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How Does Doctrine Affect Evangelism?

The Divergent Paths of Asahel Nettleton and Charles Finney

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The average Southern Baptist (if such a person exists) offers a puzzled look upon hearing the name of Asahel Nettleton, the last great evangelist who espoused the doctrines of grace. Although Nettleton (1783–1844) saw thirty thousand persons converted during a decade of active ministry in the early nineteenth century, his legacy suffers from tragic neglect, if not active contempt, at the hands of contemporary church historians.

Charles G. Finney (1792–1875), on the other hand, has recently been the subject of another extensive biographical treatment.¹ Widely regarded as the father of modern revivalism, Finney represents the watershed in the shift from Calvinism to Arminianism as the dominant theology of evangelism. Conservatives love Finney for his evangelistic zeal and liberals point with pride to his involvement in social reform. Mark A. Noll regards Finney as “the crucial figure in white American evangelicalism after Jonathan Edwards,” with more lasting impact on the life of the emerging nation than Ralph Waldo Emerson, Daniel Webster, or Horace Mann.²

Finney’s legacy shaped the theology and methodology of evangelism generally, and Southern Baptist evangelism particularly. The publication of his major works, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* and *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, left an impact upon evangelism which reaches to the present. Southern Baptist emphases such as simultaneous crusades, crusade preparation, the public invitation system, and the use of the revival meeting as an evangelistic strategy are at least in part attributable to Finney’s considerable influence on the evangelicalism of his day.

The careful student of Southern Baptist history knows that until the turn of the twentieth century, Reformed soteriology was the generally accepted stance in Convention life. Today’s Southern Baptists have adopted a “Great Commission hermeneutic” which places a greater stress on human responsibility than divine sovereignty in the

¹ Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism*, Library of Religious Biography, ed. Mark A. Noll, Nathan O. Hatch, and Allen C. Guelzo (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996).

² Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 176–77.

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soteriological equation.³ As one result of this shift in philosophy, Southern Baptists have now adopted a jumbled hybrid of Calvinism and Arminianism. They want to be Calvinistic in affirming the sinfulness of man and the permanence of genuine salvation, but balk at the Reformed doctrines of unconditional election, particular redemption, and the triumphant nature of divine grace. Bill Leonard correctly characterizes Southern Baptist soteriology as confused:

Heirs of both the Calvinist and the Arminian traditions, they often selected and popularized diverse doctrines of salvation which, when held together, had the potential for serious theological confusion.⁴

The puzzled state of Southern Baptist soteriology has produced a mixed bag of results. Jesus personally acknowledged that even the kingdom of heaven contains a mixture of genuine wheat and counterfeit in the parable of the wheat and tares (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43). Although Southern Baptists proudly lay claim to the distinction of being the largest non-Catholic denomination in the United States, sickly spiritual fruit hangs in the churches to the point that the President of the SBC emphasized the need for genuine conversion among church members in his 1997 President's Address. When millions of our church members do not give any credible biblical evidence of salvation by attending church faithfully and living at least a nominal Christian life, will eternity not expose our beloved Southern Baptist Zion as polluted by pragmatism and pride if no one dares to mention that the problem may lie in a methodology with a faulty doctrinal foundation? The enemy is quite capable of sowing counterfeit seed in the field without the help of sincere, yet careless, Southern Baptists who do not see the reasoning inherent in some popular evangelistic methods.

This article asserts that what a person, church, or denomination believes about salvation has a direct relationship on the evangelism they practice.⁵ Soteriology shapes evangelistic methodology. The assumption is that a sound doctrine of salvation should produce a sound practice of evangelism.

³ Charles S. Kelley Jr., *How Did They Do It: The Story of Southern Baptist Evangelism* (n.p.: Insight Press, 1993), 21.

⁴ Bill J. Leonard, "Getting Saved in America: Conversion Event in a Pluralistic Culture," *Review and Expositor* 82, no. 1 (Winter 1985): 123.

⁵ Material in this article comes from my dissertation, "The Relationship of Soteriology and Evangelistic Methodology in the Ministries of Asahel Nettleton and Charles G. Finney" (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997).

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Asahel Nettleton's God-Centered Revivalism

Following the theological lead of Jonathan Edwards, who stressed human responsibility within a Calvinistic world view, Asahel Nettleton represented the quintessential New England Calvinist of his day. While he held firmly to each of the tenets of the Synod of Dort (also known as the Five Points of Calvinism) as understood by his New England theological predecessors (Edwards, Joseph Bellamy, and Timothy Dwight), he first and foremost believed his doctrinal system to be true to biblical revelation.⁶

Nettleton's system of beliefs may be summarized as follows. Man, being totally depraved in nature and by choice, cannot save himself.⁷ By God's grace, some have been chosen unto eternal life.⁸ For those chosen by God (the elect), Jesus provided a penal, substitutionary atonement for their sins on the cross.⁹ The elect, for whom alone Jesus died, will be drawn by the triumphant grace of God to repentance and saving faith in Christ.¹⁰ They will be kept by God unto eternal salvation.¹¹

Human beings must be divinely regenerated, or have their sinful nature negated, before they can repent and trust Christ for salvation.¹² In Nettleton's system, human ability to respond at every stage of salvation comes from a sovereign act of God. Unless God moves, humans remain hopelessly lost.¹³

The methodology of Nettleton matched his theology. He used preaching as a means of bringing sinners to conviction of their sinfulness. He bathed all evangelistic efforts in fervent, humble prayer to the God who alone can affect the regeneration of a lost person. For those who responded to a call for the awakened to meet outside stated services, Nettleton offered inquiry meetings, which were essentially group evangelistic counseling sessions. At these meetings, individuals could receive personal assistance without public pressure to respond.

⁶ Bennet Tyler, *Memoir of the Life and Character of Rev. Asahel Nettleton, D.D.*, 2d ed. (Hartford: Robins & Smith, 1848), 273.

⁷ Asahel Nettleton, *Asahel Nettleton: Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, with an introduction by Tom Nettles and a preface by Bennet Tyler (Ames, IA: International Outreach, 1995), 394–95.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 236.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 105. Nettleton preached, "It is certain that Christ will finish the great work which he has undertaken. Not one whom he designs to save shall ever be lost."

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹² *Ibid.*, 60–73, see Nettleton's sermon entitled, "Genuine Repentance Does Not Precede Regeneration."

¹³ *Ibid.*, 89, where Nettleton states that "the only ground of hope in the case of sinners lies in the sovereign mercy of God."

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Few men have approached the level of expertise Nettleton demonstrated in personal evangelism. He was a skillful surgeon of the soul. He urged those who had been awakened to settle the matter of salvation privately before God. Multitudes came to saving faith in Christ as a result of his ministry in “waste places” and churches of all sizes and types. Few of his converts ever abandoned their profession to return to the world.

Charles Finney’s Man-Centered Revivalism

Charles G. Finney determined from his earliest days as a young Christian to counteract what he believed to be the evangelism-crippling effects of the Calvinism espoused by men such as Nettleton. Believing himself to be a corrective for an overemphasis on divine sovereignty, Finney stressed the responsibility of human beings as free moral agents.

Because he was trained as a lawyer and tragically lacking in theological education, Finney’s reading of Scripture persuaded him to see salvation in terms of legalistic moral philosophy. Such a framework demanded that those held responsible to obey the law must be free to obey. While Nettleton stressed the freedom of God, Finney chose to emphasize the freedom of man.

Finney believed humans were voluntarily, not constitutionally, depraved. Election unto salvation resulted from divine foreknowledge of one’s response to the gospel. The atonement provided by Jesus paid for no one’s sins as a penal substitution, but rather allowed God to pardon sinners without violating his own nature and law.¹⁴ Michael Horton has accurately summarized Finney’s beliefs: “God is not sovereign; man is not a sinner by nature; the atonement is not a true payment for sin; justification by imputation is insulting to reason and morality; the new birth is simply the effect of successful techniques; and revival is a natural result of clever campaigns.”¹⁵

Because humans are free moral agents, Finney believed they could reject the grace of God. Even after repenting and professing faith in Christ, a person’s ultimate salvation remained unsettled pending their obedience until death.¹⁶

¹⁴ Many evangelicals are shocked to hear this about Finney, but hear his own words: “It is true, that *the atonement, of itself, does not secure the salvation of any one*; but the promise and oath of God, that Christ shall have a seed to serve him, provide that security.” Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, ed. James H. Fairchild (Oberlin, OH: E. J. Goodrich, 1878, reprint, Whittier, CA: Colporter Kemp, 1844), 281. Page references are to the reprint edition. Italics mine.

¹⁵ Michael S. Horton, “The Legacy of Charles Finney,” *Premise* 2, no. 3, 27 March 1995 [journal on-line], available from <http://www.public.usit.net/capo/premise/95/march/horton-f.html>. Internet.

¹⁶ Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, 550, writes, “If the ultimate salvation of the saints is certain, it is certain only upon condition, that their perseverance in obedience to the end of life is certain.”

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Finney's theology caused him to perceive that only one enemy, a stubborn will, hindered the salvation of all persons. Each method Finney used was evaluated on the basis of its effectiveness in "breaking" the obstinate will of sinners. This pragmatism dominated Finney's ministry. Wielding an amalgamation of methods already being used, Finney revolutionized evangelism and birthed modern revivalism. He popularized a more dramatic form of preaching, used public prayer as a tool for applying pressure to sinners, allowed women to pray in mixed public meetings, denounced opponents, changed the accepted tradition in inquiry meetings, organized small group prayer meetings and home visitation teams, gave rise to the protracted evangelistic campaign, and paved the way for what later became the public invitation system. These new measures caused great controversy, but they also reportedly brought as many as five hundred thousand persons "to renewal."¹⁷

Applications for Contemporary Evangelism

The findings are applicable to modern evangelism on two levels. First, what principles may be gleaned from the study? Second, which man offers a better example for the future of Southern Baptist evangelism, Nettleton or Finney?

Methodologically, commonalities between Finney and Nettleton offer an excellent starting point for principles of application. If preaching is marked by passion, faithfulness to Scripture, pertinent personal application, lucid presentation, and spiritual power, evangelism will be enhanced. If ministers and church members take up the labor of prayer as did Finney and Nettleton and their co-laborers in revivals, evangelism will be revolutionized. They not only practiced personal prayer but organized the praying of churches in revival preparation. If inquirers are properly counseled without being publicly pressured to make premature (and thus spurious) decisions, the results of evangelism will be conserved to a greater degree. If ministers and church members would practice theologically precise personal evangelism, churches would be transformed by the infusion of new spiritual life.

If Southern Baptists look to these great evangelists of the past for a model for the future of evangelism, which of these men would make the most desirable example? Two reasons lead me to choose Nettleton: (1) the legacy of Finney cannot stand the strain of vigorous

¹⁷ Paulus Scharpff, *History of Evangelism: Three Hundred Years of Evangelism in Germany, Great Britain, and the United States of America*, trans. Helga Bender Henry (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1966), 109; John Mark Terry, *Evangelism: A Concise History* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 146.

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examination; and (2) the more one looks at the legacy of Nettleton, the more clearly a picture of doctrinal balance emerges.

The legacy of Charles Finney has long been disputed. Southeastern Seminary evangelism professor Alvin L. Reid notes:

Finney is credited with providing the impetus for the shift from the work of God to the work of humans in revival and spiritual awakening.... The public invitation, protracted meetings (now often called 'revival services' or simply 'revivals'), and preparation for such meetings can be traced in large measure to Finney. He has been praised and condemned for this shift. In evaluating Finney, one must remember that he was reacting to the cold, lifeless, extreme version of Calvinism of his day.¹⁸

Many of the multitudes touched by Finney's ministry turned back to the world after the local influence of the charismatic evangelist faded. B. B. Warfield warned that "a very large proportion of those swept into the churches by the excitement of the revival were not really converted, as their subsequent history only too clearly proved."¹⁹

Lest one should dismiss Warfield as a Princeton Calvinist and enemy of Finney, the testimonies of Finney's friends and co-laborers James Boyle and Asa Mahan offer further evidence that Finney's work must be viewed with serious reservation, if not suspicion. James E. Johnson has admitted that such testimonies give credence "to the accusation that many individuals were swept along in the excitement of the revival meetings who never actually experienced a change of heart."²⁰ Boyle wrote to Finney in 1834:

Let us look over the fields where you and others and myself have labored as revival ministers, and what is now their moral state? What was their state within

¹⁸ *Evangelism and Church Growth: A Practical Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Charles Grandison Finney (1792–1875)," by Alvin L. Reid, 235. Reid is far too pessimistic in his view of the Calvinism of Finney's day. Bob Pyke states that "the leading Calvinistic ministers during the Second Great Awakening were all men who agreed that evangelism needed to insist on immediate faith and repentance, and that the older Calvinism had distorted accountability by emphasizing too much the sinner's dependence on God." Bob Pyke, "Charles G. Finney and the Second Great Awakening," *Reformation & Revival Journal* 6, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 47.

¹⁹ Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield, *Perfectionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931), 2:23; Joseph I. Foot, "Influence of Pelagianism on the Theological Course of Rev. C. G. Finney," *Developed in His Sermons and Lectures; Literary and Theological Review* 5 (March 1838): 39, wrote that "during ten years, hundreds, and perhaps thousands, were annually reported to be converted on all hands; but now it is admitted, that his (Finney's) real converts are comparatively few. It is declared, even by himself that 'the great body of them are a disgrace to religion.' "

²⁰ James E. Johnson, "The Life of Charles Grandison Finney" (Ph.D. diss., Syracuse University, 1959), 399–400.

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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 had fallen—and fallen very soon after our first departure from among them.²¹

Mahan wrote in his *Autobiography* that not only many people supposedly converted in the revivals, but also the pastors of churches who hosted meetings, and even the evangelists leading the meetings, subsequently suffered morally and spiritually. He wrote,

I was personally acquainted with nearly every one of them—I cannot recall a single man, brother Finney and father Nash excepted, who did not after a few years lose his unction, and become equally disqualified for the office of evangelist and that of pastor.²²

Michael S. Horton has vigorously taken the lead among evangelicals in attacking the legacy of Finney. Horton portrays Finney as the spiritual father of the church growth movement, Pentecostalism, and political revivalism. He accuses Finney (with Finney's own words) of denying these cardinal doctrines: original sin, penal substitution as the motif of the atonement, and the divine nature of the new birth.²³

Because Finney repudiated so many key tenets of the historic Christian faith, Horton calls the evangelist “not only an enemy of evangelical Protestantism, but of historic Christianity of the broadest sort.” Horton concedes that Finney was correct in only one point: “The Gospel held by the Westminster divines who he attacked directly, and indeed held by the whole company of evangelicals, is ‘another gospel’ in distinction from the one proclaimed by Charles Finney.” Horton then asks a haunting question for evangelicals who have unwittingly, in the name of evangelistic success, placed Finney on a hero's pedestal: “With which gospel will we side?”²⁴

Monte Wilson rightly ties Finney to the changes in evangelism and sees Finney's incorrect estimate of human nature to be the root of his belief that “revivals could be planned, promoted, and propagated by man.” The modern tendency to rely on technique in revival preparation may be attributed to an adoption of Finney's false premise. When evangelism is evaluated only on the basis of results, Finney must bear the brunt of responsibility. When ministers who do not produce the appropriate numbers are ignominiously

²¹ Quoted in Warfield, *Perfectionism*, 2:26. The letter is not in the Finney Papers.

²² Asa Mahan, *Autobiography: Intellectual, Moral, and Spiritual* (London: T. Woolmer, 1882), 229.

²³ Horton, “The Legacy of Charles Finney,” Internet.

²⁴ *Ibid.* Pyke, 53, notes that Finney's theory of the atonement “was enough outside the pale of orthodoxy to have been considered heretical in previous centuries.”

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dismissed from their pulpits, the wise observer sees Finney's maxim, "a wise minister will be successful," behind the tragedy.²⁵

Finney believed that if all ministers would follow his example, revival would sweep the land, ushering in the millennium. Only one decade after his trademark book of revival methodology, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, was published, he complained that revivals had declined, both in quantity and quality. Wilson correctly comments: "By Finney's own standard, his teachings on how to produce converts and revival, as well as their underlying assumptions, were proven wrong."²⁶ Only eternity will tell how many who were beginning to experience genuine conviction of sin in Finney's revivals were hurried through a spurious salvation decision to the peril of their eternal souls.

Finney became a major catalyst in changing the theology that undergirds evangelism. As Arminianism supplanted Calvinism, man replaced God as the center of the theology of evangelism. Robert H. Lescelius correctly asserts that "it has remained so predominantly ever since in American evangelicalism."²⁷

Finney's theology and ministry were built on the false premise that Calvinism harms evangelism. Sixty-five persons had been converted in the church into which Finney was baptized in the two years before his conversion.²⁸ Finney came to faith in Christ in the midst of a regional revival during a period when Calvinism dominated the theological landscape.

The premise remains as false today as it was in Finney's day. Finney's contemporary in Britain, the Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon, built a great church and was committed to a Reformed soteriology. The phenomenally popular witness training program Evangelism Explosion came from a Presbyterian pastor, D. James Kennedy, whose church continues to grow upon a Reformed theological base. Radio preacher and author John MacArthur, Jr., pastors a thriving church and holds Reformed views.²⁹ One

²⁵ Monte A. Wilson, "Charles Grandison Finney: The Aftermath," *Reformation & Revival Journal* 6, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 97–99. Finney's statement is the title of one of his *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 161–79.

²⁶ Wilson, 100.

²⁷ Robert H. Lescelius, "The Second Great Awakening: The Watershed Revival," *Reformation & Revival Journal* 6, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 23. Pyke, 33–34, writes, "By the end of the [nineteenth] century, American evangelicalism bore little resemblance to that of 1800. The theology of conversion was no longer theocentric, the focus in evangelism now being on man and his responsibility, not on God, His holiness, and His saving mercy."

²⁸ Wilson, 100.

²⁹ MacArthur also views Finney with suspicion and concludes that "Finney's real legacy is the disastrous impact he had on American evangelical theology and evangelistic methodology." John F. MacArthur Jr., *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World* (Wheaton and Nottingham, England: Crossway Books, 1993), 235.

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cannot successfully defend the premise that to take an Arminian soteriological stand is to become more evangelistic than a church with Reformed theology. Such a simplistic ploy did not prove plausible in Finney's day, and it will not today.

Finney's legacy must be regarded as perilous because of the anthropocentric nature of his theology and the methods resulting from that theology.³⁰ In his effort to counter what he saw as an extreme form of Calvinism, Finney shifted the balance inordinately away from God and toward human agency in salvation. His evangelism missed the primary point of the gospel, a supernatural divine transformation of human beings from sinners to saints. His revivalism left behind churches which were arguably in worse condition because they split over the new measures or fired a godly minister who did not have the pulpit flair of the evangelist. Each of Finney's methods should be reevaluated with a critical view to its underlying theological foundation. For the future health of evangelism, the helpful must be separated from the harmful with regard to the ministry of Charles Finney.

On the other hand, Asahel Nettleton demonstrated the healthy potential of evangelism based on sound theology. The ministry of Nettleton did not harm churches; it built them up. Ministers who worked alongside him felt as if they had been blessed with an assistant pastor. Nettleton understood that the church existed before revival came and would continue to minister to the people of the community after the evangelist had moved to another venue. He believed it of utmost importance to guard the health of the church.

Compared to Finney's high rate of recidivism, Nettleton had a remarkable retention of converts from his meetings. Pastors commonly testified that after more than twenty-five years, nearly all professed converts continued as faithful followers of Christ.³¹

Although Nettleton's numbers cannot match Finney's, one must wonder how many of those Finney supposedly won went back to the world. Compared to Finney, Nettleton labored in a much smaller field geographically. The places where he ministered were far less densely populated. One must wonder what could have happened if Nettleton had gone to the population centers visited by Finney.

³⁰ Pyke, 39, observes that "the rough, compel-them-to-come-in, results-oriented style which marked Finney's ministry is evident from the outset. As was so characteristic of his career, after initial enthusiasm and superficial success (abetted, it would seem, by human effort and armtwisting), results invariably fell off."

³¹ "Robert A. Swanson," Asahel Nettleton: The Voice of Revival, *Fundamentalist Journal* 5, no. 5 (May 1986): 51."

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Asahel Nettleton understood that “theology determines methodology.”³² He conscientiously labored with souls in such a way as to honor the divine agency which would produce real conversion. Bennet Tyler’s testimony described Nettleton’s ministry as being like gentle rain showers which nourish parched soil and produce lasting spiritual fruit.³³ James Ehrhard has stated that “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.”³⁴ Nettleton tested methodology by the standard of Scripture because he knew any other path would ultimately cause ruin, no matter how successful it seemed.

The legacy of Nettleton offers Southern Baptists a better foundation for the future of evangelism. He was not right because he was a Calvinist; he was right because he measured right and wrong by biblical revelation rather than human reason.³⁵ He believed men were totally depraved in nature because the Bible taught it. He believed God must make the first move in salvation because Jesus so clearly stated it in John 6:44 and 6:65. He believed the atonement was a penal substitution because he thought Scripture portrayed it as such. He believed that persons could be reconciled to God only by faith in Christ and repentance toward God because of biblical teaching. He believed genuine believers would ultimately be known by holy lives because it was a biblical principle.

Southern Baptists have consistently pledged their allegiance to biblical revelation. They should reevaluate their commitment to the pragmatic evangelism of Finney by comparing it to the Bible. They would find that his views on human nature must be repudiated. He was wrong about the atonement being a payment for no one’s sins in particular. He believed human agency played a much greater role in salvation than Scripture allows. Finney’s errors in doctrine caused errors in practice which still plague Southern Baptists today, especially in the poor retention rate of new converts.

J. I. Packer’s classic work *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* represents a more biblical position. Beginning with the assumption that God is sovereign over all and particularly

³² Lescelius, 29.

³³ Bennet 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, Publisher, 1980), 7 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

³⁴ James Ehrhard, “Asahel Nettleton: The Forgotten Evangelist,” *Reformation & Revival Journal* 6, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 85–86.

³⁵ Finney, on the other hand, rejected doctrines such as original sin because he deemed them offensive to human reason. John Stanley Mattson believes Finney deemed the Bible and reason to be co-equals as ultimate sources of authority. John Stanley Mattson, “Charles Grandison Finney and the Emerging Tradition of ‘New Measure’ Revivalism” (Ph. D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1970), 197.

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in salvation, Packer describes the biblical tension of divine sovereignty and human responsibility as an antinomy which must be accepted.³⁶ Packer warns those who stress human responsibility to the detriment of divine sovereignty that such an approach leads to a “pragmatic and calculating” evangelism with a philosophy akin to “brainwashing.” He concedes that such evangelism would be appropriate “if the production of converts,” not faithful proclamation of truth, were the Christian’s responsibility.³⁷ Packer also offers a warning to those who neglect human responsibility in order to exalt divine sovereignty. The temptation for these persons is to neglect the evangelistic responsibility of all believers under the assumption that God will save the elect. Packer reproves these believers, calling evangelistic apathy “inexcusable.”³⁸

Citing the example of Spurgeon, who said he never tried to reconcile friends, Packer offers a sound and balanced perspective which recognizes the mutual dependence of the apparently contradictory truths. He wisely counsels, “In the Bible, divine sovereignty and human responsibility are not enemies.... They are *friends*, and they work together.”³⁹ This leads Packer to the conclusion: “The best method of evangelism ... is the one which makes possible the most full and thorough explanation of the good news of Christ and His cross, and the most exacting and searching application of it.”⁴⁰

As professing believers in biblical authority, Southern Baptists believe in human depravity and must stand against Finney with those who affirm that men are sinners in need of salvation, not self-induced moral reformation. They believe that salvation issues from the heart of a holy, yet gracious, God who provided a substitutionary atonement in the death of his son, Jesus Christ. They believe that salvation may be procured by repentance and faith in Christ in response to the gracious call of God through the convicting power of the Holy Spirit.

³⁶ J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1961), 18–22. Southern Seminary president R. Albert Mohler Jr. stressed that divine sovereignty and human responsibility “are parallel truths” in his 1997 spring convocation message. James A. Smith Sr., “Mohler: God’s Sovereignty & Human Responsibility True,” *The Tie* 65, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 27.

³⁷ Packer, 27–28. The wise observer sees Finney’s pattern of evangelism in this emphasis. John F. MacArthur Jr. indicts Finney as the source of modern evangelical pragmatism: “Finney was the first influential evangelist to suggest that the end justifies the means.” MacArthur, 233.

³⁸ Packer, 32–34.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 35–36.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 90. Asahel Nettleton embodied such a balanced evangelism because he affirmed divine sovereignty and human responsibility as equally biblical and carried out his ministry within the tension of the antinomy they represent. Finney chose the extreme position which favors human freedom to the neglect of divine sovereignty.

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Those beliefs should compel Southern Baptists to repudiate their ideological and methodological association with Charles Finney and move closer to the model provided by Asahel Nettleton, who embodies the theology and practice upon which the Convention was founded. Finney believed his day needed a move toward Arminianism to achieve balance. His influence caused an extreme move in the direction of human responsibility. Southern Baptists need to counterbalance Finney's excessive shift toward man and achieve biblical balance in their theology and practice of evangelism once again.

In recent days, the author has rejoiced to hear Dr. Timothy George say that it is good that Southern Baptists are reopening dialogue about these crucial matters. It is positive, as Dr. George says, that we are talking about the doctrine of salvation these days instead of the ordination of homosexuals to the ministry. It witnesses to the certainty of biblical authority in our family of faith. Let us therefore come together with open Bibles, open hearts, Christ-controlled demeanor, and reestablish the rightful balance of divine sovereignty and human responsibility in Southern Baptist soteriology.⁴¹

⁴¹ Nelson, R. (1998). "How Does Doctrine Affect Evangelism? The Divergent Paths of Asahel Nettleton and Charles Finney," *The Founders Journal: How Does Doctrine Affect Evangelism?*, Summer, 33, 11–16.