A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PREACHING OF ASAHEL NETTLETON IN THE SECOND GREAT AWAKENING

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APPROVAL SHEET

A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PREACHING
OF ASAHEL NETTLETON IN THE
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To Monnie,

my best friend, my love, my greatest supporter,

and to

the four amazing children who gave up so much of themselves

so their dad could pursue his dream.

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PREFACE

Although I am listed as the author of this finished work, it would have been impossible for me to complete without the help, support, and encouragement of a host of others. Professor Timothy Beougher has been a friend and a steady guide for me throughout this project, challenging me to think critically, work hard, and continue in the work on days I felt like quitting. Professors Charles Lawless and Chad Brand have also been highly influential on me and left an indelible mark on my thinking and my ministry. I am thankful for all those professors who have invested time in me throughout the years.

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Finally, but certainly not least, I thank my wife and our children. Proverbs 12:4 tells that "an excellent wife is the crown of her husband." Monnie, you are indeed my crown. You are my rock. You are a gift from God. You have inspired me, encouraged me, and believed in me when no one else did and it has been your love and sacrifice that carried me through this project. To Lindsey, Ethan, Terah, and Lucas, I owe a debt of gratitude that I cannot ever quantify or repay. You all supported me, cheered for me, and allowed me the time and space I needed to complete this task and I am forever in your debt. I love you all more than words on a page can ever tell.

I would be amiss if I did not recognize that it is the amazing grace of God in Christ Jesus that gives me life and health and strength for my every day and has made this project possible at all. Jesus sought me and redeemed me when I was an unworthy sinner and it is my desire to present all that I am and all that I do to honor him. My prayer is that our Lord Jesus would pour out his Spirit on his church today for great revival that will empower the church to greater faithfulness to the Great Commission.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Evangelicals have long been fascinated by the lives and ministries of salient and successful evangelists. Scores of studies have been done and volumes written about the lives, methods, and ministries of such men as George Whitefield, Dwight Moody, Billy Sunday, and Billy Graham. However, few books have been written about the ministry of evangelist Asahel Nettleton. He is not as well-known as many of the more celebrated evangelists in history. Though he is called by one prominent historian "the principal figure of the Second Great Awakening,"[1] he is still a virtual unknown to most. His ministry had a tremendous impact on thousands of people and hundreds of churches during America's Second Great Awakening. Furthermore, his engagement with the theological controversies of his day played a large part in the shaping of modern evangelicalism and an even larger part in understanding the changing shape of evangelistic ministry in the last two centuries.

Though not mentioned often in the popular literature today, Asahel Nettleton was a theological giant in his day. Christians up and down the Eastern seaboard and even in England knew of his powerful revivals and masterful preaching skills. It is said that during the peak years of his evangelistic ministry, approximately 30,000 individuals expressed faith in Christ as a result of Nettleton's preaching.[2] These numbers alone

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[1]Allen C. Guelzo, *Edwards on the Will: A Century of American Theological Debate* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1989), 217.

[2]Bennet Tyler and Andrew Bonar, *Asahel Nettleton: Life and Labours* (1854; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1996), 17.

warrant a closer look at his ministry and approach to evangelistic preaching. When one considers that Nettleton was an evangelist who interpreted the Scriptures and carried out ministry through the lens of nineteenth-century Edwardsean Calvinism, a study of his life and ministry takes on even greater significance. In Nettleton, one finds an example of a man who clung tightly to a Calvinistic soteriology and yet maintained a passion for souls demonstrated through a powerful evangelistic ministry. Accompanying the resurgence of Calvinism in the twenty-first century is an ongoing debate about whether or not those holding these doctrines can be passionate and consistent in their evangelistic approach. Is it possible for a preacher in the twenty-first century to hold consistently to the tenets of Calvinism and also have a preaching ministry that is passionately evangelistic and theologically consistent? This question is one of the many addressed in this study of Nettleton's life, ministry, and preaching. The purpose of this dissertation is to analyze the preaching and writings of Asahel Nettleton in order to discern not only his theological convictions but also the way in which his theology shaped his rhetorical approach to evangelistic preaching, focusing on the close relationship between his Calvinistic theology and his preaching.

Background

Author Jim Ehrhard calls Asahel Nettleton "the forgotten evangelist."[3] Concerning his relative anonymity, Nettleton biographer John Thornbury sadly notes, "The evangelical church has also seemed content to leave Nettleton in the graveyard of forgotten warriors."[4] One can only wonder how a man of such great prominence and evangelistic success in his day has been virtually forgotten today. Is it possible that, almost

[3]James Ehrhard, "Asahel Nettleton: The Forgotten Evangelist," *Reformation and Revival Journal* 6, no. 1 (1997): 67-68.

[4]John Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1988), 227.

two hundred years after Nettleton's death, his approach to evangelistic preaching might shed some much needed light on a contemporary debate? Moving beyond his obscurity, individuals who study his life actually discover in his ministry a great wealth of practical, pastoral, and theological insight about a theologically consistent approach to evangelistic preaching. A study of Nettleton's life and ministry produces significant insights which make needful contributions to one of today's most important practical and theological issues.

Before the fall of 2007, I had never heard the name Asahel Nettleton. Although I had a Bachelor's degree in history and had specialized in early American history, I could not recall ever hearing his name mentioned, even in passing. In the fall of 2007, while in a doctoral seminar with Timothy Beougher, entitled "Methods and Influence of American Evangelists," I was given the assignment of writing about Nettleton's life and ministry. As I took on the assignment and began researching Nettleton, I was intrigued by the way in which his ministerial methodologies were so closely aligned to and influenced by his theological convictions. His method of doing evangelism both from the pulpit and in the fields of labor was consistent with his Calvinistic convictions. His theological foundations carefully and consistently informed all of his practices. No fads or pragmatism permeated his methodologies, just faithful, simple, and biblically informed methods for making disciples. Furthermore, he broke many of the negative stereotypes about Calvinists and evangelists through his ministry.[5] Nettleton was passionate about reaching the lost and devoted his life to the practice of personal evangelism and the revival of local churches. During his peak years of evangelistic ministry, thousands came to faith in Christ through

[5]Many in Nettleton's day had a negative view of itinerant evangelists in no small part because of the divisive ministries of such men as James Davenport and James Davis and the controversy and confusion that had accompanied the "First Great Awakening" decades earlier. See Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 48-53.

his preaching and scores of churches and communities were touched by powerful revivals as a result of his visits. Individuals and communities were changed in such profound ways that decades later they were still feeling the effects of the revivals that God brought through Nettleton. In his day, he was well-known throughout New England and even across the Atlantic. These impressive results came through the ministry of a man who was unwavering in his commitment to Calvinistic doctrine. I was drawn to Nettleton and his ministry and wanted to know more.

Almost immediately, I began to ponder the implications that Nettleton's ministry might have for ministers in today's contemporary context who, while embracing Calvinistic doctrine, desire a passionately evangelistic ministry built on methods consistent with biblical teaching about sin, regeneration, the working of the Holy Spirit, the place of the Word of God, and human responsibility. As I learned more about Nettleton's opposition to Charles Finney's "New Measures" and the evolving view of revivals that Nettleton combated, I knew that his life and ministry was worthy of study. I felt an understanding of Nettleton's ministry could contribute to a deeper understanding of today's theological controversies and evangelistic practices. At least one prominent Christian historian argued that the major theological and methodological shift in the history of American evangelism occurred as a result of the growing influence of Charles Finney's revival methods combined with a growing acceptance of the liberal "New Haven" theology and its interpretations of man and his sinfulness.[6] It was Nettleton who stood against Finney's innovations and attempted to turn back the rising tide of change in evangelistic

[6]Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism, 1750-1858* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1994), xvii-xx. See also John H. Armstrong, "Editor's Introduction," *Reformation and Revival Journal* 6, no. 1 (1997): 10. Also, Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 170, 176-77, stresses the transformational impact of the Second Great Awakening and Finney's "revivalism" on the fabric of American life in general.

and revivalist methodologies. Nettleton believed that the new methods would ultimately hinder the Spirit of God from bringing true revival to churches.[7]

If there are problems with the way evangelicals *do* evangelism and discipleship today, it may very well be due to trends that can be traced back to the conflict of ideas and methodologies between Nettleton and Finney.[8] The contemporary church benefits from studying evangelists like Nettleton because their practices and theological convictions concerning revival pre-date the Finney-influenced revivalism that came to characterize most of American evangelicalism following the Second Great Awakening. With such a fruitful evangelistic ministry, a study of Nettleton's broader evangelistic methodologies, and more specifically his approach to structuring, developing, and delivering sermons, seemed in order.

As my research into his life and ministry expanded, it became apparent to me that little had been written about his actual approach to evangelistic preaching. How did Nettleton preach persuasively while remaining fundamentally true to his theological convictions? Did his language, passion, and delivery break the stereotype of the cold, dispassionate Calvinist that had developed in the New England tradition?[9] What could contemporary evangelists and preachers learn from an analysis of his sermons, rhetoric,

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[7]Even Finney himself later questioned the true nature of his earlier revivals. For an example of his doubts, see Charles Finney, "Unhealthy Revival Excitement," in Charles Finney, *Revival Fire: Letters on Revivals*, 9-13, accessed April 11, 2017, http://www.hopefaithprayer.com/books/RevivalFire.pdf.

[8]Sidney Ahlstrom concludes, "Finney is an immensely important man in American history by any standard of measure. His revivals were a powerful force in the rising antislavery impulse and in the rise of urban evangelism. He was an influential revisionist in the Reformed theological tradition, an enormously successful practitioner, almost the inventor, of the modern high-pressure revivalism which, as it spread, would have important consequences for the religious ethos of the nation as a whole." Sidney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 461.

[9]McLoughlin paints a dreary picture of the New England Calvinist (prior to Finney's innovations) as one in constant anxiety concerning his salvation, constant fear of hell, and no sense of peace or joy. See William G. McLoughlin, Jr., *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York: Ronald, 1959), 19-25.

and doctrine? I concluded that an examination of the ministry of this relatively unknown evangelist from the past would indeed yield fruit for evangelists in the present.

Contemporary Relevance

Concurrent with my discovery of Nettleton's ministry was the rising controversy surrounding the resurgence of Calvinism among Southern Baptists. It was during the years of my graduate studies that this controversy gained renewed momentum.[10] Closely following this theological controversy allowed me to see even more clearly how a further study of Nettleton's life and ministry would benefit the church today. Few question whether there is an ongoing resurgence of Calvinistic theology among evangelicals at the turn of the twenty-first century. In recent years, many popular articles in leading Christian and secular magazines and journals have chronicled this resurgence.[11] Entire books have even been written documenting this resurgence of a theological identity which, for many decades, existed in dormant form among small groups of evangelicals, but which is now making a steady return into the mainstream of evangelical thought and identity. This resurgence has been especially prominent among some of the seminaries and churches of

[10]The growing controversy surrounding the resurgence of Calvinism in the SBC can be seen by the rise in prominence of such groups and gatherings as Mark Dever's "9-Marks," the "Together for the Gospel" conference, The Founders Fraternal, the "Building Bridges" conference (2007) and the "John 3:16" conference (2008, inaugural). This growing tension that has accompanied the rise of Calvinism in the SBC has been well documented in books such as E. Ray Clendenen and Brad J. Waggoner, *Calvinism: A Southern Baptist Dialogue* (Nashville: B & H, 2008), 9-10. See also David L. Allen and Steve W. Lemke, eds., *Whosoever Will: A Biblical-Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism* (Nashville: B & H, 2010), vii-xii; Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 69-93. *Christianity Today* has also covered the growing controversy in recent years, giving it coverage in the following articles, among others: Timothy George, "John Calvin: Comeback Kid," *Christianity Today* 53, no. 9 (2009): 26-32; Collin Hansen, "Young, Restless, Reformed: Calvinism is Making a Comeback—and Shaking Up the Church," *Christianity Today* 50, no. 9 (2006): 32-38; Molly Worthen, "The Reformer," *Christianity Today* 54, no. 10 (2010): 18-25.

[11]In 2013, the *Huffington Post* Religion section released an article about the controversy. See Greg Horton, "How Calvinism Is Dividing the Southern Baptist Convention," *Huffington Post*, June 6, 2013, accessed March 9, 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/06/how-calvinism-is-dividing-the-southern-baptist-convention_n_3399504.html.

the Southern Baptist Convention. Some within the SBC have been at the forefront of restoring the theology and terminology of Calvinism into the mainstream of evangelical thought.

In a *Christianity Today* cover story documenting the career and impact of R. Albert Mohler, Jr., on modern evangelicalism, Molly Worthen writes,

> Many commentators, in these pages and elsewhere, have noted the rising interest in Reformed theology among young evangelicals. In no denomination has the Calvinist revival been more striking, and more controversial, than in the SBC. Although many Southern Baptists were Calvinists in the 19th century, for the past hundred years most have feared Calvinism as an abstract bogey in a Geneva collar, threatening to divide churches over doctrinal minutiae and kill evangelism with predestinarian bile.[12]

The article went on to note that Mohler has been intentional about his desire to "steer" the seminary in a clearly Reformed direction and that, according to recent research by LifeWay, his intentionality is paying off. The article quotes 2007 LifeWay research indicating that nearly one-third of all SBC seminary graduates identified themselves as holding Calvinistic theological views.[13] Other articles in *Christianity Today* in recent years reinforce the resurgence of interest in Calvinistic influence among evangelicals in general. One recent analysis concluded though that the resurgence of Calvinistic theology is not as widespread in the larger Christian community as it is particularly among Southern Baptists, the largest Protestant denomination in the United States. While analysts continue to debate the precise impact of this resurgence on evangelicalism, two

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[12]Worthen, "The Reformer," 24.

[13]Jeff Robinson, "Study: Recent Grads 3 Times More Likely to Be Calvinists," November 27, 2007, accessed March 9, 2017, http://bpnews.net/26914/study-recent-grads-3-times-more-likely-to-be-calvinists. Even more recent research released in 2012 indicated that 30 percent of SBC pastors "strongly agreed" or "somewhat agreed" that they were either Reformed or Calvinists. Exactly the same percentage "strongly agreed" or "somewhat agreed" that they were Arminian or Wesleyan in their theology. In the same survey though, 61 percent of respondent pastors indicated that they were "concerned" about the impact of Calvinism on the Southern Baptist Convention. See Russ Rankin, "SBC Pastors Polled on Calvinism and Its Effect," June 19, 2012, accessed March 9, 2017, http://www.lifeway.com/Article/research-sbc-pastors-polled-on-calvinism-affect-on-convention. At the very least, one can conclude that Calvinism is on the minds of many in the SBC.

truths are virtually undeniable. First, there has been a dramatic resurgence of Calvinistic theology in recent years, and second, this resurgence has had a great impact on the Southern Baptist denomination.[14]

Not everyone has seen this resurgence as a positive movement. Some have theoretically correlated recent declines in Southern Baptist evangelistic impact with the rise of resurgent Calvinism, claiming that at least a part of the reason the denomination is losing its evangelistic passion and missional effectiveness is due to changing views of the doctrines of election, human responsibility, and God's initiative in regeneration.[15] Critics surmise that a generation of pastors, teachers, and leaders has been impacted by Calvinistic views of God's sovereignty in salvation and that this generation is less passionate about traditional evangelism and evangelistic methodologies. They point to a decline in the number of traditional revival meetings, changing attitudes toward the "invitation" or "altar-call," and changes in preaching styles as indications that shifts in evangelistic methodologies are directly correlated to the rise in Calvinistic theology among Southern Baptists.[16] Others sound the alarm and warn churches against the divisive "aristocratic elitism" and "antinomian tendencies" of Calvinists in the Southern Baptist Convention, concluding that "it is impossible to be at once both truly Reformed and truly Baptist."[17] Some critics of resurgent Calvinism even go so far as to conclude that a lack of passion

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[14]Worthen, "The Reformer," 24-25.

[15]This accusation in denominational life is not new, it has limped along for decades. In 1988, Robert Selph noted, "Today, many Southern Baptists, along with most evangelicals, consider the doctrine of Election to be nonessential, detrimental to evangelism, a threat to missionary zeal, a contradiction to the love and fairness of God, and divisive to the churches. This attitude is so different from what Baptists used to embrace." Robert B. Selph, *Southern Baptists and the Doctrine of Election* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1996), 8.

[16]R. Alan Streett, "The Public Invitation and Calvinism," in *Whosoever Will*, 233-51.

[17]Malcolm B. Yarnell III, "The Potential Impact of Calvinist Tendencies upon Local Baptist Churches," in *Whosoever Will*, 223, 227, 232.

for the lost necessarily accompanies Calvinistic theology, an assertion which is hardly quantifiable but nonetheless claimed.[18]

My interest in this ongoing debate is not merely academic. It is in fact deeply personal for me on many levels. First, I am a Southern Baptist who is greatly concerned for the denomination's future and effectiveness in reaching non-Christians with the gospel of Christ. Second, I am a convinced Calvinist, having been taught the "doctrines of grace" from my first days as a newly converted Christian and having a deep-seated conviction that these doctrines are true and biblical. Third, I am a keen student of evangelism and have always considered myself active and passionate when it comes to sharing my faith in Christ. Not only do I share the gospel frequently with those I come in contact with, but I have always considered my pulpit ministry to be evangelistic in nature as well. Every sermon I preach, at some point, clearly and articulately points sinners to the cross of Christ and calls all sinners (with passion) to repent and believe on Him alone for their forgiveness. I have always considered the clear presentation of the gospel and the invitation to all sinners to be of the greatest importance in my preaching even when the sermon is not primarily related to regeneration (e.g., sermons on stewardship, relationships, church discipline, or forgiveness). It has therefore come as somewhat of a personal

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[18]Frank S. Page, *Trouble with the TULIP* (Canton, GA: Riverstone, 2000), 73-76. Also, Steve W. Lemke, "The Future of Southern Baptists as Evangelicals" (paper presented at the Maintaining Baptist Distinctives Conference, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, April 2005), 13-17, accessed March 9, 2017, http://www.nobts.edu/faculty/itor/Lemkesw/personal/sbcfuture.pdf. Also, in 2006, Jerry Vines publicly maligned Calvinistic theology and stated that if a Calvinist was evangelistic it was "in spite of his theology." Jerry Vines, "A Baptist and His Calvinism" (sermon delivered at First Baptist Church Woodstock, GA, 2006), accessed March 9, 2017, www.jerryvines.com/store/cds/product/baptist-battles. Vines' sermon was distributed to all Florida Baptist Pastors by their Executive Director, John Sullivan, in an effort to warn them about the growing Calvinistic influence. Tom Ascol of the Founders Ministry blogged about the situation in "Vines on Calvinism," accessed March 9, 2017, http://founders.org/2006/10/17/vines-on-calvinism. For more details about the growing tension, see also Tom Ascol, "Florida Pastors Sent Anti-Calvinist Propaganda," accessed March 9, 2017, http://founders.org/2007/06/06/florida-pastors-sent-anti-calvinist-propaganda. I am indebted to Nathan Finn's recounting of events for the flow of this sequence of events in his excellent chapter "Southern Baptist Calvinism: Setting the Record Straight," in *Calvinism*, 171-92, esp. 175-76.

offense and even a shock to hear critics in this ongoing debate challenge the passion for the lost and obedience to the Great Commission of those holding Calvinistic convictions.[19]

Finally, I am a shepherd of God's people and have served local churches as a pastor for over twenty years. My deepest concern is that I preach, teach, mentor, and train disciples in ways that are both theologically consistent with the Scriptures and reflective of the Great Commission passion for disciple-making that I believe Christ intends for his church. Nettleton's ministry methods produced lifelong followers of Jesus Christ. I want to be sure that I am ministering in such a way that my message and my methods produce genuinely converted, lifelong disciples of Jesus Christ who "appear to run well,"[20] enduring to the end and living fruitful lives that demonstrate growth in sanctification, obedience, and service.

For critics to make claims about a correlation between evangelism and Calvinistic theology certainly invites and merits historical and theological investigation. If the claims are indeed true that Calvinistic theology inhibits, discourages, or even lessens

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[19]Evangelist Nelson Price, "Evangelical Calvinism is an Oxymoron," *Christian Index*, 23 November, 2006, accessed March 9, 2017, http://www.tciarchive.org/2780.article, notes in an editorial that "Calvinism is a dagger in the heart of evangelism." See also Nelson Price, "Covert Calvinists," accessed March 9, 2017, www.nelsonprice.com/index.php/?p=215, where he notes, "There are a rare few Calvinists who believe in witnessing to the lost." See also Timmy Brister, "A Chronological Survey of the Calvinism/ Arminianism Debate in the SBC," accessed March 9, 2017, http://www.thedivineconspiracy.org/ Z5243H.pdf, for a thorough compilation of articles, links, blog entries, etc., pertinent to understanding the accusations leveled toward Calvinism in recent years.

[20]Bennet Tyler, *Memoir of the Life and Character of Asahel Nettleton, D. D.* (1853; repr., Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, n. d.), 325. The issue of genuine conversion was of great significance to Nettleton. His biographer, Bennet Tyler, notes that Nettleton kept a list of names of those converted under his ministry. He "followed up" with his converts for years after his meetings and noted that, generally speaking, those converted under Nettleton's ministry continued to "run well" in the faith many years afterward. This is an incredible testimony to the genuine nature of the revivals brought to the church under his ministry and has significant relevance in a day when so many profess faith in Christ but then fall away. Also, the question of whether or not so-called "conversions" at revival meetings are genuine has been a subject of more recent scholarship. See Curtis Mitchell, who seeks objectively to answer the question, "what finally happens to people who come forward in a Billy Graham crusade?" Curtis Mitchell, *Those Who Came Forward: Men and Women Who Responded to the Ministry of Billy Graham* (Philadelphia: Chilton, 1966), ix.

one's passion for obedience to the Great Commission, then these doctrines should be anathema to the church today. However, one must not assume that this proposition is *de facto* true. In fact, some argue that in the "post-Reformation era" of the last four-centuries, many of the leading evangelists in the Western church have held strongly Calvinistic convictions. Men such as Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, David Brainerd, Andrew Fuller, William Carey, and Charles Spurgeon, and in the modern era, D. James Kennedy and John Piper, have all held to greater or lesser degrees Calvinistic theology and yet were not deterred from evangelistic passion by their theological convictions, but rather driven to it.[21]

In light of these historic examples, is it fair to allow the objection of critics in the modern debate to go unchallenged? Can modern critics of resurgent Calvinism be continually allowed to oppose Calvinism based on this claim without substantiating whether or not Calvinism really "kills" evangelism? Is it even true or intellectually honest? Does Calvinistic theology indeed dampen one's passion for evangelism and is Calvinism theologically inconsistent with a passionately evangelistic ministry? With the rising interest in Calvinistic theology, it might do well to ask whether or not younger Calvinistic pastors are struggling with what it means to be evangelistic in their ministry and preaching. John Piper, himself a theological Calvinist, stated in his lectures on preaching (which were subsequently published as the book *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*).

> It is a tragedy to see pastors state the facts and sit down. . . . Good preaching pleads with people to respond to the Word of God. . . . When we preach, to be sure, it is

[21]Tom Ascol concludes that Calvinism actually fuels missionary and evangelistic impulse. Following his brief survey, he notes, "Both the biblical and historical records demonstrate that those doctrines that are commonly known as Calvinism, far from hindering missions and evangelism, actually fuel such work." Thomas K. Ascol, "Calvinism Foundational for Evangelism and Missions," in *Whomever He Wills: A Surprising Display of Sovereign Mercy*, ed. Matthew Barrett and Thomas J. Nettles (Cape Coral, FL: Founders, 2012), 288. More recently, Haykin and Robinson have written a work "to lay to rest the charge that to be a Calvinist is to cease being missional. . . . The leading subjects of this book are all Calvinists—and as shall be seen, all passionately missional." Michael A. G. Haykin and C. Jeffrey Robinson, Sr., *To the Ends of the Earth: Calvin's Missional Vision and Legacy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 13.

> God who affects the results for which we long . . . that does not rule out earnest appeals for our people to respond.[22]

One of the most vocal and visible Calvinist ministers of his generation insists that holding high views of God's sovereignty does not mean that preaching should be a dry, boring statement of theological fact, devoid of passion and pleading. Might this be a difficulty that many young Calvinistic ministers are struggling with weekly, as they seek to marry doctrinal fidelity and consistency with an earnest and heartfelt passion that compels them toward emotional and intellectual engagement with their audience? Is it possible that a younger generation of Calvinistic pastors could learn from the passion, theology, preaching, and evangelistic methodologies of a little-known evangelist like Nettleton from the pages of history?

These and other questions drove me to believe that an examination of the life and ministry of Asahel Nettleton is relevant to today's ongoing discussion about the relationship between Calvinistic theology and evangelistic fervor and practice. Nettleton, though little known in the annals of history, was a key figure in America's Second Great Awakening. He was an open and avowed Calvinist who, in a ten-year span of evangelistic ministry in Connecticut, saw tens of thousands of individuals come to saving faith in Christ because of his itinerant preaching and evangelistic ministry. Despite these astonishing results, he is relatively unknown by most students of church history today. When he is mentioned, it is almost always as the chief theological opponent of Charles Finney and his "New Measures" of revival.[23] Though his example would only serve as qualitative evidence to be added to the ongoing debate about Calvinism, his ministry, methodologies, and legacy should be considered important in the discussion today because he provides an example of an evangelist who intentionally preached Calvinistic doctrine and was successful in "closing the net" and seeing thousands converted to faith in Christ.

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[22]John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 94-95.

[23]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 227.

This study of his theology, preaching, and rhetorical style offers implications for a generation of preachers and seminarians who long to be biblically faithful in their message as well as in their methodologies.

Literature Review

As my interest in Nettleton deepened, I wrote a number of papers about him and his ministry, his theology, and his methodology. Over the course of two years of doctoral work, I was able to learn much more about this obscure man that I had been introduced to and impressed by earlier. I was surprised to discover that there is relatively little written about the man on an academic level. For the most part, when he is mentioned, it is almost exclusively as a footnote to Charles Finney who is ironically hailed by many as the "father of modern evangelism."[24] He appears occasionally in some of the more thorough histories of American theology as a footnote to the debate surrounding the "New Haven" Theology of Nathaniel Taylor.[25] The few popular works that exist about Nettleton are, for the most part, mere biographical overviews of his life and the period of The Second Great Awakening. The dissertations and theses written about Nettleton have also been either biographical in nature or written with an emphasis on Nettleton's role as Finney's antagonist. These dissertations say little about the content of Nettleton's preaching but focus instead on his methods as compared to the "New Measures" methodologies propagated by Finney, which have since become the staple in mainstream American evangelicalism.[26] Thus, as the following summary of relevant works

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[24]John Mark Terry, *Evangelism: A Concise History* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman,1994), 146.

[25]For example, in Holifield's recent work on the subject, Nettleton is mentioned no more than a handful of times, all in reference to Taylor. In the index, he is listed on three pages. E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2003), 350, 359-60.

[26]Erroll Hulse calls Finney "the catalyst for modern evangelistic methods" (94) and shows the connection between Finney's theology and methodologies and the ministries of evangelists who would follow him such as D. L. Moody, R. A. Torrey, Billy Sunday, Billy Graham, and Luis Palau, among others.

demonstrates, little is written about the actual content, rhetoric, theology, and delivery style of Nettleton's evangelistic preaching. This void in the Nettleton literature is what I address in this study.

An introduction to Nettleton and his ministry is best obtained through reading one of two helpful biographies. The first, a memoir written by Nettleton's close friend and contemporary within a few years of his death in 1844, is Bennet Tyler's *Memoir of the Life and Character of Asahel Nettleton*, published in 1853.[27] This *Memoir* combined Tyler's earlier collection of Nettleton's sermons (1845) with a thorough overview of Nettleton's life and work. It includes dozens of letters, manuscripts, and anecdotes from various ministers and congregants who were impacted by Nettleton's ministry. Tyler's work would later be "remodelled in some parts" by Andrew Bonar for an English audience in the work *Nettleton and His Labours*, published in 1854 with authorship attributed to both Tyler and Bonar. Though Bonar's work would be revised into numerous other editions, the later editions remain remarkably similar to the first and are still available today for popular consumption. Tyler's *Memoir*, as well as his and Bonar's more popular *Nettleton and His Labours*, were both filled with first-hand accounts and interviews, most of which the authors either compiled from eyewitnesses or observed personally. Though Tyler's work is the most direct source of material about Nettleton, John Thornbury's *God Sent Revival* is a more recent and accessible biographical sketch of Nettleton, first published in 1975.[28] Thornbury draws largely on Tyler's material but also supplements his study with other primary sources and occasionally his own interpretation of events. Though Tyler records lengthy portions of Nettleton's sermons

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Erroll Hulse, *The Great Invitation: Examining the Use of the Altar Call in Evangelism* (Laurel, MS: Audubon, 2006), 94-103.

[27]Tyler, *Memoir*, iii-vi.

[28]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 13-14.

and Thornbury devotes one chapter to Nettleton's preaching style (chap. 17, "The Greatest since Whitefield"), neither work extensively examines the relationship between the rhetorical style of Nettleton and his theological convictions by an analysis of his sermons. These two books present broader overviews of Nettleton's entire life and ministry.

In academia, only a handful of projects have been written about Nettleton's life and ministry in the 170-plus years since his death. The first of these is George Hugh Birney's 1943 dissertation entitled "The Life and Letters of Asahel Nettleton." This massive piece (over 450 pages) is essential for any study of Nettleton's life. Birney has recovered and compiled many letters and personal documents of Nettleton to provide the reader with a detailed account of his life and ministry. Over 200 pages of this dissertation are filled with Nettleton's letters, theological writings and diary material.[29] Birney's material is well-researched and essential for any study of Nettleton. In 1969, Sherry Pierpont May contributed another excellent project about Nettleton entitled "Asahel Nettleton: Nineteenth Century American Revivalist." May's approach as a historian is to study Nettleton as exemplary of the New England revivalism of his period and by thus understanding Nettleton, to have a better understanding of the period in general.[30] Thus, while she gives an extensive overview of his ministry, the controversies in which he was involved, and the theological dispute with New Haven, May is less concerned with the implications for ministry today that may arise out of a study of Nettleton's methods or message.

At least five dissertations or thesis projects have been written since 1997, about Nettleton, most by students at Southern Baptist seminaries. What they have in common is

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[29]George H. Birney, "The Life and Letters of Asahel Nettleton, 1783-1844" (Ph.D. diss., Hartford Theological Seminary, 1943), 236-459.

[30]Sherry Pierpont May, "Asahel Nettleton: Nineteenth Century American Revivalist" (Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 1969), 4.

that most of them compare some aspect of Nettleton's theology or methods against Finney's theology and methods. Nelson compares the theological systems and corollary methodologies of Nettleton and Finney[31] while Kang compares the preaching styles and underlying theological foundations of both Nettleton and Finney, comparing and contrasting the two.[32] Similarly, Hwang examines the role of the Bible and Christian experience in each man's methodologies, making implications for modern ministry.[33] Two other projects were so recent that they escaped my purview during my research.[34]

A number of primary source materials give great insight into the ministry of Nettleton. Most notable among these are the recent editions of Nettleton's *Village Hymns for Social Worship* (1997) and his *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening* (1995), both published by International Outreach of Ames, Iowa.[35] In *Sermons*, editor William Nichols has transcribed twenty-eight previously unpublished sermons by Nettleton and

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[31]Ricky Charles Nelson, "The Relationship between Soteriology and Evangelistic Methodology in the Ministries of Asahel Nettleton and Charles G. Finney" (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997).

[32]Sung Ho Kang, "The Evangelistic Preaching of Asahel Nettleton and Charles G. Finney in the Second Great Awakening and Applications for Contemporary Evangelism" (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2004).

[33]Sung Chul Hwang, "The Bible and Christian Experience in the Revival Movements of Charles G. Finney and Asahel Nettleton" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2006).

[34]See Michael Anthony Cobb, "The Integration of Revival Methodology, Reformed Theology and Church Revitalization in the Evangelistic Ministry of Asahel Nettleton" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 1-18. A project from the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary examined the revival methodologies of Nettleton in contrast with Finney and compared those to modern evangelists Billy Graham and Luis Pulau. See Neil D. Smith, "Contemporary Revival Methods and the New Measures Controversy" (D.Min. thesis, The Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2007).

[35]Asahel Nettleton, *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening,* ed. William C. Nichols (Ames, IA: International Outreach, 1995), i; and Asahel Nettleton, *Village Hymns for Social Worship: Selected and Original, Designed as a Supplement to the Psalms and Hymns of Dr. Watts,* ed. William C. Nichols (Ames, IA: International Outreach, 1997), preface.

taken from Nettleton's own handwritten manuscripts.[36] These sermons should give direct insight into the thought and style of Nettleton as he prepared to deliver his sermons. These manuscripts along with various contemporary accounts of Nettleton's revivals (Reverend R. Smith's *Recollections of Nettleton and the Revival of 1820*, for example) give insight into his content, organization, word selection, and delivery style.[37] Also in Nichols' *Sermons* are Nettleton's own "notes on theology," which organize and systematically spell out his various theological positions. The series of pamphlets and responses published under the title *Letters of the Rev. Dr. Beecher and Rev. Mr. Nettleton on the "New Measures" in Conducting Revivals of Religion* chronicle the debate over the methodologies accompanying Finney's revivals that arose between Nettleton and his camp and Finney and his supporters.[38] Coupled with Rosell and Dupuis's recent revised edition of Finney's own autobiography, *The Original Memoirs of Charles G. Finney*, and Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe's excellent biography *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism*, students of Nettleton can get an excellent overview of the lively debate and tense relationship that existed between these men because of their contradictory methodologies and theological approaches.[39]

Various other books critically examine this period in American history and give attention to the nature and impact of Nettleton's ministry. Iain Murray references

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[36]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 106. Even Thornbury did not have these manuscripts when he wrote his autobiography and admits that he had little written sermon material to analyze in his research.

[37]R. Smith, *Recollections of Nettleton, and the Great Revival of 1820* (Albany, NY: E. H. Pease & Co., 1848), 6-8.

[38]*Letters of The Rev. Dr. Beecher and Rev. Mr. Nettleton on the "New Measures" in Conducting Revivals of Religion- With a Review of a Sermon by Novanglus* (New York: G. & C. Carvill, 1828), vi.

[39]Garth M. Rosell and Richard A. G. Dupuis, eds., *The Original Memoirs of Charles G. Finney* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 156-84. See bibliography for Hambrick-Stowe's work.

Nettleton's ministry extensively in his study of revivals and The Second Great Awakening in the book *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism, 1750-1858.*[40] Murray essentially argues that the shifting of evangelical understanding of conversion, revivals, and evangelism takes place during this period with the results forever changing (negatively in his assessment) the power and presence of revivals in North America. He gives great attention to the roles played by both Finney and Nettleton in this monumental shift. Finally, Mark Noll and Brooks Holifield are among the historians who do an exceptional job establishing the context of early nineteenth-century revivalism in lengthy chapters in their books *America's God* and *Theology in America*.[41] Both books should be referenced and read for a better understanding of the era and the theological innovations, trends, and conflicts that shaped the period.

Finally, various journal articles have appeared through the years examining one or another aspect of Nettleton's ministry and at least some of those are worth mentioning. John Thornbury wrote an excellent article summarizing Nettleton's conflict with Finney, and Robert More, Jr., writes a brief but interesting piece looking at the importance of theological and methodological congruity, drawing from the ministry of Nettleton.[42] In addition, an excellent series of three articles appeared in the *Reformation and Revival Journal* in 1997, covering the topics of the Second Great Awakening as a "watershed" revival, Finney's impact on evangelism and revivals, and Asahel Nettleton's ministry.[43]

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[40]Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 194, 196-99, 200, 220, 235-37, 268-69, 321, 340, 387.

[41]Mark Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 269-92; and Holifield, *Theology in America*, 341-94.

[42]John F. Thornbury, "Asahel Nettleton's Conflict with Finneyism," *Reformation and Revival* 8, no. 2 (1999): 103-19. Also, Robert More, Jr., "Asahel Nettleton and Evangelistic Methods," *Banner of Truth* 85 (October 1970): 29-37.

[43]See Robert H. Lescelius, "The Second Great Awakening: The Watershed Revival," *Reformation and Revival Journal* 6, no. 1 (1997): 13-31; Bob Pyke, "Charles G. Finney and the Second Great Awakening," *Reformation and Revival Journal* 6, no. 1 (1997): 33-65; and Ehrhard, "Asahel Nettleton, 67-93.

These articles are a must read for any student of Nettleton, Finney, or the Second Great Awakening.

Delimitations of the Study

As with any research project, a number of delimitations are to be considered. First, I did not seek to prove some significant theological assumptions in the parameters of this paper. I write as an evangelical Christian who accepts the full inerrancy of the Christian Scriptures and the full affirmation that the only way for a person to be saved is through personal, explicit faith in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ (John 14:6, Acts 4:12). I also assume, based on the evidence of Scripture, that it is God's desire for all men everywhere to repent, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and be saved (Acts 17:30-31, 1 Tim 2:1-4). Furthermore, concerning the work of evangelism, I assume that the power necessary for evangelistic success is never to be found in man's methodologies, manipulation, or persuasiveness but rather that the power for conversion rests in the faithful communication of the message of the gospel, which the Holy Spirit mysteriously uses to bring regeneration and conversion to the sinner (Rom 1:16, 1 Thess 2:13, 1 Cor 1:18, 21-25, 2:1-5). Finally, though personal evangelism is and will remain the primary strategy for reaching the lost, the church must continue to hold equally high the biblical emphasis upon evangelistic preaching in the context of gathered worship (Rom 10:14-17, 1 Cor 15:1-5, Acts 2, 10:42, 1 Cor 9:16). Whenever the church is gathered and the Word of God is preached, the message preached should be Christ-centered and evangelistic. Because of a lack of space, the parameters of this project, and the thoroughly biblical grounds on which these teachings stand, these assumptions, which appear throughout the paper, are granted without the burden of proof.

Second, although the broader scope of Nettleton's ministry and methodologies are referenced (particularly in the introduction chapter) this study does not strain to examine or analyze in great depth the various methodologies used by Nettleton in his

evangelistic ministry. It instead focuses more deliberately on his preaching and the theological foundations that undergirded that preaching. Other studies and writings make much mention of Nettleton's use of the inquiry meeting, his use of contemporary hymnody, and his involvement in the "New Measures" controversy. These are certainly vital components of his total ministry and they deserve the attention they are given elsewhere. However, no significant studies focus particularly on Nettleton's sermons, examining his choice use of words, rhetorical style, and presentation in his very effective style of preaching. His sermons have not yet been analyzed through the traditional canons of rhetoric used frequently in today's culture for an analysis of one's rhetorical style. When this aspect of his ministry is analyzed alongside his particular theological convictions, with special attention given to the synthesis of Nettleton's rhetorical effectiveness and his theological convictions, a helpful study emerged.

Third, this study differs from the more recent Nettleton studies by being almost exclusively focused on Nettleton as the subject. In other words, Nettleton's theology and preaching are examined on their own merit and not as they compare to Finney's preaching. Certainly no one can write about Nettleton's life and ministry without mention of Jonathan Edwards, Nathaniel Taylor, and Finney and the "New Measures" controversy, and it is historically significant that the tension between the two schools of thought represented by Nettleton and Finney would forever change the shape of American evangelicalism. That being said, the focus of this study does not compare a particular aspect of Nettleton's ministry to Finney's and hold the two side by side. Instead, using primarily the recently transcribed volume of Nettleton's sermons, his own theological notes, and the *Letters*, I analyze first his theological foundations and then his sermons. I analyze his hermeneutical and homiletical style while giving attention to the power of his rhetorical stylizations and word selection and the manner in which he so effectively conveyed his theological understanding of regeneration, revival, and the Christian life.

Finally, because this project is primarily a historical paper and because there are certain constraints to the length of the paper, an in-depth examination of every relevant Scripture passage and doctrinal nuance is impossible. This project is not a dissertation in systematic theology. My goal is not necessarily to explain or defend particular doctrines, but rather to assume a certain theological knowledge by the reader. Even though I seek to present Nettleton's theological convictions accurately, I do not defend his positions. My goal is rather to understand how he communicated his convictions articulately, passionately, and consistently in his evangelistic preaching and called men to faith consistent with his Calvinistic convictions. Certain sections of the project lend themselves to more scriptural examination than others (i.e., the limits and ethics of rhetoric in preaching), but for the most part my project moves more toward understanding the way in which this powerful preacher conveyed the gospel with such power and clarity in the context of his theological Calvinism. When theology is addressed, it is dealt with more from a historic/systematic paradigm than from a biblical /exegetical examination.

It is my hope that this project is a significant contribution to the corpus of Nettleton literature. I also hope that by narrowly focusing on the passionate and evangelistic preaching of an astutely theological Calvinist, I make significant implications for contemporary ministers. As the number of ministers in the church that hold to greater or lesser degrees of divine sovereignty in regeneration increases, it is important for our understanding of the Great Commission that effective evangelism also increase. If indeed many theological Calvinists today struggle with the synthesis of theological consistency and passionate evangelistic appeal in their preaching, a study of Nettleton's preaching methods can provide a helpful model for examination while making significant implications for preachers. A study of his preaching ministry benefits the body of Christ by making men better and more theologically consistent preachers of the Word of God.

There has never been a greater need for pastors and leaders in the body of Christ who are evangelistically passionate, theologically grounded, and eminently

practical. The challenges of contemporary culture demand that today's preachers, pastors, and leaders be more thoughtful, articulate, and intentional than at any other time in history, if the church is to be faithful to the Lord's Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20). The example of Asahel Nettleton's ministry from the past and a close rhetorical analysis of his preaching are a helpful guide for those seeking encouragement and guidance in the present if they would just take the time to learn more of this "forgotten" evangelist.

CHAPTER 2

ASAHEL NETTLETON—THE MAN AND HIS MINISTRY

Introduction

It is unlikely that when the president of Yale College, Timothy Dwight, spoke of one of his students by noting, "He will make one of the most useful men this country has ever seen,"[1] that he could have ever known just how true those prophetic words would be. The student he spoke of was Asahel Nettleton. Dwight had no way of knowing when he spoke those words that Nettleton would become one of the leading evangelists of his day, guiding an estimated 30,000 souls to faith in Christ and being used of God to bring revival to New England churches for decades.[2] With so many thousands of people coming to faith in Christ as a result of his ministry, it is surprising that few Christians today have ever even heard the name of Asahel Nettleton. Considering the estimated results of his ministry, one would think Nettleton's name would be mentioned alongside revival greats such as Whitefield, Edwards, Finney, Moody and Graham.[3] Noted

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[1]Bennet Tyler and Andrew Bonar, *Asahel Nettleton: Life and Labours* (1854; repr., Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), 41.

[2]Ibid., 17. This number is often quoted in the study of Nettleton and finds its source in Bennet Tyler's biography. Presumably this number comes from a first-hand knowledge of Nettleton's own ministry and the number of conversions recorded at various places and tallied. As a contemporary and personal friend of Nettleton, Tyler would have had first-hand knowledge of this number, and so I assume the truthfulness and accuracy of the number unless otherwise proven. Cairns states the number is 25,000, but gives no source for that number. Earle E. Cairns, *An Endless Line of Splendor: Revivals and Their Leaders from the Great Awakening to the Present* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1986), 126.

[3]John Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1988), 233. On p. 233, Thornbury speculates that Nettleton is not counted among the great American evangelists in large part because his ministry did not impact major urban centers, but that in reality, next to George Whitefield, he was "the most effective evangelist in the history of the United States." Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 233. Furthermore, Thornbury

Edwardsean scholar Allen Guelzo says of Nettleton that "he was the principle figure of the Second Great Awakening . . . [and] the greatest revivalist Edwardseanism had ever produced."[4] Yet, Nettleton remains remarkably obscure today to even the most diligent student of church history. Where one does find Nettleton mentioned, he is often mischaracterized and portrayed as "embittered," jealous, and dull in his preaching, making little contribution to the history of preaching and evangelism apart from his opposition to Charles Finney and the "New Measures."[5] Many years ago, this obscurity and perhaps frequent mischaracterization prompted James Ehrhard to pen a biographical sketch of the evangelist for the *Reformation and Revival Journal*, which he aptly titled "Asahel Nettleton: The Forgotten Evangelist." Ehrhard notes,

> Asahel Nettleton is a significant figure in the history of revivals who has been sadly forgotten. Yet his ministry might have been one of the most successful ever. Though he never pastored a church, never wrote a book, or led an evangelistic organization, Nettleton's preaching led directly to the conversion of well over 30,000 people at a time when our nation's entire population was only nine million. Those figures, though large by comparison to most evangelists, are even more startling when one considers that his ministry encompassed little more than Connecticut and its bordering states. According to John Thornbury, the number of conversions in modern times 'proportionate to the success of Asahel Nettleton' would be well over 600,000.[6]

Such statistics are astonishing and a personality of such importance in modern times would certainly not go unnoticed. Surely with a ministry so blessed by God, Nettleton is worthy of examination. The current study focuses specifically on a rhetorical

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speculates that in Nettleton's success, extrapolated on to contemporary American population figures, would amount to nearly 600,000 converts. Ibid.

[4]Allen C. Guelzo, *Edwards on the Will: A Century of American Theological Debate* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1989), 217.

[5]O. C. Edwards, *A History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 508-11. Edwards presents Nettleton as jealous, dull, and embittered. Tom Nettles also notes and takes peculiar objection to this popular mischaracterization of Nettleton in his "Introduction to Asahel Nettleton," in Asahel Nettleton, *Asahel Nettleton: Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, ed. William C. Nichols (Ames, IA: International Outreach, 1995), xviiin

[6]James Ehrhard, "Asahel Nettleton: The Forgotten Evangelist," *Reformation and Revival Journal* 6, no. 1 (1997): 68. Ehrhard draws his figure from Thornbury, *God Sent Revival,* 233.

analysis of Nettleton's preaching with an emphasis on the synthesis of his doctrine and rhetorical presentation. In doing any rhetorical analysis though, it is essential to put the text under analysis in to a specific and understood context.[7] With that in mind, it is essential to provide an overview of Nettleton's life, along with an examination of his most productive years of ministry and reflection upon his legacy as an evangelist. Such an overview lays the foundation for the analysis of Nettleton's preaching and also proves helpful to the student who wants to learn about God's miraculous working in and through evangelism and revivals in the era under consideration.

The Period of the Second Great Awakening

Asahel Nettleton lived and ministered between the years of 1783 and 1844, covering a span of time which one historian calls "the most important single generation in the modern history not merely of English religion but of the whole Christian world."[8] The approximately sixty years of his life spanned one of the most important periods in all of American history, a period marked by tremendous political, religious, social, geographic, and demographic changes. This period following the American Revolution and leading up to the beginning of the American Civil War was marked chiefly by the political and social development of the young republic following the victory of the Revolution and then the geographic expansion of the nation westward and all the difficulties that this expansion brought with it. Historians generally recognize a handful of key movements and events that shaped this period, including the Federalist Republic period (1789-1799), the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the War of 1812, the so-called "Jacksonian" Era (1828-1836), and the prolonged depression of the late 1830s and early 1840s. This period of growth of

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[7]Robert Cathcart, *Post-Communication: Rhetorical Analysis and Evaluation* (New York: Macmillan, 1981), 20-22.

[8]W. R. Ward, quoted in Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1989), 220.

the "Antebellum South" and the rise of the abolitionist movement in the north, as well as the period of "manifest destiny" expansion, marked almost a half-century of American history.[9] Nettleton's lifetime overlapped at one point or another with all of these major movements and developments and it is important to remember these events for a proper context and understanding of the background against which he lived and ministered.

The period between the end of the American Revolution and the American Civil war was marked by great change and development in American spirituality in general. The landscape of American spirituality was transformed by an influx of diverse religious, philosophical, and spiritual thought that was largely unknown to earlier generations. In his important book on the subject, historian Nathan Hatch observes, "The transitional period between 1780 and 1830 left as indelible an imprint upon the structures of American Christianity as it did upon those of American political life"[10] and the new democratic impulse that swept the recently established nation completely transformed the religious landscape of America during this period. He notes,

> Not since the English Civil War had such swift and unpredictable currents threatened the traditions of Western society. It was not merely the winning of battles and the writing of constitutions that excited apocalyptic visions in the minds of ordinary people but the realization that the very structures of society were undergoing a democratic winnowing. Political convulsions seemed cataclysmic; the cement of an ordered society seemed to be dissolving. People confronted new kinds of issues: common folk not respecting their betters, organized factions speaking and writing against civil authority, the uncoupling of church and state, and the abandonment of settled communities in droves by people seeking a stake in the back country. These events seemed so far outside the range of ordinary experience that people rushed to biblical prophecy for help in understanding the troubled times that were upon them.[11]

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[9]Edward L. Ayers et al., *American Passages: A History of the United States* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt, 2000), 221, 267, 282-83.

[10]Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 6.

[11]Ibid.

This was a period of disestablishment for many of the major denominations in America, a "new ecclesiastical environment" for American Christians.[12] The state-church structures that had heretofore held sway over the allegiances of the people were quickly losing their grip in the new republic as state after state disestablished their "official" churches, a move that Noll explains, "Sent American Christianity cascading in many creative directions"[13] in the years following the American Revolution. This was an era of religious revivals, circuit-riders, special revelations, and frontier awakenings.[14] During this period, Americans witnessed the birth and rise of such movements as the Universalist/Unitarians, intellectual Deism, utopian communities (such as the Universal Friends of Jerusalem, New York, and later the Oneida Association of Oneida, New York), Transcendentalism, the revival of Native American religion, and the rise of various unorthodox groups that eventually birthed many modern cults and "alternative religions," such as Adventism, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Shakers, and Mormonism.[15] Understanding this cultural background helps to put Nettleton's ministry into the larger context of American history. He most certainly ministered in an era rife with religious democratization, innovation, reform, and decentralization, when, as Catherine Albanese notes, spiritual "newness was fast offering radical competition to the past."[16]

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[12]Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford, 2002), 174. Disestablishment refers to the dissolution of the state-sponsored church.

[13]Ibid., 7.

[14]John B. Boles, *Religion in Antebellum Kentucky* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1976), 16-51.

[15]Timothy Miller, ed., *America's Alternative Religions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 33-46, 47-60. See also Paul Conkin, *American Originals: Homemade Varieties of Christianity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 117-61.

[16]Catherine L. Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1999), 217.

As it relates to more historic and orthodox Christianity, the key religious movement of this period in American history was the era of religious revival that has come to be known as the Second Great Awakening (SGA). The SGA, like its predecessor the First Great Awakening a half-century earlier, was a season of great excitement, conversion, and spiritual renewal among the (primarily) Protestant churches of North America.[17] The SGA resulted in a renewal of prayer and piety among many Christians, tremendous numeric growth for several Protestant denominations, an increased commitment to missionary societies and institutions of theological higher-learning, and as Iain Murray notes, an "unusual sense of the presence of God"[18] among the churches which were swept up in the movement. Unlike its predecessor, the SGA lasted much longer (at least a quarter-century compared to no more than a decade or so for the First Great Awakening) and was more geographically far-reaching in impact, touching a larger population and impacting churches in the northeast, south, and the expanding American west while the First Great Awakening was limited primarily to the smaller population of the eastern coast of the (then) colonies.[19] Though some historians find it difficult to assign a particular set of dates to the start and finish of the SGA as an era, many agree that the movement began developing in the 1790s and continued to lesser or greater degrees in to the 1830's.[20] It was in the midst of this defining movement that Nettleton developed,

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[17]Emphasizing that these early revivals primarily affected Protestant churches does not overlook the fact that there was also growth among the Catholic churches of the young American republic during this same time. Boles, *Religion in Antebellum Kentucky*, 52-79, for example, traces the history and growth of Catholicism in Kentucky during the period concurrent with the SGA. However the impact of the SGA was primarily seen as a Protestant and particularly evangelical phenomenon.

[18]Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism, 1750-1858* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 137, 126-42.

[19]Ibid., 118-19. Also, Noll, *America's God,* 161-86. Noll documents the numeric "surge" of Evangelical churches during this period with special attention to the more republican Baptist and Methodist movements.

[20]Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 204. Hambrick-Stowe discusses the difficulty of placing dates on the era

ministered, and did his evangelistic work, and most of the changes and controversies that accompanied this great religious awakening would eventually impact Nettleton's ministry or thinking in some shape or fashion.

A Brief Overview of Nettleton's Life and Ministry

A brief overview of Asahel Nettleton's life is both necessary and important for a number of reasons. First, so that one may see a general sequence of his life and the sheer amount of ministry he accomplished. Second, for the purpose of establishing the rhetorical context and situation of his preaching, one may place Nettleton's ministry, conflicts and accomplishments into the broader, fuller context of the times previously mentioned. Third, and perhaps most important, an overview of Nettleton's life allows one to recognize the utter simplicity and ordinariness of the man, in turn giving all praise to God for the extraordinary things He accomplished through such a seemingly un-exceptional individual. By all accounts, Nettleton's early life was very normal. He was born in North Killingworth, Connecticut, on April 21, 1783, the oldest son and second child in a family of six children. His parents were common, middle-class, respected citizens who farmed for a living. They were nominal Christians who had their children baptized into the Congregationalist church and then religiously educated according to the Westminster Confession. Asahel was educated in the common district schools and learned the trade of a New England farmer, a vocation he would work after his father died in 1801, to sustain the family. His childhood was unusually uneventful and though he participated in the local practices of parties, dances, and outings, he was not known to be an unruly or

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of the SGA because the movement was more of a "renewal of the evangelical spirit" that "ebbed and flowed without any decisive breaks throughout the century." See also John Thornbury, *God Sent Revival* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1988), 21-22, where Thornbury observes that "technically" the period spans from 1792-1808 but that more generally speaking, the movement continued well into the 1830s. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 118, quotes sources that date the movement between 1798 and 1832, while Ayers et al., *American Passages*, 252, notes the dates of 1797 through the 1830s. Regardless of the precise dates one settles on, Nettleton's life and ministry spans the majority of the era.

"wicked" youth. Tyler notes, "He was not addicted to any vicious habits, but sustained, in the eyes of the world, an unblemished moral character."[21] These early years, though formative, showed no indications of either unusual piety or wickedness. They were in fact, rather ordinary.[22]

Life changed dramatically for the Connecticut farm boy when he underwent a radical conversion experience that began in the year 1800, during a local revival. For at least ten long months, he underwent an agonizing process of conviction for his sin. He wrestled with the truths of God's goodness and the consequence of God's holy law. Sometime near September of 1801, he found peace for his soul and ended his struggle, casting himself upon the mercy of God and the atonement of Christ.[23] It is important to realize that Nettleton's ordeal bore all the characteristic stages of the typical Puritan Calvinist regeneration experience as highlighted by Jerald Brauer in his article surveying the theological history of conversion from the Puritan-era through the revivalist-era.[24] Nettleton's own conversion experience no doubt shaped his thinking about regeneration. His experience not only shaped his evangelistic methodology and preaching later in life, but would also be the foundation for the theological stands he took in the controversies that would arise in years to come.

Following his regeneration by the Spirit of God, Nettleton immediately set his sights on fulfilling the call of God upon his life. Because of his father's untimely death in 1801, Nettleton found himself obligated to tend the farm for the well-being of his own

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[21]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 18.

[22]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 26-27.

[23]This lengthy ordeal is given in detail in Tyler, *Life and Labours*, 19-33, and Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 27-32. Tyler, *Life and Labours*, 35, gives the date of Nettleton's conversion at about September 1801.

[24]Jerald Brauer, "Conversion: From Puritanism to Revivalism," *Journal of Religion* 58 (July 1978): 233.

family, but his thoughts were far from fields of agriculture and were instead on the fields of the Lord which were white unto harvest. While working the farm, he seriously meditated upon the condition of the lost and the need for the proclamation of the gospel. Tyler and Bonar note that while working on the farm "he would often say to himself: 'If I might be the means of saving one soul, I should prefer it to all the riches and honours of this world,'"[25] and as he thought of eternal matters, he would ponder, "What shall I wish I had done thousands and millions of years hence?"[26] The Spirit of God planted a burden in Nettleton's heart to proclaim the gospel to the lost, but his circumstances in life demanded that he faithfully provide for his family for a season. While he tended the family farm for the next three years, he read and studied under the tutelage of his local pastor, learning theology, showing special interest in foreign missions, and reading books to prepare himself for college studies.[27]

When circumstances allowed, he entered Yale to continue his studies in the fall of 1805.[28] Whether it was an overstatement or fact, it is worth noting that Tyler and Bonar claim Nettleton "was the only professor of religion in his class."[29] As a student, he was not particularly exceptional, but was academically average and able to glean much from the time spent under the guidance of Yale president Timothy Dwight. However, his academics were not what set him apart as a student at Yale. It was his piety and general

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[25]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 34.

[26]Ibid.

[27]Thornbury notes that Josiah B. Andrews, a worker from the Missionary Society of Connecticut, mentored Nettleton during this season of his life; first as a leader in the revival that took place in Killingworth in 1801-1802, then later as the permanent pastor of the Congregational church in Killingworth. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 33-35.

[28]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 37.

[29]Ibid. By "professor," Tyler and Bonar mean that Nettleton identified himself as a Christian; the term here does not mean "teacher."

likeability that elevated him in the eyes of his classmates. The observation that he stood out because of his piety and personality however, should not imply that he did not use his time at Yale to gain a firm grasp on theological truth and systematic mastery.[30] Furthermore, it was during his time at Yale that Nettleton began to embark upon a career as an evangelist and physician of the soul. There survive at least two accounts of unregenerate students who fell under the influence of the blossoming evangelist at Yale during the Yale revival of 1807-1808. Both accounts attest to the fact that Nettleton was concerned, compassionate, and relentless in his pursuit of the spiritual regeneration of his classmates. One of these men went on to become a missionary with the American Board and touch countless other lives as a result of the personal evangelism of Nettleton.[31]

Following graduation from Yale in 1809, Nettleton set forth on a life of full-time ministry. Having developed a close friendship with another young student passionate about foreign missions, Samuel J. Mills, Nettleton wished to set forth on a career in foreign missionary work.[32] His debt to the college, however, kept him close to Yale where he began working for the school to repay his debts. Shortly hereafter in 1812, he began his itinerant ministry of preaching in churches without pastoral leadership. On his way to one of these churches in New York, he stopped over at a church in South Britain, Connecticut, and was invited to preach, an invitation which he obliged. While preaching in South Britain, God's Spirit moved in a powerful way that would result in the beginnings of Nettleton's ministry as a well-known evangelist

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[30]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 37-51.

[31]These two accounts are documented in ibid., 41-47, and again in Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 38.

[32]Thornbury notes that Mills was the "real moving spirit behind the modern American missionary movement." Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 39. This same Samuel J. Mills was one of the instrumental leaders of the Williams College "Haystack Prayer Meeting" that eventually culminated in to a leading force behind the formation of modern American missionary activity. Ibid., 39-42.

capable of being used to bring revival. In his account of the events at South Britain, Thornbury notes, "As the frustrated missionary aspirant drove his carriage across the woodlands of Connecticut to meet Tyler and preach for him, he little realised that revival fires would soon be blazing behind him."[33] Nettleton had discovered his giftedness and the ministry in which God could use him. He spent most of the next ten years almost exclusively in revival ministry. God used Nettleton's proclamation style and tendency toward soul-care during these years to reach countless thousands and establish him as a great revivalist.

Revivals were not the only ministry God had in store for Nettleton. Throughout the remainder of his life, Nettleton demonstrated that revival preaching was only one of his gifts. During the mid-1820s, he stood tall as a prominent theologian and polemicist, speaking out and standing against what he saw as the ministerial abuses of those practicing the New Measures, led by Charles Finney. Following this controversy, Nettleton once again found himself embattled in theological dispute as he helped marshal the forces of orthodoxy against the New Haven theology of Nathaniel William Taylor. This eventually led to his involvement with the founding of the Theological Institute of Connecticut, later known as Hartford Seminary. He spent his final years investing in this institution in spite of his failing health. Seeing the New Haven theology as unbiblical yet spreading rapidly through the influence of the Yale and the New Measures practitioners, Nettleton felt it was important that a seminary be established that would teach orthodox views on human depravity and conversion. He served as a board member at the seminary and spent his final years of life occasionally teaching and mentoring students. He even demonstrated a deep interest in Christian worship and hymnology when, during a period of sickness (he contracted Typhus during house visits), he used his time to compile his *Village Hymns*

[33]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 53.

for Social Worship, Selected and Original, Designed as a Supplement to the Psalms and Hymns of Dr. Watts.[34] This hymnal was a collection of poetry and the popular hymns of others and was "designed to meet the needs of a revival church, as the hymnal of Isaac Watts was thought to be lofty and more suited for worship."[35] Royalties from this popular work provided him a comfortable income for the remainder of his life.

As this brief overview of Nettleton's life shows, he was multi-faceted in his abilities and used of God to impact countless thousands of people in his day. Though he was by all worldly evaluations a rather ordinary man, God used him in an extraordinary way to further the cause of world missions, personal evangelism, Christian education, and Christian worship. These causes meant most to him because they represented the advancement of the precious gospel that had so radically changed his own life.[36]

Almost immediately after his death, his close friend and fellow-laborer in Christ, Bennet Tyler, compiled what has become the authoritative biography of Nettleton's life, his *Life and Labors of Asahel Nettleton* (1844), which, following revision, would become the more popularly disseminated *Memoir of the Life and Character of Asahel Nettleton* (1853). Tyler's biography may be overly biased in favor of his dear friend, but it nonetheless gives the most thorough information about his life and ministry.[37] This biography was used extensively by John F. Thornbury when he wrote his expansive and

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[34]Asahel Nettleton, *Village Hymns for Social Worship, Selected and Original: Designed as a Supplement to the Psalms and Hymns of Dr. Watts*, ed. William C. Nichols (1824; repr., Ames, IA: International Outreach, 1997), preface to the original edition.

[35]Robert Swanson, "Asahel Nettleton—The Voice of Revival," *Fundamentalist Journal* 5, no. 5 (1986): 52.

[36]Ehrhard, "Asahel Nettleton," 85.

[37]Jim Elliff, "The Life and Labours of Asahel Nettleton—Review Article," *Reformation and Revival* 8, no. 2 (1999): 203. In the article, which actually reviews Andrew Bonar's reworking of Tyler's original text, Elliff comments, "If this book [Tyler's *Memoir*] suffers from any lack, the most glaring would be an overmuch affinity for Nettleton by the author." Ibid., 204. He also speculates that Tyler intentionally wrote little about the New Lebanon ordeal precisely because the whole affair made Nettleton look bad.

critical look at the life of Nettleton and his greater influence on the SGA in his 1977 book, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening.* In 1995, a volume was published which compiled virtually all of Nettleton's sermons and various other writings. The volume, entitled *Asahel Nettleton: Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, has an introduction penned by church historian Tom Nettles and is a thorough and comprehensive compilation of original Nettleton sermons.[38] This volume, along with Nettleton's *Letters of the Rev. Dr. Beecher and Rev. Mr. Nettleton on the New Measures in Conducting Revivals of Religion*[39]and his earlier mentioned *Village Hymns*, form the core of the body of primary-source literature available for research today. There are various secondary articles and chapters in larger books about the SGA as well. Compared to the countless volumes written about men such as Finney, Moody, and Whitefield, relatively little work has been done on the life and ministry of this great evangelist.

Ministries, Conflicts and Movements That Define the Legacy of Nettleton

Beginning in 1812, Nettleton spent thirty-two years of his life, until his death in 1844, ministering the gospel in various capacities. The fruitful years of ministry can be divided up into no fewer than four clear eras, each of which overlap somewhat but also show distinct developments in the practice and theological growth of Nettleton as a minister of the gospel. These defining periods of ministry can be divided into the revival years (1812-1822), conflict over the New Measures (1826-1827), theological conflict over the New Haven theology (1828-1833), and the years spent founding the Theological Institute of Connecticut (1833-1844) and laboring for its growth. Though there may be

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[38]Nettleton, foreword to *Sermons*, i-iii.

[39]*Letters of the Rev. Dr. Beecher and Rev. Mr. Nettleton on the "New Measures" in Conducting Revivals of Religion, With a Review of a Sermon, by Novanglus* (New York: G & C Carvill, 1828), 2-23.

overlap in some of the periods, these markers help to understand the course of his ministerial career.

The Revival Years (1812-1822)

These years mark the period of most intense revival during Nettleton's ministry. Tom Nettles notes,

> 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.[40]

Beginning with his meeting in South Britain, Connecticut, where revival came to the people through Nettleton's ministry, he set off on a series of revival meetings in various churches throughout New England. Revival came to almost every church he visited. During this period, Nettleton perfected and practiced the "old" methods of revival, which were grounded in Calvinistic theology and viewed revival as a supernatural outpouring of God's Spirit on the people through the preaching of the Word of God. This view of revivals was markedly different from the later mindset that developed around revivals under the New Measures men, who taught that revival was not miraculous, but rather something mechanical that would occur when men did the right things. This distinction is important to note because it marks the philosophical and theological difference that set revivalists like Nettleton apart from later revivalists identified by their "revivalism."

Iain Murray traces the development of these divergent views in *Revival and Revivalism.* In his chapter, "Five Leaders in the Northeast" (of whom Nettleton is one), he notes that the ministers who led revivals before the New Measures truly believed revival was a supernatural work of God. He notes that *revivalism* came to define those

[40]Nettleton, "An Introduction to Asahel Nettleton," in *Sermons*, vi.

man-induced tactics that mechanically sought to produce visible results in a revival. Among revivalists like Nettleton however,

> No such intention marked [their] ministries. . . . It was something of a different order which was changing lives and churches. These preachers, unlike some of a later date, had more biblical sense than to accept their opponents' description of them as revivalists. Revival is not something that men can plan or command as they will; the revivals in the Northeast, which occurred over a period of thirty years, followed no pattern or sequence.[41]

Murray continues speaking of Nettleton and his contemporaries' view of revival as a supernatural working of the Spirit of God, observing, "The only explanation which they knew for the times of special blessing was that the Spirit of God, like the wind, 'bloweth where it listeth' (John 3:8)."[42] Like his contemporaries who refused to get caught up in the New Measures, Nettleton saw the sovereign hand of God as the source from which revival flowed. Theologically speaking, this would be in direct opposition to the New Measures revivalists like Finney, who later asserted in his *Revival Lectures* that "a revival is not a miracle, nor dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means—as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means."[43]

With his solid Calvinistic theology and philosophical underpinnings, Nettleton set about the work of revivals with prayer and the straightforward preaching of the Bible as his most effective means. Murray notes the style of Nettleton's sermon delivery by quoting his friend Lyman Beecher, who stated,

> The power of his preaching included many things. It was highly intellectual as opposed to declamation, or oratorical, pathetic appeals to imagination or the emotions. It was discriminatingly doctrinal, giving a clear and strong exhibition of doctrines denominated Calvinistic, explained, defined, proved, and applied, and objections stated and answered. It was deeply experimental in the graphic development of the

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[41]Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 201.

[42]Ibid.

[43]Charles Finney, *Revivals of Religion* (n p.: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), 5.

> experience of saint and sinner. It was powerful beyond measure in stating and demolishing objections, and at times terrible and overwhelming in close, pungent, and direct application to the particular circumstances of sinners. . . . His revivals usually commenced with the Church in confessions of sin and reformation. He introduced the doctrine of depravity, and made direct assaults on the conscience of sinners, explained regeneration, and cut off self-righteousness, and enforced immediate repentance and faith, and pressed to immediate submission in the earlier stages.[44]

Clearly, the direct and in-depth preaching of the Word of God was central to Nettleton's views on revival.[45] Preaching was not the only means that Nettleton used, for he made ample use of the "inquiry room" methodology, believing that as individuals came under conviction from the preaching of God's Word, they needed the immediate and direct counsel of a Christian who could lead them to peace. In one town, after his preaching brought heavy conviction among his hearers, Nettleton began his work of "follow-up" visits, stating, "Now it was time for the visiting preacher to set up a soul-clinic in order to counsel those who were seeking salvation and others who had already entered the kingdom."[46] The combined means of following the Spirit of God to a location, praying, preaching the deep riches of Scripture, and personal soul-care came to define Nettleton's ministry during the period of great revivals (1812-1822) and throughout the remainder of his life. Nettleton was tender, compassionate, personal, and sincere, and his methodology in action paints quite a different picture than that of his critics and supporters of the New Measures, who characterized the Calvinistic "old revivalists" as cold, distant, over-concerned about doctrine, and not at all emotional.

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[44]Lyman Beecher, *Autobiography of Beecher*, 1:345, quoted in Murray, *Revival and Revivalism,* 199.

[45]For a more thorough study of the views of revival held by Nettleton and his contemporaries, see W. B. Sprague, *Lectures on Revivals* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2007), 1-199. Sprague was a contemporary of Nettleton's who graduated from Yale in 1811, ran in the same ministerial circles as Nettleton, and embraced a view of revivals very closely aligned with Nettleton's own view.

[46]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 58.

Revivalist historian Frank Beardsley gives a fine overall assessment of Nettleton's practices:

> Dr. Nettleton's methods were remarkably sane and discriminating. He had an abhorrence of anything that savored of fanaticism. His doctrines conformed to the Calvinistic standards of the age in which he lived. He emphasized a dependence upon the Holy Spirit as the indispensable condition of a revival. Ministers and churches were not encouraged to try and get up a revival, but when sovereign grace gave indications that the set time to favor Zion was come he believed in a wise and faithful use of means. To this end he made use of preaching, house-to-house visitation and inquiry meetings for enforcing the truth and instructing seekers. The results of his work were invariably lasting. Of the thousands converted under his preaching, so well were they grounded in the fundamentals of the Christian faith, that very few afterwards fell away into apostasy.[47]

If results are any indication of blessing, God's hand was truly on the young revivalist and his simple methods. A summary of his ministry during these years (1812-1822) reveals that Nettleton was used to bring notable revival to no less than twenty-six different communities.[48] When considering these numbers, one should keep two factors in mind. First, when Nettleton came to a community for a meeting, it was usually an extended stay of many weeks or even months in some cases.[49] These were not "one-week meetings" in which the preacher is scheduled, arrives, preaches, and then moves on. Nettleton believed it was his ministry to stay in a community until he received clear instruction from the Spirit of God to move on to another. Second, Nettleton holding meetings in a particular town was often supplemented by various other meetings throughout the region at smaller churches, schools, colleges, and even private residences. There were almost always many

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[47]Frank G. Beardsley, *A History of American Revivals* (New York: American Tract Society, 1904), 117.

[48]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival,* 237. This number is incomplete and very conservative, as a quick reading of Tyler's chap. 4 details at least 13 revivals in the short span of less than three years. Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours,* 63-81.

[49]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 67, 70, 81.

supplemental meetings in the community and the homes of locals in addition to the Sabbath preaching.[50]

Two of his earliest meetings show the pattern of Nettleton's revival meetings. These two meetings took place in 1812-1813 in South Salem, New York, and near Litchfield, Connecticut, where he became acquainted with his lifelong friend, Lyman Beecher. Both congregations in which Nettleton preached were in a similar state—without pastors and spiritually destitute, and racked by indifference and division. In both cases, Nettleton's arrival brought intense preaching, increasingly larger crowds, personal soul-care and spiritual awakening. Tyler and Bonar note that in South Salem, "a large number gave pleasing evidence of having passed from death unto life," but after the congregation began contemplating calling Nettleton as their pastor, he felt led of the Spirit to move on to other locations.[51] At Milton, near Litchfield, Nettleton ministered for three or four months and experienced "a large ingathering of new converts . . . [by which] the church came out of its slump."[52]

One of Nettleton's most powerful revivals occurred in the summer, fall, and winter of 1815-1816 in Salisbury, Connecticut. He had initially determined that he could do no good there because people were relying too much on the power of his personality to bring revival. Always distressed by this kind of dependency on human agency, Nettleton planned to leave but was convinced by some locals to stay and see if God was at work in the community. Powerful results followed convincing him that God had indeed led him there. After some initial preaching, visiting, and pleading with the people to pray for the

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[50]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 65, 82.

[51]Ibid., 66. This pattern would often occur, but Nettleton felt early on that it was not his calling to settle in as a "settled pastor," but rather to see revival brought to as many of the "waste churches" as possible.

[52]Ibid., 61.

blessing of God, "the revival fell like rain, gradually increasing in intensity."[53] In Salisbury, it is reported that near 300 people were born again and the town itself experienced a massive revival of religious and spiritual tendencies.

Another example of Nettleton's usefulness to God in bringing revival to various circumstances took place in 1820, when Nettleton visited his alma mater, Yale College. The college had grown considerably since his attendance in 1809, but the spiritual temperature of the college in 1820 was much the same as it had been when he arrived in 1805. Shortly after his arrival, Nettleton penned a letter testifying that God was at work in New Haven and on Yale campus: "Meetings are held every evening in the week,"[54] and at inquiry meetings "we have had from sixty to about three hundred assembled . . . all solemn, and many in deep distress of soul."[55] He later reported that in the span of five weeks at least 80 came to faith in the city and 25 on Yale's campus had been converted.[56] The revival at New Haven "continued for many months and eventually between 1,500 and 2,000 were converted as a direct result of it."[57] In months following, Nettleton preached in his hometown of Killingworth and 162 were converted. Just a few months later, he preached at Wethersfield and at least 200 converts professed faith in Jesus Christ.[58]

As these few and brief accounts illustrate, God's blessing was on Nettleton's ministry of revival. Though these are only the brief, summarized accounts of a few select revivals, the stories are almost identical wherever Nettleton ministered during this period.

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[53]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 71.

[54]Ibid., 132.

[55]Ibid.

[56]Ibid., 135.

[57]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 119.

[58]Ibid.

After he fell sick with Typhus in 1822, Nettleton was forced to slow down the pace of his itinerant ministry for a season of a few years. From 1822 to 1824, during his time of recovery, Nettleton turned his focus to compiling his *Village Hymns* collection. Even this aspect of Nettleton's ministry, which is seldom given ample attention, showed his singular focus on the venture of revivals. He desired a collection of hymns "adapted to the various exigencies of a revival," but finding only a few he deemed acceptable, he altered his course to a broader compilation of hymns that would be useful for the church in all seasons.[59] In the years following the early revivals and the publication of his hymnal, the focus of Nettleton's ministry shifted somewhat, but he remained active in revivals until his final years. Even the later revivals were blessed by God. In 1827 to 1828, he went to Virginia and met with measured success.[60] Even throughout the 1830s he continued to preach with a measure of success, but the early years marked Nettleton as a true evangelist and revivalist of the SGA worthy of note and study.

Two Major Controversies: New Measures and New Haven

Author Keith Hardman's assessment of Nettleton's displeasure with the "new measures"[61] is exemplary of the shortsightedness and over simplicity with which many

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[59]Nettleton, preface to *Village Hymns*. Birney gives the most extensive analysis of *Village Hymns* and its impact on the hymnology of its day in his dissertation. See George Hugh Birney, Jr., "The Life and Letters of Asahel Nettleton: 1783-1844" (Ph.D. thesis, Hartford Theological Seminary, 1943), 90-113.

[60]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 182-83.

[61]The term "new measures" became a popular contemporary term used by writers and historians of the era to describe the methodologies that closely accompanied the revival meetings of Finney and his supporters. These methodologies, which Nettleton and many other New England ministers disapproved of, included tactics which critics claimed were useful primarily for stirring up the emotions of the hearers and providing a false sense of spirituality. Practices included extended meetings, calling out the names of "sinners" present in the congregation during meetings, involving women in the public prayers and testimonies, and calling respondents to come to the altar or mourning bench. These practices, though not invented by Finney, were popularized by him and those who followed his example. Note that various

approach this historical subject:

> Till the end of his life Nettleton was outspoken in criticizing Finney for his innovations. He thought Finney's informal approach was not as dignified and reverential as it should be. Nor did he like Finney's method of pressing for immediate decisions. Nonetheless, Finney's modern form of mass evangelism was the wave of the future, and it succeeded in achieving many conversions and prolonging the Second Great Awakening well into the 1830's.[62]

There are many problems with Hardman's assessment, not the least of which is what he means by "Finney's form . . . succeeded in achieving many conversions," but for the sake of the topic at hand, note that Hardman's assessment of Nettleton's objections is over simplified and theologically ill-informed. Hardman's assessment leaves the impression that Nettleton focused almost exclusively on issues of form and style to the exclusion of any deeper theological substance.

In reality, Nettleton's issue with the New Measures was much deeper than a harmless difference in preferences or a stylistic distaste for Finney's methods. Nettleton's objections to the New Measures were theological in nature. Because of these deep theological undercurrents, he never backed away from criticizing Finney and those revivalists who practiced the New Measures.[63] During 1826, while preaching at a church in Jamaica, New York, Nettleton first began to hear reports of countless problems affecting churches in the western part of the state where "revivals" had taken place. Nettleton heard more reports about the nature of these "revivals" and in November went to Albany to meet with local pastors and discuss the issues. While there, he met at least twice with Finney who was preaching nearby, but no records exist detailing their conversations.

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authors will capitalize "New Measures" while others do not. For consistency, I have chosen to use the proper noun form "New Measures" as Thornbury and others do throughout their works.

[62]Keith J. Hardman, *Seasons of Refreshing: Evangelism and Revivals in America* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 118.

[63]Iain Murray, *Pentecost Today: The Biblical Basis for Understanding Revival* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1998), 49-53, discusses in depth why the Old School opposed Finney on theological grounds. Murray is convinced that more was at stake than simply methodological differences.

Nettleton penned a letter to John Frost, a Finney supporter, in which he shared his developing concerns about Finney's methodology and the results they produced. Nettleton then wrote a letter to the Rev. Samuel Aikin of Utica outlining in detail his concerns about the New Measures. It is that letter and various others which form the corpus of the *Letters of the Rev. Dr. Beecher and Rev. Mr. Nettleton on the New Measures in Conducting Revivals of Religion,* published in 1828. Nettleton made clear through his positions in these circulated letters that he and others stood opposed to Finney's New Measures. Thus began the division that would last nearly a quarter of a century between Nettleton and Finney.

The *Letters* are a telling collection of documents focusing specifically on Nettleton's letter to Aiken. It is not only apparent that Nettleton's objections were more than mere methodological differences, but also that Nettleton initially sought to reconcile his differences with Finney and mentor him in a proper theological approach to revivals.[64] He respectfully refers to Finney repeatedly as a "brother" and acknowledges that works of grace have certainly been occurring under his ministry in spite of his "New Measures" with which Nettleton did not agree. Nettleton makes plain in the letter what some of his methodological differences are, such as women praying in the mixed assembly,[65] publicly praying for sinners by name,[66] using irreverence in addressing God, and holding revivals in areas without the cooperation of the settled ministers of area churches.[67]

Nettleton's greatest contention, however, had less to do with methods and more to do with the attitudes of the (often) young and inexperienced revivalists. These young

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[64]Asahel Nettleton, "Copy of a Letter to the Rev. Mr. Aikin, of Utica," in *Letters*, 19.

[65]Ibid., 10, 14.

[66]Ibid., 18, 19.

[67]Ibid.

zealots caused great confusion and division in the churches by arrogantly attacking the established ministers and shamelessly degrading their established ministries by "breaking them down"[68] before their people if they refused to accept the New Measures intended to bring revival. Nettleton viewed this hubris as the greatest of offences. He admits that there may be some usefulness in some of the New Measures, and furthermore, he had no problem with local ministers deciding in their own congregations what was acceptable.[69] Though what was unacceptable to Nettleton and what violated "the rules of ministerial order and Christian propriety"[70] was the arrogance with which Finney and his followers insisted that any who did not go along with the New Measures were "stupid, dead, and enemies of revival."[71] As Nettleton saw it, the end result of these "revivalists" was to create division and contention among the churches; a virtual "civil war in Zion— a domestic broil in the household of faith."[72] Such division, Nettleton concluded, was surely not the product of genuine Spirit-induced revival.

The letter to Aikin was immediately circulated and soon published among the supporters of Finney. Finney certainly read it himself, for shortly after Nettleton wrote it, Finney took the occasion to fire back at Nettleton by preaching and then printing a sermon from Amos 3:3 on the subject "*Can Two Walk Together Except They Be Agreed?*"[73] in which Finney characterized the enemies of revival with such terms as "lukewarm . . . dull

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[68]Nettleton, "Copy of a Letter," 10.

[69]Ibid., 12, 14, 15.

[70]Ibid., 20.

[71]Ibid., 11.

[72]Ibid.

[73]Ibid., 22, 25-41. The full text of the sermon can be found in Charles Finney, "Christian Affinity," in *Sermons on Important Subjects* (New York: John S. Taylor, 1836), 186-204.

. . . wicked . . . and coldhearted."[74] Finney comments that it was possible that revivals were being opposed because "the church and people may awake while the shepherd sleeps and will not awake,"[75] and goes on to say that wherever settled pastors opposed the New Measures, "our people had a great deal better be without any settled minister at all."[76] In the context of the unfolding events and attempted correction of Nettleton, there was no question concerning who the sermon was directed toward.[77] Clearly, Finney felt that his methods were beyond reproach and question, and anyone, such as Nettleton and his friends, who sought to question the nature of his "revivals" had best be prepared to be chastised publicly. McLoughlin notes that Nettleton received the sermon "as a personal rebuke"[78] and decided that Finney and the western revivalists "were trying to arouse the lower orders against their betters" with their practices and writings.[79]

The stage was now set for the New Lebanon Conference. This meeting of pastors and church leaders took place in July 1827, in New Lebanon, New York, and sought to bring together Nettleton, Finney, and supporters of both positions to put an end to their theological feud, discuss their differences, and come to some resolution concerning the appropriate way for revivals to flourish. At first, Nettleton hesitated to attend, for he did not feel that the conference would bear any fruit, but he was eventually persuaded in

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[74]Finney, *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 192-93.

[75]Ibid., 194-95.

[76]Ibid., 196.

[77]See Nettleton's response to Finney's sermon in Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 357-74. Nettleton felt that Finney had avoided answering the real theological question at the heart of the debate, namely the difference between "true and false religious zeal."

[78]William G. McLoughlin, Jr., *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York: Ronald, 1959), 35. McLoughlin, who seems biased toward Finney, notes the increasing antagonism that developed between the two camps and paints a picture of Nettleton as the antagonist, implying that Nettleton saw Finney as "Davenport *redivivus* to his own Edwards." Ibid., 33.

[79]Ibid., 35.

an effort to represent well the position of the "old school" revivalists. In the end, Nettleton's fears proved well-founded, for little was actually resolved at the meeting.[80] Hardman's summary of the event is helpful:

> It was . . . unanimously agreed that it was wrong to condemn settled pastors; to deprecate education; to justify any measure simply because it might be successful; to hold inquiry meetings till late at night; to exaggerate accounts of revivals' to encourage "audible groaning," violent gestures and boisterous tones: among the congregation; or to name particular individuals in public prayer. . . . The convention reviewed allegations about Finney's past revivals, but it soon became apparent that these problems were exaggerated. None of the New Yorkers wanted to condemn Finney in any way, whatever their sentiments may have been when they arrived. Discussion turned to the question of whether it was proper for women to speak and pray in public. Here the New Englanders were adamant; the Apostle Paul had forbidden women to speak in church (1 Tim. 2:12, 1 Cor. 14:34) and that ended the matter. Then it was shown that the First Presbyterian Church of Utica had been encouraging women to pray in public before Finney arrived to begin his meetings, and Finney simply went along with the practice. . . . Three days were spent debating this, but the two groups could not agree. After a great deal of prayer, the group adjourned, and Charles Finney emerged the victor, his views exonerated.[81]

Some historians today question whether or not Finney represented the real facts surrounding the Conference in his *Memoirs* accurately.[82] It is clear that Finney walked

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[80]The actual minutes from the meeting, which scarcely fill two whole pages, can be found in Edwin S. Gaustad and Mark Noll, *A Documentary History of Religion in America to 1877*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 325-27. The fact that Tyler says so little about Nettleton's thoughts on the Conference is lamented by reviewer Elliff, "The Life and Labours," 204 . Reference to the issues at hand and the letter to Aikin are made on pp. 297-333, but no direct mention of New Lebanon or Finney can be discerned. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, 37, gives a thorough analysis of New Lebanon agreeing that very little was actually accomplished beyond the emboldening of Finney because the convention "devoted itself to futile bickering over the superficial question of 'new measures' and ignored the more basic problems of theological interpretations and ecclesiastical politics."

[81]Hardman, *Seasons of Refreshing*, 155.

[82]Gary Hiebsch, "A Turning Point in American Revivalism? The Influence of Charles G. Finney's *Memoirs* on Historical Accounts of the New Lebanon Convention," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 76, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 139. In this article, Hiebsch contends that Finney misrepresented events at New Lebanon and characterized them in such a way as to present himself a victor who had silenced his critics and withstood the test of criticism, thus earning approval for his "New Measures" and forever changing the face of American Christianity. At least one scholar, Iain Murray, agrees with this in part, contending that Beecher for his part misrepresented Nettleton's position, demeanor, and motives in an effort to discredit Nettleton and win favor with the New Measures crowd, which Beecher saw as the side most likely to grow in influence and acceptance. See Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 267-69.

away from the conference feeling exonerated and free to move ahead with his brand of revivalism. Demands for his preaching increased after the conference, largely because of the way his camp publicized the events. The swell of public opinion turned in Finney's favor, opening the door for the continued growth of his revivalism movement in the eastern United States. Shortly following the conference, Beecher sought compromise with Finney and his camp in the spring of 1828, and agreed to do his part to silence the controversy, forever straining his relationship with his old friend Nettleton.[83] On the other hand, Nettleton felt that very little, if anything, was resolved since the underlying theological issues were not addressed.[84] The real issue, as Murray notes, was "a question of being for or against, not emotion, but rather the adoption of means, in addition to preaching and prayer to promote emotion."[85] As shown in the *Letters*, Nettleton and his friends believed there was indeed some work of grace evident in Finney's meetings, but the results would have been much greater without the manipulation of emotions and stress upon the human will to do that which only the Spirit can do.[86] What was not really dealt with at New Lebanon, and what Nettleton "deplored was the deliberate use of emotion to

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[83]Hardman, *Seasons of Refreshing,* 155. Lyman Beecher adds that just a few months after the New Lebanon Convention, in the Spring of 1828, Beecher and others drew up a "compromise" document to bring an end to the contention between the two parties. This "Philadelphia Compromise" was signed by many of the leading voices on both sides of the debate, except for Nettleton, who was not party to its writing or signing. The compromise essentially called on both sides of the New Measures controversy to stop quarrelling, publicly denouncing one another, and publishing tracts. Beecher's comments make it clear that Nettleton wanted to continue the fight following New Lebanon, but Beecher and others just wanted the issue to go away. This incident no doubt strained the relationship between Beecher and Nettleton. See Lyman Beecher, *Autobiography of Lyman Beecher*, ed. Barbara M. Cross (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961), 2:76-77.

[84]Regarding the New Lebanon Conference, Beecher notes, "It was not a question of orthodoxy, nor of the reality of the revivals, but of wrong measures," implying that there was very little discussion of underlying theological issues and instead an emphasis only on the pragmatic, external, aspects of revival. Beecher, *Autobiography*, 2:75.

[85]Murray, *Revival and Revivalism,* 243.

[86]Nettleton, "Copy of a Letter," 14n.

increase the number of converts without regard to the danger of counting as converts the spurious as well as the true."[87] The true nature of Nettleton's differences with Finney lay in their opposing views of regeneration and human ability.[88] This difference lay at the heart of yet another controversy in which Nettleton found himself involved just a short time later.

At the heart of Finney's aberrant view of the human will was the influence of a relatively new theological school of thought that came to be called the New Haven school of theology, named for its connection to New Haven (Yale) and the chief proponent of this theological system, Yale's president Nathaniel William Taylor. Summarized simply, the New Haven school argued for a new and revised understanding of the relationship between the will of man and the imputed guilt of Adam, a mediating position that freed the will from the rigid determinism of the old New England Calvinism and allowed "for a more aggressive revivalism."[89] Nettleton's awareness of the New Haven theology can be traced all the way back to his days at Yale, where he disagreed with his mentor Timothy Dwight on the nature of human depravity and the ability of man in his fallen state.[90] Tyler and Bonar note that Nettleton held fast to the Hopkinsian position that unconverted men, without true love for and submission to God evidenced in repentance and faith, could not properly be said to "use, but always abuse the means of grace"[91] and efforts by

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[87]Murray, *Revival and Revivalism,* 243.

[88]For more analysis of Finney's theology, see Leonard I. Sweet, "The View of Man Inherent in New Measures Revivalism," *Church History* 45, no. 2 (1976): 206-21; and Jay E. Smith, "The Theology of Charles Finney: A System of Self-Reformation," *Trinity Journal* 13 (1992): 61-93.

[89]Randall Ballmer, ed., "New Haven Theology," in *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism* (Louisville: John Knox, 2002), 406.

[90]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 48.

[91]Ibid. For a discussion on the debate surrounding the state of the unregenerate, perfectionism, and the use of means in the stream of New England Calvinistic thought and Edwardsean thought of Nettleton's day, see Guelzo, *Edwards on the Will*, 112-23.

unregenerate men to please God by doing those things commanded of Christians was fruitless apart from conversion.[92] Nettleton again drew on his own personal experience here. He had labored under conviction for ten months and during that time he attended meetings, read Christian literature, and even attempted to repent but all in vain. If anything, Nettleton reasoned, encouraging the unconverted to do that which is given to Christians to perform only created a false sense of hope and left the sinner perhaps in a worst state than if he had simply been driven to faith and total surrender to God. Dwight on the other hand, as an early leader in the New Haven movement, had "prepared the way" for a more favorable view of human ability "by attempting to break the log jam of human inability that had stymied and brought ridicule upon Calvinism."[93]

The New Haven theology, popularized by Nathaniel Taylor and effectively applied by Charles Finney in his New Measures methodologies, essentially sought a mediating position between the staunch Calvinism of Jonathan Edwards and the open Arminianism (perhaps even Pelagianism[94]) that would be later popularized by Charles Finney. Proponents of the New Haven theology argued that mankind did not inherit Adam's imputed guilt. Instead they reasoned that man's sinfulness lay exclusively in the individual's particular acts of the will rather than in guilt imputed to mankind as a result of Adam's sin. The New Haven theologians, led by Nathaniel William Taylor of Yale, reasoned that where there were no sinful actions, there was no guilt before God. Howe observes that Taylor "reinterpreted the Reformation doctrine of original sin to mean that sinning was universal but not causally necessary . . . [and though] all human beings sinned,

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[92]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 48.

[93]Hardman, *Seasons of Refreshing*, 116.

[94]Thornbury concludes, "New Haven theology was at best Arminianism, and at worst crass Pelagianism." John F. Thornbury, "Asahel Nettleton's Conflict with Finneyism," *Reformation and Revival 8*, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 116.

they possessed 'power to the contrary,' that is, the moral power to refrain from sinning if they chose."[95] Thus, New Haven theologians found themselves in the position of denying the imputed guilt of Adam or inherent sinful nature of man.[96] Influenced by the "democratic ethos of Jacksonian America,"[97] and weary of the teaching of the old New England Calvinists who urged their hearers to wait for the moving of the Holy Spirit, Taylor sought a new way that would allow hearers to respond positively and immediately to the evangelists appeals without necessarily "waiting" for the Spirit to move.[98] Taylor was convinced that humans are not born in a depraved state with the inherent or imputed guilt of Adam, but rather that men become sinful by their sinful choices. As such, Taylor reasoned that humans do indeed possess a capacity to "do otherwise" and avoid sin when rightly led and inclined to do so.[99] Based on his own experience and the fact that his entire theological foundation was built upon the established Calvinistic doctrine of the New England divines with special attention to the teachings of Jonathan Edwards, Edward Hopkins, and Joseph Bellamy, Nettleton could not make this compromise. Whereas Timothy Dwight and Nathaniel Taylor moved toward the use of "means" as helpful aids in obtaining repentance and faith, Nettleton was convinced that

> the promises of salvation go out only to those who perform the ultimate spiritual acts of repentance and faith, not to users of means (and that) to exhort men to do

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[95]Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 169. Holifield discusses Taylor's conception of depravity and sin that shaped the New Haven theology in E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 356-59. See also Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 259-63.

[96]D. A. Sweeney, "Nathaniel William Taylor," in *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals*, ed. Timothy Larsen, David Bebbington, and Mark Noll (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2003), 660-62.

[97]Keith J. Hardman, "Taylor, Nathaniel William (1786-1858)," in *The Encyclopedia of Religious Revivals in America*, ed. Michael McClymond (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2006), 1:428.

[98]Ibid.

[99]Ibid.

> anything but repent and submit to God is only to encourage carnal security and confirm men in an un-converted state.[100]

He held tightly to a view of salvation that was deeply rooted in God's work of regeneration and "his own conversion experience and the revivals he had seen at Killingworth and New Haven all confirmed in his own mind that spiritual awakenings were miracles sent down from God,"[101] sent apart from the promptings of men. The way in which the New Haven controversy tied in with the New Measures controversy is apparent to Thornbury, who observes,

> One can easily see that the principles upon which Taylor was building his theological system were fundamentally the same as those guiding the revivalist C. G. Finney. Although there were no links between the two men, the free-wheeling evangelist and the urbane scholar were both subjecting traditional views on depravity and grace to the bar of human rationalism, and in that court they could not survive.[102]

Nettleton's position put him in alliance with many of the staunch New England theologians, but eventually caused a rift between him and others, including many who aligned with his alma-mater, Yale, and his mentor, Timothy Dwight. When Nettleton heard that the evolving views of Dwight, Taylor, and the New Haven theologians were prevailing among the Yale community, he was troubled. When he heard that faculty at Yale were denying original sin in infants, he crafted a letter to Taylor warning him against his unorthodoxy. In 1829, he even made personal visits and had personal discussions with Taylor in an attempt to dissuade his friend from error, but it was all to no avail.[103] After his attempts to persuade the Yale camp of their errors, Nettleton's concern grew but he did not feel that he was physically or intellectually up to the challenge of squaring-off

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[100]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 46.

[101]Ibid., 47.

[102]Ibid., 191.

[103]Birney, "The Life and Letters of Asahel Nettleton," 155-95. In chap. 6, Birney gives an excellent and detailed account of the exchanges between Nettleton, Taylor, and other contemporaries concerning the New Haven theology.

against Taylor, so he rejected the efforts of others to take the lead in confronting the New Haven theologians.[104] Eventually, Bennet Tyler and professor Leonard Woods of Andover carried the banner of the New England theologians, and after years of back-and-forth debate publicly and in periodicals, it seemed that both sides were "at an impasse, for neither side was convinced that it was wrong."[105]

The Theological Institute of Connecticut

The theological division brought about by the New Haven theologians led to the next and final phase of Nettleton's ministerial career. In September 1833, a group of about fifty like-minded theologians met in East Windsor, Connecticut, for the purpose of forming the Pastoral Union. The Union determined in its second day of meeting that the most important thing they could do to stem the tide of the New Haven theology coming from Yale was to form a seminary for the training of ministers in New England. The Theological Institute of Connecticut (later known as the Hartford Theological Seminary) was thus born on September 11, 1833. The school elected as its first trustee, Asahel Nettleton. The board immediately set about the task of raising funds and Nettleton contributed lavishly.[106] The board then purchased land near the birthplace of Jonathan Edwards in East Windsor and planned to build the seminary. Nettleton joyfully supported the board's decision to hire Nettleton's friend and fellow-laborer, Bennet Tyler as its first

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[104]May concludes in her thesis that Nettleton was not a theologian as such and was not up to the task of challenging the intellect of Taylor, noting, "Nettleton was an evangelist, not a theologian" and reducing his role in this major theological controversy to that of essentially an organizer of the anti-New Haven forces. See Sherry Pierpont May, "Asahel Nettleton: Nineteenth Century American Revivalist" (Ph.D. thesis, Drew University, 1969), 4. May is also extremely helpful in detailing the exchanges between the camps, on pp. 322-364.

[105]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 192-93.

[106]Nettleton's old friend Lyman Beecher was distressed over Nettleton's involvement with the founding of the new school and his financial contributions to support it. He stressed his "disappointment" and noted, "The days of peace for the Connecticut churches I fear are over." Beecher, *Autobiography*, 2:225.

president. As a show of his gratitude, Tyler led the board to offer its first faculty position to Nettleton, who would teach as an instructor in Pastoral Duty. Nettleton eventually declined the full-time appointment citing his poor health,[107] but agreed to remain actively involved in the school and teach in an "unofficial" capacity, giving occasional lectures to the students and serving as a campus-chaplain of sorts.[108]

Nettleton spent most of his remaining years in East Windsor, where he eventually settled into the only home he would ever own in 1838. He was only fifty-five years old at the time, but the move into his own house signaled the virtual retirement of the evangelistic giant. He continued to do occasional revival work throughout the 1830s and often preached in the South,[109] but the era of the powerful revivals so characteristic of the earlier years of the SGA was waning. Most of Nettleton's time in the later part of the decade was devoted to the growth of the Theological Institute and occasional instruction of students, primarily in the field of evangelism and revivals. He became a well-known counselor to the students and one who took great interest in the care of their souls. Also during this time, Nettleton occasionally ventured out into the countryside to see the areas where so-called "revivals" had occurred previously, only to discover that his concerns about the New Measures were well-founded and validated. He found that few converts remained from the protracted campaigns led earlier in the SGA by those associated with and practicing the New Measures of revivals and evangelism.[110]

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[107]The letter of decline is found in Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours,* 337. He was honored, but felt he had to decline.

[108]Here I am summarizing detailed information found in Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 211-15.

[109]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 337. See also Tom Nettles' introduction to Nettleton, *Sermons*, xii-xiii, in which he notes the impression that Basil Manly, Sr., had of Nettleton when he visited Charleston in 1830. Ironically, Manly viewed Nettleton with great caution, feeling that he was a "New Measures" man himself.

[110]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 217-18.

Nettleton's final days were spent at his East Windsor Hill home, corresponding with friends, investing in students at the seminary, reading voluminously and studying his Bible.[111] He lived in financial comfort but never married, due initially to his early commitment to go to the foreign field and then later because of his sickness. In his later years, he was virtually alone except for the company of friends, students, and siblings.[112] In 1839, two honorary Doctor of Divinity degrees were conferred upon him, one by the Hampden-Sidney College of Virginia, and the other by Jefferson College in Pennsylvania. The students at the seminary organized a society known as the "Nettleton Rhetorical Society" in 1843, demonstrating the high amount of respect others had for Nettleton even in his final years when his strength was failing.[113] From 1841 until 1843, his health failed considerably due to what was diagnosed as gallstones. Following a series of surgeries that left him weak and in desperate pain, he died in his bed on the morning of May 16, 1844.[114] His will stated that small portions of his estate should be given to his siblings and his friends, but the greatest balance of his estate was willed to the American Board for Foreign Missions and to the seminary which he helped found.[115]

Nettleton's Legacy

Though often overlooked in the popular literature of today, Nettleton's impact upon his own generation should not be underestimated, nor should his legacy be forgotten. As a preacher, he left an indelible mark upon those thousands who heard him and were transformed by his ministry. Despite this, modern scholarship has not given much attention

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[111]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 428-29.

[112]Ibid., 437.

[113]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 222.

[114]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 439-40.

[115]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 224-25.

to his contributions to the field of preaching. In *History of Preaching*, Edwards notes that Nettleton was among a group of Yale graduates who "were not influential on the future of preaching."[116] Noll, in his massive tome *America's God*, takes note of Nettleton's impact chiefly as Finney's opponent, but says little of his preaching apart from including an oft-used quote (from Tyler) that points to the clearly Calvinistic and doctrinal nature of at least one Nettleton sermon from 1821.[117] McLoughlin, in his work on the subject of revivals, characterizes Nettleton as a "quiet, thin man" who "nursed a constantly frustrated ambition to become a foreign missionary"[118] and describes his revivals as "emotionally restrained but very successful."[119] McLoughlin goes on to describe the tone and methodology of Nettleton's meetings by observing,

> According to Nettleton, the revivalist's only duty was to instruct sinners in the truth of the gospel and to urge them to repent and to pray in the hope that God had predestined them for salvation. If so, God would in his own good time transform their wicked hearts. Meanwhile no action of will or feeling on the part of the sinner would be of any use. Nettleton never countenanced excitement of any sort. Whenever anyone showed signs of becoming overwrought at his meetings, Nettleton would tell them to go home and pray.[120]

This description hardly leaves a favorable impression at all to modern readers regarding the passion, warmth, and conviction with which others characterize Nettleton's preaching and meetings, nor does it even sound like the warm man that so many of his contemporaries describe him as being. McLoughlin leaves the impression of Nettleton as an overly formal, cold, bland, mechanical Puritan mouthpiece, which is certainly a caricature.

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[116]Edwards, *A History of Preaching*, 508.

[117]Noll, *America's God*, 277.

[118]McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, 32.

[119]Ibid.

[120]Ibid.

Although contemporaries of Nettleton, such as Timothy Dwight, Nathaniel Taylor, Charles Finney, Lyman Beecher, Samuel Cartwright, and Bennet Tyler, are remembered and even studied for their oratory and preaching prowess, one seldom finds Nettleton's name mentioned alongside these preaching giants. His name is absent from such works as McGraw's *Great Evangelical Preachers of Yesterday*, Wilkinson's *Modern Masters of Pulpit Discourse*, and Demaray's *Pulpit Giants*. One exception is found in David Larsen's modern two-volume collection of biographical studies of preachers, *The Company of the Preachers*. Larsen notes that Nettleton is indeed "often overlooked in the history of preaching"[121] and that he was "possibly the greatest evangelist New England saw since George Whitefield."[122] In his brief analysis, Larsen writes that Nettleton's preaching was rich with "dramatic flair," elements of theatrical engagement, and a stark "move away from the Puritan style."[123] He states that Nettleton's sermons were "remarkably creative . . . [influenced by] classical rhetorical instruction . . . [full of] rich illustrative material and vocabulary,"[124] and delivered with masterful oratorical skill.[125] Larsen's analysis commends Nettleton's preaching skill as worthy of study and even emulation by today's preachers.

One generally has to turn to the writings of Nettleton's contemporaries and the testimonies of those who attended his revivals to find more favorable analysis of his preaching legacy. Following his death in 1844, the *New York Observer* said Nettleton was "one of the most extraordinary preachers of the gospel with whom God has ever blessed

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[121]David L. Larsen, *The Company of the Preachers: A History of Biblical Preaching from the Old Testament to the Modern Era* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 2:444.

[122]Ibid.

[123]Ibid., 2:445.

[124]Ibid.

[125]Ibid., 2:445-46.

this country."[126] William Sprague certainly thought highly of Nettleton's oratory skills as a preacher and wrote,

> Dr. Nettleton's preaching was what might be expected from what has been already said of his intellectual and moral constitution; and yet, after all, there was a peculiarity about it, of which no language can convey an adequate impression. It was, for the most part, extemporaneous; though his mind had always been filled with his subject from previous study. It was in a high degree doctrinal, (Calvinistic in the sense of Edwards and Bellamy,) but every doctrine was presented in its practical bearing. It was so plain and simple that the veriest child could understand it. It was so close and searching, that the hearer could hardly help feeling that he was in contact with Omniscience. It was so deeply solemn, that it seemed sometimes as if the effect could scarcely have been heightened by an announcement of the opening of the judgment day. And yet it was addressed almost exclusively to the understanding and the conscience;—the imagination and the passions seemed scarcely ever to be thought of. There was an indescribable power in some of his tones, which those who have felt it can never forget. Forty years ago, I heard him, in an extemporaneous discourse utter the words 'Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes,' in a manner that makes my ears tingle to this day. He had his own particular way in every thing, extending even to the arrangement of the room in which he was to speak; and he contrived to avail himself even to the most minute circumstances to give additional impressiveness to the truth. Though he was often surpassingly eloquent, and would hold his audience as by a spell, yet his power was exerted in turning their views upon themselves and their Saviour, and in sending them away, not to extol his eloquence, but to weep for their own sins.[127]

In the modern era, respectable and even favorable treatment of Nettleton's preaching legacy are found more frequently in literature of a more Reformed or Calvinistic tone, where Nettleton's preaching is held forth as an example of preaching that is at once theologically astute, "sober and intellectual"[128] while remaining personally applicable, pointed at the conscience of the hearer, and emotionally stirring.[129] Borgman even

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[126]Quoted in Ehrhard, "Asahel Nettleton," 68.

[127]William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit; or Commemorative Notices of Distinguished American Clergymen of Various Denominations, From the Early Settlement of the Country to the Close of the Year Eighteen Hundred and Fifty-Five, with Historical Introductions* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1857), 550.

[128]William S. Barker and Samuel T. Logan, Jr., eds., *Sermons That Shaped America: Reformed Preaching from 1630 to 2001* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2003), 245.

[129]Brian Borgman, *My Heart for Thy Cause: Albert N. Martin's Theology of Preaching* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2002), 167-70. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 196-99, also gives favorable

compares the "searching, pointed, personal, discriminating"[130] applicational nature of Nettleton's preaching in the SGA to that of Edwards and Whitefield in the First Great Awakening.[131] While some may find this an exaggeration, it is sadly true that little credit has been given historically to the pulpit skills and preaching legacy of Nettleton, despite the tremendous results his pulpit ministry yielded.

Nettleton's legacy as a polemicist is more secure. Many of the major works that do mention Nettleton only largely overlook his success as a revivalist and give far more attention to his involvement in the theological controversies of his day. In many works, he is negatively portrayed as Finney's antagonist. He is frequently represented as the traditionalist who opposed innovation, rallied Finney's opponents against him, and led the opposition at New Lebanon. Far more attention is given to Nettleton's legacy in regard to the New Measures controversy than to the positive aspects of his ministry in many popular works.[132] Regarding the growing influence of the New Haven Theology (led by Nathaniel Taylor), Nettleton opposed Taylor publicly, but took a secondary role of supporting and organizing the tracts and publications of literature that spoke out against its growing influence. He was content to let Bennet Tyler take the lead engaging and opposing the more theologically-savvy Taylor. Birney notes that Nettleton "felt himself unequal to the arduous task of writing and answering lengthy articles and pamphlets,"[133] but strongly encouraged Leonard Woods of Andover Seminary to write

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treatment of Nettleton's preaching legacy, as does Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 105-10, in a chapter titled "The Greatest since Whitefield."

[130]Borgman, *My Heart for Thy Cause*, 167.

[131]Ibid.

[132]See McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, 32-33, 44-51; Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 230-37; and Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney*, 65-72. See also Holifield, *Theology in America*, 359-60.

[133]Birney, "The Life and Letters of Asahel Nettleton," 162-63.

and publish against Taylor's New Haven theology. Some have commented that Nettleton was not either physically or mentally up to the task of leading the charge against Taylor, but in any case, his reputation as a revivalist allowed him to lend his weight to the opposition of the New Haven school.[134] Though others took the lead debating the New Haven theologians, Nettleton clearly expended much energy in the struggle against what he saw as a compromise of orthodoxy.[135] His energies spent opposing the New Measures and the New Haven theology, both in preaching and writing, cement his legacy as a ready defender of theological orthodoxy during his lifetime.

It was his part in the New Haven dispute that led to the final phase of Nettleton's legacy as a mentor and educator. Because of the irreconcilable differences between the "old school" New England Calvinists and the New Haven (Yale) crowd, it was agreed upon by the newly-formed Pastoral Union (of Congregationalist churches in Connecticut), formed in September 1833, to start the Theological Institute of Connecticut, later known as the Hartford Theological Seminary.[136] Inaugural president Bennet Tyler placed Nettleton over "the practical training of the students."[137] In January 1834, Nettleton was unanimously selected as professor of Pastoral Duty and while he never formally accepted the call to the professorship, an arrangement was worked out with the Institute whereby Nettleton would teach regularly at certain times of the year and then be free to continue his work among the churches the remainder of the time. The arrangement suited

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[134]Even Thornbury, *God Sent Revival,* 193, concedes that Leonard Woods and Bennet Tyler were more "qualified" to "handle" the New Haven theological controversy than Nettleton. See also May, "Asahel Nettleton," 322-64. May notes that although Nettleton was in opposition to the New Haven theology and even "incensed" at the outset of the controversy, he was also "weary of battle" and willing to let others lead the charge while he organized opposition behind the scenes.

[135]Birney, "The Life and Letters of Asahel Nettleton," 155-95.

[136]Curtis Manning Geer, *A History of the Hartford Theological Seminary* (Hartford, CT: The Case, Lockwood & Brainerd Co., 1934), 43.

[137]Ibid., 51.

Nettleton at this point in his career. Curtis Manning Geer, the author of the Seminary's history, notes,

> While Nettleton was never a member of the Faculty he was probably the most influential man in the formation of the Pastoral Union. The movement cannot be understood without consideration of the part which Nettleton had in its beginnings and its early history.[138]

Nettleton devoted the final decade of his life to the formation of the seminary and the training of its students even while remaining somewhat active as an itinerant revivalist. He gave lectures and shared with the students from his own experiences as a servant of the church. He was well-liked by the student body to whom he became a pastor of sorts. Later he had both a professorship and the Nettleton Rhetorical Society named in his honor.[139] Though it frequently goes unmentioned in the literature, Nettleton procured a legacy as an educator and mentor to future generations in the final years of his life. Noll observes that the rapid need for and multiplication of seminaries and training institutions were a notable characteristic of the advances made during the SGA and Nettleton certainly contributed to and participated in this important movement.[140]

Still other aspects of Nettleton's ministry lie outside the parameters of this present study but merit mention. His contribution to hymnology and the publication of the *Village Hymns* has already been alluded to but is frequently overlooked by students of this period.[141] The collection proved to be wildly popular and practically useful among the churches of the SGA and Nettleton gave generously to the cause of Christ from the book's royalties.[142] Often overlooked is the fact that he was an ardent supporter of foreign

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[138]Geer, *A History of the Hartford Theological Seminary*, 51.

[139]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 216, 222.

[140]Noll, *America's God*, 254.

[141]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 132-37.

[142]David W. Kling, "Second Great Awakening (ca. 1795- ca. 1835)," in *The Encyclopedia of*

missions, desiring early in his ministry to give his life to foreign missions and later giving lavishly to support foreign missionary work at a time when foreign missionary enterprises were a relatively recent innovation.[143] Also, as illustrated in a collection of anecdotal exchanges collected in his *Memoirs*, he was an extraordinary personal evangelist and even an early apologist of sorts. He frequently proved ready and willing to engage Universalists, Restorationists, Antinomians, atheists, and generally all who had objections to Christian faith with solid, thoughtful, and biblical answers.[144] Birney even concludes that Nettleton "had a tremendous influence" on the beginning of the Temperance Movement.[145] He was a renaissance-man of sorts, proving to be well-rounded and multi-faceted as a servant of God and the church.

His legacy in the popular literature though, will likely remain as that of a "revivalist" of the SGA and one who was a "complete-package," using the multitude of his gifts and talents in service to the church and revivals of religion. However, he was so much more than just a revivalist. If he was not the strongest orator, or the greatest polemicist, or even the most theologically profound minister of his day, he was certainly one whose variety of talents were pulled together by God in exactly the right way to be most useful to the churches in which he ministered. Nettleton's love for pastors and the well-being of the church combined with his capable preaching skills and these combined with his passionate interest in the spiritual well-being of individuals and his ability to

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Religious Revivals, 385

[143]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 423. See also C. L. Thompson, *Times of Refreshing: A History of American Revivals from 1740-1877* (Rockford, IL: Golden Censer, 1878), 94; Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2004), 422-28.

[144]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 398-419.

[145]Birney, "The Life and Letters of Asahel Nettleton: 1783-1844," 81. See pp. 81-85 for a full treatment of Nettleton's influence on this movement. This might in fact have been a "Hopkinsian" influence on Nettleton as well. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, 408, notes, "American temperance, anti-slavery, and missionary movements owe a great debt to Hopkins's path-breaking efforts."

counsel them and speak as one who knew their hearts. These combined with his capacity to communicate deep truths in a practical way and, combined with his deep sense of humility and his love for souls, made him an eminently useful tool in the hands of God for bringing about revival. Nettleton's pastoral heart, passion for the revival of the church, and capacity for speaking truth to the human heart should define his lasting legacy. As one who knew him well, Sprague later commented,

> There was, after all, something that gave character and effect to his measures, which has not been, and perhaps cannot be, described. He had a manner of doing little things that was perfectly inimitable— another, in attempting the same, might not only defeat his end, but render himself absolutely ridiculous. He knew how to meet every case with the most appropriate counsel; and not unfrequently he produced the deepest impression by absolute silence, where he knew that the individual had expected to be personally addressed. When it is said that he had no machinery in connection with the ordinary means of grace, beyond an inquiry-meeting, it is due to truth also to say that every thing that he said and did was so peculiar, as to form what might almost seem a distinct system of measures.[146]

It is perhaps Lyman Beecher's testimony about Nettleton that has been regarded as one of the best summaries of Nettleton's legacy. In 1827, Beecher wrote,

> Mr. Nettleton has served God and his generation with more self-denial, and constancy, and wisdom, and success, than any man living. I witnessed his commencement, and knew his progress, and the relative state of things in Connecticut, especially; and what (but for his influence in promoting revivals, and exciting and teaching by example others to promote them,) might have been the condition of the churches in those days of revolution through which they have passed. Considering the extent of his influence in promoting pure and powerful revivals of religion, as destined to be one of the greatest benefactors of the world, and among the most efficient instruments of introducing the glory of the latter day.[147]

This is high-praise from Lyman Beecher, a man who himself, had quite an influence on American evangelicalism in the first half of the nineteenth century. Considering the praise of his contemporaries, Nettleton deserves a more prominent and positive legacy than that which he is usually given.

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[146]Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, 552.

[147]Bennet Tyler, *Memoir of the Life and Character of Asahel Nettleton* (1853; repr., Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, n.d.), v.

Conclusion

No study of the Second Great Awakening is complete without giving due attention to the ministry and contributions of Asahel Nettleton. Any who conclude that he was somehow "anti-revival" because of his theological Calvinism or methodology must arrive at this conclusion out of an ignorance of the man and his ministry. Indeed, when asked about whether or not revivals are from God, Nettleton once responded, "To all who oppose revivals, I would say: Beware! Lest you be found fighting against God."[148] Nettleton was not opposed to revivals at all, but instead held an altogether different view of the true nature of revivals than those who would eventually overshadow him because of their fanaticism and reported results. Ehrhard notes, "except for being remembered as the one who opposed Finney at the New Lebanon Conferences, even most histories fail to tell of the work of revival under Nettleton."[149] In many respects, he is indeed the "forgotten evangelist," but he should not be overlooked by modern students of revival, preaching, and evangelism. Those who take the time to examine Nettleton's ministry, results, and theological positions in his own words will find him to be a dynamic preacher with a pastoral heart, genuine defender of orthodox Calvinistic theology, and evangelist in every sense of the word whose concern and love was for the lost.

In a day when genuine revival is so desperately needed, today's ministers would do well to re-discover the life and ministry of Asahel Nettleton. If they would do so, they would learn many lessons from the New Englander who led dozens of revivals with long effects and led perhaps up to 30,000 people to faith in Christ in his day. Students of personal evangelism can learn from Nettleton the value of tender, personal soul-care that seeks to nurture the work of regeneration according to the Spirit's leading into a genuine saving relationship with Christ. Students of preaching can learn from Nettleton the value

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[148]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 454.

[149]Ehrhard, "Asahel Nettleton," 67-68.

of practical, biblical, and doctrinally-rich preaching that is thoroughly substantial rather than catered to the needs of the hearer or driven by some current fad or trend. Nettleton's ministry is proof that God can use this type of rich, soul-searching, doctrinal preaching to awaken unregenerate souls to their greatest need and then point them to the sufficient Savior who alone can do what the sinner cannot. Students of church growth can learn from Nettleton the value of analyzing the use of "means" according to Scripture and not merely accepting methodologies because they seem pragmatic. In his final analysis, Ehrhard notes that one can learn about the use of methods from Nettleton, who "refused to accept any New Measures simply on the basis of effectiveness."[150] Theologians learn from Nettleton the importance of boldly standing for doctrinal truth even when the trends of the time sway against such truth and firm stances set one against the prevailing culture. Educators and pastors learn from Nettleton the value of investing one's self in future generations of pastors and preachers through personal discipleship and the promotion of education for ministry. Most importantly, all can learn from Nettleton the great peace that comes from constant trust in the sovereignty of God, who knows the beginning from the end and has a purpose and plan for His own. One can learn that, like Nettleton, even when God's plans are not one's own plans, His plans are indeed rich and rewarding.

One of Nettleton's greatest fears, which he voiced in his *Letters* during the New Measures controversy, was that if the New Measures prevailed, subsequent generations would never know of the power of the revivals that existed before the introduction of the New Measures.[151] He stated,

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[150]Ehrhard, "Asahel Nettleton," 87.

[151]Indeed, by the mid-1840s, Finney himself commented upon the superficiality of and general decline of revivals as compared to the previous decades: "For the last ten years, revivals of religion have been gradually becoming more and more superficial. All the phenomena which they exhibit testify to this as a general fact. There is very much less deep conviction of sin and deep depth of humility, and much less strength in all the graces exhibited by converts in late revivals, than in the converts from the revivals which occurred about 1830 and 1831 and for some time previous. I have observed, as have others also, that revivals are of much shorter duration, and that a reaction comes on much more suddenly and disastrously than

> If the evil be not soon prevented, a generation will arise, inheriting all the obliquities of their leaders, not knowing that a revival ever did or can exist without all those evils. And these evils are destined to be propagated from generation to generation, waxing worse and worse.[152]

In many ways, today's church is the proof that Nettleton's theological concerns were prophetic and well-founded and that the careful methodologies with which he approached revivals ought to serve as a necessary corrective to many of today's popular evangelistic methods. Having bought into the false gospel of "easy-believism"[153] and having embraced many aberrant theological formulations, today's church mostly lacks the powerful moving of God's Spirit that Nettleton and his contemporaries were accustomed to in their day.[154] In large measure, this lack of the Spirit's moving could be because many of today's evangelistic methodologies and much of what is called "evangelistic preaching" today is man-centered rather than God-centered and has resulted in modern churches being filled with the very unregenerate sinners that Nettleton sought so diligently to reach with his penetrating and searching gospel preaching. If today's church longs to see God bless this generation with a genuine miracle of revival, then contemporary theologians and practitioners must learn from Nettleton's life and ministry

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formerly. Also, that fewer of the converts make stable and efficient Christians; that those who do persevere, appear to have less of the Spirit of Christ than in former revivals;—not so much of the spirit of prayer, and are not so modest and humble. In short, all the phenomena of the more recent revivals, judging from my own experience and observation and from the testimony of other witnesses, show that they have at least very extensively, taken on a much less desirable type than formerly." Charles Finney, *Revival Fire: Letters on Revivals*, 5, accessed April 11, 2017, http://www.hopefaithprayer.com/books/RevivalFire.pdf.

[152]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 348.

[153]John MacArthur, *The Gospel according to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 21. The term "easy-believism" was popularized in the late twentieth-century debate over so-called "Lordship salvation" and came to be recognized as a term to describe those who have professed faith and feel comfortable calling themselves Christian while showing no fruit of conversion. Incidentally, the churches of Nettleton's day were also full of such false converts. Incidentally, in the "Lordship salvation" debate, many of the same concerns about "spurious" conversions and a lack of spiritual fruit among the converted reminiscent of the same concerns of Edwards's day and Nettleton's as well.

[154]Ibid.

and observe how God used him to be a part of one of the greatest spiritual awakenings in modern history.

This overview shows that Nettleton's powerful evangelistic preaching did not exist in a vacuum. Nettleton's preaching and evangelistic ministry found fertile soil in a specific rhetorical context, namely the exciting, changing, and challenging years of the early nineteenth century. Nettleton's usefulness in revivals during the Second Great Awakening was closely tied to his dynamic evangelistic preaching. But what made his sermons so powerful? There was power both in the delivery and the content of Nettleton's sermons. Before examining the delivery of the sermons though, it is helpful to consider the content and subject matter of Nettleton's preaching. Tyler and Bonar write of Nettleton's preaching that "doctrinal sermons were frequent . . . [and he] sometimes preached on the severer doctrines with great power and apparent good effect."[155] Sprague concurs when he recalls that Nettleton's preaching "was in a high degree doctrinal."[156] Since his contemporaries frequently commented about the doctrinal content of Nettleton's preaching, it follows logically that to understand the nature of his preaching, one must first know something about the foundational doctrinal positions that he held. The next chapter moves the rhetorical analysis forward by examining the doctrinal foundations and positions of Nettleton, derived from an analysis of Nettleton's own written and preached material.

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[155]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 80.

[156]Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, 550.

CHAPTER 3

ASAHEL NETTLETON'S THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

To understand Asahel Nettleton's ministry, methodologies, and preaching, one must have a basic understanding of the theological system that undergirded his practices. For Nettleton, theology was not merely abstract. Rather, he shaped his ministry practices by what he knew to be true about God, man, the Bible, and redemption. Nettleton observed in his day what one author has rightly noted about evangelical churches in the modern era, namely that evangelism has been weakened and revivals are few because "the evangelical wing of the Protestant church is saturated with doctrine and practices which have no biblical foundation."[1] Nettleton was deeply concerned that his ministry and practice be rooted in a right understanding of God, His Word (the Bible), and a biblical conception of regeneration. Understanding Nettleton's theological commitments also help to understand his polemics and his involvement in many of the debates of his day.

Perhaps most importantly for this project though, it is necessary to understand Nettleton's theology in order to perform a proper rhetorical analysis of his preaching. A significant factor in traditional rhetorical analysis is the consideration of a speaker's source of invention (*inventio*).[2] In rhetorical terms, an analysis of invention seeks to discover and understand the source or sources of a speaker's ideas or arguments.[3] Since

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[1]Walter J. Chantry, *Today's Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic?* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2008), 12.

[2]Invention as a canon of classical rhetorical studies is discussed in greater detail in chap. 4.

[3]Edward P. J. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 22.

the vast majority of Nettleton's sermonic content is biblical and theological, it becomes essential to understand the theological framework from which he drew. The purpose of this section is to examine that theological framework. It is not the purpose here necessarily to explain or defend each particular doctrinal commitment, neither is it reasonable to give a thorough historical account of each doctrine. Such analysis is outside the parameters of this study. However, by examining Nettleton's theological commitments in a few key areas, it will be easier to understand the course of his ministry and practice and the biblical and theological framework that guided that course. Nettleton's theology can best be understood by examining his theological training in the context of his time, analyzing his doctrine from his own writings, and looking for his theological commitments as they were set forth in his preaching.

Theological Preparations

Childhood and Conversion

The theological foundations of Nettleton's ministry began to take shape in his early childhood. His parents were nominal members of the Congregational church, being members according to the "half-way covenant" plan, which was common in that part of New England in his day.[4] Though his parents could not vote in the assembly or receive communion, they were permitted to have their children baptized in to the church. Asahel was baptized as an infant and in his youth, and committed to memory the *Assembly's Catechism*, which was likely the Westminster Shorter Catechism.[5] Though Tyler does

[4]The "Half-Way Covenant" was a policy of church life grounded in the decision of a synod in Massachusetts in 1657, and again in 1662, that impacted New England Congregationalists. The arrangement allowed unregenerate adult members of the church the right of having their children baptized into the membership of the church. These same adults could not receive communion, but they could present their children for baptism. This decision caused a great rift between its supporters and traditionalists who saw it as a great compromise to their covenantal system. For detailed discussion, see Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 53-55.

[5]Concerning the Westminster Confession, McLoughlin notes, "This statement of Calvinism had been the creedal basis of both Presbyterian and Congregational churches since its promulgation in

not provide many details in his sketch, it is reasonable to assume that Nettleton would have had exposure early on to standard Congregationalist doctrine that was common in his day.[6] This doctrine Noll describes as "an Augustinian-Calvinist picture of the fallen human condition, of merciful divine sovereignty in redemption, and of the self-authenticating all-sufficiency of divine revelation," a theology, that Noll explains, would have assumed "there was a given (rather than constructed) character to human nature, the world, and God's ways of reaching out to the world."[7]

When only a child, Nettleton received his first religious impressions. These impressions came in the form of natural (or general) revelation. He later told how he sensed the greatness of God and the reality of death while he meditated on the setting sun one evening. This left an impression upon Nettleton even in his later years. However, it was not until revival swept through his hometown of North Killingworth in the year 1800 that he truly began to sense the Spirit of God at work in his heart. In his own personal testimony given later and published in the *Connecticut Evangelical Magazine* and then reprinted by Tyler, Nettleton testified that he came to an understanding of his completely sinful state (totally destitute of love and conformity to God) and his dependence upon an external working of God for his own regeneration.

Understanding his own personal experience and his interpretation of events is crucial for understanding his own theological underpinnings and the theology that would become foundational for him later in life. In his testimony, he shared that in response to hearing the preached Word, he fell under a great state of conviction and shame that at first

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1647." William McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York: Ronald, 1959), 18-19.

[6]Holifield, *Theology in America*, 61-64.

[7]Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 21.

he sought to escape, but ultimately could not. He continued by telling of the despondency, grief, and shame that overwhelmed him during this period. He "tried to repent . . . [but] could not feel the least sorrow"[8] for his sins. In this state, he was overtaken by fear and grief. These emotions continued until a "tremor seized all my limbs and death appeared to have taken hold upon me . . . [and then] an unusual calmness pervaded my soul"[9] which finally brought freedom from feelings of guilt and his sense of conviction. His affections toward God and the Bible had been changed by an external working of the Spirit upon his mind and heart and this transformation, he concluded, was his regeneration.[10]

The importance of Nettleton's account of his own regeneration cannot be overstated as it relates to his theological formation. His own experience of regeneration had all the distinctive earmarks of the orthodox Calvinistic understanding of how God related to men. May notes that "his own conversion was a paradigm by which he understood all others. . . . He recognized that no two religious experiences were the same, but the basic movement from 'conviction' to 'hope' was experienced by all."[11] When his period of conviction began, Nettleton's own experience was one of feeling "anxious" and unsafe and without any love for God in his unregenerate state.[12] None of his efforts to know and love God resulted in his regeneration but rather left him empty because, as he concluded later, his efforts were performed with "no love to God, and no regard to his glory," but had been influenced rather "solely by a desire to promote his own

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[8]Bennet Tyler and Andrew Bonar, *Asahel Nettleton: Life and Labours* (1854; repr., Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), 21.

[9]Ibid., 22.

[10]Tyler and Bonar record Nettleton's full testimony of conversion in ibid., 19-22.

[11]Sherry Pierpont May, "Asahel Nettleton: Nineteenth Century American Revivalist" (Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 1969),131.

[12]Bennet Tyler, *Memoir of the Life and Character of Asahel Nettleton* (1853; repr., Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, n.d.), 18.

personal interest and happiness."[13] Nettleton's own words here indicate that he came to believe all his "religious services," which were performed in his unregenerate condition, were unacceptable to God because they were motivated by pride and self-interest rather than the glory of God.[14]

His own experience taught him to understand the difference between salvation by grace and salvation by works. He noted later that all of his prayers and religious pursuits during this period were, in hindsight, unacceptable precisely because through them he had sought "to establish his own righteousness" and "vainly presumed that by diligent and persevering efforts, he should recommend himself to the favor of God."[15] His experience did not lead him to discount completely the value of calling all men to the use of the means of grace later in his ministry. It established for him their proper place and usage. He testified that it was through the preaching of the Word, the reading of the Scriptures, Christian conversation, and the written testimony of other Christians (Jonathan Edwards and David Brainerd, specifically) that the Spirit of God performed His work of both conviction and illumination in Nettleton's own heart.[16] As the truths about God's righteousness and Nettleton's own sinfulness became clearer to him, his conscience was pricked with the horrible truth of his own condemnation. When peace ultimately came to his tormented soul, Nettleton did not credit the change to anything he himself had done. For him, peace only came after the internal working of the Holy Spirit quickened his heart and transferred peace of mind to him.[17]

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[13]Tyler, *Memoir*, 20.

[14]Ibid., 18-19.

[15]Ibid., 20.

[16]Ibid., 20-21.

[17]Ibid., 21-22.

The theological Calvinism he learned as a child through the *Assembly's Catechism* was confirmed by his experience. He had been moved upon by the sovereign God of the universe, who graciously initiated His redemptive pursuit of Nettleton through a heightened consciousness of sin and the realities of eternity, holiness, and righteous judgment. His deep wrestling with these realities were helped along by reading the writings of Edwards and Brainerd and the preaching of the Word, all of which brought him to a state of utter submission to the reality of his sinfulness and the hopelessness of his vain attempts to be reconciled to God through his own efforts. Then, through the sovereign mercy of God, he was given a new heart and disposition toward the things of God. The whole process spanned a period of about ten months.[18] During this ten-month period, Nettleton experienced the powerful convicting work of the Spirit internally in response to the preached Word of God. Ultimately, the transformation that resulted in his regeneration came through the working of the Spirit, who, though separate from Nettleton, moved upon him and within him to create in him a new heart. Nettleton saw himself as a passive recipient of the gracious working of God throughout the process that culminated in his regeneration.[19] The "law of God" had done its work of conviction and led him to utter dependence upon the grace and mercy of God for deliverance.[20] Thus, Nettleton's

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[18]Tyler, *Memoir*, 23.

[19]Nettleton testified that following his own regeneration he understood that "the sinner should be born again by the special operations of the Holy Spirit" because the "natural heart is destitute of holiness, and opposed to God." Ibid., 21-22.

[20]Ibid., 23. Nettleton's testimony sounds remarkably similar to what Joel Beeke concludes was typical for the Puritan-influenced approach to evangelism, where stress was placed on the prayers of the converted, the plain preaching of the Word, "catechetical" instruction, warm and zealous pastoral guidance, and utter reliance on the work of the Spirit in regeneration. See Joel R. Beeke, *Puritan Evangelism: A Biblical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2007), 31-35, 44-45, 61, 72-73. For a modern example of this approach to evangelism, see Will Metzger, *Tell the Truth: The Whole Gospel to the Whole Person by Whole People* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 28, 30, 32, 37, 134-37. Metzger notes on p. 28, that regeneration is "God's prerogative" and again on p. 30, that "the one and only medium through which the Spirit works is the Scriptures."

later theological interpretation of regeneration had already been formed in his own mind based on his own experience.[21]

Following his regeneration, Nettleton's pursuit of the knowledge of God and his workings in the world intensified. For financial and personal reasons, he was unable to pursue theological education right away, but over the course of the next few years, Nettleton committed himself to learning. Through reading accounts in the *Connecticut Evangelical Magazine* and *Horne's Letters on Missions*, a great missionary impulse was awakened in Nettleton and he longed to yield his life to missionary service.[22] He taught youth in the local school for financial stability and committed himself to learning theology from his pastor during this time. He was finally able to enroll in Yale in the fall of 1805.[23]

Years at Yale

Overview. It was at Yale, at that time under the leadership of Timothy Dwight, that Nettleton continued to solidify his own theological positions. As a student, he philosophically wrestled with challenges to the Calvinistic orthodoxy that he had embraced up to this point and enjoyed discussion and debate of practical and theological matters.[24] He was not an extraordinary student and did not stand out as a distinguished scholar during his time at Yale. He struggled with melancholy and various health concerns, but his love for theology, "mental and moral philosophy," and the Word of God deepened and his friendship with President Dwight made an impression upon him. At

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[21]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 23-29.

[22]Tyler, *Memoir*, 25-26.

[23]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 35.

[24]Tyler, *Memoir*, 36-37, recounts that Nettleton "ably vindicated the doctrines of grace against the objections which were urged against them" by students and others and that he was heavily involved in the discussion "respecting the means of grace."

one point when Nettleton was low in spirit, Dwight lent Nettleton his sermon manuscripts on *Evidences of Regeneration* for reading and steered the young student toward the reading of *Edwards on Religious Affections*.[25] Nettleton eventually rallied, and in his final year, stood out among the student body as a very capable student of theology. Also, his relationship with Dwight grew stronger during the Yale revival of 1807-1808. During this revival, Nettleton was known to "seek out persons in a state of religious anxiety"[26] and spend much time with them "conversing upon the great interests of the soul."[27] On at least one occasion, Nettleton co-labored closely with Dwight as he ministered to a young man under religious impressions. This young man became a Christian and attributed his salvation experience, at least in part, to the labors of Nettleton and Dwight on his behalf. The man later recounted that it was Nettleton who "besiege[ed] the throne of grace on his behalf and "pleaded . . . with fervency"[28] for his soul adding, "I cannot doubt that I was more indebted to him for my relief than to any other person."[29] Alongside Dwight, Nettleton had his first taste of the glory of revival from the perspective of a gospel-laborer. Though Nettleton's theological underpinnings would never allow him to take any credit for the young man's conversion, this and other experiences like it allowed Nettleton to experience what it was like to be the means through which the Spirit ministered to a troubled soul.

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[25]Tyler, *Memoir*, 37-43. Details about Nettleton's time at Yale come mostly from the testimony of Jonathan Lee, Nettleton's roommate for three years at Yale. It is also worth noting that President Dwight, one of Nettleton's earliest mentors, was the grandson of theologian and revivalist Jonathan Edwards.

[26]Ibid., 33.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Ibid., 35.

[29]Ibid., 35, 33-36, for the full account of Nettleton's labors in this revival.

The influence of Edwards. Nettleton's study of Edwards's *Religious Affections* under Dwight's instruction is noteworthy because it reinforces the continual influence that Edwards exerted on the young minister. In the re-telling of his own conversion, Nettleton stated he had previously been acquainted with the writings of Edwards.[30] It is probable that a young man awakened to religious affections in Congregationalist-dominated Connecticut at the turn of the nineteenth century would have been familiar with the teachings of Edwards. Thornbury writes that the influence of Edwards and his writings following the First Great Awakening "dominated the theology of New England for several generations."[31] During the First Great Awakening, Edwards had seen genuine revival and became a defender of genuine revivals, writing to defend revivals that evidenced authenticity by producing a pronounced change to the "affections" of the converted.[32] By the time Nettleton was reading his writings at Yale, Edwards had already come to be identified as one of the preeminent leaders of the First Great Awakening and one of the most influential theologians in America.

Jonathan Edwards was born in 1703, in East Windsor, Connecticut, the son and grandson of well-known New England Congregationalist ministers. He spent his youth in a pastor's home immersed in learning, and hearing and discussing the major church-related issues of his day. He began his education for a life in the ministry at the age of thirteen, and graduated with honors from Yale in 1720.[33] He was ordained to the ministry

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[30]Tyler, *Memoir*, 27.

[31]John Thornbury, *God Sent Revival* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1988), 44.

[32]See Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections in Three Parts*, *Narrative of Surprising Conversions*, and *Thoughts on the Revival of Religion in New England*, in Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (1834; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 1:234-343, 1:344-64, 1:365-430. A full treatment of Edwards's theology and thoughts on revival is outside the parameters of this study, but fuller treatment of the subject is available in Holifield, *Theology in America*, 102-26.

[33]Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), 9-21, 33.

in 1727, and served as an assistant pastor to his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, in the church at Northampton, Massachusetts. When his grandfather died in 1729, Edwards assumed the pastorate and served the church until he was dismissed by the congregation in 1750 because of theological differences.[34] As early as 1731, when he was invited to deliver a message to a large group of gathered clergy in Boston, he used the very public platform to make his well-formed and traditionally Calvinistic theological views apparent to all.[35] In his biography of Edwards, Iain Murray notes that in this sermon, delivered at the Public Lecture in Boston on July 8, 1731, Edwards affirmed that man was utterly dependent upon God for redemption, for faith itself, for the gift of Christ, and for "the Holy Ghost in conversion."[36] In this sermon, Edwards was publicly and clearly setting forth a high view of the sovereignty of God in salvation.

Edwards held to traditional orthodox Calvinism in the face of what he saw as a creeping tendency toward "Arminianism" and "self-sufficiency" by many New England clergymen.[37] Holifield noted Edwards's adherence to the Calvinist theology by pointing to his high regard for the authority of Scripture, high Trinitarianism, traditional views on

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[34]Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 81, 93, 326-29.

[35]In their introduction, Kimnach, Minkema, and Sweeney note that the sermon "was first preached in Northampton in the fall of 1730." Wilson H. Kimnach, Kenneth P. Minkema, and Douglas A. Sweeney, eds., *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1999), xviii. Howeer, Edwards "subsequently delivered it in Boston at the prestigious Thursday lecture on July 8, 1731. Before the assembled clergy of Boston—to Edwards' mind New England's liberal stronghold—he affirmed the sovereignty of God in the work of redemption." They further note that due to what Edwards felt was a slow move toward "spiritual self-sufficiency . . . [and] Arminianism, [which] represented a significant threat to conservative Calvinists like himself. . . . [he] decided to herald the Calvinist doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of almighty God . . . arguing that humans stand utterly dependent on their God for eternal salvation" (xli).

[36]Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 107. The sermon was subsequently published as "God Glorified in Man's Dependence." See Edwards, *The Works*, 2:3-7.

[37]Kimnach, Minkema, and Sweeney, *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards*, xli. See also Allen C. Guelzo, *Edwards on the Will: A Century of American Theological Debate* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1989), 23-53.

original sin, and view of the atoning work of Christ, noting that for Edwards "the consequence of atonement was, as Calvinists had always argued, the imputation to the faithful of Christ's active and passive righteousness."[38] Specifically regarding his high view of the sovereignty of God, Holifield writes,

> Edwards cherished the Calvinist doctrine of the sovereignty of grace. He agreed that Christ died only for the elect and that they alone would experience the supernatural and sovereign "divine influence and operation, by which saving virtue is obtained." In his doctrine of the divine decrees, he held a supralapsarian view of election and a sublapsarian view of reprobation. In other words, the decree to redeem the elect logically preceded the decree to create them or to permit their fall, but the decree to damn the reprobate "supposed" their sinfulness in the sense that it presupposed a relation of "fitness" between sin and a damning decree. God created the elect in order to save them, but he did not create the reprobate in order to damn them.[39]

As evidenced in his own writings and sermons, Edwards's theology was the theology of the Reformation.[40] It was undoubtedly Calvinist.[41]

As his intellect blossomed and his preaching and writing became more

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[38]Holifield, *Theology in America*, 114, 102-15, for summary.

[39]Ibid., 115.

[40]Kimnach, Minkema, and Sweeney note, "Edwards was also much more of a traditional Calvinist than is common today. He drank deeply at the well of early modern 'Reformed' Protestantism and committed himself whole-heartedly to its leading theological principles: he viewed the sovereignty of God as the most basic fact of human existence and sought to submit his life and work to the perfect will of his heavenly Father; he believed in the deep-seated depravity of every wayward human heart and lamented that sin had separated humanity from its Creator; he trusted that God had become incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ, whose life, death, and resurrection had provided an atonement for human sin; and he believed in the power of the Holy Spirit to renovate human lives (both individually and collectively), restoring them to fellowship with their God and empowering them for charitable service." Kimnach, Minkema, and Sweeney, *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards*, xxxvii.

[41]Stephen R. Holmes, *God of Grace & God of Glory* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 157-59. In his discussion of Edwards's *Freedom of the Will*, Holmes notes, "Edwards feels able to deal with the five points of traditional Calvinism in little more than one paragraph each. His argument in each case is similar: the doctrines are generally accepted to be the most natural way of understanding Scripture, but is has been held that they are logically difficult, usually because of a commitment to an understanding of freedom of the sort Edwards has been concerned to debunk, so in each case he may insist on the doctrine by showing how the objections to it rely on that particular account of freedom." Ibid., 157. In other words, according to Holmes, Edwards accepts the "five points of traditional Calvinism" because he sees them taught in the Scriptures which Edwards believed trumped human logic and reason in authority.

voluminous, Edwards wrote about various topics, including natural science, philosophy, metaphysics, reason, revelation, the will, virtue, beauty, and ethics. Though, at his core, Edwards remained a biblical theologian and a pastor throughout his ministry, primarily preoccupying himself with the study of theology, "critical study of Scripture" and practical and pastoral aspects of theology, including regular preaching and the practical care of his congregation.[42] Throughout his intellectual development and copious writing, he remained anchored to his orthodox roots. Holifield observes that Edwards "sought to preserve Calvinist orthodoxy, including the standard Calvinist balance between reason and revelation."[43] Though his own intellect was expansive, Edwards always upheld the limits of human reason. He viewed reason as subject to divine revelation, believing that "unassisted fallen reason, left to itself, could never avoid idolatry,"[44] and maintaining that in "matters of religious truth, reason required the illumination of both the biblical revelation and the Spirit."[45] For Edwards, reason was a gift from God to be used for his glory, but it was subservient to divine revelation and in desperate need of the imprint of the Holy Spirit to lead men to redemption.

One of Edwards's most lasting impressions and contributions was in calling Christians to a new focus in their thinking about God. Edwards proposed a theological vision which "held that the *glory of God* was the supreme purpose of the Deity Himself in

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[42]Holifield, *Theology in America*, 104. Kimnach, Minkema, and Sweeney, *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards*, xxxvii, observe that although "Edwards was well-acquainted and adept with the entire range of Reformed theology . . . his primary interest as a pastor was in shepherding souls to heaven . . . [with] a special interest in the theology of human salvation."

[43]Holifield, *Theology in America*, 104.

[44]Ibid., 106.

[45]Ibid., 106-7.

creation, and should be the goal of all mankind."[46] Rather than frigidly perceiving the Christian life as merely church membership and Christian duty, Edwards reconceived conversion "as a vision and perception of the essential beauty of God and piety or godliness was considered to be an unselfish devotion to that vision."[47] For Edwards, this beautiful and glorious conception of the being and nature of God provided the heart for his theological system and its conception became the goal for all human endeavors.

Through his preaching, voluminous writing, pastoral work, and participation in revivals, Edwards reconceived Christian theology in a host of areas. He wrote lengthy treatises defending traditional positions on the working of the Spirit in regeneration, original sin, true virtue, ecclesiology, redemptive history, and the soul's eternal salvation.[48] Edwards wrote a lengthy and deeply philosophical discourse on the nature of the will which was greatly debated in his day and remained a subject of theological dispute throughout the course of Nettleton's revival ministry.[49] In Edwards's day, he noticed that as democratic ideals permeated the population of the colonies, Enlightenment-influenced ideas of human freedom began to change the way ordinary people conceived God and his sovereignty. James Byrd concludes that Edwards was intrigued by the notion of political freedom in his day and more specifically, the fact that "freedom's rise coincided with Reformed theology's demise."[50] Byrd further states that what troubled Edwards was that

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[46]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 44.

[47]Ibid.

[48]Edwards, *The Works*, vol. 1.

[49]Ibid., 1:3-93.

[50]James P. Byrd, *Jonathan Edwards for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 78.

thinkers influenced by Enlightenment thinking more and more "believed Calvinism was not only obsolete but also dangerous"[51] to the notions of human freedom and autonomy.[52]

These evolving views of autonomy and the freedom of the will directly impacted traditional Calvinistic understandings of regeneration and the nature of what it meant to be converted.[53] Frequently in his preaching and writing, Edwards addressed the impact of original sin, limitations of the human will, and need for divine intervention in regeneration. Thornbury is helpful in his summary of the intersection of Edwardsean views of soteriology and the human will:

> Great emphasis was put by advocates of the Edwardian school on the sovereignty of God. Salvation was an act of God's unmerited grace, rooted originally in His elective purpose. But it was, in reality, the fact of human freedom and responsibility that most occupied their studies. Edwards' classic treatise *The Freedom of the Will* sparked off an intense and exhaustive investigation among the ministers of the next century on the nature of man's will and its place in redemption. Edwards' pioneer studies, some of which were largely philosophical and speculative in nature, gave birth to the New England position that man's depravity is *moral*, not physical or mental. In other words, the only handicap that natural or unsaved men have in serving God is their own blindness and perverse unwillingness to bend the knee to the claims of the gospel. The 'deadness' of the sinner is not that of a stump or stone, but separation from God—rebellion against the creator. Men have the natural ability to turn to Christ, that is, they have the mental faculties, soul, mind and power of choosing. But they do not have the will or desire to serve God. They believed that human responsibility is founded on this distinction, for if man is not endowed with the natural or psychological faculties for doing God's will he can no more be culpable than a brute beast.[54]

Edwards's conclusions concerning moral inability and natural ability would ultimately have a tremendous influence on Nettleton and shape his thinking and preaching

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[51]Byrd, *Jonathan Edwards*, 78.

[52]Ibid. Byrd gives an excellent summary of Edwards's views on the will in a very accessible manner on pp. 77-102.

[53]See Sweeney's helpful discussions regarding Edwards' theological positions on issues of justification and the new birth, natural ability, moral inability, and original sin in his work. Douglas A. Sweeney, *Jonathan Edwards and the Ministry of the Word* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009), 114-21, 148-64.

[54]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 44-45.

methodologies.[55]

Nettleton, influenced by Edwards, would deviate from the old Puritan preparationism (as did Edwards) by applying his understanding of natural ability to his call for the sinner's immediate repentance.[56] The proper "use of the means of grace" for Edwards, and the New Divinity men that followed, involved calling men to immediate submission, repentance, and faith (because natural ability removed their moral excuse to do otherwise), while instructing them to understand that obedience to other, more ordinary means was not enough to save them, but might be useful by the Spirit in leading them to utter submission to Christ and the gospel.[57] In sum, in the Edwardsean tradition, the unregenerate man was responsible to obey God but he would not because of his moral

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[55]Holifield, *Theology in America*, 140-49, discusses at great length the development of the natural ability/moral inability discussion. Also, John Smalley (1734-1820) published two sermons in 1769 that attempted to capture the New Divinity assessment of natural ability and moral inability. John Smalley, "The Inability of the Sinner to Comply with the Gospel," accessed March 8, 2017, https://books.google.com/books?id=_x0HAAAAQAAJ&pg=PA17&dq=john+smalley+the+inability+of+the+sinner&hl=en&sa=X&ei=Qt0HVdXoK8ibyASPmYGQBw&ved=0CCMQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=john%20smalley%20the%20inability%20of%20the%20sinner&f=false.

[56]Sweeney, *Jonathan Edwards*, 118-19.

[57]Guelzo, *Edwards on the Will*, 117-23. The unregenerate sinner's use of the "means of grace," in light of Edwardsean views on the will, provided a great pragmatic conflict for the New Divinity theologians who were also quite interested in Edwardsean revivalism. Guelzo thoroughly examines this tension that existed regarding the use of the means of grace between the positions of Puritan preparationism and the evangelical immediacy of Edwardsean revival. Guelzo notes that this tension among the New Divinity men often pitted their abstract theological concepts against their own pastoral practices. The New Divinity men recognized "that to bar sinners entirely from preaching, praying, and Bible-reading would be to cut them off from the very knowledge that they were sinners and needed to repent, thus turning them into theological solipsists. . . . The New Divinity Men saved themselves from outright contradiction only by the not very helpful, or not very convincing, distinction that 'means,' while necessary to conversion," did not have the power to bring it about. Ibid., 121. See ibid., 122-23, for Guelzo's excellent conclusion to this conflict among the New Divinity men. Although Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 48, say of Nettleton that he was a strict Hopkinsian, who saw the unregenerate use of the means of grace as sinful, in his preaching he seems to have resolved himself to the paradox in a similar fashion to the other New Divinity men. He is frequently seen calling the unregenerate to obedience with the recognition that their obedience (to repent, pray, read their Bibles, etc.) could not bring about nor did it necessitate conversion, but that their obedience, required by their natural ability, might bring them to a place of confrontation with the truth of the gospel and the working of the Spirit that would ultimately lead to their regeneration.

inclination toward evil.[58] Though his obedience to the means of grace prescribed by God (such as prayer, Bible-reading, church attendance, good deeds, etc.) could not insure, warrant, or result in his salvation (which depended wholly upon the working of the Spirit on the unregenerate heart), obedience to perform such acts could be instrumental in the Spirit's work in revealing himself to the unregenerate heart. The gospel preacher must, in this line of reasoning, call men to obey God in whatever state they may be and then trust the Spirit of God to work through their consciences and in their hearts to bring about regeneration.[59] This thinking greatly impacted Nettleton's methods and rhetoric later. Contemporary theologians still seek to understand and apply Edwards's views on the human will, freedom, determinism, and the nature of regeneration.[60]

The New Divinity School. The shadow of Edwards and the impact of his teaching would loom large for decades. Historian Sydney Ahlstrom noted that following Edwards's death, "his works did not die . . . [and] his statement of the theological problem, and his reconstruction of Reformed orthodoxy had a profound impact on Congregational and Presbyterian theology in America for more than a century."[61] His understanding of the will and nature of regeneration and the interpretations of his students seeking to synthesize his Calvinism with the growing democratic ideals of the population would be at the heart of many of the theological conflicts that Nettleton would later confront.[62]

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[58]Sweeney, *Jonathan Edwards*, 148-52.

[59]Ibid., 153-54.

[60]Mark DeVine, "Total Depravity: A Biblical and Theological Examination," in *Whomever He Wills: A Surprising Display of Sovereign Mercy*, ed. Matthew Barrett and Thomas J. Nettles (Cape Coral, FL: Founders, 2012), 26-29.

[61]Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 311.

[62]Guelzo, *Edwards on the Will*, 13-14, 16. This attempt to synthesize traditional Reformed theology with the growing democratic spirit of human autonomy is at the heart of Guelzo's work. His work

The use of means in revivals and to what extent these means could bring about change in the wills of their hearers would occupy New England's students of theology for generations to come. The most prominent students and heirs of Edwardsean Calvinism and thought were those who learned directly from Edwards and sought to carry on his legacy. The more notable students were Joseph Bellamy (1719-1790), Samuel Hopkins (1721-1803), and Jonathan Edwards, Jr. (1745-1801), three theologians commonly identified with the so-called New Divinity School of theology.[63] Their interpretations of various theological issues varied from Edwards at times but each faithfully attempted to carry the torch of Edwards's theological legacy after his death.

Of the three theologians identified with the New Divinity movement, it was ironically Jonathan Edwards, Jr., who contributed the least. He studied the finer nuances of his father's theology under Bellamy, later serving as a pastor in New Haven for over twenty-five years before being called to the presidency of Union College in New York. Like his father, who scarcely served as President of Princeton College two months before his untimely death in 1758, he held the position for less than two years, dying before he was able to achieve a lasting legacy at the institution to which he was called.[64] Theologically, he did move away from his father's position on original sin, adopting instead the view that men are "damned on account of *their own personal sin merely*, and not on account of *Adam's sin*."[65] Ahlstrom observed that Edwards, Jr., also articulated

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examines the ways that New England theologians from Bellamy to Taylor wrestled with Edwards's revolutionary proposals regarding God's sovereignty and the human will.

[63]Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, 311.

[64]Edwards, Sr., died March 22, 1758, after beginning his duties as President of Princeton in late January of the same year. See Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 440-41.

[65]Jonathan Edwards, Jr., "Remarks on the Improvements Made in Theology by His Father, President Edwards," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, D. D.*, ed. Tryon Edwards (Andover, MA: Allen, Morrill, & Wardwell, 1842), 1:487, quoted in Noll, *America's God*, 275, emphasis original.

"the first full modern statement of the 'governmental theory' of the Atonement in New England Theology,"[66] a view of the Atonement that moved away from the traditional view of Christ death as penal and substitutionary for the individual.[67] Murray concluded that Edwards, Jr., "while professing to state his father's thought more clearly, actually carried the departure still further."[68]

In their attempts to carry Edwards's legacy forward, other prominent New Divinity men reinterpreted his theology to a much greater degree and with far more impact. Bellamy and Hopkins were both students of Edwards when he was alive and had such a close relationship to their teacher that upon his death, Edwards's manuscripts were passed on to them. Their major theological contributions, Bellamy's *True Religion Delineated* (1750) and Hopkins's *System of Doctrines* (1793), demonstrate that neither student was in full agreement with their mentor on every doctrine. Their works show innovation and original thought and demonstrate that the New Divinity men were ready to improve upon the theology of their mentor and the previous generation "but only as what they considered necessary extensions of the inheritance from Edwards."[69] Their writings "defined a theological era."[70]

Bellamy identified himself as a Calvinist and attempted to carry forward Edwardsean principles while remaining anchored to the truths taught and embraced by his mentor, Jonathan Edwards.[71] How faithfully he did this is still a subject of debate by

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[66]Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, 409.

[67]Ibid. For a definition of the governmental theory of atonement, see Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 806-10.

[68]Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 452.

[69]Noll, *America's God*, 132.

[70]Ibid.

[71]Bellamy's language and rhetoric, as well as his theology, show deep Edwardsean character. Reading Bellamy at times sounds identical to Edwards. For example, in discussing conversion, Bellamy

historians.[72] Bellamy continued to emphasize, like his mentor, that the essence of the Christian life was to behold the glory of God as revealed in Christ and then to be transformed by that vision of God's beauty and glory. In *True Religion Delineated* (for which Edwards wrote the preface), Bellamy's focus on the glory of God is evident from the first pages, where he states, in very Edwardsean tones, that "true knowledge of God supposes, that, in a measure, we see God to be just such a one as he is; and, in a measure, have a sense of his infinite glory and beauty in being such."[73] As a summary statement of Bellamy's close adherence to Edwards's theology, Noll writes that Bellamy taught

> the Edwardsean version of historic Calvinism—true virtue as ultimate love to God, moral and natural inability as explaining both divine sovereignty and human responsibility, original sin as part of God's permissive will for his own ultimate glory, and justifying faith as a supernatural gift of the Holy Spirit by which a person closes with Christ.[74]

However close to his mentor he attempted to remain, Bellamy did stray from Edwards (and arguably from orthodoxy) on some essential points of doctrine. In his writings, he did move away from the notion of penal atonement adopting instead a view akin to the governmental theory of the atonement.[75] He also moved away from Edwards's views on

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notes that the sinner must "return home to God from through Jesus Christ, venturing his soul and immortal concerns upon the free grace of God, and through him gives up himself to God, to be his forever, to love him supremely, live to him entirely, and delight in him superlatively, and forever to walk in all his ways; and hereby, at the same time, the man's heart begins to be habitually framed to love his neighbor as himself, with a disinterested impartiality; and thus an effectual foundation is laid for universal external obedience, and that from genuine principles." Joseph Bellamy, *True Religion Delineated*, in *The Works of Joseph Bellamy, D. D.: A Memoir of His Life and Character* (Boston: Doctrinal Tract and Book Society, 1853), 160.

[72]Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, 406-7, 412-14. Guelzo, *Edwards on the Will*, is more direct, claiming that while Bellamy and the New Divinity men did indeed "think of themselves as Edwardsean" (91), they actually distorted the central tenets of Edwards's system. He contends that the New Divinity theology "has been dismissed as a ruse by which Edwards's defense of Calvinism was watered down in order to perform the kind of accommodationism Edwards had spurned" (88), and concludes that "the New Divinity has without too much difficulty been disinherited from the family of American Calvinism, and from the history of American thought" (90).

[73]Bellamy, *True Religion Delineated*, 15-16.

[74]Noll, *America's God*, 133.

[75]Ibid., 135. See also Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims*

the nature of sinfulness, making man's sin voluntary rather than an inherent consequence of the fall.[76]

Bellamy also communicated views about the nature of the work accomplished by Christ's cross that sounded dangerously close to the Arminian view and certainly sounded nothing like the limited atonement of old New England Calvinism. Furthermore, his views concerning man's response to God's divine work sounded more and more synergistic and, in the words of historian Mark Noll, "de-emphasized the divine glory in favor of human efforts to achieve salvation."[77] On some critical issues, Bellamy indeed moved away from the positions of Edwards. Bellamy's positions are significant because his writings exercised great influence over Nettleton, who continuously read and was influenced by Bellamy's work even if he did not adopt all of Bellamy's views.[78]

The other New Divinity theologian who made a great impression on Nettleton was Samuel Hopkins.[79] In similar fashion to Bellamy, Hopkins identified himself with all of the key teachings of his mentor, Jonathan Edwards. Noll's summary of Hopkins's influence is very helpful here. Noll observed that, like Edwards, Hopkins held a high view of the authority of Scripture, affirmed the "urgency of revival,"[80] advocated "clear

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on the Way (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 504-4. Horton demonstrates with documentation that the Governmental Theory of the atonement was indeed the theology of C. G. Finney. The influence of Edwards, Bellamy, Hopkins, and Dwight on Nettleton, Tyler, Taylor, and Finney becomes more clear, which helps one see how closely linked the SGA theologians and revivalists were in their thinking.

[76]Guelzo, *Edwards on the Will*, 103-4.

[77]Noll, *America's God*, 135. Noll traces Bellamy's shifts on important doctrinal issues, frequently quoting Bellamy's *True Religion Delineated*.

[78]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 47. Also, at least three times Thornbury references the significant influence of Bellamy on Nettleton. See Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 44, 82-83.

[79]Guelzo, *Edwards on the Will*, 217. Guelzo quotes Gardiner Spring, a contemporary of Nettleton, who identifies Nettleton as "genuinely Hopkinsian."

[80]Noll, *America's God*, 272.

philosophical reasoning,"[81] adopted Edwards' view of natural ability and moral inability, and insisted that "salvation was a divine work that humans received without exerting themselves at all,"[82] that man is a passive recipient of supernatural working in regeneration.[83] However, Hopkins also departed from Edwards on key issues, including Hopkins' active engagement in social activism, his views on virtue (which elevated the role of man's works and their place in redemption), his view of the atonement as "governmental rather than penal"[84] and perhaps most importantly, his departure from Edwards on man's sinful nature. Like Bellamy and Edwards, Jr., Hopkins too would identify sinfulness not as a consequence imputed from Adam but rather as the consequence of man's sinful choices alone.[85] Noll summarizes Hopkins's positions well:

> Hopkins proved himself a faithful student of his esteemed teacher by insisting on a theocentric universe—the true followers of God should be willing to be damned for his glory; the unregenerate who tried to save themselves by performing religious duties were in fact more to be condemned than those who remained indifferent, since the former were blasphemously abusing the glorious means provided by a glorious God. But along with this valiant theocentrism came also indications of a theology directed toward a different moral consciousness—sinfulness meant not what we inherit but what we do; virtue meant love-in-action for 'the public interest'; God did indeed ordain that sin should come to pass, but only to increase the quantity of human happiness in the world. Hopkinsianism was still the theology of Jonathan Edwards, but it was now Edwardseanism rewritten for an age sensitive about intimations of inequality, awakened to the pursuit of happiness, and desperate for the moral reconstruction of society.[86]

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[81]Noll, *America's God*, 272.

[82]Ibid., 274.

[83]Ibid., 271-75. Ahlstrom affirms this as well of Hopkins. See Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, 408-9.

[84]Noll, *America's God*, 275.

[85]Ibid., 273.

[86]Ibid., 275-76. Not all scholars would concur with all of Noll's conclusions here, particularly that Hopkins' view of a willingness to be condemned for the glory of God flowing out of Edwardsean theocentricity.

Thornbury is quick to point out that while Hopkins's theology was in many ways formative for Nettleton, he was not "completely Hopkinsian in outlook" and that Nettleton would distance himself from Hopkins on man's willingness to be damned for the glory of God as well as on the notion that God was "in some sense the author of sin."[87] While Nettleton rejected these aspects of Hopkins's teachings, he seems to have been influenced by Hopkins's views on the immediacy of regeneration and the sinful use of means by the unregenerate.[88] To understand Nettleton's theological foundations, it is critical to see the stream of Edwardsean thought out of which he formulated his theology. Edwards reconceived theological and revivalist thought in his day, but following his death, truly "did not have a single disciple who was true to his essential genius."[89] Bellamy, Hopkins, and Edwards, Jr., carried the Edwardsean banner forward, but in the end, made so many modifications to Edwards's thought that it is questionable whether they identified at all with true Edwardsean theology and thought.[90] Timothy Dwight learned his theology directly from these very men, and to some degree influenced and perhaps even challenged Nettleton's theological formation during his days at Yale.

Nettleton's relationship with President Dwight deserves a closer look at this point. His studies under Dwight make Nettleton a direct descendent of the Edwardsean Calvinism that dominated New England "Presbygationalists"[91] in his day. Dwight's own theological views no doubt left some imprint on the formation of Nettleton's theological thinking, even if that impression merely served to drive Nettleton toward more traditional

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[87]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 46n.

[88]Holifield, *Theology in America*, 140-42.

[89]Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, 311.

[90]Ibid., 412-14. Ahlstrom gives a succinct but excellent "Evaluation of the Edwardsean School" and the connection or disconnect of the New Divinity men with their mentor, Edwards.

[91]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 44.

Edwardsean orthodoxy. Dwight was the grandson of Jonathan Edwards, born in 1752, in Northampton, Massachusetts. By the time he became president of Yale in 1795, he had already served as a chaplain to the American cause in the Revolutionary War, served for twelve years as pastor of a Congregationalist church, dabbled in politics and civic activism, published poetry and composed hymns, and founded an academy. He was considered to be an intellectual prodigy of sorts having entered Yale at thirteen and graduated at seventeen. He studied theology under his uncle, Jonathan Edwards, Jr., and was a gifted preacher and orator, making much of the study of eloquent oratory skills and incorporating them into his rehearsed albeit extemporaneous sermons and addresses.[92]

Upon beginning his duties as president of Yale in 1795, he immediately attacked the Enlightenment-influenced thinking that had permeated the student body. He began to lead the students back to orthodox Christian faith through open apologetic defense of the Bible to the student body in 1795, and then through the development of a four-year cycle of catechetical sermons (173 total), through which he taught the fundamentals of orthodox Christian faith with old New England Calvinistic overtones.[93] His preaching and leadership were blessed with success and subsequently, great revivals swept Yale's campus in 1802-1803, 1808, and again in 1815. It is little wonder that Nettleton, Lyman Beecher, Nathaniel Taylor, and other future leaders of the Second Great Awakening who were mentored by Dwight had such great respect and admiration for the president.

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[92]Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 6:141; and Arthur Dicken Thomas, Jr., "Timothy Dwight (1752-1817)," in *The Encyclopedia of Religious Revivals in America*, ed. Michael McClymond (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2006), 145-47. Old notes that because of failing eyesight, Dwight gave particular attention to the canon of memory and speaking without his notes.

[93]Old, *The Reading and Preaching*, 6:156-59. These sermons were later edited and published as *Theology Explained and Defended* (1818-1819), and served as an important text of systematic theology for almost 50 years.

Theologically, it is difficult to classify Dwight as a Calvinist or a true Edwardesan. Ahlstrom observes, "Whether Dwight was an Old Calvinist or a New Divinity man has often been debated, but the question cannot be settled in those terms . . . he was neither."[94] Though evangelical and orthodox, Dwight, like his New Divinity mentors, sought to strike a balance between the old Calvinistic orthodoxy of his grandfather while at the same time softening some of the terminology and underlying principles of the Calvinistic school for a new generation.[95] He witnessed the old Calvinism being attacked by the rising tide of Universalists, rival denominations, and the increasingly Enlightenment-influenced population of the growing nation which, influenced by more democratic and populist values, was increasingly rejecting the traditional Calvinism and determinism that previous generations had so freely accepted.[96] Perhaps in response to the changing sentiments of his time, Marie Caskey observed,

> The signal characteristic of Dwight's theology was his recovery of free agency . . . unlike Edwards, whose views of man were swallowed up in the splendor of divine sovereignty, Dwight tried to expound human freedom in such a way as to strike a balance between absolute sovereignty and human agency.[97]

Dwight did not desire to be overburdened with theological minutiae but sought instead a theological system that "emphasized the practical duties of Christianity almost as much as it delineated correct doctrines," and motivated the church toward a more "moralistic, philanthropic, and reformist" agenda.[98]

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[94]Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, 419.

[95]Ibid., 419. Ahlstrom also concluded that Dwight "was certainly not a strict Edwardsean."

[96]Guelzo, *Edwards on the Will*, 218.

[97]Marie Caskey, *Chariot of Fire: Religion and the Beecher Family* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1978), 38. Caskey gives a brief but helpful overview of Dwight's theological legacy and its impact on Lyman Beecher (37-43).

[98]Ibid., 38.

Like other New Divinity proponents, Dwight professed allegiance to the old Calvinism but approached the system with an innovative spirit. Yet, Dwight's evolving views on the will, the use of means in regeneration, and his renouncing of Hopkinsian views altogether have led at least one scholar to conclude that by 1795, Dwight was in fact "an ex-Edwardsean."[99] Thornbury is gentler in his assessment, categorizing Dwight among those theologians who "were merely explaining it (Edwardsean Calvinism) and bringing it in line with sound philosophical principles and thus vindicating it from its opponents."[100] McLoughlin notes that Dwight, along with Beecher and Taylor, "carefully reinterpreted the old dogma to suit the new intellectual climate," and ultimately laid the theological foundations that allowed Congregationalists to move toward a "more modern type of revivalism."[101] However faithful he remained to strict Edwardsean teaching, historians have generally acknowledged Dwight as among those theologians who sought to teach the orthodox Calvinism of Edwards while making innovations that made the doctrines accessible to the shifting masses and useful for seasons of revival and awakening, similar to those that Edwards himself experienced.

Regarding Dwight's specific theological commitments, he maintained a commitment to various interpretations of the old Calvinism but made theological modifications in a number of important areas. Noll notes,

> Dwight's own theology could be picked apart into its constituent parts—with Edwards Sr. he held that true religion was at root a matter of the affections, with Hopkins he held that sin was in the sinning, with the Old Calvinists he repudiated pietistic separatism. But most characteristic was the fact that Dwight often intentionally turned aside from complex philosophical discussions to drive home Christian mandates for action. From first to last, Dwight was a man in motion.[102]

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[99]Caskey, *Chariot of Fire*, 224.

[100]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 45.

[101]McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, 12.

[102]Noll, *America's God*, 276.

Some of Dwight's theological innovations set him apart from many of his Calvinist forefathers and moved him farther away from traditional Calvinistic understandings of man's ability to respond to God. Even while claiming to be a consistent heir of his grandfather's theology, Dwight's innovations created conflict in the Calvinist camp. Thomas summarizes Dwight's theological positioning well:

> Theologically, Dwight followed the broad outlines of his grandfather Edwards's theology. At times Dwight is identified with the New Divinity movement . . . Dwight's teachings on the governmental theory of the atonement, original sin, disinterested benevolence, and the halfway covenant linked him with these New Divinity theologians. However, he is called the founder of the "New Haven Theology" that distinguished itself from the former. Dwight preferred Scottish Common Sense philosophy to that of Locke and Berkeley as favored by his grandfather. He founded his theology on the belief that unbounded reason produced distortions. He questioned the dependency of New Divinity thinkers on logic and metaphysical presuppositions. Revivals depended on the commonsense notion of human freedom: people can choose, people do choose, people must choose. Rather than being tangled in a web of Calvinistic determinism, Dwight saw that revival was often the outcome of religious practices such as preaching, spiritual counseling, and instruction. Unlike the New Divinity theologians, who placed greater emphasis on divine sovereignty in the process of election to salvation, Dwight emphasized the significance of the human response in conversion. Revivalists such as Lyman Beecher, Nathaniel William Taylor, and Charles Grandison Finney developed these convictions yet further, and helped to usher in a non-Calvinistic, Arminian, and more human-oriented theology of revivals from the 1820s through the 1850s.[103]

Because of the major impact he would have on Nettleton's theological development at Yale and the theological development of an entire generation of pastors and theologians, understanding where Dwight stood theologically in the context of his day is incredibly important.

The Incident of Disagreement over "Means" at Yale

Nettleton learned directly from Dwight while at Yale. Tyler states that he "entertained a high respect for Dr. Dwight (and) on almost all subjects, he received his views without hesitation, and considered it a great privilege to sit under his instructive

[103]Thomas, "Timothy Dwight (1752-1817)," 146.

preaching."[104] Despite this relationship though, the young Nettleton did not hesitate to disagree with Dwight while at Yale when he saw the President's theological innovations moving away from the old Calvinism. In one incident, which Tyler documents, Nettleton, while still a student, and "a large part of the pious students in college"[105] discerned in Dwight's preaching a defection from the Hopkinsian strain of Edwardsean tradition (which Nettleton favored) regarding the unregenerate sinner's use of the means of grace in their pre-converted or unregenerate state.[106] The students understood Dwight as teaching that sinners under conviction should use means such as prayer, study, attendance at meetings, and seeking God, as ways of coming to a state of repentance and conversion.[107] Regarding this controversy, Guelzo notes that Dwight argued from the Old Testament that there "plenteous examples of the covenantal necessity of unregenerate doings."[108] While he stopped short of saying these "means" could necessarily result in one's conversion, the clear implication was that they could be "helpful aids" in coming to faith.[109] Generations of New England theologians had taught what Nettleton believed to be true from his own

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[104]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 47.

[105]Tyler, *Memoir*, 37.

[106]Caskey, *Chariot of Fire*, 42, notes, "Where Dwight differed sharply from many of his fellow Calvinists was in elevating the role of means in this work of redemption. Although God could easily accomplish man's salvation 'without even a remote reference to any means whatever,' he had provided many. Family prayer, meditation, self-examination, conversation with godly men and women, reading the Scriptures, and attendance on preaching, were all means of being awakened and converted. God required men to seek and use these helps." Of course Dwight's position set him directly at odds with the Hopkinsians who taught that all actions of the unregenerate were sinful and that the unregenerate only made their condition worse by using these means in their unregenerate state. Holifield, *Theology in America*, 141.

[107]See the earlier discussion on p. 80, chapter 2, of this study, especially n57, regarding the tension that arose among the New Divinity men regarding the appropriate use of the means of grace in evangelism and revivals. Though it appears from Tyler and Bonar that Nettleton embraced (at least early in his ministry) a Hopkinsian interpretation in theory, pragmatically he preached in light of the compromise that Guelzo concludes other New Divinity men eventually came to. See Guelzo, *Edwards on the Will*, 121-23.

[108]Guelzo, *Edwards on the Will*, 225.

[109]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 46.

experience, namely that "sinners, properly speaking, never use, but always abuse the means of grace—that in all their efforts to escape future misery and secure future happiness they are influenced by unholy motives—and that their religious services are mercenary and sinful."[110] It seems that Nettleton may have perceived a lack of urgency in Dwight's methodology and felt that he failed to urge sinners forward out of their complacency and toward utter submission to Christ. Nettleton wanted assurance that no unconverted sinner was left comfortable in their performance of duty apart from the transformational inner working of the Spirit. Perfunctory performance of religious duties by the lost were never enough to bring salvation.

For Nettleton, this doctrinal disagreement was no minor matter. His disagreement with Dwight at this point in his theological development shows great sophistication and systematic development as well as consideration of the practical implications of the doctrine. In a letter to his longtime friend, Philander Parmele, written shortly after his graduation, his theological reasoning concerning the use of the means of grace by the unregenerate was succinct and biblical. Using plain biblical truths, he reasons that "all who are *not* born of God do not love Him . . . are in the flesh . . . [and] *cannot* please God (Rom 8:8)."[111] Nettleton believed that the unregenerate man who becomes aware of his unregenerate state should not merely limp along in the performance of religious duties, but immediately submit himself to the divine mercy of God, confess his sins, call out for mercy, and remain in such a state until the Spirit of God moved to bring peace and renewed affections for God.[112] Regarding the significance of this particular disagreement over the use of means and the nature of the unregenerate, Tyler noted,

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[110]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 48.

[111]Ibid., 49, emphasis original.

[112]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 46, states, "Like Hopkins, he (Nettleton) felt that the promises of salvation go out only to those who perform the ultimate spiritual acts of repentance and faith, not to

> There was no one point in theology on which his mind was more fully established than this; or on which he more strenuously insisted, during his life, both in the pulpit, and in his conversation with awakened sinners. He considered it a point of great practical importance, and particularly useful in destroying the self-righteous hopes of sinners, and in shewing them their utterly lost condition, and entire dependence on the grace of God. This was a weapon which he wielded with great power, and which seemed to be, in his hands, pre-eminently the sword of the Spirit.[113]

Even as a young man, Nettleton was unwavering in his theological convictions, particularly where he saw their intersection with practical matters of such great importance as the conversion of sinners.[114] His willingness at this early stage to stand firm and speak out, even against a well-known and respected theological mentor, foreshadowed his future engagements as a theological polemicist.

Conclusion

This incident demonstrated that even before he began his itinerant ministry or engaged in the great disputes of his day, Nettleton was already a thoughtful theologian with well-formed theological foundations that had come from his years of personal study and coursework at Yale. He demonstrated a capacity for seeing the practical and pastoral implications of his theological foundations before he became the renowned revivalist of

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users of the means. To exhort men to do anything but repent and submit to God is only to encourage carnal security and confirm men in an un-converted state."

[113]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 48.

[114]Based on the evidence of his later preaching, it seems that Nettleton's concern about the appropriate use of the means of grace by the unconverted always remained a concern for him in his ministry. However, his concern appeared to be more about leaving the unconverted sinner comfortable in the mere performance of duties apart from submitting to Christ and the Holy Spirit in regeneration. Obedience to certain duties (such as hearing the preached Word of God, prayer, and repentance) were necessary for the sinner to come to an understanding of his greatest need, but Nettleton always sought to expose *the inadequacy of duty detached from the Spirit's work in the heart* to bring about justification. The sinner who found himself using, or under the influence of means of grace, must see their inability to please God or to save him and submit to Christ immediately. See the force of this logic in Asahel Nettleton, "All Men Commanded to Pray," in *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, ed. William C. Nichols (Ames, IA: International Outreach, 1995), 205-11. I hold to evangelical Calvinistic convictions, believing that all men must be called to obedience to the gospel and that even the unregenerate must be called to obedience in matters of prayer, repentance, reading of Scriptures, etc., knowing that these things cannot save, but that they may be the tools that the Spirit uses to bring sinners to immediate conversion through repentance and faith in Christ alone.

his generation. He formally graduated in 1809, and though he would spend an extra year at Yale in employment and furthering his studies and then another year apprenticed to a local pastor, one Rev. Bezaleel Pinneo of Milford, Connecticut, the theological foundations had already been laid for Nettleton's ministry. He drunk deeply from the wells of Edwardsean Calvinism, learned both directly and indirectly from the New Divinity men, and tasted in small portion the blessing of genuine revival in his own life. He was well prepared for the course he was about to embark upon as a revivalist.[115]

Nettleton's Theology Ascertained from His Written Material

One of the great difficulties in studying Nettleton's life and ministry is that he left so little written material behind for analysis. He never wrote a theological treatise like some of his contemporaries. Perhaps it was because he viewed himself as a "practical" theologian, busying himself with the work of revivals rather than contemplating their philosophical and theological underpinnings.[116] This is not to imply that Nettleton did not write at all in his lifetime. A great many written letters, anecdotes, and personal effects are collected in Tyler's *Memoirs*, some of them from Nettleton's own hand. These small fragments though cannot compare to a well-articulated and systematic compilation of thought. Various letters, reviews, and accounts of revival by Nettleton appeared in the quarterlies and magazine publications of his day, but most are brief and

[115]The fact that Nettleton left little written legacy makes it difficult to know just how deep the impact of Edwards and his writings run with Nettleton. Later, in 1827-1828, when he is embroiled in the New Measures controversy, Nettleton quotes, expounds, and reasons from lengthy sections of Edwards in his attack on the New Measures methodology and defense of genuine revival. See *Letters of the Rev. Dr. Beecher and the Rev. Mr. Nettleton on the New Measures in Conducting Revivals of Religion* (New York: G. & C. Carvill, 1828), 36-37, 38-39. However, it can be stated with confidence that the influence of Edwards was defining for Nettleton.

[116]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 174, note that, ultimately, Nettleton found writing to be "an irksome employment" and Nettleton was indeed pressed upon by friends to devote time to writing, but that he "came to the conclusion that it was his duty to persevere in that course which God was crowning with such signal success" (228) namely that of revivals.

were written for popular appeal as an instrument for spreading and defending revivals.[117] Very little systematic thought is developed in these pieces and only minimal scriptural support is given for theological positions. *Village Hymns* is attributed to Nettleton, but it is a compilation of hymns which reveals little of Nettleton's actual systematized thought, instead, telling more about his views on corporate worship and hymnody.

It was not until 1844, when, following his death, Nettleton's close friend and co-laborer Bennet Tyler published the *Remains of the Late Rev. Asahel Nettleton, D. D.: consisting of sermons, outlines and plans of sermons, brief observations on texts of scripture, and miscellaneous remarks* that there was any real collection of Nettleton's thoughts apart from revival accounts. Tyler would rework the *Remains* into a more biographical sketch in his 1853 *Memoir of the Life and Character of Asahel Nettleton*, noting in his preface to the new edition that he "carefully revised and corrected" his earlier material, making "some alterations" and adding "considerable additional matter."[118] The *Memoir* was edited and "remodelled"[119] in some parts in 1854, by Andrew Bonar and released in England and throughout the United Kingdom. It is this edition that is most accessible and obtainable today. There is also now a more recent compilation of Nettleton's sermons in print, which are examined later in this project. Sermons however, are written primarily for a present and listening audience in a particular rhetorical situation. Transcribed sermons can not necessarily or always have the same effect as material intentionally developed for reading and analysis, a fact that even Tyler, his

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[117]Guelzo, *Edwards on the Will*, 217, observes that even Nettleton's narratives of revival are an example of Edwards's influence on Nettleton: "It is apparent from Nettleton's own writings that he took that responsibility (i.e. carrying the banner of Edwardsean revivalism) so self-consciously that descriptions of his revivals are rhetorically patterned after Edwards's *Faithful Narratives*, right down to the case studies offered."

[118]Tyler, *Memoir*, vii.

[119]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, vii.

biographer recognized.[120] During the span of his ministry, the only major theological and pastoral publication attributed to Nettleton, is the *Letters of the Rev. Dr. Beecher and Rev. Mr. Nettleton on the "New Measures" in Conducting Revivals of Religion*. For an estimation of Nettleton's theological convictions from his own hand, this document deserves analysis because it is his theological system inevitably that will provide the content of his rhetorical texts or sermons.

Nettleton's Theology from His *Letters*

As published in January of 1828, *Letters* is (as the title implies) actually a collection of correspondences and reviews, some of which had already been made public in various magazines and revivalist publications of the day.[121] Its publication originated in response to the events of late 1825 and 1826. Revivals were being reported in the western part of New York and as the accounts became public, many orthodox ministers in and around the revivals and throughout the rest of New England grew troubled by the reports of fanaticism, hysteria, and disunity that followed these revivals. What followed was a flurry of letters questioning the nature of the revivals, which included Nettleton's letter to Samuel Aikin of Utica in January of 1827. The letter did not attack Finney personally and Nettleton almost certainly knew (and perhaps even intended) that it would be circulated

[120]Nettleton, *Sermons*, 245-46. *Sermons* is almost identical to the original *Remains* by Tyler. Apart from a few of the sermon titles varying and the addition of chap. 29, "Notes on Theology," the sermons and additional notes at the end are almost verbatim the same as Tyler's original collection.

[121]The full published document contains an anonymous preface which warns the churches of the dangers of fanaticism and states the purpose of the publication is to leave a written testimony of warning to the churches of the dangerous practices of the New Measures. Murray concluded that the preface was "clearly not by Nettleton"; see Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 236. *Letters* also contains Nettleton's letter to Rev. Aiken, another anonymous letter, Nettleton's sixteen-page review of Finney's sermon "How Can Two Walk Together Except They Be Agreed?," a brief letter from David Porter, another anonymous review of Finney's "How Can Two Walk Together . . ." sermon, which is the lengthiest portion of the book, occupying thirty-five pages, Lyman Beecher's letter to Beman warning against the dangers of fanaticism, and the list of reasons given by Nettleton for initially not wanting to attend the New Lebanon convention in July of 1827.

and become public. Nettleton's letter was shared with Finney and Finney responded with a public sermon denouncing those who questioned the revivals. Finney's sermon was published and the situation continued to escalate until all parties agreed to meet in New Lebanon, New York in July of 1827, in an attempt to address the issues.[122] In his dissertation, Ricky C. Nelson surmises that despite many of the characterizations of Nettleton in the popular literature, *Letters* and the resultant meeting at New Lebanon were about more than mere stylistic differences, personality clashes, or jealousy. For Nettleton, "theology, and specifically soteriology, the doctrine of salvation, precipitated opposition to the New Measures being popularized in the western revivals.[123]

For the purposes of present analysis, only a few sections of *Letters* will be considered, namely the sections clearly written by Nettleton. Nettleton's theological convictions concerning many of the issues of his day surfaced in these sections and are relevant still today. Specifically, many of Nettleton's theological convictions concerning the church, the appropriate use of means in evangelism,[124] the marks of genuine revival, and the nature of true religion as compared to (what Nettleton characterized as) false zeal all became evident in his brief writings.

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[122]Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, chap. 9. Murray gives a full, detailed account of the events precipitating New Lebanon as well as reflections on the meeting itself. For another interpretation of events from Finney's perspective and notes, see Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 60-73.

[123]Ricky Charles Nelson, "The Relationship between Soteriology and Evangelistic Methodology in the Ministries of Asahel Nettleton and Charles G. Finney" (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997), 12. May, "Asahel Nettleton," 424, concludes the same in her dissertation.

[124]Throughout the analysis and in the periodic use, the term "means" refers often to "the means of grace," such as prayer, Bible-reading, or attending church services, which God commands and by which sinners may come in to contact with God's grace. It can also more broadly refer to methods, methodologies, or practices used to attain an end. In the context of this study, "means" refers to the methods of obtaining revival or the conversion of the lost sinner.

Rudimentary ecclesiology. Sherry Pierpont May has rightly criticized a noticeable lack of ecclesiology in Nettleton's preaching and ministry. She writes, "There is no interest whatever, that we have been able to find, in an understanding of the sacraments."[125] She went on to comment that Nettleton mentioned little about baptism, communion, and matters of church membership. While she was correct to an extent, an examination of *Letters* reveals at least a few details about Nettleton's ecclesiology.

First, in *Letter to the Rev. Mr. Aikin*, Nettleton showed great concern for the unity of the church. Almost immediately, Nettleton questioned the genuineness of the revivals and pointed to division caused at the church in Troy as evidence for his concern. He continued by pointing out that "troubles" have been introduced into the churches as a result of the meetings and noted that some have been "in a complete turmoil all summer long"[126] because of the revivals. He contended that the so-called revivals were actually creating a "civil war in Zion"[127] and that Finney and his revivalists caused division by seeking to convert ministers rather than the unconverted.[128] Nettleton pointed to the practice of allowing females to pray publicly as having caused division, no doubt with the admonition of Paul in 1 Timothy 2:12 in mind. While he ultimately deferred to the decisions of local pastors on the matter (showing a measure of understanding congregational autonomy), he clearly felt it was unnecessary and improper to introduce

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[125]May, "Asahel Nettleton," 146. Nettleton does make clear in at least one place, his sermon "Regeneration" his explicit view concerning baptism, noting, "Baptism is not regeneration. . . . Baptism is only a *sign* or *token* of the saving influences of the Holy Spirit, and is not that work itself" (144), and concluding "the Scriptures and experience show, that all who are baptized are not regenerated." Nettleton, "Regeneration," in *Sermons*, 144, emphasis original.

[126]Asahel Nettleton, "Copy of a Letter to the Rev. Mr. Aiken, of Utica," in *Letters*, 10.

[127]Ibid., 11.

[128]Ibid.

measures into worship that not only caused division in the body, but also went against biblical counsel.[129] In his review of Finney's sermon, he stated,

> The more pure revivals are, the more they will unite the hearts of all the true disciples of Christ: for the more pure revivals are, the more lively will be the exercise, and the more just the proportion of the Christian graces; and consequently, the greater the fellowship among the saints.[130]

He spoke much more on this theme, feeling it was a major issue worthy of confrontation. However, it is clear that Nettleton had a New Testament view of catholicity and fellowship within the local bodies of Christ. He saw these signs as sure evidences of the Spirit's presence. With the legacy of James Davenport in mind, he also saw what he deemed as unnecessary strife and division as an indication that the revivals were not sent from the same God who desires unity in the body of Christ.[131] In Nettleton's mind, a mark of true revival and a true revivalist was unity around the truth of God's Word and a catholicity that could only be attributed to the working of the Spirit. Division, strife, and rivalries were all characteristic of the flesh, but unity and charity were marks of the Spirit's presence and working.

Another aspect of ecclesiology evident in *Letters* is the high regard Nettleton had for the office of pastor and the expectation that men in this office should be held in high regard at all costs. It is likely that he was informed here by passages such as 1 Timothy 3:1-7, 1 Peter 5:1-5, and Hebrews 13:17. Nettleton was appalled to hear that some of the revivalists were raising "angry dispute(s)" against the settled pastors and

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[129]Nettleton, "Copy of a Letter," 15.

[130]Nettleton, "Remarks of Mr. Nettleton on a Sermon by Rev. Mr. Finney," in *Letters,* 27.

[131]Nettleton also approached revivals knowing that the legacy of James Davenport lingered in the minds of many. Davenport had caused great disturbance and division in many Connecticut churches during the First Great Awakening. Tyler makes much of the impact that the legacy of Davenport left on Nettleton and his desire to see churches unified during times of revival. The result was that Nettleton had the highest and utmost respect for settled pastors and desired to co-labor with them and strengthen their ministries, never giving cause for division and strife in his meetings. Tyler, *Memoir*, 45-54.

"finding fault with everything the settled minister was doing"[132] and even "slandering them as stupid, and dead, and enemies of revival."[133] He believed firmly that pastors had the authority to invite whom they wished into their pulpits and protect their flocks from what they perceived as dangerous and evil trends. In Nettleton's words, pastors ought to have "the entire management in their own congregation."[134] Nettleton despaired at the practices of the revivalists by which "some of our best ministers are slandered, the churches divided, and the efficacy of the regular services of the settled ministry destroyed."[135] He also turned the attack around on Finney by pointing out that these ministers who are called by God to serve and should be held in high regard must also manifest particular affections, none of which seemed to be present among the revivalists under consideration.[136]

It seems likely that the last section of Nettleton's review of Finney's sermon was aimed directly at Finney and his revivalists. Nettleton quoted a passage from Edwards on "spiritual pride" and appeared to direct the implications of the passage at the revivalists.[137] Nettleton noted that ministers "should be like lions to guilty consciences, but like lambs to men's persons"[138] and that they should possess "amiable, Christ-like" personalities.[139] This assertion was no doubt intended to imply that ministers who demonstrated a divisive spirit, pride, contempt, and a lack of discernment might not be God-called ministers at all,

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[132]Nettleton, "Copy of a Letter," 10-11.

[133]Ibid., 10-11.

[134]Ibid., 19.

[135]Ibid., 14.

[136]Ibid., 13.

[137]Nettleton, "Remarks of Mr. Nettleton," 38-41.

[138]Ibid., 29.

[139]Ibid., 33.

but rather imposters. While some may judge Nettleton's defense of settled ministers as merely self-serving or fraternal, the reasons for his defense ran much deeper. He rightly believed that ministers, above all others, should exhibit proper affections and evidences of conversion if they were to be useful in leading congregations or revivals and that such men should exemplify gentleness, meekness, and wisdom.[140] His defense of the minister was a defense of the integrity and witness of the church—the extension of God's kingdom on earth. Disrupting, dividing, and destroying the ministry of the local church by tearing down its God-called pastors was sure evidence that the work was not of God.

Finally, there was a general sense in the letter that Nettleton envisioned the church as a place of order where worship and service were to be governed by the Scriptures. He questioned the wisdom of women praying in public meetings not merely because it was non-traditional, but because he deemed it to be a legitimate matter of disobedience to the scriptural command found in 1 Timothy 2:12.[141] Later, he questioned the wisdom of novices and untrained men being licensed to preach when such men were causing such great division. He used the scriptural injunction of Paul in 1 Timothy 5:22 to call the practice into question.[142] It is true that Nettleton speaks little on the specifics of the church, particularly the ordinances and issues of membership and discipline, but it cannot be said that he communicated no ecclesiology whatsoever.[143] Just from the quick survey

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[140]Nettleton, "Remarks of Mr. Nettleton," 29.

[141]Nettleton, "Copy of a Letter," 14-15.

[142]Nettleton, "Remarks of Mr. Nettleton," 34.

[143]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 128, 250, 311-12, 314-15, 318. Tyler and Bonar note that Nettleton was not totally uninformed regarding issues of the ordinances of baptism and communion and he was no stranger to the practice of "excommunication" or "cutting off" unrepentant church members. However, there is little mention of or preaching on a deep ecclesiology. He even references, with what sounds to be tones of approval, the excommunication of a church member who had been taken in by the New Measures and called his pastor the "head Achan" and said he had a character "as black as hell." Nettleton voices no disagreement with the congregation's decision to discipline this person. Nettleton, "Remarks of Mr. Nettleton," 32.

of *Letters* one can see that Nettleton did indeed have a well-developed vision of the church that drove much of his methodology and disputation with the New Measures group of revivalists. For Nettleton, the church was a holy community, united, and drawn together by the love of God and truth; it was orderly and in submission to the mandates of the New Testament.[144] Finally, it was an institution under the spiritual care and supervision of qualified, godly men whose entire lives were invested in the spiritual well-being of the congregation. In these, there is at least a rudimentary ecclesiology.

Appropriate use of means for conversion. Nettleton was not opposed to the use of biblical means. The external working of the Spirit did not render useless the need for evangelists to engage the lost through certain means and methods, such as proclamation, instruction in truth, public worship, missionary endeavors, and personal warnings and exhortations. It was the appropriate use of God-ordained means that allowed the message of the gospel to travel from person to person and town to town in the first place. The active working of the Spirit on the unregenerate sinner in salvation still required the communication, explanation, demonstrative calls to obedience, and demonstration of biblical truth. From his own testimony, it is clear that preaching, counseling, the prayers of God's people, and even the use of testimonies had all been used by the Spirit to bring about his own regeneration. In his own experience, the Spirit used the preached Word to bring conviction. He regularly used music in his own meetings. Nettleton was not opposed to the use of biblically sanctioned means but sharply opposed any notion that participating in or being obedient to such means necessarily led to or evidenced salvation.

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[144]Regarding order in the assembly, Nettleton notes, "The whole evil lay in violation of all the rules of ministerial order and Christian meekness, or in the inexperience, ignorance, and imprudence of these young ministers." In true biblical fashion, Nettleton sought order and structure in worship, not chaos. Nettleton, "Copy of a Letter," 11.

As an examination of his own words in the *Letters* reveals, he is not sure that those being used by the revivalists were appropriate. His disputation is not an argument against the use of means, but rather a call for discernment in the use of appropriate means. In true Edwardsean fashion and according to his own experience, Nettleton believed that because salvation was a supernatural work of God and not the result of man's works, the sinner was passive in regeneration and the Spirit did the work of regeneration. Holifield's analysis affirms this view: "The New Englanders agreed also that regeneration was a divine act, the immediate inflowing of the Spirit . . . [and] the Spirit transformed sinners from outside themselves."[145] As previously referenced in his dispute with Timothy Dwight at Yale, Nettleton held that the use of certain means were appropriate but not in any way meritorious. Nettleton frequently called all men, even lost sinners, to obedience to such biblical commands as prayer, repentance, and faith. He did this because he believed it to be the universal responsibility of all men to obey the commands of God. Men were able and responsible to obey God, but they were unwilling. The appropriate use of means for Nettleton served primarily to bring the sinner face to face with their moral inability and to a point of submission and repentance and utter dependence upon the Spirit of God for the creation of a new heart. The new means or measures or practices being used by Finney and some other revivalists were conceding too much power to the individual and placing too much confidence in the means in order to bring about the moving of the Spirit. This difference in philosophies between the old revivalists and the New Measures men was slight, but significant. Nettleton felt that these New Measures robbed God of glory and increasingly placed confidence in man and his actions.[146]

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[145]Holifield, *Theology in America*, 351.

[146]In later years, Finney himself saw the error of too strong an emphasis on human works over against the divine working of the Spirit. In his later "Letters on Revivals," he noted, "I have thought that, at least in a great many instances, stress enough has not been laid upon the necessity of Divine influence upon the hearts of Christians and of sinners. I am confident that I have sometimes erred in this respect myself. In order to rout sinners and backsliders from their self-justifying pleas and refuges, I have laid, and I doubt not

For Nettleton, the appropriate use of means (which by this time had proven effective in his own meetings) included using the prayers of the saints, singing of hymns, preaching of the Word (especially the law), and use of private counseling (i.e., inquiry rooms).[147] Nettleton expressed a desire to counsel Finney and his followers to learn these more established and acceptable means, not to abandon means altogether.[148] He calls Finney his "Brother" and admits that his help is "every where greatly needed."[149] Nettleton acknowledged that Finney is a man who is zealous to "save souls" and fears that in time, experience will prove that the means and methods which Finney and his followers are using will provide only short-term successes. For example, having heard of Finney's practice of using public prayer to denounce sinners by name, Nettleton exhorts Finney and the revivalists using his methods to return to the practice of private prayer and abandon public humiliation.[150] Stating plainly that he would never himself turn prayer

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that others also have laid, too much stress upon the natural ability of sinners, to the neglect of showing them the nature and extent of their dependence upon the grace of God and the influence of His Spirit. This has grieved the Spirit of God. His work not being honored by being made sufficiently prominent, and not being able to get the glory to Himself of His own work, he has withheld His influences. In the meantime, multitudes have been greatly excited by the means used to promote an excitement, and have obtained hopes, without ever knowing the necessity of the presence and powerful agency of the Holy Ghost. It hardly need be said that such hopes are better thrown away than kept. It were strange, indeed, if one could lead a Christian life upon the foundation of an experience in which the Holy Ghost is not recognized as having anything to do." Charles Finney, *Revival Fire: Letters on Revivals*, 7-8, accessed April 11, 2017, http://www.hopefaithprayer.com/books/RevivalFire.pdf.

[147]Tyler, *Life and Labours*, 80, 93, 262, 309. In the accounts of Nettleton's revivals, he made frequent and effective use of these means for revival.

[148]Finney denied that Nettleton showed any interest in any such correction when the two met in 1826. Finney claims that if Nettleton had sought to correct him, he would have listened "as I would at the feet of an apostle." Charles G. Finney, *The Original Memoirs of Charles G. Finney*, ed. Garth M. Rosell and Richard A. G. Dupuis (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 164-65.

[149]Nettleton, "Copy of a Letter," 18.

[150]Bob Pyke, "Charles G. Finney and the Second Great Awakening," *Reformation and Revival Journal* 6, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 45, notes, "Denunciatory preaching and praying . . . was often the humiliating singling out of those under special conviction, or those whom the preacher wanted to be under special conviction."

into such a manipulative means, he stressed that he was not opposed to the use of the means of prayer, but rather that he rejected the abuse of prayer as a tool of emotional manipulation.[151] He was convinced that the practice of publicly calling others out was an abuse of an appropriate means, noting,

> That holy, humble, meek, modest, retiring Form, sometimes called the Spirit of Prayer, and which I have ever regarded as the unfailing precursor of a revival of religion, has been dragged from her closet, and so rudely handled by some of her professed friends, that she has not only lost all her wonted loveliness, but is now stalking the streets in some places stark mad.[152]

In similar fashion, Nettleton notes that the use of the "prayer of faith" had likewise turned a biblically acceptable means into a tool of emotional manipulation. In the review of Finney's sermon, Nettleton states that other ministers had seen this "prayer of faith" used in revivals and that it consisted of "talking to God as a man talks to his neighbor"[153] and that it sought as its end to produce a "stage effect upon the individual in question, or upon the audience generally."[154] It was not beneath Nettleton to use forms of theatrics to set the tone in a meeting, but Nettleton was perceptive enough to see these tactics as playing manipulatively on the emotions of an audience and he lamented that revivals had been reduced to playing such "tricks in the presence of the great God."[155] Nettleton anecdotally recounted the tale of a fellow minister who succumbed to the use of some of the New Measures and declined from being an effective minister to a man who trusted in his own confidence. This misplaced trust in the New Measures proved to be to

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[151]Nettleton, "Copy of a Letter," 18.

[152]Ibid.

[153]Nettleton, "Remarks of Mr. Nettleton," 35.

[154]Ibid.

[155]Ibid.

his own demise and he "lost his usefulness in [the] denomination."[156] Nettleton was not opposed to the use of means for the conversion of sinners in revivals, but he clearly saw a theological move in the New Measures of Finney and his companions that shifted the focus of revivals away from the mysterious moving of God and toward emotional manipulation, immediate response, and pragmatism.[157] He judged this move to be an unacceptable compromise of the use of ordained means.

Theology of revival. His language in the letter to Aikin indicates that Nettleton was concerned about the loss of a proper theological understanding of revivals. He voiced his concern that if the New Measures continue, "we will certainly ruin revivals"[158] and justified his polemics against the New Measures by noting that "the character of revivals is to be sustained on the same principles as that of churches, or individual Christians"[159] referring to the principle of self-examination that leads to confession and repentance. Nettleton believed it was his and other men's duties to examine the state of affairs in the churches and call for repentance lest the power of God in revivals be lost forever. His sense of duty ran deep here. Nettleton pleaded with his fellow ministers, observing,

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[156]Nettleton, "Copy of a Letter," 19.

[157]Again, Finney later regretted his strong emphasis on the immediacy of conversion and his manipulative "hurrying" of the process of leading sinners to true faith in Christ in his meetings. He noted, "If I am not mistaken, there has been, in many cases, an error committed in urging sinners to submission before they are prepared to understand what true submission is. They have been urged to repent, before they have really understood the nature and desert of sin; to believe, before they have understood their need of Christ; to resolve to serve God, before they have at all understood what the service of God is. They have been pressed to make up their minds to enter immediately upon the service of God, and have been taught that they needed only to make a resolution to obey the Lord. Hence their religion, after all, has been only a religion of resolutions, instead of a religion of faith, and love, and of a broken heart. In short, it appears to me that, in many instances, the true idea of what constitutes pure religion has not been developed in the mind, and that consequently spurious conversions have been distressingly numerous. I have been more and more surprised from year to year, to find how very numerous those professors of religion are who manifestly have not the true ideal of pure religion before their minds." Finney, *Revival Fire*, 14.

[158]Nettleton, "Copy of a Letter," 16.

[159]Ibid.

> All those ministers who do not discriminate between true and false zeal, true and false affections, in their preaching and conversation, and make that difference and hold it up to the view of the world, if possible, clear as the sun, heartily approving of the one, and as heartily and publicly condemning the other, will turn out to be the greatest traitors to the cause of revivals. They become responsible not only for the sentiment in question, but also for all the corruptions which prevail in consequence of this neglect. The neglect of ministers to correct these evils for fear of doing mischief, or of being denounced as carnal and cold-hearted, or as enemies to revivals, is extremely puerile and wicked.[160]

Heretofore, at least since the days of Edwards, revivals had been viewed as mysterious blessings initiated by God and of which men were passive recipients. Certainly, men should seek and plead for the outpouring of God's Spirit but they could not manipulate it. In "Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England," speaking in defense of genuine revivals, Edwards compared the mystery of God's working in revivals to the mysterious process of a child in his mother's womb, observing, "We know not what is the way of the Spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child; even so we know not the works of God who maketh all."[161] Nettleton's contemporary and fellow preacher William Sprague described revival as a "wonderful effusion of the Holy Ghost"[162] and propounded that God was the divine agent in revival, observing that He "works in the hearts of men by his Spirit, and that he dispenses this work in the sovereignty of his wisdom."[163] Revivals in the past had been characterized by faithful preaching, which called sinner and saint alike to obey God's commands, anxious sinners under conviction, and calls for the regenerate church to pray, pursue holiness, and remain faithful.[164] But above all, Christians waited for and longed

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[160]Nettleton, "Remarks of Mr. Nettleton," 32-33.

[161]Jonathan Edwards, "Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England," in Edwards, *The Works*, 1:366.

[162]W. B. Sprague, *Lectures on Revivals* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2007), 2.

[163]Ibid., 74.

[164]This was not always the case. Nettleton discovered that many churches in his day still

for a divine outpouring of God's Holy Spirit to bring revival. Now those revivalists practicing the New Measures urged communities to act in such ways as to attempt to force the divine hand. Nettleton believed this would lead only to temporary "religious excitement," false zeal, and spurious professions.[165] Nettleton was convinced that the very theological foundations of genuine revival were at stake and particularly an orthodox understanding of God's providential work in the process. Did God sovereignly decide according to his own decrees when and where to pour out his Spirit in abundance? Or can men conjure and summon the Spirit to attend their meetings with power through their own commotion, manipulation, and trickery? These questions are implied throughout Nettleton's attack on the New Measures.

The final theological position under consideration from Nettleton's *Letters* is the true nature of conversion, with considerations to soteriology and sanctification. If the letter to Aikin primarily addressed ecclesiological and methodological issues related to the New Measures, Nettleton's review of Finney's sermon primarily addressed the nature of true religion and the need for pastoral discernment to detect whether or not revivals were genuine as evidenced by the presence of the proper affections. The impact of Edwards's theology and writings on Nettleton here is powerfully evident. Nettleton leans heavily on Edwards's teachings concerning the nature of true religion, spiritual pride, and the affections. He even quotes lengthy sections of Edwards in the sermon review.[166]

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suffered from damage done by James Davenport's ministry during the First Great Awakening. His revivals were characterized by divided churches, "fanaticism," the "anxious seat," female-led prayers, and other controversial measures similar to those manifested in Finney's meetings. See Tyler, *Memoir*, 45-51.

[165]Nettleton, "Remarks of Mr. Nettleton," 34-35.

[166]Ibid., 36-37, 38-39. Nettleton quotes from two works of Edwards, both available in Edwards, *The Works*. First, *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1:236-343) and Edwards, *Thoughts on the Revival of Religion in New England*, vol. 1, (365-430). See especially pp. 374-75.

Sanctification. In his response to Finney's sermon, Nettleton demonstrated an orthodox understanding of progressive sanctification. Nettleton detected a great deal of pride and sense of spiritual superiority in Finney's sermon. He writes,

> According to his own sermon, Brother Finney must have very low thoughts of God's holiness, or very high thoughts of his own, or both. . . . I would ask Brother Finney how high he has ascended, and how many he sees above, and how many below him, and at which company he feels the most "grieved and offended."[167]

Nettleton's comments were based on his assessment of Finney's views of his "anti-revival" opponents. In his sermon, Finney admonished his people to break fellowship with and avoid those who questioned the genuineness of the recent revivals under his leadership, for it is likely (in Finney's estimation) that they are rejecting the revivals because of their cold spiritual condition. Finney concludes on the basis of the Amos 3:3 text that the New Measures revivalists and those who opposed them therefore could not fellowship but must part ways. The true nature of the division for Finney was of a spiritual nature.

All of this talk of separation sounded like elitism and spiritual pride to Nettleton and he saw no such warrant for such an attitude in the Scriptures. After undercutting Finney's false logic by noting that "holy God and sinful man walk together"[168] on earth, he replied, "The Bible enjoins growth in grace, and recognises different degrees of holiness in the saints on earth."[169] He continued his argument by using the analogy of music and stating that "it does not require the same tone of holy feeling to produce harmony in the household of faith . . . there may be chords in music, though some notes fall far below others . . . and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ."[170] He had earlier referred to the apostle Paul as one who, in great humility,

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[167]Nettleton, "Remarks of Mr. Nettleton," 30.

[168]Ibid., 28.

[169]Ibid.

[170]Ibid., 28-29.

was "greatly delighted with even babes in Christ"[171] and concluded that the "least saint on earth loves holiness in others and rejoices in their growth in grace."[172] Nettleton even used the example of Jesus, who in his incarnation was certainly far more holy than his followers, yet still stooped to minister to them and be gladly received by them.[173] The spiritual hubris and impatience for all those who Finney and his followers deemed as "less spiritual" than themselves Nettleton found to be antithetical and contradictory to the biblical teaching regarding the progressive sanctification of all believers. He even saw the practical and pastoral overtones of this observing that if Finney's idea took hold, there should never be peace and unity in the churches because there is such a broad range of maturity among believers in the church.

Sanctification is defined by Millard Erickson as "the continuing work of God in the life of the believer, making him or her actually holy . . . a process by which one's moral condition is brought into conformity with one's legal status before God."[174] To call sanctification "progressive" is to take the position that conformity is a work of the Spirit that is an "ongoing activity" in the life of the believer and lasts throughout a Christian's life.[175] Wayne Grudem notes that the New Testament envisions sanctification "as a process that continues throughout our Christian lives"[176] and adds that over time "sanctification will increase."[177] Simply put, Christians grow and mature throughout the span of their

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[171]Nettleton, "Remarks of Mr. Nettleton," 26.

[172]Ibid.

[173]Ibid.

[174]Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 980.

[175]Ibid., 982-86.

[176]Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 748.

[177]Ibid., 749.

lives. Nettleton knew from experience that at any time in any given church there were Christians who were mature in their walk and those who were still young in the faith, needing to grow in grace, faith, and practice. Finney and his followers had neither time nor patience for those unwilling to fall in line with the New Measures and chose rather to malign, slander, and make spiritual accusations against any who stood against them as if they were inferior Christians. Nettleton was right to detect in Finney an air of spiritual hubris and superiority. What was still in these early days for Finney mere brash arrogance and impatience with his opponents would eventually blossom into full-on unorthodox views of total or entire sanctification and Christian perfectionism.[178]

The nature of true religion. The final doctrinal position easily ascertained from Nettleton's *Letters* is his view of the nature of "true religion." Again, he relies heavily on language popularized by Edwards in the First Great Awakening and his subsequent writings. In Edwards's day, he went to great lengths to prove that many or most of the conversions that took place during the revivals of his ministry were genuine and could be authenticated by the presence of various changed "affections"[179] or changes in the converted person's life and nature. Edwards defended himself and his converts against the charges that the conversions experienced were "spurious" and the excitement generated was merely carnal enthusiasm. Edwards pointed to certain affections present in the lives of the converted as the evidence that the outpouring of the Spirit of God on

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[178]Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney*, 181-85, 187, 192, 196-97.

[179]Edwards's teaching on the affections is complex. Byrd, *Jonathan Edwards*, is helpful here for the modern reader by summarizing Edwards's understanding of the affections when he notes, "We should not confuse affections with 'passions'" (48). He continues by noting that they "are not unruly and anti-intellectual passions"(49). Byrd further states, "The affections move beyond cold calculation to fervent inclination . . . affections stir us up, excite us, and move us forward . . . affections are intellectual—we have to know something before it can affect us—but when it affects us, it involves not only our minds but our hearts and bodies as well. . . . When we talk about true religion, we are talking about affections" (50-51).

the lives of converts was genuine.[180] While it is outside the scope of this study to analyze all of Edwards's writings concerning the affections, it is important to note that he taught that the absence or presence of these affections were indicative of whether or not a revival was genuine, and more importantly, whether or not an individual had been truly converted.

Byrd notes that for Edwards, "an impartial evaluation of revival was vital to the spiritual welfare of the local churches."[181] Nettleton believed this also. In his assessment, a lack of evaluation and proper discernment concerning revivals might lead to a situation in which every excitement created during religious services would be classified as a "revival" whether or not the evidences validated such a claim. Thus, Nettleton frequently challenged Finney in the critique of his Amos 3:3 sermon to examine whether or not the fruit of changed lives, harmony in the church, and increased love for God were really the by-products of the revivals Finney was conducting. Nettleton frequently alluded to "false zeal, false affections, and spurious conversions of every kind"[182] that result from mere excitement lacking genuine spiritual substance.[183]

Nettleton pointed out that emotional zeal alone did not indicate true conversion or the outbreak of revival, noting that "feelings which are not founded on correct theology cannot be right"[184] and observing that if a minister lacked discernment on spiritual matters and was "not extremely careful to distinguish between true and false affections, the Devil will certainly come in and overset and bring the work into disgrace."[185] Nettleton

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[180]Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, in Edwards, *The Works*, 1:234-335.

[181]Byrd, *Jonathan Edwards*, 47. See also pp. 55-59.

[182]Nettleton, "Remarks of Mr. Nettleton," 30.

[183]Ibid., 30-31.

[184]Ibid., 31.

[185]Ibid.

asserted that many spiritual evidences proved the genuineness of revival set forth in the Scriptures, such as growth in meekness, humility, piety, love and unity. Adding to this list, Nettleton set forth a lengthy list of quotes from New Testament passages including Galatians 5:22, Romans 12:10, Ephesians 4:2-3, 4:31-32, Philippians 2:3, 1 Peter 5:5, Colossians 3:12-14, James 3:17, and the characteristics of love set forth in 1 Corinthians 13. Nettleton concluded this argument by stating that "these are the prevailing characteristics of a revival of religion . . . their absence cannot be compensated by flaming zeal."[186] As to mere zeal, he alluded to the example of none less than the apostle Paul in his pre-converted state, suggesting that zeal alone is no indicator of a changed heart, for Paul was zealous and passionate while still unconverted.[187]

Nettleton's concern was a soteriological one. Many were being swept away in the excitement of the meetings and being led to believe that their excitement was sure evidence of conversion. He warned that there was such a thing as "a satanic influence in the form of religion,"[188] that could deceive men with false hope and he shared his concern that the product of the New Measures revivals would be many false conversions, enthusiastic hypocrites and self-deceived persons.[189] He was concerned that "flaming spiritual pride will be taken for the highest moral excellence, and will rise up and take the lead."[190] For this reason, he asserted, "It is of the highest importance that the preacher present to his hearers the distinguishing marks of true religion, the graces of the Spirit, in

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[186]Nettleton, "Remarks of Mr. Nettleton," 37-38.

[187]Ibid., 35.

[188]Ibid.

[189]Ibid.

[190]Ibid., 34-35.

all their native loveliness; and at the same time, that he detect and expose every counterfeit."[191] For Nettleton, the proof of genuine revival was not excitement, but the legitimate conversion of sinners whose lives produced the distinguishing marks of true religion.

This defense of true religion is yet another example of Nettleton's tendency to bring together abstract theological principles with practical pastoral concerns. He knew that when men really were converted and given spiritual life in accordance with the Scriptures there would be visible, tangible evidences of the Spirit's work. He also knew that the Devil was at work deceiving men and supplanting real gospel transformation, putting in its place mere temporary excitement. Nettleton was greatly concerned about false professions as evidenced by his unique tendency to check up on those converted under his preaching as he was able.[192] His great pastoral concern was that those leading revivals of his day could discern the difference between true and false enthusiasm. His argumentation shows a high degree of theological comprehension regarding how the Spirit works to bring regeneration and its inseparable corollary, sanctification. His arguments are thoroughly biblical and supported with excerpts of Edwards's writings.[193] He even closes the section with the verses of a hymn by Newton, entitled "True and False Zeal."[194]

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[191]Nettleton, "Remarks of Mr. Nettleton," 37.

[192]Tyler, *Memoir*, 235. Nettleton kept up with the converts from his revivals by keeping a list of names of the converted and he determined years later that thousands of them were still persevering.

[193]Nettleton, "Remarks of Mr. Nettleton," 36-37, 38-41. Nettleton quotes lengthy sections of Edwards to sustain his arguments regarding religious affections and spiritual pride.

[194]Ibid., 41. The hymn, titled "True and False Zeal," is by John Newton and is Hymn 230 in Nettleton's *Village Hymns*. See Asahel Nettleton, *Village Hymns for Social Worship, Selected and Original: Designed as a Supplement to the Psalms and Hymns of Dr. Watts*, ed. William C. Nichols (1824; repr., Ames, IA: International Outreach, 1997), hymn 230.

Nettleton's Theology from His "Notes"

In 1995, William C. Nichols contributed an indispensable gift to historians when he transcribed, edited, and then published the sermons of Nettleton for a new generation in *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*. Though, hidden in the midst of this collection of sermons is another document of great value to all who seek to know and understand Nettleton: Nettleton's "Notes on Theology."[195] Nichols writes in the book's foreword that these notes were transcribed from Nettleton's own "handwritten manuscripts" at the Hartford Seminary's Library and are taken "word for word" from these manuscripts. If it is reasonable to deduce that an individual's notes on theology are an accurate reflection of what one genuinely believes, then one can conclude with a fair amount of certainty that Nettleton has left some record of his theological convictions.[196] The notes cover a wide variety of theological positions, but for the purposes of this study, seven key areas are briefly summarized.

Providence. Millard Erickson defines providence as that teaching by which Christians understand "the continuing action of God in preserving his creation and guiding it toward his intended purposes."[197] In Christian theology, the doctrine of providence assumes God is the creator of all things and then attempts to explain how He maintains, governs, and actively interacts with his created order. No doubt Nettleton would have inherited his views on providence at least in part from his astute studies of his theological mentor, Jonathan Edwards. Edwards held and maintained a very traditional and high view of God's sovereignty in the face of Enlightenment-inspired naturalism, Arminianism, and the deist-driven ideas of his day, all of which gradually separated God from any interaction

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[195]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," in *Sermons*, 226-43.

[196]Ibid., i.

[197]Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 412.

with his created order.[198] In a sermon by Edwards, titled "Divine Sovereignty," one gets a sense of his high view of God and his providence:

> His understanding and power are infinite; for he that hath made all things out of nothing, and upholds, and governs, and manages all things every moment, in all ages, without growing weary, must be of infinite power. He must also be of infinite knowledge; for if he made all things, and upholds and governs all things continually, it will follow, that he knows and perfectly sees all things, great and small, in heaven and earth, continually at one view; which cannot be without infinite understanding.[199]

There can be little doubt that these high views of God were important in the formation of Nettleton's views, for in the section of his notes labeled "Providence" he began with an affirmation that "God upholds all things by the same power with which he created them"[200] and continued by noting all things "are continually under his directing power."[201] He wrote this affirmation immediately after affirming that "God created all things out of nothing in six days,"[202] and in a section on decrees noted that "God hath fore ordained whatsoever comes to pass . . . [and] He has decreed the time, manner and circumstances of every [*sic*] events taking place."[203] These affirmations leave little doubt concerning Nettleton's views of divine sovereignty. He believed God was the supreme ruler and creator of all things who, by his own power, governs and sustains all that comes to pass. God does this in the natural world by working through the laws of cause and effect, which are "evident from reason and revelation . . . [and] perfectly consistent with

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[198]Guelzo, *Edwards on the Will*, 22, 26-27.

[199]Jonathan Edwards, "Sermon on Divine Sovereignty," in Edwards, *The Works*, 2:107.

[200]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 233.

[201]Ibid.

[202]Ibid., 232.

[203]Ibid.

human liberty."[204] When God works outside of these ordinary means, those workings are "miracles" according to Nettleton.[205]

In sub-sections related to providence, Nettleton went on to affirm that God was sovereign over all the affairs of both men and angels. He affirmed that man was created as "upright and holy," but "sinned" and incurred "eternal death" as his "infinite punishment."[206] Taken as a whole, these views of the decrees of God, creation, and providence would have been considered standard and orthodox for centuries prior to Nettleton and by most Christians in his day. However, these once-settled doctrines had recently come under great attack due to the rise of Enlightenment-influenced thinking, the democratic impulse in the new United States, and the writings of deists and Unitarians.[207] Still Nettleton confessed belief in these doctrines set forth in the Bible. Of particular interest is his word concerning miracles, which occurred in God's government when natural laws are "counteracted."[208] His theological foundations on this matter help to explain his convictions concerning revival in the later debates with Finney. Nettleton believed that when revival came, it was a mysterious and divine miracle, which God in his providence willed and performed contrary to human activity. Finney would later state repeatedly that revivals are "not a miracle, nor dependent on a miracle, in any sense,"[209] and that they were decidedly not the product of a miracle or "something above the powers

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[204]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 232.

[205]Ibid., 233.

[206]Ibid.

[207]Holifield, *Theology in America*, 168. Holifield devotes individual chapters to the discussion of both deism (ch. 7, pp. 159-72) and Unitarianism (ch. 9, pp. 197-219) in his study and discusses the inroads each made and the controversy each created with established, orthodox Christian groups.

[208]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 233.

[209]Charles G. Finney, *Revival Lectures* (n. p.: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), 5.

of nature,"[210] but that rather, revivals were entirely "the result of the right use of the appropriate means."[211] On this point, Finney was emphatic. In comparing the two views, it becomes evident that Nettleton's own methodologies for revival and his opposition to the New Measures were rooted in a distinctly different theological understanding of the nature of God, his government of the world, and his providential working in and over His creation.

Trinitarianism. Nettleton affirmed a strong Trinitarian theology in his notes. This affirmation is a matter of no small significance considering the context of his times. Throughout the eighteenth century, reasoning that had been influenced by the Enlightenment and the yet-budding "higher criticism" school slowly crept across the Atlantic from continental Europe. New challenges emerged to traditional orthodox Christian positions on the authority and reliability of Scripture, man's depravity, the nature of the will, and the essence of God. As European higher criticism found its way into American religious thought, it challenged the authority of the Scriptures, resulting in many writers and some Christian ministers abandoning Trinitarian concepts of God and embracing the deistic conception of God's unity, which, in turn, led to a rejection of the divinity of Jesus.[212]

The deist's conception of the oneness of God impacted New England's churches greatly, with Samuel Hopkins claiming by 1768 that "most of the ministers of Boston disbelieved the doctrine of the divinity of Christ."[213] Noll notes that "the Unitarianism that

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[210]Finney, *Revival Lectures*, 4.

[211]Ibid., 5.

[212]Holifield, *Theology in America*, 160-70.

[213]Ibid., 199. Holifield gives a much fuller treatment of the development of Deism and its handmaiden, Unitarianism in chaps. 7, 8 and 9, but the development of the movement is outside the scope of this study. Important for the purposes of this study is to note that a rejection of the traditionally orthodox

emerged as a self-conscious theological movement in turn-of-the-century New England was an extension of the liberalizing religion of an earlier Enlightenment rationalism"[214] and that the Unitarianism of Nettleton's day expressed itself in a "trust in reason . . . belief in salvation by moral amelioration instead of by a bloody sacrifice,"[215] a view of God as "benevolent creator instead of a providential meddler,"[216] and most importantly, "the rational clarity of a unified God instead of the recondite mysteries of the Trinity."[217] These changes were a radical departure from orthodoxy indeed.

In the same year that Nettleton entered Yale (1805), Harvard appointed Henry Ware, Sr., a Unitarian, to the position of Hollis Professor of Divinity. In the years that followed, Boston became a center for Unitarian theology that would grow particularly strong and influential in Nettleton's own Congregationalist denomination, shaking "Congregational orthodoxy to its very foundations."[218] Eventually, Unitarianism found its prophetic voice in William Ellery Channing. He became pastor of the Federal Street church in Boston in 1803 and served the church until his death in 1842, making Federal Street the effective center of the growing Unitarian movement. In 1819, he preached the movement's manifesto in his famous sermon titled "Unitarian Christianity." In this sermon, Channing argued that when the Bible is interpreted as one would interpret any

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view of the trinity was under great attack precisely during the years that Nettleton's ministry peaked in New England.

[214]Noll, *America's God*, 284.

[215]Ibid.

[216]Ibid.

[217]Ibid.

[218]Edwin Gaustad and Leigh Schmidt, *The Religious History of America: The Heart of the American Story from Colonial Times to Today* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 158-59.

other book, "one must end up believing in the unity of God."[219] By this, he plainly meant a rejection of traditional Trinitarianism.

Despite the growing influence of these new conceptions of God and the rising influence of the liberal New England Unitarians, Nettleton stood firm in his Trinitarian convictions. He set forth in his notes an understanding of the Trinity that was grounded in the Scriptures and surrendered to the bounds of human reason. After his "proof" sections on the existence of God and the inspiration of the Scriptures, Nettleton's next major section was the "Doctrine of the Trinity."[220] In this section, he articulated clearly "there are three persons in the godhead: the Father, the Son and the Spirit, these three are God."[221] He cited as proof of this position the use of the Hebrew word "Alohim [*sic*]" as "plural" and then listed Scriptures from Genesis 1:26, 11:7, and Isaiah 6:3.[222] Evident from these scripture citations and his reference to the Hebrew *elohim*, is the fact that Nettleton saw the Trinity as a doctrine supported by Old Testament passages. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he believed the Bible was "inspired"[223] and thus its doctrines were to be considered true. He saw the plurality of God in the language of the Old Testament.

He coupled this observation with New Testament revelations to formulate his belief in the Trinity. Under the section "The Son is God," he cited as evidence the "names," "attributes," "works," and "worship" of Jesus from New Testament scriptures.[224]

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[219]Holifield, *Theology in America*, 200.

[220]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 227-28.

[221]Ibid., 227.

[222]Ibid., 227-28.

[223]Ibid., 227.

[224]Ibid., 228. With each proof he lists various textual evidences, such as "Rev. 1:8 & 22:13; Heb. 13:8; Matt. 28:18; 18:20; 28:20" for evidence of the Son having the attributes of God. Nettleton, *Sermons*, 228. He also uses 1 John 5:8 as evidence, but I contend his use of this text would have pre-dated the more

He then included a brief section of proofs, titled "The Holy Spirit is God," listing as evidence the same categories of "names," "attributes," "works," and "worship" with scriptural references, including Acts 5:4, Isaiah 63:10, John 3:5-6, and 2 Corinthians 13:14 among others. He added insight by noting, "Person is a rational active voluntary being,"[225] which referenced the Holy Spirit's nature as personal and rational rather than impersonal and involuntary. He argued that the Spirit is a person, not merely an impersonal force of nature.[226]

Immediately following this section, Nettleton synthesized his thought concerning the divinity of Christ in an impressive three and one-half page comparative table "showing the harmony of both Old and New Testaments respecting the Divinity of Christ."[227] In this table he created forty-one categories of names or attributions of God from the Old Testament that are fulfilled by Christ in the New Testament. Though it is possible that the comparative chart was borrowed from another source, it is just as likely that this table is an original product of his study since he listed no reference. He followed the table with his concluding statement:

> To the Father, Son and Spirit. 3 Divine persons in one and the same Jehovah as to the Trinity in unity; and to the one Jehovah existing in 3 persons of Father, Son and Spirit as to the unity in the Trinity; be all Honour, Grace & Glory ascribed by all creatures through all ages. Amen.[228]

Based on these proofs, it is evident that Nettleton affirmed orthodox Trinitarianism, based on the scriptural evidence of the Old and New Testaments. Based on the extensive efforts demonstrated in the lengthy "table" respecting Christ's divinity, it is at least possible that

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modern *Comma Johanneum* controversy. For reference here, see Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 231, and James R. White, *The King James Only Controversy* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1995), 60-62.

[225]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 228.

[226]Ibid.

[227]Ibid., 229-32.

[228]Ibid., 232. Table found on 229-32.

Nettleton had even prepared extensively for an apologetic defense of the Trinity against any who might deny or attack it.

Christology. It follows logically from Nettleton's Trinitarianism that he would hold to a high view of the person of Jesus Christ. As mentioned, he went out of his way in his notes to identify Jesus as the second person of the triune God and to show that he was the one predicted by the prophets of the Old Testament. It is worth noting that he affirms another aspect of Christ's person when he adds a section on the "Humanity of Christ."[229] Considering the errors and denials of his day, Nettleton understood that which the apostle John understood, namely that "to deny Jesus' true humanity was to deny something at the very heart of Christianity."[230] He listed nine different affirmations under this section, and though he did not mention any of the historic erroneous views of Christ's nature by name, most of his affirmations articulate clearly orthodox positions that stand in direct contrast to these historic errors.

For example, Nettleton first affirmed that "the human nature of Christ is not a distinct person separate from his divine nature."[231] This statement sufficiently refutes historic Nestorianism, the doctrine that "there were two separate persons in Christ, a human person and a divine person."[232] His third affirmation affirmed that "these two natures, Divine and Human, remain as distinct as though they were not united."[233] This clearly counters the ancient heresy of Monophysitism (Eutychianism), which Grudem

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[229]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 235.

[230]Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 540.

[231]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 235.

[232]Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 554.

[233]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 235.

notes is the view "that Christ had only one nature."[234] He continued in this manner, essentially affirming a Chalcedonian Christology.[235] He affirmed the two natures of Christ (divine and human, third affirmation), and that the divine nature was "God's" nature (fourth affirmation), while upholding the sinlessness of Christ (affirmation 8), and even denying the *kenosis* theory, noting, "Christ taking the human nature did not in the least degrade the divine nature."[236] It is unfortunate that Nettleton left no scriptural references in this section. Although he did not mention the ancient heresies by name, it appears as though he was aware of them and rejected them outright, holding instead to a high Christology according to the Chalcedonian formulation during an era when there were heightened attacks leveled against orthodox Christology.[237]

Anthropology. In his notes, Nettleton affirmed an orthodox and traditional view of man's sinfulness and fallen state in the section titled "The Apostasy of man and the consequences of it."[238] This affirmation is significant considering the great doctrinal debates of his day. It has already been eluded to that in the decades following Edwards, there began a degradation of the view of man's sinfulness and depraved nature. The New Divinity theologians began denying man's total depravity, sinful nature, and inherent guilt

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[234]Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 555.

[235]For a full treatment of the Chalcedonian Council's formulation of Christology, see Gerald Bray, *Creeds, Councils and Christ: Did the Early Christians Misrepresent Jesus?* (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 1997), 114-15, 127, 135, 145, 160-64.

[236]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 235. For a discussion of the *kenosis theory*, see Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 549-52.

[237]Though readers might wish for a more detailed Christology, these details are all that he recorded. He does, however, record a statement that hints at an affirmation of the doctrine of the eternal generation of the son, noting the oneness of God's essence by affirming, "3 Divine persons in one and the same Jehovah as to the Trinity in unity," but then affirming the distinctive individuality of each person noting "and to the one Jehovah existing in 3 persons of Father, Son and Spirit." Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 232.

[238]Ibid., 234.

tied to Adam's sin.[239] This culminated in Nathaniel Taylor's 1828 *Concio ad Clerum* sermon in which he openly denied man's sinful nature and corporate solidarity with Adam in the fall, and declared instead that sinfulness consisted only in man's sinning.[240] Taylor stated plainly that man's "depravity does not consist in any essential attribute or property of the soul . . . nor does the moral depravity of men consist in a sinful nature, which they have corrupted by being one with Adam, and by acting in his act."[241] Taylor proclaimed later in his sermon that, for purposes of evangelism, "sin and duty [must] be shown to consist simply and wholly in acts and doings which"[242] are men's own responsibility and not the result of connection to Adam.[243] Noll observed that in the sermon "Taylor thus transferred the onus of sinfulness from character to actions—people were alienated from God because of their own choices and not because of the sinful nature they shared with all other humans."[244] Despite his close connection with Bellamy, Hopkins, Dwight, and Taylor, Nettleton could not go along with this departure from the traditional and Edwardsean view of man's sinful nature. He believed the new views were contrary to both Scripture and "experience."[245]

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[239]Noll, *America's God*, 130-37.

[240]Douglas A. Sweeney and Allen C. Guelzo, eds., *The New England Theology: From Jonathan Edwards to Edwards Amasa Park* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 194-95. The text of the sermon is printed in full on pp. 194-204.

[241]Nathaniel W. Taylor, "Concio ad Clerum," in *The New England Theology*, 195-96.

[242]Ibid., 202

[243]Ibid.

[244]Noll, *America's God*, 298.

[245]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 234.

Instead, Nettleton affirmed that as soon as Adam and Eve partook of the fruit "they exposed themselves to eternal punishment . . . [their] apostasy was total"[246] and that they "ceased to love God,"[247] becoming "wholly sinful."[248] As a consequence, he noted that "all became sinners by Adam's fall . . . the condemnation of all is connected with Adam's sin,"[249] citing Rom 5:12 as scriptural proof. He even acknowledged man's corporate solidarity with Adam's sin by calling Adam mankind's "public head"[250] and affirming that the consequences of man's sin was not less because of the inherent sinful nature. He affirmed this when he observed that the consequences are "not less their own because they sin as soon as born . . . [and] not less their own because [it is] deeply rooted in their hearts."[251]

Following these affirmations, he defined sin in a series of brief statements observing that by definition it is "transgression of the law . . . selfishness or the pursuit of self-interest."[252] The influence of Edwards is evident when he added that in contrast to sin, "holiness is benevolence or disinterested love."[253] It is also significant to note that in one other section composed near the end of his notes, Nettleton, perhaps in response to the growing controversy surrounding "entire" or "complete sanctification," added a section

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[246]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 234.

[247]Ibid.

[248]Ibid.

[249]Ibid.

[250]Ibid.

[251]Ibid., 234. He affirms that Adam is a "public head for all his posterity" again in the section on "Divine providence as it respects Men." Ibid., 233.

[252]Ibid., 234.

[253]Ibid.

entitled "No man without sin in this life."[254] In this section, he affirmed progressive sanctification and the ongoing struggle with the sinful nature throughout one's entire life.[255] Regarding the sinful nature made holy following regeneration, Nettleton also made clear in his statement on "Conversion" that he viewed sanctification as a part of the act of conversion, such that it is "carried on throughout a man's life—turned more and more from sin unto holiness and from the heart grows every Christian grace."[256] In all of these views, Nettleton affirmed a traditional Calvinist understanding of man's sinful nature and the process of sanctification following regeneration.

Soteriology. Following his theological affirmation of man's complete sinfulness, Nettleton spoke to his views of man's redemption and salvation in a series of sections that include "Redemption," "Design and Work of the Redeemer," "Regeneration," "Conversion," "Saving Faith," "Justification," and "Perseverence to the end."[257] Concerning the divine role in salvation, he noted that concerning redemption, "all our knowledge on this subject is from scripture"[258] and that redemption "does not extend to all mankind or the Angels,"[259] but rather is applied by the Redeemer "to the elect."[260] In his later definition of election, he made his views clear, stating, "God in his eternal decree

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[254]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 241-42.

[255]Ibid. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, 103-5, noted that from 1836 on, Finney "developed this idea along the lines of John Wesley's sanctification." Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney*, 177-97, affirms this in his discussion of Finney's perfectionism.

[256]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 236.

[257]Ibid., 235-40.

[258]Ibid., 235.

[259]Ibid.

[260]Ibid., 236.

has chosen a certain number of mankind to be redeemed—fixing on every particular person whom he will save, and giving up the rest to final impenitence and endless destruction."[261] He even affirmed in plain language that the election of sinners is completely unconditional and not based on anything foreseen in them.[262] He continued by noting that Christ's work in redemption was "to suffer the penalty of the Law, which sinners had broken, in his own person, to redeem them from its curse."[263] He believed that "the sufferings of Christ are the only grounds of the sinner's pardon. . . . Christ bore the penalty."[264] Taken together, these statements affirm Nettleton's belief that Christ's death was both penal and substitutionary, a view at odds with the growing governmental theory of the atonement championed by many of the New Divinity theologians. Nettleton also affirmed his belief in particular atonement, expressed a belief that Christ's substitutionary death was for the elect, a view which, though controversial today, would not have been all that unusual in Congregational New England.

Regarding the application of the work of redemption to the sinner, Nettleton was clear. Regeneration "as to the cause, is the work of the Spirit of God."[265] He added that the change to the sinner is "instantaneous . . . imperceptible,"[266] and that regeneration is a change "in the will or heart . . . there are no means which are the cause of this change but [it] is wrought by the immediate energy of the Spirit."[267] In his view,

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[261]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 240.

[262]Ibid., 241. Under the section "Proved," see fifth proof .

[263]Ibid., 235-36.

[264]Ibid., 236.

[265]Ibid.

[266]Ibid.

[267]Ibid.

it was the Spirit who brought "illumination"[268] to the heart. He defines this work by noting that "to illuminate the heart is to change it"[269] and that this is a work "no man can do . . . God or the Holy Spirit is the agent."[270] He affirmed later that though "salvation may be offered to all men, only a part of them are saved,"[271] and that when the gospel is offered, men "always resist the call unless made willing to accept."[272] Though he viewed grace as irresistible, he did not view the Spirit's work as "in the least inconsistant with liberty,"[273] and affirmed that God's work in salvation is "perfectly consistant with free agency."[274] For Nettleton, the Spirit's work of regeneration was absolutely necessary. For him, the act of regeneration was a divine work of God upon the sinner by and through the Spirit.

The work of regeneration in the heart resulted in a total change of the sinner for Nettleton. In his section on "Saving Faith," he noted, "Faith implies a saving belief in the gospel that Christ is the Son of God and the Saviour of the world,"[275] and he linked faith inseparably with repentance when he stated that "repentance comes into saving faith . . . [as] it is evident from scripture that the whole of evangelical obedience is included in

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[268]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 237.

[269]Ibid.

[270]Ibid. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 943, describes the Holy Spirit's work of illumination as "enabling the recipient to understand the true meaning of the gospel."

[271]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 241.

[272]Ibid.

[273]Ibid., 236.

[274]Ibid., 236, 241. Nettleton was influenced by Edwards's view of the will, in which he viewed man as having "natural ability" but "moral inability." See Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 45.

[275]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 237.

faith."[276] For Nettleton, regeneration evidenced itself in explicit outward faith in Christ and repentance from sin as the first signs of conversion. He distinguished regeneration from conversion noting, "Regeneration is the cause and conversion is the effect . . . conversion is carried on through a man's life,"[277] resulting in holiness and continuous growth in "every Christian grace."[278] After one's heart had been quickened and given life by the Spirit, the evidence would be the individual's conversion, apparent to all by the import of love for God in one's life, increased affections toward God, and growth in the disciplines of grace.

These evidences of regeneration were necessary for perseverance according to Nettleton. He cited Matthew 24:13 and noted that persevering "unto the end of life [is] necessary for salvation . . . this doctrine is abundantly asserted in divine revelation."[279] He further asserted that "constant care and diligence"[280] should be given to the use of means for building up these evidences of regeneration that ensured perseverance. Evidences that result in perseverance could (though they do not always) lead to a real assurance of salvation for Nettleton. Nettleton confirmed that assurance was possible for the Christian who had "all the Christian graces in exercise in so high a degree as to be sure he has saving faith,"[281] but also observed that "assurance of salvation is not common to all believers . . . many never attain it"[282] because most "possess so much sin and little

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[276]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 237.

[277]Ibid., 236.

[278]Ibid.

[279]Ibid., 240

[280]Ibid., 239.

[281]Ibid., 240.

[282]Ibid.

discernment."[283] For Nettleton, perseverance was questionable and assurance was possible but not absolute.

Calvinist. There is little question among Nettleton's biographers as to his theological convictions. With one voice, his contemporaries and those who later wrote of his life all note that Nettleton was a Calvinist.[284] Tyler writes, "Dr. Nettleton preached with great plainness the doctrines of Calvinism."[285] He further remembered that during Nettleton's revivals, "converts . . . cordially embraced these doctrines,"[286] and that "if creeds were altered, it was for the purpose of making them more Calvinistic."[287] Speaking of Nettleton's theology, Heman Humphrey, quoted in Tyler's *Memoir*, observed that Nettleton was "neither a 'high nor a low' Calvinist,"[288] and observed that Nettleton "admired the illustrious Genevan Reformer, and subscribed, *ex animo*, to all the leading doctrines of his immortal institutes."[289] A "distinguished layman" wrote Tyler in 1845 and said of Nettleton's ministry that it was "abundant proof that the uncorrupted doctrines of Calvin, drawn from the scriptures of truth, are the weapons which the Holy

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[283]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 240.

[284]It is not here my intent to either defend or explain with systematic or historic detail the doctrines of Calvinism as such. By using the term "Calvinist" here I am referring to the historic theological tradition that is essentially built around the acronym of the "T.U.L.I.P," which refers to the doctrines of total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. For a fuller introduction to the doctrines of Calvinism, see David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, and S. Lance Quinn, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, and Documented* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2004), 17-71.

[285]Tyler, *Memoir*, 234.

[286]Ibid.

[287]Ibid.

[288]Ibid., 357.

[289]Ibid.

Spirit chooses to employ in the conviction and conversion of sinners."[290] One eyewitness to and participant in one of his great revivals, the Rev. R. Smith, later recollected that the doctrines Nettleton preached were the "old fashioned New England orthodoxy . . . the doctrines of grace."[291] On Nettleton's Calvinism, modern authors agree as well. McLoughlin, Noll, and Murray, to name a few, arrive at the same conclusion concerning Nettleton's Calvinism, and Thornbury summarizes the consensus opinion concerning Nettleton's theological adherence when he writes that he "adhered to the Calvinistic convictions . . . of New England."[292]

Contemporaries and historians all arrive at this conclusion because it was a course of fact. An examination of Nettleton's theology from his notes reveals this to be the case. In what has already been examined, Nettleton affirmed all of the major doctrines of the Calvinistic system of theology, including man's depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance. It is essential to establish these theological foundations because they are the foundations upon which Nettleton's method of preaching was built. How he preached was a direct reflection of what he believed about God's election of sinners, Christ's death for the elect, and the Spirit's effectual work of drawing sinners to repentance through the proclaimed word. Murray rightly concludes, "Doctrinal convictions on the nature of conversion have very practical consequences in pastoral ministry,"[293] and Nettleton's doctrinal convictions certainly

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[290]Tyler, *Memoir*, 366.

[291]R. Smith, *Recollections of Asahel Nettleton and the Great Revival of 1820* (Albany, NY: E. H. Pease & Co., 1848), 20-21.

[292]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 44. See also McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, 32; Murray, *Revival & Revivalism*, chap. 8; and Noll, *America's God*, 277.

[293]Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 216.

shaped the way he preached and the amount of confidence he did or did not put in his own capacity to communicate the gospel to the lost and wayward.

Ecclesiology. One final brief word concerning Nettleton's theological convictions is in order. It was referenced earlier that May concluded in her analysis that Nettleton says little about the "sacraments" and the particulars of the church.[294] While it is still true that ecclesiology is a very minor theme mentioned in Nettleton's material, it is helpful to acknowledge that in his notes, he ended by setting forth basic principles and convictions concerning the "Church of Christ" and "Public Worship."[295] The convictions which he confirmed include a definition of the visible church, which he wrote "includes all those who name the name of Christ or make a public profession."[296] He noted a distinct difference between the visible and the invisible church and it is of interest to note that in the visible church, he includes all who "name the name of Christ or make a public profession"[297] but says nothing of the place of baptism. He added that all who unite with the church must do so "voluntarily"[298] hinting at an emphasis on evangelical conversion over mere lifelong membership through infant baptism. He displayed a firm commitment to the principle of Sabbath worship: "It is the will of God that one day in 7 should be set apart and observed as a sabbath day."[299] Though this brief description still falls short of a detailed ecclesiology, it is a helpful addition to note.[300]

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[294]May, "Asahel Nettleton," 146.

[295]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 242-43.

[296]Ibid., 242.

[297]Ibid.

[298]Ibid.

[299]Ibid., 242-43.

[300]Presented in 1969, it is questionable if May had access to these notes on theology by Nettleton, which were only first published in 1995 and do not appear to be contained in Tyler's original

Conclusion. Nettleton's own "Notes on Theology" are a revealing and helpful tool for constructing his theological system. In Christian ministry, all practice flows out of theological conviction and Nettleton's straightforward presentation of his theological system here helps to reveal the consistent source and storehouse of doctrinal convictions from which his preaching rhetoric derived. Ernest C. Reisenger stated it well when he observed that "methods grow out of the message—and the message stems from theology."[301] From his own pen, Nettleton attests to a theological foundation that is historically orthodox, thoroughly Calvinistic, and dependent upon the working of God in response to the preaching of the gospel and the use of proper and appropriate means for the salvation of sinners.

Nettleton's Theology as Exhibited in His Preaching

In the final section of this chapter, the main surviving content of Nettleton's ministry, his preaching, is briefly examined with the intention of continuing to discern the theological themes that shaped his ministry. Some important theological themes not given full attention in his notes become evident in his preaching. For the purposes of this study, five primary areas are examined, namely his views of scriptural authority, the Spirit's role in conversion, man's sinfulness and the effects of the fall on his will, eschatological themes, and spiritual warfare themes. This survey is selective and not exhaustive. All fifty-two sermons recorded in *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening* are rich reflections of Nettleton's theology and filled with theological content. The purpose here is merely to establish some of the key doctrinal themes that appear repeatedly in his messages.

Remains or his *Memoir*.

[301]Ernest C. Reisenger, *Today's Evangelism: Its Message and Methods* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Craig, 1982), xiv.

The Word of God in regeneration. Nettleton's sermons reveal that he held a high view of the authority of the Scriptures and believed they played an important role in bringing about the regeneration of the lost. In his sermon "Causes of Alarm to Awakened Sinners"[302] based on Acts 2:37, he concluded that the powerful moving of the Spirit at Pentecost was directly related to the powerful presentation of God's Word. After he explained the text, he concluded, "The Word of God comes with power to the conscience, and shows sinners their true character and condition,"[303] noting that the powerful Word was "what ailed" those who heard Peter's sermon.[304] The practical implication for Nettleton was to preserve a very high place for the Scriptures in his preaching.

An evidence of this high view of Scripture and the necessity of its inclusion in preaching is seen in the way Nettleton consistently weaves together various texts into the content of his sermons. Of course this had rhetorical effect, but it also demonstrated the great importance Nettleton placed on getting the Word of God into the ears of his hearers. His constant use of and allusion to texts of Scripture illustrate to what a high degree he believed God worked through the preached Word to bring conversion. For example, in a sermon titled "Professing Christians, Awake!" Nettleton quoted different texts of Scripture no fewer than sixty-five times in his sermon text.[305] In many instances, he strung-together quotes from Scripture into lengthy sentences or paragraphs, likely with great rhetorical effect. He did this in "Professing Christians, Awake!" in at least two places, the first stringing together six verses and another stringing together various parts

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[302]Asahel Nettleton, "Causes of Alarm to Awakened Sinners," in *Sermons*, 412-20.

[303]Ibid., 415.

[304]Ibid.

[305]Asahel Nettleton, "Professing Christians Awake!" in *Sermons*, 1-8. I counted and this is a conservative figure. He used some texts multiple times, which were only counted once.

of seven different New Testament verses.[306] He did this in other sermons as well.[307] His reliance upon scripture texts as a major portion of his sermons demonstrated in a practical way his conviction that *the word of God is quick and powerful, sharper than a two edged sword* and that the Word was the offensive "sword of the Spirit"[308] when presented.

A reading of his sermons demonstrates that the language with which Nettleton referred to the Bible revealed his thoughts on the truthfulness and authority of the Scriptures. He referred to the Bible as "divine revelation,"[309] the "sacred Scriptures,"[310] the "Word of God,"[311] and the "counsel of God."[312] In other places referring to the Bible, he used more specific terminology, such as the "revelation from God,"[313] the "command of Christ,"[314] and the "divine testimony."[315] From these terms used to describe the Bible, one can conclude that in his preaching, Nettleton felt he was delivering the very communication of God to his audience when he preached the Bible to them.[316] The

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[306]Nettleton, "Professing Christians Awake!," 5, 7-8.

[307]Asahel Nettleton, "The Unclean Spirit," in *Sermons*, 90. See also "Gospel Warfare," 162, 164; and "The Perseverance of the Saints," 195.

[308]Nettleton, "Causes of Alarm," 415. See also p. 38, on the role of preaching.

[309]Asahel Nettleton, "The Final Judgment, Part I," in *Sermons*, 107.

[310]Nettleton, "The Unclean Spirit," 89.

[311]Asahel Nettleton, "Genuine Repentance Does Not Precede Regeneration," in *Sermons*, 65.

[312]Nettleton, "The Final Judgment, Part I," 105.

[313]Asahel Nettleton, "The Certain Destruction of All Who Do Not Seek Salvation Rightly," in *Sermons*, 133.

[314]Ibid., 136.

[315]Asahel Nettleton, "The Counsel and Agency of God in the Government of All Things," in *Sermons*, 184.

[316]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 226-27. His terminology here should be coupled with his clear affirmation in his notes for a full understanding of his high view of Scripture. In his notes he affirmed the truthfulness, historical accuracy, and inspiration of the Scriptures. He supports his belief by pointing to

authority on which he grounded his pleas and called men to repentance is repeatedly, "the Bible."[317] His desire to see men everywhere submit to the Word of God was directly related to his view that the Bible was more than a book written by men; it was rather the very revelation of God to man. From his descriptions of the Bible, his careful reliance upon scriptural texts in sermons, and his repeated appeal to the Bible as the source of his authority, it can be concluded that Nettleton had a high view of the inspired Scriptures. Coupled with his affirmation that the Bible is "true history,"[318] written by "inspired men,"[319] and authoritative in all matters,[320] it is reasonable to assume, based on the material he presented in his own words, that Nettleton's view of the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures was orthodox.

The Spirit's role in conversion. Another theological theme that occurs repeatedly in Nettleton's preaching is an emphasis upon the Holy Spirit's work in regenerating men. Using as reference again his sermon "Causes of Alarm to Awakened Sinners," Nettleton set forth his understanding of the role of the Spirit in conjunction with the proclaimed Word. As the Word of God is proclaimed, the "Spirit of God is sent to subdue the hearts of rebels . . . and set home the word with power upon the consciences of the hearers."[321] He observed, "The genuine effect of a preached gospel,"[322] is the pricking

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the harmony and unity of the Bible, the fulfillment of prophecies, and the marvelous preservation of the canon through the ages.

[317]Nettleton, "Genuine Repentance," 65-67.

[318]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 226.

[319]Ibid., 227.

[320]Ibid.

[321]Nettleton, "Causes of Alarm," 413, 415.

[322]Ibid., 418.

of the heart of hearers by the Spirit and that, in response to the proclaimed Word, the Spirit begins His "strivings" with the heart of the awakened sinner through conviction.[323] Nettleton warned that as the Spirit did his work of conviction, it was imperative that sinners yield to his work and not resist, asking,

> Do any of you fear that the Spirit of God may cease to strive with you? Your fears are not without foundation. There is a great danger that the Spirit will cease to strive. Many who were as anxious as you are, have gone back to stupidity, and have lost their souls.[324]

For Nettleton, the salvation of the sinner occurred in a clear pattern. In response to the preaching of the powerful Word, the Holy Spirit began his work of illumination and conviction in order to "bring sinners to Christ."[325]

For Nettleton, conviction of sin was the necessary work of the Spirit for regeneration. He noted, "No sinner ever repented without conviction of sin . . . the Spirit of God never interposes to rescue the sinner from destruction in any other way than by arousing his guilty conscience to perform its office."[326] Nettleton best expresses his convictions concerning the convicting work of the Spirit in his sermon "God's Spirit Will Not Always Strive,"[327] when he asks,

> But what is the object of the Spirit's strivings? Not to make men free moral agents; nor to make it their duty to repent and believe the gospel. If they were not moral agents, they would not be sinners, and would not need the strivings of the Spirit. But he strives with men to convince them of sin. It is just as natural for men to conceal and cover their sins, as it is to commit sin. They love darkness rather than light. Every one that doeth evil, hateth the light, and will not come to the light, lest he should be brought under conviction.

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[323]Nettleton, "Causes of Alarm," 418-20.

[324]Ibid., 419.

[325]Nettleton, "Regeneration," 146. In this sermon, Nettleton specifically and vigorously assaults the "Pelagian and Arminian scheme" by emphasizing the work of God's Spirit in regeneration against the more response-centered scheme of the Arminian preachers of his day.

[326]Asahel Nettleton, "The Destruction of Hardened Sinners," in *Sermons*, 36.

[327]Asahel Nettleton, "God's Spirit Will Not Always Strive," in *Sermons*, 439-44.

> The Spirit comes to demolish the excuses of sinners—to destroy their self-flattery, and to show them their lost condition. He commonly commences by troubling the conscience in view of some overt act of sin. Then he lays open to the sinner the plague of his own heart.
>
> The Spirit strives with men, not merely to show them their guilt and danger; but to show them their need of a Saviour, and to incline them to come to Christ. When they see their need of Christ, they are unwilling to come to him. 'Ye will not come to me that ye might have life.' 'No man can come unto me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him.' Now the Spirit comes to draw reluctant hearts. If it were not for this awful reluctance of the sinner to come to Christ, this drawing would not be necessary . . . All this is the work of the Spirit, and without his agency, none will be saved.[328]

Nettleton continued by observing that certain "tokens" or characteristics would identify the Spirit's work in conviction. He stated that when the Spirit's working begins, the sinner "loses all interest in the concerns of time,"[329] becomes "filled with fear and trembling,"[330] and is "troubled about that great change of heart which the Scriptures teach him he must experience, or he cannot be saved."[331] As the Spirit worked, Nettleton testified in other sermons that it was the immediate duty of the sinner to cease "halting between two opinions,"[332] come to a "decision . . . break off all your sins . . . leave all—to take up every cross and to follow Christ now."[333] However, for various reasons that Nettleton expounded on in the sermon "God's Spirit Will Not Always Strive," he contended that many would not yield to the Spirit's strivings and in so resisting the striving of the Spirit, quench Him to their own eternal ruin. He ended the sermon with words of warning:

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[328]Nettleton, "God's Spirit Will Not Always Strive," 440-41.

[329]Ibid., 441.

[330]Ibid.

[331]Ibid., 442.

[332]Asahel Nettleton, "Indecision in Religion," in *Sermons*, 23. For entire sermon, pp. 17-24.

[333]Ibid., 23.

> When the Spirit has departed, the sinner may be cheerful . . . He may feel little concern for the salvation of his soul . . . He may even laugh, and make sport of the subject of religion . . . He may listen to a preached gospel—to the most solemn warnings, and to the most melting invitations—but it will all be in vain. He will slumber on in impenitence till he awakes in hell, and his soul is lost forever.[334]

Nettleton's convictions concerning the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration were set forth clearly in his preaching. For him, the Spirit worked in tandem with the proclaimed Word to bring conviction and illumination, and to perform the supernatural work of regeneration on the sinner's heart. The sinner's responsibility was to submit to the Spirit's strivings and turn without condition to Christ as Lord. This theological conviction supported and sustained his evangelistic preaching. His confidence in the working of the Spirit freed him from the burden of reliance upon any human talents or means. This reliance upon the Spirit would later lead Tyler to respond to a question about the secret of Nettleton's success by answering,

> We must not overlook the fact that God acts as a sovereign, and pours out His Spirit when, where, and in what measure, He pleases . . . He [Nettleton] knew that he was an earthen vessel, and that when any success attended his labours, the excellency of the power was of God and not of him.[335]

Nettleton's confidence was not in his own preaching, but rather in the promise that the Spirit worked in accordance with the proclaimed Word.

Man's depravity. It is only really necessary to examine in depth one sermon of Nettleton's to grasp his full understanding of the depth of man's sinfulness and the limitations of the will. His convictions concerning human depravity are set forth in a sermon appropriately titled, "Total Depravity," and based Genesis 6:5.[336] With logical and didactic consistency, Nettleton first corrected the mischaracterizations of the doctrine

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[334]Nettleton, "God's Spirit Will Not Always Strive," 444.

[335]Quoted in Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 105.

[336]Asahel Nettleton, "Total Depravity," in *Sermons*, 394-98.

by stating in the negative what the doctrine did not mean. He noted that total depravity did not imply that "all men are equally wicked . . . that men are as bad as they can be . . . that men are not free moral agents . . . [or] that men are destitute of conscience."[337] Having established the mischaracterizations, he then replied in the positive, explaining, "By the doctrine of Total Depravity is meant, that all men, by nature, are destitute of love to God, and consequently wholly sinful—or to adopt the language of the text, that every imagination of the thoughts of their heart, is only evil continually."[338] He then defended his position on total depravity with a series of proofs which included "direct passages of scripture . . . the doctrine of regeneration . . . the distinction which the scriptures make between the saint and the sinner,"[339] and perhaps of greatest interest, "the experience of every Christian."[340] Hearkening back to his own conversion experience, Nettleton recalled his spiritual emptiness toward the things of God and concluded, "The experience of Christians perfectly harmonizes with this doctrine."[341]

May's assessment of Nettleton's sermon here is helpful. She concluded that his "definition is important because it clearly shows that depravity, for Nettleton, is centered in man's love or allegiance. It is man's relationship to God, not his acts toward man nor his compliance with laws, which determines his sinful nature."[342] She continued in her analysis by observing that, for Nettleton,

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[337]Nettleton, "Total Depravity," 394-95.

[338]Ibid., 395.

[339]Ibid., 395-96.

[340]Ibid.

[341]Ibid., 397.

[342]May, "Asahel Nettleton," 134.

> What is important is that the sinner recognize that he does not love God. It is this understanding of the doctrine which is the basis of the need for a new love or a new relationship to God, i.e., it is the basis for Nettleton's doctrine of regeneration.
>
> Thus total depravity, based on human experience and confirmed by biblical teaching, is the cornerstone for his understanding of regeneration. Meddle with this stone and the building may collapse. And, as we look at other doctrines, we will see that the unity of the gospel is such for Nettleton, that to turn any block too sharply is to tumble the structure.[343]

May rightly assessed just how foundational the doctrine of total depravity was for Nettleton's theological system and just how critical it was for his evangelistic methodology. In his sermon "Many Now on the Earth Are Greater Sinners Than Those Who Are in Hell,"[344] he left sinners without any hope, comparing them to the wicked of Noah's day, by asking,

> Will it be said that their hearts were *totally depraved*? This is doubtless correct. *And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was evil continually*. The same may be said of sinners now living. The eye of God is fixed upon every sinner's heart. He takes cognizance of every thought and every imagination. They are *all evil, only evil continually*.[345]

In contrast to the New Divinity theologians, Nettleton held fast to Edwardsean Calvinism concerning man's sinfulness and utter evil in the sight of God as an inherent part of his nature. Apart from regeneration, all of man's actions were sinful and unacceptable in the sight of God and the only hope for man in his sinful state was for the transformative work of the Spirit of God to come upon him and rescue him. He attacked the possibility that man, in his unregenerate state, had any hope of reaching God in his sermon "Genuine Repentance Does Not Precede Regeneration."[346] In this sermon, which is one of his

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[343]May, "Asahel Nettleton," 135.

[344]Asahel Nettleton, "Many Now on the Earth Are Greater Sinners Than Those Who Are in Hell," in *Sermons*, 127-32.

[345]Ibid., 130, emphasis original.

[346]Nettleton, "Genuine Repentance," 60-73.

longest and most complex, he declared that "before regeneration there is no love to God,"[347] and drawing from the apostle Paul's writings, concluded that natural man in his unregenerate state "cannot please God."[348]

Man's inability to please God in his depraved and unregenerate state, however, did not in any way, Nettleton concluded, free him from the responsibility of obeying God's divine will in his unregenerate state. Nettleton still called sinners to obey the gospel, pray, abandon sin, and seek God in his preaching, even if he had doubts that they would do such things. Obedience to such biblical commands certainly honors God, and are always in the sinner's best interest because they are commanded by a benevolent and just God. These acts to which sinners are frequently called in Nettleton's preaching were acts for which men were responsible to perform. However, they did not result in or merit salvation, nor did obedience to such acts necessarily guarantee the onset of revival or the regeneration of the lost. This differentiation is a critical theological distinction for understanding the preaching and ministry of Nettleton, for he adopted, preached, and defended the Edwardsean views of natural ability and moral inability to reconcile his views of God's decrees and man's responsibility before God. Regarding this Edwardsean innovation concerning the human will, Noll writes,

> On the question of free will, Edwards had made a critical distinction that became even more important for later theologians than it was for him. The distinction was his response to the charge that the traditional Calvinist doctrine of election to salvation amounted to pure fatalism—if God selected those who would be saved strictly from the council of his own will, then surely human beings were little more than passive automatons. Edwards repudiated that conclusion. . . . People were, in fact free to do what they wanted to do, and so they really did have a 'natural ability.' But because people were also born sinners, they inevitably and necessarily chose self and sin over God and so displayed a 'moral inability.' To Edwards, this distinction was enough to show that people could be both free in their choices and bound in their sin.[349]

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[347]Nettleton, "Genuine Repentance," 61.

[348]Ibid., 62.

[349]Noll, *America's God*, 272.

Nettleton adopted this view of man's will in synthesis with his views on the doctrine of depravity. Continuing in his sermon "Genuine Repentance Does Not Precede Regeneration," he declared that those who reject the doctrine of depravity on the grounds that it is unjust for God to require of man what he cannot perform "deny the distinction between natural and moral inability."[350] He explained,

> The reason why God *invites* sinners to come out of their prison is not because they cannot; but because they will not. The reason why he *commands* them to do it, is not because they cannot but because they will not. The reason why they are to be punished in such an awful manner for not doing it, is not because they cannot, but because they will not. Unwillingness always makes it proper to invite and command. The will and nothing else is the object of command. This and nothing else is the ground of punishment.
>
> I will now state what appears to me to be the real difficulty. *The sinner will not do what he can*. I know this is denied by many. They reason in this way—that because the Bible everywhere attributes this change to God; therefore the sinner cannot do it. It is said that if the sinner could produce this change himself, then the power of God would not be necessary.[351]

He concluded by asserting what would become a pillar of his evangelistic methodologies, namely that "because the sinner has power to do what God commands, it does not follow of course that the sinner will exert that power."[352] He expanded on this idea in many other sermons, and stated his case plainly; although men can repent, they will not. Speaking to this seeming contradiction, he states in another sermon "the reason why God will punish you for not obeying is not because you cannot, but because you will not,"[353] and concludes, "The reason why the Almighty power of God is necessary to draw you is not because you cannot, but because you *will not come to Christ*."[354]

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[350]Nettleton, "Genuine Repentance," 70.

[351]Ibid., 71.

[352]Ibid.

[353]Nettleton, "Indecision in Religion," 21.

[354]Ibid., 21, emphasis original. See also pp. 17-18, and Nettleton, "The Counsel and Agency of God," 186-90, for further examples of Nettleton's preaching on the doctrine of total depravity and its

For Nettleton, the synthesis of the doctrines of total depravity, man's natural ability, man's moral inability, and man's total need for the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, drove his message and methodologies. To Nettleton, man's will was utterly broken and perverse. Though man was able to turn to God, he absolutely refused to do so because he loved sin and did not love God. With conviction, Nettleton called on sinners to repent immediately and when they refused, pointed out that their refusal was evidence of their depravity and just grounds for their condemnation. From this theological foundation, he steered sinners toward total surrender to the gospel in repentance and faith, admonishing them with the truth that their works were unacceptable and their only hope was in surrendering to Christ as Lord.[355]

Eschatological themes. As one might expect given Nettleton's high view of the truthfulness of Scripture and his position on man's sinfulness, a reading of his sermons reveals a well-formed theological position on many of the eschatological themes of Scripture. These include, but are not limited to, the return of Jesus, the millennium, the resurrection, the final judgment, the immortality of the soul, and the eternal realities of heaven and hell. Although the latter years of the Second Great Awakening have come to be identified with the growing influence of millennialism and various apocalyptic movements, this impact is not evident on the preaching ministry of Nettleton.[356] In fact, though various eschatological themes pervaded his preaching, for the most part he preached on the themes of regeneration, revival, and repentance. For this reason, his eschatological

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consistency with the justice of God in condemning sinners and the sinner's total need for dependence upon the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

[355]For an example of how he did this, see Nettleton, "The Counsel and Agency of God," 180-90.

[356]Jerry Bergman, "The Adventist and Jehovah's Witness Branch of Protestantism," in *America's Alternative Religions*, ed. Timothy Miller (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 33-35. See also Eugene Taylor, "Swedenborgianism," in *America's Alternative Religions*, ed. Miller, 80-82, for a survey of the impact of this movement on early nineteenth-century popular culture.

themes are only highlighted to verify that he held orthodox positions as such since he says almost nothing about eschatological themes in his "Notes on Theology."

For a general overview of Nettleton's eschatological views, a close examination of the two-part sermon series "The Final Judgment" will suffice.[357] Combined, these lengthy sermons set forth a fairly-well developed orthodox view on most key eschatological themes. For example, he noted in the first line of the sermon that "the doctrine of a future general judgment is fundamental to the Christian system."[358] He went on to affirm that Christ will be "the judge of the world"[359] and "God will judge the world by Christ,"[360] affirming that Jesus will return at a time which no man knows, but not until "the great work of redemption is finished . . . [for] this world was created by God as a stage on which to display the glorious plan of redemption."[361] He affirmed a belief in an earthly reign of Christ noting that "the day of judgment will not come until after the millennium."[362] He describes the millennial period with optimistic language, as a time free from war, famine, and pestilence, in which the world will become "exceeding populous"[363]

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[357]Nettleton, "The Final Judgment," 103-21.

[358]Ibid., 103.

[359]Ibid., 104.

[360]Ibid.

[361]Ibid., 105.

[362]Ibid., 107.

[363]Ibid. See further descriptions of eschatology on pp. 108-9. Nettleton's view seems to be a variety or form of the traditional post-millennial view common to late eighteenth and early nineteenth century American Christianity. He is optimistic about a millennial age of peace and prosperity that is yet to begin, but follows that period with a terrible period of apostasy and destruction of Christianity before Christ's return. Traditionally, post-millennialism holds that "the return will occur at the close of a long period of righteousness known as the *Millennium*." Lorraine Boettner, *The Millennium* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1984), 4. Nettleton's language of apostasy following the millennium sounds more akin to modern dispensationalist pre-millennial language describing the tribulation period, but he certainly affirms a millennial period of prosperity before the return of Christ.

because of this prosperity. But following this millennial period, there will be a great "apostasy,"[364] described in vivid language, before the return of Jesus to the earth and the final judgment. He then affirmed a general resurrection of all the dead past and future, noting, "The resurrection will find them all,"[365] even those whose bodies have turned to ashes and dust.[366] He ended the first sermon with an affirmation that the "final judgment does not come until after the millennial state."[367] The greater part of the second sermon on "The Final Judgment" was spent explaining the details surrounding the glorious return of the Savior and the accompanying resurrection of the dead.[368] It is important to note here that Nettleton had well-developed and thoughtful insights on the eschatological themes of Scripture, which he set forth with clarity in these doctrinal sermons.

More generally speaking, he frequently attested to firm convictions concerning the eschatological realities of heaven and hell. He affirmed a view of heaven as the state of blessedness in which all the redeemed will spend eternity and hell as a place of just torment for the wicked.[369] In the first sermon on "The Final Judgment," concerning the present reality of heaven and hell, he notes,

> Souls are continually ascending into heaven, and descending into hell. This has been the case from the death of Abel down to the present time. Some have been in heaven and some in hell for hundreds of years. And there they will continue until Christ shall come to judgment. Shortly all the present generation will die and their souls will either ascend to heaven or descend to hell. And so the souls of all who

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[364]Nettleton, "The Final Judgment," 108.

[365]Ibid., 111.

[366]Ibid., 110-11.

[367]Ibid., 113.

[368]Nettleton, "The Final Judgment, Part II," 114-21.

[369]Asahel Nettleton, "The Death of the Righteous," in *Sermons*, 26-28; Asahel Nettleton, "The Necessity of Regeneration No Matter of Wonder," in *Sermons*, 426-27; Nettleton, "The Destruction of Hardened Sinners," 34, 39.

> shall die will suddenly enter heaven or hell, and remain in the world of departed spirits until Christ shall come to judgment.[370]

It was not at all beneath Nettleton to use the themes of heaven and hell as motivation for repentance and regeneration in his preaching either. In his sermon "The Necessity of Regeneration No Matter of Wonder," he painted with vivid detail a glorious picture of heaven and ended with a rhetorical appeal, asking his audience, "Do you hope to go to heaven?"[371] some six times in a row as he closed his message.[372] Likewise, in his sermon "The Destruction of Hardened Sinners," he painted a vivid picture of hell as a place of punishment, calling it "the doom of the incorrigible sinner."[373]

Of importance here is the fact that Nettleton did indeed have a theologically orthodox view of the major eschatological themes of the Bible. All of the major eschatological themes find treatment in his preaching. Heaven and hell were realities for Nettleton which, like his views on depravity and regeneration, motivated his passionate preaching ministry and calls for men to be converted.

Spiritual warfare themes. Themes of spiritual warfare are also presented in Nettleton's sermons. He viewed the battle for men's souls and the purity of the church through revivals against the backdrop of the biblical language of spiritual warfare. Most notably, in his sermon "Gospel Warfare," he affirmed that "the work of the gospel ministry is a warfare,"[374] complete with an "enemy" who lords over a "kingdom."[375] He

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[370]Nettleton, "The Final Judgment, Part I," 112.

[371]Nettleton, "The Necessity of Regeneration," 426-31. The appeals are on pp. 430-31.

[372]Ibid.

[373]Nettleton, "The Destruction of Hardened Sinners," 30-39. The detailed description of hell is found on p. 34.

[374]Asahel Nettleton, "Gospel Warfare," in *Sermons*, 159. Complete sermon on pp. 158-67.

[375]Ibid., 159.

spoke of course of Satan, who he identifies as "the god of this world—The prince of the power of the air—the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience . . . an adversary [who is] tenacious of his subjects."[376] He stated that Satan fortifies "the sinner's heart by strong and powerful prejudices . . . raised sometimes against the gospel itself, against its doctrines and duties; and sometimes against the minister of the gospel."[377]

From this language, it is apparent that Nettleton viewed resistance to the gospel, doctrinal impurity, and even attacks against ministers as manifestations of the great cosmic struggle between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. A real part of this spiritual warfare, Nettleton observed, was the capacity of Satan to keep sinners in their unconverted state by blinding them to truth, hardening their hearts, and keeping them "in love with sin."[378] Nettleton was clear in his belief that the chief offensive weapon to be taken up in this warfare was the clear articulation of truth that came through gospel preaching, particularly of the Calvinistic brand.[379] He warned against moralistic distractions and drove home his point that only gospel preaching would counter the enemy's deception, by noting, "Preaching mere external morality will never bring one soul to Christ . . . preaching which does not aim at the heart, and take hold of the conscience, never *attacks the strongholds of Satan*."[380]

In other sermons, Nettleton articulated similar themes, attesting to the reality of the spiritual struggle using the warfare language of Ephesians 6.[381] In "Professing

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[376]Nettleton, "Gospel Warfare," 159.

[377]Ibid., 161.

[378]Ibid., 162.

[379]Ibid., 165-66.

[380]Ibid., 165, emphasis original.

[381]Nettleton, "Professing Christians Awake!," 3-4.

Christians, Awake!" Nettleton painted a vivid picture of the warfare taking place throughout the earth:

> War is declared with all saints. And the legions of hell have gone up upon the breadth of the earth. He is already in possession of the hearts of all wicked men. They are his servants. The devil is styled the *prince of this world—The ruler of the darkness of this world. This is the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience—* While you sleep these are all sowing tares and destroying about us.[382]

He continued with this vivid description in his attempt to wake up the church to the reality of the spiritual struggle that actually existed. In his sermon "The Unclean Spirit," he spoke in vivid language that recognized the reality of "the powers of darkness,"[383] "evil spirits"[384] and the "blasphemous rage of damned spirits."[385] For Nettleton, spiritual warfare was a reality, not merely a metaphor.

Conclusion

In this section, the theological foundations of Asahel Nettleton have been set forth with clarity and detail. Nettleton was known by his contemporaries as one who preached deep and rich theological content with great effect. His theological preaching flowed out of his deep theological foundations which, as demonstrated, were eminently in the tradition of conservative Edwardsean Calvinism. From his own writings it is evident that he held to a conservative theology rooted in the sovereignty of God, orthodox Trinitarianism, and traditional Calvinistic interpretations of depravity, election, limited atonement, the irresistible working of the Spirit, and explicit faith in Christ as a necessity for the conversion of sinners. In his own writings he demonstrated a solid understanding of the practical implications of his theological system, speaking to such issues as the

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[382]Nettleton, "Professing Christians Awake!," 4, emphasis original.

[383]Nettleton, "The Unclean Spirit," 84. Full text of the sermon is presented pp. 84-92.

[384]Ibid., 85.

[385]Ibid., 89.

unity of the church, nature of sanctification, and evidences of genuine conversion. The content of his preaching, when surveyed, shows abundant theological content. From his sermons, it has been demonstrated that he preached with an emphasis on man's depravity, the working of the Spirit in regeneration, and explained with reasonable clarity the complex nature of natural ability and moral inability as related to the conversion of sinners. It has been thoroughly demonstrated that Asahel Nettleton believed, taught, and proclaimed with solid theological foundations. It is even reasonable to conclude that he was a "throwback" of sorts theologically, identifying more directly with Edwardsean Calvinism and revivalism than the New Divinity men who inherited Edwards's legacy following his death.

Having analyzed the broad historical context in which Nettleton ministered in chapter 2 and having investigated thoroughly his biblical and theological framework in this chapter, foundations have been established for a rhetorical analysis of his preaching. With an understanding of the times in which he ministered and a general grasp of his worldview, it now becomes necessary to analyze precisely what rhetorical methodological approaches he used so effectively in communicating his message through preaching. How did Nettleton effectively communicate these aforementioned theological truths to his hearers with such passion, clarity, and effect? This question is the subject of study in the next chapter. Having established Nettleton's theological foundations, the rhetorical analysis of his preaching that follows will uncover what made his presentation and communication so effective in his day.

CHAPTER 4

A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF NETTLETON'S PREACHING

Introduction

A rhetorical analysis of one's preaching ministry brings together (as the words imply) the disciplines of rhetoric and homiletics.[1] Edward Corbett explains that rhetoric is "the art or the discipline that deals with the use of discourse, either spoken or written, to inform or persuade or move an audience."[2] William Evans writes that homiletics is defined as "that science or art—or indeed both—which deals with the structure of Christian

[1]Whether or not the two *can* come together and how they intersect is the subject of Duane Litfin's, *Paul's Theology of Preaching,* where he opens by noting, "The intersection of classical rhetoric and Christian preaching" is a "clash of two worlds" that comes together in 1 Cor 1-4. Duane Litfin, *Paul's Theology of Preaching* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 15. Fred B. Craddock refers to a "marriage between homiletics and rhetoric," which has been "such a long one" that divorcing the two would require very "careful reflection." Fred B. Craddock, "Is There Still Room for Rhetoric?" in *Preaching on the Brink: The Future of Homiletics*, ed. Martha J. Simmons (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 66.

[2]Edward Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 3. New Testament scholar Ben Witherington defines rhetoric as "the ancient art of persuasion used from the time of Aristotle onwards through and beyond the NT era in the Greek-speaking world to convince one audience or another about something. . . . I am not merely talking about the use of rhetorical devices, though that is included, I am talking about all that went into convincing an audience about some subject." Ben Witherington III, *New Testament Rhetoric: An Introductory Guide to the Art of Persuasion in and of the New Testament* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), ix. Sister Miriam Joseph gives a broader definition, noting that rhetoric "prescribes how to combine sentences into paragraphs and paragraphs into a whole composition having unity, coherence, and the desired emphasis, as well as clarity, force, and beauty." Sister Miriam Joseph, *The Trivium: The Liberal Arts of Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric: Understanding the Nature and Function of Language* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry, 2002), 9. A simpler definition views rhetoric as "the study of producing discourses and interpreting how, when, and why discourses are persuasive," from William M. Keith and Christian O. Lundberg, *The Essential Guide to Rhetoric* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008), 4. For the purposes of this study, I do not discount the uniqueness of Christian preaching as distinct from other types of oration and I fully acknowledge the divine role of the Spirit in the preparation, delivery, and effectiveness of the preached Word. I have adopted though, a positive view of rhetoric as one useful and helpful tool (among others) for evaluating effectiveness in preaching.

discourse, embracing all that pertains to the preparation and delivery of sermons and Bible addresses . . . homiletics, then, is the art and science of preaching."[3] The two fields have much in common as they both concern themselves with the subjects of effective public speech, the art of persuasion, and various delivery methods. However, classical rhetoric was birthed and developed in the context of ancient Greco-Roman intellectual and political discourse and predates Christianity by at least five centuries.[4] Conversely, homiletics as a discipline grew out of the Christian church's desire to train and equip its messengers to interpret and communicate Christian truth faithfully in the world.[5] Though the two disciplines have co-existed and overlapped for almost two millennia, their relationship to one another is still complicated and at times unclear.[6] Before proceeding, this relationship must be examined to determine the proper use of rhetorical tools in relationship with Christian preaching.

Rhetoric and Preaching

The relationship between rhetoric and homiletics in the preparation and delivery of sermons has, throughout the history of the church, always been strained and somewhat tenuous.[7] Hogan and Reid note, "There has been some dispute about the relationship

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[3]William Evans, *How to Prepare Sermons* (Chicago: Moody, 1964), 11.

[4]Edward P. J. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford, 1990), 539-78. Corbett gives an overview that "introduce[s] the student to at least some of the key figures and some of the significant developments in rhetoric" (539) including Classical Rhetorics, Rhetoric During the Middle Ages, Continental Rhetoricians, English Vernacular Rhetorics of the Sixteenth Century, English Rhetorics of the Seventeenth Century, English Rhetorics of the Eighteenth Century, and Rhetoric in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.

[5]O. C. Edwards, Jr., *A History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 106. Edwards notes that Augustine set forth the first homiletics textbook in his *De doctrina christiana* in the late third and early fourth centuries.

[6]Ibid., 11-27, 40, 51, 102, 126-27, 224, 271, 315-16. Edwards gives an excellent treatment of the overlap of homiletics and rhetoric up to the Protestant Reformation.

[7]Throughout the ages, there has been an ongoing debate about how much of preaching should be prepared and how much of it should be prophetic. After alluding to the role of rhetoric in ruining classic

between rhetoric and homiletics off and on in the history of preaching. . . . [T]he dispute began almost from the outset of the Christian church and, in many ways, is still with us today."[8] In a contemporary article summarizing the salient points of the modern debate, Deborah Gill notes the very concern often voiced by those who oppose the use of rhetoric and rhetorical studies, namely the fear that the study of rhetoric causes preachers "to risk relying on our own wisdom and power rather than God's."[9] She went on to address the claim, often used by opponents of rhetorical studies, that the apostle Paul serves as an example of a preacher who had dabbled with classic rhetorical devices but then abandoned them for total reliance upon the Spirit of God.[10] She outlines the argument of the opponents of the use of rhetoric in preaching:

Greek philosophy, Martyn Lloyd-Jones warned his students about an over-reliance on rhetorical studies in preaching, stating, "The form became more important than the substance, the oratory and the eloquence became things in and of themselves, and ultimately preaching became a form of entertainment." D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, 40th anniversary ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 21-22. Vines and Shaddix reference this ongoing debate as well in their text on preaching, see Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit: How to Prepare and Deliver Expository Sermons* (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 144-48. Also, Fred Craddock addresses the changing role of rhetoric in preaching to a post-Christian world in Craddock, "Is There Still Room for Rhetoric?," 66-74.

[8]Lucy Lind Hogan and Robert Reid, *Connecting with the Congregation: Rhetoric and the Art of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 12.

[9]Deborah M. Gill, "We Preach Christ Crucified: Rhetoric in the Service of Jesus Christ," Enrichment Journal Online, Winter 2013, accessed March 9, 2017, http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/201301/201301_110_Preach_Christ.cfm.

[10]For a fuller treatment of this pivotal subject, it is important to reference a critical work on the subject of Paul's relationship to classical rhetoric by scholar Duane Litfin. Regarding Paul's use of and relationship to classical rhetoric in 1 Cor 1-4, Litfin notes, "Paul plainly wanted his listeners to embrace Christ in faith, but he eschewed the use of persuasive technique designed to move them to do so. To use such techniques, Paul held, would have raised the specter of the listener's [faith] resting upon the preacher's facility as a rhetor, and of the preacher thereby usurping the Spirit's role in creating [faith]. In other words, it would have replaced the divine dynamic of the cross with the human dynamic of rhetoric, thereby depriving the cross of its saving power." Duane Litfin, *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation: 1 Corinthians 1-4 and Greco-Roman Rhetoric* (Cambridge: University Press, 1994), 247. Regarding the passage in 1 Cor 1-4, George Kennedy's conclusion is similar to Litfin's. He notes, "This passage (1 Cor 1:1- 2:13) may be said to reject the whole of classical philosophy and rhetoric . . . for rhetoric, the Christian can rely on God, both to supply words and to accomplish persuasion if it is God's will . . . in place of worldly philosophy there exists s higher philosophy, only dimly apprehended by man." George Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric*

> By comparing Luke's narrative of Acts 17-18 with Paul's confession in 1 Corinthians 1-2, some attempt to argue that Paul made a paradigm shift in his preaching—rejecting rhetoric—and cite 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:16 as Paul's defense of his new position. They claim that when Paul was in Athens on Mars Hill, he preached with the eloquence and wisdom of the Greeks. Having had such small success using the classical methods of communication, however, Paul changed his approach in Corinth (they claim); and that from then on the apostle abandoned oratorical approaches for a demonstration of the Spirit and power (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:1-5). The intended implication of the argument is that we should do the same: reject rhetoric and embrace the anointing instead.[11]

Gill rejects this argument and goes on to conclude that a responsible study of rhetoric can be useful in the service of Jesus Christ: "Responsible rhetoric in the service of Christ . . . recognizes that communication is God-given—part of the image of God in us; and, it seeks to understand, engage, and influence others in loving ways that please our Creator."[12] She concluded by noting that the responsible use of rhetoric in preaching involves a recognition that

> the good news is all about Jesus; and it seeks to spotlight the Cross . . . recogniz[ing] the ultimate importance of its goal—the eternal salvation and entire transformation of souls for the glory of God . . . [and] "humbly acknowledge[ing] the absolute necessity of a demonstration of the Spirit and power to convince.[13]

This brief article is a helpful introduction to the subject of rhetoric as it relates to preaching and the controversy that often surrounds its use.[14]

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and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 131-32.

[11]Gill, "We Preach Christ Crucified."

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Liftin's work is far more in-depth on the subject and his conclusions similar. He urges caution against overemphasis on human persuasion (rhetoric) and recommends far greater reliance upon the Holy Spirit for results in preaching while acknowledging that an understanding of rhetorical devices and training can help preachers, as they did Paul, "to win a hearing and accommodate the comprehension of his listeners . . . it need only have been those rhetorical strategies which Paul perceived as designed to promote *yielding* that would have appeared inappropriate to him, for it was only in this realm that one began to tread beyond the role of the herald and impinge upon the work of the Spirit in inducing πίστις." Litfin, *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation*, 261-62. For the complete opposition position, see Ronald E. Sleeth, *Persuasive Preaching* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), 96, who notes in his conclusion that "the preacher who desires to be persuasive has a good model in St. Paul who said he became all things to all men that he might

A positive view of rhetoric and its relationship to preaching does not necessarily lead to its abuse.[15] It was already observed that the use of rhetoric cannot replace the working of the Spirit in conjunction with the clear articulation of the gospel. As Chapell notes, "God is not relying on our craft to accomplish his purposes."[16] The use of rhetoric in the service of preaching does not mean that the preparation of sermons must become a process of crafting ornate, manipulative, and overly-cumbersome orations that flatter and excite audiences with complexity and literary precision. Conversely though, because of the great significance of the act of Christian preaching, preachers should always seek to improve their craft and calling.[17] This desire for improvement is why dozens of books are written each year instructing preachers in methods that will improve their preaching. As Al Fasol stated well in the introduction to one such text, "The success of preaching

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be the means of saving some . . . the modern preacher, too, is called upon to adapt his message to those whom he faces in as persuasive a way as possible." Sleeth says almost nothing in his work about the role of the Holy Spirit in creating faith, neither does he address Paul's discussion in 1 Cor 1-4, and he has precious little to say about expositional preaching.

[15]Despite the somewhat misleading title, Leighton Ford, in his book *The Christian Persuader*, takes a surprisingly balanced view on the subject of the role of rhetoric, persuasion, and appeal in effective evangelism. While stressing subjects such as zeal in preaching and passionate invitations, Ford notes, "Conviction of sin is the work of the Holy Spirit . . . [and] we must be aware of seeking to induce guilt by some mere psychological technique . . . neither clever oratory, nor logical persuasion, nor angry denunciation can bring men to a true sense of sin." Leighton Ford, *The Christian Persuader* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 111. Referencing J. I. Packer's language of "antinomy" to describe the tension between the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man, Ford continues, "God holds me responsible for 'faithful evangelism,' not for success . . . therefore, I may plead, but never coerce . . . our patter for evangelism is Jesus, who never manipulated or forced people" (122).

[16]Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 18.

[17]In a recent podcast, Theon Hill, Assistant Professor of Communication at Wheaton College, stated that his entire motivation for initially studying rhetoric was that he got "sick of bad preaching" and that there is an increased need for the church to "give more attention to our communications" in today's present reality. Theon Hill, "Episode 12: Rhetoric and Preaching the Gospel," interviewed by Ed Stetzer and Lynn Cohick for Theology for Life Podcast; quote at approximately 11:53 in broadcast; accessed March 9, 2017, http://www.tflpodcast.com/podcast/episode-12-rhetoric-and-preaching-the-gospel/.

lies in one's inner sense of dedication, not in the mastering of speech techniques,"[18] but he continued by noting that his text "merely seeks to enhance the dedicated, divinely called preacher's ability to communicate."[19] This balanced approach to improving communication techniques should drive a cautious integration of rhetorical principles and analysis into modern homiletics and evangelistic Christian engagement.[20]

In a section of his introduction titled "Dangers of Rhetorical Studies" in *Treatise on The Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, John Broadus warned against preachers who were "anxious only to display skill, and gain oratorical reputation.[21] D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones warned his preaching students against just this abuse when he referenced seventeenth century preachers who were "regarded and acclaimed as great preachers," but in reality,

> They had gone too far in a certain direction. Their sermons had become works of art. They were literary masterpieces, perfectly constructed, freely interspersed with classical and literary allusions and quotations. The result, however, was that the people in general were more or less ignorant of saving truth, of the real truths of the Scriptures, and went merely to enjoy these perfect ornate sermons. To listen to them was a literary and aesthetic treat.[22]

Lloyd-Jones is right to reject this abuse of rhetorical extravagance in gospel-preaching, but protecting against this abuse does not mean disregarding the science of rhetoric altogether.

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[18]Al Fasol, *A Guide to Self-Improvement in Sermon Delivery* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 6.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Vines and Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit*, 229-30. Vines and Shaddix observe "a tendency to disparage rhetorical studies as they relate to sermon delivery" (229) but then, noting Broadus's use of classical rhetorical themes in his *Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, conclude, "Rhetoric is a legitimate area of study for the pastor who desires to preach effectively" (229-30).

[21]John A. Broadus, *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (1870; repr., Louisville: The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012), 9.

[22]Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching & Preachers*, 229.

In a very real sense, the science of rhetoric is used whenever sermons are preached, whether the preacher recognizes it or not. Regarding the processes of the mind, James Sire points out that "everyone has a worldview"[23] whether or not they think about it. This worldview "lies so deeply embedded in our subconscious that unless we have reflected long and hard, we are unaware of what it is."[24] In exactly the same way, only regarding the act of communication, all preachers use rhetoric when they preach, whether they think about it or not and whether they plan it or not. Corbett notes that rhetoric is not an *a priori* science and observes that in developing rhetorical principles, Aristotle did not make them up out of thin air, but rather,

> observed the practice of effective orators, analyzed their strategies, and from that observation and analysis codified a body of precepts to guide others in the exercise of the persuasive art . . . what men did instinctively they could do more effectively if they consciously schooled themselves in the *art* of that activity.[25]

As a communicative art, preaching is a public act that seeks effective communication of truth. Robert Cathcart observes, "By definition, public discourse is rhetorical . . . through it we intentionally influence others . . . to view the world in a certain way and to act accordingly."[26] Hogan and Reid rightly add that, in the Christian context, "effective preaching is effective rhetoric, and we cannot begin a theory of preaching pietistically devoid of an understanding of the art of rhetoric."[27] Since preaching is a form of public communication that aims for a response from hearers, it is an inescapable conclusion that

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[23]James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 17.

[24]Ibid., 19.

[25]Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 2nd ed., 41.

[26]Robert S. Cathcart, *Post-Communication: Rhetorical Analysis and Evaluation* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1981), 3.

[27]Hogan and Reid, *Connecting with the Congregation*, 13.

tools gleaned from the discipline of rhetoric can help to improve the quality and effectiveness of a preacher's discourse and delivery.

Even though he took a "mainly negative" view of the study of rhetoric, Broadus conceded that it is not "proper to treat homiletics as entirely distinct from rhetoric . . . homiletics may be called a branch of rhetoric, or a kindred art."[28] The real question for preachers of the gospel then, is whether or not the rhetoric they use and the rhetorical pattern with which they approach homiletics is effective in communicating divine truth to their hearers. Andy Stanley reminds preachers, "Our approach to communicating should be shaped by our goal in communicating."[29] For the Christian preacher, the goal should be nothing less than the clear articulation of biblical truth in an engaging manner that leads to transformation in the lives of all who hear the message.

It is with this goal in mind that a rhetorical analysis of Asahel Nettleton's sermons is approached. Nettleton communicated divine truth in a powerful way in his day, resulting in the conversion of thousands during the Second Great Awakening, most of whom remained faithful throughout their lives. With that record of success, Nettleton's preaching deserves attention. Fasol rightly observes, "Sermon delivery is the servant of sermon content . . . *what* we preach is always more important than *how* we preach."[30] In the last chapter, it was proved that the theological content of Nettleton's sermons was orthodox according to the Calvinist system. His content was focused on the sovereign

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[28]Broadus, *Treatise*, 12.

[29]Andy Stanley and Lane Jones, *Communicating for a Change* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2006), 93.

[30]Fasol, *A Guide to Self-Improvement*, 9, emphasis original. Danny Akin wisely adds to this maxim by noting for the contemporary context, "What you say is more important than how you say it, but how you say it has never been more important." Danny Akin, "Why Preach Expositionally? To See Lives Changed for the Glory of God," Danny Akin: President of Southeastern Theological Seminary Blog, accessed March 13, 2013, http://www.danielakin.com/why-preach-expositionally-to-see-lives-changed-for-the-glory-of-god/.

working of God through His Spirit to convert men from their lost state to new life in Christ. Having laid the theological foundations of his message (the *what*), it is now appropriate to examine Nettleton's methods of organization, delivery, and style (the *how*) with the goal of discerning what made his preaching effective. The goal of discovering his effectiveness will be approached through the method of rhetorical analysis.

Rhetorical analysis, often referred to as rhetorical criticism, is the practice of "breaking down" discourses (written or spoken) in order to "understand *how* or *why* a message was *effective*."[31] Corbett explains that, once versed in the principles of what makes for sound speech, composition, and argumentation, readers are "made aware of all the artifice that goes into the composition of a discourse . . . [and] better equipped to analyze what other speakers . . . have done to achieve their effects."[32] Cathcart is helpful here noting that rhetorical critics "play this role with regard to public discourse, analyzing it and assessing its merits,"[33] and that rhetorical analyses "contain all the characteristic strategies of rhetoric, and . . . reveal the practices of the moment . . . hop[ing] to provide greater insight into how persuasive communication works and at the same time to improve the quality of public discourse."[34] In the Christian context, a rhetorical analysis of sermonic material seeks, insofar as is possible, to discover what made a minister's preaching effective and memorable by analyzing the context of the sermon, the audience, the sermon's organization, its delivery, and the response of the audience. The use of rhetorical analysis to analyze preaching is not an academic innovation. For example, this approach is essentially the approach that studies like Sprague's *Annals of the American Pulpit* took

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[31]Cathcart, *Post-Communication*, 4.

[32]Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric,* 2nd ed., 43

[33]Cathcart, *Post-Communication*, 5.

[34]Ibid.

in 1855, and more recently, David Larsen's two-volume *The Company of Preachers* in 1998.[35] After giving biographical surveys of various preachers' lives, both works examine bits and parts of sermons and postulate as to what made the preachers such effective communicators in their generations. Various dissertations have also been written doing rhetorical analysis on the sermons or writings of famous preachers, analyzing their message, and attempting to understand them in context.[36] Though other materials have been written on Nettleton's methodologies and impact on the Second Great Awakening, no such analysis has been done to date focusing specifically on the sermons of Asahel Nettleton.

Source Data and Methodological Approach

The sermonic material to be analyzed is found in the collection of fifty-two sermons compiled in *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, which consists mostly of sermon outlines, notes, and transcripts taken "word for word from Nettleton's handwritten manuscripts."[37] These sermons appeared in 1845, in Tyler's *Remains*, but recent edits and re-printing make the Nichol's edited work more accessible. Although Tyler himself admits in his original preface that many of the sermons were taken "from

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[35]William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit; or Commemorative Notices of Distinguished American Clergymen of Various Denominations, From the Early Settlement of the Country to the Close of the Year Eighteen Hundred and Fifty-Five* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1857), 2:542-54. David L. Larsen, *The Company of Preachers: A History of Biblical Preaching from the Old Testament to the Modern Era* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 1:369-74.

[36]Norma Desha Bunton, "A Rhetorical Analysis of Representative Sermons of John Donne" (Ph.D. diss., State University of Iowa, 1954), 261-72. See also Neil R. Leroux, *Luther's Rhetoric: Strategies and Style from the Invocavit Sermons* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2002), 7. The book was revised from Leroux's dissertation.

[37]Asahel Nettleton, *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, ed. William C. Nichols (Ames, IA: International Outreach, 1995), i.

his (Nettleton's) lips"[38] during the time of "his last sickness,"[39] all sermon texts are considered with equal weight.[40] The sermons are studied to understand their organization of thought, use of rhetorical devices, and style arrangement. Although Tyler recorded (and the recent edition includes) a section of "Plans of Sermons and Brief Observations on Texts of Scripture," these are brief and underdeveloped and appear much more like outlines and notes than fully developed sermons. Though they may be referenced for support, they will not be the primary source of consideration. Other source data used for this analysis includes various contemporary reports, letters, and books written by eyewitnesses who either knew Nettleton, heard him preach, or were participants in his revivals. These will be studied for limited insight in to Nettleton's style of delivery, command of voice, body language, and audience responsiveness to his preaching. Admittedly there are limitations to this approach since there are no audio or video recordings of Nettleton's preaching voice or delivery. Even Tyler lamented, "There was much in his manner of delivery, that gave interest and efficacy to his preaching, of which nothing can be learned by reading his discourses."[41] Despite this limitation, Nettleton's sermons and contemporary accounts will be the source material most heavily used in this section in an attempt to learn more about his rhetorical organization and what made his sermons so effective. Occasionally, secondary sources will be referenced for insight and interpretation.

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[38]Asahel Nettleton, "Preface," in *Sermons*, 246.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Those sermons re-printed by Nichols from Tyler's earlier work are found in the second-half of the book (chaps. 30-53 and "Plans" and "Miscellaneous Remarks"). The first twenty-eight sermons (chap. 1-28) and Nettleton's "Notes on Theology" (chap. 29) are the more recently edited and transcribed materials.

[41]Nettleton, "Preface," 246.

Nettleton's sermons will be evaluated using a combination of classical and modern rhetorical canons. Some consideration will be given to Aristotle's classical "genres" of rhetoric and more attention to his more popular categories of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*, although the analysis of these categories will appear separately throughout the analysis.[42] The greater part of the analysis will evaluate Nettleton's sermons according to the more accepted canons derived from the Roman Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* and commonly referred to today as the "five canons of rhetoric."[43] The five canons will provide a paradigm for analyzing Nettleton's methods of discovery (*invention*, or the source for argumentation), arrangement (*disposition*), style (*elocution*), memory (*memoria*), and delivery (*pronunciato*), with particular attention given to the logic of his arrangement and various tools that defined his style of preaching.[44] Attention will also be given to the rhetorical situation of Nettleton's sermons. The rhetorical situation refers to the "context, time, audience, and circumstances"[45] of any given text or speech since, as Litfin observed, "No act of communication . . . can be fully appreciated apart from the context in which it occurs."[46] To appreciate the context of Nettleton's sermons, it will be necessary to speak briefly about the messenger, his subject matter, the occasion of the text, the audience, and the purpose of each text.

For the analysis of Nettleton's sermons, the use of Aristotelian categories, the five canons of Quintilian, and a consideration of context will all be used to help understand

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[42]Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric: Translated and with an Introduction and notes by H. C. Lawson-Tancred* (London: Penguin, 1991), 83-129. See also Keith and Lundberg, *Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, 7, 25-26; and Nancey C. Murphy, *Reasoning and Rhetoric in Religion* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 58-63.

[43]Murphy, *Reasoning and Rhetoric*, 63-67.

[44]Ibid., 65.

[45]Keith and Lundberg, *Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, 24.

[46]Duane Litfin, *Public Speaking: A Handbook for Christians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 19.

what made his sermons effective. Corbett's *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* will be referred to for guidance in understanding terminology and devices from the discipline of rhetoric. To define these terms and place them in the context of Christian preaching, reference will be given to a variety of modern rhetoric texts and numerous homiletics texts as well. Broadus's *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* is particularly useful in this regard not only because of its proven character as a homiletics text, but also because it is so clearly influenced by and designed around classical rhetorical themes and categories. It was also written in the nineteenth century for a nineteenth century audience, within just a few decades of the ministry of Nettleton himself, so it may well reflect some of the sentiments of the age.

Rhetorical Categories Defined and Related to Preaching

The rhetorical categories introduced will now be defined in more detail with particular attention given to their application to Christian preaching. Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BCE) is often credited as "the first theorist of rhetoric"[47] and considered by many to be the father of this field of study.[48] His most lasting contributions to the field include his categories (or types of speeches) and rhetorical proofs, which for him meant the speaker's ways or means "of making speech persuasive."[49] Aristotle interpreted all speeches as being in one of three categories, namely forensic (speeches given in a public forum to persuade), epideictic (speeches that display the quality of someone or some thing, such as a eulogy, often associated with ceremonies), and

[47]Keith and Lundberg, *Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, 6.

[48]Ibid.

[49]Ibid., 7.

deliberative (speeches that argue for "a course of action").[50] Roman orator Cicero modified the categories somewhat, focusing less on the context that prompted the speech and instead focusing on the speaker's motive or intent.[51] For Cicero, all speeches were classified by their purpose, whether they sought to inform, persuade, or entertain.[52] These classical categories, though widely accepted and still very helpful, prove insufficient for the categorization of every rhetorical discourse. New categories have been added for modern analysis.[53]

Christian preaching is an example of a rhetorical discourse that does not fit neatly into one of Aristotle's categories. Corbett notes, "The ancients made no provision in their rhetorics for sermons. . . later . . . the art of preaching was usually considered under the head of epideictic oratory."[54] Preaching certainly has an element of the epideictic (ceremonial, formal, aesthetic), but also contains elements of the forensic (persuading unbelievers to believe in Christ as Lord and persuading believers to make right moral decisions), and even elements of the deliberative (calling an audience to repent, pray, or give). One of the newer categories is the *apologia*, which seeks to persuade an audience "to view a person or action more favorably"[55] (such as the person of Christ or the action of trusting him as Lord for salvation), or to "change [one's] judgment"[56] about an accusation or charge (such as addressing false claims about Jesus). This category may

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[50]Keith and Lundberg, *Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, 7; Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 2nd ed., 39-40.

[51]Keith and Lundberg, *Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, 26-27.

[52]Ibid., 27.

[53]Ibid., 26-27. Newer categories include *eulogy* (often commemorative), *encomium* (praise), and categories set forth by Cicero including informational speaking, persuasion, and entertainment.

[54]Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 3rd ed., 29.

[55]Keith and Lundberg, *Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, 26.

[56]Ibid.

come closer to defining at least some Christian preaching,[57] and much of evangelistic engagement, but because of the uniqueness of the medium of biblical preaching (particularly its authoritative source and chief motive), the classical Aristotelian categories prove only little help in the rhetorical analysis of sermons and will only be referenced occasionally in this study.[58] Christian preaching remains a singularly unique form of communication in a category by itself, related to, but distinct from, traditional categories of communication.[59]

Aristotelian proofs are more helpful for contemporary sermonic analysis. For Aristotle, the "proofs" are the means by which men persuade others. The first of these, *logos*, is used to address men with rational, structured arguments. Corbett observes, "Rationality is man's essential characteristic . . . ideally, reason should dominate all of man's thinking and actions."[60] For Aristotle, *logos* (logic) referred to "the appeal to reason"[61] in one's discourse, that is, "the arguments it makes"[62] as it (the discourse) attempts "to move an audience from one belief to another by walking the audience through reasonable steps."[63] In the context of preaching and the rhetorical analysis of

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[57]And is, of course, the basis for modern Christian apologetics.

[58]Broadus, *Treatise*, 12. The uniqueness of preaching as a medium is what led Broadus to conclude that while the study of rhetoric can be useful, preaching must never be a slave to its principles.

[59]Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, 64. Lloyd-Jones argues on p. 64 that preaching is unique in that it is authoritative communication from God, to man, through the medium of the preacher, which "does something for the soul of man, for the whole person, the entire man." The fact that preaching is so unique a medium and relies heavily on divine help should not lessen the emphasis on the preparation of the preacher, for he still seeks to communicate through human language. He must command and follow the rhetorical rules of grammar, logic, and organization of argument. He must pay special attention to the meaning of words and the way they are communicated.

[60]Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 3rd ed., 37.

[61]Murphy, *Reasoning and Rhetoric in Religion*, 58.

[62]Keith and Lundberg, *Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, 31.

[63]Ibid.

sermons, this definition calls for an examination of the sermon's structure, development, or argumentation. Here, Burrell is helpful in his text on preaching:

> It is obvious that inasmuch as the preacher's object is persuasion, his appeal must be addressed to the reasoning faculties of those who hear him. . . . The preacher, above all other men, is expected to be able to give a reason for the hope that is in him. And the sermon is his opportunity. He is like an advocate in court with a case to argue. Preaching is more than talking about a thing. Clear, succinct, well grounded, cumulative, progressive and convincing statements are what tell. Pretty periods and striking epigrams are merely flowers along the way.
>
> I do not go with those who affirm that the time for argument in the pulpit has gone by. So long as there is a single sinner left on earth who rejects the Gospel of Christ there will be need of proving to him its 'sweet reasonableness' in order that he may accept it. The fact that there is in some quarters a strong prejudice against logic or argumentation will perhaps account for the feeble sentimentalism which is preached in some pulpits these days.[64]

It must not be assumed that Burrell's words imply a lack of trust in the Spirit's work or an overdependence on rhetorical devices. He merely argues that a sermon should be logical (as opposed to illogical) in its presentation of truth in order that it might be understood by an audience. When true statements are arranged coherently in order to prove a proposition, they are said to form an argument. Well stated arguments should lead an audience toward comprehension of, and agreement with, a discourse's main idea.[65] While he stressed that "care should be taken to treat the authority of Scripture as paramount,"[66] Broadus stressed to his students that preachers "have constant need of argument"[67] and that "preachers really have great use for argument"[68] since they are in fact calling audiences to understand, believe, and act upon the commands of Scripture.

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[64]David James Burrell, *The Sermon: Its Construction and Delivery* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1913), 129-30.

[65]Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 3rd ed., 25.

[66]Broadus, *Treatise*, 134.

[67]Ibid.

[68]Ibid., 131.

Preachers need not get overly distracted by the use of rhetorical devices such as "syllogisms" or "enthymemes"[69] to agree that the goal of preaching, as Mohler states, "begins with the preacher's determination to present and explain the text of the Bible to his congregation"[70] in a way that makes possible the text's comprehension and an appropriate response to it. Mohler adds that even when the goal of the preacher in his sermon is evangelistic, evangelism will only take place "as we present and explain the biblical text itself."[71] John Stott agrees with this sentiment. While warning against overcomplicated structures and "artificiality"[72] in organizing the sermon, he reminds preachers that "most communicators agree that orderly arrangement is necessary . . . to organize our thoughts into some structure if they are to be communicable."[73] This pursuit of logical argument is why most sermons, even today, are built around a single premise (drawn from the text of Scripture) that the preacher attempts to drive home with points (proofs) that express or strengthen the argument of the text. Chapell writes, "A well-planned sermon begins with a good outline—a logical path for the mind."[74] While one need not be slavishly driven by the *logos* or logical structure of a sermon, effective communication demands good structure and argumentation.[75] If it is assumed that the

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[69]Keith and Lundberg, *The Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, 36-37.

[70]R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 66.

[71]Ibid., 67.

[72]John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 229.

[73]Ibid., 228-29

[74]Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 130.

[75]Broadus, *A Treatise*, 132, advised, "Every preacher, then, ought to develop and discipline his powers in respect to argument. If averse to reasoning, he should constrain himself to practise it; if by nature strongly inclined that way, he must remember the serious danger of deceiving himself and others by false

printed text of a sermon is an actual representation of the message preached, this element of analysis is possible with historic texts.[76]

Aristotle's second proof is directed at the *ethos* (credibility) of the speaker. For Aristotle, "ethical appeal is exerted . . . when the speech itself impresses the audience that the speaker is a person of sound sense, high moral character, and benevolence."[77] Corbett emphasizes that *ethos* is directly related to the speaker's character, but also adds that this character or *ethos* must be "evinced in the speech itself."[78] When the audience has a strong sense of a speaker's *ethos*, they are more receptive to his or her message and more likely to respond positively to the action called for in the message. Aristotle found *ethos* to be "the most effective kind of appeal."[79] Corbett notes, "Even the cleverest and soundest appeal to the reason could fall on deaf ears if the audience reacted unfavorably to the speaker's character"[80] or if the audience does not trust the speaker. While much of the emphasis classically has been upon the *ethos* as set forth in the discourse, Cathcart emphasizes that modern rhetorical critics tend to evaluate information about "the speaker's background, training, and activities to better understand the meaning and intent of the message."[81] This broadened understanding of the speaker's *ethos* suggests that modern

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arguments. One who has not carefully studied some good treatise of Logic, should take the earliest opportunity to do so."

[76]Aspects of invention (which is addressed shortly) are often categorized together under *logos*. In other words, *logos* is not just the organization of logical arguments, but in Aristotelian division, can include the gathering of those arguments. In the five canons, the gathering of material (invention) and organization of it in to a coherent argument (arrangement) are categorized separately.

[77]Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 3rd ed., 80.

[78]Ibid.

[79]Ibid.

[80]Ibid.

[81]Cathcart, *Post-Communication*, 19.

critics evaluate *ethos* not solely on the basis of the discourse's content, but also on the basis of the speaker's life and character. This evaluation of life and character is much more significant for public figures, such as political leaders and Christian preachers, because their messages so frequently have moral overtones.

In the context of a rhetorical analysis of sermons, an examination of *ethos* seeks to understand how the speaker is viewed by the audience and whether or not the audience believes him or her to be a person of credibility.[82] Haddon Robinson remarks, "As much as we might wish it otherwise, the preacher cannot be separated from the message . . . the man affects his message . . . the audience does not hear a sermon, they hear a man."[83] Chapell agrees, noting, "No truth more loudly calls for pastoral holiness than the linkage of a preacher's character and the sermon's reception . . . the people will not remember what I said, they will remember *me* and whether my life gave credence to the message of Scripture."[84] It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the audience's perception of the speaker's character. In Christian discourse, the *ethos* and credibility of the speaker, both in his life and in his discourse, is an absolute necessity.

Ethos, simply put, speaks to the "credibility and trustworthiness" of the speaker.[85] To gain the trust of the audience, the speaker must have a relationship with them that gives them confidence in the messenger as well as his or her message. *Ethos* is

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[82]Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 3rd ed., 80-81. For establishing credibility with an audience, Corbett mentions important qualities, such as good sense, good moral character, good will toward others, an adequate or professionally erudite grasp of the subject being discussed, valid reasoning, proper perspective, good taste, discriminating judgment, an abhorrence of unscrupulous tactics, respect for commonly acknowledged virtues, and adamant integrity.

[83]Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 24.

[84]Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 29, emphasis original.

[85]Keith and Lundberg, *Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, 38.

created by speaker's actions, deeds, understanding, expertise, experience, and in the case of Christian preachers, holiness and maturity in Christian graces.[86] No rhetorical analysis is complete without a consideration of the preacher's *ethos* and its impact on the effectiveness of his communication. This is one reason why it is necessary to have a fuller picture of the whole of Asahel Nettleton's life if one is to understand his preaching and evangelistic effectiveness.

Pathos is the third of Aristotle's rhetorical proofs. A speaker's *pathos* refers to his or her "appeal to the emotions of the audience"[87] in the discourse. Corbett explains that while speakers should not seek to manipulate emotions alone in a discourse, all speakers must recognize that "intellectual conviction is often not enough to move people's will to act"[88] and "it is our will ultimately that moves us to action and since the emotions have a powerful influence on the will, many of our actions are prompted by the stimulus of our emotions."[89] Keith and Lundberg's definition is helpful here:

> Audiences come to a speech with feelings based on anticipation, and these feelings are transformed, or not, by the speech. Pathos refers to the emotional state of the audience, as produced by the speaker or speech. The audience may feel bored, irritated, or excited by the speaker or the speech. Or they may have vague or specific feelings about the topic. The important thing is that their feelings (what Aristotle calls their 'state of mind') help frame how they understand the arguments of the speech and whether they may accept them. Successful speakers work to bring the audiences' emotions into alignment with the arguments they are making.[90]

Murphy concludes that *pathos* is the "appeal to the audience's emotions . . . [but] often this calls upon the speaker's ability to appeal to the imagination by the use of descriptive,

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[86]Keith and Lundberg, *Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, 38-39.

[87]Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 3rd ed., 86.

[88]Ibid., 94.

[89]Ibid., 86.

[90]Keith and Lundgren, *The Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, 39.

sensory language."[91] Evident in these definitions are two aspects to consider when evaluating *pathos* in preaching. First, the speaker will exhibit *pathos* of some kind, whether consciously or not when he preaches. In the context of Christian preaching, the speaker might either sound cold and disconnected or perhaps angry or vindictive. Each of these emotions elicit a particular response from the audience. However, is the preacher getting the emotional response that he is seeking? Second though, the *pathos* of the preacher should seek to move the audience toward an appropriate emotional response. The *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*, through the choice and placement of appropriate words, should ideally all work together toward this desired end.[92]

For the preacher, this *pathos* must always be driven by sincere love and a desire for the spiritual well-being of the audience. Lloyd-Jones notes,

> The trouble with some of us (preachers) is that we love preaching, but we are not always careful to make sure that we love the people to whom we are actually preaching. If you lack this element of compassion for the people you will also lack the *pathos* which is a very vital element in all true preaching.[93]

Few men have been more cautious about the abuse of rhetoric and the dangers of emotional manipulation than Lloyd-Jones. He who counsels preachers to greater *pathos* also warns them against its excesses: "Note that I say emotion not emotionalism . . . I reprobate that . . . [and] there is nothing more hateful than a man who deliberately tries to play on the surface and superficial emotions of people."[94] Yet even he, while abhorring emotional manipulation, recognizes the need for passionate preaching that conveys love and interest for the spiritual well-being of the audience. Stott adds that *pathos* comes from "the

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[91]Murphy, *Reasoning and Rhetoric in Religion*, 62.

[92]Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 3rd ed., 86-88.

[93]Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching & Preachers*, 105.

[94]Ibid., 107.

combination of mind and heart, the rational and the emotional"[95] and preachers must avoid "cold and aloof"[96] preaching effectively by searching for a "synthesis of reason and emotion."[97]

It would be a mistake to assume that *pathos* means the manipulation of the audience's emotions. *Pathos* must be distinguished from dangerous and unethical practices of emotional manipulation which have no part in gospel preaching. Loscalzo rightly notes that manipulation of the emotions that relies on "scare tactics,"[98] or taking advantage of grief, or even using laughter or sad stories to be "coercive"[99] to get an emotional response is "unworthy of the gospel."[100] From a secular stance, Cathcart recognizes that emotional appeals, when used appropriately and not abused, are a part of all human communication. He observes,

> There has long been controversy about the legitimacy of using emotional appeal to change hearers' beliefs or behavior. There has been a tendency to link effective persuasion with the use of logical argument and undesirable persuasion with the use of emotional appeal. Such a dichotomy fails to take into account that humans are both thinking and feeling beings. Some of the most venerated messages of the past are those that appeal to people's love of freedom (the Declaration of Independence) or to their compassion (Lincoln's Gettysburg Address). It is practically impossible for people to believe that something is true or that some course of action is correct without having some feeling about it. Thus, persuasive discourse, to be effective, must appeal to the whole person by using strategies which appeal to both the heart and the head.[101]

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[95]Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 282.

[96]Ibid., 283.

[97]Ibid.

[98]Craig A. Loscalzo, *Evangelistic Preaching That Connects: Guidance in Shaping Fresh and Appealing Sermons* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 30.

[99]Ibid.

[100]Ibid., 29.

[101]Cathcart, *Post-Communication*, 53.

Keith and Lundberg concur with this analysis when they note that the use of *pathos*, when partnered with logical argumentation, "is not manipulative but a way of letting emotion reinforce logic."[102] Students of rhetorical analysis both in the past and present, secular and sacred, acknowledge that the right use of *pathos* plays a significant role in public speaking and in the Christian context of preaching.

The key to a right use of *pathos* in preaching is that amalgamation of logic and feeling that is appropriate and natural when speaking about eternal truths and spiritual realities. This marriage that must define preaching was perhaps best stated in Lloyd-Jones's response to the question "what is preaching?":

> Logic on fire! Eloquent reason! Are these contradictions? Of course they are not. Reason concerning this Truth ought to be mightily eloquent, as you see it in the case of the Apostle Paul and others. It is theology on fire. And a theology which does not take fire, I maintain, is a defective theology; or at least the man's understanding of it is defective. Preaching is theology coming through a man who is on fire. A true understanding and experience of the Truth must lead to this. I say again that a man who can speak about these things dispassionately has no right whatsoever to be in a pulpit; and should never be allowed to enter one.[103]

Pathos that is driven by love and characterized by passion, warmth, and appropriate zeal should be a mark of gospel preaching. This kind of passion does not necessitate or assume a particular style, tone, or cadence in delivery. It may manifest itself in a quiet sincerity as well as in a boisterous plea. The mark of its presence, however, will be in how well the preacher's *pathos* connects with and moves the audience's emotional state "in harmony with the other proofs."[104] The rhetorical analysis of Nettleton's sermons will seek to discover what role *pathos* had in his preaching and understand what made him successful in capturing and guiding the emotional response of his audience through the presentation of gospel-truth.

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[102]Keith and Lundberg, *The Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, 40.

[103]Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching & Preachers*, 110.

[104]Keith and Lundberg, *The Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, 40.

Of the remaining categories that form the paradigm for rhetorical analysis, some have already indirectly been touched on. There is frequent overlap between Aristotelian categories and the five canons derived from Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria.*[105] Murphy explains that the rhetorical analyst uses the canon of invention (*inventio*) to uncover the means used "for discovering pertinent arguments for the case one intends to make."[106] Still another definition, from Joseph, is helpful in noting, "Invention is the art of finding material for reasoning or discourse."[107] Joseph lists sixteen different areas that Cicero developed for forming the logical content of an argument.[108] Murphy adds, "This part of rhetoric involves gathering information and constructing arguments that the information makes possible."[109] Edwards observes that it is during the step of invention that a speaker seeks the best and most reliable information in order to "figure out what to say to best make one's case."[110] This canon frequently absorbs and overlaps with the Aristotelian categories of *logos, ethos,* and *pathos*, which act as servants of the invention process.[111]

For sermonic analysis, the goal is to understand from what information or source the preacher derives his argument. In preaching, the source is usually and primarily the text of Scripture expounded upon in the sermon, but sources can also

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[105]Murphy, *Reasoning and Rhetoric in Religion*, 63.

[106]Ibid.

[107]Joseph, *The Trivium*, 109.

[108]Ibid. Joseph lists definition, division, genus, species, adjuncts, contraries, contradictories, similarity, dissimilarity, comparison, cause, effect, antecedent, consequent, notation, conjugates, and a seventeenth category of testimony. This analysis does not use all of these categories to analyze invention, but may refer to some of them.

[109]Murphy, *Reasoning and Rhetoric in Religion*, 63.

[110]Edwards, *A History of Preaching*, 12.

[111]Ibid.

include situations in the congregation, passing events in the community, and national or international events.[112] The invention process may include, but is not limited to, sources derived from practical or personal experience, as Broadus notes, when he observed that when gathering source material for preaching "the chief phases of religious experience deserve to be somewhat frequently made the subject of special and careful discussion."[113] Broadus encourages the use of biographies, other religious writings, and even "study cases"[114] as legitimate sources for the preacher to consider and include in his preparation.[115] In rhetorical analysis, the canon of invention is useful for examining the preacher's study and preparation of content and helps the analyst answer the question, "what information did the preacher use to build and strengthen his argument?" Cathcart notes that analyzing a discourse's invention is critical "because it forms the basis of the speaker's claim to truth and accounts for the data presented."[116] This aspect of analysis, when coupled with what has already been said about *logos*, combines to discern the "what" of a sermon's content.

The rhetorical analyst uses the canon of arrangement or disposition (*dispositio*) to discern how the speaker has arranged the content gathered in the invention stage for presentation or argumentation. This too works closely with what Aristotle considers the *logos* aspect of rhetoric. Keith and Lundberg use the term "organization"[117] to describe

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[112]Burrell, *The Sermon*, 33-35.

[113]Broadus, *A Treatise*, 86.

[114]Ibid., 87.

[115]Ibid., 86-87.

[116]Cathcart, *Post-Communication*, 45.

[117]Keith and Lundberg, *The Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, 55.

this canon and describe it as "the order in which things get said"[118] adding that arrangement is what "guides listeners through the speech and helps them identify and remember the most important points."[119] Keith and Lundberg add,

> Organization orients listeners to a speech's structure by indicating what the arguments are and how they relate to one another. By distinguishing main points from subpoints, a speaker alerts the audience to what's most important in the speech. This makes the speech intelligible to the audience and helps them see where it is going, in terms of the goals of the speech and the means (arguments) for getting there.[120]

Joseph adds that disposition involves "the proper ordering of the parts of a composition—its introduction, body, and conclusion—according to the principles of unity, coherence, and emphasis."[121] From a rhetorical perspective then, understanding a text's (or sermon's) organization and flow allows the analyst to determine *how* the speaker organized his or her material for presentation to the audience.

In the Christian context of preaching, there are many different ways to organize a sermon, but the central fact remains that the material of a sermon must be arranged coherently and logically for the audience to understand and process the message delivered. Chapell notes that selecting which material to use, then organizing that material in a "logical path for the mind,"[122] is essential to effective communication, adding, "There is no question that excellent preaching requires some structure."[123] On the importance of well-ordered organization in the sermon, Burrell observes, "Other things being equal a good outline is the guaranty of a good sermon; and, *per contra*, an imperfect outline (or,

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[118]Keith and Lundberg, *The Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, 55.

[119]Ibid.

[120]Ibid.

[121]Joseph, *The Trivium*, 109.

[122]Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 130. He rightly observes, "Too much information and too much complexity can lead to confusion or paralysis." Ibid., 116.

[123]Ibid., 131.

still worse, none at all) is the occasion of much flat, stale and unprofitable discourse."[124] He adds, "Sermonizing is focalizing . . . [and that] a discourse is powerful in proportion to the order reigning it in."[125] Burrell continues by noting that, in speech, "ideas . . . must be so arranged that they shall be best fitted to do things . . . the outline tends to clearness in the elucidation"[126] of these ideas.

While balancing the value of rhetorical preparation with the spiritual aspect of preaching, Broadus writes in his chapter on "Argument," that "argument, as to the truth and value and claims of the gospel . . . is one of the means by which we must strive to bring them (unbelievers), through the special blessing of the Spirit, into some real, some operative belief."[127] Broadus rightly acknowledges here that while the work of illumination is ultimately the Spirit's to perform, the Spirit uses "the means" of the preacher's logical and orderly organization of truth to operate on the mind of hearers. The critical need for logic, flow, organization, and precision in the arrangement of the sermon's argument cannot be overstated.[128] A rhetorical analysis of sermonic material unearths the preacher's method in this process and evaluates whether or not the organization of material is logical and effective in communicating Christian truth.

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[124]Burrell, *The Sermon*, 53.

[125]Ibid., 54-55.

[126]Ibid., 55.

[127]Broadus, *A Treatise*, 131. Broadus does not use the term "argument" in the contemporary sense of "disagreement," but rather uses it to designate the method of logically arranging material in the sermon for maximum effectiveness.

[128]In classic rhetoric, emphasis was placed upon the arrangement of the introduction, the body of the argument (which primarily included key arguments, subpoints, and proofs) and then the conclusion, or closing appeal. See Joseph, *The Trivium*, 109. Also, Keith and Lundgren, *The Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, 57-58, note that Quintilian defined six different potential "parts" of a speech. In the context of sermonic analysis, it would be ideal for every sermon to be driven by and organized around the biblical text, although this is not always the case. See Keith and Lundberg, *The Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, 56, for alternative patterns for arrangement of material, and Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 127-30.

Broadus demonstrates great appreciation for and knowledge of the canons of rhetoric in his classic work on sermon preparation. He felt that a mastery of arrangement was of critical importance for the gospel preacher. Because of its importance, he devoted a full, lengthy section of his text on this section, addressing "The Several Parts of a Sermon," using the classic emphasis upon introduction, body, divisions of the body, and conclusion. He also addressed different types of arrangement.[129] For Broadus, attention to proper arrangement could not be overstated. He began the section by stating, "The effective arrangement of the materials in a discourse is scarcely less important than their intrinsic interest and force,"[130] and continued an emphasis on its importance, noting that arrangement is important "to the speaker . . . [for] effect upon the audience,"[131] and for making the discourse "pleasing . . . persuasive . . . [and] easily remembered."[132] Broadus acknowledges that passion may often drive a speaker to speak spontaneously and without arrangement "with powerful effect . . . but to rely on this habitually is surpassingly unwise."[133] He warned students of preaching: "The speaker who neglects arrangement will rapidly lose, instead of improving, his power of constructing [and] organizing, a discourse."[134] Broadus rightly observes that while reliance upon the Spirit's work is a necessity of Christian preaching, the importance of argument and arrangement cannot be overlooked as critical components in the preparation of sermons.

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[129]Broadus, *A Treatise*, xvii. See in his outline of material an influence of the traditional canons of rhetoric in the way he organized his text.

[130]Ibid., 209.

[131]Ibid., 210, 212.

[132]Ibid., 213-14.

[133]Ibid., 212.

[134]Ibid., 211.

The third canon of rhetoric is the canon of style (*elocutio*), which Murphy notes is primarily concerned with a speaker's "choice and arrangement of words."[135] Joseph gives a broader definition, noting that style is concerned with "good diction, good grammatical structure, pleasing rhythm, clear and appropriate language, effective metaphor, etc."[136] Murphy points out that in classical rhetoric, special attention is paid primarily to three types of style, namely "the plain style for instruction, the middle style for moving people to action, and the high style for charming or delighting the audience."[137] Depending on the circumstances of a particular discourse, speakers may adjust their stylistic approach or choose to use a combination of various levels of style. Preachers must frequently do the same according to their audience and the particular situation or context of the sermon.[138] However, once an approach is settled upon, a speaker must accordingly choose their words wisely and for maximum impact.[139] Using the analogy of clothing, Keith and Lundgren state,

> Ideas don't just leave your head 'naked' by themselves, but you choose words for them . . . you have a choice about the words you use. They can be plain or fancy, cheap or expensive, sexy or boring; they can show off your deepest thoughts or hide them. Just as there is no neutral way to dress (after all, anything you put on is a choice that says something about you), there is no neutral way of choosing words when speaking.[140]

A speaker will often intentionally choose to craft his or her words according to the audience addressed and the purpose of the address. This choice of words tells much

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[135]Murphy, *Reasoning and Rhetoric in Religion*, 64.

[136]Joseph, *The Trivium*, 227.

[137]Murphy, *Reasoning and Rhetoric in Religion*, 64.

[138]Hogan and Reid, *Connecting with the Congregation*, 141-12.

[139]Vines and Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit*, 231. Vines and Shaddix conclude on p. 231 that "the words you choose can render your sermon powerfully effective or miserably inept."

[140]Keith and Lundgren, *The Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, 62.

about the speaker's motivation and intention. Although the warning of Lloyd-Jones against making sermons "works of art" has already been referenced and should be heeded seriously by preachers of the Word of God, a discourse's style will greatly impact its effectiveness.[141]

The final two canons of rhetoric, while important, will be less critical in the current analysis because of the limitations of the project.[142] The canons of memory (*memoria*) and delivery (*pronunciato*) are difficult to evaluate without actually observing and witnessing the delivery of a discourse, and as such, will only receive minor consideration in this analysis.[143] The canon of memory has received little attention historically in the study of rhetoric.[144] Murphy explains that it is the canon that attempts to understand "the devices used by speakers—first, for their own recall and, second, so

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[141]In terms of sermonic preparation, Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 231-36, also emphasizes the right choice of words using the clothing metaphor. After noting that preachers will literally utter millions of words in the course of their pulpit ministry, he observes that "words matter . . . in order to communicate clearly, we have to clothe our thoughts in words" (231), then advised preachers to make their word-choices "simple" (232), "vivid" (234), and "honest" (234).

[142]Brian Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 65. Vickers notes that the canons of memory and delivery "only make proper sense when rhetoric is a performance-art."

[143]Their secondary treatment in this analysis does not imply that these canons are not important, particularly for preaching. Broadus devoted lengthy sections of his preaching text to the importance of both devices for effective communication. See Broadus, *A Treatise*, 365-400, 401-31. In the modern context, Stott, Lloyd-Jones, Chapell, Litfin, and Fasol all give counsel and instruction on the importance of style and memory. Even John MacArthur, who states that "speaking to a congregation from the pulpit should be no different than speaking with them individually in the pastor's office," gives treatment of delivery issues such as voice, eye contact, and gestures. John MacArthur, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching: Balancing the Science and Art of Biblical Exposition* (Dallas: Word, 1992), 329-30. These canons are eminently important for preachers to consider for effective communication. Though, the point here is that in a rhetorical analysis of a pre-modern preacher's preaching (done before modern recording equipment), these devices can only be referenced secondarily and as they appear in the testimonies of those who heard the preacher. MacArthur, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, 328-31. See also Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, chaps. 7-8; Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, chaps. 5, 12, 13; Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, appendix 1, 4; Litfin, *Public Speaking*, chap. 9; and Fasol, *A Guide to Self-Improvement*, chaps. 2-4.

[144]Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 2nd ed., 38. Robert Smith calls memory "the forgotten canon," then explains how critical it is, in his view, for excellent doctrinal preaching. Robert Smith, Jr., *Doctrine That Dances: Bringing Doctrinal Preaching and Teaching to Life* (Nashville: B & H, 2008), 115.

that the audience does not lose the point part way through."[145] Vickers notes that the canon of memory "involves the orator memorizing his speech for delivery,"[146] but memory was closely associated with the earlier process of invention, for if one's gathering of ideas and research was done well, then by use of memory the speaker could draw from the stored memories of the ideas gathered during invention.[147] A rhetorical assessment of memory thus involves more than just an emphasis upon the memorizing of a discourse. It is instead an attempt to understand how well-rehearsed and well-prepared the speaker was in the presentation of his or her material and what devices or methods were used for memorization and recollection of the discourse.[148] Further, this canon attempts to assess whether or not the speaker was able to present the material in a clear, organized, and memorable fashion to their audience without slavish adherence to a written text. Simple outlines, repetition, rhyme, anaphora, and alliteration are all tools that speakers use to make their discourses more memorable.[149]

In his recent homiletic text *Doctrine That Dances*, Robert Smith helps contemporary preachers understand the important role of the canon of memory for effective preaching.[150] In chapter 5 of his book, he refers to the five canons of rhetoric and their usefulness for modern preachers in the construction and delivery of doctrinal

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[145]Murphy, *Reasoning and Rhetoric in Religion*, 79.

[146]Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric*, 65.

[147]Ibid.

[148]Elizabethada A. Wright, "A History of the Arts of Memory and Rhetoric," *InSight: Rivier Academic Journal* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2009), accessed March 10, 2017, http://www.rivier.edu/journal/RCOAJ-Fall-2009_table.htm. Wright discusses the historical development of memory devices, particularly in the ancient world where she notes that classical orators would often use visual cues and spatial arrangement to prepare to speak without written material before them.

[149]Keith and Lundgren, *The Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, 63-66.

[150]Smith, *Doctrine That Dances*, 112-17.

sermons. He first emphasizes the role of invention over delivery in effective preaching, arguing that far too many preachers emphasize style over content. Then, in response to this criticism, he suggests that modern preachers "must be intentional about delivering sermons that are substantive without ignoring the significance of style."[151] For Smith, the secret to bridging this gap is in the rediscovery of and rightful use of the canon of memory. He observes,

> Memory is the forgotten canon. Preachers need to trust their minds in their preaching endeavors. It is impossible for the preacher to bring up information to the first floor of articulation when the basement of preparation is bare and empty. The Holy Spirit brings to our remembrance what is in the file system of the mind. However, if nothing has been put in the mind to remember, does the preacher expect the Holy Spirit to create something out of nothing? If there is nothing in the basement of the mental file cabinet, the first floor of delivery is a disaster . . . memory is hard work . . . preachers ought to move from memorizing to picturizing, internalizing, actualizing, and eventually turning the ink of the manuscript into the blood of their life.[152]

Smith's application of memory and use of the canons for effective sermon preparation and delivery should inspire emulation among preachers seeking effective communication.[153] Such is the value and practical benefit of the tools of rhetoric when understood and used properly. The analysis of Nettleton's sermons will investigate to what degree he used the canon of memory effectively in his preaching.

The last of the traditional five canons of rhetorical analysis is the canon of delivery (*actio*). Rhetorical analysts use the canon of delivery to assess the actual presentation of the discourse to a speaker's audience with particular emphasis on the

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[151]Smith, *Doctrine That Dances*, 113.

[152]Ibid., 115.

[153]Broadus addresses the role of memorization and extemporaneous recall in his text as do a host of other modern preaching texts, which place emphasis on the idea of intense study being supplemented by periods of meditation, memorization, incubation, and prayer, that the preacher may have an excellent grasp of the prepared material balanced with extemporaneous and creative processes during the actual delivery. See Broadus, *A Treatise*, 399. Also, for comments on mental visualization, incubation, and memorization, see Vines and Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit*, 195-99, chap. 11; Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 333-36.

effective use of voice and gesture, or as Murphy phrased it, "the manner of speech and . . . what is now called body language."[154] Today, speakers (especially professional public speakers) are still taught that effectiveness in delivery is linked primarily with mastery of these same categories (voice and gesture), although many sub-categories are now included and considered, such as vocal volume, vocal pitch, inflection, articulation, variety of tones, rhythmic pacing, rate of delivery, eye-contact, facial animation, hand-gestures, body language, posture, dress, and even the use of visual aids or props.[155] Broadus spoke at length about the importance of delivery, addressing primarily the use of voice and body language, but states well the importance of its emphasis:

> Delivery does not consist merely, or even chiefly, in vocalization and gesticulation, but it implies that one is possessed with the subject, that he is completely in sympathy with it and fully alive to its importance; that he is not repeating remembered words, but bringing forth the living offspring of his mind.[156]

As already referenced, Smith stresses the importance of delivery but the need for it to be subservient to and flowing out of diligent invention. He discourages the tendency of preachers to imitate other speakers and admonishes them instead to "find their own voice and delivery style so that they can be maximally used in the uniqueness of their own personality through the power of the Holy Spirit."[157] Since delivery is the vehicle through which all of the speaker's invention, arrangement, style, and memory reach the target audience, great attention should be given to whether or not delivery was effective, that is, whether it helped or hindered the discourse's impact on the audience.

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[154]Murphy, *Reasoning and Rhetoric in Religion*, 92; Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric*, 65.

[155]Fasol, *A Guide to Self-Improvement*, chaps. 2-3; Vines and Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit*, chap. 12; Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, appendix 1.

[156]Broadus, *A Treatise*, 401. See chaps. 18-19.

[157]Smith, *Doctrine That Dances*, 116.

Analysis of sermons or discourses that have already been delivered and have not been recorded with modern technology can be difficult. However, Cathcart notes that it is not altogether impossible:

> Even messages which appear only in written or printed form have their presentational aspects. A crudely hand-written note announcing that a bomb has been placed in a building is definitely more persuasive than a machine-printed, neatly folded pamphlet. Although written or printed presentational forms do not have the great variety of strategies available for oral presentation, there are choices available to the communicator. These include the use of italics, capital letters, exclamation points, wide or narrow margins, and boldness of type.[158]

In other words, some degree of an analysis of delivery is possible when the documents are studied closely. In addition to the study of Nettleton's sermons as they are printed, eyewitness accounts of his delivery will be drawn upon for hints as to his particular delivery methods. These hints may help to discern what frequently made his sermons such moving and effective discourses from the perspective of those who responded.

Summary

The ancient discipline of rhetoric, when used cautiously and in deference to the mysterious working of the Holy Spirit, must be considered invaluable to the Christian communicator.[159] Since so much of the Christian experience emphasizes either public or interpersonal communication of the gospel message with others, Christians should be concerned with the constant evaluation of and improvement of their speech patterns. In this regard, the tools provided by the discipline of rhetoric can be helpful servants. The rhetorical analysis of the sermons of an effective preacher from the past has potential

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[158]Cathcart, *Post-Communication*, 71-72. While noting the difficulties that arise from analyzing printed discourses (rather than witnessing them firsthand), Cathcart observed on p. 71 that "Often, an original oral message has its greatest impact on audiences who read a printed version of the speech."

[159]As Litfin notes repeatedly in his analysis, "creating πίστις [faith] was the sole province of the Spirit of God, working through the cross of Christ" and the use of rhetoric must only be used cautiously to enhance one's capacity to engage an audience, not to formally *persuade* them to faith through eloquence of words. Litfin, *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation*, 247.

value for modern preachers by drawing attention to patterns of invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery, which the Holy Spirit used to awaken faith and bring great transformation and revival in a specific context. Combined with a right understanding of the historic rhetorical situation and the preacher's own *pathos* and *ethos*, the cumulative analysis should provide a helpful sketch of the kind of preaching that was useful in particular contexts. Although imitating another's approach to preaching offers no guarantee of yielding the same results as the original presentation, it is possible that some aspects of such scrutiny will assist modern preachers in being more effective communicators. With that desire in mind, the rhetorical analysis of Nettleton's sermons occupies the remainder of this chapter.

Analysis of the Rhetorical Situation Accompanying Nettleton's Preaching

Keith and Lundgren define the rhetorical situation as "the situation that animates a speech—the context, time, audience, and circumstances."[160] Since all discourses "address specific needs for specific audiences at a given time in a given place, the rhetorical situation is key to understanding any given speech."[161] Chapter 2 presented an overview of the period of the Second Great Awakening and the major themes of Nettleton's ministry, giving the reader some sense of the spirit of the age necessary for understanding Nettleton's rhetorical situation. Moving forward, a focus on context will seek to discern more specifically the context surrounding Nettleton's own preaching ministry and the sermons under examination. To understand best Asahel Nettleton's sermons, some details concerning their specific context must be established. The context will be established by considering briefly the components of speaker, occasion, audience,

[160]Keith and Lundgren, *The Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, 24.

[161]Ibid.

purpose, and subject. Details about each of these components will help in understanding the messages themselves.[162]

Speaker

Nettleton's own personal piety, earnestness, and diligence, displayed early on in his ministry, laid the foundations for the *ethos* that would lend credibility and gravitas to his preaching ministry. The testimony of his personal conversion first appeared on the pages the *Connecticut Evangelical Magazine* in 1803 and again in 1804 and was likely, widely read by many and especially those interested in revivals.[163] After his conversion but before beginning his studies at Yale, Nettleton devoted himself to independently completing preparatory theological studies and he spent much time in the tutelage of his pastor. While a student at Yale, his classmate Jonathan Lee observed that Nettleton was

> one who feared God. Ever kind, courteous, conscientious and exemplary, unassuming and unostentatious; his words and actions bore the most powerful testimony in my conscience, to the genuineness of his religious principles. He evidently had a taste for the spiritual themes and exercises pertaining to religion, so predominant and controlling as to leave small space for merely literary ambition. His best loved place was the chapel, listening with devout solemnity, to the prayers and preaching of the venerated Dwight. His best loved book was the Bible. His best loved day was the Sabbath—and his best loved friends, were those who knew the joys and sorrows of a pious heart.[164]

Nettleton's piety and interest in spiritual matters served him well when the campus was blessed with revival in 1807-1808. Tyler writes that he was among the first "to discover

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[162]Though overly heavy in his emphasis on the power of rhetoric for persuasion, Sleeth, *Persuasive Preaching*, 9-21, does have some helpful comments regarding the evaluation of the rhetorical situation.

[163]Tyler, *Memoir*, 13. Tyler mentioned that Nettleton's personal testimony was published in the fourth (1803) and fifth (1804) volumes. Nettleton's testimony begins on p. 33 of vol. 5, no. 1, but is reprinted in its entirety in Tyler, *Memoir*, 13-16. Tyler then includes Nettleton's revised and corrected testimony, given later, on pp. 16-23.

[164]Ibid., 29-30.

indications of special religious impressions,"[165] and openly aided in the revivals by "seek[ing] out persons in a state of religious anxiety"[166] for counsel and prayer. The story was relayed earlier of Nettleton's labors alongside President Dwight for the relief and salvation of a "despairing sinner"[167] during this season of revival. Tyler even relates that during his studies at Yale, he frequently taught at a school in New Haven to support himself financially and, while teaching, took "deep interest in the spiritual welfare" of the students at the school.[168] These observations help to establish that, among his peers, Nettleton was recognized to be a sincere, spiritually-minded, and heavenly-focused student. From the early days of his ministry, he established a particular *ethos* as a godly man committed to his Christian faith and Christian ministry.

When he began his ministry among the churches in 1811, he made intentional choices about the nature of his itinerant ministry, which further established his reputation and credibility. He intentionally sought out churches in some of "the most desolate parts of the Lord's vineyard . . . destitute of settled pastors"[169] and which had often been "overrun by fanatical sects"[170] in so-called revivals of the past. He intentionally limited his labors "to waste places, and destitute congregations"[171] or "dead churches" as they would be characterized in the modern parlance. Many of these churches were left divided

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[165]Tyler, *Memoir*, 33.

[166]Ibid.

[167]Ibid., 35.

[168]Ibid., 28.

[169]Ibid., 45.

[170]Ibid.

[171]Ibid., 45, 51.

and damaged by the tactics of James Davenport[172] and his followers decades earlier,[173] but Nettleton's willingness to minister diligently and readily among the "waste places" established a deep love and respect for local churches and settled pastors that would be reciprocated in the years that followed.[174] He was deeply convinced that in his unique calling as an evangelist, it was his "duty not to weaken the hands of settled pastors, but to do all in [his] power to strengthen him."[175] This love and respect for pastors and concern for the unity of the church went a long way to establishing his unique credibility among hurting churches.[176] It helps to explain the eager anticipation with which pastors wanted Nettleton to preach and minister among them and the establishment of a reputation that preceded him wherever he went.

Most importantly though is the fact that as his labors began, they were met with great success almost from the beginning. In the fall of 1812, he arrived at South Britain (CT) where a spirit of revival had already been displayed. His ministry of preaching, house-to-house visiting, and personal evangelism was received well and

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[172]Randall Balmer, "Davenport, James," in *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 172. See also Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), 223-27, for accounts of Davenport's divisive and unruly revival ministry. See also John Thornbury, *God Sent Revival* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1988), 48-53.

[173]Tyler, *Memoir*, 45-49. Tyler documents extensively, in a lengthy footnote found on pp. 45-49, the damage left behind from earlier revivals and specifically from the ministry of Davenport. This information is taken from a tract by the Rev. Joseph Fish, according to Tyler.

[174]Ibid., 46-50.

[175]Ibid., 51.

[176]Lyman Beecher would later state that Nettleton had developed "an almost morbid horror of any thing approaching to fanaticism" because of his time ministering among churches that had been devastated decades earlier by the reckless ministry of James Davenport. Beecher believed this contributed to Nettleton's hyper-sensitivity to Finney's New Measures. See Lyman Beecher, *Autobiography of Lyman Beecher*, ed. Barbara M. Cross (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961), 2:68.

furthered the spirit of revival in the community.[177] Shortly thereafter, Nettleton ministered at another "waste" church in South Salem, New York, where his labors were met with a similar outpouring of a spirit of revival for the next two months. The people of South Salem were so moved by his ministry that they implored him to stay, but he refused.[178] Following the successes at South Britain and South Salem, word of mouth traveled quickly and Nettleton ministered in a series of churches where his revivals were blessed with spiritual renewal and the conversion of many.[179] This pattern continued for many years with many of the revival accounts being shared in the literature of the day and recounting vividly the conviction and regeneration of men, women, boys, and girls "from seventy years of age, down to school children."[180] Almost surely this pattern of repeated blessing wherever Nettleton preached, and the publication of the results (via print media and word of mouth), created a credibility that led to eager anticipation among the people wherever Nettleton was called upon to minister. This anticipation can be seen in the number of delegations dispatched to visit Nettleton and plead with him to come to their church and minister.[181] This anticipation coupled with natural curiosity of the people

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[177]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 17-20. Incidentally, the pastor for whom Nettleton was "filling in" was none other than Bennet Tyler and the excellent report of his work and his reception by the people at the church in South Britain launched a lifelong friendship between young Nettleton and Tyler, who would later accompany Nettleton at his death and become his biographer.

[178]Ibid., 57-58.

[179]Revivals followed in Danbury, Monroe, North Lyme, Bloomfield, Milton, and South Farms. Each was met with an outpouring of God's Spirit and revival in the churches. Also, "conversion" is used here, as frequently in Tyler's *Memoir*, not in the technical sense (contrasted to regeneration) but in the more common modern usage to designate individuals "getting saved" or "turning to Christ." Tyler refers to these as "hopeful conversions." See Tyler, *Memoir*, 59 for an example.

[180]Ibid., 55-68. Quote from James Morris's unpublished account (Tyler, *Memoir*, 62) of the revival at South Farms, where he recorded the names and ages of eighty individuals converted under Nettleton's revival services.

[181]The pattern of Nettleton being invited either by dispatched groups or pastors to churches, which were sometimes experiencing the beginnings of revival or sometimes destitute and divided, became

created a context in which many were eager to hear Nettleton preach.[182]

Both as a young man and also in his later years, Nettleton's reputation and credibility was established and strengthened by his character, godliness, and singular focus on the souls of men. Rev. R. Smith, who had been blessed by Nettleton's ministry during a revival in 1820, later wrote of him that he was "courteous . . . reserved . . . entirely controlled by judgment rather than emotion . . . some would have pronounced him austere,"[183] adding that he was a man of such "holy sincerity" and humility that he would impress those around him with "a sort of awe."[184] Francis Wayland also wrote of Nettleton: "His manner of life was consistent with his appearance in the pulpit . . . his residence was generally with the minister of the parish in which he was laboring"[185] and observed that whatever time he was not counseling sinners or encouraging pastors he spent "devoted to secret prayer and the reading of the Scriptures . . . his whole time seemed devoted to labor for souls."[186] Edward Beecher, son of Lyman Beecher, affirms this quality of Nettleton when he wrote a decade after Nettleton's death:

> The central element and impelling force in his character was an uncommonly constant and firm belief of the realities of the invisible world, of the magnitude and intensity of human depravity, and of the absolute necessity of regeneration and sanctification in order to save the soul. . . . In Mr. Nettleton, this all absorbing

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almost characteristic and demonstrates the *ethos* that he had among the churches even in his early years as an evangelist. See Tyler, *Memoir*, 60, 61, 68, 71, 72, 83, for examples.

[182]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 71, notes that Nettleton "became a sort of celebrity" and that as word spread about revival meetings, "large groups of people followed him wherever he went." Such was the curiosity and anticipation his meetings created.

[183]Rev. R. Smith, *Recollections of Nettleton and the Great Revival of 1820* (Albany, NY: E. H. Pease & Co., 1848), 24.

[184]Ibid., 26.

[185]Francis Wayland and H. L. Wayland, *A Memoir of the Life and Labors of Francis Wayland, D.D., LL.D., Late President of Brown University* (New York: Sheldon and Company, 1867), 1:110.

[186]Ibid.

> intensity of interest in salvation never passed away. He had comparatively no interest but in this one thing, the salvation of the soul.[187]

Beecher added that Nettleton was "remarkably kind, social, and communicative"[188] and even references a "vein of humour"[189] in his personality. However, words like "magnitude," "intensity," and "all absorbing," help paint a picture of the gravitas that lent credibility and believability to Nettleton's pulpit ministry. When he spoke, audiences listened, in part, because they could see that he believed, lived, and was transformed and burdened by those truths he declared.

These details are but a few of many available that describe Nettleton's personality and character and help to establish the *ethos* that accompanied his ministry. However, each is significant for understanding the rhetorical situation in which he preached. The audience's perception of the speaker greatly impacts how they will receive the message.[190] In Nettleton's case, he was well-loved by many brethren who welcomed him in to their churches and received him with curiosity and anticipation because they had heard about or read of the great spirit of awakening that accompanied his ministry. By those who knew him best, it was apparent that he was wholly sanctified unto the work of saving souls and that God was blessing him with a particular measure of the Spirit in his ministry.

Occasion

The occasion of Nettleton's preaching was almost exclusively in religious gatherings. These gatherings typically took one of three different forms. First, he

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[187]Edward Beecher, "From the Rev. Edward Beecher, D. D.," in *Annals of the American Pulpit*, 553.

[188]Ibid.

[189]Ibid.

[190]Corbett notes, "Even the cleverest and soundest appeal to the reason could fall on deaf ears if the audience reacted unfavorably to the speaker's character." Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 2nd ed., 93.

preached formal sermons on Sunday (the Sabbath) in the context of gathered worship, often multiple times in one day.[191] Sometimes spiritual awakenings akin to revival were ongoing at the time of Nettleton's arrival while other times the churches were in a state of desperation, not experiencing revival but likely seeking it. The second occasion that provided the context for his sermons was the "inquiry room" meetings that he held in almost every place that he preached.[192] These meetings were less formal than Sunday services and generally took place in homes or public places throughout the week, often in the evening. Those who had shown interest or spiritual anxiety in response to the Sunday sermon would be invited to gather and Nettleton would generally begin with a "short address, suited to produce solemnity, and to make all who were present feel that they were in the presence of a holy and heart searching God."[193] Following the address (sermon), Nettleton and sometimes other ministers or helpers would pray and then spend time with those who had gathered, counseling them regarding spiritual matters.[194] Many of Nettleton's addresses were in the context of these "inquiry meetings" with anxious but searching sinners. The other oft-mentioned occasion was the prayer meeting that took place in public spaces on weekdays or Saturdays and sometimes in conjunction with

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[191]Tyler, *Memoir*, 148, mentions that Nettleton "preached, generally, three sermons on the Sabbath, and several during the week."

[192]Ricky Charles Nelson, "The Relationship between Soteriology and Evangelistic Methodology in the Ministries of Asahel Nettleton and Charles G. Finney" (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997), 81-83. Nelson discusses the "inquiry room" methodology, "which Nettleton exercised most effectively" (81).

[193]Tyler, *Memoir*, 214.

[194]For an overview of the "inquiry room" meetings, also referred to as "inquiry meetings," see ibid., 87, 91, 138, 140, 145, 154-55, 178. Dozens of accounts of "inquiry room" meetings exist in the literature as it appeared to be Nettleton's most successful and chiefly used means of evangelism outside of the pulpit. Thornbury dedicates chap. 18 to describing the "inquiry room" methodology in Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*.

holidays or days of fasting.[195] On rare occasion, Nettleton even used funeral gatherings as occasions to gather anxious sinners around the body of the deceased and deliver a message about their spiritual state to them.[196] Such events demonstrate that he understood the propriety of different moods of discourse at different times and on different occasions within his ministry.

Audience

The speaker's audience is another "crucial" component that must be considered when reconstructing the rhetorical situation.[197] The testimonies from the period and Nettleton's own notes support the assertion that in his audiences were people of virtually every age, education level, gender, and standing in society.[198] Testimonies from the revival at South Farms indicate that boys and girls and men and women from twelve years old to seventy all were converted during the revival.[199] It is important to note that from his sermons, it is evident that he aimed his sermons primarily at four different groups of people, whom he assumed could be present in any of his meetings.[200] Although in most

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[195]Tyler, *Memoir*, 80, 136, 139, 141, 143-44.

[196]At least three occasions are mentioned where this occurred, Tyler, *Memoir*, 68, 79, 96. Tyler notes that Nettleton and his co-laborer, following the sudden death of a student, were "anxious to improve this solemn providence to the best advantage" (90). He also addressed a specific case of the sudden death of a young lady and spoke directly to the family and friends in Asahel Nettleton, "The Contemplation of Death," in Nettleton, *Sermons*, 14-15.

[197]Keith and Lundgren, *The Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, 11, note, "To be successfully persuasive, you need to figure out exactly whom you want to persuade and what would convince them . . . to persuade an audience, a speaker needs to say the right thing to the right people in the right situation, at the right time, and with the right ethical conditions."

[198]Tyler, *Memoir*, 74-77, 96, 129, 164.

[199]Ibid., 62-67.

[200]Sleeth, *Persuasive Preaching*, 16-17, is helpful here, instructing the preacher to be aware of the type of audience he is speaking to and noting that, typically, audiences will be one of three sorts: "the believing audience," "doubting audience," or "disbelieving or hostile audience." Each should be approached differently.

sermons he addresses multiple groups, his sermons were frequently crafted precisely to address one of these categories of listeners and often, the intended audience is made apparent in the sermon's title.[201] First, he sometimes addressed "sleeping" or apathetic Christians and called them to awaken from their state of slumber, calling them to more faithful observance of their Christian duties.[202] These messages seem crafted to call the sleeping church to awaken to a revival of their Christian duties. They were typically deeply doctrinal and ended with clear calls to action, such as fasting, reconciliation, and repentance.[203] In his sermon "The Duty of Fasting, and The Manner in Which the Duty Should Be Performed," Nettleton clearly speaks to professing Christians when he calls them to a time of repentance, fasting, and prayer:

> It is highly proper, in times of spiritual declension, for the members of a particular church to assemble and make a public confession of the prevailing sins of that church, and to renew their covenant with God, and with one another. This should be done with prayer and fasting.[204]

Quite directly here, Nettleton was addressing a Christian crowd and they were being called to attend faithfully to the Christian duties of confession and repentance. His message was directed firmly at a particular crowd and he called them to a specific action.

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[201]Asahel Nettleton, "Sinners Entreated to be Reconciled to God," in *Sermons*, 356-70. Also, Asahel Nettleton, "The Backslider Restored," in *Sermons*, 389-93.

[202]Asahel Nettleton, "Professing Christians, Awake!," in *Sermons*, 1-8. In this sermon's introduction, he plainly stated that the "text then, is addressed . . . to the Christian who is asleep," using Rom 13:11 as his text (1). For sermons directed primarily at Christians, see Asahel Nettleton, "The Death of the Righteous," in *Sermons* 25-29; Nettleton, "The Perseverance of the Saints," 191-204; and Nettleton, "The Backslider Restored," 389-93.

[203]In Nettleton's *Sermons*, Christians are called to awaken to spiritual warfare ("Professing Christians Awake!," 6), persevere in doctrinal truth ("Gospel Warfare," 165-67), repent of sin, withstand temptation, pursue holiness, and be useful for service to God (Nettleton, "The Mortification of Sin, Part I," and "The Mortification of Sin, Part II," 168-79), humility, confession of sin, and reconciliation with other Christians ("The Duty of Fasting and the Manner in Which the Duty Should Be Performed," 349-55), and restoration from one's "backslidden" state ("The Backslider Restored," 392-93).

[204]Nettleton, "The Duty of Fasting," 352.

A second audience Nettleton addressed was the deceived Christian. These attendants were those church members who were perhaps comfortable with a profession of faith or lifetime membership in the institutional church, but demonstrated no evidence of genuine conversion.[205] For example, in "Self-Examination," after asserting that Christians can indeed "walk in darkness"[206] by neglecting self-examination, Nettleton expounded on the "positive evidences of regeneration"[207] and ended by observing, "A false hope is worse than none . . . examine well the foundation on which you rest your hopes of heaven, lest you discover your mistake too late."[208] Again, in a sermon titled "The Danger of Hypocrisy" it is clear that the entire point of the sermon was to warn against the danger of a "hypocritical profession of religion."[209] Using the text from Matthew 25:1-8, Nettleton warns that "many professors of religion will be finally lost,"[210] pointing out that "many will take up with a mere empty profession of religion,"[211] and warning them that there is a marked "distinction between true and false professors of religion."[212] Knowing that his audience consisted of many unregenerate church members, he ends by calling them to self-examination and introspection to see whether their lives reflected true "christian graces."[213] Nettleton was conscious of these unregenerate church

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[205]In Congregational and Presbyterian polity, it was possible to be a church member by (infant) baptism, but to be without a credible profession of faith or any at all.

[206]Asahel Nettleton, "Self-Examination," in *Sermons*, 326.

[207]Ibid., 329, 327.

[208]Ibid., 333.

[209]Asahel Nettleton, "The Danger of Hypocrisy," in *Sermons*, 303.

[210]Ibid., 306.

[211]Ibid., 307.

[212]Ibid., 309.

[213]Ibid., 311.

members in his audience and frequently used texts and word choices that addressed their unique situation of familiarity with the gospel and false hope grounded in their connection to the church rather than genuine regeneration. His familiarity with this unique situation present among his hearers shaped the preparation, choice of text, word choice, and delivery of his sermon.

At other times, entire sermons or lengthy sub-sections of sermons were devoted to addressing those who were plainly unregenerate or unbelieving. Nettleton frequently acknowledged in his preaching that some in his audience did not identify themselves as Christians and he set out to engage them evangelistically with his message. For example in "The Destruction of Hardened Sinners," the entire appeal is directed at "sinners" who have repeatedly heard the gospel but have rejected it outright.[214] He begins the sermon by pointing out that while the "humble Christian is always thankful for admonition . . . the haughty sinner, whose way is always right in his own eyes, indignantly rejects it."[215] The distinction is clearly between those who hear the gospel and receive it and those who live in rejection of the gospel appeal. Nettleton goes on to address his audience in this same sermon by pleading, "Sinner! If you cannot be alarmed, you cannot be saved,"[216] and concluding that many "have gone to hell from under the light of the gospel."[217] There can be no mistaking here who he was addressing and to whom his sermon was crafted and directed; clearly Nettleton addressed the unsaved. The same audience is targeted in his sermons "The Burdened Sinner Invited to Christ for Rest" and "Salvation for the Lost," among others.[218] In the latter sermon, Nettleton directly addresses the

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[214]Asahel Nettleton, "The Destruction of Hardened Sinners," in *Sermons*, 30-39.

[215]Ibid., 30.

[216]Ibid., 36.

[217]Ibid., 39.

[218]Asahel Nettleton, "The Burdened Sinner Invited to Christ for Rest," in *Sermons*, 421-25;

condition of the sinner, noting from the text that the sinner is condemned by the law, is in need of pardon, is invited to Christ for life, and is driven by the Spirit toward conviction to ask the question, "What must I do to be saved?"[219] In this one sermon, Nettleton describes the state of the unsaved by referring to him in various ways, including "lost,"[220] "condemned,"[221] "under the sentence of death,"[222] "destitute of spiritual life,"[223] "spiritually dead,"[224] and "wandering farther and farther away from God,"[225] making it quite apparent that he was addressing a specific crowd with his message—a crowd he believed was unconverted. With evangelistic purpose and zeal, Nettleton selectively chooses words that will get the attention of unbelievers in his audience, and in so doing, demonstrates the way his audience helped to shape his discourse.

Finally, there were instances in which Nettleton addressed diligent and revived Christians and addressed them in such a way that he sought to teach, instruct, and educate them in the faith. This crowd was different from the aforementioned "apathetic" Christian, for in these messages, the call is more to heed doctrinal instruction and less to awakening resulting in regeneration. In these messages, conscious of his audience, Nettleton aimed to instruct and root his hearers in doctrine, theology, and particular nuances of the Christian faith. In the two-part series of sermons titled "The Final Judgment,"[226] Nettleton

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and Asahel Nettleton, "Salvation for the Lost," in *Sermons*, 445-50.

[219]Nettleton, "Salvation for the Lost," 446-47.

[220]Ibid., 446.

[221]Ibid.

[222]Ibid.

[223]Ibid., 447.

[224]Ibid.

[225]Ibid., 449.

[226]Asahel Nettleton, "The Final Judgment, Part I," in *Sermons*, 103-13; Asahel Nettleton, "The

systematically instructs his hearers in eschatology, addressing subjects such as the final judgment, the return of Christ, the millennium, the resurrection, and the eternal state. He goes into tremendous detail explaining even the minor details of his eschatological views, demonstrating that his goal was to instruct a Christian crowd rather than to appeal to the unconverted.[227] A similar pattern is repeated in his sermons on "The Mortification of Sin, Parts I & II,"[228] and again in "The Counsel and Agency of God in the Government of All Things,"[229] where his appeal is to the regenerate Christian and his goal is the development of Christian character through the in-depth explanation of Christian doctrine.[230] Although each sermon contains evangelistic appeals and warnings within their arguments and frequently conclude with rhetorical questions meant to drive home an appeal to the conscience of the unsaved, their target audience was believers and the evangelistic appeal was secondary, appearing as almost an afterthought.[231]

In order to understand correctly the rhetorical situation of Nettleton's sermons, it is critical to understand how the different audiences to whom he spoke shaped and

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Final Judgment, Part II," in *Sermons*, 114-21.

[227]For example, in Nettleton, "The Final Judgment, Part I," 107, his discussion of the millennium gives the impression that he espoused post-millenial eschatology. See chap. 3 discussion about eschatological themes in preaching.

[228]Asahel Nettleton, "The Mortification of Sin, Part I," in *Sermons*, 168-74; and Asahel Nettleton, "The Mortification of Sin, Part II," in *Sermons*, 175-79. These two sermons address the doctrine of sanctification, generally, and dying to the power of sin.

[229]Asahel Nettleton, "The Counsel and Agency of God in the Government of All Things," in *Sermons*, 180-90. This sermon addresses the doctrine of divine sovereignty and the providence and government of God over all of human affairs.

[230]The material in this sermon is profound and in-depth. Nettleton teaches on the decrees of God and their relationship to the free actions and free agency of man. Modern readers can detect a hint of Nettleton's engagement of some of the doctrinal tensions of his day in the sermon that is obviously (upon reading) directed toward a different crowd than most of his appeals.

[231]Note for example there is no appeal at the conclusion of "Counsel and Agency," 190. Likewise, no appeal for repentance appears at the end of "Mortification, Part I," 174, and only a very weak appeal in the final three paragraphs of "Mortification, Part II," 179.

altered the content of his messages and the style of his delivery, a process which Litfin refers to as audience adaptation.[232] Litfin observes that it is the "primary challenge"[233] of a speaker to make specific choices "about how to reach *a particular audience* with a given idea . . . no two audiences are ever the same,"[234] and noted that, though this process is one of the most difficult tasks involved in any kind of speaking, it must be mastered "so that [the] audience, to the greatest extent possible, will be able to comprehend and willing to act upon [the speaker's] ideas."[235] Understanding that Nettleton comprehended and applied this principle to his preaching ministry helps in the rhetorical analysis of his sermonic content and allows the reader of his material to comprehend more thoroughly his preparation process and rhetorical development.[236]

Purpose

Reconstructing the rhetorical situation also involves an attempt by the reader to understand the original purpose of the speech. Insofar as it can be construed, the reader seeks to understand the speaker's original intent in delivering the speech and seeks to discern generally what problem created the need for the speech as well as what response the speaker sought to obtain from his or her audience.[237] Taking the previous "rhetorical

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[232]Litfin, *Public Speaking*, 40.

[233]Ibid., 39.

[234]Ibid., emphasis original.

[235]Ibid., 40.

[236]Cathcart, *Post-Communication*, 41, emphasizes the importance of understanding the intended audience and advises the rhetorical critic when he observes, "The critic can best analyze the rhetorical act by viewing the message as a set of strategies employed by the speaker to deal with the obstacles produced by the active participation of the audience in the interaction. The analysis should explain not only what the speaker was doing to influence the audience but also how the audience's involvement shaped the message and the response."

[237]Ibid., 42-43. Cathcart warns the critic against what he calls the "intentional fallacy," noting that an analyst/critic can never truly know what is in the mind of the speaker but can only rather infer a

situation" factors into account helps to draw conclusions about Nettleton's purposes in his preaching. He was speaking, primarily in churches and religious meetings, as a trusted man of God, to congregations and communities that were often spiritually apathetic but anticipatory of awakening due to the wider spirit of revival evident around the nation. With these factors in mind, the purpose of Nettleton's sermons is not difficult to discern. Again, these purposes might vary according to the audience, but generally speaking, Nettleton sought in his sermons to awaken his hearers to either renewed Christian duty or to religious conversion.

In the sermon "Salvation for the Lost,"[238] Nettleton states outright what purpose he fulfilled in preaching the gospel. Reflecting on the text found in Luke 19:10,[239] Nettleton states, "We learn from this subject why ministers preach the gospel . . . the business of ministers is to show them their lost condition, and to urge them to come to Christ for life."[240] Biographer John Thornbury notes that when preaching to the lost, Nettleton preached with "pathos and tender appeal . . . he scarcely sounds like the Calvinist he was reputed to be. . . . [He] pour(ed) forth his heart in earnest, passionate invitations for the sinner to yield to Christ"[241] as he put forth "The 'Free Offer of the Gospel.'"[242] Clearly, much of his preaching was for evangelistic response. However, Thornbury then observes that, at other times, "his addresses were designed to establish

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purpose or intent based on what was actually said.

[238]Nettleton, "Salvation for the Lost," 445-50.

[239]"For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (AV)

[240]Nettleton, "Salvation for the Lost," 449.

[241]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 108.

[242]Ibid.

theological points and contradict current errors."[243] Thornbury's statements reinforce this two-fold purpose in Nettleton's preaching of converting the lost and building-up the already converted. This observation is true, in general, of the body of Nettleton's preaching. Thus, his purpose was both informative and persuasive and never merely entertaining or ceremonial (epideictic).[244] Even Nettleton's sermons, which are more informational or doctrinal in nature, still had the purpose of persuading the believer to repent of sins, recommit themselves to Christian duties, or reject false teaching and embrace orthodoxy. In Nettleton's sermons, one will not find calls to mere social action, endorsement of politicians, or calls to revolution—these were outside of what he saw as the real purpose for gospel preaching.

Nettleton does not often come out and state the purpose for his sermon from the outset as many modern homileticians recommend.[245] Instead, his sermons typically began by launching directly in to the exposition of his chosen text first, and only later moving toward any unifying statements of purpose or application. This organizational style makes discerning the more specific purposes of his sermons more difficult. Though the titles of his sermons often indicated *to whom* the address was directed and what the subject matter might be, Nettleton's sermons do not typically begin with introductions

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[243]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 109.

[244]Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 3rd ed., 139-43. See also Keith and Lundgren, *The Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, 25.

[245]Hershael W. York and Bert Decker, *Preaching with Bold Assurance: A Solid and Enduring Approach to Engaging Exposition* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 139-40, 182. York and Decker instruct students to discover the "core proposition" (139) of a text, which is "the main point stated in an applicational way" (140). The core proposition should be stated clearly and up front, preferably in the introduction (182) and then everything that follows in the sermon should relate to the core proposition. This core proposition acts as a "compass" for the preacher and the hearers. They also note, "We don't normally want our listeners to wonder where we are going. Tell them up front and then develop it, showing them step by step how the text leads us to this proposition" (182). Though there is much to admire about Nettleton's rhetorical style and effectiveness, it can be said that he typically had no such homiletical method as this to clarify his purpose and unify his messages as such. At least none appear in the print versions of his sermons.

that summarize, preview, or state the purpose of the sermon. Without up-front "purpose statements" as such to preview the sermon's direction, it is more difficult to determine oftentimes exactly what purpose Nettleton had in mind until the applications are set forth in the text.

The individual purpose of each specific sermon would be easier to analyze if Nettleton had more frequently (as he occasionally does) stated up front the purpose for the sermon. For example, in the sermon "The Government of God, Matter of Rejoicing," Nettleton states almost at the beginning of the message that "my present object is to show that it is a matter of rejoicing that the Lord thus reigns."[246] He clearly communicates his purpose up front to give the audience a sense of where he will take them in the message. Again, in "The Necessity of Regeneration No Matter of Wonder," the first words of the discourse are "it will be the object of this discourse to show that it is no marvellous thing that sinners must be born again."[247] Once more, in the sermon "Total Depravity,"[248] he states his purpose right away, noting, "The object of this discourse will be to illustrate and establish the doctrine of *Total Depravity*." However, in the majority of Nettleton's sermons, the reader is not informed so directly about the sermon's purpose. Often, the reader is left wondering about the specific purpose of the message until much later in the discourse.[249]

Subject

To say too much about the subject matter of Nettleton's sermons would be

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[246]Asahel Nettleton, "The Government of God, Matter of Rejoicing," in *Sermons*, 371.

[247]Asahel Nettleton, "The Necessity of Regeneration No Matter of Wonder," in *Sermons*, 426.

[248]Asahel Nettleton, "Total Depravity," in *Sermons*, 394-98.

[249]For example, in Asahel Nettleton, "The Sinner Slain By the Law," in *Sermons*, 408-11, Nettleton launches straightway in to the exposition of the text followed by various proofs and then five "reflections." Not until the final, brief paragraph does one learn that this is an evangelistic plea whereby sinners are instructed to be "slain by the law . . . [to] be made alive by the gospel" (411).

redundant. In the previous categories, it was already established that he was an orthodox Christian preacher who preached primarily in churches and public gatherings about matters of individual salvation, revival, and Christian doctrine. The subject matter about which he most often spoke was biblical theology, historic Christian teaching, and the need for men to be saved. Though each individual sermon may touch on a different specific subject depending on Nettleton's biblical text and the situation he was addressing, his subject matter was thoroughly biblical, Christian, and orthodox in nature with a heavy emphasis on experimental doctrine. Almost never, even anecdotally, does Nettleton wander in to subjects such as politics, government, entertainment, or philosophy unrelated to the subject matter of the salvation of souls, the holiness of the saints, or the revival of the church. This is not to say that he did not have any peculiar interests in these subjects, only that an analysis of his sermons will find them singularly focused on limited subject matter pertaining to the gospel of Christ. This singularity of focus led Edward Beecher to write,

> In Mr. Nettleton this all absorbing intensity of interest in salvation never passed away. He had comparatively no interest but in this one thing, the salvation of the soul. His mental powers were very good; but he took little or no interest in science, or literature, or art. All his energies were absorbed in one purpose,—to save his own soul and the souls of others. Hence his early and all-absorbing interest in Theology. In College he studied other things, as duty required, but ever, and in all places, he recurred to this as his chosen theme. He studied it also not merely metaphysically, but experimentally and for practical ends.[250]

With first-hand testimonies like this, there can be little doubt about what subject matter Nettleton spoke of when he preached.

Rhetorical Analysis of Nettleton's Preaching Using the Five Classical Canons

The five canons of classical rhetoric, already discussed at length, are useful tools for evaluating how and if and to what degree Nettleton used rhetorical devices and organization in his preaching. If so, then it would seem to be a form of "means" that he

[250]Beecher, "From the Rev. Edward Beecher, D. D.," 553.

found useful in preaching. In other words, reliance on rhetorical devices and organization would indicate that Nettleton was thoughtful and intentional about using communicative tools for the clear and effective communication of Scripture with the desired end of seeing his hearers respond. If he is found to use rhetorical and homiletical devices intentionally, then it can be said that his theological underpinnings concerning the sovereignty of God in salvation did not negate his responsibility as a preacher. This section of analysis will seek to determine if and how Nettleton used the canons of invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery in crafting his sermons, based on the material at hand.

Invention (*Inventio*)

The source material for Nettleton's sermons can be said to be primarily the Scriptures. All of his sermons are rooted in a biblical text and developed around a central theme found in the biblical text. In his sermon "The Duty of Fasting, and the Manner in Which the Duty Should Be Performed," Nettleton takes the text of Nehemiah 1:4 and commences to build the entire sermon around the theme of the Christian duty to fast, how fasting should be performed, and how fasting should lead the individual Christian and the Christian community to repentance and revival.[251] The content of the biblical text supplies the material around which his message is built. Even within the body of the sermon, Nettleton uses more biblical texts for illustrative purposes and to strengthen his argument, showing again a reliance upon the biblical text as the source of his material.[252] In his sermon "The Wise and the Foolish Virgins," Nettleton uses the parable of the ten virgins from Matthew 25 to discuss the difference between those who are truly wise, demonstrated by their credible profession of faith, and those who are foolish and deceived by a false

[251]Nettleton, "The Duty of Fasting," 345-55.

[252]Ibid., 346-47. Nettleton refers to the role of fasting in the days of Jonah and Esther and moves to a discussion of Jesus's teaching about fasting in the Sermon on the Mount.

profession and false sense of security.[253] More cases could be analyzed to reinforce this point, but it is not necessary. Since rhetorical invention seeks to discern essentially where the speaker finds his arguments,[254] it can be easily deduced from even a quick perusal of Nettleton's sermonic material that the primary source for his argumentation and preaching was the Scriptures.

Although the Scriptures were his primary source of invention, they were not the only source from which Nettleton drew the subject matter of his sermons. It is evident in his sermons that he also drew source material from personal experience, the history of the church, Christian hymnody, the writings of other theologians, and contemporary reports of various other revivals. These sources occasionally show up in his preaching as evidence that the reserve from which he drew in his preaching was expansive. Nettleton used his own personal experiences or the common experiences of his hearers to relate truth.[255] In "Seek Ye the Lord," he is calling unconverted sinners to repent and turn to Christ.[256] He invites his hearers to consider the fact that, during times of religious revival, "the Lord is peculiarly near,"[257] thus making their opportunity to respond with repentance more favorable. He says this as one who has experienced the unique stirrings of revival himself and has seen the barriers broken down in the lives of others. What follows is a listing of circumstances that make repentance more favorable for the hearer. Nettleton conveys these circumstances as one who has witnessed this

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[253]Asahel Nettleton, "The Wise and the Foolish Virgins," in *Sermons*, 98.

[254]Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 3rd ed., 22.

[255]Smith, *Recollections*, 26, notes, "The great secret of the power in this extraordinary man, has seemed to us to have consisted in . . . *his own deep religious experience: his clear conceptions of divine truth* as taught by the Bible, and his own observation of the Spirit's work: *his knowledge of human nature: his self-command,* and *quick perception of right expedients*" (emphasis original).

[256]Asahel Nettleton, "Seek Ye the Lord," in *Sermons*, 53-59.

[257]Ibid., 54.

situation before. He points out that when revivals break out, "every body begins to talk,"[258] and soon, "the fear of man is less . . . in a great measure removed."[259] He continues the description by noting, "Friends and acquaintances are now becoming Christians,"[260] and suggests that "a revival affords a peculiar means of grace."[261] He concludes, "The Spirit of God does more for sinners at such a time than at others."[262] Nettleton is drawing here from experience, as one who has seen the peculiar strivings of men during revivals and can identify with the experience of his hearers as they come to terms with their alarmed consciences which are being moved upon by the Spirit of God.[263]

Other sources from which he often draws material for his sermons are the related sources of personal experience and common sense.[264] To illustrate a theological point in one sermon, he recounts "a short conversation on this subject [with] a person who denied this doctrine"[265] and then goes on to answer their objection. In "Genuine Repentance Does Not Precede Regeneration" he argues for the reasonableness of the divine requirement of repentance by relaying the common experience of a parent instructing a rebellious child to obey.[266] He observes, "Common sense declares that it is

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[258]Nettleton, "Seek Ye the Lord," 54-55.

[259]Ibid., 55.

[260]Ibid.,

[261]Ibid.

[262]Ibid., 56.

[263]Ibid., 57.

[264]Smith, *Recollections*, 50.

[265]Asahel Nettleton, "The Perseverance of the Saints," in *Sermons*, 202.

[266]Asahel Nettleton, "Genuine Repentance Does Not Precede Regeneration," in *Sermons*, 60-73.

his (the child's) duty to obey the command (of the parent) . . . but the child is unwilling."[267] He then drives home his point by asking,

> Does this unwillingness make it improper for the parent to invite, entreat, and command the child to do what he can? . . . If the child would, but could not obey the command, I could see no propriety in the parent's conduct . . . but if the child can, and will not; his unwillingness is no excuse . . . his unwillingness is the very thing which makes it proper to command.[268]

Nettleton is drawing from "plain common sense"[269] here as he makes a theological argument. The source of his argument is that of common experience.

There are still other useful sources of invention to be found in Nettleton's preaching. In numerous places, he supports, illustrates, and colors his argumentation with the use of poetry and hymnody. In "The Parable of the Lost Sheep," drawn from the text in Luke 15:3-7, Nettleton throughout the sermon makes much of the notion that "the joy of angels is most sensibly felt every time one more is added to the company of the redeemed."[270] As he closes the message by calling sinners to repent, he does so with a stanza from a hymn, the lyrics of which strengthen his plea by echoing, "O ye angels hovering round us, Waiting spirits, speed your way, Hasten to the court of Heaven, Tidings bear without delay; Rebel sinners, Glad the message will obey."[271] In many other sermons, he draws on contemporary hymnody extensively.[272]

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[267]Nettleton, "Genuine Repentance," 72.

[268]Ibid.

[269]Ibid.

[270]Asahel Nettleton, "The Parable of the Lost Sheep," in *Sermons*, 286.

[271]Ibid., 289. These words come from the fifth stanza of a hymn simply titled "Sinners Will You Scorn the Message?" that appears later in *Village Hymns*. See Asahel Nettleton, *Village Hymns for Social Worship*, ed. William C. Nichols (Ames, IA: International Outreach, 1997), hymn 71.

[272]Asahel Nettleton, "Sinners Affectionately Entreated to Enter on the Christian Pilgrimage," in *Sermons*, 247-60. See also Asahel Nettleton, "Despisest Thou the Riches of God's Goodness?" in *Sermons*, 150-57. It should come as no surprise that Nettleton, who later compiled and edited *Village Hymns*,

Still other examples abound that demonstrate the extensive well of source material from which Nettleton drew in his sermonic composition.[273] Nettleton drew from his own theological training and his keen awareness of the theological controversies of his day, evidenced by the polemical and systematic presentation of doctrinal issues in various sermons.[274] In "Genuine Repentance Does Not Precede Regeneration," he organized his material systematically to attack those who called on the unregenerate to respond to God with prayer and good works.[275] Nettleton defends the decrees of God, his knowledge of future events, and the free agency of man in light of these decrees in the sermon "The Counsel and Agency of God in the Government of All Things."[276] The sermon "The Perseverance of the Saints" is an organized doctrinal defense of the doctrine of perseverance of the saints grounded in the promises of God[277] and a careful explanation of the place and quality of individual assurance of salvation[278]. In these and other places, Nettleton is clearly responding to theological controversy and the changing theological trends of his day in an effort to ground his hearers in correct doctrine.

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would have such a deep love for and knowledge of Christian hymnody and use his devotional love for hymnody in his discourses.

[273]Tyler, *Memoir*, 326-27, notes, "Although he preached principally without writing, he did not preach without study. He bestowed much thought on his sermons. They were rich in matter . . . they were interesting and instructive to persons of the most cultivated intellect. He investigated subjects thoroughly, and exhibited the result of his investigations with a clearness and force rarely, if ever equaled."

[274]Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, 549, comments, "Whenever the temporary or partial suspension of pain would admit, he was occupied in reading some standard work on Theology or Church History."

[275]Nettleton, "Genuine Repentance," 61-62, 63-73.

[276]Asahel Nettleton, "The Counsel and Agency of God in the Government of All Things," in *Sermons*, 180-90.

[277]Nettleton, "The Perseverance of the Saints," in *Sermons*, 193-97.

[278]Ibid., 200-204.

Demonstrating still other sources of invention, he displays a knowledge of church history by referencing the slaughter of 30,000 Protestants during the Reformation period in the sermon "Discerning between the Righteous and the Wicked,"[279] and outlining extensively and with great detail the Pelagian heresy in "Regeneration,"[280] showing engagement with historical sources in the preparation of sermons. Besides these sources, Nettleton illustrates his point in another sermon by recounting the remorseful deathbed pleas of famous skeptics Voltaire and Thomas Paine.[281] He even uses anecdotes from "the book of an ancient author"[282] and "one of our early missionaries"[283] and reports from missionary William Carey[284] as source material for his sermons. One cannot but be reminded of the testimony of Nettleton's peers, who indicated that he was very well-read and fully acquainted with the controversies and trends of his day.[285] This survey indicates that Nettleton, while relying primarily on the Scriptures and his own experiences as an evangelist, drew forth his sermonic material from a host of sacred and secular sources and life experience itself.

Arrangement (*dispositio*)

Corbett explains that the canon of arrangement or disposition is the division of rhetorical analysis "concerned with the effective and orderly arrangements of the parts of

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[279]Asahel Nettleton, "Discerning between the Righteous and the Wicked," in *Sermons*, 76-77. He also references Luther and other Reformers in their struggle against the papacy in "Gospel Warfare," 166-67.

[280]Asahel Nettleton, "Regeneration," in *Sermons*, 145-46.

[281]Asahel Nettleton, "The Rich Man and Lazarus," in *Sermons*, 342.

[282]Nettleton, "The Burdened Sinner Invited to Christ for Rest," 425.

[283]Nettleton, "Salvation for the Lost," 445.

[284]Nettleton, "The Final Judgment, Part I," 111.

[285]Tyler, *Memoir*, 313-26.

. . . spoken discourse."[286] In analyzing Nettleton's preaching, three specific areas of arrangement are under focus and analysis. First, is an analysis of his arrangement and use of biblical texts. Second, consideration is given to the logical construction of his arguments, and finally, analysis of how he introduced and concluded his sermons.

An analysis of Nettleton's source material revealed that the Scriptures, and more specifically, individual biblical texts, were the primary source of invention for his sermons. The first thing that can be said about his arrangement and use of biblical texts is that he overwhelmingly focused on the exposition of very brief passages of Scripture, usually limiting himself to a focus on a single text of Scripture as the main theme of his discourse.[287] Nettleton's use of the biblical text in arranging his sermons challenges some of the contemporary notions of expository preaching and its definition and limitations. Frequently, the term "expository preaching" is assumed to mean a "systematic and consecutive exposition of Scripture"[288] that leads individuals and congregations through the whole counsel of God in a detailed and drawn-out series of sermons.[289] If one associates expository preaching only with lengthy "verse-by-verse" or "chapter-by-chapter" approaches to the biblical text, then Nettleton was not primarily an expository preacher of that sort. However, this line of thinking mischaracterizes and misrepresents

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[286]Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 3rd ed., 25.

[287]Of the 52 sermons in *Sermons*, 40 are based on single verses of Scripture, or parts of a single verse, while 7 sermons are based on texts of 2 verses. Only 7 of his sermons are based on texts of Scripture longer than 2 verses. Of the 7 sermons with texts longer than 2 verses, 4 are expositions of New Testament parables.

[288]Alistair Begg, *Preaching for God's Glory* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 42.

[289]Some immediately think of D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, who preached 232 sermons on Ephesians alone and another 366 on the book of Romans. Broadus comments, writing in the nineteenth century, that some in his day "object to *continuous* exposition on the ground that it lacks variety; they grow tired of hearing the preacher, Sunday after Sunday, announce the same book and perhaps the same chapter." Broadus, *A Treatise*, 264.

what expository preaching is by definition. John Stott summarizes the discussion best when he notes,

> It is my contention that all true Christian preaching is expository preaching. Of course if by an 'expository' sermon is meant a verse-by-verse explanation of a lengthy passage of Scripture, then indeed it is only one possible way of preaching, but this would be a misuse of the word. Properly speaking, 'exposition' has a much broader meaning. It refers to the content of the sermon (biblical truth) rather than its style (a running commentary). To expound Scripture is to bring out of the text what is there and expose it to view. The expositor prizes open what appears to be closed, makes plain what is obscure, unravels what is knotted and unfolds what is tightly packed. The opposite of exposition is 'imposition', which is to impose on the text what is not there. But the 'text' in question could be a verse, or a sentence, or even a single word. It could equally be a paragraph, or a chapter, or a whole book. The size of the text is immaterial, so long as it is biblical. What matters is what we do with it. Whether it is long or short, our responsibility as expositors is to open it up in such a way that it speaks its message clearly, plainly, accurately, relevantly, without addition, subtraction or falsification. In expository preaching the biblical text is neither a conventional introduction to a sermon on a largely different theme, nor a convenient peg on which to hang a ragbag of miscellaneous thoughts, but a master which dictates and controls what is said.[290]

Using Stott's definition, many today have far too narrowly defined what it means to preach expositionally.

John MacArthur wrote recently that "the very essence of expository preaching [is]—to explain the meaning and implications of the text with clarity and conviction so that God's people can understand and obey his Word."[291] Mohler defines expository preaching as "that mode of Christian preaching that takes as its central purpose the presentation and application of the text of the Bible."[292] Taken together, these definitions make clear that expository preaching as a homiletical category should be defined by its nature, adherence to the biblical text, and intention to bring the people of God rightly in

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[290]Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 125-26.

[291]John MacArthur, "The Mandate and the Motivations: Inerrancy and Expository Preaching," in *The Inerrant Word: Biblical, Historical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspectives*, ed. John MacArthur, Jr. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 335-36.

[292]Mohler, *He Is Not Silent*, 66.

to obedience with the will of God, not by the length of the text the preacher chooses as his theme or organizing principal. While it is true that, typically, "expository units"[293] are paragraphs or groups of "five to ten verses,"[294] and preachers must always be wary of dealing "with any text in isolation,"[295] it must be conceded that there is no hard and fast rule for how lengthy a biblical text must be in order for a preacher to be considered an expository preacher. Nettleton's sermons were arranged and organized chiefly around a central text of Scripture in an expository manner.

Another observation is to be made about Nettleton's arrangement and use of biblical texts in his sermons. While each sermon is principally organized around a "controlling" text that guides the direction of the sermon, he lavishly supported his ideas, within the sermon, with biblical proof texts quoted fully or in part. These verses were often written out in their fullness and frequently multiple verses would be "woven" together in long succession for effect. It was noted previously that in the text of "Professing Christians Awake!"[296] there are no fewer than 65 different biblical texts referenced and woven in to the sermon text.[297] In "The Unclean Spirit," after explaining the controlling text from Matt 12:43-45, Nettleton cites no fewer than 32 other biblical texts (totaling 38 verses) throughout his sermon.[298] The pattern is demonstrated again,

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[293]Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 52.

[294]Ibid.

[295]Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, 77.

[296]Nettleton, "Professing Christians Awake!," 1-8.

[297]See chap 3n293.

[298]Asahel Nettleton, "The Unclean Spirit," in *Sermons*, 84-92. In order, beginning on p. 85: Matt 23:38, Jas 4:7, Eph 3:17, Acts 16:30, 1 Pet 1:8, Col 1:27, Pss 72:6, Acts 3:19, Eph 2:12, Gen 6:3, 1 Pet 5:8, 2 Thess 2:10-11, 2 Pet 2:20-22, John 6:66, Eph 1:9, Rom 8:28, Heb 6:6, Hos 4:17, Luke 19:42, 1 Thess 5:3, Prov 29:1, Matt 24:39, Luke 12:40, Eph 4:18, Deut 28:8, 1 Tim 4:2, Prov 9:7-8, Matt 15:14, Heb 10:29, 26-27, Acts 16:30, Job 21:14-15.

though to a lesser degree, in his sermon "The Danger of Hypocrisy," where after explaining the controlling text from Matthew 25:1-8, Nettleton cites (fully or in part) 14 other passages of Scripture for a total of 18 more verses throughout the sermon.[299] These verses are almost always used without referencing their place in Scripture. Furthermore, there is generally no attempt whatsoever to exegete these verses, teach them in an expository manner, or explain them with reference to their context. One can only conclude that Nettleton used this many scriptural references either for theological reasons[300] or for mere rhetorical effect, feeling that their inclusion in support of his main argument lent an air of authority or perhaps kept his hearers engaged by their common familiarity. Whatever the reason, it is clear that an important element of Nettleton's method of arrangement involved building the expository sermon solidly around a biblical text and then using other verses to support his argument.

Nettleton arranged the material in the body of his sermons in various ways to construct his arguments and turn his exposition in to an appealing "form"[301] that could be delivered and received by his hearers. His sermons frequently followed (with some minor variation) a logical structure that becomes fairly predictable, consisting mainly of

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[299]Nettleton, "The Danger of Hypocrisy," 303-11. In order, beginning on p. 307: Rev 3:4, Matt 8:11, Luke 13:24-28, 1 Sam 16:7, Rom 2:28, Matt 23:27, Rom 2:29, Matt 21:31, Mark 13:13, Matt 7:14, Rev 3:1, 2 Cor 5:17, Ezek 33:11, Jas 5:8.

[300]Asahel Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," in *Sermons*, 239, comments, "Preaching the gospel implies a declaration of the whole system of truths therein contained." Perhaps the "whole system" for Nettleton implied "proofing" his points with various Scripture references. Asahel Nettleton, "Causes of Alarm to Awakened Sinners," in *Sermons*, 415, indicates, referencing the text of Heb 4:12, that "the Spirit of God set home the Word with power upon the consciences of the hearers . . . they (hearers) saw and felt their danger . . . the effect corresponding with the instrument used." Nettleton might have been thoroughly convinced that the more Scripture he declared, the more likely God would use it as the agent of the Spirit's working to "prick hearts" and convert the lost. This is only my speculation.

[301]I use the term *form* here in the homiletic sense as Lloyd-Jones does when he contends, "The essential characteristic of a sermon is that it has a definite form, and that it is this form that makes a sermon . . . it is based upon exposition, but it is this exposition turned or moulded into a message, which has this characteristic form." Lloyd-Jones, *Preachers & Preachers*, 83.

(1) reading of the text, (2) exposition of the text, (3) a statement of his argument to be proved, (4) argument developed, (5) the argument applied, and finally, he usually closed with an (6) appeal for application. This pattern is observed in "Indecision in Religion," in which Nettleton begins by reading the text of Scripture (1 Kgs 18:21) and explaining Elijah's predicament.[302] He then frames his argument with the words "then let us inquire,"[303] followed by two questions: "Why have you hitherto neglected to come to a decided choice?" and "How long do you purpose to halt?"[304] In explaining the first point (or question), he sets forth seven excuses that the unregenerate man might put forth for not repenting and then responds to each one biblically.[305] After demolishing the sinners excuses, he concludes that the reason behind the excuses is the sinner's real reason for being unconverted: their "hearts are so wicked that you *will not come to Christ*."[306] After establishing this real reason, he moves to the second question of "how long do you propose to halt?,"[307] urging his hearers to lay aside their excuses and "leave all—to take up every cross and to follow Christ *now*."[308] He brings the message to an abrupt conclusion, repeating the question "How long halt ye?"[309] multiple times and warning listeners that

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[302]Asahel Nettleton, "Indecision in Religion," in *Sermons*, 17.

[303]Ibid.

[304]Ibid. Interestingly here, as in the majority of his sermons, the points are "outlined" in his notes with "I" and "II" indicating structure and intentionality in his thought process.

[305]Ibid., 17-21.

[306]Ibid., 21, emphasis original. Showing his intentionally logical ordering, he follows this statement with three numbered reasons why the sinner "will not come to Christ," all ending with the repeated phrase "you will not come to Christ."

[307]Ibid., 21. This is not a typing error. On p. 17, the text says "purpose" while here, it reads "propose."

[308]Ibid., 23, emphasis original.

[309]Ibid., 24.

after "your course is run, your bodies will fall into the grave, and your souls into the hands of the living God."[310] The whole argument, stated, supported, and concluded, is designed to force the sinner to confront their excuses for rejecting repentance, stop "halting between two opinions,"[311] and make a decision of the will to submit to God immediately.

Another sermon "The Mortification of Sin, Part I," demonstrates the way Nettleton so frequently organized his sermons in a logical and methodical manner, stating his proposition early on and then fortifying the proposition by answering objections and cumulatively building a case for the truth of the proposition.[312] Though not all of his sermons are organized with such precision, "The Mortification of Sin, Part I" provides an example of how Nettleton incorporated systematic argumentation and logical flow of thought in to his exposition of the text. The outline of the sermon can be discerned by Nettleton's own outline which appears in the text as follows:

The text (Galatians 5:24)
Introductory exposition
1. What it implies.
    a. It does not
        i. Consist in the suppression of external acts *merely*
        ii. Does it imply an entire freedom from all sin?
    b. But it implies
        i. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit
        ii. The subversion of its dominion
2. Wherein it resembles crucifixion
    a. The death of the cross was not a natural, but a violent death.
    b. The death of the cross was a shameful death.
    c. The death of the cross was a lingering death.
    d. Crucifixion is a painful death.
3. The means of promoting it
    a. Feel your absolute dependence upon God
    b. Avoid temptation
    c. Labor for a still deeper sense of the vanity of the world
    d. Bring clearly to view the great things of eternity

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[310]Nettleton, "Indecision in Religion," 24.

[311]Ibid., 23.

[312]Nettleton, "The Mortification of Sin, Part I," 168-74.

e. Carefully attend to all the duties of religion
    i. Humble yourself
    ii. Confess your sins
    iii. Be willing to have others tell you your faults
    iv. Be very careful when you are reproved by a Christian brother
    v. Improve the reproaches of enemies
    vi. Cherish those thoughts which are the most opposed to all sin.
    vii. Think what your sins cost the Saviour
4. The evidence that the work is begun
5. Inferences from the whole.
6. Motives to engage in the duty.

The first of the two-part sermon stops at the end of point 3, but "The Mortification of Sin, Part II," picks up the argument and continues in just as systematic a format as the first part. The sermon was an exhortation to Christians to take mortification (i.e., sanctification, the daily putting-to-death of the flesh) seriously, even though it was a painful and difficult process. Nettleton first emphasized that it was an inward spiritual act performed by the power of the Spirit, then compared it in its painfulness to Christ's death on the cross, and finally listed practical ways believers could appropriate this reality in their lives. The argument is cohesive, coherent, and cumulative in its effect. This outline is included to illustrate Nettleton's capacity for organizing sermonic arguments in highly detailed, logically ordered form. Regarding the effect of such arrangement, Kang notes, "Those who heard him usually felt carried along almost irresistibly by the power of his reasoning."[313] Although not all of his sermons are this highly structured, many were arranged to demonstrate systematic, propositional argumentation and organization.[314]

Yet another sermon, "The Burdened Sinner Invited to Christ for Rest,"[315] demonstrates another, almost polar-opposite style or arrangement that occurs in many of

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[313]Sung Ho Kang, "The Evangelistic Preaching of Asahel Nettleton and Charles G. Finney in the Second Great Awakening and Applications for Contemporary Evangelism" (Ph.D. diss., The Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2004), 111.

[314]For examples of other highly systematized, outlined sermons, see Nettleton, "The Final Judgment, Part I," 104-13, and "The Final Judgment, Part II," 114-21. Also, "The Perseverance of the Saints," 191-204, and "Self-Examination," 323-33.

[315]Nettleton, "The Burdened Sinner Invited to Christ," 121-25.

Nettleton's sermons. It is essentially a "running commentary"[316] approach to a passage followed abruptly and suddenly by an appeal for response. This style is so qualitatively different from the aforementioned examples that it begs the question of whether this sermon might have been crafted with a far different rhetorical situation in mind.[317] In "The Burdened Sinner Invited to Christ," Nettleton introduces his passage (Matt 11:28-30), follows it with a brief exposition of the text, then breaks down the passage phrase by phrase, expanding briefly on each section only to draw the sermon to a sudden close with an illustration and appeal. An outline of the sermon shows its simplicity of form:

Text presented
Brief exposition
-They *labor* and are *heavy laden* (followed by brief commentary)
-*I will give you rest* (followed by brief commentary)
-*And I WILL GIVE you rest* (followed by brief commentary)
-*Take my yoke upon you* (followed by brief commentary)
-*And learn of me* (followed by brief commentary)
-*For I am meek and lowly in heart* (followed by brief commentary)
-*Meek and lowly in heart* (followed by brief commentary)
-*And ye shall find rest to your souls* (followed by brief commentary)
-*For my yoke is easy* (followed by brief commentary)
-*And my burden is light* (followed by brief commentary)
-Conclusion with illustration and appeal

The previous examples are mere samplings of some of Nettleton's sermons, but they serve to depict great variety in the way he structured, organized, and presented the source material of his sermons. He was at times highly organized, propositional, and systematic, using a logical "outline" form and at other times, more pastoral and devotional in his approach to the message. With such a large body of material to analyze

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[316]Countless instructors of preaching, both past and present, warn that the "running commentary" approach to a text is decidedly not expository preaching. See Broadus, *Treatise*, 264; Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching & Preachers*, 83; Vines and Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit*, 153. At least two other sermons of Nettleton's clearly fall under this type of arrangement, see Nettleton, "The Parable of the Prodigal Son," 290-302, and "The Rich Man and Lazarus," 334-44.

[317]Perhaps an "inquiry room" discourse, with less formality than Sabbath preaching. See Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 114-15, and Tyler, *Memoir*, 214-15.

as Nettleton's sermons,[318] given in such a variety of settings and situations, it is difficult to discern a consistent form or pattern that fits every sermon. A few things though can be said with confidence about how Nettleton arranged his material. First, he always began with the Scripture followed by a (more or less) brief exposition of the text. This is true of every one of Nettleton's sermons in *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*. Whatever else may follow, exposition of the text was always first. Second, nearly all of his sermons are arranged in highly logical order. Third, there is generally a heavy emphasis on the practical or experimental aspect of his sermons[319] and this emphasis was built in to his arrangement through the use of sections devoted to "practical remarks,"[320] "inferences,"[321] or "reflections."[322] These sections were typically numbered and organized in ways that naturally flowed from and were directly related to the main argument set forth in the text's exposition. Finally, it can be said that his arrangement style is intelligible and direct. In the arrangement of his material, Nettleton steered clear of unnecessary material. Beyond the insertion of strategically-placed hymn-lyrics, which were used regularly in support of some doctrinal truth or assertion, there is little accommodation in his sermons for anecdotes, lengthy stories, or illustrations.[323] The sermons are instead direct and plain in their exposition of the Scripture and call to the

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[318]There are 52 sermons in Nettleton's *Sermons*, over 400 pages of sermon transcripts.

[319]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 108. Thornbury notes that Nettleton's sermons were "always full of practical application."

[320]Nettleton, "The Death of the Righteous," 28-29; Nettleton, "The Sin and Consequences," 273.

[321]Nettleton, "The Perseverance of the Saints," 200. See comments by Broadus on the use of "inferences" and their connection to the Puritan tradition in Broadus, *Treatise*, 246-47.

[322]Nettleton, "The Destruction of Hardened Sinners," 37; and Nettleton, "The Parable of the Lost Sheep," 283.

[323]Regarding Nettleton's preaching, Tyler notes that "it was addressed almost exclusively to the understanding and the conscience;—the imagination and the passions seemed scarcely ever to be thought of." Bennet Tyler, "Asahel Nettleton, D. D.," in *Annals of the American Pulpit*, 2:550.

hearers for willful response. Nettleton's arrangement, though not technically complex, was effective, as noted later by Francis Wayland, who observed, "I never heard logic assume so attractive a form, or produce so decisive an effect."[324]

A final observation is set forth regarding Nettleton's use of introductions and conclusions in his sermons. Regarding the importance of arranging these two components, York and Decker observe, "People remember the final words of a sermon more easily than anything else in the whole message—with the possible exception of the introduction."[325] Oddly, in Nettleton's preaching, there is no great emphasis on including, organizing, or using these components to great rhetorical effect. Regarding introductions, in very few instances does Nettleton begin his sermon with a thoughtful or engaging introduction.[326] He typically launched right in to the exposition foregoing the preparation that the mind so naturally seems to require.[327] In the opening words of "Despisest Thou the Riches of God's Goodness," Nettleton acknowledges a special "anniversary" event and calls the people to give thanks, then straightway begins his exposition of Romans 2:4.[328] Only a few instances can be ascertained where brief sentences regarding the topic at hand are sometimes mentioned as an introduction,[329] but overall it does not seem that

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[324]Wayland and Wayland, *A Memoir*, 1:108.

[325]York and Decker, *Preaching with Bold Assurance*, 184.

[326]Although there is no indication as to exactly what Nettleton said, on at least one occasion a hearer noted, concerning Nettleton's method of introduction, that "His text was Heb., xi, 16—"or profane person as Esau, who for one morsel of meat, sold his birth-right." His method of introducing it, was somewhat startling. But I sunk down into a state of indifference, for the time being." Smith, *Recollections*, 49.

[327]Paraphrased from Robert L. Dabney, *Evangelical Eloquence: A Course of Lectures on Preaching* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 140.

[328]Nettleton, "Despisest Thou the Riches of God's Goodness?," 150. Possibly an early Thanksgiving celebration.

[329]Nettleton, "The Sin and Consequences of Being Ashamed of Christ," 261; and Nettleton, "The Parable of the Lost Sheep," 278.

introduction, which has traditionally been a part of effective oration, was included in Nettleton's process of arrangement.[330] Nettleton's sermons indicate more attention given to conclusion, but it is still seldom distinguishable in the arrangement of the material. His conclusions were not "set off" in the text of his sermons and were often abrupt and rhetorically awkward.[331] The force and motion of scriptural truth and logic in Nettleton's sermons propel the hearer constantly toward divine truth and its application, but then fail to capitalize on this momentum by bringing the discourse to a crescendo emphasizing application and response.[332] This is not to say that Nettleton completely ignored the conclusion aspect of arrangement as his sermon texts often exhibit recapitulation, application, and "suggestions."[333] Rather, one is left with the impression that Nettleton had little concern for the careful preparation of his conclusions.[334]

There is significant diversity in the way Nettleton arranged the material of invention for his sermons. Some of his sermons exhibit complex arrangement patterns while others seem to have a much simpler extemporaneous quality about them.

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[330]Tyler says that Nettleton "carefully avoided in the pulpit, witticisms, ludicrous comparisons, and everything suited to produce levity. He felt that he was standing in the presence of God, and addressing immortal beings on subjects of infinite moment." Tyler, *Memoir*, 329. Perhaps it was a genuine conviction, grounded in Nettleton's theological presuppositions, that preaching was such a holy affair that there was no time to waste with complicated rhetorical devices such as *exordium* and conclusions.

[331]For instance, the conclusion of Nettleton, "Genuine Repentance," 73, where after presenting a torrent of argument for the necessity of the Spirit's quickening to regenerate the lost, Nettleton summarizes the logic of the sermon, then ends abruptly. Or again, see Asahel Nettleton, "Many Now on the Earth Are Greater Sinners Than Those Who Are in Hell," in *Sermons*, 132.

[332]Broadus speaks of the conclusion that "ought to have moved like a river, growing in volume and power, but instead of that, the discourse loses itself in some great marsh, or ends like the emptying of a pitcher, with a few poor drops and dregs." Broadus, *A Treatise*, 244.

[333]Categories emphasized by Broadus. Ibid., 132.

[334]Stott emphasizes the need for careful preparation of the conclusion because "listening to sermons and listening to concerts . . . should be two very different experiences, for music is to be enjoyed, while Scripture is to be obeyed." Hearers must be carefully called to action in Christian exhortation, for we are called to be "doers of the Word, and not hearers only" (Jas 1:22-25). Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 246-47.

Furthermore, Nettleton does not seem to have given much attention to artistry or eloquence in the thoughtful arrangement of either introductions or conclusions in his sermons, choosing primarily to appeal to the conscience and the heart rather than the imagination and trusting that the Spirit of God would take truths proclaimed and apply them by his own power.

Style (*elocutio*)

Although Nettleton would have almost certainly denounced any accusation that he was intentionally intruding on the Spirit's work of the heart through eloquence or rhetorical device, nonetheless, many noticeable elements of style recur in his preaching. First, he clearly relies on repetition of certain phrases, and particularly questions, to leave an impression on the mind of his hearers.[335] This rhetorical device may be, in fact, the most readily identifiable aspect of Nettleton's style, as testified to by Tyler, who observed that he was "sometimes repetitious."[336] In the sermon "The Wise and the Foolish Virgins," Nettleton repeats the phrase "*the foolish took their lamps, and took no oil in them*" (or some slight variation of it) no fewer than six times leading to the conclusion of the message.[337] In "Causes of Alarm to Awakened Sinners," Nettleton first addresses the

[335]In rhetorical studies, this is referred to as *anaphora*, defined by Corbett as "the repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginning of successive clauses." Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 3rd ed., 437. See pp. 436-44 for various other schemes or types of repetition for rhetorical effect.

[336]Tyler, *Memoir*, 332-33. This observation by Tyler is meant as a compliment, not a critique. Tyler continues, "He would frequently dwell upon a thought, and present it in different aspects, for the purpose of impressing it more deeply on the mind, and fixing it in the memory" (332). In a footnote, Tyler recounts the words of an anonymous source, who states, "He [Nettleton] had the art of repeating some short and striking sentence in a manner, and with an effect which no man could successfully imitate . . . like the repeated strikes of the beetle, in the hand of a giant, upon the head of the wedge, driving it in to the very heart of the knotty oak" (333). The Rev. R. Smith also recalls Nettleton's "slowness, his repetitions, and his careful discrimination" in preaching. See Smith, *Recollections*, 25.

[337]Asahel Nettleton, "The Wise and the Foolish Virgins," in *Sermons*, 101-2.

"principal grounds of alarm to the awakened sinner"[338] by listing a series of seven qualities characteristic of the lost man, all beginning with the phrase "he realizes" or "he is convinced."[339] However, the repetition for effect does not stop there, for as the same sermon progresses, he directs the truth of the unregenerate man's condemnation directly at the heart through a series of seven closing questions, all beginning with either "do any of you begin to fear" or "do any of you begin to realize"[340] as he builds his case and moves toward his final conclusion. The rhetorical question "do you hope to go to heaven because . . ."[341] is repeated six times in the sermon "The Necessity of Regeneration No Matter of Wonder" as Nettleton cuts away at the false hopes of the deceived and moves them toward proper submission to Christ. Many more examples could be given of Nettleton's use of repetition,[342] leading to the conclusion that this was indeed his favorite stylistic rhetorical device and it was intentionally and thoughtfully planned and used, though perhaps less for eloquence and more for purposes of teaching and recollection.[343]

Nettleton also used his words to paint vivid images in the minds of his hearers. Consider his choice of words in the sermon "The Wicked Standing before the Judgment

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[338]Asahel Nettleton, "Causes of Alarm to Awakened Sinners," in *Sermons*, 415.

[339]Ibid., 416-17. "The awakened sinner *realizes that he* is condemned by divine law, *realizes that* the punishment to which he is exposed is eternal, *realizes* the awful uncertainty of human life, *realizes* that pardon is uncertain, *realizes* that it is altogether uncertain how long the Spirit will strive, *he is convinced* that he shall never do anything to better his condition short of repentance, *he realizes* that he is altogether without excuse for not repenting and believing in Christ now, and *he is convinced* that if he does not repent now, he never shall" (416-17, emphasis added).

[340]Ibid., 418-19.

[341]Nettleton, "The Necessity of Regeneration," 430-31.

[342]Asahel Nettleton, "The Ways in Which Sinners Cover Their Sins," in *Sermons*, 400-401; Nettleton, "Sinners Entreated to be Reconciled to God," 367-69; Nettleton, "Religion the Only True Source of Happiness," 385-86; Nettleton, "Self-Examination," 329-32; Asahel Nettleton, "The Great Salvation," in *Sermons*, 312-15. This is not an exhaustive listing of Nettleton's use of repetition, but it establishes a strong case.

[343]Smith, *Recollections*, 42.

Seat," as he skillfully crafts an image from words of the "vast assembly before the throne of God."[344] He declares before the throne of God, "their open or public sins will be made more public,"[345] and the sinner's "groveling soul is seen in all its deformity."[346] He then constructs the next nine paragraphs around describing those who will be judged. He strikes an image of

> the unjust man, the extortioner in all his dishonesty, fraud, undue advantages, overreaching and oppressions he hath practised . . . there appears the devotee of pleasure and amusement, his thoughtless, useless, wicked life, the hours occupied with dress, with idle talk . . . there is the slanderer, who has talked only in calumnity and falsehood . . . there is also the scoffer at religion . . . there is the profane man with all his horrid mass of oaths and curses and blasphemies falling from his lips . . . there also will stand the Sabbath breaker . . . here also will be exhibited the character of him who profanes the sanctuary of the living God by sleep, by worldly thoughts, of disregard of the offers of life from the ministers of Christ . . . such are the characters of multitudes in this world, and such will they appear before God and the vast assembly of the judgment day.[347]

The precision of these words and their mounting effect leaves little doubt that they were carefully chosen and arranged in this descriptive way to transport the hearer, in their imagination, to the very scene of God's judgment throne.[348] No doubt they were intended to see themselves at the judgment throne as well.

Nettleton uses a similar device in "The Great Salvation" when, with words, he creates the image of eternal separation from Christ, inviting hearers to "cast your thoughts forward into a boundless eternity, before you take the tremendous leap into the bottomless

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[344]Asahel Nettleton, "The Wicked Standing before the Judgment Seat," in *Sermons*, 222.

[345]Ibid.

[346]Ibid.

[347]Ibid., 222-23.

[348]Contemporary and friend Lyman Beecher said of Nettleton that Nettleton had an "unsurpassed power of description which made the subject a matter of present reality." He follows with an account of Nettleton's "Sermon on the Deluge" demonstrating how powerful his descriptive language could be at times. Lyman Beecher, *The Autobiography of Lyman Beecher*, ed. Barbara M. Cross (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961), 2:484.

pit,"[349] then, using the voice of the eternally condemned who has suffered "millions of ages,"[350] the preacher recalls how the lost man "once enjoyed a day of salvation . . . once, millions of ages back, I remember well the time."[351] He repeats the image once more for effect, telling the crowd that the condemned sinner who has suffered "millions and millions of ages . . . reflects . . . 'O' what a precious season I once enjoyed . . . but alas! It is gone forever.'"[352] A more vivid and fearful image one would be hard-pressed to summon as Nettleton urges his hearers to submit to Christ immediately. Again, as he describes the scene surrounding the resurrection of believers, his words artfully create an image of the event:

> Was there a noise and a shaking among the dry bones in the valley of vision? What will be the noise, and shaking, and uproar, when every bone shall fly through the atmosphere, in quest of its kindred bone. But not one shall be lost, or miss its way, or mistake its place! What apparent wild disorder when clouds of dust shall rise and darken the world! Now all that dust shall assemble a form, a vast multitude of human bodies of both the righteous and the wicked. And now the whole race of Adam appears upon the earth at once. A multitude which no man could number, of all the ages and nations and languages. But their bodies will be widely different.[353]

Though it was the testimony of his contemporaries that Nettleton's preaching was "not characterized by elegance of style,"[354] and that he lacked the "eloquence which dazzles by splendid diction,"[355] his word choices and imagery indicate otherwise.[356]

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[349]Nettleton, "The Great Salvation," 320.

[350]Ibid., 321.

[351]Ibid.

[352]Ibid.

[353]Nettleton, "The Final Judgment, Part II," 119.

[354]Tyler, *Memoir*, 332. Also, Smith, *Recollections*, 25, notes, "*He was not eloquent* . . . in the usual acceptation of the word" (emphasis original).

[355]Tyler, *Memoir*, 332.

[356]Of Nettleton's power with words, one anonymous believer states, "When he spake of the glories of heaven, it was, almost, as if he had been there himself. When he made his appeals to the sinner, he made them with a directness, which placed before him, as in a mirror, his utterly lost state. It seemed at

Still, Nettleton used other rhetorical devices with great effect, including his probing use of rhetorical questions aimed at the audience, his impersonation of the sinner's heart, and his tendency to anticipate, state, and answer the objections of the scoffer. In almost every sermon analyzed, Nettleton uses rhetorical questioning to a greater or lesser degree,[357] but the use of this device is clearly displayed in his sermon "Rejoice Young Man."[358] After stating propositionally that "if you have never believed in Christ and repented of your sins, you are already under sentence of condemnation,"[359] he drives home the application of this point by speaking rhetorically to the "young man" and asking no fewer than nineteen sequential questions, including "can you amuse yourselves with trifles, while the soul is in danger of being lost?"[360] and "were this day to close the scene of your mortal life, what have you gained?"[361] This use of rhetorical questioning is repeated in many other places, including "Many Now on Earth Are Greater Sinners than Those Who Are in Hell,"[362] and "The Wicked Standing before the Judgment Seat of Christ,"[363] and

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times, as if he was about to uncover the bottomless pit, and to invite the ungodly to come and listen to the groans of the damned; and then, drinking deeply of the spirit of his master when he wept over Jerusalem, to urge them to flee from the wrath to come, with an expression of countenance, which is not in my power to describe." Tyler, *Memoir*, 138.

[357]Francis Wayland comments that after stating obvious truth, "by a series of questions, each deliberately considered, and not suffered to pass away until the speaker and hearer gave the same answer, his opponents would find themselves face to face with an absurdity so glaring, that notwithstanding the solemnity of the scene, the hearer could hardly escape the disposition to laugh at himself, for holding a belief that appeared so utterly untenable." Wayland and Wayland, *A Memoir*, 1:109.

[358]Asahel Nettleton, "Rejoice Young Man," in *Sermons*, 40-52.

[359]Ibid., 49.

[360]Ibid., 51.

[361]Ibid., 52.

[362]Nettleton, "Many Now on Earth," 132.

[363]Nettleton, "The Wicked Standing," 225.

again in "Sinners Entreated to Be Reconciled to God."[364] Nettleton also used the devices of impersonating the sinner and answering his anticipated objections as a way of undermining the objections of the heart that he felt certain some in his audience harbored.[365]

This survey shows plainly that Asahel Nettleton demonstrated *elocutio*, or style, in his preaching through use of various rhetorical devices. Such precision as he displays in his usage could not have been by mere accident; his consistent use of these devices clearly implies that Nettleton thoughtfully and intentionally crafted his sermons with such style as to appeal to and engage his hearers on various levels and in various ways. Though his contemporaries noted of him that he lacked eloquence of style, analysis of the sermonic material suggests otherwise.[366]

Memory (*memoria*)

It is nearly impossible to ascertain from printed texts of Nettleton's sermons just how much the canon of memory impacted or shaped his preaching. The testimonies of his contemporaries indicate that Nettleton was primarily an extemporaneous speaker, but the data here is a bit conflicting. His biographer, Bennet Tyler, states that his preaching

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[364]Nettleton, "Sinners Entreated to be Reconciled to God," 362-69.

[365]Nettleton, "Indecision in Religion," 18-21; Nettleton, "Abandoned by God," 95; Nettleton, "The Counsel and Agency of God," 181-83, 186; Nettleton, "Total Depravity," 395-97.

[366]Not all of his contemporaries evaluated Nettleton's preaching as plain, unadorned, or lacking eloquence. Wayland and Wayland, *A Memoir*, 1:109, state that Nettleton displayed "a power of eloquence that I have rarely heard." Furthermore, there may be some confusion about what Nettleton's contemporaries even meant when they said he lacked eloquence. Testimonies from Smith, *Recollections*, 49-50, 140, demonstrate this point. The eyewitness "thought the preacher had too many repititions—that his language was not of that high order which I had oftentimes heard and admired and that he was far from being an eloquent man" (49-50). But then the man goes on to describe how captivated he was by Nettleton's preaching, begging the question of what nineteenth-century contemporaries of Nettleton even meant by "eloquent." Did they mean *"elocutio"* in the classic and technical sense? Or in the common sense of "ornate"? Another eyewitness later testified of Nettleton that "I changed my mind with regard to his being eloquent; for what is eloquence but that which has the effect of eloquence?" (140)

was "for the most part, extemporaneous . . . he rarely had any manuscript before him, unless it were a very brief outline of his discourse. . . . He found it impossible to write his sermons."[367] Another source, Francis Wayland, observes that Nettleton "never used notes (although I believe he sometimes wrote out some of his sermons)."[368] Taken together, these comments rule out both total memorization of the text and complete reliance upon a written script and imply that while Nettleton took a certain amount of notation or preparation with him into the pulpit, he relied largely on his own memory when it came to delivering his sermons.[369] Another interesting observation concerns the amount of hymnody Nettleton incorporated into his sermons and begs the question of whether or not Nettleton took prepared texts of hymns with him in to the pulpit or rather relied upon the memorization of such hymns and delivered them from memory with any measure of cadence or pitch inflection. Also, instances of Nettleton extemporaneously relaying illustrations or anecdotes during his sermons serve to remind that he regularly drew from memory and experience more than what was outlined on paper.[370]

Delivery (*pronuntiatio*)

Not unlike the evaluation of the canon of memory, it is difficult to evaluate and analyze the canon of delivery without physically being able to see or hear a speaker's delivery. However, there is sufficient data recorded from those who did see and hear Nettleton preach from which certain conclusions can be drawn. Specifically, as it relates

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[367]Tyler, *Memoir*, 326.

[368]Wayland and Wayland, *A Memoir*, 109.

[369]Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, 550, speaks directly to this issue when he notes that Nettleton's preaching "was for the most part, extemporaneous; though his mind had always been filled with his subject from previous study."

[370]Smith, *Recollections*, 50.

to the delivery of his sermons, some observations can be made concerning Nettleton's eye contact, voice, and body language or gesticulations.

Broadus makes much of the preacher's use of his eyes for visual connection with his congregation. In fact, he states, "The most potent element in the delivery of a real orator is often the expressiveness of the *eye* . . . the almost superhuman power of an orator's eye."[371] Apparently, Nettleton had a commanding control over his audiences when he preached, in part because of his penetrating glare. Heman Humphrey, recorded in Tyler, observes that when Nettleton preached, his hearers "might have thought him dull . . . but for the glance of his piercing eye, and an undefinable something in his whole manner, which insensibly gained and riveted your attention."[372] He continues,

> His eye, after all, was the master power in his delivery. Full and clear and sharp, its glances, in the most animated parts of his discourses were quick and penetrating, beyond almost any thing I recollect ever to have witnessed. He seemed to look every hearer in the face, or rather to look into his soul, almost at one and the same moment. You felt that you was in the hands of a master, and never stopped to inquire whether he was a good or a bad pulpil orator. Whatever the critics might say, in one thing you could not be mistaken. He arrested your attention and made you feel, for the time at least, that religion is indeed "the one thing needful."[373]

Yet another testimony from Smith's *Recollections* refers to a meeting in which Nettleton, in the midst of a powerful sermon, turned and "with a look and voice and manner, indicating the deepest feeling, he repeated his text"[374] with powerful effect.

Sprague refers to Nettleton's capacity, while preaching, to "hold his audiences as by a spell"[375] and one might reasonably assume that this element of Nettleton's rhetorical power was in part conveyed through visual contact with his audience. As Tyler

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[371]Broadus, *A Treatise*, 374.

[372]Tyler, *Memoir*, 358.

[373]Ibid.

[374]Smith, *Recollections*, 136.

[375]Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, 550.

notes, not only was Nettleton making visual contact with his audience, but when he preached, "every eye was fastened on him, and the whole assembly listened in breathless silence."[376] Regarding Nettleton, Beecher states that he lived with an "all absorbing intensity of interest in salvation"[377] and "in his countenance and whole aspect there was such a manifestation of absolute conviction of eternal realities, and of deep earnestness and emotion, that few could remain long in his presence unmoved."[378] Sprague comments of Nettleton's "almost intuitive perception of the workings of the human heart,"[379] and perhaps his piercing glance or solemn stare conveyed to his audiences his deep sincerity and his feeling that when he preached, "he stood on the verge of eternity, and that he was addressing immortal beings, to whom he must be a savor, either of life unto life, or of death unto death."[380] Ultimately, his visual engagement proved to be a notable element of his delivery.

Another notable element of Nettleton's delivery style about which many of his contemporaries comment was his voice and its use in his delivery. Tyler observes, "He had no sanctimonious tone . . . his manner was simple and unaffected . . . his articulation and emphasis were natural, and the deep-bass tones of his voice were sometimes peculiarly solemn and impressive."[381] Wayland notes that, when Nettleton preached, "his manner was quiet, especially at the commencement . . . his voice grave and deep-toned . . . his whole aspect was that of a man who had just come from intimate communion with

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[376]Tyler, *Memoir*, 333.

[377]Beecher, "From the Rev. Edward Beecher, D. D.," 553.

[378]Ibid., 554.

[379]Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, 549.

[380]Tyler, *Memoir*, 332.

[381]Ibid., 329.

God."[382] Drawing from various sources, Thornbury writes, "The tone of his voice was definitely bass, though it modulated greatly in the course of a message."[383]

Though it was by all accounts a good voice, it was not necessarily the voice itself that was of great consequence, for Humphrey notes, "There was nothing particularly captivating in his voice, his style, or his delivery—nothing to make you admire the man."[384] It was the way Nettleton controlled his voice that made it a rhetorical asset. He used his voice skillfully and masterfully as a tool to deliver the message with *pathos* by using proper modulation and pitch at just the right times throughout his delivery. This is what gave him such a powerful voice. One witness who sat under Nettleton's preaching during a great revival recounts his vocalization during the delivery of a sermon:

> When he began to speak, there was a benignant solemnity in his countenance, which awed the most thoughtless, while at the same time it excited an unwonted desire to hear what he had to say. He always commenced on a low key, enunciating every word and syllable distinctly, and frequently repeating a leading sentence to make it better remembered. So simple were his sentences, so plain and unadorned his style, and so calm his delivery, that for a few moments, you might have thought him dull, and sometimes common place. As he advanced, and his heart grew warm, and his conceptions vivid, his voice caught the inspiration, his face shone, his whole physical frame seemed to dilate, and there were times when he was awfully overwhelming. Men held their breath, and the audience moved slowly away, not to talk of the preacher but to meditate, read, and pray.[385]

Thus, Nettleton's voice and his appropriate use of it during his preaching proved to be yet another notable element about his delivery style.

Finally, Nettleton's body language and mannerisms from the pulpit helped to create the delivery style that made him such an accomplished preacher. It is Wayland

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[382]Wayland and Wayland, *A Memoir*, 109.

[383]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 106.

[384]Heman Humphrey, quoted in Tyler, *Memoir*, 357. From the context, it appears that what Humphrey was referring to was the particularly ordinary pitch or tone of Nettleton's voice. In other words, it was not a noticeably strong or powerful voice.

[385]Smith, *Recollections*, 41-42.

that tells of Nettleton addressing "the audience from the deacons' seat, or the platform in front of the pulpit,"[386] but then standing up, "throwing a red bandanna handkerchief over his left arm, and in tones varying but little from those of earnest conversation, . . . sway[ing] an audience as the trees of the forest are moved by a mighty wind."[387] Yet another testimony from the 1820 revival tells of an occasion when, while preaching, Nettleton "waved his arms with an abandoning gesture backwards, until it did seem they felt themselves given up and hopeless."[388] Taylor adds that Nettleton was "animated . . . [but] not boisterous or vehement."[389] An account by Humphrey paints perhaps the best picture of Nettleton's pulpit demeanor:

> Dr. Nettleton's delivery was always solemn, always earnest, and not seldom even vehement. This was particularly the case in the height of those numerous and powerful revivals in the midst of which he labored for so many years. The action of his mind was intense. The yearnings of his soul over the impenitent were irrepressible. His countenance, his voice, every thing showed it. And yet, incredible as it may seem, in his most impassioned appeals, there was not a particle of enthusiasm. By this I mean, that he was never hurried away into any extravagance of language, or emotion. He never, for one moment, lost the balance of his mind. He was always perfectly self-possessed. I have seen him in circumstances of overpowering interest, when the movements of the Spirit were 'like a mighty rushing wind,' and could never perceive any wavering in his judgment or his prudence. He was ever the same in the pulpit, in the lecture-room, and in the inquiry meeting—always earnest and solemn, but never carried away by his feelings, beyond the bounds of propriety.[390]

Nettleton's delivery style was animated, but never excessive, it was passionate, but never unbridled, it was "filled with emotion, but it was not emotive."[391] By all indications, his

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[386]Wayland and Wayland, *A Memoir*, 109.

[387]Ibid.

[388]Smith, *Recollections*, 136.

[389]Taylor, *Memoir*, 331-32.

[390]Humphrey, in Tyler, *Memoir*, 358-59.

[391]Sherry Pierpont May, "Asahel Nettleton: Nineteenth Century American Revivalist" (Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 1969), 159. May continues by noting that Nettleton's "first intention was not to arouse the emotions. First he wanted to appeal to the understanding, and then to enable the hearer to

presence in the pulpit was animated, but steady and controlled, demonstrating earnestness, gravity, and passion, but never excessive or uncontrolled movement or animation that would have called his credibility, or the credibility of his message or methods, in to question.

Many more accounts from eyewitnesses could be shared that shed light on Nettleton's delivery, but those shared establish adequate testimony to help measure Nettleton's use of the canon of delivery. When it came time for him to deliver the material he had gathered, organized, stylized, and memorized, he delivered the message in a capable way to his hearers. By mastering the use of the visual component, his vocal gifts, and the animation of his person, he developed a unique style of delivery that ultimately allowed for effective communication to take place.

The Response of Nettleton's Audience

Insofar as it is possible nearly 200 years later, some observations can be made about the response of Nettleton's audience, which ultimately reflects the success of his preaching. Because of the hundreds of meetings he held throughout his ministry and the dozens of accounts of those meetings that exist, only general statements can be made here. First, it can be said that during the meetings themselves, there was solemnity and attentiveness generally unaccompanied by none of the excesses that characterized some of the other revival movements of Nettleton's day and those of the previous century.[392] His audiences listened to his message intently and with solemn stillness, and fixed their

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recognize its personal application. Thus a clear, vivid, plain, and careful presentation was necessary. Only after that should the emotions be aroused."

[392]Tyler, *Memoir*, 229, notes that in his meetings, Nettleton "endeavored to check all *violent manifestations* of feeling, by showing that they had in them nothing of the nature of religion; and when he discovered any tendency to such manifestations in a religious meeting, he would generally dismiss the assembly, and advise the people to retire in silence to their homes."

attention wholly on Nettleton as he preached.[393] In many cases, they responded with tears, contrition toward God, confession of sin, and repentance.[394] If revival began to manifest itself, Nettleton discouraged all forms of "ostentation and vain glorying,"[395] and instead encouraged those involved in the revival to "talk little"[396] of its progress for fear that the Spirit might be grieved.[397] As people continued to respond and the Spirit was perceived to be working, the combination of regular preaching, inquiry room meetings, personal engagements, and word of mouth, resulted, more often than not, in revival.

Nettleton's preaching and personal ministry frequently brought revival to the communities in which he preached. Though in response to the revivals that his preaching brought, people and entire communities were transformed. Tyler observes,

> These revivals were characterized by a great solemnity. Christians were solemn. They were not merely excited and filled with great animation for a season; but they were deeply humbled in view of their past neglects of duty. They mourned over their backslidings, and returned to God with deep contrition. Sensible of their great sinfulness, and of the alarming condition of sinners around them, they felt deeply solemn and walked humbly with God. Their minds, it is true, were sometimes filled with great joy, but it was a joy mingled with reverence. They felt that they were in the presence of God and had no disposition to indulge in vain mirth. They carefully abstained in their conversation, from every thing suited to produce levity or to banish serious thoughts from the minds of the impenitent. The things of eternity lay with great weight on their minds, and had a commanding influence upon all their conduct. When they looked around them, and saw so many of their fellow men perishing in sin, their eyes affected their hearts. They felt in some measure, as did the weeping prophet when he said 'Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of

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[393]Tyler, *Memoir*, 205.

[394]Although this was not *always* the case. Rev. Noah Porter records that during his time with Nettleton, Nettleton preached in "two other large and solemn assemblies, in adjoining parishes, with no special effect that could be afterwards traced." Noah Porter, "From the Rev. Noah Porter, D. D.," in William B. Sprague, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2007), 304-5.

[395]Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, 551.

[396]Ibid.

[397]Ibid.

> tears; that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people.' With these feelings, they could not but be solemn.[398]

This type of response accompanied most of Nettleton's preaching ministry. This response of the masses to revival was the true measure of the success of his ministry.

Nettleton's audiences responded favorably to his preaching, both during his preaching and long after he had moved on to another town. Their response was the response of faith, repentance, and new life that Nettleton hoped for with each message preached. Bennet Tyler summarizes the success of Nettleton's ministry of preaching and revivals with the following observation:

> *He was a successful preacher*—Soon after he began to preach, his labors were crowned with signal success, and for ten or eleven years he was almost constantly employed in guiding inquiring souls to Christ. Few men have ever been instrumental in the conversion of so many souls. Thousands have acknowledged him as their spiritual father, who will, I doubt not, be his joy and crown in the day of the Lord.[399]

Conclusions

This analysis of Nettleton's preaching has brought to light many details. The project has analyzed closely the *corpus* of Nettleton's preaching as presented in *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening* with the intent of understanding his sermonic development and preaching style during the Second Great Awakening and its consistency, or lack thereof, with his theological system, surveyed in chapter 3. This rhetorical analysis has examined Nettleton's preaching using the Aristotelian modes of persuasion and the five canons of rhetoric to understand whether there is consistency between Nettleton's preaching and theology, and further, to seek to discern what made his preaching appealing. Four conclusions follow in no particular order.

First, in his preaching ministry, Asahel Nettleton models all three of the Aristotelian modes of persuasion that classic rhetorical studies emphasize. Speaking

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[398]Tyler, *Memoir*, 227.

[399]Ibid., 333.

purely from the perspective of rhetorical analysis and without discounting the divine element of his ministry, Nettleton's impressiveness and power as a speaker can be attributed, to a large degree, to his personal *ethos*, the *pathos* in his preaching, and the *logos* of his material. Nearly all his contemporaries who knew or wrote about Nettleton attest to his good reputation,[400] the consistency and holiness of his character both in and out of the pulpit,[401] his credibility and trustworthiness when in the pulpit, and his rejection of unscrupulous and undignified methodologies in ministry. In short, he was an evangelist trusted by his peers and his audiences.[402] Audiences found him to be earnest, proven, and genuinely concerned for their souls, and so readily received his preaching ministry. Even his opponents found his sincerity and force of character itself to be impressive and not infrequently, persuasive.[403] For these reasons, he was imbued with a sense of authority that others recognized and respected. For Nettleton, the greatest apologetic for his gospel ministry was the *whole person*[404] that he proved to be, both in and out of the pulpit. He was effective not just because of what he said, but because of the person he *was* in life.

Nettleton's *pathos* was a part of his *ethos*. His audiences judged him to be trustworthy and credible because they could see that his passionate love for both God and people drove him not only while he preached in the pulpit but when he shared Christ outside of the pulpit as well. His personal friends attest to this best, noting the "all

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[400]Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, 549.

[401]Tyler, *Memoir*, 340-41.

[402]Ibid., 193-94. The account is of Nettleton's work in connection with the church in Enfield, CT.

[403]Charles G. Finney, *The Original Memoirs of Charles G. Finney*, ed. Garth M. Rosell and Richard A. G. Dupuis (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 164. Finney himself was so initially excited about meeting Nettleton that he was overwhelmed and wrote on p. 164 that he "felt like sitting at his feet, almost as I would at the feet of an apostle."

[404]I borrow this phrasing from Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 3rd ed., 81.

absorbing intensity of interest in salvation"[405] that consumed him not just in the pulpit, but in everyday life. Though in many ways mild-mannered, Nettleton was consumed by zeal and passion for eternal realities. Those to whom he ministered saw this in him and they responded.

If it was Nettleton's *pathos* and *ethos* that appealed to the hearts of his audiences, it was his *logos* that appealed to their minds. Nettleton was an informed, intelligent, and thoughtful man. As his preaching indicates, he had an ability to process scriptural truth, then with great force of logic he conveyed it to his audiences in articulate, crisp, and practical ways that even children could understand.[406] He defended and promoted scriptural truth with sound argumentation and was prepared to demolish the objections of those who opposed the truth. His biblical exposition combined with his argumentation and passion made his preaching true "logic on fire!"[407]

Second, Nettleton used rhetorical artistry to craft his sermons in such a way that they were engaging, appealing, and memorable. This is not to imply that he purposefully crafted his sermons with classical rhetoric or rhetorical devices in mind. There is no definitive proof of that in the literature. However, he did purposefully develop logical argumentation, use repetition, make vivid word choices, and deliver his sermons in such a way that the classic categories of rhetoric were all satisfied in his preaching. He used logical argumentation to convince the mind of one's need to submit to God. He used repetition intentionally to make his points memorable. He chose words that painted pictures in the minds of his audience to move them emotionally. These were just a few of the rhetorical devices revealed in this analysis which do, classically speaking, make good

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[405]Beecher, "From the Rev. Edward Beecher, D. D.," 553.

[406]Tyler, *Memoir*, 205.

[407]Lloyd-Jones, *Preachers & Preaching*, 110.

rhetoric. Whether Nettleton himself would have called it "good rhetoric" is irrelevant. Furthermore, by making use of well-crafted sermons and developing a polished delivery style, Nettleton sometimes came close to practicing some of the very excesses in his own preaching and revivals that he was so quick to criticize when exercised by his opponents.[408]

Third, an analysis of Nettleton's sermons reveals consistency between his theological foundations and all that occurred in the preaching event. As a matter of sheer content, it can be plainly stated that he taught and preached theological Calvinism and orthodox Christian doctrine. He did not hold back, mask, or attempt to avoid preaching biblical truths concerning election, predestination, and the sovereign decrees of God over all the affairs of men. He saw no inconsistency between his beliefs in God's sovereignty and man's free agency. His particular understanding of moral inability[409] freed him of any concerns about original sin and injustice with God. He believed absolutely that conversion was everything and that man's heart must be changed from the inside by the external working of the Spirit of God in regeneration.[410]

However, of greater importance was the fact that his practice of preaching was, in every way, from preparation, to content, to delivery, consistent with his convictions about man's fallen condition, his need for salvation, and the working of the Spirit in regeneration. There was an undeniable synthesis between his doctrinal content and his rhetorical presentation that demonstrated his full confidence in the truth of God's Word coupled with his burning conviction that such truth must be presented to the minds of

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[408]Evidence supports the fact that Nettleton did tend toward a bit of the "theatrical" element at times. There was his precise "packing" of his preaching venues, speaking while seated in the deacon's chair, waving the bandanna, and even purposely not showing up at a meeting for effect. See Smith, *Recollections*, 29-30; Wayland and Wayland, *A Memoir*, 109; and Thornbury's assessment, Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 73-74.

[409]Nettleton, "Genuine Repentance," 68-70.

[410]Beecher, "From the Rev. Edward Beecher, D. D.," 553.

hearers in a passionate, convincing, and persuasive way. Nettleton viewed his preaching as a useful escort to lead men to powerful biblical truths concerning God's majesty, man's utter hopelessness, and their great need for the mercy of God in Christ. If his preaching could escort listeners to the door of these great truths, he believed it was the Spirit that applied these as He did his work of creating in them a new heart. For Nettleton, men must hear biblical truth clearly, submit to it, respond obediently, and allow the Spirit to do what only He could do in saving them.[411]

This theological conviction was the real source of Nettleton's controversy with the New Measures revivalists. His opposition was theologically grounded, not rooted in suspicion, jealousy, or stubbornness.[412] He rejected many of the practices of those associated with the New Measures revivalism because he saw an inconsistency with some of their tactics that appeared to call unregenerate men to Christian actions without first urging them to immediate submission to Christ for regeneration.[413] In his own preaching and practices, he shunned any attempt to manipulate sinners to respond to his appeals with raw emotion or acts of disinterested benevolence. Though Nettleton sought to convince the minds of his hearers through effective argumentation, he did not attempt to persuade men's hearts or wills through manipulation of promise, for persuading the will was an act he felt only the Spirit of God could do. However, he did not hesitate to call his hearers to complete obedience, surrender, and submission to divine realities, reminding them that when they would not, judgment awaited them.[414] Nettleton dared

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[411]Nettleton, "Regeneration," in *Sermons*, 146.

[412]Edwards, *A History of Preaching*, 508, characterizes Nettleton as "an embittered man who would find the reason for his existence in resisting the new methods of evangelism that were to sweep the country."

[413]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 239. See points under sub-heading "Dispensation of Grace."

[414]Nettleton, "Regeneration," 147. Litfin's helpful study guides here, reminding that it is only the Spirit of God that can create genuine faith. In that sense, men do not seek to truly "persuade" which

not encourage men to reliance on human activity for salvation and he would not leave them comfortably clinging to some false assurance.[415] He never led his audiences to believe that God was in some way limited *by* or obligated *to* their response, but rather trusted that God was benevolent, wise, and sovereign in his choices.[416] Nettleton used language carefully, for he had observed manipulation in the practices and language of the New Measures practitioners. He was careful in his choice of words and though he called all men always to obedience to God, he rejected the gross theological inconsistency involved in telling the unconverted that they could make themselves new hearts or regenerate themselves by doing the duties of a Christian apart from the internal working of the Holy Spirit. Even more so if these actions were linked to some promise of salvation as a reward for man's actions. Prayer, repentance, and acts of virtue were the rightful obligation of all men but were especially necessary for the Christian following conversion, as evidence of the internal operations of the Spirit. For Nettleton though, conversion was the starting point for new life in Christ. Acts of obedience toward God could not in some mysterious way create faith or warrant redemption, but could potentially create false hope if trusted in for justification apart from the Spirit's heart-work.

On the basis of these theological foundations, analysis of Nettleton's preaching reveals that the language, argumentation, and even carefully selected words in his preaching were consistent with his theology. In this regard, his preaching has much to say to modern preachers about the need for consistency between one's theological foundations and the message and method of their preaching. Thoughtful, consistent, theologically

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only the Spirit can do. See Litfin, *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation*, 206-7.

[415]Nettleton, "Regeneration," 144.

[416]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 232-33. See sub-headings "Decrees of God," and "Providence."

precise language coupled with ethos and pathos will make for bold, passionate, evangelistic, and theologically astute preaching.

The final observation is more subjective, but important nonetheless. Nettleton's passionate preaching, yielding the results that it did, provides a qualitative argument against the theory that Calvinism as a theological framework kills evangelism or somehow discourages passionate engagement with the lost.[417] That claim is heralded all too frequently in contemporary American evangelical circles. If anything, Nettleton's Calvinism actually drove him to more faithful evangelism precisely because he put no reliance in the works of the flesh, but completely trusted God for the results of the work. This trust in God ultimately explains why Nettleton was blessed with the kinds of results he experienced. Perhaps in the future, when the claim is made that "Calvinism kills evangelism," future students will point to the life and ministry of Asahel Nettleton as evidence to the contrary.

[417]Frank Page, *Trouble with the TULIP: A Closer Examination of the Five Points of Calvinism* (Canton, GA: Riverstone, 2000), 74-75.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Critique

In her dissertation, Sherry Pierpont May observed, "Tyler's biography of Nettleton is a memorial, composed to uphold and exonerate the life and character of his beloved friend . . . we should expect—and we receive—no negative criticism of Nettleton."[1] Her comment implies that because of the lack of any critique of Nettleton, Tyler's sketch loses some academic credibility. Biographical writing without critique is often known as *hagiography* in the literary world, and to not critique a subject fully, revealing both the negative and positive characteristics, is to communicate bias. No one is perfect and Asahel Nettleton certainly was not. In the interest of giving a fair assessment of the evangelist, the following critiques are offered.

First, it does appear from the sources that Nettleton had a peculiar and somewhat "eccentric" personality that limited his usefulness at times. Sprague notes, "It is not to be disguised that there was a vein of something like eccentricity in Dr. Nettleton's character,"[2] which he goes on to speculate may have been because of "bodily disease"[3] or poor health. Whatever the case, it seems from the source material that Nettleton's peculiar

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[1]Sherry Pierpont May, "Asahel Nettleton: Nineteenth Century American Revivalist" (Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 1969), 156.

[2]William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit or Commemorative Notices of Distinguished American Clergymen of Various Denominations, From the Early Settlement of the Country to the Close of the Year Eighteen Hundred and Fifty-Five* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1857), 2:549.

[3]Ibid.

personality limited opportunities throughout his ministry for camaraderie with brethren and polemical engagement. To be sure, this seems more a personality peculiarity than any moral flaw, but a personality issue nonetheless that limited him in interpersonal relationships with others. Finney claimed, in his autobiography, that on the night of their first casual meeting, Finney was to go hear Nettleton preach but Nettleton showed "uneasiness . . . and remarked that I must not be seen with him."[4] Certainly this incident alone does not condemn Nettleton's character, but this kind of coldness and distance becomes a pattern for Nettleton, showing up quite regularly in his ministry.[5]

His peculiar personality likely played at least some part in his failings later at New Lebanon in 1827, when Nettleton failed to rally his brethren to censure Finney's behavior in revivals and even failed to confront the truly theological nature of the New Measures conflict.[6] At first, he was hard pressed to attend at all and when he decided to go, he proved less than effective in articulating the theological problems with the New Measures.[7] Given his opportunity to confront what was arguably the most serious

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[4]Charles G. Finney, *The Original Memoirs of Charles G. Finney,* ed. Garth M. Rosell and Richard A. G. Dupuis (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 164. Thornbury goes to great lengths to defend Nettleton on this point and questions the credibility of Finney's clearly bias report. Thornbury believes that their appearance together might have lent Nettleton's credibility to Finney's revivals, which he refused to do. John Thornbury, *God Sent Revival* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1988), 164-68. Thornbury's assessment is reasonable and likely correct. Still, one wishes Nettleton had composed himself with more decorum and poise than the unfortunate affair implies.

[5]Vincent Harding, *A Certain Magnificence: Lyman Beecher & the Transformation of American Protestantism, 1775-1863* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson, 1991), 153-56. Harding implies a certain fickleness or sensitivity on the part of Nettleton in his relationship with Beecher during the revival in Litchfield in 1821-22. He concludes that Nettleton turned quickly on Beecher and intentionally distanced himself from Beecher after Beecher's favorable opinion of the Chauncey Goodrich sermon on original sin, which was basically an early sermon supportive of what would become the New Haven view on original sin and depravity. Harding goes on to describe Nettleton in terms like, "condescending" (231), thin-skinned (233), and "hyper-sensitive" (264).

[6]John Thornbury, "Asahel Nettleton's Conflict with Finneyism," *Reformation and Revival* 8 (1999): 110-18. In his article, Thornbury gives an assessment of the true nature of Nettleton's conflict with Finney and an assessment of Nettleton's "failure" at New Lebanon.

[7]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 178, states, "It was not exactly a moment of triumph for the somewhat weather-beaten warrior . . . he appeared nervous and agitated, and . . . the convention had been

practical and theological issue of his day, Nettleton fumbled. In much the same way, when he was later recruited by friends to take the lead in opposing Nathaniel W. Taylor and the New Haven men, Nettleton, citing various reasons, felt that such a task was "too arduous an undertaking"[8] for him and recommended another take the lead. It seems strange that one of the most notable leaders of revivals in his day, when given the opportunity to lead in confronting the two most openly divisive and unorthodox movements of his time, withered and withdrew instead. This lion in the pulpit seems to have demonstrated timidity and agitation at the most inopportune of times.[9]

Still another event points to Nettleton's behavior as problematic. Tom Nettles recounts the incident in 1830 in which Nettleton, during a visit to Charleston, South Carolina, passed on the opportunity to make the acquaintance of and confer with Basil Manly, Sr., a Baptist leader, theologian, and prominent preacher in the South.[10] Manly attempted to show hospitality by visiting Nettleton while he was in Charleston, but

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trying for him."

[8]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 192.

[9]In his important assessment of the two personalities, Lyman Beecher, who was closely acquainted with both Nettleton and Finney, gave a balanced explanation as to why the two men could not resolve their differences. See Lyman Beecher, *Autobiography of Lyman Beecher*, ed. Barbara M. Cross (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961), 2:69-70. Beecher notes that in their personalities, Finney was "perfectly at antipodes with Mr. Nettleton" (70), and that while Nettleton was "reverential, timid, secretive . . . and subdued" (69), Finney was "bold, striking, demonstrative . . . full of eclat" (69-70). He observed, "The atmosphere most congenial to Mr. Nettleton was one of hushed, mysterious stillness," while Finney was "frank, open, giving his opinion without solicitation in a strong style, somewhat dictatorial." (70). Perhaps summing up their irreconcilable personalities, Beecher notes that "both were originals, both had their eccentricities, but their eccentricities were of opposite kinds" (70).

[10]Tom Nettles, "An Introduction to Asahel Nettleton," in Asahel Nettleton, *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, ed. William C. Nichols (Ames, IA: International Outreach, 1995), xii-xv. Manly Sr., (1798-1868) was an influential Baptist pastor and educator in the South in the first half of the nineteenth century. He served as pastor of the First Baptist Church in Charleston, SC, from 1826 to1837, then went on to serve as the president of the University of Alabama for nearly twenty years. He was instrumental in the founding of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845, and later, the Confederate States of America. See Randall Balmer, "Manly, Basil (Sr.)," in *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 353-54.

Nettleton repeatedly declined to see him, only later to complain publicly that no one in Charleston had paid him any attention. Manly was quite insulted by the whole affair and certainly surprised by Nettleton's behavior.[11] Nettles, with optimism, hopes that the whole affair was a "regrettable misunderstanding"[12] and notes that the affair "sadly precluded what might have been a relationship that could have benefited Southern evangelicals, particularly Baptists."[13] While no single one of these incidents necessarily invites undue criticism by itself, strung together they leave an unflattering picture of Nettleton as someone whose usefulness in confronting some of the most important kingdom issues of his day was limited by a peculiar type of fear of confrontation or inability to navigate inter-personal relationships with much decorum. This limitation is regretful.

At least from an analysis of the source data at hand, some doctrinal concerns about Nettleton's theological system became evident. In his remarks on "Infant Depravity"[14] and his "A Sermon for Children,"[15] the logic of Nettleton's reasoning leaves one to believe that because of original sin, infants who die do indeed go to Hell. In the source data examined for this project, Nettleton gives no alternative understandings on the subject.[16] May relays concern over a lack of "Christology"[17] in Nettleton's preaching, observing that Christ and his redemptive work are "conspicuously neglected in

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[11]Tom Nettles, "An Introduction to Asahel Nettleton," in Asahel Nettleton, *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, xiii.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid., xv.

[14]Asahel Nettleton, "Infant Depravity," in *Sermons*, 485.

[15]Asahel Nettleton, "A Sermon for Children," in *Sermons*, 140-42.

[16]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 390.

[17]May, "Asahel Nettleton," 146.

Nettleton's theology,"[18] and further concludes that Christology was "primarily a formal doctrine for Nettleton . . . [and that,] except in rare instances, Christ seems to be artificially brought in without there being any need for him."[19] She even postulates that some of his language combined with his failure to speak clearly about penal substitutionary atonement might imply an embrace of the governmental theory[20] of the atonement, popular among New England Calvinists of the eighteenth and nineteenth century.[21] Nettles echoes a similar sentiment, observing that though there was no denial of the "more objective doctrines of the gospel"[22] in Nettleton's preaching, one only finds minimal attention to traditional themes, such as faith, the basis of justification, and the work of Christ at the cross. Nettles seems to lament this "so-called lack of 'proportion'"[23] in Nettleton's theology and the subsequent "misunderstanding"[24] that it creates. Nettleton's belief in penal substitutionary atonement is made clearer in a section in his "Notes on Theology" titled "Design and Work of the Redeemer."[25] Though his words here

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[18]May, "Asahel Nettleton," 144.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Iain Murray defines the governmental theory by noting, "Christ's death was not a payment of debt on behalf of those whose sins he bore; it was rather an action to satisfy public justice, making it safe and possible for God to forgive those who repent and believe . . . the act that secures forgiveness is man's not Christ's." Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism, 1750-1858* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 262.

[21]May, "Asahel Nettleton," 144-46.

[22]Nettles, "Introduction," xii. Nettles here quotes and reflects upon an 1844 review of Tyler's *Memoir* in the *Biblical Repertory and Theological Review*, which points out similar theological shortcomings in Nettleton's preaching.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid.

[25]Asahel Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," in *Sermons*, 235-36. These "Notes on Theology" were not published until Nichols' 1995 publication (see Nichols' "Foreword," in *Sermons*, i), thus making it unlikely that May had them at her disposal at the time of her thesis, published in 1969.

ultimately affirm an orthodox view of substitutionary atonement, one is still left puzzled as to why the atoning work of Christ was not more proportional and central to his preaching and why he frequently used language and themes so closely related to the governmental theory of the Atonement. With the finished work of Christ at the cross so central to the work of evangelism, it is disappointing that Nettleton was not clearer about this topic and its necessity for the redemption of sinners in his preaching.

Nettleton failed to develop a robust ecclesiology in his preaching and left little evidence of any emphasis on the ordinances of baptism and communion in his ministry.[26] Furthermore, his teaching concerning the believer's assurance of salvation is less than satisfying. While teaching that assurance was possible, he seems to believe it is "not . . . common"[27] among believers and that to profess such an assurance, a Christian must "have all the Christian graces in exercise in so high a degree as to be sure he has saving faith."[28] Sadly, even on his own deathbed his words attest to the fact that he lacked full assurance of salvation.[29]

Last, and certainly least, it is disappointing that Nettleton did not take the time or effort to write and publish more than the few letters that survive.[30] Tyler and Bonar

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[26]May, "Asahel Nettleton," 146. She refers to baptism and the Lord's Supper as "sacraments" in her critique, linking them more to Nettleton's underdeveloped Christology, whereas many other Protestants (and nearly all Baptists) would link these ordinances to the doctrine of the church, or Ecclesiology. Interestingly, in his two sections on the "Church of Christ" and "Public Worship" in his "Notes on Theology," the ordinances are not even referenced. See Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 242-43.

[27]Asahel Nettleton, "Self-Examination," in *Sermons*, 325-26.

[28]Nettleton, "Notes on Theology," 240.

[29]Bennet Tyler and Andrew Bonar, *Asahel Nettleton: Life and Labours* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), 432-34. Tyler himself expresses great disappointment over the fact that Nettleton lacked assurance of his own salvation.

[30]Concerning "great" preachers, Demaray observes, "All are writers . . . the alert preacher will be certain to print that literature from his ministry which can be of help to others." Donald E. Demaray, *Pulpit Giants: What Made Them Great* (Chicago: Moody, 1973), 166.

raise the issue, noting that Nettleton's own friends wished he had written more but that he had concluded he was too occupied with revivals to write.[31] It seems shortsighted for one of such great intellect and talents as Nettleton, with such great influence and persona during this era, to not have written more than he did. The contemporary church would no doubt have benefited greatly from his thoughts on revivals, reflections on ministerial practices, and personal accounts of revivals under his leadership.

Implications

The study of Nettleton's life, ministry, and preaching has yielded much fruit. His life and model of ministry still have much to say to contemporary church culture. Following is a list of implications for practical application to modern ministry.

Doctrinal Preaching Has the Intrinsic Power to be Used of the Holy Spirit to Change Minds

First, the powerful effect of Nettleton's preaching make a strong case for reconsidering modern preaching paradigms. Passionate preaching that is doctrinal, expository, and exegetical has fallen on hard times over the past century.[32] Dever and Gilbert note that "in the evangelical church"[33] there is a "loss of confidence in the preached Word of God."[34] More specifically, they note that this loss of confidence has extended especially to "biblical exposition,"[35] and in many cases very poor examples of it.

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[31]Tyler and Bonar, *Life and Labours*, 228.

[32]Albert Mohler links the decline of doctrinal and expository preaching to a waning confidence in the power of the Word of God. See R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 15-21.

[33]Mark Dever and Greg Gilbert, *Preach: Theology Meets Practice* (Nashville: B & H, 2012), 3.

[34]Ibid.

[35]Ibid., 5.

Nettleton's preaching ministry reminds that well-crafted, theologically pregnant, rhetorically-informed sermons prepared well and preached with passion can be greatly used of God to bring a true outpouring of his Spirit to his people.

Some preachers today, and doubtless many Christians in the pews, are skeptical about the value of doctrinal exposition and authoritative preaching in twenty-first century culture.[36] Speaking of this "disinterest in expository preaching," Alistair Begg observe that many show no interest in it precisely because so much of the exposition they have heard was "lifeless, dull, and even thoroughly boring."[37] However, as seen, it was not so with Nettleton's preaching. As has already been shown, he did not shrink back from preaching doctrine, even the difficult ones, often to great effect,[38] and when he preached doctrinally, it was not boring, drab, or tedious. Instead, countless testimonies tell of the way Nettleton's (doctrinal) preaching captured and held his audiences. Robert Smith, Jr., recently offered encouragement on the subject of doctrinal preaching with his book *Doctrine That Dances*, where he opens his introduction with the words, "This book is about doctrinal preaching, about handling biblical truth as the 'true and living Word' that it is, with the sermon functioning as a privileged partner with doctrine in what can be

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[36]Regarding the role of preaching in the "emerging-church" context, Dan Kimball observes, "Some emerging worship gatherings . . . rarely have preaching or even pop-rock worship bands. Instead, they may simply have ambient music playing in the background. Their gatherings primarily consist of people going to creative stations to pray, read Scripture, and meditate, plus some communal readings together." Dan Kimball, *Emerging Worship: Creating Worship Gatherings for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 87. For further discussion of Kimball's views regarding preaching in emerging contexts, see pp 87-89. Jim Shaddix engages contemporary views of the importance of preaching against some modern attitudes in Jim Shaddix, "To Preach or Not to Preach: An Evangelical Response to the Emergent Homiletic," in *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent: A Discussion of the Emergent Church Movement,* ed. William D. Henard and Adam Greenway (Nashville: B & H, 2009), 281-307.

[37]Alistair Begg, *Preaching for God's Glory* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 28. See also Tom Patton, "Is Expository Preaching Boring?" Preachers and Preaching Blog, The Master's Seminary, March 31, 2015, accessed April 7, 2017, https://www.tms.edu/preachersandpreaching/is-expository-preaching-boring/.

[38]Asahel Nettleton preached entire sermons on "The Final Judgment," "Regeneration," "The Mortification of Sin," and "The Counsel and Agency of God in the Government of All Things," all found in *Sermons*.

described as a joyous doxological dance to the glory of God."[39] Against prevailing popular opinion that doctrinal or expositional preaching is dull or boring, Smith believes it is possible to restore rhetorical beauty to doctrinal preaching to make it once again interesting, appealing, and worshipful. Smith directs preachers to consider the value of a comprehensive knowledge of the essentials of rhetoric, directing them toward an understanding of the five canons and calling them to develop a more thorough balance in the sermon's "substance . . . and . . . style."[40] Nettleton's homiletical approach to preaching was sound and it was effective; it produced a balance of exposition, style, and delivery. He preached sermons that were highly doctrinal, logically organized, expositional, and delivered them with power and passion. His preaching could serve as a helpful example for training a generation of preachers to preach with passion and substance.

The Wedding of Doctrinal Preaching and Evangelistic Preaching

The second implication flows directly out of the first. Homiletic departments in evangelical colleges and training centers should perhaps consider if there might be a greater need to train young ministry students in evangelistic preaching. Perhaps there is too great a distance in seminaries between the homiletics department and the evangelism department. V. L. Stanfield notes in his study that if "the pulpit is the preacher's greatest opportunity to evangelize,"[41] then should it not follow that seminaries and ministry training centers be training young preachers how to be effective evangelists in their regular exposition of the Word to their congregations? Is it possible that many young students

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[39]Robert Smith, Jr., *Doctrine That Dances: Bringing Doctrinal Preaching and Teaching to Life* (Nashville: B & H, 2008), 1.

[40]Ibid., 112. See pp. 113-17, for Smith's fuller discussion of the right and balanced use of rhetorical studies for sermon preparation.

[41]V. L. Stanfield, *Effective Evangelistic Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965), 13.

are being trained well in the art of exposition but not being trained to see the necessary connection between doctrinal fidelity and evangelistic zeal in preaching? Some believe that evangelistic preaching is that which is done by a traveling or vocational evangelist rather than by the regular preacher of God's Word.[42] Such dichotomy in thinking should not exist in the church. Those who preach must always see themselves as evangelists doing evangelism for the glory of God in and through their preaching. There should be no distance or dichotomy between doctrinal preaching and evangelistic preaching. Lloyd-Jones calls for a marriage of the two types of preaching:

> Evangelistic preaching should be more, rather than less theological, than any other, and for this good reason. Why is it that you call people to repent? Why do you call them to believe the gospel? You cannot deal properly with repentance without dealing with the doctrine of man, the doctrine of the Fall, the doctrine of sin and the wrath of God against sin. Then when you call men to come to Christ and to give themselves to Him, how can you do so without knowing who He is, and on what grounds you invite them to come to Him and so on. In other words it is all highly theological. Evangelism which is not theological is not evangelism at all in any true sense. It may be calling for decisions, it may be a calling on people to come to religion, or to live a better kind of life, or the offering of some psychological benefits, but it cannot by any definition be regarded as Christian evangelism, because there is no true reason for what you are doing apart from these great theological principles. I assert therefore that every type of preaching must be theological, including evangelistic preaching.[43]

Nettleton's preaching serves as a witness and reminder that there should be no disconnect between evangelism and preaching. Even though the two may remain distinct courses of ministerial training, greater effort must be made to wed evangelism and preaching together in all levels of ministerial, homiletical, and theological training.

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[42]R. Larry Moyer hints at this tendency, observing that many evangelists are capable soul-winners, but not good preachers at all. Conversely, many pastors are capable preachers, but not evangelists. See R. Larry Moyer, *Show Me How to Preach Evangelistic Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012), 30.

[43]Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preachers & Preaching*, 40th anniversary ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 76-77.

The Need for Theological Consistency in Preaching

For some time, controversy has accompanied the use of the so-called "invitation" in preaching services.[44] Some evangelicals who lean toward a Calvinistic interpretation of soteriology have rejected the use of the invitation and the resulting "system"[45] that has grown up around it because of its tendency toward abuse and manipulation. Some critics observe that the invitation has become almost "a new evangelical sacrament"[46] by the importance that has been placed upon it by many. Instead, some critics propose a more personal and less emotionally manipulative approach to dealing with sinners outside the worship service akin to Nettleton's "inquiry room" methodology. Evangelicals whose theology is not Calvinistic have been quick to assume that the jettisoning of the "altar-call"[47] or prolonged invitation methodology automatically implies that Calvinists somehow do not believe in evangelism.[48] Nettleton's preaching ministry challenges preachers to consider a third way—one that lies beyond merely rejecting the invitation system or feeling obligated to it against one's conscience. He

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[44]Errol Hulse, *The Great Invitation: Examining the Use of the Altar Call in Evangelism* (Laurel, MS: Audubon, 2006), 89-109.

[45]Iain Murray, *The Invitation System* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 2. While affirming the necessity of inviting men to Christ as a component of true gospel preaching, Murray questions the "system" that requires individuals to "come to the front" (2) at the end of a service following an appeal. He is concerned that this system "leads inevitably to the danger of hastening unregenerate men to confess their 'faith'" (22). Conversely, John Piper, a well-known preacher of Calvinistic persuasion, notes, "It is a tragedy to see pastors state the facts and sit down. Good preaching pleads with people to respond to the Word of God." John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 95. I argue that preachers should seek to strike an articulate balance between the poles of manipulation and removing the invitation altogether.

[46]Hulse, *The Great Invitation*, 109.

[47]Ibid., 7.

[48]R. Alan Streett, "The Public Invitation and Calvinism," in *Whosoever Will: A Biblical-Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism*, ed. David L. Allen and Steve W. Lemke (Nashville: B & H, 2010), 233-34.

modeled theological consistency between his systematic theology and his rhetoric, and in so doing, set the example for others.

The preacher ought to mean what he says and say what he means when he preaches. He ought to preach with clarity and precision and treat the doctrines which he is preaching with great seriousness, seeking a full understanding of the doctrines and giving attention to his explanation of them as he preaches. If done well, then it is altogether possible for a Calvinist preacher to construct the evangelistic rhetoric in his sermon carefully and truthfully, so that he does not need to throw out invitations altogether. Rather, he can carefully approach them in such a way as to avoid the excesses of the "invitation system" while satisfying his responsibility of inviting sinners to repent and believe immediately.

To preach this way though, the preacher must be thoughtful concerning the logical arrangement of his ideas during his study. He must be intentional about the precise language he uses as he crafts the style of his sermon. In this way, rather than inviting sinners to "come and pray the sinner's prayer and be saved today," a premise that many would reject on theological grounds, the preacher seeking theological and methodological consistency could instead urge sinners who feel the weight of conviction to come and seek counsel during an invitation. During the counsel, which could be immediate or at a later time, the pastor (or evangelist) could carefully take the Word of God and counsel the burdened sinner towards immediate repentance and faith in Christ without the emotional manipulation, use of a "sinner's prayer," or use of other methods that have been the subject of criticism by some.[49]

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[49]See David L. Larsen, *The Evangelism Mandate: Recovering the Centrality of Gospel Preaching* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1992), 98-108. In his chapter, "The Methodology of the Evangelistic Invitation," Larsen evaluates various methods for incorporating invitations without all of the negatives of the "invitation system." See especially pp. 106-8.

In this way, the use of the means of public invitation is maintained, but theological integrity is restored to the process through the use of precise and meaningful language. The solution for the preacher then, is not necessarily throwing out the use of invitations altogether in preaching[50] or risking unrest and division in a church that may practice an invitation, but to craft carefully and precisely what he says, how he says it, and what he offers to those who respond. Doubtless, many on both sides of this debate will reject this "middle-ground" for various reasons, but perhaps a call to theologically precise language and terminology in evangelism and preaching could help to change the discussion. Furthermore, this implication is not only helpful for the "public invitation" question, but rather is an imperative that should carry over into all areas of theology and practice in the church.[51]

The Need for Instruction in the Basic Tools of Rhetoric

This implication may be the most controversial yet because of the negative association of classical rhetorical studies with *eloquence* and *persuasion*. Some may feel that by calling for preachers to be instructed in the rhetorical categories that there will be a tendency toward reliance upon fleshly means or eloquence for the sake of eloquence, but this need not be so.[52] Corbett explains that many modern students, sacred and secular, are

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[50]Indeed, Streett warns against this notion, stating, "Any sermon that does not include an invitation as well as a proclamation is not New Testament-style preaching." R. Alan Streett, *The Effective Invitation: A Practical Guide for the Pastor* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004), 37.

[51]For example, the preacher should strive for theological consistency in his rhetoric concerning and the practice of communion, baptism, church membership, etc.

[52]Incredibly helpful here is appendix 4 in Duane Litfin, *Paul's Theology of Preaching: The Apostle's Challenge to the Art of Persuasion in Ancient Corinth* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 339-49. Stressing the difference between *persuasion* (which he considers to be outside the realm of Christian preaching) and *comprehension*, he notes, "The preacher cannot, must not, encroach upon the role of the Holy Spirit by employing persuasive strategies designed to promote yielding . . . but the preacher can and should do everything possible to build comprehension of the reality of Christ's claims upon the listener . . . this is what it means to be a faithful herald of the gospel." Ibid., 349.

wholly unfamiliar with the principles of rhetoric, as the classical milieu of the discipline seems so "remote from the concerns and needs of contemporary society."[53] And yet, Corbett continues, "[R]hetoric is an inescapable activity in our lives . . . every day we either use rhetoric or are exposed to it . . . everyone living in community with other people is inevitably a rhetorician."[54] Whenever humans speak, they are using rhetoric.

It is, in fact, inevitable that gospel preachers and Christian communicators are going to practice rhetoric at somewhat of a higher level as they regularly communicate to gatherings. In light of this responsibility, is it altogether unreasonable that Christian preachers and communicators should be trained and equipped to do it well? Nearly every homiletics textbook teaches the preacher that his character and godliness help to give credibility to his message. Is this not an emphasis on the rhetorical principle of *ethos*? Again, homiletics textbooks spend copious amounts of time instructing students of preaching in the proper way to exegete a text and arrange its truths. Is this not the use of arrangement? And what of homiletics instructors who have their students watch sermons preached by others (or themselves!) and analyze them for effective delivery style? Is this not rhetorical analysis with an emphasis on delivery? Homiletics texts go to great lengths to discuss the merits of written sermon texts versus outlines versus sermon memorization. This debate simply frames the question of memory in terms of preaching.

The Christian communicator, and particularly the preacher, should seek clear communication for the fulfillment of the Great Commission, for the advance of the gospel, and for glory of God. The survey of Nettleton's sermons and subsequent conclusions drawn from it serve to remind preachers that thoughtful, intentional homiletics and

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[53]Edward P. J. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 29.

[54]Ibid. Corbett even mentions "preachers" on p. 30, noting that they "are as actively exercising their rhetorical skills today as they ever were."

exposition of Scripture informed by basic rhetorical principles can serve to promote excellence in Christian preaching.[55] A knowledge of basic rhetorical principles and the regular analysis of one's own sermons could produce great fruit for the preacher as he seeks to enhance his effectiveness in precisely and passionately communicating spiritual truth. Though, as Litfin is careful to remind the preacher, the quest for rhetorical improvement must always remain subservient to the preaching of the cross and complete reliance upon the Spirit's role in creating faith, persuading the heart, and bringing inner transformation.[56] The response of the listener must never be dependent "upon the preacher's facility as a rhetor,"[57] for then the preacher would seek to undermine the divine work of the Spirit in creating faith by "usurping the Spirit's role"[58] in regeneration. The tools of rhetoric are limited, and ultimately can only serve the preacher by helping to "win a hearing"[59] or "accommodate the comprehension"[60] of the audience. Thus, kept in balance and used in correct proportion, the tools of rhetoric can be useful and helpful as instruments to sharpen one's preaching skills for clearer and more effective presentation of truth.

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[55]This is precisely what Fred Craddock argues in Fred B. Craddock, "Is There Still Room for Rhetoric?" in *Preaching on the Brink: The Future of Homiletics*, ed. Martha J. Simmons (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 66-74. Craddock answers the rhetorical question that titles the chapter with a definitive "Yes!," noting that the use of rhetoric in homiletics should not be influenced by the current cynicism toward the use of language (68), that students of preaching must not miss the benefits of the discipline of rhetoric merely because the term has been used pejoratively (68), that in the use of rhetoric by preachers the prior question of the limits of *persuasion* must be solved (69), and that there is need in contemporary times for a broadened understanding of rhetoric (70) to include modern communications theory and language studies.

[56]Duane Litfin, *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation: 1 Corinthians 1-4 and Greco-Roman rhetoric* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 294.

[57]Ibid., 247.

[58]Ibid.

[59]Ibid., 261.

[60]Ibid.

A Need to Recover the Language and Concept of Revival

In the context of twenty-first century church life, there is not much talk anymore about "revival." Kenneth Stewart, speaking specifically in the context of the Reformed tradition, acknowledges that "general support for religious awakening and revival . . . through the nineteenth century fell on hard times in the latter half of the twentieth."[61] Along these lines, Thornbury adds, "The twentieth century heirs of the Reformed tradition have been generally of the Princetonian school, which became increasingly intellectual and philosophical, and not much interested in revivalism."[62] Sadly though, this truth could easily be echoed by many across the evangelical spectrum. For various reasons, the language of revival is all but gone from contemporary church life. Regarding this loss of the knowledge of past revivals and awakenings, Thornbury laments, "In a large measure, American Christians do not know there were such experiences, and what they do read about they cannot understand."[63] This loss of knowledge is tragic.

The study of past revivals, awakenings, and outpourings of the Spirit could serve the church well today. Tim Beougher, writing in 1995 about the 1970 revival at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, observes, "In a day when the cries for awakening grow louder and louder, seeing how God has worked in the past provides both instruction and encouragement for prayer in the present."[64] If today's pastors and church leaders would prayerfully and thoughtfully take the time to study the revivals of the past

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[61]Kenneth Stewart, *Ten Myths about Calvinism: Recovering the Breadth of the Reformed Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2011), 118.

[62]Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 228.

[63]Ibid.

[64]Timothy K. Beougher, "Times of Refreshing: The Revival of 1970 at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary," in *Evangelism for a Changing World: Essays in Honor of Roy Fish*, ed. Timothy Beougher and Alvin Reid (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw, 1995), 215.

and the lives and ministries of those whom God used to bring such revivals about, it would enrich the lives of contemporary believers and ministers in at least four ways. First, such study would serve as a source of encouragement. It encourages the heart to read of the transformation and piety of faithful men and women of God from the past who were awakened by an outpouring of God's Spirit. Second, it would help to stir desires among the body of Christ to see such an outpouring today. Third, it would expose modern Christians to the great theology, preaching, and terminology of the past, most of which has been lost on today's church. And finally, as familiarity with the language and testimonies of past revivals took root in the hearts of today's Christian, it could serve to transform the way contemporary Christians think, talk, and pray concerning a revival in the present day. There could be no better example of just such outpourings from the past than those facilitated by the preaching and ministry of evangelist Asahel Nettleton during the Second Great Awakening.

Personal Reflections on the Project

This writing project has meant a lot to me personally and has transformed my thinking on many levels. The subject first caught my attention because I was struggling to understand how to bring my own Calvinistic theological convictions in line with my passion (or lack thereof) for evangelism in all spheres of my ministry. I had never heard of Asahel Nettleton prior to being introduced to him in a doctoral seminar ten years ago, but in hindsight, I am glad that I was. I was once encouraged by someone at seminary to pick a "dead mentor" and spend lots of time with him. What he meant by that was, adopt a preacher or theological figure from the distant past and become acquainted with them thoroughly. Spend time with them. Read biographies about them. Learn from the story of their life and let God's faithfulness to them be a blessing to you in the present.

While I did not plan it this way, Nettleton has become that mentor to me. Reading about the life of Asahel Nettleton has made me desire to be a better pastor.

Though Nettleton was not a settled pastor as such, reading the testimonies of his tender dealings with those he came in contact with has shaped my dealings with others in my congregation. The line so oft quoted in Nettleton literature about his "intuitive perception of the workings of the human heart"[65] has challenged me to consider how deeper study of my congregants' lives, hearts, and spiritual needs could make me a better pastor and physician of the soul. Even acknowledging his faults, shortcomings, and limitations has deeply challenged me to examine more closely my own character, integrity, and ministerial practices.

The study involved in chapter 4 of this project challenged me deeply as a preacher who regularly stands before God's people. Learning of Nettleton's *ethos* among those he served pricked me deeply, and led me to thoughtful consideration about personal piety (or the lack of it) in my life and how that may be diminishing my authority as I stand to preach to God's people. Further, the study of his preaching challenged me to consider an analysis of my own preaching and to ponder, sadly, how many of my own sermons lack the skillful force of logic, creative word choice, and passionate delivery that so characterized Nettleton's preaching. While I am competent in the exposition of Scripture, and even in public speaking, comparing my sermons to Nettleton's sermons has made me feel inadequate. The study has driven me to desire better preaching habits.

Finally, this study moved me many times over the past few years to consider my love for the local church. Understanding Nettleton's commitment to the "waste places" has significant relevance for me and many other young ministers today. Frequently, God calls young men (as he did me) to small, struggling, out of the way churches with little opportunity for growth or change and it becomes burdensome to labor in such difficult places and see so few results. As I began to see from the pages of history

[65]Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, 2:549.

the way God stirred those small churches where Nettleton ministered and how God did great things in their midst, it has given me a new love and hope for such small "waste places" that still exist today. Though I now pastor a mid-sized congregation that is healthy and growing, I want my heart's desire to be contentment where God has placed me as I labor faithfully and pray for an outpouring of his Spirit similar to those witnessed by my "mentor," Asahel Nettleton.

Implications for Future Study

Throughout the course of this study, many interesting topics were unearthed that lay outside the scope and perimeters of this project. Nettleton was a minister of a unique sort, and over the course of his career, he served in many different roles and capacities, including revivalist, polemicist, personal evangelist, educator, and hymnologist. Future students of Nettleton and his ministry might consider pursuing deeper research on one of the following topics.

First, little is written about the role of music and specifically hymns in the life and ministry of Nettleton even though he edited, collected, and published what became the most popular hymn collection of his era. *Village Hymns for Social Worship*[66] as published first in 1824 and included arrangements by such names as John Newton, Isaac Watts, William Cowper, Charles Wesley, and Martin Luther. Future students of Nettleton might consider studying his use of hymns in his preaching, the place of hymns in his revivals, or the larger impact that the book itself had on the Second Great Awakening and the decades that followed. This study might prove especially fruitful and beneficial for someone studying sacred music or worship. George Hugh Birney's dissertation would be

[66]Asahel Nettleton, *Village Hymns for Social Worship: Selected and Original Designed as a Supplement to the Psalms and Hymns of Dr. Watts* (1824; repr., Ames, IA: International Outreach, 1997), see 'Preface to the Original Edition,' n. p.

an ideal place to begin this study, as Birney gives the most thorough treatment to date of this aspect of Nettleton's ministry.[67]

Another practical suggestion for future study would be a consideration of Nettleton's ministry in the "waste places" as a model for modern church revitalization. In recent years, a host of new missiological books have been released in the evangelical world about the revitalization of existing churches across the North American landscape.[68] As times have changed, many churches that thrived less than fifty years ago struggle today to keep the doors open. Into that scenario steps the model set forth in Nettleton's ministry. He intentionally sought out churches that often could get no one else to come and minister because of past division or shifting population. His methods of faithful pastoral care, fervent doctrinal preaching, and personal evangelism in that context might prove a fruitful model for those seeking to revitalize a contemporary church in a similar setting.[69]

Finally, a suggestion for future Nettleton students that has great bearing on the history of systematic theology might be a consideration of Nettleton's theological system and its relationship to the theology of Jonathan Edwards. Edwardsean studies encompass a vast array of topics and approaches, but the question of who really carried the banner of Edwardsean theology and thought is still somewhat unsettled. Eminent historian Mark Noll wrestled with this question in some depth and concludes that none of the "New

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[67]George Hugh Birney, "The Life and Letters of Asahel Nettleton: 1783-1844" (Ph.D. thesis, Hartford Theological Seminary, 1943), 86-113.

[68]An example would be Mark Clifton's recent book, which encourages men of God to consider "fighting for the glory of God, [by] replanting a dying church." Mark Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory: Revitalizing Dying Churches* (Nashville: B & H, 2016), 20. See also Bill Henard, *Can These Bones Live? A Practical Guide to Church Revitalization* (Nashville: B & H, 2015), 3-21; and Andrew M. Davis, *Revitalize: Biblical Keys to Helping Your Church Come Alive Again* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 18-20.

[69]Concurrent with the writing of this project, another dissertation was written by a student at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary exploring this very topic. See Michael Anthony Cobb, "The Integration of Revival Methodology, Reformed Theology and Church Revitalization in the Evangelistic Ministry of Asahel Nettleton" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 1-18.

Divinity" men (Bellamy, Hopkins, Edwards Jr., and Timothy Dwight) *truly* carried Edwardsean thought forward, but all revised Edwardsean Calvinism in ways that made it unrecognizable to Edwards' own thought.[70] Nettleton claimed the mantle in some ways, returning to Edwardsean views on depravity and making much of Edwards' categories of natural ability and moral inability. Did Nettleton resurrect the real theological system of Edwards after it had been watered down and innovated by his apparent successors? Was the system of theology and revivals that Nettleton espoused closely akin to those of Edwards? These questions beg to be answered by future students of evangelist Asahel Nettleton.

In many ways, Asahel Nettleton is indeed history's "forgotten evangelist."[71] Despite the tremendous results his ministry produced and despite the powerful testimony of his life and labors, it is unlikely that he will ever step out from the shadow of Charles Finney or stand alongside names like Dwight Moody or Billy Sunday.[72] However, for those willing to take the time to learn of Nettleton and his powerful ministry of revivals, there will almost certainly be a blessing. For in him, they will discover an uncommonly ordinary man through whom God accomplished extraordinary things. As this rhetorical analysis of Nettleton's preaching has produced challenging and thoughtful conclusions for today's contemporary church, future studies of other aspects of his life and ministry will continue to challenge and edify the church and keep his legacy alive.

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[70]Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 269-76. Noll treats Edwards' legacy extensively in chaps. 14 and 15.

[71]James Ehrhard, "Asahel Nettleton: The Forgotten Evangelist," *Reformation and Revival Journal* 6, no.1 (1997): 67-68.

[72]Although Thornbury, "Asahel Nettleton's Conflict," 118, is optimistic that this neglect is a "defect . . . in the process of being corrected."

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ABSTRACT

A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PREACHING
OF ASAHEL NETTLETON IN THE
SECOND GREAT AWAKENING

Terry Allen Leap II, Ph.D.
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017
Chair: Dr. Timothy K Beougher

This dissertation examines the life and ministry of American revivalist Asahel Nettleton (1783-1844) with special attention given to his preaching. The project is a rhetorical analysis seeking to dissect and understand what made Nettleton's preaching so effective during the Second Great Awakening and analyzing whether his rhetoric in preaching was consistent with his stated theological system.

Chapter 1 introduces the project by pointing out rising tensions created by the resurgence of Calvinistic theology in American churches in recent years, especially among Southern Baptists. Nettleton, a Calvinist, is presented as a model of a preacher who was evangelistically passionate and theologically consistent.

Chapter 2 gives an overview of Nettleton's life and ministry. Special attention is given to his revivals in New England between 1812-1822 and theological controversies in which he was engaged throughout his career, particularly his conflict with Charles Finney over the "new measures."

Chapter 3 establishes Nettleton's theological system. With emphasis given to his own preaching and notes, his theological system is ascertained in key areas and placed within the broader theological context of his times.

Chapter 4 begins with a preliminary discussion of the role of classical rhetoric in Christian homiletics. From there, a detailed analysis of Nettleton's preaching is

performed, using Aristotelian categories and the traditional canons of invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. Conclusions are drawn that show a consistent relationship between Nettleton's theological Calvinism and his passionate preaching. Also, conclusions are drawn concerning what made Nettleton's preaching successful, with attention given to the elements of arrangement and style in his sermons.

Chapter 5 begins with a necessary critique of Nettleton's ministry and methods. Implications for contemporary ministry follow with an emphasis on improving contemporary evangelistic preaching and challenging contemporary preachers to consider the cautious use of classical rhetoric as a tool to help become more effective and precise preachers. The chapter ends with personal reflections and suggestions for future studies.

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