

A Brief Biographical Sketch of Asahel Nettleton

by Asahel Nettleton

The sermon provides a detailed biographical sketch of Asahel Nettleton, highlighting his early life, conversion, ministry, and theological contributions.

Scripture: Proverbs 3:5, 1 Corinthians 15:58, Galatians 6:9, 2 Timothy 2:15, 1 Peter 5:7

Topics: "Evangelism", "Orthodox Theology"

Description

Dr. Tom Nettles delivers a sermon on the life of Asahel Nettleton, a devoted evangelist born in 1783, who underwent a profound spiritual transformation after struggling with the wickedness of his heart. Nettleton's dedication to Christ led him to become an effective spiritual counselor during revivals, earning praise from Timothy Dwight. Despite aspirations for missionary work, Nettleton's impactful preaching in Connecticut kept him there. He later engaged in a theological dispute with Charles Finney, emphasizing the importance of orthodox theology and opposing certain revival methods.

Transcript

A Brief Biographical Sketch of Asahel Nettleton

By Dr. Tom Nettles

On April 21, 1783, Asahel Nettleton was born into the home of a Connecticut farmer, the second child and eldest son of six children. In his youth, he was catechized in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, giving him a mental apprehension of truths which, when God brought the truths home to his heart, greatly increased his effectiveness as an evangelist. In the year 1800, Nettleton became convicted that his life was dangerously frivolous; as a result, he sought to change both himself and his friends.

An increasing sense of the wickedness of his heart brought about a corresponding attempt to prove the Bible wrong. He disliked the God he found there, for he knew that such a Holy Being must of necessity condemn him. He wished for God's non-existence. After Nettleton struggled in spiritual distress for ten months, God's Spirit changed his heart and brought him to embrace the Savior. He did not at first recognize his change as conversion but now found delight in objects which before had "given him so much distress."

His views and feelings were the same as those "whom he regarded as the friends of Christ." Now, instead of hoping for God's non-existence, the attributes of the Tri-une Deity appeared lovely and "the Saviour was exceedingly precious." Now, instead of feelings of bitter opposition, he contemplated the doctrines of grace, with delight, and "had now no doubt of their truth." This astounding change, he knew, was "not the result of any effort of his own, but of the sovereign and distinguishing will of God."¹ In 1805, in spite of pressing hardships, Nettleton entered Yale College, then under the presidency of Timothy Dwight.

During his years there he justly gained the respect of his classmates as having unmixed sincerity in his devotion to Christ and earnestness in his desire for the salvation of his friends. Beyond the necessary study of the liberal arts curriculum, he gave his time to theological study and the development of a capacity for spiritual discernment. During a revival in 1807 at Yale, Nettleton was effective as a spiritual counselor. His career at Yale prompted the judgment from Timothy Dwight, "He will make one of the most useful men this country has ever seen."² Nettleton, along with Samuel Mills, envisioned a life of service among those who had never heard the gospel on the mission field.

Three factors converged to preclude that possibility for Nettleton. One, a debt incurred while in school needed to be paid and he felt he must stay until that was done. Meanwhile, his preaching in destitute areas of Connecticut was so effective that leaders of the Congregational church urged upon him the duty to stay. Third, his contraction of typhus in 1822 eliminated all remaining hopes he had of work on the mission field. In 1812, at the invitation of the pastors of churches, Nettleton began itinerating.

Nettleton had seen the effects, and in fact had interviewed some eyewitnesses, of the inordinate affectations of James Davenport in the Great Awakening. He entered into this ministry with several convictions. One, he must do nothing to win affection from or destroy the influence of the settled pastorate. No lasting good could be done without the support and long-term influence of faithful pastors. Two, he would not seek to stir up interest where it was clear the Spirit of God had not preceded him.

If he in fact detected a spirit of "enthusiasm" he would work to root it out. He had no fear at all that in his opposition to this type of misguided zeal he was "quenching the spirit." Three, he would not stay where there appeared to be any reliance on him. He felt he could be of no use if a church's anticipation fostered hope and excitement because of confidence in the human instrument, rather than remorse for sin and desire for the favor of God. Four, he believed that those converted during seasons of revival had a fervour for God purer and more sustained than those who made professions in times without general revival.

Nettleton made the following observation in 1829. During the leisure occasioned by my late illness, I have been looking over the regions where God has revived his work for the two years past. The thousands who have professed Christ in this time, in general appear to run well. Hitherto, I think they have exhibited more of the Christian temper, and a better example, than the same number who have professed religion when there was no revival.... When I look back on revivals which took place ten or fifteen years ago, I have been agreeably surprised to find so many of the subjects of them continuing to adorn their profession.

Take the whole number who professed religion as the fruit of these revivals, and take the same number who professed religion when there was no general revival, and I do think that the former have outshined the latter. I have not made a particular estimate, but from what I have seen, I do believe

that the number of excommunications from the latter is more than double in proportion to the former.³ For eleven years Nettleton immersed himself virtually without respite into the cause of revivals. This involved preaching three times on Sabbaths, usually twice, maybe thrice, during the week, and numbers of

personal interviews and visits to homes where small but spiritually interested groups would be gathered. This schedule came to a halt in October, 1822, when after visiting a sick person he contracted typhus fever.

For more than two years he was unable to engage in any revival activity, but took advantage of the time to compile his Village Hymns for Social Worship. After that time he could engage in far less strenuous activity, was more selective in engagements, and took longer periods of rest between revival efforts. Though the impression of his person was less powerful than before, accounts of his visits to churches still abound with testimonies of the effectual working of the Spirit of God.

He traveled not only in New England during these years but also into the South as far as Virginia and South Carolina. He went to the United Kingdom in 1831, ostensibly to rest, but preached frequently. In addition, he regularly had opportunity, as well as necessity, to distinguish between revivals in America and the more recent impact of the New Measures excitements. One report of the revivals in America concentrated on methods, events, and results characteristic of the New Measures fervor.

Nettleton responded, "I am exhausted in my attempts to vindicate our revivals. I can only tell the good ministers here, that I do not, and never did, approve of the practice mentioned in the above letter."⁴ That practice Nettleton had opposed with increasing conviction since 1826. At that time he was drawn into a controversy with Charles Finney. The controversy was never really about methods although that issue first prompted the initial meetings between Nettleton and Finney.

Though Finney declared "He could have led me almost or quite at his discretion," there is no evidence in any of Finney's relationships with older, more experienced and wiser people that he had any penchant for being led.⁵ The conflict climaxed at New Lebanon, New York, in July 1827. Nettleton had written publicly opposing the methods employed in Finney's meetings.⁶ Finney responded with a sermon, "How can two walk together except they be agreed?" The conference was arranged by Nathan Beman, a Finney supporter, and Lyman Beecher.⁷ There amidst wrangling, charges and counter charges, and some histrionic posturing on the part of Lyman Beecher, Nettleton felt strongly the futility of such discussion.

Near the close of the meeting, Nettleton read a letter outlining the disturbing practices and the conference approved resolutions rejecting the use of such practices. Finney and his followers, while clearly advocating some of the measures which give rise to these complaints, denied that these measures consisted of such abuses as outlined in the letter.⁸ Perhaps, Finney proposed, a resolution against lukewarmness should also be adopted. Several factors conspired against any satisfactory resolution to this conflict, especially in the dynamics of the New Lebanon Conference.

One, the issue continued to be reduced to one of methods and the underlying theological distinctions garnered only brief attention. The orthodox participants, in fact, seemed unaware at this time that distinction in methods arose from radically different theological assumptions. Only in the next few years was the reason for this impasse in the discussion understood more fully. Two, one of Nettleton's chief protagonists, Lyman Beecher, agreed with Finney's anthropology and would soon be visibly aligned with the theological shift voiced in 1828 by Nathan W.

Taylor.⁹ Three, others who complained against Finney's methods were actually susceptible to many of Finney's theological caveats concerning human responsibility. They were followers of the "consistent Calvinists" Samuel Hopkins and Nathanael Emmons.¹⁰ Four, Finney and his co-adjutants went to the conference fully convinced that the charges against them were false, or, where correct, merely reflected a

theological or methodological insight superior to those of their accusers.

Finney claimed that after the conference opposition to his revival efforts decreased.¹¹ He said that the opposition of Beecher and Nettleton was "impertinent & assuming, uncalled for & injurious to themselves, & the cause of God." And besides that, in spite of their efforts Finney could say, "their opposition never made me ashamed, never convinced me that I was wrong in doctrine or practice, & I never made the slightest change in conducting revivals as a consequence of their opposition.

I thought I was right."¹² In 1832, after his return from England, Nettleton joined efforts to conserve the orthodox theology of the past from the destructive force of Taylorism and the dispiriting effects of Finneyism. A vital part of this effort consisted of the founding of the Theological Institute of Connecticut. Nettleton, refusing an invitation to become a regular faculty member, was retained as an occasional instructor. He spent his last years lecturing on evangelism, counselling students, writing letters to friends making observations on the condition of religion in New England and America, and preaching as strength allowed.

In May 1844, he died after a lengthy season of suffering and in a great deal of pain. His comforts in Christ, however, outstripped the rigors his calamitous sickness and to the end he continued to affirm that it was "sweet to trust in the Lord."¹³

1 Bennet Tyler, *Nettleton and His Labours* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975) p. 29. This volume was first published in 1844 and was published in Scotland in 1854 with an introduction and occasional notes by Andrew Bonar and also, by him, "Remodelled in some parts." The Banner of Truth edition is a reprint of the 1854 printing in Scotland. This will normally be referred to as "Tyler," but special mention will be made of Bonar when it is clear that the text is a part "Remodelled" by him or inserted on the basis of his own knowledge. 2 *Ibid.*, p. 41 3 From a Letter of Nettleton quoted in "A brief sketch of an Argument respecting the nature of Scriptural, and the importance and necessity of numerous, rapid, frequent, and extensive Revivals of Religion," in *Biblical Repertory & Theological Review*, January, 1834, p. 124 4 Tyler, p. 289. 5 Charles Finney, *The Memoirs of Charles G.*

Finney: The Complete Restored Text ed. Garth M. Rosell and Richard A. G. Dupuis (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989) p. 204. Hereinafter this will be referred to as *Memoirs*. One also should consult John F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival* (Welwyn, Herts, England, and Grand Rapids: Evangelical Press, 1977) pp. 164 - 179. 6 This was eventually published in 1828 along with other letters in a volume entitled *Letters of the Rev. Dr. Beecher and Rev. Mr Nettleton on The New Measures in Conducting Revivals of Religion*.

New York, 1828. 7 Beecher's *Autobiography* records that Beecher said, "Finney, I know your plan, and you know that I do; you mean to come into Connecticut and carry a streak of fire to Boston. But if you attempt it, as the Lord liveth, I'll meet you at the State line, and call out all the artillery men, and fight every inch of the way to Boston, and then I'll fight you there." Beecher eventually signed a truce with the party of Finney and invited him to preach at his Boston church in August, 1831. 8 Finney, *Memoirs*, p. 222.

Finney's version of the conference and all its connections is recorded on pp. 216 - 231 as well as valuable footnotes by the volume's editors. These footnotes contain references to related source material. Finney continued to defend the profitableness of his measures with an unusual sense of their virtual divinity. "I have always & everywhere used all the measures I used in these revivals, & have often added other measures such as the anxious seat whenever I have deemed it expedient.

I have never seen the necessity of reformation in this respect. Were I to live my life over again, I think that with the experience of more than forty years in revival labors I should under the same circumstance use substantially the same measures that I did then. And let me not be understood to take credit to myself No indeed. It was no wisdom of my own that directed me. I was made to feel my ignorance & dependence & led to look to God continually for His guidance. I had no doubt then nor have I ever had that God led me by his Spirit to take the course I did.

So clearly did he lead me from day to day that I never did nor could doubt that I was Divinely directed" (p. 227). 9 In his famous address *Concio ad Clerum*, Taylor rejected the Westminster Confession's doctrine of original sin. Sinfulness is not innate; neither guilt nor necessary predisposition toward sin are innately connected with the human heart, according to Taylor. Sin always is a deliberate moral choice as has no pre-existence to the choice. One always has the power of contrary choice.

This theology blended perfectly with the revival techniques of Finney. Nettleton and Taylor were close friends all of their lives, but Nettleton ardently opposed Taylor's "New Haven Theology." 10 Again, Finney's representation of their ideas was extravagant, but their alterations in Edwards's theology diminished the direct connection between original sin and the sinner's sinning, and made it appear that each individual's sin arose from the decree and over-ruling providence of God. 11 Interpretations of the New Lebanon conference from distinctly different perspectives may be seen in Keith J.

Hardman, Charles Grandison Finney 1792 - 1875 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990) pp. 133-149; and, Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994) pp. 225 - 252. That the theological tendencies of Finney were not clear at this time probably contributed to the focus of the discussion on method more than doctrine and also explains some of the support he received from settled pastors who believed the Westminster Confession. Hardman's discussion of Beecher's zeal for the "social order" explains both his initial opposition and eventual friendship (148, 149). 12 Finney, *Memoirs*, pp. 239, 240. 13 For an account of his sickness see Thornbury's *God Sent Revival*, pp. 220 - 225. Thornbury's book gives a sensitive and engaging portrayal of Nettleton's entire life.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/asahel-nettleton/a-brief-biographical-sketch-of-asahel-nettleton/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net