

# Asahel Nettleton: The Forgotten Evangelist

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<https://www.ccwtoday.org/2004/04/asahel-nettleton-the-forgotten-evangelist/>  
accessed 11/25/2020

The year was 1812. America had just declared war on Great Britain in June and lost its first battle in October. In the midst of that climate, a young, unimpressive minister on his way to an assignment in New York stopped at a church in the community of South Britain, Connecticut.<sup>1</sup> When he was invited to preach, no one could have anticipated the impact his ministry would have, not only on this small church, but also on all the East Coast over the next three decades.

As this visiting preacher spoke, the congregation became aware that something unusual was happening. His probing questions seemed to penetrate each heart, peeling back layer after layer, showing the reality of their sin. Many in the congregation wondered how he knew them so well. As he continued, he warned the audience of their desperate need for repentance and the danger of any delay. Many in the congregation were brought to a deep conviction of sin.

After the message, the congregation dismissed without any formal invitation. They returned home to deal with God regarding their sin. During the week, conversion came mightily to many.<sup>2</sup> The revival that began that week spread throughout New England, spilled over into New York, and resulted in a deep work of regeneration that lasted until the mid-1800s. During that span of time, God graciously used this man to bring more people to Christ than any man since George Whitefield came to America a half century earlier. Who was this man?

Mention the names of Finney, Moody, Sunday, or Graham and visions of great evangelistic ministries are brought to mind. But mention Asahel Nettleton and few will have any idea who you are talking about. Except for being remembered as the one who opposed Finney at the New Lebanon Conferences, even most histories fail to tell of the work of revival under Nettleton.

Asahel Nettleton is a significant figure in the history of revivals who has been sadly forgotten. Yet his ministry might have been one of the most effective ever. Though he never pastored a church, never wrote a book, or led an evangelistic organization, Nettleton's preaching led directly to the conversion of well over 30,000 people<sup>3</sup> at a time when the entire nation's population was only nine million. Those figures, though large by comparison to most evangelists, are even more startling when one considers that his ministry encompassed little more than Connecticut and its bordering states. According to John Thornbury, the number of conversions in modern times "proportionate to the success of Asahel Nettleton" would be well over 600,000!<sup>4</sup>

Thornbury is not alone in his assessment of Nettleton's significance in history. His own contemporaries, who had heard such giants as Edwards, Whitefield, Finney, and Moody, counted Nettleton's ministry as unusually successful. In 1844, *The New York Observer* said that Nettleton was "one of the most extraordinary preachers of the gospel with whom God has ever blessed this country." *The New York Evangelist* agreed saying, "Few men, since the apostolic days, have been honoured with such a signal success in preaching the word, and in the conversion of sinners as he...."<sup>5</sup> Bennett Tyler said of him, "We do not claim for *Dr. Nettleton* the rank of Whitefield; but he stands very high among those who have 'converted sinners from the very error of their ways,

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<sup>1</sup> Thornbury, John F., *God Sent Revival* (Durham, England: Evangelical Press, 1977), 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>3</sup> Bennett Tyler and Andrew A. Bonar, *Nettleton and His Labors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth reprint, 1854, Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Thornbury, 233.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

saved souls from death, and hidden a multitude of sins.”<sup>6</sup> Even Lyman Beecher, who had both Nettleton and Finney in his pulpits, said of Nettleton, “Considering the extent of his influence, I regard him as beyond comparison, the greatest benefactor which God has given to this nation.”<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps what is most significant about Nettleton’s ministry is not the sheer number of conversions but the number who remained faithful to Christ many years later. Most evangelists today would be delighted to “find” even a small percentage of their converts, much less to see them living for the Lord.<sup>8</sup> Nettleton’s converts were surprisingly solid. For example, of the eighty-four converts in an 1818 revival at Rocky Hill, Connecticut, all eighty-four had remained faithful according to their pastor’s report twenty-six years later. Similarly, only three spurious conversions out of eighty-two professors were noted in another pastor’s report on a revival in Ashford, Connecticut.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, toward the end of his life, “after reflecting on the many who had claimed conversion [under his ministry] but had since fallen away,” the great evangelist Charles Finney “had mixed thoughts on the genuine results of his work.”<sup>10</sup> He was not alone. In a letter to Finney, one of his co-workers raised some interesting questions about their work:

Let us look over the fields where you and I have laboured as ministers and what is now their normal state? What was their state within three months after we left them? I have visited and revisited many of these fields and groaned in spirit to see the sad, frigid, carnal, contentious state into which the churches have fallen and fallen very soon after we first departed from among them.<sup>11</sup>

B. B. Warfield also tells of the testimony of Asa Mahan, Finney’s closest friend and long-time co-worker:

No more powerful testimony is borne ... than that of Asa Mahan, who tells us — to put it briefly — that everyone who was concerned in these revivals suffered a sad subsequent lapse: the people were left like a dead coal which could not be reignited...<sup>12</sup>

Nettleton’s ministry was decidedly different from that of Finney, not only with regard to conversions, but also with regard to the lasting impact upon the communities which he visited. One contemporary pastor, Bennett Tyler, noted the differences between the revivals of Finney and Nettleton:

These revivals were not temporary excitements, which like a tornado, sweep through a community, and leave desolations behind them; but they were like showers of rain, which refresh the dry and thirsty earth, and cause it to bring forth “herbs meet for them by whom it is

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<sup>6</sup> Tyler and Bonar, viii.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>8</sup> Amazingly, one of the greatest evangelistic organizations of the twentieth century is very pleased with a retention rate of less than 15 percent. See Sterling Houston, *Crusade Evangelism and the Local Church* (Minneapolis: World Wide Publishing, 1984), 29. Most alarming is that the majority of those who claim to have made “decisions for Christ” have no interest whatsoever in Christ or His church. See Jim Ehrhard, “The Dangers of the Invitation System,” *Reformation and Revival*, Summer 1993, 2:82.

<sup>9</sup> Robert A. Swanson, “Asahel Nettleton — The Voice of Revival,” *Fundamentalist Journal*, May, 1986: 51.

<sup>10</sup> “Did You Know?” *Christian History*, VIII, 4:4.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in B. B. Warfield, *Perfectionism*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford, 1932), 2:26.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:26-27.

dressed.” These fruits were permanent. By them the churches were not only enlarged, but beautified and strengthened; and a benign influence was exerted upon the community around.<sup>13</sup>

Although Nettleton and Finney were contemporaries, Finney has eclipsed Nettleton completely. Today, these questions must be asked: Who was this man so specially used by God in the conversion of many souls? Why has one of such significance been sadly forgotten in our generation? And what makes his ministry so different from the evangelistic ministries seen today? Such questions form the focus of this paper.

### **His Early Years and Conversion**

Born on April 21, 1783, on a farm in North Killingworth, Connecticut, Asahel was the second of six children. Baptized as an infant, his parents taught him morality, the Westminster catechism, and farming skills. He attended the village school and participated in community parties, outings, and dances. As a youth, he had an unusual experience during a sunset where the falling darkness brought him his first serious thoughts about the reality of death. But these thoughts were fleeting, and no permanent fruits came from this momentary reflection.<sup>14</sup>

In the fall of 1800, at age eighteen, Asahel began to come under the convicting power of the Holy Spirit. After an evening of merrymaking at the annual Thanksgiving celebration, thoughts of death returned to haunt his conscience. These thoughts led him to religious pursuits. Instead of relieving his troubled heart, his zeal to pray, read the Scriptures, and do good works only produced greater doubts and dissatisfaction.<sup>15</sup>

These failures led Nettleton to all sorts of doubts. He began to question whether the Bible was true. When he came to the conclusion that the Bible could not be trusted, he concluded that there was no God. However, such conclusions refused to comfort his heart for he thought, “What if the Bible should prove to be true! Then I am lost forever.”<sup>16</sup> The writings of Edwards and the Memoir of David Brainerd deepened his conviction of lostness. After ten months of anguishing conviction, Nettleton came to the end of himself:

All self-righteousness failed me; and, having no confidence in God, I was left in deep despondency.... After awhile, a surprising tremor seized all my limbs, and death appeared to have taken hold upon me. Eternity — the word *Eternity* — sounded louder than any voice I ever heard; and every moment of time seemed more valuable than all the wealth of the world. Not long after this, an unusual calmness pervaded my soul, which I thought little of at first, except that I was freed from my awful convictions....<sup>17</sup>

Nettleton had been converted. The character of God became more lovely, the work of Jesus more precious, and the doctrines of grace more delightful:

The character of God, and the doctrines of the Bible, which I could not meditate upon before without hatred, especially those of election and free grace, now appear delightful, and the only means by which, through grace, dead sinners can be made the living sons of God.<sup>18</sup>

His conversion came during a period of revival in Killingworth under the ministry of Josiah Andrews. By March 1802, ninety-one new converts were received into the church. The effects of

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<sup>13</sup> Bennett Tyler, *New England Revivals as They Existed at the Close of the Eighteenth and the Beginning of the Nineteenth Centuries*, (Boston: Massachusetts Sabbath School Society, 1846; reprint, Wheaton: Richard Owen Roberts Publishers, 1980), 7.

<sup>14</sup> Thornbury, 26-27; Tyler and Bonar, 18-19.

<sup>15</sup> Thornbury, 29-31.

<sup>16</sup> Tyler and Bonar, 26.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22, emphasis in original.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

the revival gave Asahel new aspirations. While working in the fields, he often thought, “If I might be the means of saving one soul, I should prefer it to all the riches and honours of this world.”<sup>19</sup> An epidemic swept through Killingworth during the spring and summer of 1802 killing his father and youngest brother. For the next three years, he cared for the farm and the family, taught in the village school, and studied under the tutelage of Josiah Andrews.

By 1805, Nettleton had committed himself to pursue missionary service. He enrolled at Yale and completed his academic training in an undistinguished fashion.<sup>20</sup> Still, the potential of Nettleton did not escape the notice of President Timothy Dwight, the grandson of Jonathan Edwards, who remarked: “He will make one of the most useful men this country has ever seen.”<sup>21</sup> Upon his graduation in 1809, he remained at the college to work and repay some debts. Nettleton was ordained in 1811; and, while waiting for a call from one of the missionary societies, he ministered as pastor for a brief period in the “waste places” of southeastern Connecticut.<sup>22</sup> In the autumn of 1812, Nettleton received an invitation to preach in South Salem, New York. On his way to New York, he stopped over to spend a week in South Britain, Connecticut where his fame as an evangelist began.<sup>23</sup>

### **Years of Revival**

The years from 1812 until 1822 can be accurately characterized as the years of revival for the ministry of Nettleton. Although God continued to use this preacher in revival until his death in 1844, these years provided the most remarkable movements of the Spirit of God under his ministry.

Following the revival at South Britain, Nettleton continued on to his appointment in South Salem, New York. This community was considered another of the “waste places,” not open to spiritual revival.<sup>24</sup> In a short time, the preaching of Nettleton began to take hold of the hearts and minds of the people. “The seriousness soon spread through the place, and the subject of religion became the engrossing topic of conversation.”<sup>25</sup> In a few weeks, a great number had been surprisingly converted. Asahel was so well-liked that the church tried to call him as their pastor. However, he still considered himself bound for missionary service, and, after two months at South Salem, moved on to other preaching opportunities back in Connecticut. The results of his ministry were remarkably similar. In Danbury, Monroe, North Lyme, Hadlyme, and Bloomfield, “his labours were greatly blessed to the quickening of God’s people, and to the awakening and conversion of sinners.”<sup>26</sup>

In the autumn of 1813, Nettleton went to preach in a church in Litchfield known as Milton. The church had dismissed its pastor under “strained circumstances,” and the congregation was full of internal divisions. Again, the preaching of Nettleton brought many under great conviction. At one meeting, several experienced such horror of mind that they began to cry out in the services.

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<sup>19</sup> Tyler, 29.

<sup>20</sup> However, his college friends thought highly of him:

“[He] was held in respect by all in college; but peculiarly loved and esteemed by Christian professors. His spirit was excellent, and his example unexceptionable.” Tyler and Bonar, 39-41.

<sup>21</sup> Thornbury, 37; Tyler and Bonar, 41.

<sup>22</sup> These places were towns that had been visited by James Davenport during the first Great Awakening. His extravagant methods often resulted in church splits and brought much discredit to the idea of revival in those churches. See Thornbury, 47-43 and Iain H Murray, *Jonathan Edwards* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 223-29.

<sup>23</sup> Thornbury, 52-53.

<sup>24</sup> “The church was destitute of a pastor, and was in a cold and backslidden state. Great spiritual apathy existed in the congregation,” noted Bennet Tyler. Tyler and Bonar, 65.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67.

Nettleton had them removed to a neighboring house to be counseled personally, while he continued with the meeting. In a few months, a large number had been converted. In just over one month, more than eighty people were converted from every age group, ranging from a twelve year old to a widow of seventy.<sup>27</sup> Best of all, the breach in this once divided church had been healed. It was during his time at Milton that Nettleton became acquainted with Lyman Beecher who served as pastor in Litchfield.<sup>28</sup>

Revival seemed to follow Nettleton in each of the towns he visited. By 1815, it seemed that everyone desired his labors among them. In the spring of 1815, the ministers of New Haven invited him to come to their community. His work of revival there began when he visited a local school for girls. In a personal letter to his friend, Philander Parmele, Nettleton recounted the progress of revival in this school:

A number have been alarmed. How many it is impossible to tell. It was just a week from the time I came to this place to the day on which the great inquiry openly and solemnly began. *What must I do to be saved?* For three days the distress of some was overwhelming. On the fourth day four were rejoicing. On the fifth day eleven more were rejoicing. From that time the work has been gradually spreading through the town. The prospect is still brightening. This morning I have found 2 more rejoicing in hope. Within about four weeks upwards of 50 have entertained hope in this place.<sup>29</sup>

Similar experiences were recorded during Nettleton's time ministering in Middleton, Connecticut in 1817:

There has been an increasing solemnity for some time past. Meeting were crowded and solemn.... One young man seized my hand exclaiming "I am a sinner. I am a sinner. What shall I do?" They [the people at the meeting] left the house and went home sighing, & sobbing in every direction. I came home & found a number around the door of Mr. Williams' house, in the most awful distress, Some were standing, some sitting on the ground, & some on the doorsteps exclaiming "What shall I do" I shall die. I shall die. "I Can't live." This alarmed the neighbors who called to witness the awful scene. With much ado I got them into the house, about eight or ten in number. The fact was, the young man aforementioned, who left the meeting house in such distress, was walking in company with them, when all at once he found relief and exclaimed, "I have found the Saviour." He was now very joyful. *He sat clothed and in his right mind; and they were afraid.* My first business was to warn them against a false hope. Prayed with them and enjoined it particularly on them not to go home together, but to go alone, & be alone, for the business must be settled between God and their souls.

Maria (a young woman living in this family) was one of the number. She retired to her chamber, sighing and sobbing, and crying for mercy, and exclaiming "I shall die, I shall die." She came down and went outdoors and returned in the same awful distress to her chamber. And suddenly all was still and hushed to silence. I sat still below and said nothing. I soon heard the sound of her footsteps descending the chamber stairs. She opened the door and with a joyful countenance exclaimed O, Sir, I have found the Saviour. I continued to warn her of the danger of a false hope. She exclaimed "I love Christ. I do love him. O how sweet." In the morning, early, she called to see one of her anxious mates, who was so distressed the night before; and Lo: Barsheba exclaimed "I have found the Saviour." That was a happy meeting. The young man

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<sup>27</sup> George Hugh Briney, "The Life and Letters of Asahel Nettleton, 1783-1844" (Th.D. dissertation, Hartford Theological Seminary, 1943), 60.

<sup>28</sup> Thornbury, 58-61; Tyler and Bonar, 67-81. Tyler gives a number of personal accounts of conversions that occurred in the Litchfield area through Nettleton's ministry.

<sup>29</sup> Letter to Philander Parmele, August 4, 1815, Nettleton Manuscript Collection, Hartford Seminary Foundation. Emphasis in original.

aforementioned resided in the same family (this was John Towner's house). On Saturday evening about mid-night another, equally distressed, found relief. Within a few days 8 or 10 are rejoicing in hope.

What will be the end, I know not. Do pray for us, and your friend,

A. Nettleton.<sup>30</sup>

In the summer of 1819, Nettleton's ministry shifted from Connecticut to the area near Saratoga Springs, New York. Although he went there for a period of rest, local ministers pressed him into service once they learned of his presence. In Saratoga Springs, forty professed salvation, including some of the most respectable people of the community. In nearby Malta, crowds as large as fourteen hundred came to hear him. He remained in the area until February 1820, reporting over six hundred converts during that period.<sup>31</sup>

From there, his work touched the students of Union College in Schenectady, New York. Nettleton gives one account of the awakening that took place among the students there:

The room was so crowded that we were obliged to request all who had recently found relief to retire below, and spend time in prayer for those above. 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 have no adequate conceptions of the solemn scene.<sup>32</sup>

One student particularly impacted by Nettleton's ministry was Francis Wayland, the future president of Brown University. Wayland's interests before the revival were almost entirely academic and religion was "a matter of small and distant reality."<sup>33</sup> Nettleton's preaching changed the direction of Wayland's life. Wayland stated, "I became intimately acquainted with Mr. Nettleton, and my conversations with him were of great use to me." His children also noted Nettleton's impact on the ministry of their father: "He gained lessons never to be forgotten in the mode of addressing men on religious subjects."<sup>34</sup> Wayland, though familiar with many of the great preachers of his era, said of Nettleton, "I suppose no minister of his time was the means of so many conversions."<sup>35</sup>

Nettleton stayed in the area until the fall of 1820. During that time, he was the instrument of revival in many congregations. In Nassau, New York, alone, over one hundred people were converted in the period from the end of April to the end of June.<sup>36</sup> In one area, Nettleton himself estimated the impact of the revival:

"Within a circle whose diameter would be less than twenty-four miles, not less than eight hundred souls have been hopefully born into the kingdom of Christ, since last September."<sup>37</sup>

Shortly after Nettleton returned to Connecticut, he began to preach in the church of Noah Porter in Framingham. Within three months, two hundred and fifty were converted. Not only this, the

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<sup>30</sup> Letter to Philander Parmele, December 1, 1817, Nettleton Manuscript Collection, Hartford Seminary Foundation. All grammatical errors and spellings have been retained as in the original hand-written letter.

<sup>31</sup> Thornbury, 89. Also see Tyler and Bonar, 141-43 for one minister's report of the effect of Nettleton's ministry in his congregation.

<sup>32</sup> Thornbury, 91.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-101.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

revival transformed the entire town.<sup>38</sup> But the grueling schedule that Nettleton kept was beginning to affect his health. He retired to the community of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, for a period of rest. Once again, the local pastor requested that he preach. Within weeks, revival broke out and within a few months more than eighty persons (half of them “heads of families”) had been converted.<sup>39</sup> In 1821 and 1822, Nettleton also labored in Connecticut and saw similar works of revival in such places as Litchfield (in Lyman Beecher’s church), Somers, Mansfield, Goshen, and other communities.

In early October, 1822, Nettleton visited a family in Wilbraham, Massachusetts, where there was a case of typhus fever. By the middle of the month, he began to have the tell-tale symptoms and retired to the home of his friend Philander Parmele in Bolton, Connecticut. By mid-November, he was so sick that he dictated his will. Shortly thereafter, he began to recover only to discover that his gracious hosts, the Parmeles had contracted the disease themselves. Mrs. Parmele recovered but Nettleton’s closest friend, Philander, succumbed to the disease on December 27. This news broke his heart, and he described that time as the “most trying” of his life. While he continued to recover from the disease and the loss of his friend, Nettleton was encouraged by reports of the continuing effects of revivals that had been initiated under his preaching.<sup>40</sup>

### **Years of Conflict**

For nearly two years after the attack of typhus, Nettleton preached only occasionally. His weakness prevented any regular ministry, and he sometimes had relapses that would force him to be bedridden for weeks. During that time, Nettleton put together a contemporary hymnal that met the need of churches in revival. Since Watts was so revered in the churches of his day, he wisely considered his publication as supplement to be used alongside of Watts rather than replacing it. In 1824, Nettleton’s Village Hymns for Social Worship, Selected and Original, Designed as a Supplement to the Psalms and Hymns of Dr. Watts was published and was extremely popular among the churches that had experienced revival.<sup>41</sup>

In the final years of Nettleton’s life, the focus of his ministry changed from that of the prominent promoter of revival to the theological defender of true revival. While his preaching continued to be used by God as a instrument for revival in Virginia (1827-28),<sup>42</sup> North Carolina (1829),<sup>43</sup> New York (1830-31)<sup>44</sup> and England (1831-32),<sup>45</sup> his latter years are remembered most for two major controversies.

By the autumn of 1824, Asahel’s health had sufficiently improved to allow him to return to some preaching. He first went to Bethlehem, Connecticut, to preach in the former pulpit of Joseph Bellamy. Forty came to faith during his short stay there.<sup>46</sup> From there, he preached in Brooklyn, New York, and Taunton, Massachusetts, with similar results.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Tyler and Bonar, 147-53.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 154-65.

<sup>40</sup> Thornbury, 129-31.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 132-37.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 180-85.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 205-6.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 206-10.

<sup>46</sup> Bellamy was a friend of Edwards and a proponent of revival during the first Great Awakening. Although he died in 1790, his theology continued to influence most of western Connecticut. *Ibid.*, 153. Also see Tyler and Bonar, 240-63 for more detailed accounts of these engagements.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

In February 1826, he attended a congregation in Jamacia, New York, that was pastorless and full of strife. When the people learned of his identity, they asked him to preach; and an awakening ensued that lasted into the autumn. It was during his stay in Jamacia that Nettleton first received reports of problems arising from revivals in Oneida County, New York. It seemed the use of some “new measures” in revival was causing great division and confusion in the churches of that area. An increasing flow of people came to him to complain about what was going on in these revivals and to plead with him to help set matter right.<sup>48</sup> Still, Nettleton hesitated:

Heretofore his battles had been with infidels and out and out enemies of the gospel. Although he had been engaged in minor theological debates with other preachers about the various points of theology, these discussions had taken little of his time and energy. Nothing had interfered with his concentration on the winning of souls.<sup>49</sup>

In November, he went to Albany, New York, to talk with some pastors in that area. Charles G. Finney, the leading proponent of these “new measures,” was preaching across the river in Troy. He even met with Finney on at least two occasions during his time there, though little information about those meetings remains.<sup>50</sup> In a letter to John Frost, one of Finney’s supporters in the area, Nettleton recounted that he was “already worn out with conversation”<sup>51</sup> and that the first meeting contained little discussion of the new measures. In another letter to Frost, Nettleton is more specific about his concerns. There he cites a number of examples where the new measures and those using them were disrupting the churches of the area and “breaking down” the “settled ministers” of the churches.<sup>52</sup> Finney initiated the second meeting by visiting the home where Nettleton was staying in Albany. According to Finney’s account of the meeting, he offered to accompany Nettleton to the service Asahel would be preaching. According to Finney, Nettleton “manifested uneasiness, and remarked that I must not be seen with him.”<sup>53</sup> According to Thornbury, “The uneasiness which Nettleton may have felt at this time would have been based upon the fact that a public appearance of the two men together would have been used to advantage by the new measures advocates.”<sup>54</sup>

Following his second visit with Finney, Nettleton wrote a letter to “the Rev. Mr. Aikin of Utica” in which he outlined his objections to the new measures. In beginning, however, Nettleton is careful to acknowledge the hand of God in the revivals of Finney: “There is, doubtless, a work of grace in Troy.”<sup>55</sup> He further noted:

We do not call into question the genuineness of those revivals, or the purity of the motives of those who have been most active in them.... But the evils to which I allude are felt by the churches abroad; members which have gone out to catch the spirit, and have returned, some grieved, others soured, and denouncing ministers, colleges, theological seminaries, and have set whole churches by the ears, and kept them in turmoil for months together. Some students of divinity have done more mischief in this way than they can ever repair....

The evil is running in all directions. A number of churches have experienced a revival of anger, wrath, malice, envy, and evil-speaking, (without the knowledge of a single conversion,) merely in consequence of a desperate attempt to introduce these new measures. Those ministers and

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 153-56.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>50</sup> Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism, The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism, 1750-1858* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 228-30. Hereafter cited as Murray, *Revivalism*.

<sup>51</sup> Cited in Briney, 125.

<sup>52</sup> Briney, 307-20.

<sup>53</sup> From *The Memoirs of Rev. Charles G. Finney* cited in Thornbury, 165.

<sup>54</sup> Thornbury, 165.

<sup>55</sup> Tyler and Bonar, 342.



Christians who have heretofore been most and longest acquainted with revivals, are most alarmed at the spirit which has grown out of the revivals of the west.... The friends of brother Finney are certainly doing him and the cause of Christ great mischief. They seem more anxious to convert ministers and Christians to the peculiarities, than to convert souls to Christ.<sup>56</sup>

Some of the peculiarities he mentioned included the use of the anxious bench, praying openly for sinners in the meeting by name, appointing new converts to lead revivals, and denouncing ministers who did not use their methods. Nettleton was especially concerned about the unwillingness of Finney and his co-laborers to have any of their methods examined. Furthermore, anyone who questioned the new measures was denounced as being “enemies of revival.”<sup>57</sup>

Although Nettleton did not wish to be cast into a role of confrontation, his observations of the work in Oneida County convinced him that he could do no less:

Irregularities are prevailing so fast, and assuming such a character, in our churches, as infinitely to overbalance the good that is left. These evils, sooner or later, must be corrected. Somebody must speak, or silence will prove our ruin. Fire is an excellent thing in its place, and I am not afraid to see it blaze among the briars and thorns; but when I see it kindling where it will ruin fences, and gardens, and houses, and burn up my friends, I cannot be silent.<sup>58</sup>

Thus the stage was set for what came to be known as the New Lebanon Conference on July 18, 1826, in New Lebanon, New York. Before the meeting, Finney printed a sermon he had preached on Amos 3:3: “How can two walk together except they be agreed?” In his sermon, Finney contended that all who opposed his new measures were opposed only because of “their frosty hearts.” Since they were not right with God, Finney reasoned, these could not appreciate “white-hot revivalism.”<sup>59</sup>

Nettleton responded with a letter to Gardner Spring which was printed in the *New York Observer*. In it, he noted that Finney never really dealt with the distinction between true and false zeal, calling all zeal a mark of religious affection.

The sermon in question entirely overlooks the nature of true religion. It says not one word by which we can distinguish between true and false zeal, true and false religion. If the tone of feeling can only be raised to a certain pitch, then all is well. The self-righteous, the hypocrite, and all who are inflated with pride, will certainly be flattered and pleased with such an exhibition, especially if they are very self-righteous and very proud. *False affections often rise higher than those that are genuine*; and this every preacher, in seasons of revival, has had occasion to observe and correct .... If the preacher is not extremely careful to distinguish between true and false affections, the devil will certainly come in and upset the work, and bring it into disgrace.<sup>60</sup>

Nettleton’s letter attacked both the logical and scriptural foundations to which Finney had appealed. He pointed out that one cannot dismiss all evaluation as “unchristian”:

“Without great care and close discrimination, the preacher will unwittingly justify all the quarrels and divisions in our churches.”<sup>61</sup>

He reminded readers that Paul would not even allow men to be teachers unless they were of “full age, who by reason of use have their senses exercised to *discern* both good and evil” and that Paul

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 343-44.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 348.

<sup>58</sup> Thornbury, 145.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>60</sup> Tyler and Bonar, 360. Emphasis in original.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 362.

would not allow young converts to preach: “Not being a novice, lest he fall into condemnation, reproach, and the snare of the devil.”<sup>62</sup> Finally, Nettleton listed Edwards’ observations about the marks of spiritual pride, concluding:

It is a mark of spiritual pride to refuse to enter into discourse or reasoning with such as are considered carnal men, when they make objections and inquiries. Humility would lead ministers to condescend to carnal men, as Christ has condescended to us, to bear with our unteachableness and stupidity, and follow us with instructions, line upon line, precept upon precept, saying: “Come, let us *reason* together;” it would lead to a compliance with the precept: “Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh of you a *reason* of the hope that is in you with *meekness* and fear.”<sup>63</sup>

With these two great salvos fired, the conference was already in deep water when it convened. Little was accomplished, and both parties departed with no agreement about any issues. Finney felt vindicated as churches in the large cities of the East coast began to invite him to their pulpits. In fact, this conference was the last time the two leading preachers of New England, Asahel Nettleton and Lyman Beecher, stood together.<sup>64</sup> The second crisis in Nettleton’s life, the debate over the theology of Nathaniel Taylor, would divide them forever and thrust Beecher into Finney’s camp.

During 1827, Asahel Nettleton experienced spells of fainting which prompted his doctors to encourage him to try a warmer climate as a remedy. Nettleton decided to spend the winter in the mountains of Virginia near Hampton-Sydney College. He preached in the surrounding towns with his usual effectiveness. While there, several students from Yale visited the college and created a stir by advocating the teachings of their president, Nathaniel W. Taylor.<sup>65</sup>

Most alarming was Taylor’s denial of the complete depravity of man, the imputation of original sin, and the inability of man.<sup>66</sup> Apart from any special work of the Holy Spirit, man could refrain from sinning simply by choosing to do so. Likewise, no special work of God was needed to bring the sinner to Himself. Not only was this theology doctrinally unsound, Nettleton knew that it would serve to undermine true conversion by placing the focus on what man can do rather than on what God does in salvation. All that an evangelist needed was to present the truths in such a way as to persuade men toward a decision:

Dr. T. speaks as if *the only difficulty* in the way of a sinner loving God lay is their want of clear & distinct views of divine things.... Dr. T. takes it for granted that if the sinner only had clear views of God, he would love him. But the facts prove the contrary.<sup>67</sup>

Nettleton also recognized that such a theology would support the very methods he sought to oppose in Finney’s ministry. The publication of Finney’s *Autobiography* confirmed any suspicions that Nettleton might have had. In it, Finney openly opposed any doctrine of original sin, referring to it as “anti-scriptural and nonsensical dogma.”<sup>68</sup> Finney contended against the

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 368-74. Emphasis in original.

<sup>64</sup> Thornbury, 174-79.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 182-94.

<sup>66</sup> This idea was not entirely unique to Taylor. It found its roots in the teachings of Samuel Hopkins. He taught that there is no sin but actual transgressions. He denied any imputation of sin from Adam passed down to his descendants. His theology formed the basis for views of Taylor and most of the advocates of the “New Haven Theology,” often called the “New Divinity.” See Joseph A. Conforti, *Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity Movement* (Washington, D.C.: Christian College Consortium, 1981).

<sup>67</sup> “Dr. Taylor’s Views of the Means of Regeneration,” Nettleton Manuscript Collection, Hartford Seminary Foundation, 182-2872-80308: 18. Emphasis in original.

<sup>68</sup> Michael S. Horton, “The Legacy of Finney,” *Modern Reformation*, (January-February 1995): 6.

belief that the new birth was in any way a divine gift. He insisted that regeneration consists in the sinner changing his ultimate choice, intention, preference.... when mankind becomes truly religious, they are not enabled to put forth exertions which they were unable before to put forth. They only exert powers which they had before, in a different way, and use them for the glory of God.<sup>69</sup>

When such a theology is applied to revival, the revivalist may use any means necessary to bring the church to a state of revival. Finney himself said of revival:

“A revival is not a miracle, nor dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means — as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means.”<sup>70</sup>

Nettleton’s stance against the New Haven Theology eventually led to the break in his relationship with Lyman Beecher. Beecher felt that the issue of theology was indeed the primary one that caused Nettleton to oppose both Finney and Taylor:

“He wanted the battle to go on. He was one of those that never can give up their own will. He had the notion that the New Haven brethren were currying favor with Finney.... That was the origin of all his bitterness against Taylor.”<sup>71</sup>

The letters of Nettleton indicate no such bitterness on his part toward Taylor. Indeed, he remained Taylor’s friend until his death. In a letter to Taylor in the last year of his life, Nettleton mentioned the doctrinal debate and assured Taylor that, although they had disagreed for many years, their personal friendship had not been affected:

I need not tell you that I love you. You know that I have ever loved you.... I impeach not your motives. I judge not your heart. I would cherish the hope that your own religious experience is at variance with some of the things which you have published — I say this with the kindest of feelings, and with eternity in view. Receive it as my dying testimony, and as an expression of my sincere love. Farewell, my brother. We shall soon meet at the judgement seat of Christ. God grant that we may meet in heaven.<sup>72</sup>

In his final years, Nettleton gave his time and energy to the students of the Theological Seminary of Connecticut in Hartford founded in response to the continued teaching of the New Haven Theology at Yale. Bennett Tyler became president, but Nettleton was the “father confessor to the campus” according to George Briney.<sup>73</sup> Evangelism was his field, and the preaching of doctrines “eminently useful in winning souls” formed the theme of most of his lectures.<sup>74</sup>

Nettleton became seriously ill in 1841 with what was diagnosed as gall-stones. Two surgeries proved unsuccessful, and Nettleton continued to weaken. He died the morning of May 16, 1844. He left behind a considerable estate, mostly from income from the sale of his hymnal. Even his will indicated a man sold out to the cause of Christ: He willed small portions to his brother and sister and some friends; the balance he willed to the Seminary and to the American Board for Foreign Missions, the institutions “which represented the causes closest to his heart.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 8.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>71</sup> Murray, *Revivalism*, 266-67.

<sup>72</sup> Briney, 215-16.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>74</sup> Thornbury, 216-19.

<sup>75</sup> Briney, 217.

## Conclusions

One cannot overestimate the importance of the ministry of Asahel Nettleton. Francis Wayland, founder of Brown University, said of Nettleton, “I suppose no minister of his time was the means of so many conversions.”<sup>76</sup> Most surprising to modern readers is the discovery that Nettleton’s tremendous effectiveness occurred without any of the methods that modern evangelicals think are so essential in evangelism. For example, in all his ministry, thousands came to a solid, lasting faith in Christ though Nettleton never once gave an “altar call.” In fact, one of the greatest struggles in Nettleton’s life occurred as he led the stand against such “new measures” employed by Charles Finney.

Without a doubt, Finney’s methods were effective in attracting large crowds and in securing large numbers of “professions.” But they involved many questionable aspects that Nettleton and other ministers could not accept. In one of his letters, Nettleton wrote of his great concern for future generations. Asahel recognized that the greatest danger might not be to his generation but to succeeding ones who would assume that all revivals were dependent upon such measures:

If the evil be not soon prevented, a generation will arise, inheriting all the obliquities of their leaders, not knowing that a revival ever did or can exist without all those evils. And these evils are destined to be propagated from generation to generation, waxing worse and worse.<sup>77</sup>

Indeed, the fears of Nettleton have come to pass. Not only is Nettleton forgotten,<sup>78</sup> the idea of revival apart from certain methods has also passed from memory. Nettleton has been forgotten because this present generation, like the followers of Finney, has become obsessed with results and statistics to the neglect of theology. Finney himself said,

The success of any measure designed to promote a revival of religion, demonstrates its wisdom.... When the blessing evidently follows the introduction of the *measure itself*, the proof is unanswerable, that the measure is wise. It is profane to say that such a measure will do more harm than good.<sup>79</sup>

Every new church growth idea that works is deemed to be of God. “After all the results speak for themselves,” most argue. Nettleton refused to accept any new measure simply on the basis of effectiveness. Likewise, he knew that allowing any method to go untested by the truth of Scripture would ultimately lead to the ruin and discredit of any revival:

And all of those ministers who do not discriminate between true and false zeal, true and false affection, in their preaching and conversation, and make that difference, and hold it up to the view of the world, if possible as clear as the sun, heartily approving of one, and as heartily and publicly condemning the other, will turn out to be the greatest traitors to the cause of revivals.<sup>80</sup>

Nettleton’s ministry also teaches about the importance of preaching in revival. Few men have ever preached with the power and effectiveness of Nettleton. Francis Wayland said he “would sway an audience as the trees of the forest are moved.”<sup>81</sup> Thornbury summarized Nettleton’s preaching:

In the accounts and descriptions of the great revivals in which Nettleton laboured, one thing comes across very powerfully, and that is that he was able to bring home the awesome realities of the eternal world home to the souls of men. When he talked about the heinousness of sin,

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<sup>76</sup> Thornbury, 94.

<sup>77</sup> Tyler and Bonar, 348.

<sup>78</sup> Even his picture, once prominent at the Seminary, now sits abandoned in an attic. According to Thornbury, “The fate of his picture seems almost symbolic of what has happened to his testimony in America.” Thornbury, 229.

<sup>79</sup> Quoted in MacArthur, 233. Emphasis in original.

<sup>80</sup> Tyler and Bonar, 363.

<sup>81</sup> Thornbury, 55.

they felt its sting. When he portrayed the sufferings of Christ, they felt the trauma of Calvary. When he proclaimed the holy character of God, they trembled at the vision. When he thundered forth the judgements of hell, men were moved to escape that place.<sup>82</sup>

While most modern preaching seeks to avoid doctrinal topics, Nettleton, like Whitefield and Edwards before him, preached the great doctrines of the faith. One pastor in East Granby, Connecticut described his preaching during the revival in his congregation:

Doctrinal sermons were frequent; but these had a practical turn. They were eminently scriptural and plain, and made men feel that *they* were the men addressed, and not their neighbors. He sometimes preached on the severer doctrines with great power, and apparent good effect.<sup>83</sup>

Nettleton's ministry reminds that all the great doctrines of the faith can be preached with great effect in awakening people to God.

The need for revival today is as great as it has ever been. But it is not just any kind of revival that is needed. The need is for a revival clearly based upon the work of the Holy Spirit rather than on the methods of man. Nettleton's ministry, when compared with that of Finney, shows that real revival was not always dependent upon certain "laws of revival" popularized by Finney. It came simply upon the faithful and fearless preaching of God's Word. Nettleton's ministry testifies to the power of God's Word in bringing sinners to faith. Most of all, it reminds all that revival, like conversion is truly a work of a sovereign God among His people.

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>83</sup> Tyler and Bonar, 80. Emphasis in original.