to "show me a more excellent way. 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. But do you expect me to abandon my own views and practices and adopt yours, when you yourselves cannot deny that, whatever errors I may have fallen into, or whatever imperfection there may be in my preaching in style, and in everything,—yet the *results* unspeakably surpass the results of yours?"[52]

Although Finney wrote these lines years after Nettleton's death, pragmatic defenses such as these must have been common during the controversy, for Tyler quotes an 1827 letter from Nettleton, in which the evangelist says,

> It is said that God has blessed these measures to the conversion of sinners. The same may be said of female preaching; and it may be asked in reference to that, "How can that be wrong which God

[46] "Dr. Humphrey," pastor in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, quoted in Tyler, 137 (emphasis original).

[47] Notably Nettleton's letter to Aikin (238–50 in Tyler) and his letter to "Rev. Dr. Spring" of Durham, New York, 4 May 1827 (250–65).

[48] Ibid., 259.

[49] Ibid., 259 (emphasis original).

[50] Ibid., 259.

[51] See Garth M. Rosell and Richard A. G. Dupuis, ed., *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 223–31, where Finney responds to Nettleton's criticisms, notably those found in Tyler's biography. Finney says of Nettleton's "pamphlet of letters" against him, for example, that "they fell dead from the press, I believe, for I scarcely heard them spoken of" (225).

[52] Ibid., 83 (emphasis original).

> has blessed to the conversion of a soul?" I answer, it is an acknowledged fact, that profane swearing, opposition to revivals, mock conferences have all been overruled to the conviction and conversion [of sinners]. And shall we not encourage and defend these things? The man who defends the principle in question appears bad in argument and worse in practice.[53]

However unconcerned Charles Finney claimed to have been in his *Memoirs,* he nonetheless agreed to meet with his critics at New Lebanon, New York, in July 1827. Leading the opposition was Lyman Beecher with Nettleton at his side, somewhat reluctant in his involvement but active in his criticism. The New Lebanon Convention failed to deter Finney. Indeed, it was an unmitigated disaster for Nettleton's views. Finney bluntly refused to change his methods. In fact, the main result was that shortly afterwards Beecher went from being a steadfast opponent of Finney to his staunch ally. Tyler commented that Nettleton saw no hope of rescuing Finney from his excesses "so long as he was upheld and encouraged by ministers of high respectability."[54]

Observers have long puzzled about why Nettleton focused on Finney's methodology rather than his theological views. John Thornbury, whose sympathies are with Nettleton, charges that the New Measures "were only outward manifestations of more profound deviations: the skin blisters caused by poison in the bloodstream."[55] One would think that Nettleton was orthodox enough in his Calvinism to see the problems in Finney's theology. Finney, after all, promoted a system that, as Warfield puts it, was founded on "the unordered Pelagianism of the man in the street," [56] and further shaped by the more controversial aspects of the New England Theology, such as those represented in Taylor's New Haven Theology. The same doctrines that Nettleton opposed in Taylor were flagrantly present in Finney: stress on human ability, the nature of sin only as conscious transgression, and other tenets that critics did not hesitate to call "Pelagian."[57] Thornbury hints that Nettleton's allies may have been the problem. Perhaps Nettleton hesitated to confront Finney's theology at New Lebanon because the theology of Nettleton's allies differed only in degree from Finney's.[58] A simpler solution may be that

[53] Tyler, 338.

[54] Ibid., 238. Beecher did not turn against Nettleton, however. After the evangelist's death, Beecher wrote to Tyler: "Considering the extent of his [Nettleton's] influence, I regard him as beyond comparison, the greatest benefactor which God has given to this nation; and through his influence in promoting pure and powerful revivals of religion, as destined to be one of the greatest benefactors of the world, and among the most efficient instruments of introducing the glory of the latter day" (v).

[55] John Thornbury, "Asahel Nettleton's Conflict with Finneyism," *Baptist Reformation Review* 6 (Summer 1977): 18.

[56] Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Perfectionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932), 2:18. Warfield uses the phrase to describe Finney's theology at the beginning of his theological education.

[57] The term *Pelagian* refers to the teachings ascribed to the British monk Pelagius (active c. 383–410). In contrast to the teaching of Augustine, Pelagius taught that humans are born neutral, without taint of original sin, and have complete natural ability to obey the commandments of God.

[58] Thornbury, "Asahel Nettleton's Conflict with Finneyism," 18.

Nettleton was simply unaware of Finney's theological views. While Finney's methods were evident to all, his theology received less attention until years later when he began to set it forth in print.[59]

Regardless, the New Lebanon Convention changed neither Finney's views nor his methods, nor did they slow the ascent of his star. Finney became America's leading evangelist, and his methods (and to a lesser extent his theology) became the evangelistic model. Meanwhile Nettleton's reputation declined until he was remembered by many largely for his opposition to Finney.

Nettleton's Place in the History of Evangelism

Despite his illness and the controversy with Finney, Asahel Nettleton's last years continued to be profitable. He preached on occasion, and often to great effect. He took the side of his friend Bennet Tyler in New England's religious conflicts by warmly supporting the founding of the Theological Institute of Connecticut (later Hartford Theological Seminary) as a counterweight to Yale and the New Haven Theology of Nathaniel Taylor.

Nettleton also made his mark on American hymnology, compiling one of the first American hymnbooks: *The Village Hymns* (1824). Not surprisingly, even in his hymnal, revival and evangelism were not far from his mind. In the introduction, Nettleton says, "I had hoped to find, in the style of genuine poetry, a greater number of hymns adapted to the various exigencies of a revival. Laborious research has, however, led me to conclude, that not many such compositions are in existence."[60] Later he observes,

> There is a numerous class of hymns which have been sung with much pleasure and profit in seasons of revival, and yet are entirely destitute of poetic merit. . . . I am satisfied from observation, as well as from the nature itself of some hymns, that they must be ephemeral. They should be confined to seasons of revival: and even here they ought to be introduced with discretion; for on this their principal utility must depend. A book, consisting chiefly of hymns for revivals, however important in its place, would be utterly unfit for the ordinary purposes of devotion—as prescriptions, salutary in sickness, are laid aside on the restoration of health.[61]

As important as Nettleton regarded revivals, he understood that they were not the whole of the ministry of the church and were not to shape its worship.

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[59] Charles Hambrick-Stowe notes that theological attacks on Finney did not appear until a few years after the New Lebanon Convention when Presbyterian and Congregational theological controversies aroused closer scrutiny of Finney's doctrinal teaching. *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 124–26.

[60] Asahel Nettleton, *Village Hymns for Social Worship Selected and Original,* 6th ed. (New York: Elisha Sands, 1826), v. Birney devotes an entire chapter to Nettleton's contribution to hymnody (86–113).

[61] Nettleton, *Village Hymns*, vi. There is a minor mystery concerning Nettleton's work with hymns. Is he the source of the name for John Wyeth's tune "Nettleton," which is commonly sung to Robert Robinson's "Come Thou Fount"? Since *Village Hymns* contains only lyrics (the music being published in a separate volume) and Nettleton had no musical skill, the answer is at best uncertain and probably unlikely. *Village Hymns* includes "Come Thou Fount" as a hymn appropriate for "Rejoicing in Revival" (435).

Of course, it is as an evangelist that Nettleton left his greatest heritage. Today the reputations of Whitefield and Finney overshadow that of Nettleton. How contemporaries compared Nettleton with Finney is evident above. How they compared him with Whitefield—a much more positive model to New England Calvinists—is also interesting. Bennet Tyler contrasted Whitefield's success in the pulpit with Nettleton's success through a combination of preaching, use of the inquiry room, and private counseling.[62] In fact, Tyler was not afraid to say that Nettleton's preaching "addressed more to the conscience, and less to the passions than that of Whitefield," an approach that resulted in fewer disorders and firmer converts.[63] H. Humphrey of Amherst College noted that while Whitefield blew "the trumpet over the dead and buried formalism of the churches," Nettleton sought "to 'strengthen the things that remained and were ready to die' in destitute churches."[64]

The typical way to judge an evangelist is by the results of his work, either in number of converts (or other "decisions") or the apparent impact of his work on society at large, such as Billy Sunday's measure of success in promoting the cause of prohibition. Nettleton's localized meetings within the religious establishment of New England do not appear to have had a remarkable effect on society—although unlike the frontier in that same era, the Northeast possessed a high standard of at least superficial social rectitude and public morality. Though Nettleton interested himself deeply in the growing temperance movement, temperance was always subsidiary to evangelism.[65] The number of converts is harder to pin down. Birney says that Nettleton oversaw fifty revivals in his ministry.[66] Exerting due caution, Thornbury estimates a total of 25,000 converts as the result of Nettleton's ministry, further suggesting that the evangelist's care and diligence in the inquiry meetings and in counseling resulted in an extremely low proportion of lapsed converts.[67] If Nettleton's numbers were not large, compared to more famous evangelists, they at least seem to have been more firm.

Part of the value of studying Nettleton's career is that the pattern of his ministry more closely resembles that of a modern evangelist than that of, say, D. L. Moody or Billy Sunday, who addressed millions in multi-week urban campaigns. Like Nettleton, a modern evangelist in America is likely to minister to a single congregation over a period of a few days and to professing church members rather than the unchurched.

Therefore, the counseling emphasis of Asahel Nettleton may provide a closer model for the modern evangelist: on making sure the message is communicated clearly and personally, even if Nettleton's "inquiry meetings" might be difficult to arrange today. Finally, the repeated theme that observers offered for Nettleton's ministry—to "strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die"—underscores the role of evangelists in the contemporary church. Facing the assault of western culture, evangelists can strengthen and rally believers by holding firm for the gospel. Such a course is not a

[62] Tyler, 200–1. Tyler explains the "lecture room" as a form of inquiry meeting (205–6).

[63] Ibid., 201.

[64] Ibid., 360.

[65] See Birney, 81–85.

[66] Ibid., 75.

[67] Thornbury, *God Sent Revival,* 233.

mere holding action. To "strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die" is the counsel of Christ himself, counsel that many contemporary churches can not only heed but even embrace. That was the course Asahel Nettleton followed to great blessing.