

# Nettleton and Finney

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If I had to select a decade which is one of the most instructive that we could consider in church history, then I would choose the 1830s. That period saw the rise of the Oxford Movement, with John Henry Newman, Pusey and Keble. Then there was the beginning of the Plymouth Brethren with J N Darby as the founder. But equally interesting, if we turn to the United States of America we find that a very significant controversy developed there in the 1830s. I refer to what is known as the **New Measures** controversy which emerged in 1831 or 1832 and involved two great leaders, Asahel Nettleton and Charles Finney.

### **Charles Finney**

Now Charles Grandison Finney has been called the 'Father of Modern Evangelism' and there can be no doubt that he has had a tremendous influence upon evangelicalism in the United States and also in this land. In many ways his descendants are D L Moody, Billy Sunday, R A Torrey and Dr Billy Graham.

Charles Finney was born in the state of Connecticut in 1792. He was not born into a Christian family nor did he have a Christian upbringing. He was trained to be a lawyer. He had a very sharp, precise and analytical mind. Indeed, his approach to Christian things was distinctly sceptical. There was almost a proverb in the town where he lived that if you could convert Finney then you had a revival on your hands! However, his studies in the law brought him into contact with mention of the law of Moses and in this remarkable way he got hold of a Bible and began to read the law of Moses and to study the whole of the Bible. His fiancée was praying for him and that is how he became a Christian. But it is interesting to note that when he was training as a lawyer he himself says that he was almost as 'ignorant of true religion as a heathen'. He was converted in 1821, when he was 29 years of age. Within two years he abandoned his legal career and began to itinerate as a preaching evangelist.

### **Theology**

On a superficial level he adopted some very strange views. For instance, he held that for someone to drink tea or coffee was a sin. He regarded the wearing of ribbons as sin. Attending parties was a sin. He had a distinctly legalistic approach to many things. He even said that if someone leaves a bookmark in their Bible that simply shows that they are reading it as a perfunctory duty, their heart is not in it. In many ways he was himself a strange man, a man of striking appearance, of great charisma, of poise and assurance.

In matters of theology he distinctly repudiated Calvinism and contended that one of his main aims in life was to wage war on the strongholds of Calvinism in

his day. But he was not really an Arminian either, he was in fact a nineteenth century Pelagian. That is to say, he had a view of fallen man that was highly optimistic, which is the very opposite of the view of biblical writers. The Bible declares men to be sinners in the sight of God, it teaches total depravity, that man is fallen in every area of his life and being. He dismissed the Westminster Confession as being 'contrary to reason', and with it the great Calvinistic doctrines we find there.

Finney was a strong believer in human ability in the realm of spiritual things, in the sight of God. Where the emphasis of the Bible is that men cannot do those things which God requires of them, the view of Charles Finney was that if God commands men to do something, they must be able to do that thing. If I 'ought' to do something, then I 'can' do it. This is the way he argued.

Not only was he a strong believer in human ability he was also a strong believer in human reason, man's rational faculties. These two things often go together. It determined Finney's approach to theology altogether. He would consider a particular doctrine, let us say the imputation of Adam's sin. He would ask himself, does this accord with human reason? Is this acceptable to man's mind, to his intellect? If it is not, then he would dismiss it. He would conclude

that this is not what the Bible teaches. The great Charles Hodge regarded Charles Finney's faith as a philosophy, as the rational principle at work. It is man's intellect governing what he believes instead of humbly accepting the revelation which God has given to us and believing that. What man's mind is able to work out determines what he is able to accept and believe.

He did not hold to man's total depravity, nor that the sin of Adam is imputed or reckoned to the account of the whole human race. Then the atonement as a satisfaction made for sins and the inward, efficacious work of the Holy Spirit regenerating the sinner in a way which the unaided individual cannot, these too were rejected as 'contrary to reason' by Finney.

His view of sin is important. Sin, he said, lies in the actions of men. It does not lie in their constitution, nor in their nature nor their dispositions. That is why we say that he rejected total depravity. Sin does not begin in the heart but in the will. It is altogether a diluted doctrine of sin. And it is not the doctrine of the Bible. His view of sin was to have profound repercussions in terms of his actual practice, as we shall see.

Finney did not believe that children were born into the world with an inherited, depraved and corrupt nature. As far as he was concerned, they were neutral in respect of spiritual things. They had no moral nature until they actually sinned. The emphasis is not upon the heart and the nature but rather upon man's deliberate, wilful actions in the sight of God.

It is to be expected that what he believed about regeneration coheres with his whole system. 'Regeneration', he wrote, 'consists in the sinner changing his ultimate choice, intention, preference.'<sup>1</sup> The Bible teaches that men are impotent, dead in their sins, utterly helpless to effect their own spiritual change. But for Finney the sinner can change his spiritual choice without the

efficacious work of the Holy Spirit. A diluted doctrine of sin leads to a false view of regeneration.

So what we have in Finney is a man-centred theology. He saw man as being at the centre of the universe. Man, not God. Now I would contend that the spirit of the age in the 1830s, especially in America, was a significant factor in this situation. There was an emphasis on democratic principles and on man expressing his own will by exercising his vote. The sovereignty of man is an important concept in a democracy and this affected the way in which Finney thought. Men electing to choose God rather than God electing to choose men. This was the way in which men were thinking and Charles Finney was influenced by that climate of thought.

## **Methods**

In the late 1920s Finney began to introduce what became known as the 'New Measures'. The principle of novelty was important to him. 'Without new methods it is impossible that the church should succeed in gaining the attention of the world to the subject of religion.'<sup>2</sup> In other words, if we are going to interest men outside we must introduce novelties and excitement, we must startle them in some way.

First of all, he and his followers would use what was in fact coarse or even abusive language. It may seem astonishing but they were not afraid to denounce in the strongest terms, even by name, their opponents or those who resisted their particular views. They would pray for people by name and give them a 'dressing down' by name in the presence of the living God. There is an interesting, and true story which shows how this backfired somewhat on Finney in later years. He had become the president of Oberlin College and it was his practice to pray in public for each member of the faculty by name and occasionally he resorted to criticism of them in prayer. On this particular occasion he did just that. But after he had prayed a younger member of the faculty asked if he too might pray and Finney granted him permission. So he prayed and mentioned Finney by name and prayed specifically that the Lord would give him a spirit of greater meekness and charity. After this, we find, Finney's prayers for others by name were somewhat shorter. The medicine had its effect!

**By far the most important** of these New Measures was the introduction of what was known as the 'anxious seat'. Basically it was a pew or bench at the front of the church and at the end of his evangelistic preaching he would appeal to sinners to come forward publicly and sit in the anxious seat. They would make this open, public stand. Now I want to emphasise that this had been completely unknown in the Great Awakening of the previous century. You will be well aware that under Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield and the Tennents thousands were converted but there was no invitation system, no appeals to come forward. Men, women and young people, they were saved where they were. Hearing the word they were convicted of their sin. They

would go home and go to their closets and in prayer they would find the Saviour. The anxious seat was a novelty.

So why did Finney introduce it? To use his own words, he wanted to 'bring sinners to a stand'. 'Preach to him ... but bring him to the test, call on him to do one thing, to take one step that shall identify him with the people of God. Say to him, there is the anxious seat, if he is not willing to do so small a thing as that, then he is not willing to do anything.'<sup>3</sup> This is the way Finney reasoned. Sinners should be preached to but they should also be constrained publicly to confess the Saviour and openly to acknowledge him there at the front of the church.

### **Decisionism**

The reason why the New Measures controversy is so important for us today is because it is the origin of decisionism. This has become so popular, so much part and parcel of the modern evangelical scene, that we tend to forget that it is only about 150 years old. In decisionism the emphasis is on man's will. Tremendous pressure is put upon him to affect his will rather than seeking a change of his heart. The biblical order is that the word of God must appeal to the mind and then through the mind it must reach the heart and then through the heart it must reach the will. But Finney, and his followers in later generations, tended to by-pass the mind and the heart and to concentrate upon the will, pressurising men to commit themselves publicly by coming forward and sitting in the anxious seat.

When these measures were first introduced the best men in America were strongly critical of them on theological grounds. They saw a double danger in this approach. Those that come to the front are led to believe that they are now 'born again'. And they may be, or they may be deluded in this assumption. Those who **do not** come to the front are led to believe that they have rebelled against God, Finney put it as strongly as that. There is here the danger of a double delusion. Those who come forward and those who do not come forward are both liable to be deluded about their true spiritual condition. In 1832 William Sprague published his 'Lectures on Revival'. At the back of that excellent book there is a series of letters written by some of the most eminent ministers in New England around the years 1831-2.

In many ways it is one of the best features of the book. They are responding to the New Measures and make it very clear that they regarded the anxious seat as a dangerous innovation. They were not contending that the Lord cannot use this. But they did draw attention to its inherent dangers. What is also significant is what Finney himself actually said in later years concerning those that had flocked forward to the anxious seat, 'The great body of them are a disgrace to religion.'<sup>4</sup> This was his own verdict and it was the very charge the critics of these measures had levelled against them in the first place.

It was not only his theological opponents who were disappointed with the apparent fruits of his evangelism. James Boyle was a friend and fellow-labourer of Finney and his criticism is of particular interest. This is what he wrote to Finney, not years afterwards but just three months after he had left,

'I have re-visited many of these fields (where we laboured) and groaned in spirit to see the sad, frigid, casual and contentious state into which the churches had fallen.'<sup>5</sup>

Robert Louis Dabney, one of America's greatest theologians, was highly critical of the system. In later years he called it, 'the grand peril and curse of American Protestantism'.<sup>6</sup> Because it involved a 'criminal recklessness'<sup>7</sup> he called it 'a spurious revivalism'.<sup>8</sup>

## **Revival**

In 1835 Finney published his own '**Lectures on Revival**'. Some 12,000 copies sold within a few months, something quite astonishing. But what Finney had to say was really very dangerous. 'Religion is the work of man.'<sup>9</sup> 'A revival is not a miracle.'<sup>10</sup> 'A revival is the result of the right use of the appropriate means.'<sup>11</sup> Notice what he is expressing here. Provided you use the right methods then you will have a revival. It is a mechanical view of revival and there have been many who have sought to follow Finney's advice. They have used the means and adopted the methods but they have not found that the revival came. 'One of Finney's cardinal errors', said Dr Lloyd-Jones, 'was to confuse an evangelistic campaign and a revival, and to forget that the latter is something that is always given in the sovereignty of God.'<sup>12</sup>

Finney's position is a far cry from that of the great man of God, Jonathan Edwards. He said that revival is 'an outpouring of the Spirit of God' which involves 'remarkable effusions at special seasons of mercy', when God sovereignly intervenes, comes down and blesses his people. It was W G McGloughlin who contrasted Edwards and Finney in these terms: 'One saw God as the centre of the universe, the other saw man. One believed that revivals were "prayed down", the other that they were "worked up".'<sup>13</sup>

## **Asahel Nettleton**

It is Edwards who is our link with Asahel Nettleton. Nettleton was a spiritual grandchild of the towering intellect and spirituality of Jonathan Edwards. He was born in 1783. As a young man he was decent, upright and moral. He had been baptised as a child and had learned the Ten Commandments. He knew his catechism, but he was not converted. He was virtuous but was without God, as many people are. He was destined to become a farmer so far as his parents were concerned and as a young man this was his own intention.

One evening he was out in the fields when he saw the sun setting over the horizon. It reminded him that one day his own life would set and fade into the darkness of another world. This began to awaken him and he experienced a number of such occasions when he was reminded of death and God and eternity. He was converted in 1801 at the age of 18, after having been in the 'Slough of Despond' for many months. He had known the distress of spiritual anxiety and had come through the 'pangs of the new birth'. This experience was to have a profound effect upon his own ministry because it gave him a knowledge of the human heart which was invaluable to him in later years.

Having become a Christian he now began to think about his future. Should he become a farmer? He asked himself, 'What shall I wish I had done thousands and millions of years hence?'<sup>14</sup> Now his eye was upon eternity. He knew he was accountable to God. 'If I might be the means of saving one soul, I should prefer it to all the riches and honours of this world.'<sup>15</sup> His heart was set upon spiritual things. He consecrated himself to the living God and was to become one of the greatest preachers America has ever seen. He decided initially he would devote himself to the cause of foreign missions. At an early age he and a friend made a solemn covenant to avoid 'all entangling alliances', by which they meant marriage, 'and to hold themselves in readiness to go to the heathen whenever God in his providence should prepare the way.'<sup>16</sup> Asahel Nettleton never did marry. He felt it would keep him from serving God as he would like to.

In 1805 Nettleton went to Yale College and stayed four years. At that time the president of the college was Timothy Dwight, the grandson of Jonathan Edwards. Dwight published a volume of his theological sermons which went through some forty editions. He was an eminent man even in his own day. When he first went to Yale, ten years before Nettleton arrived, conditions there were deplorable. He found that, 'Wines and liquors were kept in many rooms; intemperance, profanity, gambling and licentiousness were common'.<sup>17</sup> Dwight dealt with the situation by the preaching of the Word of God and some of this theological sermons can still be read today. By this means the situation dramatically improved and was entirely different by the time Nettleton came to Yale.

## **Preaching**

Dwight's opinion of Nettleton was that, 'He will make one of the most useful men this country has ever seen'.<sup>18</sup> And he was proved to be right. Nettleton's theology was Calvinistic to the very core. He believed in the total depravity of man, in the necessity of regeneration, in justification through Christ alone and in the sovereignty of God in salvation. In fact, he believed the things that Finney did not believe.

In 1811 Asahel Nettleton was licensed to preach. He was by now 28. He never settled in one particular place and became an itinerant evangelist. In the first year of his ministry nothing particularly startling occurred. But after that first year, whilst preaching in the church of his life-long friend Bennett Tyler revival began to set in. Wonderful things began to occur and this set the pattern for the ministry which God had for him in the future. Generally speaking, Nettleton restricted himself to New England and to run-down churches which needed building up, what he called the 'waste places'. He would remain in such an area for three or four months. Being unmarried he could easily do this. When he came to a particular place he would analyse the situation and try to see what the need was. He would then prescribe the remedy. Knowing what points needed to be made, he would then minister the Word of God over the period of his stay.

This is how his biographer, John F Thornbury, describes what Nettleton and his preaching must have been like:

‘Slowly and deliberately the preacher steps behind the pulpit. A glow is upon his face as if he, like Moses of old, had been in higher regions talking with his God. He begins to speak in a slow conversational tone, but there is such earnestness and sincerity in his manner that you dare not miss a word. He keeps your eyes glued upon him.

As his message unfolds, he seems to be touched by a fire from the heavenly altar. The theme is noble and vital. It centres about the great realities of God. He talks of the holiness of the Supreme Being, the awful guilt of sinners and the way of salvation through Christ. He pleads with sinners to submit to God with a pathos you’ve never heard before. He speaks to you as though he knew your very thoughts and tells the whole crowd exactly how you feel. The words that pour from the pulpit pierce your heart like a shot from an arrow and stay there, burning inside you. You look around and others are also touched. Some are weeping, others are quietly praying that God will take them up into his arms of love.’<sup>19</sup>

One remarkable feature of his preaching was that it was very searching. It was as if he knew the hearts and minds of men and could read their thoughts. Men felt as if God were speaking to them personally, as if Nettleton were a mind-reader who already knew their sins. There is also in his preaching a great emphasis upon submission. Sinners needed to submit to God and their submission must be immediate and unconditional. There was an urgency about it which lay in the content of the preaching itself. And the Spirit of God used the words of his messages. Here is an example from one of Nettleton’s sermons as he is pleading with sinners:

‘By the mercies of God and by the terrors of His wrath, by the joys of heaven and the pains of hell, by the merits of a Saviour’s blood and by the worth of your immortal souls, I beseech you, lay down the arms of your rebellion, bow and submit to your rightful Sovereign.’<sup>20</sup>

## **Trials**

We turn now to the **three major trials** which Nettleton had to endure during his life. First, in 1818, when he was about 35, there was a serious attack made on his moral integrity. He was openly accused of immorality. The charge was totally untrue, nevertheless it caused him great pain and he wondered how he should handle it. At first a lawsuit was considered but then he and his friends decided against this, feeling the best answer was the purity and consistency of his character. Yet it was a tenacious charge; some ten years later his enemies were still seeking to drag it forward.

Then in 1822, when he was 39, he underwent a serious attack of typhus and almost died. He had been itinerating for some ten years and the Herculean schedule had taken its toll. He was weakened and therefore vulnerable to the attack. He remained bedridden for forty days and faced the prospect of death. But the Lord brought him through and he was raised up for further ministry, although physically he was never the same again. Thornbury says he was a semi-invalid for the remaining twenty-two years of his life.

From 1826 onwards his third trial was the controversy involving the New Measures. Finney and Nettleton were the protagonists. Men looked to Nettleton to defend the cause against these novelties. He maintained that the anxious seat was 'calculated to efface conviction of sin and induce false conversions'.<sup>21</sup> He had little time for what he called 'revivals of modern stamp', in particular those in which Finney was involved. He, like Edwards, believed that a revival was something which only God could give and that he did send at certain times in the history of the Christian church. He held that a revival was a time of crisis, a golden opportunity for sinners to find the Saviour and for the kingdom of God to come with power.

## Ministry

We shall consider now **three aspects** of Nettleton's ministry. First, his methods were not the New Measures. He believed in preaching, counselling and prayer. His preaching was about the character of God, his infinite, eternal holiness, the strictness of his law, the certainty of hell and the necessity for repentance. He believed in doing what is known as a 'law work' for 'by the law is the knowledge of sin'. He desired that men might have an awareness of their sin and be convicted of their sin.

Secondly, the pattern of the Spirit's operations under Nettleton's ministry should be noted, or rather, the pattern which he aimed at with the aid of the Spirit. It was not that he had a stereotyped view of conversion. Nevertheless, he was always looking first for the awakening of the sinner, the arousing of interest and a sense of need, then conviction of sin, of personal sin and rebellion against God. Then following conviction he sought immediate and unconditional submission to God, the peace of God which follows from peace with God. This is what he aimed at and what, by God's grace, he achieved.

Thirdly, the results of Nettleton's labours. It was estimated that some 30,000 people were saved under his ministry, nor were they transient conversions. Dr Francis Wayland commented on the eloquence and effectiveness of his preaching and concluded, 'I suppose no minister of his time was the means of so many conversions'.<sup>22</sup> 'Nettleton', Wayland went on to say, 'would sway an audience as the trees of the forest are moved by a mighty wind'.<sup>23</sup> That wind was nothing other than the power of the Holy Spirit. No wonder he has been regarded as the greatest preacher America had seen since Whitefield.

In later years Nettleton was involved with the Theological Institute of Connecticut. By this time his health was not good and he had to be more careful about his schedule. Yale College was no longer suitable for the production of ministers as it could not be relied upon to train men sound in the faith. When the Institute was set up Nettleton became an occasional instructor of students, having turned down the post of president. Such was his experience of the way the Lord had so wonderfully blessed him that he became regarded there as 'the grand old man of revivalism'. He would often visit the students in their homes and give them pastoral advice. He was greatly beloved and despite his poor health he lived to the age of 61, dying in 1844.



## Lessons from these two men

There is, first, *a vital connection between doctrine and practice*. This pertains in any realm, not least in relation to Christian work. Both these men illustrate this in different ways. Finney's theology was Pelagian. His optimistic view of man's reason and ability meant that it is not in the least surprising that he adopted the New Measures and the anxious seat. The connection reminds us that the real issue behind decisionism is a theological one.

We should notice, secondly, *the danger of rushing people to Christ*. George Whitefield used to speak of 'mushroom converts', which spring up overnight and soon disappear. This undoubtedly happened under Finney's ministry. But although there was an urgency about Nettleton's preaching there was a permanence about what God accomplished through him. The danger is in getting people to make a public stand before they are ready. We must not rush people to Christ before they know the terms of the gospel and are convicted of their sin. We need to bide our time, preaching, praying and waiting on God to give the increase in due season.

Thirdly, we must never forget that *coming to Christ is a spiritual act* not a physical act. This is the mistake of the anxious seat. The act of coming forward is almost understood as being the mark of regeneration. But coming to Christ is inward and private, even mysterious although it may well manifest itself outwardly. Repentance and faith are spiritual experiences.

Nettleton reminds us, fourthly, that *only time will tell whether someone is truly born again*. He was careful and cautious because there is such a thing as a temporary conviction of sin. We must never forget that our Lord, in the parable of the Sower, said that there are some who 'believe for a while'. This is always so but Finney's techniques were almost bound to produce many spurious converts.

We need to re-capture, fifthly, *the concept of the 'pangs of the new birth'*. We do not hear much of this today. We seldom see people in despair over their spiritual state, weeping and prostrated. Rather than extracting a premature commitment from people not yet ready to believe on Christ we ought to be asking why our own ministry is not being marked by the same evidences of conviction as those of former generations.

The ministry of a man like Asahel Nettleton will, sixthly, point clearly to *our own desperate need for genuine revival*. This cannot be worked up, it cannot be organised. We are dependent upon God for revival. Our desperate need is for God to visit us again and to pour out his Spirit in these barren days, to convince men of sin, of righteousness and of judgement to come.

Seventhly and lastly, all this reminds us that *it is not new methods that we should seek after*. It is the old methods, the tried and tested ones of the preaching of God's word and faithful intercession, which we should be employing. As those men of New England put it, it is 'the old foundations'<sup>24</sup> we need to build on, 'the good old paths'<sup>25</sup> we need to tread.

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*Would that this one Book were in every language, in every land; before the eyes and in the ears and hearts of all men! Scripture without any comment is the sun whence all teachers receive their light.* Luther

*There is scarcely any noble part of knowledge worthy of the mind of man, but from Scripture it may have some direction and light.* Richard Hooker

*I want to know one thing — the way to heaven: how to land safe on that happy shore. God Himself has condescended to teach the way. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that Book! At any price, give me that book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be a man of one book.* John Wesley

*I am profitably engaged in reading the Bible. Take all of this Book upon reason that you can and the balance on faith, and you will live and die a better man.* Abraham Lincoln