

Church History (56): Asahel Nettleton

Without doubt, Asahel Nettleton was one of the most industrious men in the history of the church, and yet remains one of the most forgotten.

I. Asahel Nettleton

1. *His life.* Nettleton was born on April 21, 1783 into the home of a Connecticut farmer, the second of six children. He was taught the Shorter Catechism from his youth, though his parents were not "notably religious." Along with his siblings he was given a modest education, and with the boys "instructed in the fundamental crafts of agriculture." "His parents, according to the custom which prevailed at that period in some parts of New England, were professors of religion, on what was called the half-way covenant plan—that is, they were not admitted to full communion, but having publicly assented to the covenant of the Church, they were permitted to offer their children in baptism" (Tyler).¹ Beginning with the 1790s, revival was spreading through New England. "This was a period of refreshing from the presence of the Lord, wherein not less than one hundred and fifty churches in New England were favored with the special effusions of the Holy Spirit; and thousands of souls, in the judgment of charity, were translated from the kingdom of Satan into the kingdom of God's dear Son" (Tyler).² "In the year 1800, Nettleton became convicted that his life was dangerously frivolous; as a result, he sought to change both himself and his friends. An increasing sense of the wickedness of his heart brought about a corresponding attempt to prove the Bible wrong. He disliked the God he found there, for he knew that such a Holy Being must of necessity condemn him. He wished for God's non-existence. After Nettleton struggled in spiritual distress for ten months, God's Spirit changed his heart and brought him to embrace the Savior" (Nettles).³

On the night of the annual Thanksgiving, in the Fall or autumn of 1800, he attended a ball. The next morning, while alone and thinking with pleasure on the scenes of the preceding night, and of the manner in which he had proposed 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? This thought was, for the moment, overwhelming; and it left an impression on his mind which he could not efface. At this time, he gave himself much to the reading of the Scriptures and other religious books, and separated himself as much as possible from thoughtless companions. Thus, for months, he mourned in secret, and did not communicate his feelings to a single individual. As is common with persons when awakened to a sense of their danger, he went about to establish his own righteousness. He vainly presumed, that by diligent and persevering efforts, he should recommend himself to the favor of God. He was, accordingly, very abundant in his religious services. During this period, he read President Edwards' *Narrative of the Revival of Religion in Northampton*, and the *Memoir of Brainerd*. These served very much to deepen the conviction of his utterly lost condition. It was about ten months, from the time when Mr. Nettleton's attention was first seriously turned to the subject of religion, before he obtained peace in believing. With him, what the old divines termed the *law-work* was deep and thorough. This protracted season of conviction gave him a knowledge of the human heart which few possess; and which was doubtless intended by God to prepare him for his peculiar labors as a minister of Christ.⁴

¹ Bennet Tyler, *Asahel Nettleton: Life and Labors*, 18

² Bennet Tyler, *Asahel Nettleton: Life and Labors*, 19

³ Asahel Nettleton: *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, iv

⁴ Bennet Tyler, *Asahel Nettleton: Life and Labors*, 23-30

Soon after his conversion, Nettleton had aspirations of becoming a missionary. But these desires were ended, when his father and younger brother died of yellow fever. "The untimely death of his father threw the entire family responsibilities upon the shoulders of the oldest son" (Thornbury).⁵ This meant, his educational aspirations had to be put on hold. "After long days of labor in the fields during the summer, he went to the parsonage where, under the tutelage of his pastor, he investigated Biblical truths. By the autumn of 1805, four years after his conversion, Nettleton had mastered the preparatory studies for college. In the middle of the autumn term, he entered the freshman class at Yale" (Thornbury).⁶ Yale at the time was overseen by Timothy Dwight, the grandson of Johnathan Edwards, and while he sought to suppress blatant immorality, few students were spiritually minded. "During the winter of 1807-1808 he was involved in the second revival of his life. It took place at Yale and in the outlying region in New Haven. Nettleton took a great interest in this movement and frequently counselled with those who were awakened. The pattern of Asahel's intellectual interests and activities during the years at Yale would seem peculiar if we did not look at the future work God had designed for him. All of his experiences thus far, on the farm, in the college class room, and as a teacher in an academy, were preparing him to be a winner of souls" (Thornbury).⁷ In 1810, after his mother died and he turned the farm responsibilities over to his brother Ambrose, he trained for a year under the oversight of a local pastor. In 1811, he was licensed to preach. "At twenty-eight he was beginning his ministry somewhat later than usual. He buried himself in the writings of the great master Edwards, and his most brilliant pupils, Joseph Bellamy (1719-1790) and Samuel Hopkins (1721-1803)" (Thornbury).⁸

In 1822, Nettleton contracted typhus fever. "The sickness of Nettleton in 1822, gave a shock to his constitution from which it never recovered. For a considerable part of the time during the remainder of his life he was exceedingly feeble, and at no time was he able to engage in arduous labor" (Tyler).⁹ By the early 1830s, a considerable amount of opposition mounted against Nettleton and the "old theology." Yale, was virtually taken over with the theology generated by Finney often referred to as "New Haven Theology." The need for a seminary was apparent, and in 1838, the Theological Institute of Connecticut in East Windsor, CT, was founded. Nettleton relocated to East Windsor, where he would finish his years as a professor. "Although Asahel was only 57 when he moved into his new house, he settled into what was a virtual retirement. He was never able to lead a vigorous life again, and although there were times when he felt good enough to resume some preaching activity, he was, for the final 22 years of his life, a broken vessel" (Thornbury).¹⁰ In 1841 he became seriously ill with what was diagnosed as gall-stones. For more than a year he tried every remedy possible, but became no better. Finally, he agreed to two surgeries, with little effect. For the last few months of his life, he was an invalid. Just before dying he said, "It is sweet to trust in the Lord." He died May 16, 1844, after "great suffering."

2. *His ministry.* "Having been licensed to preach in 1811, in 1812, at the invitation of the pastors of churches, Nettleton began preaching. He entered into this ministry with several convictions. One, he must do nothing to win affection from or destroy the influence the influence of the settled pastorate. Two, he would not seek to stir up interest where it was clear the Spirit of God had not preceded him" (Nettles).¹¹ Soon, all hopes of becoming a foreign missionary were ended. "The reader is, doubtless, anxious, by this time, to know why Mr. Nettleton did not become a missionary, as he intended. The reasons can be stated in few words. Soon after he began to preach, his labors were crowned with signal

⁵ J.F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening*, 35

⁶ J.F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening*, 35-36

⁷ J.F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening*, 37-38

⁸ J.F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening*, 44

⁹ Bennet Tyler, *Asahel Nettleton: Life and Labors*, 23-30

¹⁰ J.F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening*, 44

¹¹ Asahel Nettleton: *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, v

success. Wherever he went, the Spirit of God seemed to accompany his preaching. His brethren in the ministry, witnessing the success of his labors, were of opinion that he ought to delay, at least, the execution of his purpose to leave the country. In deference to their opinion, he consented to delay, and as his labors became increasingly successful, his brethren were more and more convinced that God had called him to labor as an evangelist at home" (Tyler).¹² "For eleven years he immersed himself virtually without respite into the cause of revivals. This involved preaching three times on Sabbaths, usually twice, maybe thrice, during the week, and numbers of personal interviews and visits to homes where small but spiritually interested groups would be gathered" (Nettles).¹³ He visited over fifty towns between 1812-1822. He began his preaching in the "waste places" of southeastern Connecticut. "These churches were small in membership, spiritually inert, and often unable to afford a fulltime minister" (Thornbury).¹⁴ He spent on average three months in every town, leaving the town with an established church, and as the revival continued, a minister. Until 1816, most of Nettleton's preaching was in "waste" churches which had no pastor. But as the awakening progressed these barren spots became scarcer. Increasingly, pastors began to invite him into their parishes to preach. "Normally he did not remain long after a revival commenced, but he was there long enough to give initial counsel to the new converts. Very early in his ministry he discovered that the babes in Christ should not be left too quickly. The local churches provided, of course, a natural nursery where the new born souls could be nourished" (Thornbury).¹⁵

Several personal accounts of Nettleton's preaching exist. Lyman Beecher (1775-1863), who was a co-laborer and close friend, described his preaching as follows: "His preaching was discriminatingly doctrinal, giving a clear and strong exhibition of doctrines denominated Calvinistic, explained, defined, proved, and applied, and objections stated and answered. It was deeply experimental in the graphic development of the experience of saint and sinner. It was powerful beyond measure in stating and demolishing objections, and at times terrible and overwhelming in close, pungent, and direct application to the particular circumstances of sinners."¹⁶ In a letter to William Sprague, Alvan Hyde recounts Nettleton's ministry in his church: "The Rev. Asahel Nettleton spent a few days with us. He preached five sermons to overflowing assemblies, and his labors were remarkably blessed. The Spirit of God came down upon us, 'Like a rushing mighty wind.' Conversations were frequent, sometimes several in a day, and the change in the feelings and views of the subjects was wonderful. At the suggestion of Mr. Nettleton, I now instituted what are called inquiring meetings. More than a hundred persons attended the first. These meetings, as I found them to be convenient, were continued through this revival."¹⁷ "The public church services were only a very small part of his work during a typical revival. An ordinary week included numerous sessions in private homes and his own room, in which he was constantly explaining and applying the truths he proclaimed from the pulpit. Asahel's stirring preaching and pointed private counsel became a two-pronged thrust which closed in the sinner – a double net, coming from above and beneath, from which it was difficult to escape" (Thornbury).¹⁸ "Such was his knowledge of the human heart, and of the feelings which divine truth excites when presented to the minds of unsanctified men, that he was able to anticipate objections, and to follow the sinner through his various refuges of lies, and strip him of all his excuses" (Tyler).¹⁹

¹² Bennet Tyler, *Asahel Nettleton: Life and Labors*, 53-54

¹³ Asahel Nettleton: *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, v

¹⁴ J.F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening*, 44

¹⁵ J.F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening*, 44

¹⁶ Ian Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 199

¹⁷ William Sprague, *Lectures on Revivals*, 281

¹⁸ J.F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening*, 111

¹⁹ Bennet Tyler, *Asahel Nettleton: Life and Labors*, 53-54

Unfortunately, Nettleton wrote down few of his sermons. Bennet Tyler published a volume of his *Sermons and Observations and Miscellaneous Remarks* a year after Nettleton died. Additional sermons taken from his original handwritten manuscripts were eventually added to form the only existent volume of Nettleton's works. In a sermon on Regeneration (from John 1:12-13), Nettleton began with some errors about regeneration. "Baptism is not regeneration. Nothing is plainer than that an external rite cannot change the heart. Baptism is only a sign or token of the saving influences of the Holy Spirit, and is not that work itself. It cannot be the token of a thing, and the thing itself at the same time. Both the Scriptures and experience show, that all who are baptized are not regenerated."²⁰ He then defends true regeneration (as a sovereign act of God) from all "Pelagian and Arminian schemes, for they are in substance the same."²¹ "These are: (1) That God not only proclaims the offers of grace and salvation to all men alike, but that the Holy Spirit is equally and sufficiently distributed to all men to insure their salvation, provided they duly improve the benefits bestowed upon them." "(2) That the precepts and promises of the gospel are not only good and desirable in themselves, but so suited to the natural reason and interests of mankind, that they will of course be inclined to receive them, unless overpowered by prejudice, and a habitual course of sin." "(3) That the consideration of the threatenings and promises of the gospel is sufficient to remove these prejudices and reform that course." "(4) That those who thus seriously reflect and amend their lives have the promise of the Holy Spirit, and are entitled to the benefits of the new covenant." In other words, Nettleton is opposed to the idea that regeneration is a work of man, whereby he changes himself. "Under this erroneous statement of fundamental principles which is apt to strike an inconsiderate mind in a favorable manner, the very life and soul of gospel truth is taken away. On this scheme, all men have an equal measure of the Spirit, and the difference between one man and another is to be ascribed wholly to himself; to the improvement he has made of the blessings vouchsafed. And regeneration is a reformation of life, induced by moral suasions, or commenced in consequence of the understanding being enlightened and the affections being moved by divine truth alone."²²

After all preparatory means—all the promises and threats of the gospel—all the operations of common grace—and all exertions of unregenerate sinners, they must be born of God to become His children. There must be a new creation—a work accomplished by Almighty power—a sovereign—special—supernatural act, like making a world, or raising the dead, as to the power exerted, and without such an act no one can every see the kingdom of heaven. Persuasion is not sufficient to make men new creatures. If the Spirit operates on the minds of men only by setting persuasive arguments or motives before them, be the kinds never so diverse or well adapted to this purpose, yet after all, it depends on the will of man whether any shall be regenerated or not. On this scheme the glory of regeneration would belong to ourselves. It would be uncertain also, whether Christ would have any spiritual seed, as it would depend after all upon the uncertain determination of each individual before whom the motives were set. This then contradicts the Scriptures. God does not confine His operations to setting motives of persuasion before men: *Thy people shall be willing in the day of Thy power.*²³

In a sermon entitled, *Genuine Repentance Does Not Precede Regeneration* (from Jer.31:19 – 'Surely after that I was turned, I repented'), Nettleton said: "There are two kinds of repentance. One arising from the fear of punishment, and dread of consequences; without either love to God or hatred to sin. Such was the repentance of Saul, or Judas, and others. This may, and generally does precede

²⁰ Asahel Nettleton: *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, 144

²¹ Asahel Nettleton: *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, 145

²² Asahel Nettleton: *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, 145-146

²³ Asahel Nettleton: *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, 147

regeneration. But this is not godly sorrow. *Godly sorrow works repentance unto salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world works death.*" He then clarified: "There is a kind of repentance which always precedes regeneration, but it is not the repentance which the gospel requires. That repentance which implies no love to God, and no hatred to sin, and nothing but terror and dismay is not commanded. But that repentance which God commands, and which ministers are bound to preach includes both."²⁴ And yet, this in no way denies man's responsibility to repent. "But I would remark, that I have not asserted that the sinner is not under obligations to repent before regeneration. That it is not the duty of the sinner to repent before God changes his heart, that we have not asserted. It is his duty. It is the duty of sinners to do many things which they never have done, and perhaps never will do. It is their duty to stop sinning, and to *love God with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength.* This is their duty. And so it is their duty to repent, without delay, but they have never done it, and some never will do it."²⁵ This led him to say: "The Bible does call upon sinners to repent; and yet considers repentance as the gift of God. For example, John came preaching, and exhorted men to repent (Matt.3:2), and yet on the other hand repentance is the gift of God (Acts 5:31). Thus, you see, John the Baptist, Christ, and His Apostles, and God Himself urged the duty of immediate repentance. And on the other hand, they ascribe it wholly to God."²⁶ "Again—the Bible calls upon sinners to believe in Christ; and yet, considers faith as the gift of God." "Again, sinners are represented as being dead in trespasses and sins (Eph.2:1), and yet God commands them to live (Ezek.18:23)." "In all these passages you see that the Bible calls upon sinners to do what he needs almighty power to accomplish. Now whether I am able to explain this difficulty or not, it is the language of the Bible, I wish you to remember. You have seen that God does command sinners to *repent*, and *believe*, and *make a new heart*, and *arise from the dead*. And those ministers who do not, in His name, call upon them to do the same, do not preach as God has commanded them. You have seen that *repentance*, and *faith*, and a *new heart* are all the gift of God. And whoever does not attribute them wholly to God robs Him of His glory, and does not preach the Bible."²⁷

And yet, "How can it be proper for the Bible to command sinners to do what needs Almighty power to do for them?" Nettleton answered by describing the nature of the sinner's inability. He said, to describe the sinner as locked in a prison cell and unable to free himself, is not the best way to illustrate the case. "Though the finally impenitent will be forever shut up in the prison of hell, yet this is not the case with sinners on earth. Though I can see no injustice in God's making it impossible for sinners on earth to come out of their prison and be saved; yet there is one point in which this illustration will not hold." "The very fact that God does invite, and command sinners to come to Christ is, to me is a convincing proof that the difficulty lies only in the sinner's will. The single command, *Turn ye to the strong hold, ye prisoners of hope* is to me a convincing proof that all the bolts and bars of his prison are now removed. Christ has opened the doors of his prison and proclaimed liberty to the captives. God does not command the sinner to break through bolts and bars and massy walls. But this is the case with all who deny the distinction between natural and moral inability. They call upon the sinner to do what they themselves acknowledge absolutely impossible. This I do not admit. Again—If the prisoner were to be confined and punished without reprieve for all his past sins, that would be perfectly just, and right. But if the prisoner were commanded to break through bolts, and bars, and massy walls, and then in addition to all his past crimes were to suffer tenfold punishment for not doing it; I confess I do not see the justice of it."²⁸

²⁴ Asahel Nettleton: *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, 61

²⁵ Asahel Nettleton: *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, 63-64

²⁶ Asahel Nettleton: *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, 65

²⁷ Asahel Nettleton: *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, 66-67

²⁸ Asahel Nettleton: *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, 70-71

3. *His controversy with Finney.* Beginning with 1826, concern increased over methods employed in Finney's meetings. "Pressures were placed upon Nettleton to speak out. His friends constantly urged him to come to their aid. They felt defenseless, almost overwhelmed by the errors that rolled through their territory. To whom could they turn, but to him? No one else, apparently, had the stature and respect among the churches to check the rising tide of fanaticism. At length Asahel decided that the interests of Christ's kingdom required him to act. Churches near and dear to his own heart were in turmoil, and pastor friends were turning to him for a solution to the problem. Silence was becoming impossible. In the latter part of 1826, he decided that the time for confrontation had come" (Thornbury).²⁹ Nettleton met with Finney on two occasions. Following the first, Nettleton wrote publicly opposing Finney's methods. Finney responded with a sermon, *How Can Two Walk Together Except They be Agreed?* This led to a second meeting in New Lebanon, NY, in July 1827. Following this meeting, Nettleton wrote a private letter to a friend. "Opposition from the world is always to be 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 alarm. The evil is running in all directions. A number of churches have experienced a revival of anger, wrath, malice, envy, and evil-speaking (without the knowledge of a single conversion), merely in consequence of a desperate attempt to introduce these new measures. As we now have it, the great contest is among professors of religion—a civil war in Zion—a domestic broil in the household of faith. The friends of brother Finney are certainly doing him and the cause of Christ great mischief. They seem more anxious to convert ministers and Christians to their peculiarities, than to convert souls to Christ."³⁰

Mr. Finney himself has been scarcely three years in the ministry, and has had no time to look at consequences. He has gone, with all the zeal of a young convert, without a friend to check or guide him. And I have no doubt that he begins with astonishment to look at the evils which are running before him. The account which his particular friends gave of his proceedings is, in substance as follows—He has got ministers to agree with him only by 'crushing' or 'breaking them down.' The method by which he does it, is by creating a necessity, by getting a few individuals in a church to join him, and then all those who will not go all lengths with him are denounced as enemies of revivals. Rather than have such a bad name, one and another falls in to defend him. This moral influence being increased, others are denounced, in a similar manner, as standing out, and leading sinners to hell. And to get rid of the noise, and save himself, another will 'break down,' And so they wax hotter and hotter, until the church is fairly split in twain... There is another method of conducting revivals which may avoid these difficulties. Settled pastors occupy nearly the whole field of operation. They have, and ought to have the entire management in their own congregation. Each one has a right to pursue his own measures within his own limits; and no itinerant has any business to interfere or dictate. It will ever be regarded as intermeddling in other men's matters. If they do not choose to invite me into their field, my business is meekly and silently to retire. And I have no right to complain. But many young men are continually violating the rules of ministerial order and Christian propriety in these respects. Impatient to see the temple rise, they are now doing that which, it appears to me, will tend ultimately, more than anything else, to defeat the end which they wish to accomplish. They are now pulling down, in many places, the very things which I have been helping ministers to build up; and for which I have often received their warmest thanks.³¹

²⁹ J.F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening*, 157

³⁰ Bennet Tyler, *Asahel Nettleton: Life and Labors*, 344-345

³¹ Bennet Tyler, *Asahel Nettleton: Life and Labors*, 345-346