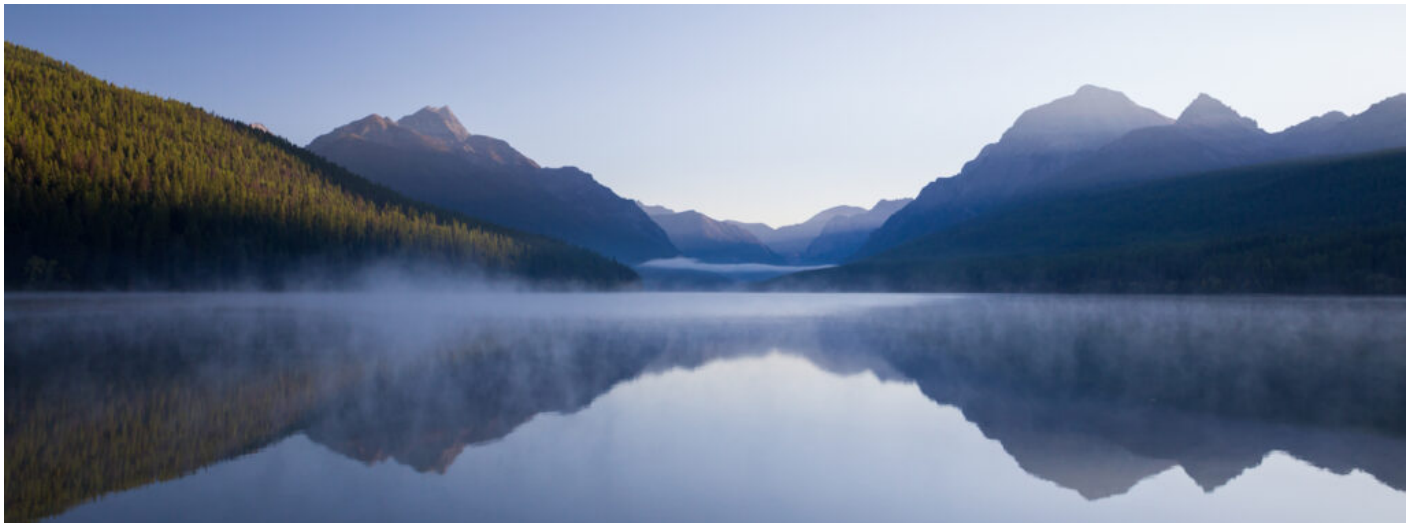


When the Right Man Speaks Too Little: Lessons from Asahel Nettleton



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It has been said that “history is written by the victors.” It is true in the context of war, and it is also true in theological controversy. In the context of the Second Great Awakening, the clear winner is Charles Finney, the preacher with unusual giftings in oration and credited with bringing the “new measures” into mainstream evangelicalism, like his protracted meetings or the famous “anxious bench.” The story of this so-called awakening has largely been told from the perspective of the victors. Those days brought challenges to the American church they had never faced before, challenges that still reverberate today. Finney drew a line in the sand for many presbyteries and communities. While many accommodated his innovations or hesitated to oppose them, one minister emerged as a leading critic. One man stood firm in sounding the alarm, refusing to embrace the new measures or remain silent as they spread. That man was Asahel Nettleton. Nettleton helps show us where the line lies between pastoral charity and courage. When ought we to step into controversy in the public? What if truth requires conviction and timely action?

Finney & Nettleton

While Charles Finney's revivalism came to dominate popular memory of the Second Great Awakening, Asahel Nettleton represented a continuation of the Calvinistic evangelicalism inherited from the First Great Awakening. More importantly, Nettleton's conduct during the controversy over Finney's "new measures" reveals the difficulty of maintaining pastoral faithfulness, doctrinal integrity, and Christian charity amid growing theological division.

Charles Finney began his ministry under the care of the St. Lawrence Presbytery in western New York. Although ordained within Presbyterianism, he increasingly rejected central doctrines associated with Calvinism, especially original sin and total depravity. Finney even declined the opportunity to study at Princeton because of its teaching on depravity. Over time, he came to view traditional Presbyterian theology as an obstacle to genuine revival. His "new measures," including the anxious bench and emotionally charged preaching, reflected this theological shift. Critics believed these methods confused true conversion with outward response and placed too much confidence in human methods rather than the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit.

Among Finney's critics, Asahel Nettleton stands out because he himself was a successful revival preacher. Influenced deeply by Jonathan Edwards and the legacy of the First Great Awakening, Nettleton preached extensively on sin, depravity, and the necessity of regeneration. Nettleton's ministry demonstrated that revival could flourish without Finney's innovations. He believed revival must remain grounded in doctrinal orthodoxy and careful pastoral oversight. Though he never employed the anxious bench or manipulative techniques, thousands professed faith under his preaching throughout New England. His preaching was doctrinal, experiential, and pastoral. Rather than seeking immediate professions of faith, Nettleton carefully distinguished between emotional distress and genuine conversion brought about by the Holy Spirit. Nettleton feared that Finney's methods encouraged ministers to rely upon technique and emotional pressure instead of the ordinary means of grace and the sovereign work of God.

New Lebanon Conference

As Finney's popularity grew outside of Oneida County, the need for action from dissenting ministers intensified. Nettleton's dear friend Lyman Beecher and Finney's close associate Nathan Beman organized a meeting of Presbyterian and Congregationalist ministers in New Lebanon, NY in July 1827. The meeting brought together Finney, Nettleton, Beecher, Beman, and other ministers to discuss the growing divisions caused by the new measures. By this point, tensions had already escalated through public letters and sermons. Finney accused his opponents of spiritual deadness, while Nettleton warned that Finney misunderstood true religion and was in danger of spiritual pride.

The conference itself proved revealing. Finney's popularity was rapidly growing, and many ministers were increasingly unwilling to oppose methods that appeared numerically successful. At New Lebanon, the disagreements became clear. The issue was not whether revival should occur, but what revival truly was. For Nettleton, revival was a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit producing conviction of sin and lasting transformation. For Finney, revival increasingly appeared connected to the proper use of means and methods capable of producing results. Nettleton feared these innovations would leave lasting damage upon American Christianity.

If there was anyone to take Finney to task, it was going to be Nettleton. Though he was the most respected revival preacher of the old Calvinist persuasion, he remained largely silent during the proceedings. His silence was not indifference, but caution. This would prove to be a tactical mistake. Nettleton hoped to preserve peace within the church and still believed Finney might be corrected without creating a larger division among evangelicals.

His concerns ultimately proved correct, but it appeared to be too late. Finney's influence spread rapidly through Presbyterian and Congregational churches, while opposition to the new measures steadily weakened. Finney was influencing key ministers in various presbyteries, leading to seismic shifts in reformed churches in a short matter of time. Beecher, who during the conference told Finney that if he ever came to Massachusetts for a revival Beecher would, "meet you at the state line, and call out the artillery men, and fight every inch of the way to Boston."¹ Only a year later, Beecher ceased publicly resisting Finney and ended up inviting him to preach at his church in Boston.

Nettleton, however, remained committed to the Calvinistic evangelical tradition inherited from the First Great Awakening. Yet, since he was not the victor in this theological struggle, Nettleton faded into obscurity the rest of his life. His influence remained while he was alive, and he stayed faithful, but his legacy was not remembered. He has been dubbed by those who know him as the "Forgotten Evangelist." We would do well to remember this Calvinist preacher of Revival.

Lessons for Today

What are we to make of this? Nettleton was one of the last significant voices opposing Finneyism. I believe there are some lessons we can learn.

#1 Pastoral courage means speaking at the right time

This might be the biggest lesson to learn from Nettleton. He knew the truth and defended it wholeheartedly, yet when it mattered most he failed to leverage his influence by speaking sufficiently to the issues at the New Lebanon Conference. There is a time to be quiet and a time to speak—we need God’s help and wisdom to know the difference.

To be clear, although Finney was ordained into Reformed pastoral ministry, he eventually denied original sin, monergism, and penal-substitutionary atonement. Finney’s doctrine was an all-out assault on historic protestant Christianity. This is to say nothing of his problematic “new measures.”

We ought to have courage to call a spade a spade, whether that be the abortion clinic down the street, the errors of Rome, the compromise of the charismatic movement, or politicians who manipulate Scripture.

We must be shepherds who tenderly guard our flocks, but we must also warn them of the attacks of the wolves. Courage often looks like standing against error. Nettleton can be credited with doing this. However, his error was that he did not speak at the most opportune time. We often think that to be charitable is to remain silent. But there is a way forward, where we are kind to our theological opponents, while being very clear on the danger they pose.

#2 Pastoral courage means not purchasing peace at the expense of truth

Nettleton was a very admirable churchman. His desire for unity in the churches came from good motivations. Yet, the peace he sowed allowed for Finney’s errors to go unchecked and to begin the slow process of evangelical churches abandoning their traditions steeped in the old Calvinism that Nettleton taught. Many of the churches Finney was allowed to preach in are no longer faithful to their original evangelical convictions. Even Finney’s flagship institution, Oberlin College, is no longer considered Christian in any meaningful sense.

#3 Pastoral courage means fighting for the church’s future

Pastors are watchmen and they have a duty to observe the rising tide of our culture before it becomes a flood. We must observe false teaching today to help the church in the future. Cowardice in the present will be costly in the future. We do not know Nettleton’s heart; Was he naive? Was he a coward? We cannot know. But we can safely say that he missed the opportunity that was presented to him.

We must learn from Nettleton. Sometimes the right man speaks too little, and the wrong man speaks too much. Nettleton was far too gentle to Finney's bombastic argumentation. Being a pastor sometimes means not allowing misdirected charity to prevent boldness. Fellow pastor, you may have sound doctrine, you may strive for peace, and you may love the church, but you must also be courageous for the truth. Nettleton opposed Finney's error, but the question remains was he loud enough, clear enough, and soon enough in that opposition? Every generation of pastors will face this choice. Will we have public pastoral courage in our own day?

1. "Finney, I know your plan, and you know I do; you mean to come into Connecticut and carry a streak of fire into Boston. But if you attempt it, as the Lord liveth, I'll meet you at the state line, and call out the artillery men, and fight every inch of the way to Boston, and then I'll fight you there.", *God Sent Revival*, 178. Cited in Beecher's *Autobiography*, 1.101.

– Thornbury, John F., *God Sent Revival*. Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 1993.

– Beecher, Lyman. *Autobiography of Beecher*. 2 Volumes. New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1865. ↩

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