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*A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership*  
Volume 8 • Number 2 • SPRING 1999

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## ASAHEL NETTLETON'S CONFLICT WITH FINNEYISM

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*John F. Thornbury*

*H*alf the people of God hardly know their head from their heels at this time. They are gaping after wonders . . . . We are only at the beginning of an era of mingled unbelief and fanaticism.

—C. H. SPURGEON

*A* more copious out-pouring of the Spirit is wanted to set all things in order. Errors in doctrine, licentiousness in conduct, deadness and formality in profession, will not stand before the strong influences of the Spirit. O that there should appear an evident difference between His work and everything human, and between those ordinances in and through which He works, and those ordinances wherein He hides His face and leaves men to themselves.

—JOHN ELIAS

*T*he two most widely known evangelists of the first half of the nineteenth century in the United States were Asahel Nettleton (1783-1844) and Charles G. Finney (1792-1875). In some ways these two men were very similar. Both were powerful public speakers. Both were endowed with good voices and piercing eyes, and could hold audiences spellbound when absorbed in the fervor of preaching. Both saw great religious upheavals as a direct result of their preaching, and in each case thousands made professions of faith.

But here the comparison ends. Nettleton and Finney represent two entirely different forces in American religion, and were participants in a division that has not been healed to this day. These two men had vastly different views on how evangelism and revivals should be conducted, and they personally debated various issues in head-to-head encounters, written discussions, and through articles written in contemporary religious magazines.

The year of 1997 marked the 170th anniversary of an epochal conference held at New Lebanon, New York, where these two men and their coadjutors confronted each other in what has proved to be a watershed for American evangelism.

There is a stream in the Canadian Rockies known as Kicking Horse Creek, which flows out of the mountains and divides at a certain point. The water flowing west ends

up in the Pacific Ocean, and the water flowing east winds its course toward the Atlantic. A great division took place in American evangelism in the third decade of the nineteenth century and since then the streams have flowed farther and farther apart. In this article I shall attempt to give the background of this division.

### WHO WAS ASAHEL NETTLETON?

Asahel Nettleton's life encompassed an exceedingly eventful period in American church history. He was born near the beginning of a great spiritual revival known as the Second Great Awakening, and died just a few years after it was over. Technically, this designation is usually applied to the period between 1792 and 1808 when there was a tremendous surge of evangelical fervor in New England, Virginia, Tennessee, and Kentucky. But the afterglow of this brilliant light was seen one-third of the way through the nineteenth century. It was not until the 1830s that one could say that the Awakening was truly over.

Nettleton grew up on a farm and intended to follow that trade, but God had other plans for him. He was converted in his hometown of Killingworth, Connecticut, when the Awakening struck that little community in 1801. Shortly after his conversion he started making plans to go to college, but many difficulties presented themselves. His father died in an epidemic in 1802, and this delayed academic ambitions, as the burden of family support fell upon him, the oldest son. But through considerable sacrifice and determination he was able to enroll in the freshman class at Yale in 1805. During his four years at Yale he studied under Timothy Dwight, grandson of Jonathan Edwards. These were productive years.

Nettleton's ultimate goal, since shortly after his conversion, was to be a missionary. During his junior year at Yale he became acquainted with Samuel J. Mills, a student at

Andover Seminary, who was a member of the famous "Hay Stack Prayer Meeting" group, and had an important part in the genesis of the American missionary movement. No missionary opportunity opened up for Nettleton following his college years, so he began to do itinerate preaching in what he referred to as the "waste places" (i.e., communities where Congregational churches, which was Nettleton's denominational affiliation, were run down and usually without a pastor).

The first year of his preaching was relatively uneventful. While in a "waste place" in eastern Connecticut he had an opportunity to see the devastating results of "wild fire" revivalism, because it was in this vicinity that the notorious James Davenport had labored during the First Great Awakening. Davenport's vehement denunciation of other preachers, highly emotional style, and confidence in trances, visions, etc., gave him the reputation of being a fanatic. The church at Stonington, Connecticut, where Nettleton was in 1811, had split during Davenport's ministry there, with both factions now virtually extinct. This experience had the effect of making Nettleton extremely cautious in his evangelistic methods. It also served to convince him that evangelists should work in full cooperation with pastors.

In 1812, about the time the war between England and America was heating up, Nettleton went to western Connecticut to preach in the church of Bennet Tyler in South Britain. It was here that some of the powers of Nettleton as a preacher began to surface. Tyler sensed that he had more than ordinary gifts in winning souls. After spending a week in South Britain he went to southern New York, where revival broke out. A small struggling church was swelled with a flood of converts, and the community was profoundly changed as a result.

These successful ventures in 1812 launched Nettleton on his career as an evangelist and revivalist. For the next ten

years he pursued a vigorous schedule, preaching throughout Connecticut, southern Massachusetts, and eastern New York, with powerful awakenings attending his preaching at virtually every place. The spiritual transformations that took place under his ministry seem almost incredible, so much so that one is almost disposed to dismiss these reports as exaggerated were there not so many documented attestations to them from credible witnesses. *The Connecticut Evangelical Magazine* carried a running account of Nettleton's revivals, and Bennet Tyler, Nettleton's biographer, compiled a long list of letters from pastors who had benefited from Nettleton's visits in their communities. In these letters various details of the revivals are recorded. His ministry was highly prized among the Presbyterian and Congregational churches of New England. He also frequently visited his alma mater at New Haven, where some of his greatest awakenings occurred. When he was preaching at Union College in Schenectady, New York, a young tutor named Francis Wayland was greatly influenced by the revival on campus. Wayland later became president of Brown University.

Nettleton's preaching centered around the basic themes of the gospel. His sermons were highly intellectual and logical but also plain and biblical. He often preached on the holiness of God, the strictness of the law, the atonement of Christ, the horrors of hell and the glories of heaven. He powerfully stressed the imperative need for immediate repentance on the part of the sinner. He did not hesitate to preach the sovereignty of God in the salvation of sinners, even to the lost. In the midst of a revival, this type of ministry had a crushing effect upon those already under conviction for sin.

The revivals he witnessed were very powerful but as a rule void of much noise and outward excitement. He frowned upon emotional outbursts and would not allow

the fanatical manifestations, such as leaping, shouting, and rolling on the floor, which characterized the Western Revivals in the frontier communities.

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His methods were simple and scriptural. He relied on preaching at the regular services of churches, prayer meetings, personal visitation and counseling as tools of his evangelism. He often conducted "inquiry meetings" in which he addressed the unconverted alone and instructed them about the basics of salvation.

Nettleton was an informed and convinced Calvinist. He adopted the views of Jonathan Edwards almost without modification, particularly his distinction between moral and physical inability. He had great respect for Joseph Bellamy, whose works he constantly studied. He was influenced to some extent by Samuel Hopkins, though it is misleading to classify him as Hopkinsian.<sup>1</sup> On one point he was thoroughly in sympathy with Hopkins, namely that the unconverted should not be told to "use the means" but to

submit to God through repentance and faith. Hopkins believed that all the works of the unregenerate outside of Christ are wicked, and he thought that to tell the lost to "use the means" only makes hypocrites and false professors.

While preaching in southern Massachusetts in 1822 he contracted typhus and came very near to death. Although his life was spared, the disease left his body in a weakened condition. For the rest of his life he was constantly trying to preserve his health and energy, at which he was only partially successful. He often visited the Southland for his health, particularly the vicinity around Hampton-Sydney College in Virginia, where great revivals occurred under his preaching in 1828. He also visited England in 1832, but his evangelistic labors there did not have the tremendous results seen in America.

#### ASAHEL NETTLETON MEETS CHARLES G. FINNEY

Nettleton first heard of Charles G. Finney when he was preaching on Long Island, New York, at a place known as Jamaica. While here he began to receive reports about certain revivals and strange happenings in the vicinity of Oneida County, New York. An uproar was taking place there because of the introduction of what were being referred to as New Measures. Salient manifestations of these phenomena were a denunciatory style of preaching, irreverent attitudes in the pulpit, bringing women forward to preach and exhort in mixed assemblies, calling people by name from the pulpit (especially well-known sinners in the communities), and high-pressure methods of getting converts, such as urging people to rise up in their seats or come down to the altar in order to become Christians. These and other unorthodox and novel devices were met with stiff opposition on the part of some, but were gaining in popularity and threatened to carry all before them, or at least split some churches.

Nettleton had preached in the eastern sections of New

York and had many friends there. He recognized immediately the harmful tendencies of the New Measures and feared that the cause of revivalism would be hindered by them. Although he was at first reluctant to get involved, his friends persuaded him that the New Measures (which were exacting blind devotion) could not be stopped unless he came to their aid. In December 1826 he went to Albany, New York, to witness firsthand what was going on.

The New Measures were only outward symptoms of the doctrinal peculiarities of Finney. He was quite Pelagian in his theology and denied many of the truths which Nettleton had preached so forcefully, i.e., original sin, the imputed righteousness of Christ, and the special agency of the Holy Spirit in conversion. Finney had a totally humanistic approach to revivals, believing that they were the result of natural laws and could be promoted by human contrivances such as the New Measures. He believed and preached that revivals were not miracles sent by God but that they could be attained by creating an excitement in the community. If sensational methods were necessary to create such an excitement, then sensational methods were used. Such notions were very repugnant to Asahel Nettleton.

When Nettleton went to Albany he did not desire to meet with Finney, but rather wanted to talk to the pastors. He soon became convinced that the New Measures type of revivalism was as bad as he had heard, if not worse, and that something should be done to stop it. He believed that the only way for the fanatical revivalism to be curbed was to convince the pastors of their harmful character, so he did not seek out the evangelists who were promoting it.

Through the influence of a pastor, John Frost, however, Nettleton had two personal meetings with Finney at the beginning of 1827. Exactly what went on in the meetings is shrouded in mystery. Nettleton's biographer chose merely to mention them without much elaboration.<sup>2</sup> Finney dis-

cusses the interviews in his autobiography, written some forty years later, and his account seems to cast Nettleton in a bad light. He claims that he had an almost reverential admiration for Nettleton, based on the reports he had received about him, and wanted to "sit at his feet." "At that time my confidence in him was so great that I think he could have led me, almost or quite, at his discretion."<sup>3</sup>

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*How much stock can we place in the account of Finney? It is now a well-known fact that some of the assertions of his autobiography are historically inaccurate. In fact, in the introduction Finney admits that some of the events he attempts to chronicle were at such a distance behind him that he might inadvertently be incorrect.*



According to Finney, Nettleton seemed cool and reserved, but did not bring up any controversial problems. At the second encounter, on a day in which Nettleton was scheduled to preach at an evening meeting. Finney suggested that he accompany Nettleton to the meeting. But, according to Finney's account, Nettleton said in effect that he did not want to be seen with him. The whole impression given here is of a young and pliable preacher needing counsel and help from an old champion of the cross, but getting a brush-off.

How much stock can we place in the account of Finney? It is now a well-known fact that some of the assertions of his autobiography are historically inaccurate. In fact, in the introduction Finney admits that some of the events he attempts to chronicle were at such a distance behind him that he might inadvertently be incorrect. It is hard to believe, however, that such an important conference would have been forgotten by Finney. These meetings between Finney and Nettleton, at a critical moment in the history of American evangelism, are of such importance that I determined to discover, if possible, through personal research exactly what did go on.

After reading the little book, *Letters on the New Measures*, issued by Nettleton and Lyman Beecher in 1828, and other letters that Nettleton wrote soon after his conferences with Finney, I became convinced that Finney's account is correct to this extent: Nettleton did not, in fact, try to debate with Finney privately about the New Measures or make them a major point of discussion. I also do not find it hard to believe, given the total situation at the time, that Nettleton was cool and reserved toward the younger preacher. There is an adequate explanation for this, however.

As far as his reserve and his desire not to appear in public with Finney, it reflected Nettleton's alarm at what was going on in the churches as a result of Finney's methods. But there is something even more significant. Many of the younger evangelists who were associated with Finney were claiming that Nettleton supported them. In fact even before Nettleton left Jamaica he had received reports that the New Measures people were telling everyone that Nettleton was on their side. Considering this fact, it is not surprising that he did not want to walk into a public meeting arm-in-arm with Finney.

But why did he not try to change Finney in their private encounters? The answer seems to lie in Nettleton's person-

ality and his own assessment of Finney. This conclusion comes out clearly in a letter that Nettleton wrote to S. C. Aiken, who was befriending Finney, a letter included in the booklet mentioned above. Here are Nettleton's words, written shortly after his interviews with Finney:

I have long been wishing to correct some of his peculiarities, that I might invite him into my own field and introduce him to my friends. Aside from feeble health, one consideration only has prevented me from making the attempt. Some of his particular friends are urging him on to the very things which I wish him to drop. I fear that their flattering representations will overrule all that I can say. And having dropped these peculiarities his labors for awhile might be less successful; and then he would resort again to the same experiment.<sup>4</sup>

What this statement amounts to is this: Nettleton felt that it would be useless for him to try to mold Finney as long as Finney was getting the kind of support from pastors he was receiving at the time. No doubt Nettleton discerned Finney to be very independent, a quality well known to those who had tried to influence him. George Hugh Birney stated correctly, in a doctoral thesis, that "Finney was not the sort of man to be led by anyone."<sup>5</sup> This certainly does not square with Finney's claim that he was ready to be led in any direction by Nettleton. Whether the older evangelist was wise in not dealing directly with Finney about the problems in the churches is a moot question. One thing is certain: Nettleton was weighing Finney and the New Measures movement very carefully, and he intended to deal with them in the way he thought most effective.

In just a few days Nettleton did state very clearly what he thought of the New Measures in a letter to S. C. Aiken, a friend and supporter of Finney who pastored a church in

Utica, New York. This letter, which takes up a considerable portion of the *Letters on New Measures*, was the most famous of Nettleton's life. Basically he weighs the methods and measures of Finney in the light of Scripture, common sense, and his own long experience as an evangelist. He concludes that the revivals in New York were simply fire out of control. The letter is not strident in tone, nor does it seek to impugn the motives of the western revivalists, but it does come down hard on the irregular, nearly fanatical, character of the new evangelism.

The communication to Aiken was intended as a sort of circular letter to the whole Finneyite camp. It was passed around quickly among Finney's supporters, and they reacted with considerable heat. A corrective from so prestigious a source could not be ignored. Finney immediately jumped to his own defense. He preached a sermon in the church of a minister known as Nathan Beman. From his text, Amos 3:3, he titled the sermon "How Can Two Walk Together Except They Be Agreed?" In this sermon he heaps scorn on his opponents. He accuses them of having dead and "frosty" hearts and of not being right with God, thus accounting for their opposition to the new revivalism.

Finney's sermon was published in Philadelphia in March 1827 and attracted much interest. Nettleton countered with an article in *The New York Observer* in which he answered some of Finney's charges that his opponents were against revivals. In this letter Nettleton went somewhat further than in the previous one and exposes what he regarded as ignorance on the part of Finney on some of the basic essentials of true religion. He accused him of exalting self-righteousness, pride, and false zeal as opposed to the meekness and humility which are enjoined in the New Testament. Finney's sermon and Nettleton's article brought the New Measures problem to the attention of the entire eastern seaboard.

### NEW LEBANON CONVENTION

As time went on Nettleton and Finney emerged as opposite poles in the field of evangelism, each attracting others to themselves. To some extent the division was geographical. Most of the eastern men, who held forth on the fields where Nettleton's revivals had occurred, sided with him. Many of the western pastors, far removed from the intellectual strongholds of Calvinism, moved into Finney's orbit. Among those sympathizing with Nettleton at this time was Lyman Beecher, who sought to come to his aid.

When Beecher sided with Nettleton, some of the western men decided that something should be done to resolve the dispute, or at least to bring the parties to a better understanding. Through a conference between Nathan Beman, who was a Finneyite, and Beecher, a convention was arranged at which the two groups were to come together to discuss the issues that divided them. It was to be a meeting of minds for both camps. The convention was set for July 18, 1827, at New Lebanon, New York. Present at this gathering were such men as Beecher, Beman, Aiken, Justin Edwards of Andover, William R. Weeks, one of the original opponents of Finney from Oneida County, and Heman Humphrey, the president of Amherst University, who was chosen to be the moderator. Nettleton and Finney were also there.

For more than a week they debated such matters as the proper place of women in the church, the propriety of calling the unsaved by name in public prayer, how revivals were to be conducted, the alleged boisterousness and irreverence of the New Measures men in the pulpit, and other matters. The debate accomplished little. It did not settle anything, and at the end the camps were no closer together. Toward the end of the conference, Nettleton read a lengthy paper on his views, and in it he stated that he and the New England men were not convinced that Finney and his

group were following scriptural laws in their methods of revivalism.

### WHY WAS THE CONVENTION A FAILURE?

Looking at this debate in hindsight we can now see that the issues before the convention were superficial. The New Measures were only outward manifestations of more profound deviations, the skin blisters caused by poison in the bloodstream. Never in the entire conference did Finney's Pelagian tendencies come under review. The fact is that some, even in Nettleton's own camp at the New Lebanon conference, were much closer to Finney in their theology than they were to Nettleton. The very heresies which Finney was preaching were now springing up in Nettleton's own back yard. At Yale University, Nathaniel W. Taylor was just beginning to openly propound his "new divinity," which was simply a more sophisticated version of Finneyism. Ironically, Lyman Beecher was to become a complete convert to this new theology.

Taylor, and others on the Yale faculty, advocated the notion that there is no sin in the human personality except the overt sin which comes by deliberate choices of the mind. In other words, man does not have a perverted nature, original at birth. He also rejected imputed sin in any form, denying an organic or legal connection between Adam and the human race. He attributed to the will of man a total sovereignty and believed that it could not be influenced by any external power, including that of God. In 1828 Taylor preached a sermon, titled *Concio ad Clerum*, at a Yale commencement in which he formally defended his views. Although he claimed that he was not deviating from John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards or the Westminster divines, the difference between his view and theirs was only too obvious to orthodox Calvinists.

Taylor's sermon brought the debate to the real ground

which was at stake: orthodox theology. The fact that Yale had gone into error produced a grave situation in the Calvinist camp. Suddenly men such as Tyler, Nettleton, Caleb Tenney, Joseph Harvey, and hundreds of pastors who had matriculated at Yale found themselves at odds with their alma mater. A dark cloud had arisen over the land which had been visited with such powerful revivals, and a fierce conflict now seemed inevitable.

The conflict burst forth in the latter part of the 1820s and 1830s. The peace of the churches was shattered with pamphlets, books, and articles in various magazines which carried on debates on the issues of original sin, imputation, the sovereignty of God and other matters. Taylor's theological position, known as New Haven Theology, was at best Arminianism, and at worst crass Pelagianism. The opposing group had men fully equal to the task of defending the traditional faith. Orthodox Calvinists, both at Princeton and Andover Seminary, refuted Taylor and showed where he had specifically deviated from Scripture. Leonard Woods at Andover wrote a series of letters to Taylor in which he accused him of virtually making man his own savior by his views on the will.

Nettleton took part in this controversy in a limited way, although his health was too poor for him to devote much time or energy to it. He did have a major part, however, in starting a school which was to be a new base for the older views on theology and revivalism. It was organized in 1832 and was named The Theological Institute of Connecticut.<sup>6</sup> Bennet Tyler, Nettleton's biographer and long-time friend, was the first president and teacher of theology. Nettleton was never an official faculty member, but he eventually moved to East Windsor, Connecticut, the site of the school, and often lectured to the students there on subjects of practical divinity, especially revivalism.

The Taylor-Finney type of theology has to some extent

been dominant in American evangelism since the crucial years during which they arose. For example, the use of the anxious seat, or pressuring people to move their bodies in a public meeting to secure the salvation of their souls, grew out of the Pelagian theology these men advocated. If man has the power to convert himself, as Finney asserted, then Christian workers are encouraged to get converts in the quickest and easiest way possible. Shifting the body from one place to another is a convenient way of translating man's decision into action. This type of method has been the hallmark of many famous evangelists in America since the days of Finney.

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With the rise of Finneyism came a decline in the older methods of Nettleton and Whitefield, that of preaching man's responsibility but also leaning on the power of a sovereign God to actually convert people. Nettleton predicted that the new type of evangelism would lead to disastrous results, and the events of history have vindicated his forecasts. In fact, revivalism as known during the two great awakenings began to disappear in the 1830s, and even Finney had to admit that most of the professors of faith which sprang up in the 1830s did not act like real Christians. Finney said in a lecture which was published in *The*

*New York Evangelist* that of all the converts from the revivals of the preceding ten years "the great body of them are a disgrace to religion. Of what use would it be to have a thousand members added to the Church to be just such as are now in it."<sup>7</sup> Nine years prior to this statement of Finney, Asahel Nettleton had told the New Lebanon Convention that such would be the results of a wrong approach to revivalism.

Thus Asahel Nettleton proved to be wise beyond his time. This man, although quite a celebrity in his own day, is relatively unknown to modern evangelicals. History has exalted Charles G. Finney as the "Father of Modern Evangelism," and has buried Nettleton in the graveyard of forgotten warriors. This defect is in the process of being corrected.<sup>8</sup>

Asahel Nettleton was a man with faults and frailties like everyone else, but he was used mightily of God in evangelizing and defending the true faith. In some respects his ministry is a manual on how to carry on evangelism in a scriptural way with fervor, zeal, and love, without compromise. It would surely be a salutary contribution to the contemporary scene if more evangelicals rediscovered this great itinerant American preacher, Asahel Nettleton.

#### Author

Dr. John F. Thornbury is pastor of Winfield Baptist Church, Winfield, Pennsylvania, and has made several previous contributions to *Reformation & Revival Journal*. He is the author of several books, including *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening*, *Help Us to Pray*, and *David Brainerd: Pioneer Missionary to the American Indians*.

#### Notes

1. The leading notions peculiar to Hopkinsianism can be learned by con-

sulting any standard theological encyclopedia. Hopkins himself was accused of teaching that God is the author of sin. Actually he did not go much beyond standard Reformed views on this question, though he used somewhat stronger language in expressing himself. He also taught a "love of indifference" view which in essence was that the godly are willing to be damned if the glory of God required it. There is no evidence that Nettleton believed this.

2. Bennet Tyler makes the following remarks on this matter in *Memoir of the Life and Character of Asahel Nettleton* (Hartford, 1844), 247: "He had two interviews with Mr. Finney, hoping that by a free consultation, their views might be brought to harmonize, so far at least, that they might co-operate in promoting the interests of Christ's kingdom. But in this he was painfully disappointed."
3. Finney, *Memoirs* (New York, 1876), 202.
4. *Letters of the Rev. Dr. Beecher and Rev. Mr. Nettleton on The New Measures in Conducting Revivals of Religion* (New York, 1828), 19.
5. George Hugh Birney, *The Life and Labors of Asahel Nettleton* (unpublished doctoral thesis submitted to Hartford Seminary, 1943), 125.
6. This school was moved to Hartford in 1865 and renamed The Hartford Theological Seminary. It continued to serve as a training school for ministers until 1972 when it was finally closed.
7. Cited by William G. McLoughlin in *Modern Revivalism, Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York, 1959), 147.
8. Cf. Bennet Tyler and Andrew Bonar, *The Life and Labours of Asahel Nettleton* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975 reprint), and John F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1977). For a shorter introduction to Nettleton's life see John H. Armstrong, *Five Great Evangelists* (Inverness, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 1997). For an interaction with the effect of Finneyism on modern revival and evangelism see John H. Armstrong, *When God Moves: Preparing for True Revival* (Harvest House: Eugene, Oregon, 1998).