Revivalist in Conflict: Asahel Nettleton and the Controversy Over "New Measures"

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REVIVALIST IN CONFLICT:

ASAHEL NETTLETON

AND

THE CONTROVERSY OVER 'NEW MEASURES'!

by

Frederick W. Evans, Jr.

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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INTRODUCTION

To inform a Protestant American, at least one of fundamentalist or conservative evangelical persuasion, that a man by the name of Asahel Nettleton once withstood Charles Grandison Finney over the latter's evangelistic methods is enough to suggest that the former was an enemy of the gospel and of the souls of men. For a century and a half the methods and message of Finney, the premier revivalist of his era (1792-1875), have held almost undisputed sway on the American evangelistic scene. Finney Lives On is not only the title of a recent biography\(^1\) but an historical fact. The Finney influence continues strong, and the Finney name calls forth admiration and even awe among a sizeable segment of the Christian community. The noted evangelist did not hesitate to infer that those who opposed him were fighting against God, and most present-day evangelicals would tend to agree.

Woe, therefore, to the memory of Asahel Nettleton, Charles Finney's older contemporary (1783-1844) and no mean evangelist in his own right, for sounding an alarm against Finney and his 'New Measures,' charging that because of such "irregularities ... the character of revivals had gone back half a century."\(^2\) Moreover, Nettleton not only spoke out against what he considered Finney's excesses but actively sought to halt their spread. In spite of physical weakness, he invaded Finney territory in Upstate New York and later in the New York City area in hopes of reversing the tide which the New York evangelist had generated. Surely, to all Finney partisans, this proves that Nettleton was an

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\(^2\) Letter, Asahel Nettleton to John Frost, March 28, 1827, Hartford Seminary Foundation Archives, Nettleton Papers.
obstructionist and worse. Even those who hold no particular brief for Finney have concluded that his adversary was "a crabby old man fighting vainly for the status quo" or possibly "touched by jealousy." No matter who renders the judgment, Asahel Nettleton would seem to stand condemned.

Yet here and there one uncovers tributes to the man which apparently belie the popular - or unpopular - image. One historian of revivals has written of Nettleton's own evangelistic career:

Dr. Nettleton's methods were remarkably sane and discriminating. He emphasized a dependence on the Holy Spirit as the indispensable condition of a revival. Ministers and churches were not to try to 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 sinners. The results of his work were invariably lasting.

Going back closer to Nettleton's time, we have Scotland's Andrew Bonar, not only admiring the American's life and labors, but writing a laudatory biography of him. While the Mercersburg theologian, John W. Nevin, who as a college student had responded to Nettleton's preaching, observed that the revivalistic "system appeared under its best character, it is well known, in his hands, and was altogether different from what it became afterwards in the hands of such men as Finney and Gallagher."

Couple these testimonials with certain estimates of the long-term consequences of Charles Finney's ministry and Asahel Nettleton is no longer cast in

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an altogether unfavorable light. One of Finney’s early evangelistic assistants wrote his old chief some years later:

Let us look over the fields where you and others and myself have labored as revival ministers, and what is now their moral state? What was their state within three months after we left them? I have visited and revisited many of these fields, and gazed in spirit to see the sad, frigid, carnal, contentious state into which the churches had fallen—and fallen very soon after our first departure from among them.7

Even more damaging is the autobiographical statement of Asa Mahan, Finney’s colleague at Oberlin College in after years, regarding the pastors and evangelists engaged in the revival movement, that “among them all—and I was personally acquainted with nearly every one of them—I cannot recall a single man, brother Finney and father Nash excepted, who did not after a few years lose his unction, and become equally disqualified for the office of evangelist and that of pastor.”8 Cross in his book has documented the fall of several Finney co-workers.9 Moreover, the book’s title, The Burned-Over District, borrowed from Finney’s description of the spiritual desolation left behind by earlier exhorters,10 suggests a not entirely salutary effect of Finney’s own revivals in the region. It was Bevin’s severe judgment that “years of faithful pastoral service on the part of a different class of ministers, working in a wholly different style, have hardly yet sufficed to restore to something like spiritual fruitfulness and beauty the field in Northern New York over which the system passed as a wasting fire, in the fulness of its strength.”11

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8 Quoted by Warfield, ibid., pp. 26,7.
9 Cross, op. cit., Chapter 11, pp. 185-97.
10 Charles G. Finney, Memoirs (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1903), pp. 77,8
11 Quoted by G. Frederick Wright, Charles Grandison Finney (Boston: Broughton, Mifflin, 1891), p. 65.
Doubtless different observers would, according to their point of view, arrive at differing evaluations of the two contending revivalists. It is not the purpose of this study to pass any final judgment on their relative effectiveness. What the more favorable estimates of Nettleton's ministry and the less sanguine appraisals of Finney's do serve to point up is the significance of the one who has been all but forgotten in the attention and adulation paid the other. There can be no question that Charles G. Finney in his day was riding, and in a measure creating, the wave of the future. Nor is there any doubt that Asahel Nettleton was the immediate loser in his refusal to 'cooperate with the inevitable.' But this does not void his long-range importance. Sometimes history is kinder to vanquished than to victor.

In two related areas especially, the Nettleton story has some relevance for this latter day. A single-minded man whose life was evangelism, Nettleton represented a distinctive evangelistic approach. Although the first of the full-time itinerant evangelists, he might fairly be considered the last evangelist in the Calvinistic tradition of Edwards. Almost all evangelists after him, from Finney to Graham, were to preach an essentially different message, beginning with human need and stressing human response. For Nettleton, however, the starting-point was the offended glory of God and the sovereignty of Divine grace. The universality of the gospel for him was to be found, not in Christ's dying for all men, but in the fact that Christ's death for the elect was to be proclaimed to all. It is of more than passing interest that today, one hundred fifty years later, there is a turning back to this God-centered emphasis. One advocate of a return to a Nettleton-type evangelism has stated:

While we must always remember that it is our responsibility to proclaim salvation, we must never forget that it is God who saves. It is God who brings men and women under the sound of the gospel, and it is God who
brings them to faith in Christ. Our evangelistic work is the instrument that He uses for this purpose, but the power that saves is not in the instrument; it is in the hand of the One who uses the instrument.  

Closely connected with the evangelistic message are the methods employed to further it. The same present-day writer goes on to say:

If we forget that it is God's prerogative to give results when the gospel is preached, we shall start to think that it is our responsibility to secure them. And if we forget that only God can give faith, we shall start to think that the making of converts depends, in the last analysis, not on God, but on us, and that the decisive factor is the way in which we evangelize. And this line of thought, consistently followed through, will lead us far astray.

Just how far astray he proceeds to suggest:

If we regarded it as our job, not simply to present Christ, but actually to produce converts - to evangelize, not only faithfully, but successfully - our approach to evangelism would become pragmatic and calculating. We should conclude that our basic equipment, both for personal dealing and for public preaching, must be twofold. We must have, not merely a clear grasp of the meaning and application of the gospel, but also an irresistible technique for inducing a response. We should, therefore, make it our business to try and develop such a technique. And we should evaluate all evangelism, our own and others', by the criterion, not only of the message preached, but also of visible results. If our own efforts were not bearing fruit, we should conclude that our technique still needed improving. If they were bearing fruit, we should conclude that this justified the technique we had been using. We should regard evangelism as a battle of wills between ourselves and those to whom we go, a battle in which victory depends on our firing off a heavy enough barrage of calculated effects. Thus our philosophy of evangelism would become terrifyingly similar to the philosophy of brainwashing.

All of this bears directly on the issues which set Asahel Nettleton over against Charles G. Finney. Indeed, it is almost a contemporary restatement of Nettleton's charges. To be sure, both men had their evangelistic techniques. It could not be otherwise. Lyman Beecher's Autobiography notes that Nettleton "set snares for sinners" while Finney "rode them down in a


13 Ibid., pp. 27-8.
cavalry charge," that Nettleton, "being crafty, took them with guile" while Finney, "being violent, took them by force."14 Nonetheless, the two men were far apart in the place and prominence which they assigned to their respective techniques. Finney unabashedly declared that a revival was "not a miracle" but "a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means,"15 and he set about to discover and utilize those means. However, if Finney was supremely confident that his 'New Measures' would bring about the desired result, Nettleton, for whom revival was ever a miracle, became increasingly cautious lest his means get in the way of God.

It is to the source and course and outcome of their controversy over revival measures that this study would now direct itself. Because Finney wrote more widely and influenced more largely, most accounts of the conflict have told the story from his side - or, at least, on the strength of his information. In this instance, however, there will be a conscious effort made, with the help of Nettleton's correspondence, to picture the issue through other eyes as well.


CHAPTER 1

REVIVALS RETURN TO NEW ENGLAND

Although Charles Finney will be sharply contested in the events which are to be related, there can be little disputing his statement that "a revival of religion presupposes a declension."\(^1\) So it was with the revivals in ancient Israel associated with the names of such kings as Hezekiah and Josiah. Under their royal predecessors loyalty to Israel's God had become apostasy, with dire consequences, and only a marked return and reviving restored true joy to king and people. So, too, has it been in the history of the Church. The ebb-tides of spiritual life have been reversed only by timely phenomena which fall under the heading of revival movements. Even the Church of the Middle Ages could not have been sustained without its periodic monastic revivals. As for the Churches of the Reformation, which began in perhaps the most notable revival of all, they have invariably declined, only to regather strength through revivals, such as the Puritan and Evangelical, each of which was a virtual reformation in itself.

In this study, however, we use the term 'revival' not in the general religious or even the definitely Christian sense. We will be applying it to a still more specific and American institution known as 'revivalism' - i.e., the setting apart of special seasons and the scheduling of special services, or simply the use of regular services, with the deliberate aim of fostering and promoting a revival. Moreover, we do well to focus upon revivalism in its peculiarly American character. For over two hundred years "it is revivalism more than any other phenomenon that has supplied the landmarks in our religious

\(^1\)Finney, Lectures, op. cit., p. 9.
history - the undulations, upheavals, points of departure, and lines of continuity. Furthermore, both of the antagonists in the 19th Century drama that will claim our attention were fully committed to revivalism and, in fact, were considered the leading revivalists of their day. Outwardly they were to differ as to the steps that were justified in bringing such revivals to pass. Then, too, they had deeper differences than met the eye. Both, however, were representatives of the revivalistic system which is still followed at the local level by multiplied thousands of American churches and on a wider scale by mass evangelists who would further the cause of 'revival in our time.'

What might be the genesis of revivalism with its conscious effort to promote or, at least, cooperate with heaven in the reviving of God's people and the awakening of the unconverted? McLoughlin dates revivalism, as we know it today, from the early 1800's. "It was in the second great awakening that 'modern revivalism' began." Sweet, for his part, sees its antecedents in the 'election sermons' preached annually in the New England colonies, especially from 1700 on. It would seem, however, that Perry Miller and those who follow him have a strong case for tracing it back to Solomon Stoddard, the long-lived (1643-1729) and imperious minister of Northampton who was both Jonathan Edwards' grandfather and predecessor. Like other ministers of his time, Stoddard adhered to the 'Half-Way Covenant' whereby children of those who could not testify to the required salvation experience were granted baptism

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and limited church privileges. Unlike other Puritan divines, however, Stoddard saw these 'Half-Way' members and their children as candidates for conversion and deliberately set out to bring them into a full church relationship. In so doing he reaped five 'harvests,' as he called them, the first in 1679 and the last in 1718. He could report that "the better part of the Young People in the Town seemed mainly concerned for their eternal salvation" and thus, in Miller's words, "won Northampton the honor . . . of being the most 'enthusiastical' town in the colonies." ⁶

Stoddard's impress on the history of revivalism cannot be denied in view of his influence upon Edwards and the subsequent role the latter played in the First Great Awakening. Although he was later to renounce the Half-Way Covenant in the interests of a converted membership, Edwards from the start stood with his grandfather in looking for periodic 'harvests,' not only from within the Northampton Church, but from the surrounding area as well. Miller suggests that from the time of Stoddard's funeral in 1729 Edwards "knew . . . he had to produce a Stoddardian harvest" and goes on to say that "in the spring of 1735 he made more than good; his revival was spectacular." ⁷ Whether the Northampton revival was as much the human product as Miller avers is highly debatable, for from the late 1720's on similar local awakenings had been breaking out in the Middle Colonies and constituting the first phase of a Great Awakening. What is beyond question is that this first phase of a larger revival movement was anchored to particular churches and associated with the preaching of their own ministers or invited ministers from neighboring parishes.


⁷Ibid., p. 136.
In 1740, however, the character of the Awakening changed suddenly and dramatically, and all the way from South Carolina to Massachusetts, with the triumphant tour of the eloquent exhorter, George Whitefield. Under Whitefield's Calvinistic preaching, but hardly Calvinistic preaching style, the Awakening broke through the levees of established church life and not without beneficial results. The poet Whittier later wrote how

... the flood of emotion deep and strong,
Troubled the land as it swept along,
But left a result of holier lives,
Tenderer mothers and wiser women... 8

Yet there were reservations even in the mind of such a friend of revivals as Jonathan Edwards. When Whitefield, in the course of his tour, spent a memorable weekend in the Edwards home, the host pressed the visitor at several points. 'Edwards asked if his guest did not give far too much credit to impulses, and conveyed his dislike of Whitefield's readiness to pronounce other people unconverted without meticulous examination. He also questioned Whitefield's wisdom in insinuating that the people ought to forsake "unconverted ministers."' 9 It was Edwards' impression, rightly or wrongly, that "Mr. Whitefield liked me not so well for opposing these things." 10

However, it was not the large-hearted Whitefield who would bring the Awakening into disrepute, but a number of others who sought to emulate him when he was gone, making up in zeal what they lacked in wisdom. Most notorious of these was James Davenport, scion of a founding Connecticut family, who

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9 Miller, op. cit., p. 144.

abandoned his church on Long Island to itinerate, more often than not uninvited, among the churches of New England. Regarding Davenport, one has written: "Although there were powerful emotions at work, there was no hysteria before his ill-starred appearance."¹¹ Assaulting Connecticut in mid-1741, he roused his audiences to a frenzy, denouncing all non-cooperative ministers as unconverted and urging their people to withdraw and form new congregations. One excess led to another as Davenport, forced out of Connecticut, headed for Boston where he again outdid himself and was deported. It soon became apparent that the friends of the revival had far more to fear from him than did its enemies.

Even before Whitefield appeared on the scene, and well before Davenport, there had been a considerable anti-revival party centered in Boston. Its members had looked askance at Stoddard's Northampton "harvests" and were even more disturbed by the revival which broke out under Stoddard's greater grandson. Thus, forces for and against revivals were already lining up in the 1730's. During the Whitefield sweep of 1740 opposing voices were largely drowned out in the popular acclaim accorded the mighty preacher. Only temporarily, however, as, with Whitefield back in England, the Old Lights or anti-revivalists could now point to Davenport and his ilk as proof that revivals were bad. While the revival party, or New Lights, could, in support of their record, point to "the increase in church membership . . . variously estimated at twenty to fifty thousand and . . . the noticeable elevation in public morals."¹² They could also cite the scores of new regular Congregational churches which were the product of the Awakening. In rebuttal, the Old Lights could ask about the church splits which in Connecticut alone had resulted in


¹² Ibid., p. 9.
irregular congregations by the tens.

It was the excesses spawning the separatist churches, more than the New Light-Old Light controversy itself, which brought the New England phase of the Awakening to a standstill by the mid-1740's. For the New Lights the post-revival period was one of consolidation and also of theological formulation. The theologizing of these revivalists was indeed unusual because "in Western Christendom, the pietist movement did not generally produce a theological school." But then not every revival movement could boast a Jonathan Edwards. After being forced out of his Northampton pastorate, Edwards, during the Stockbridge years which followed, proceeded to systematize his thought in a series of remarkable treatises. Whereupon Edwards' two ablest disciples, Joseph Bellamy and Samuel Hopkins, built upon their master's foundation until they had constructed the so-called 'New Divinity.' "Within a generation after the Awakening these three theologians had provided enough grist for the doctrinal mills to keep other theologians grinding for generations to come."14

During the pre-Revolutionary period the New Lights, while espousing revivals in theory, became more and more taken up with the fine points of theology. In part, this was to counter the Unitarian drift of many an Old Light. However, the development of a Calvinistic system friendly to revivals had the effect of formalizing the New Light movement and thus rather effectively cutting the nerve of revival activity. As a consequence, neither the Edwardsean Calvinists nor the older anti-revival Calvinists were in a condition to hurl back the flood-tide of Deism and infidelity which swept in from Europe both before and after the War for Independence. English Deism had been current for

13 Gustad, op. cit., p. 138

14 Ibid., p. 137
decades, but the French and Indian War had given it renewed impetus in the Colonies as church life was often interrupted and Sunday observance increasingly disregarded. Then came the Revolution and with it the French connection, which opened the minds of multiplied Americans to the intoxicating ideas emanating from Paris. In the new nation "Voltaire and Volney and Peine were welcomed by leading minds as emancipators from religious tyranny, the proper sequel to political emancipation."\(^{15}\)

It is difficult for us to comprehend the extent to which French skepticism captured the American imagination and reduced the churches to tight little islands in the midst of a sea of infidelity. There was hardly a man in public life who was not tinged with some infidel notions, and the colleges scarcely knew a student who made a vital Christian profession. Accompanying this intellectual rebellion was a revolution in moral standards which displayed itself the more flagrantly the further West one journeyed. There is justification for Sweet's statement that "in the period of the Revolution, and in the years immediately following, religious and moral conditions of the country as a whole reached the lowest ebb in the entire history of the American people."\(^{16}\) For a time the heirs of Edwards seemed paralyzed by these developments, coming a short half-century after the Great Awakening. By the year 1790, however, they were commencing to shake themselves and to look for revival days again.

Edward D. Griffin, who was prominent in the revival movement which followed, first as a minister and then as President of Williams College, after noting that "long before the death of Whitefield in 1770 extensive revivals in America had ceased," - and so they had, at least, in Griffin's New England -


\(^{16}\) Sweet, op. cit., p. 117.
went on to describe the change which now took place:

About the year 1792 commenced three series of events of sufficient importance to constitute a new era. That year the blood began to flow in Europe... That year was established at Kettering in England the first in the continued series of societies which have... introduced the age of missions and of active benevolence. And that year or the year before began the unbroken series of American revivals. There was a revival in North Yarmouth, Me., in 1791. In the summer of 1792 one appeared in Lee, in the county of Berkshire. The following November, the first that I had the privilege of witnessing showed itself on the borders of East Haddam and Lyme, Conn., which apparently brought to Christ about a hundred souls. Since that time revivals have never ceased.17

By the year 1800 revivals had almost become the rule in many New England communities, especially in Connecticut. Ingatherings of church members were sometimes larger in one year than for the twenty-five years previous. Even the New England colleges, with the possible exception of Harvard, enjoyed revival seasons. It was at Yale, however, that the revivals of greatest consequence manifested themselves, revivals associated with the name of a grandson of Jonathan Edwards, Timothy Dwight. So significant was Dwight in the Second Awakening and in the subsequent history of revivalism that a recent writer on the subject introduces it with the words, "In the beginning was Dwight."18 A man of enormous energy and overpowering personality who was equally opposed to French infidelity and, what he considered its handmaid, Republican politics, Dwight assumed the Yale Presidency in 1795. Almost immediately he sought "to break the enemy's grip" upon the College where "a pitiful minority, clinging desperately to an inherited belief in Christianity, hardly dared display its loyalty to a faith generally discredited and scorned."19


Dwight's aim was revival and his method was frontal attack. After challenging the Yales infidels to debate and putting them to rout, he "followed his initial success with a heavy cannonading" in the form of a series of lectures on the Evidences of Divine Revelation. Gradually he drove the enemy from its last outposts, and finally in the Spring of 1802 a momentous revival swept the campus, with fully a third of Yale's two hundred thirty students 'hopefully converted.' Other revivals under Dwight's aegis were to follow in 1807, 1812 and 1815, until membership in the College Church, open only to those who professed conversion, climbed to over half the student body. Even more momentous for the future, Dwight gave himself to the theological training of the increasing number of Yale men who were offering themselves for the ministry. This included imbuing them with his own convictions regarding revivals, for Dwight's theology was first and last a revival theology. Many of the names that will figure prominently in this study, including that of Asahel Nettleton himself, are those of men who sat at the feet of the Yale President. "From a great commander they learned how to outmaneuver the foe."

A prominent characteristic of Dwight's revivalism was his emphasis on the use of 'means' to carry it forward. He himself had employed all manner of devices - debates, lectures, sermons, interviews, and organized prayer - to recapture Yale for the faith. Even so, he "exhorted others to 'use the same means of grace' with all the power of his forceful personality." Yes, only God could save, but, "in Dwight's opinion, man himself must use ceaselessly all the means at his disposal toward that great end. In fact, the work of

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20 Ibid., p. 301.

21 Ibid., p. 303.

salvation was as arduous as it was great. No object could be attained without efforts proportional to it; but, if it was conscientiously pursued, Dwight thought there was sound reason to expect success. The proper use of means could and would force a man to choose between Christ and infidelity. And choose he must.

If this emphasis on 'means' was characteristic of Dwight, it was a considerable departure from that of his maternal grandparent, the great Edwards. Mead acutely observes: "Edwards' connection with the First Awakening was much different from Dwight's connection with the Second. Edwards preached sincerely and vividly of what he had experienced but apparently was genuinely surprised when the revival began. Dwight deliberately set out to start a revival in the college and among the eminent men of the state." Indeed, according to Mead, Dwight, as distinct from Edwards, "represented no special school in New England Divinity." Rather was he a practical revivalist out to secure those results which he felt would glorify God. If the success of revivalism required a sinner's actively utilizing the means at his disposal, then those actions were to be considered 'good,' Jonathan Edwards to the contrary notwithstanding.

Such a change in emphasis, with the stress now placed increasingly on human responsibility, and even capability, as against Divine sovereignty, would have many repercussions. Concerning Dwight and the two who carried his emphasis on 'means' still further, Lyman Beecher and Nathaniel Taylor, it has been said: "Their actions resulted in a modification of Calvinism to the point

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23 Cunningham, op. cit., p. 327.


that it could hardly be recognized as such. These men were never so concerned
with building a coherent scheme of theological thought as they were in winning
conversions."26 Under them Calvinism gave way to Evangelicalism; under their
children evangelical piety would be supplanted by a religious moralism.

Caught between the revivalism of Edwards and that of Dwight - for a time
torn between the two - was the subject of this study. We shall see how the
logical extension of Dwight's doctrine of 'means' into Finney's policy of 'New
Measures' forced Asahel Nettleton to follow out the logic of his own deeply-
rooted convictions and stand against the latter. In 1800, however, the alter-
natives were not nearly as clear as they would be in 1827. The revivals which
marked the beginning of the Second Awakening in New England were much like the
one which had come to Northampton in 1735. They were centered in the local
church and were presided over by the minister or a brother pastor specifically
invited to help him. Often scores would respond with no visible means to urge
them on except the ministry of the stated services. On occasion additional
meetings would be held in private homes. Again and again there are references
to the lack of physical and emotional excitement and testimonials to the
fact that "the moral effects were salutary; the division in the church was
healed; attention to services greatly increased; various immoralities were
stopped; and family worship was observed in the homes."27 Truly, Jonathan
Edwards would have found no fault and could have asked for no more.

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26 James E. Johnson, "Charles G. Finney and a Theology of Revivalism,"

27 Quoted by Strickland, op. cit., p. 54.
When the New Measures Controversy was raging in 1826 and the year following it seemed that Asahel Nettleton was already an old man, and, indeed, he himself rather felt that way. In a note to the Presbyterian minister at Durham, New York, where he had gone for respite in the midst of the conflict, Nettleton wrote on April 21, 1827: "This day I am 44 years of age . . . I feel thankful that a kind providence has led me to this place . . . I cannot express my feelings now. But in view of the uncertainty of life would say that I am rather happy in the thought of laying my bones in your burying ground." 1 If Nettleton thought of himself as being on the brink of eternity, it is not surprising that others also saw him as older than his years and that a social historian of our time should mistakenly characterize him as "the famed evangelist of the Great Revival in 1800" who by 1827 was "too old to remember accurately his own earlier methods." 2 The truth is that "during the 'Awakening of 1800' there were no outstanding evangelists" because "the feeling against itinerants was still strong." 3

As for Nettleton, he was not even a professing Christian in 1800 but a seventeen year-old who was just beginning to feel the pangs of conscience and spiritual concern that would lead to his conversion in late summer of the following year. A product of the 1800 Awakening he most certainly was, but hardly its leader. Nor could anyone have guessed that Nettleton would one

1 Letter, Asahel Nettleton to Seth Williston, Hartford Seminary Foundation Archives, Nettleton Papers.
2 Cross, op. cit., pp. 163,4.
day develop into an evangelist of note. He was not the grandson of Jonathan Edwards, as was Timothy Dwight, nor the son of aristocratic parents, as was Matheniel Taylor. Far from it, he was the second of six children born to a farm couple in the Southern Connecticut community of North Killingworth. The date of his birth, April 21, 1783. His father had served two hitchers in the Continental Army and then settled down with his bride to a rather humdrum post-Revolutionary life. Neither Samuel nor Amy Nettleton could qualify for full membership in the local church and seemed content with owning the 'Half-Way Covenant' and presenting their children for baptism on that basis. Although good moral people, they gave the three sons and three daughters only a limited amount of religious instruction for that time. "There was nothing in the background of young Asahel to explain his later reputation as a minister of exceptional personal piety."4

Man, however, is incurably religious, and young people especially, given any exposure at all, are 'subject to religious impressions.' Whether at home or in the district school, Asahel Nettleton had been exposed to the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Then, too, during his formative years revivals had come back to Connecticut, and conversion again became a live possibility for teenagers and oldsters alike. It was this combination of the Shorter Catechism and a revival atmosphere which first set him to thinking. "At one time in particular, while alone in the fields, and looking toward the setting sun, he was powerfully impressed with the thought that he and all men must die."5 Was it the answer to the 19th Question of the Catechism which stimulated such

4Ibid., p. 18.

an impression: "All mankind, by their fall, lost communion with God, are under
his wrath and curse, and so made liable to all the miseries of this life, to
death itself, and to the pains of hell forever"? Possibly so. In any event,
the impression was not lasting. Mottston himself later said that during
his growing-up years, although "taught that God would punish sinners . . . I
did not believe that I should suffer for the few offences of which I had been
guilty." 7

It was not until the Fall of 1800 that what Bunyan termed the "scum of
conviction" began to take hold upon him. As a youth he had "had no sympathy
with the Puritan point of view" 8 and therefore felt no qualms about attending
the village's Thanksgiving Ball that Autumn. "The next morning," however,
"while alone, and thinking with pleasure on the scenes of the preceding night,
and of the manner in which he purposed to spend the day, in company with some
of his young companions, the thought suddenly rushed upon his mind, we must
all die, and go to the judgment, and with what feelings shall we then reflect
upon these scenes!" Suddenly "all those amusements in which he had taken
delight were overcast with gloom," and from that moment forward he "dwelt
much on the scenes of death, judgment and eternity . . . Although he had con-
soled himself with the thought that he was as good as others around him, and
that his condition was, of course, as safe as theirs; yet he now felt conscious
that he was unprepared to meet his God." 9

6 The Westminster Shorter Catechism with Proofs from the Scriptures
(Philadelphia: Board of Christian Education, United Presbyterian Church in

7 Quoted by Tyler, op. cit., p. 13

8 Birney, op. cit., p. 20.

9 Tyler, op. cit., p. 15.
What he went through over the course of the next ten months seems passing strange today, and even to those who have come up in the most fervently evangelical or strictly fundamentalist circles. "The road which the penitent sinner had to travel in those days was long and hard. The newer theology which emerged a generation later offered an easier way."¹⁰ Within another fifteen years, in fact, Nathaniel Taylor would introduce the new revivalism from his pulpit in New Haven's Center Church. "At the close of every sermon he always repeated the imperative demand that they choose one or the other and stressed the necessity and possibility of their doing so at once."¹¹ Conversion could take place quickly, without passing through a drawn-out agony of conviction. In introducing this change of emphasis, radical for New England, Taylor was eventually joined by his great friend and 'alter ego,' Lyman Beecher. Looking back on his own conversion and subsequent ministry, Beecher would write:

I can see now that if I had had the instruction I give to inquirers, I should have come out bright in a few days... For cases like mine, Brainard's Life is a most undesirable thing. It gave me a tinge for years. So Edwards on the Affections is a most overwhelming thing and to common minds the most entangling... I have used my evangelical philosophy all my lifetime and relieved people without number out of the sloughs of high Calvinism.¹²

For Asahel Nettleton, however, there would be no avoiding the 'Slough of Despond.' He would continue in agony of soul for the greater part of a year. At the time of his coming under 'conviction' he and his friends had been planning to set up a dancing school. Now, without explanation, he would have nothing more to do with it. In fact, he did not reveal his inner struggles to anybody. He hoped that others would join him in pursuit of

¹⁰Birney, op. cit., p. 22.

¹¹Mead volume on Taylor, op. cit., pp. 59,60.

religion; however, his pride kept him from opening his heart to them beyond uttering a general word of warning to some young person against continuing in the path of folly or penning a note to the same effect. Perhaps this was the beginning of Nettleton's letter-writing propensity, which in later years would be welcomed by his many friends, yet prove an occasional source of embarrassment. Even so, his warnings now were ridiculed by some and appreciated by others.

His friend and biographer, Bennet Tyler, suggests that, when Nettleton first became anxious for his soul, he did not have any true conceptions of the depravity of his heart, only that "he was not in a safe condition." But for one brought up in the Reformed and Puritan tradition there could be no genuine conversion without a keen sense of heart depravity. A vague sense of sin would not do. The story of Nettleton's extended anguish is basically that of his coming to the place where he could say with the Old Testament prophet, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and ... exceedingly corrupt," and go on to make the personal application of the New Testament apostle, "I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing." To this day people are slow to arrive at such a conclusion, and Nettleton was no different. "As is common with persons when awakened to a sense of their danger, he went about to establish his own righteousness." This he did, not only by abandoning his former amusements and forsaking the company of old friends, but by going out into the fields and woods at night and for hours at a time crying to God for mercy.

13 Tyler, op. cit., p. 16.
14 Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 6:18 (American Standard Version)
15 Tyler, op. cit., p. 16.
As might be expected, the wretched youth was the more devastated when no answer seemed to come. He began to doubt the Bible and even to question the existence of God. Only to have the thought come to him, "What if the Bible should prove to be true?" If so, he felt himself lost forever. "These struggles in his mind," says Tyler, "led him to a more just knowledge of his character and condition." Even this, however, was not sufficient to give him a proper sense of his own depravity. It was the reading of Edwards' Narrative of Surprising Conversions and The Life and Diary of David Brainerd, so ill-recommended later on by Baecher, which now plunged him into deeper despair. "One day, while alone in the field, engaged in prayer, his heart rose against God, because He did not hear and answer his prayers." Just then there occurred to him the Pauline words, "The carnal mind is enmity against God." It came with such overwhelming force, this further revelation of his depravity, that he fell prostrate on the ground.

There was yet another obstacle in the way. In his own conversion narrative he tells of his attitude at the time toward God: "I accused God of the greatest injustice in requiring me to return to Him ... I considered God obligated to love me." Very plainly young Wattleton was having his problems with the Calvinistic doctrines of Divine sovereignty and electing grace. Tyler writes:

There was much talk respecting these doctrines, at that time, in North Killingworth. Some disbelieved and openly opposed them. He searched the Scriptures with great diligence to ascertain whether they are there taught; and although his heart was unrancorced to them, he dared not

16 Ibid., p. 17.
17 Ibid., p. 18.
18 Romans 8:7
19 Quoted by Tyler, op. cit., p. 13.
deny them, for he was convinced that they were taught in the Bible. He would sometimes say to himself, if I am not elected, I shall not be saved, even if I do repent - then the thought would arise, if I am not elected I shall never repent. This would cut him to the heart, and dash to the ground all his self-righteous hopes. For a long time he endured these conflicts in his mind. Meanwhile he became fully convinced, that the commands of God are perfectly just, that it was his immediate duty to repent, and that he had no excuse for continuing another moment a rebel against God. At the same time he saw that such was the wickedness of his heart, that he never should repent, unless God should subdue his heart by an act of sovereign grace.

Having come to this deep persuasion of God’s justice and his own depravity, Asahel Nettleton was on the verge of the conversion which he craved. After a final struggle he abandoned himself to sovereign grace, whereupon, in his own words, "an unusual calmness pervaded my soul, which I thought little of at first, except that I was freed from my awful convictions, and this sometimes grieved me, fearing I had lost all conviction."²¹ For several days he dared not suppose that he had received a new heart. Then, as his heart peace continued and as it seemed to be the same that other Christians enjoyed, "he began to think it possible that he might have passed from death unto life." Indeed, "the more he examined himself, the more evidence he found that a great change had been wrought in his views and feelings respecting divine things . . . The character of God now appeared lovely. The Saviour was exceedingly precious; and the doctrines of grace, towards which he had felt such bitter opposition, he contemplated with delight . . . He was ready to say with the Apostle, by the grace of God I am what I am."²²

Not long before he had derived no comfort from reading Jonathan Edwards' account of David Brainard's brief, blazing career. Now Asahel Nettleton, at

²⁰Ibid., p. 18.
²¹Quoted by Tyler, ibid., p. 14.
²²Ibid., p. 19.
least in the manner and matter of his conversion, was standing on common
ground with that other Connecticut youth of fragrant memory. What Edwards
wrote of Brainerd applied equally well to Nettleton:

His convictions of sin, preceding his first consolations in Christ, were exce-
ceedingly deep and thorough; his trouble and exercise of mind, by a
sense of sin and misery, very great and long continued; and the light
let into his mind at conversion and in progressive sanctification, ap-
ppears to have had its genuine humbling influence upon him, to have kept
him low in his own eyes . . . In his conversion he was brought to see
the glory of that way of salvation by Christ, that is taught in what are
called the doctrines of grace . . . It is very evident that Mr. Brainerd's
conversion was wholly correspondent to what is called the Calvinistical
scheme, and was the effect of those doctrines applied to his heart. 23

Not only Nettleton's experience but his attitude toward assurance was
typical of the older Calvinism. Twentieth Century Calvinists may talk with
confidence of the 'security of the believer,' but Calvinists of an earlier
time, giving diligence to make their calling and election sure, emphasized
rather the 'persistence of the saints.' So it was that Nettleton "had such
a deep and abiding sense of the deceitfulness of the human heart, and of the
danger of self-deception, that not only at this period, but ever afterwards,
he was exceedingly cautious in expressing his belief that he was accepted of
God." Instead, he would say, "I have no doubt that I have religious enjoy-
ment; but the question is, whether it be of the right kind." Or, as on an-
other occasion, "The most that I have ventured to say respecting myself, is,
that I think it possible I may get to heaven." 24 That was as far as he would
go. Whenever others would express a strong confidence in their salvation,
he was sure that they did not realize what tricks their hearts could play on
them.


Why describe at some length the psychology of Nettleton's conversion? For the good reason that what happened to the youth is a large explanation of the man. His salvation experience and the revival which it catalyzed in his home church, the Second Society of Killingworth, were to establish a pattern for all the subsequent revivals with which he was connected and the conversions associated with them. As Nettleton's recent biographer has expressed it:

His fear had been real panic, his repentance true agony, and the peace of mind which he finally achieved was deep and sweet. It was, in a very real sense, a period of preparation for the work he was to do. It made him sympathetic with the problems of others, but it also made him impatient with conversions too easily won.

Through it all a revivalist of a very particular sort was in the making.

Asahel Nettleton's road to conversion may have been tortuous, but the resultant changes in his life were pronounced. It has often been so with those who have traveled such a route. Nettleton's Scottish admirer, Andrew Bonar, suffered even longer pre-conversion distress but fifty years later could write in his diary:

Let me record it to the praise of the glory of divine grace and infinite mercy that for many years (indeed, as many as I can remember), since my first discovery of the sinner's way to God by Christ, I have never been allowed to lose my way to the mercy seat for a single day. I have not always had bright sunshine, but I have every day had sunlight, and not darkness in my soul."

In the case of the freshly-converted Nettleton, we are told that he "had the most intense desires to be instrumental in the salvation of his fellow men." Working in the fields, he would say to himself, "If I might be the means of saving one soul, I should prefer it to all the riches and honors of this world."

27 Tyler, op. cit., p. 21.
Soon, through the reading of the *Connecticut Evangelical Magazine*, the vision of the farm boy was further widened by accounts of the early ventures of William Carey's English Baptist Missionary Society and also of the London Missionary Society, both of which had been founded in the previous decade. The more he read the more desirous he was of going forth as a foreign missionary, if God should open the way. That would take some doing, however, for Nettleton's education had been limited to the village school. Then, too, he seemed bound to the farm for an extended period when his father died in an 1802 epidemic and Asahel became the sole support of the family.

Nonetheless, the inner compulsion to prepare himself for the ministry, and especially for missionary service, was strong. He begged and borrowed books, making the most of every spare moment for study. During the winter months he taught school, and many a winter evening the youthful teacher would himself recite to his minister. So it was that over the course of the next three years he was able to bring himself up to the minimum requirements for admission to Yale, beginning his freshman year in the fall of 1805. For a combination of reasons "he was never more than an average student."28 Necessarily he was away from New Haven a great deal of the time, returning home to help with planting and harvesting. In addition, he did school-teaching on the side to help pay expenses, all of which contributed to a less than exceptional academic record. Nor was he particularly prominent among the student body. Older than most and highly motivated, he was there for business only.

Not that he failed to make his mark. As might be expected, his influence was along religious lines. Exactly one hundred years later another Yale man was to leave a similar impress upon his contemporaries. Concerning

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28 Birney, *op. cit.*., p. 35.
William W. Borden, a classmate wrote: "No matter if some said he was too religious, or others that he was too narrow, or that he was heavy, there was one thing that nobody at Yale ever questioned - that was that he was strong . . . I can vouch that he was the strongest religious force in our class." The very same words might have been used to describe Asahel Nettleton. Nettleton needed to be strong, too. Although Yale had experienced a revival in 1802, by 1805 a new student generation that was stranger to the revival had taken over, with the result that Nettleton was the only 'professor of religion' in the entering class. Soon, however, he was joined by a close friend from his home community, Philander Parmelee, and the two young men, together with some others, formed a sort of 'Holy Club.' This band of enthusiasts were to be Timothy Dwight's shock troops as once again the Yale President sought to capture a Yale student body for Christ.

As before, the great end in view was revival, and, when it broke out in the winter of 1807-08, Nettleton had much to do with it. A friend and former roommate reminisced about those revival days:

Nettleton was no indifferent spectator, but among the first to discover indications of special religious impressions, and to seek out persons in a state of religious anxiety . . . Often did I see him with one or two heart-burdened youth of the youngest class, walking arm in arm in the college yard, before evening prayers, conversing upon the great interests of the soul . . . It was manifest that his conversation with such individuals, his silent and unostentatious labors, in connection with his Christian brethren in their meeting for prayer and conference, held a very prominent and important place in that memorable and joyful season. Here was something of a preview of the way in which Nettleton would go about his own revival ministry. Here, too, was a man after Timothy Dwight's heart. It was not only a tribute to Dwight's perception that he said of Nettleton at


30 Tyler, op. cit., p. 27.
about this time: "He will make one of the most useful men this country has ever seen."\[31\]

Great, however, as was the appreciation of the two for each other, the student was not overawed by the President. If need be, he could stand over against him on a theological issue. So he did in his senior year after Dwight, in a series of sermons, advanced the idea "that the prayers and strivings of awakened sinners, although they possess no moral goodness, are not to be regarded, in all cases, as positively sinful."\[32\] To Nettleton, who even before coming to Yale had cut his theological eye-teeth on Edwards, Bellamy and Hopkins, this was an error which compromised the doctrines of total depravity and sovereign grace. It also ran counter to his own discovery of the entire sinfulness of his pre-conversion religious observances. According to Tyler:

"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."\[33\] Once again, the convictions of the youth anticipated the positions that would be taken by the man.

This is not to suggest that Asahel Nettleton's convictions were by this time fully set. Just the year before he had been so troubled by doubts, perhaps brought on by overwork, that he briefly withdrew from his college course. Even past his fortieth birthday he seemed more flexible than many on certain theological points. There is his well-known 1824 letter to Lyman Beecher, which Beecher later presented as proof that Nettleton had once taken the more

\[31\] Birney, op. cit., p. 38.
\[32\] Tyler, op. cit., p. 28.
\[33\] Ibid., p. 30.
liberal position of Beecher and Taylor, a position which he came to repudiate. On the surface, it would seem that Beecher had a point. Wrote Nettleton:

... I believe it to be a matter of fact that you and I are really a different kind of Calvinists from what Unitarians have imagined ... I do suppose that we preach moral obligation and dependence different from many of our old divines - that in some things the Calvinism of Connecticut or New England has undergone an important change. Why not take this ground with Unitarians? We feel no concern for old Calvinism. Let them dispute it as much as they please; we feel bound to make no defense. Come home to the evangelical system now taught in New England.

While this sounds strangely inconsistent with the later and even the earlier Nettleton, it can be explained in part by his friendship for Beecher and his enthusiasm for Beecher's 'evangelical crusade' against Unitarianism. Beecher had an irresistible way about him, and Nettleton, who did not yet have to face the issues which would one day divide them, found it very easy to support Beecher against the common enemy, and on his friend's terms.

In 1809, however, it was a consistently Calvinistic Asahel Nettleton who graduated from Yale rather heavily burdened with debts. To satisfy his creditors, he secured a position as Butler to the College for the year 1809-10. During the day hours he supervised the food services, such as they were, while in the evening he pursued further studies under the direction of President Dwight. The following year he studied with the Congregational minister at Milford, Connecticut, looking forward to a licensure to preach, which was granted him by the New Haven West Association in May, 1811. Not that he had any thought of seeking a pastorate, for the vows of God were upon him to go to the mission field. In the previous year a number of students at Andover Theological Seminary, including Adoniram Judson and Nettleton's good friend, Samuel Mills, had laid out in forming the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Tyler tells us that, when Nettleton heard about it, "he

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lamented with tears that he could not have been there. He feared that it was an indication of Providence that he was not to be permitted to become a missionary."  

His missionary purpose, however, remained steadfast. Awaiting the call of the American Board or some other sending agency, he devoted himself, in the meanwhile, to supply preaching in what were known as 'waste places,' small or run-down churches which could not afford a regular minister. Connecticut, more than any other of the New England States, had lost population during the last decade of the 18th Century and the first decade of the 19th in an out-migration to Vermont, Western New York and the old Northwest Territory.  

The rural communities of Connecticut felt the losses especially, and many a village church now found it a struggle to survive. There were, howbeit, other reasons for the existence of the 'waste places,' as Asaheh Nettleton soon discovered. Why, he wondered, were there an unusual number of these churches which had seen better days in the southeast corner of the State? One thing, he learned, they shared in common. They were all churches that had been visited by the notorious James Davenport in the latter stages of the Great Awakening.

Intrigued, he investigated further, digging into the parish records of the Church in North Stonington. He was able to piece the story together with the help of entries, pamphlets written at the time, and the recollections of two or three of the oldest in the community. It seems that North Stonington had once had a large and flourishing congregation. On the eve of the Great Awakening they had called a new minister, Joseph Fish by name. Under Fish the

35 Tyler, op. cit., p. 34.

Church had shared largely in the spiritual benefits of the Awakening. In Fish's handwriting there appeared this entry for a certain memorable Sunday: "In this great and glorious day of grace were admitted in one day the following persons . . .," to which was attached a list of eighty names. No fewer than eighty had in one day joined a village Church on the strength of a conversion testimony.

Then, short months after this ingathering, James Davenport had come to Stonington. As Birney summarizes the sad story, Davenport soon decided "that Joseph Fish was not sufficiently enthusiastic over the Awakening. Fish, on his part, resented the uninvited intrusion of an outsider. He believed that there were enough signs that the Spirit of God was at work in the parish. A rivalry developed between them, and Davenport began to denounce the minister. He encouraged his own converts to withdraw from Fish's Church and set up a rival congregation," which they did, almost four hundred, including ninety-two members, breaking away. Whereupon Davenport, his mission accomplished, moved on to another town. Before long both churches were in a struggling condition. When finally reunited in 1827, they could claim but sixty members between them.

All the distressing details Mattlenton uncovered seventy years after the event. It was not only what Davenport had done which alarmed him; it was the way he carried it off. Joseph Fish had written a pamphlet describing some of the interloper's methods - his encouraging noise and outcries in the services as signs of sincerity, his quickness in declaring people converted, his

37 Cited by Birney, op. cit., p. 51.

38 Ibid., p. 52.

39 Excerpted by Tyler, op. cit., pp. 36-39.
numbering of converts, his denouncing of those who opposed him as unconverted, his promoting of visions and trance-like states, his turning his followers loose as public exhorters. Nettleton made a mental note of all these irregularities, forever renounced them for himself and determined to oppose them should they again rear their heads. More particularly, he purposed in his heart to be a friend to 'settled' or 'standing' ministers, as pastors of churches were called in those days. If Davenport broke down the influence of ministers, he, Nettleton, would do everything possible to hold up their hands. "He was convinced that without a settled ministry there could be no rational prospect of building up churches, or of enjoying genuine revivals of religion."40

Nor was the threat to the ministry altogether a thing of the past, for the Second Awakening, even in New England, had produced its own crop of zealots. There were once again self-styled evangelists within Nettleton's own Congregational connection who conducted themselves much as Davenport had. One of these, a James Davis, sought to win Nettleton over to the Davenport way of doing things. Supposedly a missionary to the Indians, Davis spent much of his time seeking to evangelize his fellow Yankees. He charged that settled ministers were opposed to revivals and insisted that there could be no revival in any community unless the minister were first 'broken down.' Having just traced the trouble in the North Stonington Church back to Davenport, Nettleton was hardly inclined to agree with Davis. Still less so, when, on inquiry, he learned that Davis and his kind had left more than one wrecked congregation behind them. In fact, the various Congregational Associations had sought to curb their activities, only to meet with defiance. It was little wonder that

40 Ibid., p. 40.
resident ministers had opposed Davis. Nettleton had been influenced through his contacts with Davis, but not in the way the latter intended. He was more sympathetic than ever with the minister's point-of-view and the more determined in his own itinerating "to act as he would wish an itinerant to act in his church if he were the minister." 41

With such an attitude and with his obvious evangelistic gifts, it is not surprising that Nettleton was soon in much demand throughout Connecticut and beyond. Minister after minister suspended his rule against itinerants in order to obtain the services of the recent Yale graduate. For every invitation he could accept there were several he had to refuse. Everywhere he went revival followed, or so it seemed. His calendar was so full he never found himself free to follow out his original missionary intention. Moreover, "whenever he spoke of leaving the work which he was doing to go to the mission field, his associates sought to dissuade him," citing "his great success as an itinerant preacher . . . (as) proof he was already doing what God wanted him to do." 42

Looking back on Nettleton's active days, his contemporary, Eleazar Porter, wrote in after years:

...this distinguished itinerant found no difficulty to labor as an assistant of stated pastors, without making himself their rival. If in any instance he could not conscientiously coincide with the views, or cooperate in the measures of a pastor, among whose charge he was invited to labor, he did not sow discord in that church, nor seek to detach their affections from that minister, but quietly withdrew to another place. The consequence was, that the visits of this devoted servant of Christ were always sought and never dreaded nor regretted, by ministers or churches. 43

41 Birney, op. cit., p. 54.
42 Ibid., p. 47.
43 Quoted by Birney, ibid., p. 48.
In all of this Asahel Nattleton was simply acting out his convictions, convictions which had not been developed in a vacuum. Every event of his Christian life, beginning with his conversion, played a part in their shaping. His disagreement with Timothy Dwight, his disgust with James Davenport, his distaste for James Davis, together they do much to explain the man who, after his own career had passed its apogee, would so strenuously dispute the ministry and methods of another whose more startling career was then on the rise.
CHAPTER 3

"THE STILL, SMALL VOICE CONVINCES OF SIN!"

Many have been the books and booklets issued over the past century and more on the general subject, "How to Promote and Conduct a Successful Revival."¹ It is doubtful if Asahel Nettleton would have spoken of 'conducting' a 'revival of religion,' for he thought of himself as merely 'assisting' in revival seasons - some forty of them in the years 1811-22, by his biographer's count. Not only did he see himself as the minister's assistant, but his part was simply to cooperate with what God was already bringing to pass. He "never held out the idea to churches that they could 'get up a revival' or that they could have revival at any time." True revival, he insisted, was a "sovereign interposition of God."² His friend, Jonathan Lee, tells of his coming by invitation to Salisbury, Connecticut. However, when he discovered that his presence was considered essential to the desired revival, "he at once declined staying or making any effort, saying, 'I can do no good here.'"³ Nor was this an unusual reaction on Nettleton's part. "When he found that they were placing undue dependence on him, he often suddenly disappeared, at least for a season."⁴ Nor did he encourage the notion, which Finney was soon to popularize, that revival would surely come if God's people prayed 'the prayer of faith.' Certainly God would honor humble, fervent prayer. But praying that sought to force God's hand was not bold; rather was it brazen and presumptuous.

¹Title of volume ed. by R. A. Torrey (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1901).
²Tyler, op. cit., p. 153.
³Quoted by Tyler, ibid., p. 56.
⁴Ibid., p. 151.
Such attitudes hardly made for aggressive evangelism, by modern standards. Indeed, the energetic Lyman Beecher was quite impatient with Nettleton for not pressing the battle more vigorously when the latter was ministering in Beecher’s Litchfield, Connecticut, parish. In a letter to his son, Edward, Beecher complained:

Later now, Brother Nettleton has relaxed all exertions as to visiting and efforts to push and extend the work except on the Sabbath and in lectures, and is becoming unwell, in part for loss of stimulus and inaction. He is gathering in the awakened and banding the converts, and seems indisposed to make any more work for himself. I am troubled, but cannot say or do anything.  

Lyman Beecher, however, was never one to do nothing. If he could not get all the action he wanted from the evangelist, he himself would provide the rest.

So it was that in an earlier letter he reported to Edward that “Nettleton’s preaching and my exhortation seemed to have great effect.” Not that he felt he could dispense with his visitor’s services, for he went on to say, “Mr. Nettleton will continue for the present, but I had hard work to keep him on the Sabbath.”  

Very evidently there was something about the reluctant evangelist which even Beecher valued highly. That was his effectiveness, verified not so much by the immediate results as by the passing of time. Few engaged in public evangelism have been able to say, as did Nettleton, and with truthfulness: “I have been looking over the regions where God revived his work for the two years past. The thousands who have professed Christ in this time, in general, appear to have run well... I think they have exhibited more of the Christian temper, and a better example, than the same number who have professed religion

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6 Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 345.
when there was no revival." As if to confirm the general rule, he then went on to cite several instances of converts who had not 'run well.' No doubt, like Moody after him, Nettleton would have characterized such as his converts, not God's. One cannot but be impressed with his intimate knowledge of what had happened to this person and that after he had left a community. Probably no itinerant since Paul himself maintained closer contact - through extensive correspondence, return visits, and intercessory prayer - with those who had professed Christ under his ministry.

If we had only Nettleton's word for it, we might well be skeptical of his success story. His biographer, however, gathered affidavits from scores of ministers who had had to live with the results of Nettleton's labors. Virtually to a man they confirmed the truth of the evangelist's own accounting. More than ten years after a revival season in Farmington, Connecticut, the minister could write: "Within about three months, I suppose there were about two hundred and fifty members of the congregation who supposed that they had passed from death unto life . . . Of these a few have since been rejected, and others have declined from their first love . . . Many have died, and many have removed from our immediate connection, but those who remain now constitute the chief strength of the church." Even the successors of these ministers, alongside of whom Nettleton had worked, freely reported much the same. In 1844 the new minister of the Torrington, Connecticut, Church commented on the 1816 revival there: "The subjects of that work, with few exceptions, have adorned their profession, and some of them have been, and still are pillars

7 Quoted by Tyler, op. cit., p. 162.

8 Letter, Noah Porter to William B. Sprague, March 12, 1832, in Sprague, op. cit., Appendix, p. 73.
in the church. The influence of this revival upon the church, and upon the
community, was in a high degree salutary."

On the strength of such statements, Tyler concluded: "If anything is sus-
cceptible of being proved by testimony, it is established beyond all question
that the revivals which were originated and sustained through his instrumen-
tality, bore, in no common degree, a Heavenly impress." He then went on to
ask how such favorable results were obtained. By way of answer he offered,
elsewhere, this observation:

The success of Dr. Nettleton was not in every respect like that of White-
field. Whitefield's power was chiefly in the pulpit. His eloquence was
overpowering, and great multitudes were sometimes awakened by a single
sermon. Dr. Nettleton did not expect such effects from a single effort
in the pulpit. His success was the combined effect of preaching in the
church, and in the lecture room, and of private conversation. His
preaching was always solemn and impressive, and sometimes to a high de-
gree eloquent. It was more instructive, and addressed more to the con-
science, and less to the passions than that of Whitefield. As a natural
consequence, the revivals which occurred under his preaching were more
pure - attended with less fanaticism, and a smaller proportion of tempo-
rary converts.

From Virginia, where Nettleton spent much time in his later years, came a simi-
lar word, by John H. Rice of the Union Theological Seminary then recently es-
blished in that State: "Mr. Nettleton is a remarkable man, and chiefly, I
think, remarkable for his power of producing a great excitement without much
appearance of feeling. The people do not weep or talk away their impres-
sions. The preaching chiefly addresses Bible truth to their consciences."

9 Quoted by Tyler, op. cit., p. 61.

10 Memoir of Nettleton by Bannet Tyler in Annals of the American Pulpit,
William B. Sprague, ed. (New York: Robert Carter and Bros., 1859), Vol. 2,
p. 550.

11 Tyler, op. cit., pp. 150, 1.

12 Quoted by Tyler, ibid., p. 154.
It was as a Biblical preacher, who aimed at the conscience, that Nettleton registered with his hearers. Largely extemporaneous in speech and earnest in manner, he sought to demolish the excuses of the unbelieving, leaving them helpless and hopeless apart from God's sovereign mercy. Through the close application of the Calvinistic doctrines he would give the Holy Spirit every opportunity to convict of sin, righteousness and judgment. As he himself told Eleazar Porter:

In the first stage of a revival, while depravity is yet ascendent, and conscience asleep, I would preach the Law, with its awful sanctions and solemn claims on sinners to be holy, and that immediately. But when the first moments of a revival are past and sinners are settling down to presumptuous confidences, I would preach Election. Conscience is then roused enough to make a cord which sinners cannot break. Their own convictions are on my side, so that they cannot escape; and I would hold them fast, and repeat my strokes under the fire and hammer of divine truth.13

A Massachusetts minister described the evangelist's preaching style thus: "He spoke with a clear voice - rather slow and hesitating at first, but gradually rising, till, before the close, it was like a mighty torrent, bearing down all before it." Then followed this description of the content of Nettleton's preaching: "He brought from his treasure the doctrines of total depravity, personal election, reprobation, the sovereignty of divine grace, and the universal government of God in working all things after the counsel of his own will. And these great doctrines did not paralyze, but greatly promoted the good work."14

However, it is doubtful if either Nettleton's doctrinal emphasis or direct manner of speech would have made such an impact had they not been joined with an exceptional knowledge of the human heart and an ability to speak there-to. Tyler has told of the first time he heard him, in a schoolhouse in South Britain, Connecticut, early in Nettleton's evangelistic career:

13 Quoted by Tyler, ibid., p. 161.

14 Quoted by Tyler, ibid., p. 118.
"With great solemnity he looked upon the congregation, and thus began. 'What is that murmur which I hear? - I wish I had a new heart. What shall I do? - They tell me to repent - I can't repent - I wish they would give me some other direction." Little wonder that many a hearer felt that the evangelist was reading his thoughts, that he knew all about him. Yes, and in large measure, Nettleton did, for he had been through it all beforehand. His own prolonged period of soul agony had given him a rare insight into the thinking processes of those who had not yet 'closed with Jesus Christ.'

Lyman Beecher characterized Nettleton's preaching as "deeply experimental in the graphic development of the experience of saint and sinner" and his sermons as "adapted to every stage of a revival, and condition of individual experience." Yet he went on to note that all this would not have met with any exceptional response had it not been for the revivalist's giving himself daily to individuals and small groups gathered in homes. In addition, he would hold inquiry meetings for those who had been 'awakened' and meetings for young converts where they were encouraged to testify, sing and pray. These smaller gatherings and personal conferences actually received the larger share of his attention, for he would preach only three or four times weekly. It was in the lecture rooms of churches that he felt especially at home. Even more was he in his element in confronting people one by one. In this regard Weisberger has commented: "If other evangelists hit upon the potency of mass appeal, Nettleton's discovery was the efficacy of the personal approach after the preaching."  

15 Ibid., p. 43.  
17 Weisberger, op. cit., p. 67.
Somewhat solemn and austere he may have been in the pulpit, but in personal conversation he seems to have been both engaging and pointed. Tyler cites numerous instances of Nettleton's 'individual work with individuals.' One young woman, troubled by her sins for some time, said to the revivalist, "I know not what to do next." "Next," he asked, "Next to what?" Instantly she saw the worthlessness of all her prayers and strivings, and replied, "Next to nothing." As might be expected, Nettleton was frequently called upon to answer objections to the doctrine of election. Another young woman asked him one day, "What do you think of the doctrine of election? . . . I don't know what to think of it." Nettleton's response, "What do you wish to think of it?" "I wish," she said, "to think it is not true." To which he replied: "Suppose, then, that it is not true. The doctrine of repentance is true. You must repent or perish. Now, if the doctrine of election is not true, what reason have you to believe you ever shall repent?" Reflecting for a moment on her failure to repent thus far, she conceded, "If the doctrine of election is not true, I shall never repent." Sometimes, however, an inquirer would try to hide behind the Calvinistic doctrines. Such was a young man who had just read Jonathan Edwards' treatise on Freedom of the Will. He told Nettleton: "The reasoning is conclusive. It is impossible to controvert it. I am not a free agent and am not accountable for my conduct." Only to be told by the older man: "I admit your premise, but I deny your conclusion; and, moreover, you do not believe it yourself. If you did, you would not fear to blaspheme your Maker. But you dare not do it. You know you are a free and accountable agent."  

18 Tyler, op. cit., p. 238.  
19 Ibid., p. 237.  
20 Ibid., p. 242.
That Asahel Nettleton made use of revivalistic measures and introduced some measures of his own there can be no doubt. However, the minister of the Church in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, also seems to have been correct in stating that he did not "adopt any new measures apparently for effect."\(^{21}\) Certainly his whole evangelistic approach was in marked contrast with that which so soon was to be associated with the name of Charles Finney. Leaving Finney unnamed, Tyler drew the sharpest of distinctions between the two men:

Dr. Nettleton never adopted the anxious seat, nor any of its kindred measures. He never requested persons to rise in the assembly to be prayed for, or to signify that they had given their hearts to God, or that they had made up their minds to attend to the subject of religion. He never held his meetings to a late hour in the night; nor did he encourage loud praying and exhorting. He did not encourage young converts, and others who had more zeal than discretion, to take the charge of religious meetings, or to go forth as public exhorters. He was never personal in his prayers and exhortations, nor did he countenance it in others. He did not allow himself to denounce ministers and professors of religion, as cold and dead, and as the enemies of revivals. He entirely disapproved of all such measures, and considered them suited to mar the purity of revivals, and to promote fanaticism and delusion."\(^{22}\)

It is plain that the scare thrown into him by the two Jameses, Davenport and Davis, lasted for a lifetime.

This is not to suggest that Nettleton himself was never confronted by outcries and other disturbances. In the one revival of which he left a day-by-day account, that at Nassau on the road from Albany to Pittsfield, he tells of loud crying, but adds, "I requested them to suppress their cries and be as still as possible."\(^{23}\) Earlier at Milton, Connecticut, it had been necessary to remove two or three from one of his meetings. After the uproar had quieted,

\(^{21}\) Quoted by Tyler, ibid., p. 104.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., p. 159.

\(^{23}\) Quoted by Tyler, ibid., p. 77.
Nettleton spoke to this effect:

It may, perhaps, be new to some of you, that there should be such distress for sin. But there was great distress on the day of Pentecost, when thousands were pricked in the heart, and cried out, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Some of you may, perhaps, be ready to say, if this is religion, we wish to have nothing to do with it. My friends, this is not religion. Religion does not cause its subjects to feel and act thus. These individuals are thus distressed, not because they have religion, but because they have no religion, and have found it out. It was so on the day of Pentecost. The thousands who were pricked in their heart had found that they had no religion, and were unprepared to meet their God. They had made the discovery that they were lost sinners, and that their souls were in jeopardy every hour.

Even today we can recognize the wisdom of his words, for they gave comfort neither to wild enthusiasts nor to scoffers.

Remarkable as was Nettleton's restraint, he was capable, on occasion, of the startling act. It would have been surprising if a man with the gift and temperament of an evangelist were not. Once, at Waterbury, Connecticut, he announced that he was leaving because the young people had scheduled a harvest ball for the day after their annual Thanksgiving. The social event was cancelled. Beecher tells of a wedding ball in New Haven, while Nettleton and he were laboring there, and of his friend's success in keeping certain young people, who were anxious for their souls, from attending. Not that such strong actions did not leave him open to false charges. Birney has traced the source of one such story to an infidel club in South Britain, Connecticut, at the time Nettleton was ministering in those parts. It "began with the report that he had gone into the bedroom of a young girl 'to talk with her of religion. She called her parents, and Nettleton left town rather precipitately afterward.'" Before it had run its course the story told of "his seducing a young woman in Waterbury." Birney adds that "the whole thing had the ring of

24 Ibid., p. 47.
falseness to it," but the slander followed Nettleton for years. As late as 1828 it had been spread in Virginia, and Nettleton's Connecticut friends were compelled to vouch for his character. Such are the hazards of an evangelistic career.

For all the occasional excitement, the dominant motif of Nettletonian evangelism was that of order and restraint. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the preface to his Village Hymns for Social Worship, compiled during his lengthy period of recovery from typhus in 1823 and 1824. Birney writes: "It was his experience in revivals that the Watts collection were too lofty and formal for evangelical use." Accordingly, he "determined to edit a hymnal which would meet the needs of the revival era, and, at the same time, preserve the standards he had set." 26 Most revealing, however, were his prefatory comments on that section of the hymnal which, he insisted, was to be used only during revivals:

I am satisfied from observation, as well as from the nature itself of such hymns, that they must be ephemeral. They should be confined to seasons of revival; and even here, they ought to be introduced with discretion; for on this their principal utility must depend. A book, consisting chiefly of hymns for revivals, however important in its place, would be utterly unfit for the ordinary purposes of devotion -- as prescriptions, salutary in sickness, are laid aside on the restoration of health. 27

Asahel Nettleton was unusual among evangelists, to say the least. The very man who gave to itinerant evangelism a new respectability was himself extremely cautious and even skeptical of his calling. In an 1829 letter he was to write: "I feel grieved and sick when I think of some who want to be evangelists, because they are unfit for settled pastors. I have long seen and

26 Ibid., pp. 92, 3.

deplored this evil." As early as 1820 he had rejected the proposal of a committee of the General Association of Connecticut Congregationalists that a number of evangelists be commissioned to forward the cause of revivals, with Nettleton as the first. It was a noteworthy tribute to the committee members' confidence in him, but he would have none of it. "He knew even more than they the dangers of the itinerant system, and he was able to persuade the committee to drop the matter." Such an evangelist - one who could write, "It is the still, small voice that convinces of sin" - could only be jarred by the din of a loud and confident revivalism that had come to birth in the West and was even then working its way Eastward.

It is to these Western developments that we now turn, going back in point of time to the Second Awakening as it was anticipated in Virginia and the Carolinas, as it blazed forth in Kentucky and Tennessee, and as it, in its frontier expression, exerted an ever-widening influence on the older and more settled regions of the country. Only by looking to the West in 1800 can we rightly appreciate the collision of revivalistic forces and personalities which rocked the Northeast a quarter century later.

28 Quoted by Tyler, op. cit., p. 42.
29 Birney, op. cit., p. 49.
30 Quoted by Tyler, op. cit., p. 90.
CHAPTER 4

A NEW REVIVALISM SWEEPS THE WEST

It was a chronicler of early Kentucky Presbyterianism who wrote: "Unlike the still small voice, or the softly flowing waters of Siloa, the Great Revival of 1800 rather resembled the whirlwind, the earthquake, the impetuous torrent, whose track was marked by violence and desolation."¹ Even allowing for a measure of hyperbole, this vivid simile accurately reflects the fact that the Second Awakening in the West differed markedly in its manifestations from the Awakening in its New England form. Connecticut and Massachusetts people could become revival enthusiasts, as demonstrated in 1740 and again two generations later, but their enthusiasm was almost invariably tempered by the recognition that they stood in the English Puritan tradition and represented the established order of things. They looked back with pride on their Colonial past and no less regarded themselves as guardians of the young nation's future. Furthermore, many of the more venturesome New England spirits had already moved West, to New York and Ohio, by the beginning of the 19th Century. Those left behind were not likely to set out soon on any radical road, whether of politics or religion.

Quite different, however, was the breed of men and women who provided the very prominent human factor for the 'Great Western Revival.' They were, by and large, of different background, these rough and ready frontiersmen who had migrated westward toward the headwaters of the Ohio and then southward between the ridges of the Alleghenies into the Valley of Virginia and the Piedmont

sections of the Carolinas and Georgia. From there many of them had journeyed further west along the Holston River into Tennessee and through the Cumberland Gap into Kentucky. Who were they, and what were they like? A Southern Presbyterian authority has written: "The spearhead of the trek to the southwest was composed of Scotch-Irish who had reached low levels of spiritual depression in each succeeding migration: First, when they crossed from Scotland to the North of Ireland; then again when they crossed the Atlantic; and finally when they moved into new and pioneer country in America." To put it another way, their Gaelic background rendered them particularly susceptible to the highs and lows of religious experience, and the conditions of the frontier, so different from those in settled New England, had brought most of them to a new low.

A present-day historian of the American Frontier has summarized the situation then prevailing west of the Alleghenies and Blue Ridge:

The task any religious group faced on the frontier was a difficult one. The first settlers were poor and isolated. Many were going to move on in a few years and were not interested in creating permanent institutions in a temporary resting place. Even later settlers at first had to concentrate on feeding and clothing their families rather than on founding, endowing and supporting churches; the population needed to support a church was likely to be scattered over a wide area. Any religious group that thought in terms of a substantial building and a paid, educated clergy as the center of the community was doomed to disappointment in prevailing western conditions.

And yet the same writer has noted that conditions "did have certain advantages for enterprising religious groups." The way in which pioneer sought relief from daily drudgery in often uproarious social gatherings suggested that they would "respond favorably to religious inspiration" if it came in the form of "a simple, direct emotional appeal" that "enlivened their life on earth and promised a rich reward in the world to come.""}

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3 Horsman, op. cit., p. 131.
Nor did the enterprising groups and individuals fail to follow the pioneer into the western lands. "With a real apostolic urge the Methodist circuit riders had felt the challenge to follow the trail of the backwoodsmen with the gospel, and Baptist and Presbyterian missionaries had been aroused by the same imperative." By far the majority of these missionaries and ministers came over the mountains from Virginia and the Carolinas. It is increasingly evident that they can be considered among the latter fruits of the First Great Awakening, which in the South enjoyed a much more extended life-span than in New England. Wesley M. Gewehr has traced three phases of the Great Awakening in Virginia: the Presbyterian, from 1740 until 1760; the Baptist, in the late 1760's and early 1770's; and the Methodist, climaxing in a notable revival on the very eve of the Revolution in 1776. Recent research by Disciples' historians has led them to conclude that there was never any real break between the First and Second Awakenings from Virginia southward, not even during the Revolutionary period. They have observed a direct line of revivalists among the Presbyterians, from the Tennents through Samuel Blair and Samuel Davies and David Caldwell to James McGready, who was to be the firebrand of the Second Awakening in its Western appearance.

On one point there can be no dispute, however, and that is that a series of smaller revivals in Virginia in the 1780's led directly to the Kentucky Revival of 1800. Beginning about 1785 there was a sudden multiplication of Virginia Methodists which enabled them to send circuit riders into Kentucky, then considered a part of Virginia. A similar revival among the Baptists led to further missionary outreach to the West, with numbers of revival converts

4 Mode, op. cit., p. 52.

soon moving on to Kentucky and Tennessee and there serving as local preachers. Perhaps "the most important of these pre-revivals, as far as the South is concerned, and doubtless having the greatest influence upon the nation as a whole," was the one which began at the Presbyterians' Hampden-Sydney College in 1787. Its place in American church history would be assured if its only result had been the conversion of Archibald Alexander and the subsequent founding of Princeton Theological Seminary and Union Theological Seminary in Virginia. More immediate, however, was its impact through a young North Carolinian, James McGready, who spent the summer of 1789 in the Hampden-Sydney area on his way back home from studies in Western Pennsylvania. That summer McGready's soul caught fire, and in the fall he carried the revival torch to the Carolinas, where for the next six years he labored as "a Boanerges both in manner and matter, and an uncompromising reprover of sin in every shape." The"hideousness of his visage and the thunder of his tones" was too much for some of his more fastidious parishioners, and in 1796 he left for Kentucky where a man of his blunt speech and emotional fervor was more likely to be appreciated.

Already "a large number of congregations in Western Pennsylvania had drawn up written covenants to pray for a revival," for "on all hands there was a consciousness of spiritual bankruptcy and of the need of divine favor." Accordingly, McGready, on taking up his new work in Logan County, Kentucky, bound his people in a solemn covenant to fast on the third Saturday of each month, and to pray one-half hour on Saturday evenings and again at sunrise on Sunday mornings "for repentance and a Pentecost." Meanwhile, McGready himself

6 Lacy, op. cit., p. 68.
7 Davidson, op. cit., p. 132.
8 Lacy, op. cit., p. 74.
continued his fiery preaching. Soon there were signs of growing concern among
his people, and in July 1800 the much prayed-for revival broke out during an
observance of the Lord’s Supper. Within short weeks revival fires were spread-
ing throughout Central Kentucky and beyond, aided by a new phenomenon known as
the Camp Meeting and accompanied by the most unusual physical manifestations.
The Camp Meeting was a very natural development among a widely-scattered popu-
lation. It gave those who found it impossible to attend a single service
their chance to come together for a protracted series lasting over a period of
days. Very quickly it caught on. In August of 1801 as many as 25,000 were
assembled at one time in the famous Cane Ridge Camp Meeting, with other thou-
sands constantly going and coming.

Such mass gatherings, as might be expected, produced their own highly-
charged emotional atmosphere. Simultaneously a dozen exhorters might be shouting
their message in different areas of the encampment, but their pent-up
listeners needed little encouragement to express their feelings. Let one per-
son begin to sob or shout, and others would follow. In a matter of months a
wide variety of "bodily exercises" - falling, jerking, rolling, running, danc-
ing and even barking - became accepted indications of the Holy Spirit’s influ-
ence, if not of conversion itself. Certainly there were few human influences
present “to check the groanings and the shoutings which for many marred these
meetings. From all accounts at times they seemed as in bedlam, with emotion-
alized men and women weeping, groaning, shouting, jerking, and dancing, or
falling into trances and corporses.”9 The few who did try to regulate the Camp
Meetings, especially the 'Father of Kentucky Presbyterianism,' David Rice,
were "freely denounced as hindrances to the work . . . as standing in the way;

9 Ibid., p. 75.
as deists at heart; and as having no religion." Thus were respects paid to Father! Rice for declaring: "That we had a revival of the spirit and power of Christianity amongst us, I did, do, and ever shall believe, until I see evidence to the contrary; but we have sadly mismanaged it; we have dashed it down and broken it in pieces."

Nonetheless, the Revival in Kentucky largely set the pattern for the Awakening as it spread to other parts of the West and South - Tennessee, North and South Carolina, western Virginia, western Pennsylvania, and the regions north of the Ohio River. The Kentucky manifestations may have been more extreme, but in all the frontier regions the Awakening was of a very different order than the quiet, church-centered, minister-controlled movement that predominated in New England and contributed to the conversion of Asa Helton in September of 1801. That very month revival broke out among the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians in the southwest corner of Pennsylvania, amid scenes far more reminiscent of Logan County, Kentucky, than of Middlesex County, Connecticut. As in Kentucky the year before, the Pennsylvania revival began in the course of a Communion season.

Some hundreds were, during the season, convinced of their sin and misery; many of them sunk down and cried bitterly and incessantly for several hours. Some fell suddenly; some lost their strength gradually; some lay quiet and silent; some were violently agitated; and many sat silently weeping, who were not exercised with any bodily affections.

If the revival in the East was true to the old order, represented politically by the Federalists, the revival in the West was typical of the emerging new order which found its political expression in Jeffersonian Democracy.

10 Davidson, op. cit., p. 167.
11 Ibid., p. 187.
12 Quoted by Strickland, op. cit., p. 101.
It amounted to a new revivalism, pitched toward the common man. Nor was this true only with regard to the measures employed and the manifestations permitted. The message itself, even among western Presbyterians, was taking on an altogether new coloring. Concerning McGready and his preaching, a recent writer has remarked that he "was more interested in the salvation of his listeners than in constructing a formal creed." The same writer adds: "The orthodox Presbyterian interpretation of election had little meaning for McGready. Although he occasionally used the term, and never denied it as a principle, for him it meant little more than that God, from the beginning, had known those who would eventually achieve justification." Certainly McGready found no difficulty in collaborating with Methodists in the Camp Meetings. His Calvinism was more mild than militant, and some of his fellow-presbyters renounced both Calvinism and the jurisdiction of the Presbyterian Church. They had little patience with the older Calvinistic revivalism which kept men waiting for God to work faith in the heart. As far as they were concerned, the choice was man’s, not God’s, and the time was now.

This is not to suggest that all, or even most, Kentucky Presbyterians went along with the new doctrinal emphasis. The majority of the Synod stood against it, and a minority withdrew to form the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. Still others, calling themselves 'Christians,' moved by stages into the Campbellite movement, while two lived out their lives as Shakers. All of this had a devastating effect on Presbyterianism south of the Ohio. In Archibald Alexander’s words: "The truth is - and it should not be concealed - that the general result of this great excitement was an almost total desolation of the Presbyterian Churches in Kentucky and part of Tennessee." The great gainers


14 Quoted by Davidson, *op. cit.*, p. 189.
through the Western Awakening were the Methodists and Baptists, the former because their message emphasized the will of man, the latter because their form of government was based on the popular will. The historical moment for both groups had arrived. It had come on the frontier, which was already beginning to have a decided effect upon the national consciousness.

There can be no appreciating the revival movement, East or West, without taking into account the conviction that a rapidly growing country - by the year 1800 there were already one million Americans west of the Appalachian barrier - "needed continuing revivals in order that the spiritual life of the nation should keep pace with its expansion and material prosperity." Even New Englanders were coming around to this point of view by the second decade of the new Century, chief among them Lyman Beecher. Although Beecher, at least for a time, felt he was being true to the older revivalism, he and his friend, Nathaniel Taylor, were actually developing something quite new. Moreover, "the essence of the new revivalism," according to Hudson, "was a direct appeal to the minds of men to commit themselves to the fundamental truths of Christianity. Only thus, it seemed clear to them, could the advance of infidelity be arrested and the old order preserved. Without such a commitment among the people, firmly grounded in a personal religious experience, the battle - in a society where majority vote prevailed - would most certainly be lost." East and West, revivals were seen as essential to the churches' nationwide strategy. Only one question remained to be answered - Which revivalism?

It was apparent that Western revivalism in its crasser forms could not gain general acceptance in the more settled regions of the country. True,

15 Lacy, op. cit., pp. 87,8.

Methodists brought the Camp Meeting all the way East to New England, but by far the greater part of the Yankee population held aloof from it. It simply did not square with the Congregationalist way. However, if Connecticut Congregationalists could safely ignore the Methodists in their midst, they could not remain indifferent to Presbyterian developments across the border in New York State. Ever since 1708, when the historic Saybrook Platform was adopted, the Congregationalists of Connecticut had maintained close ties with Presbyterians in the Middle Colonies, so much so that other Congregationalists regarded their Connecticut brethren as Presbyterians in disguise. This 'Presbyterian' connection was strongly reinforced by the Plan of Union of 1801, a joint action of the General Association of Connecticut and the Presbyterian General Assembly. "By it, the enthusiasm and energy generated by revival in the East were channeled to spread revival in frontier areas." The net effect was the Presbyterianizing of hundreds of churches, especially in Western New York and Ohio, that might otherwise have been Congregational. Congregationalist ministers and members with Connecticut roots moved almost \textit{en masse} into the Presbyterian fold. At the same time, they did not entirely forget their Congregational background, nor did the church fathers back in Connecticut allow them to forget. There was constant interchange, as the fathers anxiously followed from afar the progress of the children.

That they had some reason for concern was borne out by New York developments. Strickland, after noting that the Second Awakening enjoyed a lengthier life than the First, observed: "Within this sustained revival movement there were a number of outstanding revival waves. The main theater of action of the

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Great Revival shifted from Kentucky to central and western New York.\textsuperscript{18} Not that it did so immediately, for until after the War of 1812 revivals in Upstate New York were comparatively few. There had been a short-lived revival season at the turn of the Century, which might be taken as testimony to the providential nature of what occurred in many places in the year 1800. Cross informs us that "the winter of 1799-1800 was in Western New York long called the time of the Great Revival."\textsuperscript{19} Not, however, until the years 1816 and 1817 did the whole region from the Hudson to the Niagara Frontier become revival ground. As yet the revivalism was of the more traditional type, with Asahel Nettleton himself 'assisting' in a number of Eastern New York localities. So it continued into the 1820's, but the quiet, orderly evangelism, so prized by Nettleton, could not expect to go unchallenged indefinitely. The West was too close to Western New York, and the West was in process of influencing the Seaboard States as never before. The Era of Jefferson was giving way to the Age of Jackson, western Virginia to Tennessee.

Out of the ferment of the times arose the man who would distill the essence of Western revivalism and make it synonymous with evangelistic activity nationwide for generations to come. Born in 1792, Charles Finney as a two-year old accompanied his parents in their move from Connecticut to Oneida County in Central New York. They were not professing Christians when they went west, perhaps because revivals had not yet returned to Connecticut, nor did they profess Christ until well along in their New York years, possibly because revivals were slow in coming to that part of the country. Finney later painted a rather dim picture of the religious opportunities during his boyhood and youth:

\textsuperscript{18} Strickland, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 113.

\textsuperscript{19} Cross, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 9.
I seldom heard a sermon, unless it was an occasional one from some travelling minister, or some miserable holding forth of an ignorant preacher who would sometimes be found in that country. I recollect very well that the ignorance of the preachers that I heard was such, that the people would return from meeting and spend a considerable time in irrepressible laughter at the strange mistakes which had been made and the absurdities which had been advanced.

To a large degree Finney's future attitudes and actions were shaped by his exposure to those preachers and by the ridicule heaped upon them.

Educational opportunities on the New York frontier were also limited, and young Charles was sent back to Connecticut for some high schooling. Here again his religious impressions were negative. "The religion in that place," he wrote, "was of a type not at all calculated to arrest my attention. The preaching was by an aged clergyman, an excellent man, and greatly beloved and venerated by his people; but he read his sermons in a manner that left no impression whatever on my mind... I must confess, it was to me not much like preaching."21 In his early twenties Finney capitalized on his secondary education by teaching school in New Jersey, but after three years he returned, "almost as ignorant of religion as a heathen," to Adams, New York, there to study law with a local attorney. It was at Adams that he first became a regular church-goer and, in due course, choir director. Once again, however, he was sharply critical of what he heard from the pulpit. Concerning the Presbyterian minister in Adams, Finney reminisced: "His preaching was of the old school type; that is, it was thoroughly Calvinistic... As I sometimes told him, he seemed to me to begin in the middle of his discourse, and to assume many things that to my mind needed to be proved. He seemed to take it for granted that his hearers were theologians... But I must say that I was

21Ibid., p. 6.
rather perplexed than edified." By no means was Charles Finney the minister's most appreciative auditor, although, looking back, he confessed, "I now think that I sometimes criticized his sermons unmercifully."23

Surely Finney had no just reason for criticizing George W. Gale personally, for the minister showed him every kindness. No doubt it was this personal interest which kept him coming back, and not only to church services, but to prayer meetings. Both the meetings and the prayers he analyzed ruthlessly, as he did Gale's sermons. Even as Gale's Calvinism seemed to him to assume too much and prove too little, so he wondered why, in his own words, "the prayers that I had listened to from week to week were not, that I could see, answered."

This was true especially with regard to the people's prayers for revival.

They exorted each other to wake up and be engaged, and to pray earnestly for a revival of religion, asserting that if they did their duty, prayed for the outpouring of the Spirit, and were in earnest, that the Spirit of God would be poured out, that they would have a revival of religion, and that the impenitent would be converted. But in their prayer and conference meetings they would continually confess, substantially, that they were making no progress in securing a revival of religion.

Such were the earliest thoughts on the subject of one who within short years would become expert as securing revival results through a wholesale abandoning of George Gale's - and Asahel Nettleton's - Calvinism.

During this formative period Finney began to read the Bible with a lawyer's eye: first of all, to satisfy his curiosity regarding the Mosaic code; after that, to search out the reasons why the prayers of the Adams' Presbyterians were not answered; and, finally, convinced through study of the truth of the Scriptures, to face the question of his own relationship with Christ.

22 Ibid., p. 7.
23 Ibid., p. 8.
24 Ibid., pp. 9, 10.
was a question which Finney, who regarded himself as a logical man, felt required a soon answer. There would be no ten-month agony for him; a few days would do. He has told how "On a Sabbath evening in the autumn of 1821, I made up my mind that I would settle the question of my soul's salvation at once, that if it were possible I would make my peace with God." For the next two days he shut himself up in his room with his Bible while his conviction of sin increased. On Wednesday morning he headed for his law office, but did not arrive until evening. In the midst of anxious thoughts regarding salvation through Christ, an inner voice had stopped him on the street, asking, "Will you accept it now, today?" His reply, "Yes, I will accept it today or die in the attempt." Off he headed to some woods outside town where he battled the issue through on his knees. On his way back to the village he was concerned because the sense of sin had left him. Nevertheless, he determined to pray on, although he no longer felt any concern for his soul. That evening in the office, as he poured out his heart to God, it seemed to him that he met Christ face to face and bathed Christ's feet with his tears.

Far better to let Finney himself relate what happened next. The paroxysm of weeping over,

As I turned and was about to take a seat by the fire, I received a mighty baptism of the Holy Ghost. Without any expectation of it, without ever having thought in my mind that there was any such thing for me, without any recollection that I had ever heard the thing mentioned by any person in the world, the Holy Spirit descended upon me in a manner that seemed to go through me, body and soul. I could feel the impression, like a wave of electricity, going through and through me. Indeed it seemed to come in waves and waves of liquid love; for I could not express it in any other way. It seemed like the very breath of God. I can recollect that it seemed to fan me, like immense wings.

25 Ibid., p. 12.
27 Ibid., p. 20.
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Thus there took place one of the most influential conversions in history, almost as far reaching in its consequences as John Wesley's Alderagate experience, with which it shared certain elements in common. Like Wesley who said, "I felt my heart strangely warmed" and "I felt I did trust Christ," Finney's feelings were the prominent feature in the change which came over him. Unlike Asahel Nettleton, who distrusted his feelings, Finney was sure that his feelings were good, so good that now he saw himself as one who "did not sin." For him the experience was everything, even if it meant reinterpreting Christian doctrine to conform to it. So it is that we have him speaking of "this experience of justification," apparently confusing it with sanctification, which he defined in terms of perfectionism. Here was an emphasis which, if it carried the day, as eventually it did, would change the whole tenor both of orthodoxy and revivalism. Just as in 1821 "Finney considered himself orthodox according to the standards of reason and experience," so "after 1835 church-goers and ministers alike dropped their preoccupation with theology and based their religion on 'experience'." Indeed, McLoughlin continues, "'Experience religion' or 'heart religion' as opposed to 'head religion' was the essence of modern revivalism from its outset despite Finney's (and Beecher's) Lockean

28 Ibid., p. 23.
claims regarding the reasonableness of Christianity.""}^{30}

During his day-long struggle in the woods Finney had vowed, "If I am ever converted, I will preach the Gospel."^{31} The next morning he announced to a client whose case was to come up for trial within a matter of hours, "I have a retainer from the Lord Jesus Christ to plead his cause, and I cannot plead yours."^{32} Immediately, with a boldness that was to characterize him all his days, he became a zealous witness and could soon point to numbers, including his own father and mother, who were 'hopefully converted' as a result. There was, however, his purpose to preach, and in order to fulfill it he began to 'read theology' under the direction of his minister. One gains the impression that most of their sessions together climaxed in doctrinal debates, as Finney vigorously contested his tutor on the 'Five Points of Calvinism' - Total Depravity and consequent Inability, Unconditional Election, Limited or Definite Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and the Perseverance of the Saints. Notwithstanding, George Gale proudly sponsored the young lawyer when he was taken under care of Presbytery in the Spring of 1822. On that occasion some of the ministers urged Finney to pursue further theological studies at Princeton. If we can believe his account, he refused in no uncertain terms: "I plainly told them that I would not put myself under such an influence as they had been under; that I was confident that they had been wrongly educated, and they were not ministers that met my ideal of what a minister of Christ should be."^{33}

It was a foretaste of Finney's blunt speaking to and about other ministers in years to come.


^{31}Finney, Memoirs, op. cit., p. 17.

^{32}Ibid., p. 24.

^{33}Ibid., pp. 45,6.
For some unaccountable reason, Oneida Presbytery not only took him under its care but in March, 1824, licensed him to preach, with another Presbytery later ordaining him. In the course of the licensure examination he was asked whether he received and adopted the Westminster Confession and Catechisms as his own. He replied that he did subscribe to those doctrinal standards insofar as he understood them. Later he was to admit that at the time he had not even read the documents, and to add:

When I came to read the confession of faith, and saw the passages that were quoted to sustain these peculiar positions, I was absolutely ashamed of it. I could not feel any respect for a document that would undertake to impose on mankind such dogmas as those, sustained, for the most part, by passages of Scripture that were totally irrelevant; and not in a single instance sustained by passages which, in a court of law, would have been considered at all conclusive. 34

The older Calvinism had rough treatment in store for it at Finney’s hands, as did the older revivalism that was posited upon it. No emphasis on man’s moral inability, or 'cannot-ism' as he came to call it, for Finney, nor on waiting for God to give a new heart! On the contrary, he has told us that in his first schoolhouse revival at Evans Mills -

I tried to make them understand . . . that God was willing, and they were unwilling; that God was ready, and they were not ready. In short, I tried to shut them up to present faith and repentance as the thing which God required of them, present and instant submission to his will, present and instant acceptance of Christ. I tried to show them that all delay was only an evasion of present duty; that all praying for a new heart, was only trying to throw the responsibility of their conversion upon God; and that all efforts to do duty, while they did not give their hearts to God, were hypocritical and delusive. 35

From Evans Mills Finney moved increasingly into full-time revival activity throughout Central New York, even though this meant leaving his bride of two days and not returning to her for six months. His village and small-town ministry created inevitable suspicion among ministers and laymen indoctrinated

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34 Ibid., p. 60.
35 Ibid., pp. 79, 80.
with the older views, but ordinary people, and often the village infidel, responded to his unorthodox preaching and preaching style. What affected them was not only his personal magnetism, but his pragmatic approach to conversion and to life. This answered to their own frontier experience; it conformed to the changing mood of the nation as a whole. It has been said that "Finney was supremely confident in the absolute truth of his own conversion," that "he insisted it was normative," for all, and that "he merely sought to bring his own experience before his revival audiences and make it their own."36 That he was so successful in doing so is attributable in large part to his ability to articulate their unspoken thoughts and to persuade them to follow out the logic of their own 'common sense.'

For a year and a half Charles Finney was but one of a number of revivalists laboring in the Upstate region. However, toward the close of 1825 there began the series of 'Western Revivals,' so called after the community of Westers just to the north of Rome, New York. From Western the revival was to spread to Rome and Utica, not to mention a score of lesser towns, and catapult the evangelist into a figure of national prominence. Finney, sure of himself since his conversion, had only been strengthened in that opinion by his early successes. "The more experience I had," he would write one day, "the more I saw the results of my method of preaching, the more I conversed with all classes, high and low, educated and uneducated, the more was I confirmed in the fact that God had led me, had taught me, had given me right conceptions in regard to the best manner of winning souls."37 Now, in the wake of the 'Western

37 Finney, Memoirs, op. cit., p. 87.
Revivals,' others had come to the same conclusion, including a number of Presbyterian ministers. Even his old mentor, George Gale, began to weaken in his Calvinist resolve when he learned that within the bounds of Oneida Presbytery the converts numbered no fewer than three thousand. Equally significant, a number of young men, most of them the fruit of Finney's labors, began to attach themselves to the evangelist and his prayer assistant, 'Father' Daniel Nash. Shortly this 'holy band' would be sallying forth to conduct revivals of their own after the Finney pattern.

The sudden notoriety brought inquiries from afar, and these were answered by all manner of reports and rumors. It was understandable that advocates of the older revivalism in Connecticut and New Jersey and Pennsylvania should be troubled at tidings of a message that was so very different from their own. Concerning this, Finney stated: "The doctrines preached at these revivals were the same" that he had set forth earlier. "Instead of telling sinners to use the means of grace and pray for a new heart, we called on them to make themselves a new heart and a new spirit, and we pressed the duty of instant surrender to God." However, it was not the message proclaimed in the 'Western Revivals' but the measures employed which first agitated out-of-state correspondents, possibly because news of the measures travelled faster. According to Finney, the means used in his earliest revivals "were simply preaching, prayer and conference meetings, much private prayer, much personal conversation, and meetings for the instruction of earnest inquirers." Such methods were fairly standard for that time, the inquiry meeting having been developed by no less than Asahel Nettleton, but a man of Finney's free-wheeling tendencies was bound to add some twists of his own. After all, he was the one who maintained

38 Ibid., p. 189.
39 Ibid., p. 77.
that "there must be an adaptation of means to the end to be secured." 40

What, exactly were the "New Measures" which Finney hit upon, measures designed "to get the attention of people and bring them to listen to the truth?" 41 For himself he chose to pray extemporaneously, preach without notes and kneel in prayer. As for laymen, he urged their praying and exhorting in public, with women encouraged to band together for common prayer. More particularly, he built the "anxious meeting" upon the already established meetings for inquirers, using it to exhort personally each anxious soul to an immediate decision. He also perfected the protracted meeting, an extended series of services, as the most likely way to secure and sustain a revival, while at a later time he introduced the "anxious seat" or "mourner's bench." Such were the measures which Finney publicly advocated, insisting that "there has never been an extensive reformation, except by new measures," 42 and going so far as to claim that "the success of any measure designed to promote a revival of religion, demonstrates its wisdom," unless it be merely a trick or actually a hindrance. 43

What, then, were the reports which circulated regarding Finney's measures? Asahel Nettleton in a widely publicized letter to S. C. Aiken, the Presbyterian minister at Utica and a Finney supporter, repeated most of the negative information that had come to him - the using of the Names of God with irreverence, the denouncing of ministers and church members who opposed the evangelist, the attempt to bring recalcitrant ministers into line by pressure tactics, the practice of women praying in 'promiscuous assemblies' and

40 Ibid., p. 154.

41 Finney, Lectures, op. cit., p. 172.

42 Ibid., p. 255.

43 Ibid., p. 180.
the policy of praying for people publicly by name.\textsuperscript{44} Compared with the printed correspondence in Unitarian publications, Nettleton's charges were mild.

One Utica Unitarian caricatured Finney's preaching as follows: You "raise your voice, lift high your hand, bend forward your trunk, fasten your staring eyes upon the auditors, declare that they know it to be God's truth that they stand upon the brink of hell's gaping pit of fire and brimstone, and bending your body and bringing your clenched fist half way from the pulpit to the broad aisle denounce instant and eternal damnation upon them unless they repent forthwith." On the other side of the theological spectrum, a Troy Presbyterian "charged Finney with 'shaking his fist' in the face of a woman because she said that Calvinism taught her that she must wait for the influence of the Holy Spirit before she could repent: 'You lie!' Finney shouted; 'You can repent and be converted immediately.'\textsuperscript{45}

Finney, for his part, denied all accusations but one, admitting that women had sometimes prayed in mixed gatherings. His Memoirs, however, do on occasion draw back the curtain on some tumultuous scenes. In an early revival at Antwerp, New York,

The congregation began to fall from their seats in every direction, and cried for mercy. If I had had a sword in each hand, I could not have cut them off their seats as fast as they fell. Indeed nearly the whole congregation were either on their knees or prostrate, I should think, in less than two minutes from this first shock that fell upon them.\textsuperscript{46}

Finney has also left us an account of the Rome revival which several times refers to people falling and lying prostrate on the floor. In one meeting "the feeling was overwhelming. Some men of the strongest nerves were so cut down

\textsuperscript{44} January 13, 1827. Quoted By Tyler, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 178-86

\textsuperscript{45} Quoted by McLoughlin, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 28, 9.

\textsuperscript{46} Finney, \textit{Memoirs}, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 103.
by the remarks which were made, that they were unable to help themselves, and had to be taken home by their friends.\textsuperscript{47} In another meeting a man who was seated directly in front of the evangelist "fell from his feet as if he had been shot. He writhed and groaned in a terrible manner."\textsuperscript{48} It was a fearful thing in those days to come face to face with the former lawyer, as he carried out his 'retainer from the Lord Jesus Christ.' Strong measures, he insisted, were required when the cases were so desperate.

Of two things there seems little doubt. Finney's measures did bring sharp disension into a number of Upstate churches. Large congregations in Auburn, Albany and Troy were split down the middle, and more than one small-town congregation suffered a lasting division. Finney preferred to brush these unhappy developments aside, attributing them solely to the agitation created by his opponents. For all his admirable qualities, his supreme self-confidence made it difficult for him ever to admit that he might have been in the wrong. Nor can there be any question that Finney's followers outdid him in their own excesses. Such members of the 'holy band' as Jedediah Burchard, James Boyle, Luther Myrick and Nathaniel Smith vied with each other in their zeal to promote the 'New Measures.' Nettleton, in his letter to Aiken, reported one abused brother as writing, "I have been fairly skinned by the denunciations of these men, and have ceased to oppose them to get rid of their noise."\textsuperscript{49} Even stalwart Finneyites were alarmed. McLoughlin cites two letters received by Finney in March of 1827. Gale wrote in one that his Presbytery felt it had to take a stand against certain measures in order that "some of our

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., p. 163.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., p. 165.
\textsuperscript{49} Quoted by Tyler, op. cit., p. 181.
Evangelists might be kept in proper bounds. Smith and Myrick you know have been a little latitudinarian with respect to them. A week later John Frost of Whitesboro would write: "Br. N. Smith needs a curb bit, and there is danger that two or three rash spirits may abuse your things. He is for having no limits fixed to females praying nor praying for persons by name . . . I have no doubt that a degree of censoriousness has prevailed that needs to be checked."

To concerned New Englanders it seemed that wild-fire was coming perilously close to home. They had been relatively untroubled by the earlier outbreaks beyond the Appalachians. They had even rejoiced at news of the Great Revival in the West. This, however, was a different matter. The conflagration had been ignited by one of their own native sons. New York Presbyterianism, which was in many ways an extension of Connecticut Congregationalism, had been badly scorched. Now the flames, after burning over Central New York, were spreading Eastward to Albany and Troy. They had leaped the Hudson, and nothing seemed to stand between them and the western border of Massachusetts and Connecticut. The old order was in danger.

Of all New Englanders none was more concerned than Asahel Nettleton. In Finney and his assistants he may or may not have seen the Great Western Revival sweeping East, but he did see the ghosts of James Davenport and James Davis come back to haunt him. Everything that he had stood for and sought to accomplish seemed threatened, especially his labors in Eastern New York. As he was to write Aiken from Albany early in 1827:

Seven years ago, about two thousand souls were hopefully born into the kingdom, in this vicinity, in our own denomination, with comparative stillness. But the times have altered. The kingdom of God now cometh with great observation. Opposition from the world is always to be

50 Quoted by McLoughlin, op. cit., p. 30.
expected. It is idle for any minister to expect a revival without it. But when it enters the church of God, the friends of Zion cannot but take the alarm.\footnote{Quoted by Tyler, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 178.}

Even though it meant laying aside their campaign against Unitarianism at their own doorstep, Nettleton and his friends felt that they could not let the battle across the state line go by default.
CHAPTER 5
"A WAR HAS COMMENCED IN ZION!"

Sidney Mead, commenting on Lyman Beecher's pro-revival and anti-Unitarian crusade, has noted how the outbreak of the New Measures Controversy affected New England:

Beecher held the orthodox together, and kept the Unitarians on the defensive until 1826, largely by the obvious success of his revivalistic activity in strengthening the churches. But revivals were a dangerous method to employ. The fires, once lighted, were apt to get out of hand, and all New England shuddered at the memory of the extravagances and excesses of the Great Awakening. It needed but a sensational outbreak of revival activity that could be attributed to the New Haven group, to discreditee Beecher's whole campaign against the Unitarians. And this was provided by the noisy revivals conducted by Charles Grandison Finney in the Presbyterian churches of Western New York, a region well known to be closely related to Connecticut Congregationalism.1 From the time of the Rome and Utica revivals in the first half of 1826 the Unitarian press gleefully carried eye-witness accounts which dramatized Finney's excesses and taunted the New England revivalists with them. For example, the New Yorker was reported as saying: "You sinners of Utica, and some of you who now hear me, will go to hell, and the saints and angels will look down from heaven, and when they see the sinners of Utica in the lowest, deepest, darkest pit of hell, they will shout and clap their hands for joy."2 Again, Finney was reputed to have said, "Our young converts in Gouverneur (N.Y.) will pray down a kingdom sooner than the old church members will pray a hen off her nest."3 Of course, such statements from the lips of one who preached extemporaneously were difficult to confirm after the fact.

1 Mead article on "Lyman Beecher," op. cit., p. 233.
2 Quoted by Birmay, op. cit., p. 119.
3 Ibid., p. 121.
The revival forces in New England, however, had their own grapevine. A flood of conflicting reports led to several distinguished clerics, including President Nott of Union College and President Griffin of Williams, visiting the scene of the 'Western Revivals' in the summer of 1826. If Asahel Nettleton is to be believed, the observers were not favorably impressed. Nettleton wrote to John Frost in March of the following year: "To tell you the truth, my Br., the ministers and other Christians from this region, New York & all N. Eng., who visited Oneida Co. last summer saw with their own eyes so many things that they deplored that it was the universal opinion, far and near, that the character of revivals had gone back fifty years. . . . The ministers were universally deploring the introduction of these new measures & were guarding & watching against them for months before I came to Albany." 4 Perhaps the alarm was not quite as universal as Nettleton claimed, but the hostile reactions were sufficiently widespread to give concern to Finney's supporters, if not to the evangelist himself. Soon they were using the names of Beecher and Nettleton himself to defend Finney against his attackers, suggesting that to assail Finney was to impeach the revival ministries of the two New Englanders.

It may have been the invoking of his own name which roused the ailing Nettleton to action toward the close of 1826. For months he had been following developments with increasing anxiety. Back in the summer he had been urged by the man who was to be his chief informant in the Controversy, William R. Weeks of Paris Hill, N. Y., to write a series of tracts against the 'New Measures':

... there is very much gaining currency of late on the subject of revivals, which you would view as I do, of a very dangerous tendency. Now it is of little use for such a one as I am to lift a feeble voice against

4 Letter, Asahel Nettleton to John Frost, March 28, 1827, op. cit.
such things. It is easily drowned in the clamor and I am soon put to
shame as an opposer of revivals. But your reputation is too well estab-
lished, as a promoter of revivals, to be affected by any such opposition
or clamor. What you should say on that subject would be listened to
with profound attention and, if not cordially acquiesced in, as it could
not be by the enemies of truth, it would yet greatly strengthen the
hands of those who are now struggling for life against the floods of
error. 5

Into early fall, however, Nettleton seems largely to have suspended final
judgment. He himself was 'assisting' in a revival in Jamaica on Long Island
when he received a letter from an Auburn, N. Y., correspondent, reporting
harsh denunciations by a young man, presumably emulating Finney. To this he
replied, in part:

It is very important to a young preacher that he avoid a censorious
spirit & always speak kindly of such as are held in reputation among
Xns. And, if he labor among such, he had better forego the prospect
of doing present good than to lose the confidence of these men. I can
think of times in the commencement of my ministry when I had no doubt that
a given course would be blessed to the conversion of many souls. I might
have been mistaken. At any rate, acquiescence in the judgment of my
brethren would secure their confidence - until I have been astonished
to find them so generally willing to allow me to adopt my own course.
The truth is, all Xns. are imperfect. And all our exertions to do good
are attended with more or less imperfection. Good measures will be often
innocently opposed, for the want of experience only. The same measures
may be very good, or very bad in different places & under different cir-
cumstances. 6

Here were words of caution, calculated to give the gainsayer, as well as the
zealot, second thoughts.

By the same token, we should recognize that Nettleton was genuinely per-
turbed. From his vantage point, the Finney phenomenon looked distressingly
like an earlier page in history. As he was later to write Aiken of Utica,

"Whoever has made himself acquainted with the state of things in New England,

5Letter, William R. Weeks to Asahel Nettleton, July 24, 1826, Hartford
Seminary Foundation Archives, Nettleton Papers.

6Letter, Asahel Nettleton to Charles C. Furman, October 26, 1826,
Hartford Seminary Foundation Archives, Nettleton Papers.
near the close of the revival in the days of Whitefield and Edwards, cannot
but weep over its likeness to the present." McLoughlin betrays his prejudice
when he theorizes: "The more Nettleton heard about Finney and his cohorts the
more irascible and petty he became until everyone recognized that he saw Fin-
ney as Davenport redivivus to his own Edwards." It is doubtful if Nettleton
ever saw himself as a reincarnation of Jonathan Edwards - he had few such il-
lusions - but it is true that increasingly he saw Finney in terms of James
Davenport. Recalling his purpose to oppose anything and anyone who might re-
semble Davenport and his extremes, he was by November, 1826, receptive to an
invitation from Finney's opponents in Eastern New York. To Albany, therefore,
he went directly from Jamaica. He was to remain in the Upper Hudson area
until well after the New Lebanon Convention the following July.

On arrival he discovered that the unhappy division which had come to
the Presbyterian Church in Auburn the previous summer was now repeating itself
in the Second Presbyterian Church of Albany. Finney had been invited to Au-
burn by the minister, Dirck Lansing, but a considerable element in the congre-
gation became estranged during the course of the 'revival.' Rather typically,
Finney wrote off the dissenters as 'unconverted.' Now a similar situation had
arisen in Albany. In one version of his March, 1827, letter to Frost Nettle-
ton wrote: "A war had already commenced in Doct. Chester's Ch. long before my
arrival. Some of his most disorganizing members had begun to pray for him and
others in public, by name, as cold and stupid, & dead, & unconverted." Nor
was that all, for trouble was soon to follow in the Presbyterian Church at

7Quoted by Tyler, op. cit., p. 181.
8McLoughlin, op. cit., p. 33.
9Letter, Asahel Nettleton to John Frost, March 28, 1827, op. cit.
Troy six miles upriver. Indeed, at that very moment Charles Finney was holding forth in the Troy Church with the enthusiastic support of its minister, Nathanael S. Beman. Asahel Nettleton had invaded enemy territory.

What should he do next? Feeling that none of the previous correspondence had made any dent on the Finneyite camp and fearing that he would have little influence with Finney himself, Nettleton decided to establish personal contact with some of Finney's friends. Accordingly, arrangements were made for John Frost of Whitesboro and another man to come to Albany for a conference. The meeting was cordial, with Nettleton discoursing at length on his own revivalistic principles and urging them on the two visitors. Frost and his companion, on the other hand, could not see where the Nettleton and Finney positions were so far apart. About the only conclusion reached was Frost's to the effect that, if the two evangelists could but be brought face to face, most of the difficulties would be revealed as misunderstandings and quickly ironed out. It may very well, therefore, have been Frost who urged Finney to seek out Nettleton in Albany. At any rate, the younger man twice made the short journey from Troy to consult with the veteran from Connecticut.

The accounts of the two interviews are conflicting. Evidently Nettleton had considerably more to say when the two were together and Finney after they had separated. The latter was to write over forty years afterwards:

I had had the greatest confidence in Mr. Nettleton, though I had never seen him. I had had the greatest desire to see him; so much so that I had frequently dreamed of visiting him, and obtaining information from him in regard to the best means of promoting a revival. I felt like sitting at his feet, almost as I would at the feet of an apostle, from what I had heard of his success in promoting revivals. At that time my confidence in him was so great that I think he could have led me, almost or quite, at his discretion. 10

This is how Finney may have seen it in long retrospect, but his feelings at
the time may have been something else again. "In spite of what he says," in
Birney's view, "Finney was not the sort of man to be led by anyone. Already
embittered by the opposition he had encountered, he was not eager to be told
that he was wrong."\textsuperscript{11}

In the first and longer meeting Nettleton, according to Finney, avoided
conversation on the matters in dispute between them, discussing rather "the
views held by the Dutch and Presbyterian churches in regard to the nature of
moral depravity." On this and other doctrinal subjects, reminisced Finney,
"I found that he entirely agreed with me, as far as I had opportunity to con­
verse with him."\textsuperscript{12} Nettleton, for his part, recollected that "when he called
to visit me I was already worn out . . . notwithstanding I did tell him that
I feared his talents & efforts could not be kept within our denomination &
told him some reasons as far as time and strength would permit."\textsuperscript{13} It would
seem that Nettleton's version was not only closer to the event but also to
the facts. Once more to quote Birney: "Anyone familiar with the doctrinal
views of the two men must know that if they had talked at any length they
could not have been in agreement, and anyone acquainted with Nettleton would
think it unlike him to avoid talking about the matters over which there was
dispute, and on which he felt so strongly."\textsuperscript{14}

Even so, Nettleton in their first session probably did not get down to
specifics as he might have, had he been fresh and had he felt it would do any

\textsuperscript{11} Birney, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 125.


\textsuperscript{13} Letter, Asahel Nettleton to John Frost, March 28, 1827, \textit{op. cit.}

\textsuperscript{14} Birney, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 126,7.
good. The second session some days later ended on a sour note when Nettleton had to excuse himself for a preaching appointment. Whereupon Finney offered to accompany him and was rather abruptly turned down. Nettleton obviously was uneasy at the thought of being seen with Finney, lest the Finneyites continue to claim that he approved of them and their methods. Nor was his wariness altogether unwarranted, for well into 1827 they still were picturing him to a wondering public as one of their own. Not so Finney himself, however. After being snubbed by Nettleton and going to listen to him anyway, Finney concluded: "I saw enough to satisfy me that I could expect no advice or instruction from him, and that he was there to take a stand against me. I soon found I was not mistaken." 15

With Finney of the same opinion still, if not more so, Nettleton went back to working on Finney's followers. He prepared a position paper and sought out Finney's fervent Troy supporter, Nathan Beman, that he might read it to him. As Nettleton told it: "I ... labored with all my might to convince him of the calamitous tendency of these measures, until I lost all my strength, & in consequence spent the remainder of the night in faintness. I expected that Br. Beman would lay the subject fully before Br. F., as he told me he would. But all this did not avail." 16 So it was that Nettleton redrafted his paper in letter form, and under date of January 13, 1827, sent it to Aiken in Utica. He intended that it be circulated, and in this he was not disappointed. With the Aiken letter the controversy was out in the open. In Nettleton's words, "The great contest is among professors of religion - a civil war in

15 Finney, Memoirs, op. cit., p. 203.
16 Letter, Asa Hel Nettleton to John Frost, March 28, 1827, op. cit.
Zion— a domestic broil in the household of faith.” Or more simply, as he was later to write Frost, "A war has commenced in Zion."  

This first blast of Nettleton's trumpet against Finneyism was a fairly complete statement of his views on the issues at stake. He acknowledged that "many sinners have been hopefully born into the kingdom, but," he insisted, "it has been at awful expense." Rather than attack Finney personally, he lamented that "the friends of brother Finney are certainly doing him and the cause of Christ great mischief" in their being "more anxious to convert ministers and Christians to their peculiarities than to convert souls to Christ." He compared the resultant tension with that which he had "sometimes seen, in its incipient stages, in New England, between some young revival ministers on the one side and whole associations of ministers on the other." Always Nettleton thought in historical terms. Thus he would tell Aiken and others, "Could Whitefield, and Edwards, and Brainerd, and Davenport (who later confessed his errors, ed.) now arise from the dead, I have no doubt they would exclaim, 'Young men, beware! beware!'" What Nettleton did not realize was that the whole historical situation was changing, that the times were with Finney rather than with the older revivalism he himself espoused.

Stoutly maintaining that "the best friends of revivals ... are the most alarmed at the evils that are rising," Nettleton went on to write, "I have been anxiously looking and waiting, all summer long, for such men as yourself and Mr. Lansing, and others most intimately acquainted with brother

17 Quoted by Tyler, op. cit., p. 179
18 Letter, Azabiel Nettleton to John Frost, March 28, 1827, op. cit.
19 Quoted by Tyler, op. cit., pp. 179,80.
20 Ibid., p. 181.
Fi...y, to take hold, with a kind severity, and restore order; but in vain."21

As for himself, he said:

I wish I had health and strength to show brother Finney my whole heart on this subject . . . Aside from feeble health, one consideration only has prevented me from making the attempt. Some of his particular friends are urging him on to the very things which I wish him to drop. I fear that their flattering representations will overrule all that I can say. And having dropped these peculiarities, his labors for a while might be less successful; and then he would revert again to the same experiment.22

Here Nettleton was getting close to the core of the problem, the need of Finney and the demand of the new era for revivalistic 'results.' He then concluded with an appeal to return to the old way of doing things: 'Though it may seem too slow and silent in its operation, yet, being the lawful method of conducting this warfare, it will secure the confidence of ministers and Christians, the consciences of the wicked, and a crown of glory.'23

After sending off his letter to Aiken, Nettleton turned back to more personal contacts with Finney partisans. With only one of them, Asahel S. Horton of Clinton, N. Y., does he seem to have made much headway. It was not, however, for want of effort. In the case of Norton, Nettleton poured out his heart for the better part of two days and nights. Yet if he was largely ineffective in bringing Finneyites around to his point of view, his thus far solitary campaign did lead to the mobilizing of many of his New England friends and their coming to his aid. Chief among them was that ever-available field general for all evangelical causes, Lyman Beecher. As a first salvo, Beecher framed a letter addressed to Beman and Finney. On the one hand, his object 'was to justify them against the opposition of formalists and the

21 Ibid., pp. 182,3.
22 Ibid., p. 185.
23 Ibid., p. 186.
haters of revivals of religion." On the other hand, he added: "This, however, makes it necessary that Brother Finney should come upon ground on which we can sustain him, for we can not justify his faults for the sake of his excellencies." This expressed desire of Beecher to be able to support Finney was an ill omen for the ultimate success of Nettleton's warfare.

For the moment, however, Nettleton and Beecher seemed of one heart in the common struggle. Beecher sent his old friend a copy of the letter to Beman and Finney, together with a personal epistle in which he poured out his feelings and fears regarding the evils of Finneyism. This personal word was intended for Nettleton's eyes alone, and great was Beecher's umbrage when Nettleton, to strengthen his own position, showed it to the Moderator of Troy Presbytery who, in turn, showed it to others until finally an extract from it was printed up in the form of a handbill. Always one to cover up his tracks, Beecher was highly embarrassed. He feared that Nettleton's indiscreet act was "as if a man should throw a firebrand on a train of powder while another was attempting to guard against ignition." From his new home in far-off Boston Beecher could not have known that the fat was already in the fire. The war had begun some weeks before.

Not that others, on both sides, were not trying to contain and even snuff out the conflagration. One such was Nettleton's future biographer, Ben-net Tyler, then President of Dartmouth College. In a letter dated February 11, 1827, he told his friend of visiting and hearing Finney in Troy. According to Tyler, Finney

... wanted to sit at your feet and learn. But he had got the impression that you avoided him and did not want to converse with him. He is wounded also by your letter to Mr. Aiken. Still he expressed the strongest wish to have a good understanding with you. I assured him that you would be willing to converse with him at any time when your health and strength might permit, at the same time giving him distinctly to understand that you could not approve of some of his measures and that you and he could not act in accord unless you could agree as to important measures. I am not without hope that he may yet be managed and moulded into the right shape. If it can be done a great object will be gained ... 26

No less hopeful was Finney's friend, the irenic John Frost. Writing Nettleton from Troy on March 3, 1827, Frost again sought to commend his man to the adversary:

I discover nothing in you or Brother Finney that indicates a bad spirit. ... Many things have been said by all of us that may be abused. But I assure you ... that Brother Finney, as I said to you, has none of that management of which some have suspected him. My own opinion is that he is not capable of plots. He is so frank, and my opinion has not altered of him from the first, that he is capable of being moulded into a distinguished instrument of good to the church, provided he is treated with Christian kindness and friendliness.27

All immediate attempts at peace-making, however, went up in smoke when Finney on March 4 flung down the gauntlet from the pulpit of the Troy Church. Taking as his text Amos 3:3 - "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" - the New York evangelist offered this proposition: "If anything, even upon the same subject, that is far above or below our tone of feeling, is presented; and if our affections remain the same and refuse to be enlisted and brought to that point, we must feel uninterested and perhaps grieved and offended."28

In so many words, he was suggesting that all the opposition to him was below

26 Letter, Bennet Tyler to Asahel Nettleton, February 11, 1827, Hartford Seminary Foundation Archives, Nettleton Papers.


28 Quoted by Tyler, op. cit., p. 187.
the tone of his 'affections' and was therefore unable to rise to the level on which he preached. It was plainly a slap at Nettleton. At least, the Connecticut revivalist, who about this time had retired from Albany to Durham, N. Y., for some rest from the battle, took it as such and proceeded to frame a lengthy rebuttal. This he sent in the form of a letter to a prominent Presbyterian minister in New York City, Gardiner Spring, who had it published in the New York Observer.

The gist of Nettleton's reply was that Finney's proposition was "false in theory, contrary to fact, and dangerous in its consequences." The most spiritual of Christians are interested "in the least degree of holiness in any saint," while "the spirits of just men made perfect, and holy angels . . . rejoice over even one sinner that repenteth." At the same time, "the least saint on earth loves holiness in others . . . and he loves those most, whose tone of holy feeling is raised farthest above him." As for Christ, "the tone of the Saviour's pious and holy feeling is raised far above that of all his followers. Hence, according to the statement of the sermon (i.e., Finney's), he could have had no followers on earth, and can have none now." In the same way, "Is not (the holy character of God) above the tone of the feelings of any man? . . . According to the principles of his own sermon, brother Finney and his friends cannot walk with God, for they are not agreed."29 Throughout the letter Nettleton treated his lawyer counterpart to a lesson in logic. In the background, however, were two contrasting views of Christian experience. For Finney, the greater the feeling tone, the higher the experience; while Nettleton saw all those who had had healthy conversions as feeling rightly about the things of God.

29 Ibid., pp. 188,9.
Indeed, Nettleton went on to assert, the issue between him and Finney had nothing to do with higher or lower states of feeling, but rather with true and false zeal. As he put it, "All those ministers who do not discriminate between true and false zeal . . . 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."\(^30\) He continued:

Without close discrimination, an attempt to raise the tone of religious feeling will do infinite mischief. This was the manner of false teachers. "They zealously affect you, but not well." It will be like that of Paul before his conversion, and like that of the Jews who were never converted, "a zeal of God but not according to knowledge." The driving will become like the driving of Jehu, "Come, see my zeal for the Lord." The storm, and earthquake, and fire, are dreadful: but God is not there.

Here, again, was Nettleton pleading for "the still, small voice." All in all, his was cogent reasoning. However, the strong emotions, pro and con, which Finney had generated had pushed matters beyond the point of rational discussion. Feelings were ruling Finney himself and, like a mighty torrent, were soon to dominate the whole realm of evangelism. In a word, Finney was acting; Nettleton could do little more than react.

React even more strenuously he did when told of what had taken place in Durham five months before his arrival. The sleepy village, nestled in the foothills of the Upper Catskill range, had been given a taste of excitement by some "raw recruits from Camden, Oneida County," products of the 'Western Revivals.' One young Finney convert, in particular, announced that "he knew all about how to conduct revivals." Pointing to the Presbyterian Church, he spoke of "the abominations which were portrayed on those walls." Referring to the minister, Seth Williston, he challenged the townspeople, "Are you afraid of

\(^30\) Ibid., p. 191.

\(^31\) Ibid., p. 193.
him?" Interrupting an evening service, the young man dropped to his knees, after the manner of Finney, and uttered a denunciatory prayer for Williston as a "liar," while a companion informed the congregation that the minister "was the head Achan in the camp & that his character was as black as hell." The report of this Finneyite invasion clinched matters in Nettleton's mind. Granting that the invaders were a bit "crazy," he went on to conclude in his March letter to Frost, "Now such things would never come from revivals if not borrowed from leaders." Finney was to blame. The formidable New Yorker was no different in kind from Davenport and Davis before him. He was a wrecker of churches and an enemy of settled ministers.

Just how keenly Nettleton felt about the Durham incident, and even more serious trouble in the Church at nearby Hunter, is revealed in a subsequent letter to Frost, dated April 18. Possibly he did not recall the exact contents of his previous letter or perhaps he did so for emphasis, but he went over the same ground again and in greater detail. It was Finney who was at fault for what had happened at Durham and Hunter: "Errors adopted and defended by a popular itinerant preacher will be the first things which young converts, as well as many others, will try to imitate." Marking back to his own conversations with Finney, Nettleton mentioned Finney's doubting that young men could make use of Nettleton's procedures. Now Nettleton concluded that this was because Finney thought "it would require too much time and care to secure the confidence of settled ministers . . . that the shortest and best method of getting along with settled ministers is to 'break them down' and denounce them at once as cold & stupid & dead if they do not fall in to defend all their innovating measures." Far different Nettleton's emphasis on long-term

32 Letter, Nettleton to Frost, March 28, 1827, op. cit.
consequences rather than short-term results: "I have tried to view the subject on all sides - to ascertain what the general interest of religion requires & how it will appear when the present generation of ministers are sleeping in their graves." Unfortunately for Nettleton, not many men were thinking that far ahead.

John Frost could not have failed to detect a hardening of Asahel Nettleton's attitudes. From henceforth there were be no temporizing. Finney, in Nettleton's mind, stood convicted. His 'New Measures' were to be rejected out of hand. Doubtless the stream of letters coming to him out of Central New York had contributed largely to Nettleton's new determination. Some of the correspondence was discerning and almost prophetic, such as James Richards' February 22 letter from Auburn. Wrote Richards in part:

As to the novel measures which have been adopted in relation to revivals, my opinion has all along been precisely what it is now, except that I supposed at first, they were the offspring of extraordinary excitement, and would probably be relinquished as the excitement should subside. But presently, however, I began to think there was ground to fear that the abettors of them were acting from erroneous speculations on the subject, and that their operations were a matter of deliberate contrivance, and would probably be pursued as part of a system. At every step of their progress, I became more convinced that they had a plan, the result of new and extraordinary light, and that their object was to revolutionize the churches.

Just how perceptive was this 1827 observation is revealed by the rhetorical question posed in 1838 by a conservative Congregational editor: "Who is not aware that the Church has been almost revolutionized within four or five years by means of such excitements?" In this same connection, McLoughlin has noted: "It was evident . . . that Finney and his friends were interested

33 Letter, Asahel Nettleton to John Frost, April 18, 1827, Hartford Seminary Foundation Archives, Nettleton Papers.

34 Letter, James Richards to Asahel Nettleton, February 22, 1827, Hartford Seminary Foundation Archives, Nettleton Papers.

in more than saving souls. They were out to reform the Presbyterian church. To do this they planned to employ revivalism as both a means and an end. It was to be the means of proving the validity of their new theology of free will and free grace, and its end was to instill the spiritual favor of frontier pietism into the lukewarm churches in order to reform both them and the world.  

If the Richards' letter was edifying, the missives which flowed from the pen of Nettleton's constant correspondent, Weeks of Paris Hill, were often something else again. Fairly typical was a Weeks' letter under date of February 26.

It abounded in Central New York gossip and began:

I dropped you a hasty line from Clinton last week. Since then I have seen your letter to Mr. Aikin. I receive some further information about the impression it makes. The word given out is, it is a very good letter, but founded on misinformation. A friend who has been at Auburn, after giving an account of your letter there, says - "As we should expect, I find the abovementioned letter has made a wonderful stir in Auburn. Mr. A. S. Wills and Mr. Maynard (students) called me into their room this morning, and told me that Mr. N. had founded his letter on more and false reports . . . that they had facts in their possession which would defeat its design, and throw the public's influence in favor of Mr. Finney, that Mr. Finney had more than once called on Mr. Nettleton to talk over the subject of the letter and he had refused to enter into a discussion with him and indeed did not treat him as a Christian minister - that Mr. Nettleton had not been the same man since he had a fit of sickness some time since, which very much impaired his mind - that the letter would not hurt but only raise him (Mr. Finney) in Oneida Co., where he is well known."

After sharing other choice tidbits, Weeks' friend had closed on this note:

"My inference from the whole is that there is a determination not to alter or relax in the new measures - but to give them, if possible, the sanction of Mr. Nettleton's name, which has been done many times before during the years - or, if that cannot be effected, to denounce him with the rest as having turned round to become an opposer of revivals."

With such information coming to him regularly, it is not surprising that Nettleton was kept on edge. Indeed, the flaw in his campaign against Finneyism

36 Ibid., p. 41.

37 Letter, William R. Weeks to Asahel Nettleton, February 26, 1827, Hartford Seminary Foundation Archives, Nettleton Papers.
was not his personality nor his theological position nor his presentation of the issues but rather his too ready acceptance of the second and even third-hand reports that had been passed along to him. A recent writer on the Controversy has told of one Finneyite having "a meeting with Nettleton, who admitted he had not personally seen or heard any of the excesses he charged against Finney's band but believed his evidence was accurate." 38 Plainly the man from Connecticut was overly dependent on others for his facts. It is a tribute to his own integrity that his conclusions were as valid as they often proved to be.

All this is not to suggest that Nettleton was the only one who felt embattled. On the other side, Beman was having problems with his own Church and Presbytery, and Finney himself was being investigated by Columbia Presbytery to the south of Troy. One Finney partisan, Moses Gillett of Rome, wrote to a fellow enthusiast, "I suspect that you and I have both been too free in denouncing cold ministers and cold professors of religion." 39 Nettleton's campaign was having some effect; his adversaries were knowing their anxious moments. As for Finney, he managed to put off and ultimately avoid a showdown with the investigating Presbytery, thanks, in part, to a timely snowstorm which kept the investigators at home.

In Beman's case, however, the trouble did not vanish with the coming of Spring. Serious charges had been leveled against him. An ecclesiastical trial was in the offing. According to reports, he had pushed the 'prayer of faith' to new lengths, pointedly praying at people sitting in his congregation. One Troy lady was startled to hear her minister pray, allegedly:


39 Ibid., p. 389.
"O Lord! thou seest this hardened enemy of thine! . . . Thou seest how she is . . . stretching out her puny female hands to lay hold of Thee, and pull Thee from thy throne . . . Thou knowest how black her heart is, and how her enmity to Thee rankles; and burns with all the melice of a demon . . . Now, Lord God Almighty! come down upon this enemy of thine; break in upon her; break her down, O Lord, break her down! . . . Break her down; crush her at thy feet; slay her before Thee!"

Regardless of one's feelings about him, there can be no question that Nathan Beman was coming honestly by his future designation as "the War Horse" of New School Presbyterianism. In the present conflict he was the most fervent of Finney's supporters among 'settled ministers,' going so far as to give from his pulpit this ultimate in introductions to the evangelist, "Now, I want you all to listen to what God says!" 40

Eventually, and after the founding of a Second Church in Troy by his opposition, Beman would be reinstated in the good graces of the Presbytery and go on to be Moderator of the General Assembly and later President of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. In the meanwhile, however, he was in dire danger. It was his precarious personal position, as well as the general agitation aroused by Nettleton, which led the Finneyites to send Beman to Beecher in Boston. Why Lyman Beecher? As "the politician and organizer" 41 far excellence of the evangelical forces in New England, Beecher was in a position to deflate the controversy as no other man. Moreover, the very depth of his involvement in church politics suggested that he would not be above compromising the issues at stake. For the time being, in Birney's words, Beecher "was throwing the full strength of his fertile intellect" into the conflict, "but the followers of Finney saw, and correctly saw, that here was their man." 42 Mead has shared

40 Quoted by Weisberger, op. cit., p. 114.
41 Mead volume on Taylor, op. cit., p. 154.
42 Birney, op. cit., p. 136.
a pertinent observation by Beecher's son-in-law, Calvin Stowe:

Dr. Beecher, when fighting with the Philistines, was perfectly fearless, and never hesitated to deliver a free and hard blow wherever he could. But when Judah was pitched against Ephraim and Ephraim against Judah his whole feeling and policy changed. Then he could never bear to strike. He hesitated, temporized, compromised. The harmony of the Congregational ministers of New England with each other, the union of the Congregational with the Presbyterian churches, this was to him the glory of Christ's kingdom, the threshold of the millennium, it must not be disturbed. He made every sacrifice to preserve it."

Back in mid-March Beecher had written Nettleton: "We must save young men and not smite them. I mean, we must take care not to throw young men into the opposite scale." In the course of things he had also written Beman: "We are in the confines of universal misrule and moral desolation. . . No time is to be lost . . . Ministers must come together and consult." Here was no Nettleton with unbending principles; here rather was a man of policy who was almost waiting for Beman to come to him with some proposal. When the visitor from Troy arrived and suggested that each of them invite an equal number of men, representing the two sides of the conflict, to meet in a convention, Beecher readily fell in with the idea. Beman's belief that the contending parties, if brought together in a cordial atmosphere, would find that much more united them than separated them was Beecher's fervent hope, if not yet his confidence. Simultaneously, personal invitations were issued to a number of ministers from New England, New York and Pennsylvania to assemble at New Lebanon, New York, on the third Wednesday of July, 1827.

Even if all invited could not attend, it was considered essential that the two leading revivalists be present. Thus Beman wrote Finney: "You have

43 Mead volume on Taylor, op. cit., p. 207.
45 Quoted by Cole in article on Convention, op. cit., p. 388.
learned from Bro. Lansing and Frost what I have been doing in the Nettletonian War, and I trust you will attend the anticipated meeting - It is to be held at New Lebanon on Wednesday, the 18th, 10 o'clock A.M. You must come. There can be no apology received. Long years later Finney was to write: "A proposition was made by somebody, I know not who, to hold a convention or consultation on the subject of conducting revivals ... I had nothing to do with getting up the convention." This may well be true, in view of the Beman letter. More questionable, however, was Finney's further statement regarding the Convention: "Nor was I any more particularly concerned in its results, than any of the members that attended." The truth is that the new revivalism and Charles Finney himself had much at stake in the proceedings and outcome at New Lebanon. As the Convention would go, so the scales of immediate advantage and initiative would be tipped.

How, then, did Asahel Nettleton react when Lyman Beecher's invitation came to him? At the time he was seeking to regain his limited strength in the county-seat town of Catskill on the Hudson. After his Albany exertions of the winter he was no longer eager for further confrontations that would put him under added physical strain. What is more, he could not see where any good would come out of it. On May 10 he had written to Beecher regarding his earlier talks with Finney: "You may think it strange that I did not receive him and run the risk of moulding him. But I could not do it without sanctioning all that he had done, and joining with disorganizers all over the world; for my name was already in their service at the West; and besides, if I should not succeed,

66Quoted by Cole, Ibid., p. 390.

it would ruin us both, and if I should have succeeded, the disorganizers would say I had spoiled him." Strange, indeed, it must have seemed to Beecher, and yet not so strange as Beecher's editor has suggested: "Considering the dis-similarity of the two individuals, (it is not) likely he would have succeeded, or strange he did not feel inclined to try." Rather was Nettleton "perfectly willing to let the matter rest in the hands of settled ministers whose business alone it is to determine the question, what measures shall be introduced into the churches."\(^{48}\)

If Nettleton's initial response was, "I pray thee have me excused," Beecher would hear none of it. It was the honored evangelist's duty to put in an appearance. Failing to do so, he would leave the advocates of the older revivalism at a distinct disadvantage. No, they would not ask him to take the lead. Beecher and his lieutenants were fully able to bear the brunt of the leadership burden. Yet there could be no substitute for Nettleton's presence, were he only to repeat his information and restate his convictions. In the end Beecher prevailed, and in mid-July Nettleton took leave of Catskill and began the journey to New Lebanon, where for nine days the climactic, though not the final, engagement of "Zion's civil war" would be fought, with results still felt to this day.

It could only have been an apprehensive Nettleton who arrived on the scene, the more so because his latest letter from Weeks, dated July 6, conveyed alarming news, if true:

A minister who has been to N. Eng. and N. York tells me he thinks Dr. Beecher is so far prepossessed in favor of Mr. F. that he would now be


\(^{49}\) Birney, op. cit., p. 138.
rather pleased to have him in Boston - said if he would only obey or-
ders, he thought he would do . . . C. D. wrote from N. Y. that . . .
Messrs. Beman and Lansing had been there and seen Dr. Spring, having
called on you at Catskill - but "Mr. N., it seems, is unyielding."
"It is reported Sp. regretted to them that N's remarks had been pub-
lished." . . . Correct people about here begin to think, from all they
hear, that Dr. Beecher is about ready to give his countenance to Mr. Fy.
I was credibly informed last evening that Mr. Smith of Canastad told a
man in Oswego Co. that he had Mr. Nettleton's confession in his house,
in which he acknowledged that he had been misinformed about Mr. Fy. and
that he wondered he should be so foolish as to believe the gross misre-
presentations that had been made to him. 50

Nor was this the sum total of Weeks' reporting. It was enough to unsettle a
man of strong constitution. Thanks to William R. Weeks. Asahel Nettleton
would go into the New Lebanon gathering anticipating the worst.

50 Letter, William R. Weeks to Asahel Nettleton, July 6, 1827, Hartford
Seminary Foundation Archives, Nettleton Papers.
New Lebanon, situated just inside the New York State line opposite Pittsfield, Massachusetts, has never been much more than a village. Notwithstanding, it can present its just claims to fame. On the outskirts of New Lebanon was established the second Shaker community in the United States. In New Lebanon was born the first defeated Presidential candidate with a popular majority in American political history, Samuel J. Tilden. However, the one New Lebanon event which had most far-reaching consequences, for religious Americans especially, was the so-called 'Convention' held there in late July of 1827. Thither from the West came the representatives of the new revivalism, gathered round the charismatic figure of Charles G. Finney. To stand them off and, if possible, turn them back came, largely from New England, the guardians of the older revivalism, epitomized in the person of Asa Nettleton. As it turned out, neither Finney nor Nettleton were to play leading roles in the proceedings, Finney letting his friends do most of the talking and the sickly Nettleton spending much of the time in his room.

Nor was it a 'convention' in the 20th Century size or sense of the term. Finney referred to it as a 'consultation,' a far better designation for a gathering of but sixteen men. Only twelve, in fact, were present at the start, Finney and five of his cohorts - Beman of Troy, Lansing of Auburn, Gillett of Rome, Frost of Whitesboro, and Henry Smith of Camden, all from New York - while Nettleton had an equal number of supporters - Beecher, Weeks, Asahel Norton, together with President Heman Humphrey of Amherst College and Professor Justin Edwards of Andover Seminary. This even division was to be maintained when four others soon joined the deliberations - Caleb Tenney and
Joel Hawes, both Connecticut ministers and Nettleton men; George Gale, Finney’s earliest sponsor; and Silas Churchill, the New Lebanon minister, for whom Finney had recently held a revival. The setting, therefore, was far from unfriendly to Finney. New Lebanon may have been a half-way meeting-point for the rival groups, but it was also the scene of a previous Finney triumph, his nearest approach, up until that time, to New England.

As for Finney himself, he, by his own testimony, went into the Convention with high hopes: "I supposed that as soon as the brethren came together, and exchanged views, and the facts were understood, that the brethren from the East who had opposed the revivals, especially Dr. Beecher and Mr. Nettleton, would see their error, and that they had been misled; and that the thing would be disposed of..." Looking back on the Convention from a distance, Finney would proudly assert, "After this convention, the reaction of public feeling was overwhelming;" and again,

After the convention I heard no more of the opposition of Dr. Beecher and Mr. Nettleton. Opposition in that form had spent itself. The results of the revivals were such as to shut the mouths of gainsayers, and convince everybody that they were indeed pure and glorious revivals of religion, and as far from anything objectionable as any revivals that ever were witnessed in this world.

The confident New Yorker may have been among the first, but he was not the last to speak 'evangelistically' of almost unqualified success. Yet even he let drop statements which indicated that all had not gone as swimmingly as he might have wished. For example, he was to write, 'We soon discovered that some policy was on foot in organizing the convention, on the part of Dr. Beecher.

1Finney, Memoirs, op. cit., p. 211.
2Ibid., p. 218.
3Ibid., p. 220.
However," he felt impelled to add, "we regarded it not."

The truth is that Beecher, ever the organizing genius, did seek to guide the course of things to his desired goal. Beecher's hand was first seen in the selection of President Humphrey of Amherst as moderator. The secretarial duties were then divided between a Nettletonian, Weeks of the flowing pen, and a Finneyite, Smith of Camden. Their joint minutes were later to be published in the *New York Observer*, which hailed the Convention results and expressed the hope that "the spirit of Christian tenderness and supplications, which seems to have pervaded the meeting, will be diffused through all our congregations." On the other hand, the Unitarian *Christian Examiner* and *Theological Review* reprinted the proceedings "without hope that it will afford any gratification to any of our readers." The Unitarian editor went on to say, "There can be but one deep feeling of regret and even shame among all enlightened Christians at the disgrace, which such proceedings as we have here recorded, are adapted to bring on our religion." Thus did the Unitarians continue to capitalize on the troubles of the orthodox, Lyman Beecher in particular.

Beecher, looking back from almost as distant a perspective as Finney, recalled that "it was a battle royal" and maintained that "we stood out against them as having been disturbers of the churches." The Convention opened tamely enough on Wednesday afternoon, the 18th, with a season of prayer and praise.

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4 Ibid., p. 211.
7 Ibid., p. 370.
The following morning, however, first signs of disension appeared when Beecher had Justin Edwards propose a series of general resolutions aimed at discovering areas of agreement. The Fimney partisans briefly demurred, saying that they regarded the Convention as being solely for the purposes of correcting "misapprehensions" and restoring "peace among the brethren." However, Edwards' first batch of resolutions were harmless enough and passed unanimously.

They included such statements as:

Revivals of true religion are the work of God's Spirit, by which, in a comparatively short period of time, many persons... are brought to the exercise of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. ... The preservation and extension of true religion in our land has been much promoted by these revivals... According to the Bible and the indications of Providence, greater and more glorious revivals are to be expected... Though revivals are the work of God's Spirit, they are produced by means of divine truth and human instrumentality, and are liable to be advanced or hindered by measures which are adopted in conducting them... There may be some variety in the mode of conducting revivals, according to local customs... There may be so much human infirmity and indiscretion and wickedness of men, in conducting a revival of religion, as to render the general evils which flow from this infirmity... greater than the local and temporary advantages of the revival... In view of these considerations... there should be a general understanding among ministers and churches, in respect to those things which are of a dangerous tendency, and are not to be countenanced. 9

All this was but preliminary to the real action, and late Thursday afternoon Edwards fired the first shell. He proposed that the Convention resolve "that in social meetings of men and women, for religious worship, females are not to pray." Of all the resolutions that would come before the gathering this was probably dearest to Asahel Nettleton's heart. Earlier John Frost had told his New York friends that Nettleton "considers the praying of females in the presence of males as the greatest evil to be apprehended." 11 Beyond

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9 Convention Proceedings, op. cit., p. 360

10 Ibid., p. 361.

11 Quoted by Cole in article on Convention, op. cit., p. 389.
question, the resolution was now introduced out of deference to him. The re-
action of the Finneyites would indicate whether they had any serious intent of
meeting his objections. Nor did he have to wait long. Their response was im-
mediate. Tempers flared, and to such an extent that business was recessed
until the next day. Although he said nothing at the time, Nettleton was most
deeply affected of all. His precarious health could not tolerate a highly
charged atmosphere, particularly when his own convictions were in the balances.

Come Friday morning the controversial resolution was debated warmly and
at length. When the question was called for, Nettleton, Beecher and company
were recorded in the affirmative, while the opposition abstained. Whereupon
the Finneyites struck back, with Frost asking, "Is it right for a woman in any
case to pray in the presence of a man?," and Lansing offering a resolution to
the effect "that there may be circumstances in which it may be proper for a
female to pray in the presence of men." Now it was Finney and company which
gave unanimous approval and the New Englanders, together with Weeks and Nor-
ton, who declined voting. Matters were deadlocked, and there was little else
to do but conclude with prayer and adjourn for the day.

Saturday morning Justin Edwards was at it again, asking that the Conven-
tion go on record against the impropriety of itinerant evangelists invading
the parishes of settled ministers uninvited. Bristling with resentment, the
Finneyites replied that they had never so entered the parish of any minister.
It was at this point that Joel Hawes, according to Beecher, softened and said,
"Well, I profess I am satisfied." Only to have Beecher break in -

"Stop," said I, "Brother Hawes, don't be in a hurry and decide too
quickly. Gentlemen," said I, "you need not think to catch old birds

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with chaff; it may be true that you don't go personally into minister's parishes; but, in the noise and excitement, one and another of the people in the towns want you to come and preach, and you are mighty reserved, and say, 'Ah no, we cannot come unless ministers invite us,' and so you send them back like hounds to compel them to call you."

It was at this point that Lyman Beecher later claimed he turned and faced his antagonist, saying, "Finney, I know your plan, and you know I do; you mean to come into Connecticut and carry a streak of fire to Boston. But if you attempt it, as the Lord liveth, I'll meet you at the State line, and call out all the artillerymen, and fight every inch of the way to Boston, and then I'll fight you there." Finney, in after years, would both quote Beecher's war-like statement and also, in his Memoirs, insist that he had no recollection of it. Assuming that Beecher did express himself in such strong terms, it was hardly an auspicious start to that Saturday at New Lebanon.

Edwards' next proposal, which called for control of meetings by a presiding officer, passed, however, without dissent. The same was not the case when Edwards went on to propose that the practice of calling people by name in prayer be avoided. Once again the Westerners refused to vote and countered with their own resolution, declaring "that the calling of persons by name in prayer may take place in small social circles, but in all cases it ought to be practiced with great caution and tenderness." The lengthy and sometimes sharp discussion which followed was too much for Asahel Nettleton, who at this point left the meeting, not to return until the following Wednesday. Finney would one day offer this explanation for Nettleton's illness: "He plainly saw that he was losing ground, and that nothing could be ascertained that could

justify the course that he was taking. So it may have seemed to the hale and hearty New Yorker, but there can be little question that Nettleton, physically and emotionally, was not up to the excitement.

When all but Nettleton returned to the fray on Monday, July 23, Justin Edwards had more resolutions in his pocket, beginning with one that condemned "audible groaning, violent gestures, and boisterous tones in prayer." Beecher also sought to insert the phrase, "and unusual postures," but without success. Eventually the motion passed with only three Finneyite dissents. The next Edwards' resolution read: "Speaking against ministers of the Lord Jesus Christ, in regular standing, as cold, stupid, dead, as unconverted, or enemies to revivals of religion, is improper." Quickn Beman was on his feet, adding to the list, "as heretics, or enthusiasts, or disorganizers, or deranged, or mad," all epithets that had been used to describe Finneyites and their captain.

It soon became apparent that the Westerners were becoming more aggressive. When Edwards went on to propose a motion against declaring people converted "without opportunity for examination, and time to afford evidence of real conversion," he was compelled, by the strenuous objections, to withdraw it.

Now it was Dirck Lassing who seized the initiative from the New Englanders with his own proposition against "the writing of letters to individuals in the congregations of acknowledged ministers, complaining of measures supposed to have been employed in revivals of religion, being calculated to impair the confidence of the members of such congregations in their ministers, and to

16 Finney, Memoirs, op. cit., p. 213.
encourage the wicked to oppose. 18 It was obvious that Lansing was speaking out of his own recent, unhappy experience in Auburn. It was also evident that he and his friends were going on the offensive.

The next day, Tuesday, was the last and great day for resolutions, as if enough had not been offered already. Throughout the morning Edwards held the floor. He first offered a motion which read, in part, "that the existence in the churches of evangelists in such numbers as to constitute an influence in the community, separate from that of settled pastors, and the introduction by evangelists of such measures, without consulting the pastors, or contrary to their judgment and wishes, by an excitement of popular feeling which may seem to render acquiescence unavoidable, is to be carefully guarded against." This was unanimously adopted, but not Edwards' next ponderously-worded resolution, declaring, "Language adopted to irritate . . . such as describing the character, designating the place, or anything which could point out an individual or individuals before an assembly, as the subject of invidious remarks, is, in public prayer and preaching, to be avoided." This time five Finneyites, including the evangelist himself, abstained, claiming that it would seem to rule out preaching "adapted to make sinners suppose that their individual case is intended." 19

A final string of resolutions, offered by Edwards and unanimously adopted by the rest, condemned "irreverent familiarity with God;" "invidious comparisons" made by "ardent but uneducated young men" between themselves and settled ministers; the stating of "untruths to awaken sinners;" "unkindness and lack of respect;" the "conniving at acknowledged errors;" the justifying

18 Ibid., p. 365.
19 Ibid., pp. 365-6.
of any measure "because of its immediate success and without regard to its scriptural character;" lack of care "for the scriptural evidences of true religion;" and the adoption of measures "not fit to be published abroad." Asa Nettleton may have been indisposed, but in his absence his friends were doing all they could to underscore his objections to Finneyism and its 'New Measures.'

Tuesday afternoon was Nathan Beman's chance to throw his own resolutions, five of them, into the hopper, with Lansing and Frost each adding their own. Beman got things under way with this motion: "As human instrumentality must be employed in promoting revivals, some things undesirable may be expected to accompany them; and as these things are often proclaimed abroad and magnified, great caution should be exercised in listening to unfavorable reports." This time it was the New Englanders who abstained after declaring, "As the above does not appear to us to be, in the course of Divine Providence, called for, we therefore decline to act." Very different were the votes cast, and by those on both sides, depending on whose ox was being gored.

In a second resolution, Beman went on to note "that the best conducted revivals are liable to be stigmatized and opposed by lukewarm professors and the enemies of evangelical truth." Beman's third resolution insisted that "attempts to remedy evils existing in revivals of religion may . . . do more injury and ruin more souls, than those evils which such attempts are intended to correct." His fourth resolution was somewhat surprising, possibly a sop to the opposition: "In public meetings for religious worship, composed of men and women, females are not to pray." While in due course he offered this

20 Ibid., pp. 366,7.

21 Ibid., p. 367.
fifth resolution: "In preaching the gospel, language ought not to be employed with the intention of irritating or giving offence; but that preaching is not the best adapted to do good and save souls which the hearer does not perceive to be applicable to his own character." All of this, however, left Nettleton's supporters unmoved. As Birney has written, "The course of Divine Providence did not move the New Englanders to act," and they sat out each vote.

They continued to sit on their hands when Lansing, again giving expression to his own recent hurt, presented a resolution condemning the writing of letters to individuals and congregations and other outside interference in the parishes of settled ministers. This the Nettleton forces could hardly accept, for it would seem that one or two of them had been in personal touch with dissident members of Lansing's Auburn flock. In reply, they maintained that on occasion it might be "the duty of ministers of the gospel freely to communicate, by letter or otherwise, with one another, and with private Christians, and give notice of approaching danger." However, they could no longer object when John Frost offered two final proposals against the holding of meetings far into the night and against exaggerated reports of revivals. Here was another small concession to Nettleton and his friends. Thus the long contest of resolutions and counter-resolutions came to an end. All were relieved, though none was satisfied.

Tuesday evening, all day Wednesday and Thursday morning, the final Convention session, were largely devoted to the reading of prepared statements and the discussing of their contents. It was on Wednesday, the 25th, that

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23 Birney, op. cit., p. 146
Nettleton, somewhat recovered from his exhaustion, returned to read a lengthy position paper. According to Finney, it covered the same points as the letter Nettleton had sent to Aiken in January. When his adversary had finished, Finney arose and categorically denied the allegations. In his own words: "I then affirmed that so far as I was personally concerned, not one of those facts mentioned there, and complained of, was true." Moreover, he recollected that all his friends who were present "at once affirmed, either by expressly saying so, or by their manifest acquiescence, that they knew of no such thing." What is more, Finney made a special point of his recalling that Weeks of Paris Hill, whom he assumed to be Nettleton's prime source of information, "said not a word" and that this "was astounding to Mr. Nettleton and Dr. Beecher."25 Finally, Finney summarized the entire affair with this observation: "The fact is that had not Mr. Nettleton listened to false reports, and got committed against those revivals, no convention would have been held upon this subject, or thought of."26

It is regrettable that a full account from the Nettleton side was never published. We can be sure, if Finney's over-all record for accuracy is any test, that the conclusion of the matter was not quite as favorable to him, at least immediately, as he has led most to believe. By the same token, there is good evidence that Nettleton's cause was injured when his witnesses, especially Weeks, held their peace. Perhaps there was no more fair-minded member of the Convention than Joel Haves of Hartford. In a letter written within a month of the Convention's close, Haves came as close as any participant to objectivity. Replying to rumors of his having said that Nettleton "appeared


ill as far as veracity is concerned in the late conference, and just escaped
with a whole skin," Hawes issued this qualified denial:

Far otherwise. I did indeed think that in reporting things by letter or
otherwise, he was not always sufficiently careful to know on what au-
thority such things could be stated, and that owing to this, he did, in
some one or two instances, perhaps more, report matters that were not
well supported. But to me and to all others of our Eastern brethren, it
seemed wonderful that he should have steered so clear of difficulties
and misstatements in a scene the most agitated, the most perplexed and
most incapable of being rightly understood that ever fell under my obser-
vation. His feelings for many months past have been most deeply inter-
ested in the occurrences of the event, and that, in this state of mind,
believing as he did that the cause of revivals was about to run down
and a deep wound inflicted on religion, he should in no instance have
erred in judgment or conduct, is what could be expected of no man. But
as a man of wisdom and prudence and great moral courage Br. N. never
stood higher in my estimation than he does this moment... 27

When the New Lebanon gathering was convened the Finneyites had everything
to gain and nothing to lose from its outcome. It afforded them a new respect-
ability, sitting down with the likes of Lyman Beecher and Asahel Nettleton, and
also a forum for their views. Notwithstanding Beecher's generalship, the stra-
tegic advantage lay with his opposition. Nettleton anticipated this, as
Beecher, flushed with a notable succession of triumphs over the Episcopalians
and the Unitarians, could not. It came as a genuine surprise to him when the
Finney forces stood up and fought back, giving as heavy blows as they re-
ceived. On his return trip to Boston, he remarked to the proprietor of an inn
where he had stopped for dinner: "We crossed the mountains expecting to meet
a company of boys, but we found them to be full-grown men." 28 The best con-
struction that Beecher could possibly place upon the convention was that he
had won a Pyrrhic victory. Judged solely by the minutes of the proceedings,
New Lebanon had been no better than an inconclusive draw.

27 Letter, Joel Hawes to Rev. Ludlow, August 24, 1827, Hartford Seminary
Foundation Archives, Nettleton Papers.

28 Quoted by Mead volume on Taylor, op. cit., p. 208.
With the passing of time, moreover, it was increasingly and generally regarded as a defeat for Beecher and Nettleton. As Cole has written: "The convention gave a nation-wide prominence to Finney and to his 'new measures.' . . . After New Lebanon he was the man who had stood up to two of the foremost New England evangelists." This was enough to render him something of a folk-hero in the eyes of the rest of the country. The same writer continues: "The convention had other significant results. The outcome of its debate opened the doors for the spread and intensification of revivals, not only through the scattered villages along the (Erie) canal but also through the country, into the cities, back into the heart of New England itself. And with the spread of the revivalistic spirit, a new impetus was given to the complex movement for social and moral reform." Such a movement Lyman Beecher, with his evangelical pragmatism, could not long resist. Sooner or later he would have to give it his approval, even though it would mean abandoning his old friend, Nettleton. Weeks of Paris Hill, for all his gossip-peddling, was only ten months premature in his prediction of things to come.

29 Cole article on Convention, op. cit., p. 396.
"GO ON, DEAR BROTHER, IN THE GOOD WORK!"

The New Lebanon Convention, as Charles Finney remembered it, marked the end of the opposition coming from Lyman Beecher and Asahel Nettleton. According to his Memoirs, he heard no more of it, possibly because he did not wish to hear. Always it was inconceivable to him that anyone could sincerely question the 'glorious revivals' associated with his ministry. Consistency of reporting, however, was not Finney's chief virtue, and, having denied that it existed, he promptly proceeded to describe the post-Convention opposition in some detail. Of course, it was the opposers who were blameworthy, his contention being that "all the controversy and all the publishing had been on the side of the opposition." Furthermore, he himself was "as ignorant as a child" of the machinations on the other side. "How little I knew or cared what Dr. Beecher and Mr. Nettleton were saying or doing about me!," he would one day insist. In particular, he would go on to claim that "at the very time Dr. Beecher was in Philadelphia," seeking to influence the Presbyterian General Assembly against him, he, Finney, "was laboring in that city . . . in the midst of a powerful revival of religion, perfectly ignorant of Dr. Beecher's errand there." If Finney pictured himself as far above it all, unaware and unembroiled, his subalterns were very much involved in the continuing conflict. "Certainly," Birney has observed, "the convention did not put an end to the feeling of

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1 Finney, Memoirs, op. cit., p. 223.
2 Ibid., p. 225.
bitterness in the part of the Finneyites." Their resentment, superficially, was directed at Beecher, but more basically at Nettleton, whom they rightly recognized as their principal antagonist. Politically, Beecher might be their obstacle for the moment; philosophically and theologically, however, it was Nettleton who stood in the way. Coupled with their negative emotions regarding the opposition was their positive elation at the results of New Lebanon. They had the sense that, if they had not yet achieved final victory, it was only a matter of time. By way of confirmation, they could point to the flood of invitations which now came to their favorite evangelist. Weisberger has excerpted some of them: "Brother Finney, ... the precious servants of Jesus are in the dark ... I cannot rest until you come;" "We do not see how we can do without you;" "A great anxiety ... prevails of having you sound the Gospel trumpet among this people;" "Brother, ... our petition ... comes from a few, on behalf of a town containing more than 6,000 inhabitants, who are ... crying 'peace,' when there is no peace." Indicative of the upturn in Finney's fortunes was the size and situation of the towns and cities to which he was invited. From New Lebanon he went directly to Stephentown, a small village five miles to the north. After again stating that his opposition had at New Lebanon "received its deathblow," Finney noted, "I have seldom labored in a revival with greater comfort to myself, or with less opposition, than in Stephentown." Stephentown, however, was to be the last of his village revivals, except for an occasional return visit in after years to Oneida County, the scene of his early triumphs. Now it

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3 Birney, op. cit., p. 149.
4 Weisberger, op. cit., pp. 121,2.
was on to Wilmington, Delaware, twenty miles down-river from Philadelphia, and then to Philadelphia itself, the very center and citadel of Old School Presbyterianism. What Philadelphia had in store for it might have been anticipated by the course of things in Wilmington. Finding that his host minister in Wilmington held Old School views, Finney set out to bring him around to another way of thinking. Over the course of two or three weeks he labored with the man in personal conversation, and then began to exhort his people to 'make themselves a new heart,' not to wait for God to do it. So completely was the minister won over that Finney reported him as admitting to a parishioner that he had never before really 'preached the Gospel.' McLoughlin concedes that "Finney may have exaggerated this story," but hastens to add that "contemporary evidence indicates that his preaching, and particularly the results which it achieved in terms of conversions, persuaded a great many ministers that Calvinism was dead."6

When first news of Finney's successful foray into the greater Philadelphia area reached Nettleton, he was hardly taken by surprise. While he hoped "that the captivity of Zion had turned," he was fearful that it had not and that the Finneyites would now be more aggressive than ever. As early as mid-August he had written Lavius Hyde, the minister in Bolton, Connecticut, urging him to introduce an anti-New Measures resolution at the next meeting of Hyde's Congregational Association. In the letter he restated his concern as follows:

The great evils which have existed and do exist and are likely in a measure to prevail and which convoked the convention owe their origin to lawless Evangelists. Every evangelist is under a powerful temptation to adopt the measures in question, because it gives him influence with

6 McLoughlin, op. cit., p. 42.

7 Letter, Asahel Nettleton to Charles Furiman, October 16, 1827, Hartford Seminary Foundation Archives, Nettleton Papers.
the disorganizing part of our churches and creates an interest in his favor and against the settled Pastor. By this means the Pastor is compelled to invite the Evangelist into his field to forward division or to avoid the name of being an enemy to revivals - and all against his own judgment and conscience.

Nettleton, for one, would never go against conscience. "Should these measures prevail," he insisted, "a generation will arise not knowing that revivals ever did or ever can exist without all these irregularities attending them. We are bound to leave our testimony to the contrary." 9

During the fall of 1827 Nettleton's contrary testimony came in for increasing attack. In October he wrote to Charles Furiman at Auburn: "I understand that there is an anonymous letter in circulation in your Seminary speaking freely of Mr. F.- and myself. The same letter, as I suppose, has been sent to Philadelphia and is in circulation in Oneida County. I have had an anonymous one sent me, and I recognize the hand." 9 So general was the whispering campaign against Nettleton that, under date of November 8, Lyman Beecher sent the following testimonial to the New York Observer:

It having been represented to some of the subscribers, that we disapproved of the proceedings of the Rev. Mr. Nettleton, in reviewing a sermon preached at Troy, March 4, 1827, and in opposing the sentiments and practices which it seemed intended to vindicate and extend; we regard ourselves as called upon by a sense of duty to say, that the proceedings of Mr. Nettleton appear to us to have been characterized by uncommon intellectual vigor, correct and comprehensive views of the interests of the church, and by distinguished wisdom, fidelity, firmness and benevolence, well adapted to promote the interests of pure religion throughout the land. 10

To it were affixed the names of Beecher and the other New Englanders who had taken part in the New Lebanon Convention.

8 Letter, Asahel Nettleton to Dr. Lavius Hyde, August 17, 1827, Hartford Seminary Foundation Archives, Nettleton Papers.

9 Letter, Nettleton to Furiman, October 16, 1827, op. cit.

10 Quoted by Tyler, op. cit., pp. 198,9.
Ever since the Convention there had been a desire on the part of some for a moratorium on the public debate. Joel Hawes had given expression to this in his August letter to Ludlow. "It's so difficult to know what's true, that I am satisfied it is high time to leave off writing and talking on the subject. Silence for six months will put things right again or at least put them in a way of convalescence." Asahel Nettleton, on the other hand, foresaw very differently the results of silence. Writing to Beecher on October 29, he offered his advice in no uncertain terms:

We think to forestall public opinion by silent measures, but this is giving them all the advantage they want. We can correspond with our friends who are already firm and need no correction, but this does not touch the evil. It is the irregulars themselves, and the ignoble vulgus, and the whole host of insurgents, that need to know our opinion and our determination to make a firm and decided stand against these measures. A few letters like that of Dr. Porter would soon turn to flight the armies of the aliens ... I do think that you and Brother Edwards ought to publish something ... Letters have been circulated in Philadelphia and at the South saying that all the ministers of this region agree with Mr. Finney, and that Mr. Nettleton's Remarks have done himself more harm than they have Mr. Finney. Unless something is published, thousands will believe it. As far as he was concerned, Nettleton added, "I intend to remain silent until somebody speaks to divert attention from me to the subject itself."

Out of this correspondence came an agreement between Nettleton and Beecher to issue jointly their respective letters to Aiken and Beman, Nettleton's letter to Spring on Finney's Troy sermon, and an anonymous review of the same sermon, together with the letter by Eleazar Porter to the Editor of the New York Observer. This compilation, bearing the title, Letters of the Rev. Dr. Beecher and Rev. Mr. Nettleton on the 'New Measures' in Conducting Revivals of Religion, was published in January of 1828. The Preface, which plainly bore the style marks of Lyman Beecher, attempted to disclaim all responsibility for

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11 Letter, Hawes to Ludlow, August 24, 1827, op. cit.

the 'New Measures.' If the Measures succeeded under God, well and good, but if they were to fail, the Preface continued, "it may at least be known . . . that some were NOT their patrons; and especially that such names as Nettleton and Beecher and Porter, to say nothing of others, were not responsible for their devastation." When Asahel Nettleton would hardly have written in so tentative a fashion. It was yet another indication that Beecher's allegiance to the cause was by no means assured.

In the late fall of 1827 Nettleton, for health reasons, went south to Virginia where he remained until the spring of 1829. His removal not only took him out of the arena of controversy, but further strained his already weakening ties with Beecher. Now it was Beecher who bore the brunt of the Finneyite counter-attack when the Letters came off the press. For some months, through the winter and into the spring of 1828, the rather violent reaction seems to have temporarily strengthened his resolve. There can be no question that the Finney forces during this time were acting and reacting strongly. Weeks had read things rightly when he had written to Nettleton back in November, "I think there is every indication that he (Finney) and his measures are to be pushed forward at all hazards." Nowhere was the Finney surge more evident than in Philadelphia, whither the evangelist had gone from Wilmington. Although he began in a church on the outskirts, he soon was invited to preach in Philadelphia's First and Second Presbyterian Churches. Finney's influential friend, David Dodge, wrote from New York in February, 1828, that news of his being welcomed into those prestigious pulpits had "almost petrified opposition" in that city. By March, however, Finney was running into increased

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13Quoted by Mead volume, op. cit., p. 209.

14Letter, William R. Weeks to Asahel Nettleton, November 19, 1827, Hartford Seminary Foundation Archives, Nettleton Papers.
Philadelphia resistance, which led his recent 'convert,' the Wilmington minister, to write: "Satan will never let go such a stronghold without a mighty resistance. It is his metropolis - his headquarters - the citadel of his power as far as the Pres. Ch. is concerned."15

Reports of these developments troubled Lyman Beecher, off in Boston, and, when he was invited to supply the Second Church of Philadelphia during the Presbyterian General Assembly in mid-May, he readily accepted. It was his chance to keep a 'New Measures' man out of the Second Church, which had just become vacant. He could not have anticipated that before that Assembly week was past he would have signed a truce with Finney and his partisans. Once again, they sized up Beecher, his violent talk notwithstanding, as one with whom they could deal. Whether Beecher came to them, as he alleged, or they to him, as seems more likely, is immaterial. It is enough for us to know that Lyman Beecher, along with eleven Finneyites, including Finney himself, put their signatures to the following statement:

The subscribers, having had opportunity for free conversation on certain subjects, pertaining to revivals of religion, concerning which we have differed, are of opinion that the general interests of religion would not be promoted by any further publications on those subjects, or personal discussions, and we do hereby engage to cease from all publications, correspondences, conversations, and conduct designed or calculated to keep those subjects before the public mind, and that, so far as our influence may avail, we will exert it to induce our friends on either side to do the same.16

"Thus," Finney's biographer concluded, "was a most important truce declared between the followers of Nettleton and Beecher and the friends of Finney."17

15 Quoted by McLoughlin, op. cit., p. 43.
17 Wright, op. cit., p. 95.
It might have been more accurately described as a truce between Finney's friends and Beecher as an individual, for Nettleton, in Prince Edward County, Virginia, had not been consulted. Beecher was to rationalize his action for posterity in these words: "The effect...was good. The excesses we had complained of, though real, were effervescent and evanescent. The men (Finney and his group) were beginning to be ashamed of themselves. They soon sobered down." With this Finney, in his own Memoirs, could not have disagreed more heartily: "It has been assumed and asserted that since the opposition made by Mr. Nettleton and Dr. Beecher, I have been reformed, and have given up the measures they complained of. This is an entire mistake. I have always and everywhere, used all the measures I used in those revivals and have often added other measures, whenever I have deemed it expedient. I have never seen the necessity of reformation in this respect."  

In any case, Lyman Beecher now had the unenviable task of justifying himself to Asahel Nettleton. His lengthy letter of May 28, 1828, told of his conferring with a number of ministers, from New England and elsewhere, and of their approving the course which he had followed. The letter then offered a dozen reasons for his coming to terms. The gist of these was that a prolonging of the conflict would further injure Nettleton both in health and reputation; that it would do injury to the character of the Finneyites, which he hoped "to save...for the Church;" that the public was weary of the controversy; and that the 'New Measures' men had issued so many denials of evangelistic wrong-doing that they stood "bound before the public to good behavior in

time to come." Most revealing was the eleventh of the reasons which Beecher cited in his letter to Nettleton:

There is such an amount of truth and power in the preaching of Mr. Finney, and so great an amount of good hopefully done, that if he can be so far restrained as that he shall do more good than evil, then it would be dangerous to oppose him, lest at length we might be found to fight against God; for, though some revivals may be so badly managed as to be worse than none, there may, to a certain extent, be great imperfections in them, and yet they be, on the whole, blessings to the Church.

With the passing of time it became obvious that Beecher had done more than sign a truce, that his face was now turned toward Finney and away from Nettleton. To the end he was to maintain that he had brought peace to the Church. In his own words: "The settlement worked well on the whole. The fact that after so much feeling and such deep excitement so happy an arrangement was made, shows real Christian principle in all concerned. It might, in former times, have led to martyrdom. There was real evil - there was real good on both sides. Nobody was finally injured. The evil was corrected; the good was saved." What Beecher's peace-making involved, however, became apparent two years later when he invited Finney to Boston in August of 1831 and reported that there the evangelist "did very well." This was high praise from Lyman Beecher, who could give full endorsement only to his own manner of preaching and evangelism.

How was it possible for Beecher to do such a seemingly abrupt about-face? By no means was it as sudden as it seemed. His Autobiography reveals that he had long been moving in the same general direction as Finney. One writer has noted that "the friction between Finney and Beecher was not theological in nature; in fact, they were close to agreement on such matters." Theologically,

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21 Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 80.
both were men of their times, eager to renovate the older theology and bring it into line with the optimism and activism of a new age. It was only in the practical area that they stood apart. As a true New Englander and early ecumenist, "Beecher was apprehensive regarding the 'new measures' being employed by Finney lest they disrupt the unity of the Church and eventually hinder the cause of revivals." This explains his continuing effort, not so much to subdue Finney, as to soften the objectionable features of Finneyism. Even here, however, the two men had more to bring them together than to keep them apart. Another present-day historian has suggested that it is not necessary "to distinguish the 'carefully controlled' revivals which developed under the capable leadership of Beecher from the more extravagant forms and enthusiastic awakenings of Beecher's western contemporaries. In terms of the specific function they were designed to serve and the end they had in view, the two types of revivalism may be regarded as indistinguishable."23

The direction Beecher had taken and his convergence with Finney at many essential points were soon to be highlighted by the theological controversy which broke out in the fall of 1828. For years Beecher's closest friend, Nathaniel Taylor, had been propounding views, first as minister of New Haven's Center Church and then as Professor of Theology at Yale, which even Timothy Dwight and, for a time, Beecher himself regarded as dangerous. However, it was not until 1828 that Taylor set forth his opinions in such a way as to cause New Englanders to take sides. Basic to his thinking was "the reduction of God's power over his creatures to 'persuasion only'" and the characterization of revivalists as "co-workers with the Holy Spirit to effect that

22 Johnson article, op. cit., p. 346.

23 Hudson, op. cit., p. 70.
persuasion."²⁴ To this Taylor joined "the conception of fixed and eternal 'truth,' to which all reasonable minds must give assent as soon as it was made clear to them."²⁵ Not only was such theologizing a far cry from Calvinism, but it tallied remarkably with what Charles Finney had been saying about the reasonableness of Christianity and the ability of men to grasp the Gospel and respond to it, if only it was presented graphically enough. Taylor and Finney were talking the same language. It was not the precise language that Beecher would have chosen - he later was to say that "Taylor did it indiscreetly"²⁶ - but it was close enough for him to cast in his lot with the New Haven theologian and, in large measure, with the New York evangelist.

Meanwhile, Finney himself was undergoing certain outward changes. From Philadelphia he went to Reading and from Reading to New York City, where prominent businessmen, active in the many voluntary societies and reform movements spawned by the Second Awakening, became his sponsors. An immediate effect of his association with these men - the Platts and the Dodges and the Tappans - was some modifying of his methods and polishing of his manners. This his Upstate lieutenants had feared and now interpreted as a loss of spiritual unction. With some of them he was never to be on intimate terms again.

Although his new refinement estranged him from a few, it brought him ever wider respectability. By 1830 a minister friend would be able to write the great revivalist, "Prejudices against Finneyism seem ... to have almost wholly given way."²⁷ Then, too, his New York supporters interested him in the other

²⁴Mead volume, *op. cit.*, pp. 126, 7
²⁵Ibid., p. 159.
movements of which they were a part. As a result, revivalism, of the Finney variety, and reform became well nigh inseparably linked for a decade and more. The reasons for the rapidly changing attitudes toward Finney have been summarized thus:

He had moved into the orbit of Protestantism's expanding system of benevolent societies. The close relationship between 'new measures' revivalism and benevolent enterprise strengthened the leaders of the growing network of voluntary societies who early sensed Finney's power, and on his several trips to New York in the late 1820's they exerted some modifying influence upon him. He refined his methods a little, weaving strands from eastern revivalism into the pattern that had been so successful on the frontier. He came to see that the reform emphasis was indeed a useful addition and a legitimate complement to his stress on conversion.

In a word, Finney had joined forces with the emerging power structure. It was a combination which a few New England ministers, espousing the older revivalism, could hardly hope to contain, much less defeat.

Lyman Beecher had little difficulty switching to the winning side. He was quite proud of himself, too, satisfied that he had been more influencing than influenced. Asahel Nettleton, however, was far from persuaded by Beecher's argument, especially when Weeks and other Northern correspondents reported that the Finneyites were more secure than ever and acting as if they had won the war.\(^{29}\) Nearly every mail brought word of additional schisms in Upstate New York and of deepening problems in New York City. The almost unrelieved bad news from the distant battlefront might well have taken a further physical toll had not Nettleton been buoyed up by encouragements close at hand. His Southern hosts had received him warmly, and presently he proved to be a source of spiritual blessing to them. As Lacy tells it; "Nettleton became instrumental in an extensive revival which resulted in large accessions to the Church. He


\(^{29}\) Birney, *op. cit.*, p. 152.
traveled over the mountains to Western Virginia where his presence and preaching had great effect, but his chief influence was over seminary students and his principal contribution was 'in quickening and directing the minds of the ministers, especially on the subject of revivals of religion.' There seems little question that Nettleton's Virginia sojourn and his subsequent visits played a significant role in keeping the Southern revival party within Old School Presbyterianism. Where he had failed in the North he largely succeeded in the South.

Throughout his eighteen months in the 'Old Dominion' he did what he could by letter to influence the deteriorating Northern situation. Rather bitterly Beecher wrote of Nettleton: "He wanted the battle to go on. He was one of those that never can give up their own will," Whether it was self-will or strength of conviction on his part, "there was plenty of encouragement from every side for Nettleton to continue his opposition, and he did," especially after his return North in the spring of 1829. Responsible men urged him to carry on the fight, among them Henry Davis, the President of Hamilton College. In a letter dated July 13, 1829, Davis referred to "the storm which has been breaking upon me" and described something of the attempt of Upstate Finneyites to dislodge him and take over his College. Addressing himself more directly to Nettleton, he wrote:

We have reason to thank God that you did not retire from the field as you once contemplated, and I rejoice to learn that you think of attempting to leave something behind you which shall prove a warning to the pastors of churches against the evils which have been, and still are, extensively experienced by certain frontiers of our American Zion. I am surprised that some of our brethren are not satisfied with what they have already

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30 Lacy, op. cit., p. 98.
done - that they should still be desirous and even exerting themselves to introduce the new measures in places abroad, when they have such tangible proof of their paralyzing and distracting effects in the churches on every side around them.

The Hamilton President then offered this word of exhortation: "Go on, Dear Brother, in the good work; and may the Lord enable you to erect a beacon which shall furnish salutary warning to thousands when you and I are slumbering in our graves."33

As much as physical limitations would permit, Nettleton gave himself to revival activity in his Northern summers and Southern winters. During the winter of 1830-31 he remained in the North, preaching for extended periods in Newark, New Jersey, and New York City, which by that time had come to be regarded as Finney territory. After he had left the New York area a leading Finneyite was to write concerning him, "I do not know that anybody regrets his departure."34 Tyler, on the other hand, speaks of "a plentiful effusion of divine influences"35 through Nettleton's New York and Newark ministry. By that time, however, all the momentum was with Finney. Moreover, the controversy over 'New Measures' was now taking second place to the theological conflict swirling about the head of Nathaniel Taylor. Birney has suggested that the doctrinal conflict "broke, in part, because Nettleton and his conservatives had been too busy with the 'New Measures' controversy to keep an eye on Yale."36 When it did come to a head, with the merging of Taylor's theology and Finney's 'measures,' there was nothing for Nettleton to do but stand with Taylor's

33Letter, Henry Davis to Asahel Nettleton, July 13, 1829, Hartford Seminary Foundation Archives, Nettleton Papers.
34Quoted by Cole volume, op. cit., p. 23.
36Birney, op. cit., p. 160.
opposition and join them in founding a rival 'Theological Institute' at East Windsor, which continues to this day as the Hartford Seminary Foundation.

In the correspondence of his later years there was less and less mention of the contest between himself and Finney. It did surface again in connection with a year-long visit to the British Isles in 1831-2. Wherever Nettleton went, not only in England, but in Scotland and Ireland as well, he was questioned regarding American revivals and was "not a little pained to find that many excellent clergymen had come . . . to look upon them with suspicion." In particular, they were alarmed by news of the latest of Finney's 'Measures,' the 'Anxious Seat.' Nettleton sought to allay their fears, as he later wrote W. B. Sprague of Albany:

I informed them that I had never adopted the practice and that it was never approved of in New Eng., unless they had commenced the practice since I had left America. They all spoke with astonishment, saying that they thought the practice had been approved and adopted all over the States and that it was regarded as a powerful means of promoting revivals of religion. This practice, they observed, had long been adopted in Eng. and Scotland - but only among a certain class of Methodists and the Ranters.

The same letter to Sprague contains a paragraph regarding Nathan Beman which reveals the consistency of Nettleton's views on the 'New Measures' subject:

As to Beman's preaching as you have described, I must say that I am not at all surprised. I have been aware of his movements ever since I was in Albany. I spent one afternoon and evening and a part of the next day with him at Br. Weed's house and read him my letter to Aiken before it was sent and explained my views and told him that the measures he was then pushing would as certainly ruin the character of revivals as that the sun would continue to travel in the heavens. I also informed him that if he continued his course and was himself a Christian he would be plunged into awful darkness - as Davenport was. He knows what I think. But I have told no one of that interview except the members of the

N. Lebanon convention - and there I did in the presence of Beman.  
To the end of his days Nettleton held to his basic position, as, indeed, Finney did to his. This Beecher, whose sails were more adjustable, regarded as unreasonable on Nettleton's part and worse. He was to write, "When Nettleton wanted us to break fellowship with the New Measures men, and we would not, he became dissatisfied," adding, "Nettleton never did much good after he got crazy on that subject." 

Stubborn and somewhat eccentric he may have been. Even his cordial admirer and biographer, Bennet Tyler, acknowledged "his peculiarities of character, some of which his best friends could not but regret." Nettleton had his idiosyncrasies, but inconsistency and insincerity were never among them. In fact, Lyman Beecher's son, Edward, would write of Nettleton's break with his father over the New Haven Theology: "I was not surprised at his feelings. They grew out of his deep religious experience." More recently Birney, from his own close study of the man, has written: "Whenever he believed that the church was in danger it made no matter who stood in the way. He fought for the truth as he saw it." One hundred years after Nettleton another man of somewhat similar temperament and character went down to defeat in a related ecclesiastical controversy. At the time of J. Gresham Machen's death, the novelist Pearl S. Buck, whose missionary status with the Presbyterian Church he had strenuously opposed, recorded her feelings regarding him: "I admired Dr. Machen

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38 Letter, Asahel Nettleton to William B. Sprague, March 16, 1833, Hartford Seminary Foundation Archives, Nettleton Papers.
41 Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 554.
42 Birney, op. cit., p. 194.
very much while I disagreed with him at every point ... The man was admirable. He never gave in one inch to anyone.\textsuperscript{43} Such might properly have been the tribute paid by a Charles Finney to his old antagonist, Asahel Nettleton, when on the 16th of May 1844, word went out from East Windsor, Connecticut, that Nettleton had finished his earthly course.

It has generally been assumed that J. Gresham Machen, for all his erudition, was a theological anachronism in the third and fourth decades of the 20th Century. So, too, has it been stated that "if anyone symbolized the obsolescence of orthodoxy in the nineteenth century, it was Asahel Nettleton."1 Looking only at a given segment, though a very considerable segment, of American Church history, this is a valid judgment. Nettleton, as the last significant representative of Edwardian revivalism, was, in a sense, born too late. One has written of him and those who stood with him: "Always they worked under the relentless pressure, which they sensed but did not fathom, of the growing individualism and humanitarianism of the day, by which their Calvinism was slowly being shouldered aside."

On the other hand, the theology of Charles Finney "had a message for this world as well as the next, and it was a message which fitted perfectly the ebullient optimism of the 1830's."3 In the words of another, "Men could not forever bow as wretched sinners on Sunday and swell with self-confidence the other six days of the week."4

Even an Asahel Nettleton could not remain totally unaffected by the changing spirit of the age. We have noted how early in the 1820's, before his Calvinism was fired and hardened by the New Measures Controversy, he could

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1 Cole volume, op. cit., p. 22.
2 Mead volume, op. cit., p. 16.
3 McLoughlin, op. cit., p. 100.
write of himself and Beecher as "really a different kind of Calvinists ... from many of our old divines." Moreover, he may inadvertently have contributed to the success of the type revivalism he so vigorously opposed. McLoughlin has observed that "the conservative itinerant evangelism practiced by Nettleton in New England for the fifteen years preceding Finney's arrival on the scene paved the way for a more tolerant attitude." While Ahlstrom, in his magisterial overview of the American religious experience, has suggested that Nettleton's "invariable success in calling sinners to repentance undermined the idea that a revival was the work of God," his in spite of the fact that the evangelist himself "insisted on understanding conversion in a thoroughly Edwardsean sense." Not only so, but McLoughlin has further claimed that W. B. Sprague's Lectures on Revivals of Religion, ostensibly written in support of Nettleton, proved "that the concept of modern revivalism was gaining ground even among conservative ministers in the early 1830's." However much he may have recoiled from the changes in theology and methodology taking place before his eyes, Nettleton was in part, at least, a product of his time.

That being said, we cannot dismiss lightly the protest which he raised against Finney's innovations in practice and Taylor's in doctrine. His fears were not imaginary, his charges not without foundation. Birney, writing from a more liberal stance but with notable understanding of Nettleton's conscience, has pointed out: "His prediction that the tendencies inherent in the 'new measures' would ultimately lead to a repudiation of the use of evangelists was

5 McLoughlin, op. cit., p. 122.
7 McLoughlin, op. cit., p. 124.
proved when the General Association of Connecticut in 1836 passed a series of resolutions condemning the use of itinerant preachers by the churches." Not only was his alarm regarding 'New Measures' vindicated in fairly short order; his concern with respect to the New Haven Theology also received early justification. "Although his opponents were quick to deny it," Birney continues, "his charge that Finneyism and the New Haven Theology were tending in the same direction was demonstrated by fact." Where this would lead Connecticut Congregationalism has been aptly summarized by Sidney Mead. Concerning Nathaniel Taylor, Mead has remarked: "His was the battle for the right of that new theological liberalism to exist within the orthodox churches of Connecticut, and, because he and his colleagues fought so well, later leaders like Leonard Bacon, Horace Bushnell and T. T. Munger, who made Connecticut Congregationalism practically synonymous with liberalism, were permitted to develop their position practically unchallenged."

It is instructive to note that Taylor "and Beecher preferred to describe their views as 'evangelical Christianity' . . . rather than Calvinism." In an earlier time Calvinism, with its stress upon Divine sovereignty, had, whenever it went to seed, tended toward Deism. Now Evangelicalism, emphasizing man's responsibility and response, would display a frequently repeated tendency toward Liberalism. Finney's and Taylor's shared confidence in man's capacity to appreciate and his ability to act upon a gospel of personal salvation would in due course express itself in the humanism and humanitarianism of a 'social gospel' - especially so, in the wake of Finney's identifying himself

8 Birney, op. cit., p. 220.
9 Mead volume, op. cit., p. 233.
10 Ibid., p. 125.
with the reform movements of his day and Taylor's insistence that the Divine Author of the Bible "demands only a rational faith of rational beings" and even consents that "the book... itself shall be tried at the bar of human reason." It is to the credit of Nettleton's foresight that he was among the first to anticipate the results of the union between what the Princeton theologian, Charles Hodge, characterized as "the cold, Pelagian system of the new divinity" and "the engine of fanaticism." This is not to say that Nettleton did so with any personal glee. As Tyler wrote: "The pain of Whitefield was not greater, when his friend and brother, John Wesley, avowed his hostility to Calvinism, than was that of Dr. Nettleton when these brethren whom he tenderly loved, began to maintain and propagate opinions which seemed to him to be unscriptural, and to be adapted to injure the cause of revivals."

Always it was difficult for Lyman Beecher to understand how Nettleton could differ so strenuously with him and Taylor, his long-time friends. For Beecher friendship was the overriding consideration. Taylor was his best friend, and he would hold fast to him, even if he felt he sometimes spoke or wrote unwisely and even though good friends, such as Nettleton, were of the opposite mind. "There was no trouble," he would write, looking back, "until I would not denounce Taylor." He would also reminisce wistfully of the days when he and Nettleton labored side by side. With Nettleton, however, the prime consideration was loyalty to the faith, as he saw it in the Scriptures. While he would never renounce a friend, he would denounce his opinions, if he

11 Ibid., p. 108.
12 Quoted by Warfield, op. cit., p. 34.
13 Tyler, op. cit., p. 222.
felt them to be at variance with revealed truth. How well this is illustrated by a letter which he wrote to Nathaniel Taylor in January of 1843! Taylor, for old times' sake, had visited him in East Windsor during his last lingering illness. Evidently the conversation was most cordial, with no mention made of theological differences. Two days later, however, Nettleton sent this letter of thanks and exhortation to Taylor in New Haven:

"I thank you for your visit, and the sympathy which you have manifested in my affliction. The sight of your face revived many tender recollections. There were many things I wished to say to you, but my strength would not permit ... As you are aware, I consider myself near to the eternal world; and I wish to say, that my views of the great doctrines which I preached twenty-five years ago, have not altered. They appear to me more precious than ever. I wish also to say, that I have the same view of some of your published writings, which I have often expressed to you in years past. I need not tell you that I love you. You know that I have ever loved you. You know also that I have been grieved and distressed that you should have adopted and publicly maintained sentiments which I cannot but regard as eminently dangerous to the souls of men, I impeach not your motives. I judge not your heart. I would cherish the hope that your own religious experience is at variance with some things which you have published; particularly on the ... great doctrine of regeneration. It does seem to me, I experienced all which you make essential to regeneration, while ... my heart was unreconciled to God. And this is the reason which leads me to fear that what you have written will be the means of deceiving and destroying souls. I say this with the kindest feelings, and with eternity in view. Receive it as my dying testimony, and as an expression of my sincere love ... God grant that we may meet in heaven." 15

There can be little disputing the fact that Nettleton regarded his own particular evangelistic approach in too sacrosanct a light. He failed to take into account that the Holy Spirit, who 'works when and where and how He pleases,' has employed a wide variety of men and means in different periods of history. At the same time, Nettleton must be commended for his conscious effort to conform his own measures to Biblical principles. His opposition to women praying in mixed gatherings and his insistence upon order in religious

15Quoted by Tyler, op. cit., pp. 223, 4.
assemblies was quite in accord with the letter of Pauline teaching. Certainly he was far more scrupulous in this regard than were the Finneyites. Commenting on the plethora of methods invented by the 'New Measures' people to create an excitement and attract a crowd, Cross has written, "Such devices were deliberately adopted, because experience showed that they worked." Not that this proved that "the perpetrators were hypocrites or scoundrels." Nathan Beman could see no inconsistency in saying, "I hope we look to God, but we must have means." Finney himself would write, "A revival is the result of the right use of appropriate means," adding, rather lamely, as an afterthought, "But means will not produce a revival, we all know, without the blessing of God." For Finney almost any means would do to achieve what he considered a Biblical end; for Nettleton the means were to be Biblical, too.

Basic to the New Measures Controversy itself and to any latter-day discussion of it is the relationship of revivalism to revival. Here, again, it would seem that Nettleton saw more clearly, than did Finney, both the dangers of revivalism and its limitations. He was fearful of any revivalism divorced from the local church or independent of its settled ministry, and was exceedingly cautious about describing the results of a given revivalistic effort as 'revival.' Charles Finney, on the other hand, was not troubled by such compunctions. A British preacher of our time, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, has offered this analysis of Finney and his revivalistic philosophy:

He was a man who taught quite definitely that, if one applied a given technique, one could have a revival at any time. This is the essence of Finney's teaching in his book on revivals. But history has surely proved that Finney was quite wrong. Many have tried to plan revivals by using his technique and have done so honestly, sincerely, and

16 Cross, op. cit., pp. 182,3.
17 Finney's Lectures, op. cit., p. 12.
thoroughly, but the desired revival has not come. One of Finney's cardinal errors was to confuse an 'evangelistic campaign' and a revival, and to forget that the latter is something that is always given in the sovereignty of God. It never results from the adoption of certain techniques, methods and organization. It seems clear from the historical facts that Finney himself for a number of years was in the midst of a true revival and greatly used by God. During the course of this revival certain things, such as the confession of particular sins, and certain other accompaniments appeared. These results Finney seems to have misinterpreted and, as a result, propounded his theory that, if people can be persuaded to confess their sins, revival will take place. It is the fallacy of believing that if we produce the results and consequences of revival, we shall have the revival itself. 18

Dr. Lloyd-Jones goes on to mention some of Finney's later suspicions regarding his revivalistic results, such as the oft-quoted statement in the Oberlin Evangelist, "The converts of my revivals are a disgrace to Christianity, and if I had my time over again I would preach nothing but holiness." 19 If Finney felt that his converts lacked staying-power, he could not say that his philosophy of revivalism was anything but long-lasting and far-reaching. Geared to what he himself termed a 'changing age,' it produced converts in far greater numbers than heretofore, in part by lowering the standard for conversion. Ignoring the Calvinist-Arminian distinction and other doctrinal niceties, it comprehended almost the whole of 19th Century American Protestantism - so that by 1875 a D. L. Moody could say, "I am an Arminian up to the Cross; after the Cross, a Calvinist." 20 Joined with the New Haven Theology of 'free-will' and later the Oberlin Theology of 'perfectionism,' it made for a Pietism which, largely stripped of theological content, could only blend with oncoming movements that also stressed human endeavor and perfectability. In brief,

19 Ibid., p. 31.
20 Quoted by Opie, op. cit., p. 155.
Finneyism contributed largely to what has been termed 'The Broadening Church.' It can be said to have found its climactic expression in the large-scale church accessions which followed World War II when as high as sixty-five percent of adult Americans could claim some ecclesiastical address.

What, then, shall we say of the more recent down-turn in church membership and attendance and, indeed, of the noteworthy turnabout of religious attitudes generally which commenced in the 1960's? There are indications that this phenomenon, still too current to permit of historical appraisal, may be associated with another major change in the American temper. Much as the uncertainty of the Colonial and Federalist eras gave way to increasing optimism and a sense of 'manifest destiny,' so the optimistic and expansive spirit of our immediate past is today reeling under the repeated blows of national and international crises. According to Ahlstrom, "As the decade of the sixties yielded to the 1970's, . . . Americans, whether conservative, liberal or radical, found it increasingly difficult to believe that the United States was still a beacon and blessing to the world."21 Observers of the current scene have compared it with a similar loss of confidence among the ancient Greeks which came, in Gilbert Murray's words, as a result of "the failure of human government . . . to achieve a good life for men; and . . . the failure of the great propaganda of Hellenism, in which the long drawn out effort of Greece to educate a corrupt and barbarian world seemed only to lead to the corruption and barbarization of the very ideals it sought to spread."22 Professor Murray conceded that the change taking place in the Greeks was "hard to describe"

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and finally resorted to calling it "a failure of nerve." 23

If it be true that what we are witnessing today is 'a failure of nerve' - and, admittedly, the almost incorrigible American optimism dies hard - we should not wonder that America's churches, conditioned by optimistic presuppositions, are experiencing theological shock and undergoing structural upheaval. History is not prophecy, and the details of future developments are not clear, so that "one could only be assured," Ahlstrom again writing in the immediate past tense, "that radically revised foundations of belief were being laid" and "that a drastic reformation of ecclesiastical institutions was in the offing." 24 Nonetheless, it would not be mere conjecture to suggest that, if pessimism or, at least, a sober realism regarding man and the world is in process or replacing a humanistic optimism, the religious situation in the 1970's is quite the reverse of that existing in the 1820's. For a century and a half American Protestantism has presented its evangelical and liberal alternatives, with both schools of thought making much of man, albeit in different ways. Now it would appear that in the emerging situation a new set of options is coming into view. On the one hand, there is likely to be a strong stress on God's sovereignty in history and salvation, call it Calvinism or something else. Contending with this new theocentric emphasis will be a conjunction of religious and anti-religious forces whose common denominator will be a denial of the God of the Biblical revelation and His Christ. Should this eventuate, Asahel Nettleton will no longer seem quite as quaint or obsolete. The loser in the New Measures Controversy may even receive his due.

23 Ibid., p. 123.

24 Ahlstrom, op. cit., p. 1094.
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Letter, Asahel Nettleton to Charles Furiman, October 16, 1827.
Letter, William R. Weeks to Asahel Nettleton, November 19, 1827.
Letter, Henry Davis, to Asahel Nettleton, July 18, 1829.
Letter, Asahel Nettleton to William B. Sprague, March 18, 1833.

All the above correspondence is to be found in the Archives of the Case Memorial Library, Hartford Seminary Foundation, Hartford, Connecticut.