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Reformation
&
Revival

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Book Reviews

The Event of the Century

J. Edwin Orr, ed. Richard Owen Roberts

International Awakening Press: Wheaton, IL (1989)

383 pages, cloth, \$27.50

We are in debt to Richard Owen Roberts for his compilation and editing of this useful volume. Though some of the material appeared in other publications of Orr, for the most part it represents the first appearance of a body of work by Orr that had lain dormant until Roberts insisted that it come into the light. The binding is excellent, burgundy cloth with a gold stamped spine. The paper is sturdy; the print is easily read. Notes, however, are at the end of the book instead of the bottom of the pages, making it a little inconvenient to locate the many references to primary sources in Orr's text. In addition to the notes at the end, Roberts includes two appendices, an excellent bibliography (including works on revival, church and association minutes, newspapers, unpublished theses and papers), and a helpful index.

The exclusive focus of this work is the prayer revival of 1857-58. After a preface explaining the vocabulary of revival, three chapters give immediate historical background. Chapters four through twenty-four then chronicle the revival from Canada to the Deep South (including a chapter on Jamaica) in the colleges, among the slaves, and perpetuated into the armies of both the Union and the Confederacy. Orr then discusses the relationship of the press to the revival, the particular elements of society that opposed it, and its characteristics and results. He includes masses of statistics and dizzying journeys into a variety of cities and villages all over the United States. Anecdotes and quotations pass by as numerous and as quickly as carrying cars on a freight train. Some passages and sections are riveting in interest, and others are forgettable.

Several factors weaken this work and seem to be consistently true of Orr's treatment of revivals. One is the lack of anything but the minimum of theological analysis. His favorite theological designation is "evangelical," but he also uses the terms Wesleyan, Calvinist, and Arminian. Though these should communicate something to the reader, there are times when a theological examination of a prominent individual or the preaching characteristic of a particular "stirring" would be helpful. Indicative of this uncritical, and at times latitudinarian, approach is his remark that Sprague's work on revival "stressed the sovereignty of God" while Finney's stressed "the responsibility of man," and both emphasized the "agency of the Spirit" (xv). Certainly the differences between Sprague and Finney come to more than just emphasis. Sprague's *Lectures* were compiled partly to counteract the influence of Finney, and the letters on revival it contains from a number of other individuals immediately confront Finney's approach. The misperception that Calvinistic views of revival omit a place for human responsibility is as erroneous as the quip that a good theology consists of three parts Calvinism and two parts Arminianism. Human responsibility could not be emphasized any more strongly than it is in sermons of Edwards, Whitefield, and Calvin. On the contrary, both the semi-Pelagianism of Finney and the Arminianism of Wesley diminished human responsibility in proportion to the abiding effects of Adam's sin on his posterity. Any analysis of revival cannot pass lightly over these theological issues. This lack of critical thinking surfaces again in Orr's assertion that Edwards's "theocentric concept of revival was held by almost every reporter of the 1857-1858 Revival" (xiii). If this is true, Orr should spend more time documenting it than simply asserting it. Surely an event so heavily influential in Methodism and of which Finney himself serves as an interested observer, reporter, and participant cannot be said to be dominated by Edwards's

concept of revival.

A second criticism concerns an issue that is a combination of style and substance. Stylistically, Orr's endless quoting of statistics and percentages of increase makes for weary reading. Some of that is necessary, but perhaps a major portion of it could be condensed into tables rather than cast as a burden in the narrative. Substantively, the statistics are supposed to prove that something genuinely of God occurred on a pervasive scale denominationally, ethnically, and geographically. This method tends to enforce the lack of critical interaction with the claims. If one becomes overwhelmed with the mammoth size of the movement, then it is supposed to be of God, with individual critical objections pushed to the side. For example, events as radically distant as the increase of the number of baptisms among the disciples and the report of a convert giving a "tearful testimony" at a Unitarian Universalist religious conference serve as evidence of revival. In addition, he reports that the Unitarians' more evangelical wing defended the revival (p. 247). Among Roman Catholics of New York and Brooklyn, although "nothing sensational occurred," priests conducted preaching missions and, in some parishes, served over 5,000 at each communion (p. 75). Perhaps we are to understand these as Edwardsean Unitarians and Catholics. These events certainly demonstrate that something pervasive was happening but cannot serve as evidence of genuine biblical revival. At most they can serve as evidence that all groups observed the emotional, moral, and social benefits of the movement and approved of it. That may be all that Orr is demonstrating in those instances; a clearer distinction between essential truth and non-essential side effects would improve the presentation.

Another problem is the lack of clarity in sentences on the one hand and in argument on the other. Some sentences are too obtuse to understand. Try this one.

"The percentages of church membership to population of whites and blacks were approximate during 1800, but by 1860, when out of four-and-a-half million blacks in the country, barely half a million were members of churches, the actual percentage of black members of churches in the population was only half the total of the white Americans" (p. 202).

Orr's chapter on "The Definition of Terms" offers no help in distinguishing one term from another, but is instead an argument for the genuineness of the work of the Spirit in revivalism, revivals, awakenings, and effusions of the Spirit. Some terms that he mentions subsequently, such as "stirring," he does not mention here.

Even with these somewhat aggravating elements, Orr's treatment is helpful and offers a perspective different from that maintained by many historians of revival. First, his overall purpose of demonstrating the pervasive impact of the 1858 prayer revival he accomplished with justifiable aplomb. "This research," he claims, "has established its scope in schools and colleges, upon every class and nationwide" (p. 337). Of particular interest is his work showing the revival's power in the South, among slave and free, prior to the Civil War and in the Union Army during the Civil War (chaps. 21-24). His citations of D. L. Moody's work with the Christian Commission among the Union soldiers is noteworthy. In addition, the prejudicial falsehood perpetrated by Charles Finney that "There seemed to be no place found for Him (God) in the hearts of the Southern people at that time," falls with the thud of finality under the weight of the evidence garnered by Orr (pp. 155-175). He feels that Perry Miller's judgment that this movement was "The Event of the Century" is well justified, and the abundance of his evidence bears him out (p. 338).

Another attractive feature is anecdotal richness. Interspersed within the mountains of statistics and rushing

streams of denominational narrative are some clear, still pools of human interest. Orr's narrative of the reaction of Unitarian Theodore Parker to the revival is informative, entertaining, and poignant. Parker thought the revivalists were unbalanced mentally, and they thought that "hell never vomited forth a more wicked and blasphemous monster than Theodore Parker" (p. 249). The chapter on "The Pre-eminence of Prayer" gives helpful information on the structure of the prayer meetings, using the famous Fulton Street Prayer meetings as a model, as well as encouraging reports about obvious answers to the petitions of those participating, including the famous Henry Ward Beecher (pp. 279-91). The chapter citing "The Approval of the Press" demonstrated that the secular "press was the revival's greatest earthly ally for a couple of years" (p. 240). Religious periodicals were particularly astounded that the secular press provided so complete and satisfactory a summary of the revival. Orr surmises that its freedom from hysteria and fanaticism, its insistence on order and punctuality, and its obvious moral impact turned a medium normally "filled with insinuations against the truth of Christianity" into a major channel of propagation.

Another positive contribution of this book is Orr's confrontation with the interpretative schemes of William J. McGloughlin and John Kent. Though there is much to be said for some of McGloughlin's analyses of the influence of Finney, his denigration of the 1858 prayer revival deserves to be questioned. Orr's material is sufficient to bring the proper corrective. McGloughlin also set D. L. Moody in the wrong context, using secular sociology to interpret him; Orr, along with Stan Gundry's book on Moody, gives far more accurate interpretations of Moody. Moody, though not observably systematic in the way theology appears in his preaching, had great appreciation for insightful theological preaching and was a great admirer and reader

of Charles Spurgeon.

In spite of the weaknesses often endemic to Orr's approach, (Roberts tells an interesting anecdote about this on pp. viii-ix) *The Event of the Century* is so chock full of good information, so properly corrective in its approach to some current interpretations of revival, and so thoroughly positive toward the reality of God's action in history that time spent with it will be an investment in edification.

Tom J. Nettles

Revival

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

Crossway Books: Wheaton, IL (1987)

316 pages, paperback, \$9.95

In 1857-58 God sent a most precious revival to the United States. It began in the old Dutch Reformed Church on Fulton Street in New York City. Jeremiah Lanphier, city missionary, called a noon-time prayer meeting designed for business men. In the most extraordinary fashion, God turned this localized event into the most amazing spiritual happening of the century. Within weeks, churches, chapels, halls, and auditoriums across the city of New York were packed with noon-time supplicants. Like prairie fire it spread across the country. In two years God added well over a million converts to the churches. In 1859 this powerful revival leapt the Atlantic Ocean and showed itself as a magnificent season of grace in the United Kingdom.

Revival, by David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, commemorates this British event of 1859. The author, then the increasingly well-known pastor of London's Westminster Chapel, felt led

of God to deliver a series of 24 sermons on revival in 1959, hoping and praying that after the passage of 100 years God would do it again. For almost two decades these sermons were only available on audio tapes, and many hearts, including my own, were stirred and blessed in listening to them. Then in 1987, Crossway Books issued these sermons by the Doctor in a volume with a foreword by Dr. J. I. Packer.

The sermons are textual and deal with the most pressing issues facing today's Christians, including the urgent need for revival today and hindrances to revival like unbelief, doctrinal impurity, defective and dead orthodoxy, and spiritual inertia.

Three of these powerful sermons are based on Joshua 4:21-24, and inspire expectations for revival, trace out the characteristics of revival, and demonstrate its true purpose.

A very significant chapter titled "The Effects of Revival" deals with the whole issue of phenomena as they manifest themselves in spiritual awakening. The words of Acts 2:12-13 are the focus: "And they were all amazed, and were in doubt, saying one to another, 'What meaneth this?' Others mocking said, 'These men are full of new wine.'" Both physical and mental phenomena are carefully analyzed, and some very sane and greatly needed advice is provided. This chapter, carefully heeded, will prove of great usefulness when true revival comes.

As anyone familiar with the Doctor might expect, he was no mere dabbler in revival information, but was passionately alive to what God had done in the past and full of hope that in the providence of God he would live to see the glory of God once more fill the churches of old England and Wales. While the Lord did not grant him this particular favor, He did permit him to personally relive, to some degree, the experience of others in revival and to see at least touches of great refreshing from the presence of the Lord in many

places. His chapters on the effects of revival and how revival comes are clearly not written by some intellectually detached scholar but by a man very much in tune with the ways of God in revivals.

The section on prayer for revival, drawn from Exodus 33, is immensely consequential and in and of itself well worth the price of the book.

I am especially impressed with three chapters on the glory of God in revival in which the Doctor expounds Exodus 33:18-23. In verses 15-16, Moses said to God, "If Thy presence does not go with us, do not lead us up from here, for how then can it be known that I have found favor in Thy sight, I and Thy people? Is it not by Thy going with us, so that we, I and Thy people, may be distinguished from all the other people who are upon the face of the earth?" We live in a day when the people of the world can hardly believe in God because of the apparent absence of God's presence from the church.

The very mark that Moses says separates the people of God from the people of the world is strikingly absent. If a reader cannot think of any other reason to pray for revival, this development of the issues affecting God's glory in the church should be sufficient to drive him repeatedly to his knees in seeking God's face for that precious work of reviving grace which alone can make the church God's glory in the world.

The closing chapters, based on Isaiah 63 and 64, eloquently detail the sordid and unhappy condition of a church on which God has turned His back. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones did not look upon revival as another minor blessing it would be nice to add to our trophy case of captured graces. He lived, breathed, preached, and wrote as one who saw the tragic plight of the decadent church in desperate need of revival, and knew it could never again shine in the world without this mandatory blessing.

How can it be explained that for so long, so few have felt the immensity of this burden and have lifted their voices as prophets of old to the church of Christ to repent and return to the God of the Bible in the hope that seasons of refreshing might come from the presence of the Lord?

If you can read this book—and I most certainly urge you to do so—and remain unstirred, you may need to concern your heart even more with regeneration than with revival.

Richard Owen Roberts

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Revival

Richard Owen Roberts

Richard Owen Roberts Publishers (1991)

P.O. Box 21, Wheaton, IL 60189

159 pages, hardcover, \$12.95 Available in paperback, \$7.95

“Rather than writing merely to inform people and overcome revival ignorance, I have written with the conviction that the *experience* of personal revival is worth far more than its external facts, no matter how consequential. Read this book not so much for the information it contains as for the effect its truths can have upon your life” (p.11). This introductory quote sets in motion Richard Owen Roberts’s strategic book *Revival*. As stated, it is not a book of history, but appeal. It is a cry for revival. It is a cry for revival with *you* as the object.

Let me warn you: Richard Owen Roberts’s *Revival* may be hazardous to your sin life! Roberts is well able to give historical data on revival, having amassed thousands of volumes on the subject, now partly housed in the Billy

Graham Center Library on the campus of Wheaton College. But he is not romantically looking back in this book, except for an occasional supporting illustration and the use of introductory quotes before each chapter. Rather, he is laboring to deliver a message. He has installed a homing device within its pages and prays, Lord willing, for his missile to detonate in your heart.

The book answers the questions on revival which have to be posited. In this sense, it is a classic treatment. The queries are given to us in this way: What is revival? When is revival needed? When can revival be expected? What truth must revival emphasize? What are the dangers of revival? What hinders revival? Will the fruits of revival last? Each question is given as a chapter title. He then provides us with a ten-page selected bibliography (150 books) which is worth the price of the book in itself. (We value this bibliography, by the way, because he has given us some of the best and most accessible titles from his 5,000-entry annotated bibliography called *Revival Literature*, offered by his own publishing company.)

The book's strategic nature lies in the fact that these questions are being answered by someone of our day who had an orthodox theology (attributing revival ultimately to God's initiation), while at the same time is fully saturated with the best insights of those who were recipients of revival in earlier days. In fact, you may read with confidence that what Mr. Roberts writes in our idiom is precisely what others of past generations would have told us. In this sense it has a welcome place upon the bookshelf of modern revival literature.

And what is revival? It is "an extraordinary movement of the Holy Spirit producing extraordinary results" (pp. 16-17). Writes Roberts:

I reaffirm that ordinary preaching produces ordinary results.

Those who purpose to sound good when they preach may anticipate compliments. Those who seek to impart knowledge may expect to succeed. Those who yearn to see transformed lives and preach the Word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit will be prepared to see conversions and growth in personal holiness among their hearers. However, revival is not the ordinary result of ordinary work. Revival is always extraordinary (p. 18).

The book contains a sobering section on backsliding. Roberts lists, amplifies, and does spiritual surgery with 25 evidences of a backslidden heart. Here are portions of the first three. See whether they apply:

1. *When prayer ceases to be a vital part of a professing Christian's life, backsliding is present. . . .* Some who "say" their prayers every day never pray. The formulation of thoughts and ideas along religious lines, the mouthing of words, the bowing of the head and body, and the repetition of phrases, do not in and of themselves constitute real prayer. If the heart does not earnestly commune with God, no genuine prayer is present. . . .
2. *When the quest for biblical truth ceases and one grows content with the knowledge of eternal things already acquired, there can be no mistaking the presence of backsliding. . . .* This is not to say backsliders never read the Bible. Many backsliders have long established habits of dutiful devotions they have never broken, but while they go on reading Bible words, backsliders are content with the truth of God already in their possession. . . .
3. *When the biblical knowledge possessed or acquired is treated as external fact and not applied inwardly, backsliding is present. . . .* Not every backslider has totally abandoned the acquisition of biblical truth. Some badly backslidden pastors acquire new biblical knowledge on a weekly basis. It is possible to go on learning new things from the Holy Scriptures

without benefit to the soul. . . . Likewise, the backslider may sit in a Bible-preaching church every time the doors are open. He may listen attentively to the words spoken and congratulate the preacher on his unfolding of biblical truth, but if that Word does not drive out self, his backslidden condition only worsens every time he hears the Bible (pp. 37-39).

Roberts makes no little attack on the Christian's sins and the import of believers being right with God and each other, yet one is forced to examine whether his or her faith is real when rebellion persists.

It becomes apparent as one continues in the book that Roberts believes large segments of the professing Christian world are, in fact, without Christ, and that true revival strikes at that issue with hurricane force. He has employed a paradigm somewhat divergent from many current views of revival which place the heart of the problem almost in toto with the masses of "carnal believers." What others call "the carnal believer" (continuously dull-edged, persistent in sin, without affection toward God, etc.) Roberts would be prone to describe as a religiously affected non-believer. Being somewhat conversant with historical revival, I would heartily concur with Mr. Roberts that the issue of false conversion was a leading edge of revival preaching. You catch this conviction particularly in the section "What Must Revival Emphasize?" What revival does emphasize is repentance—repentance from sin and repentance from dead works. Read this:

Accepting Jesus Christ as Savior has become for millions of professing Christians nothing but a dead work. For many there has been no turning from sin and self and no yielding to the Lord Jesus Christ. Without genuine repentance there can be no genuine conversion. The true Christian has the life of God in him. This life is received by exchange: a life for a

life—His life for my life. When I come to the end of myself and in faith surrender to Him, casting all upon Him, He replaces my broken and ruined life with His own. It is impossible to have Christ as Savior but not as Lord. One cannot be saved from hell without being saved from sin and self. To pretend otherwise is hypocrisy. To teach otherwise is heresy (p. 71).

Perhaps there is no more important segment of the book for evangelicalism (given our attraction to theatrics and excess along with our shallow doctrinal base) than Roberts's study of 15 dangers of revival. He warns:

Time after time throughout revival history, insensitivity to the fragile nature of true revival has accounted for the sudden withdrawal of the divine presence which is always such a remarkable and essential aspect of divine outpourings. When God withdraws Himself because of the failure of His people to give proper biblical guidance and stability to revival, the mechanical aspects of the work may continue and even grow for a period, but in due time the counter-revival will prevail and the great work of God's kingdom will slip back to its former level (pp. 88-89).

Among others, these dangers include:

Trying to duplicate by mere human efforts what can only be divinely wrought . . . focus on the peculiar and sensational . . . neglect of prayer and private duty due to the press of revival activity . . . unfavorable comparisons among workers . . . the exaltation of novices . . . exaggeration or distortion of the truth . . . scandalous confessions . . . neglect of the whole counsel of God, etc.

Roberts effectively lays out the hindrances to revival both for pastors and the congregation. I found too much of myself in one of the eight pastoral portraits, and recognized

some additional pertinent concerns for our churches in the section on “five false loves” of congregations. These false loves are as follows:

1. *The love of tradition.*
2. *The love of disorder.* The ordering of priorities according to Scripture and sound spiritual judgment is a discipline in which most churches fail miserably. In studying the program of a typical church, one may find it often impossible to be certain whether it is a business venture, a social club, a political lobby, a neighborhood block party, a sports center, or a nominal religious organization. . . . What priorities are close to the heart of God?
3. *The love of brevity.* . . . Can the Maker of time be advised how much time He is allowed to accomplish His will and purpose in His own church?
4. *The love of comfortable truth* . . . It will be a long time before I forget the pastor who, immediately following my sermon in which a gripping sense of the Spirit of God became manifest, apologized for what I said, saying he was sure I did not wish to see anyone aroused or upset.
5. *The love of respect* . . . The love of respect is a path that leads to hell.

The last segment of the book deals with the fruits of revival, with special instructions to the reclaimed believer and the new convert. The way this section is written reveals Roberts’s conviction that God *will* come and “visit” His people.

This book will likely be with us a long time as a reliable source. Much of the best literature on revival is written during times of historic awakening. For many of us this adds interest and depth, but because of archaic phraseology, complexity of writing style, and intensity of thought, the average reader will never open these older works. Roberts, himself a lover of ancient books, nonetheless has written for the audience that is with us now. This book will

be understood by all who read it . . . and, I believe, with substantial profit. Read *Revival* by Richard Owen Roberts.

Jim Elliff
Associate Editor

Give Him No Rest, A Call to Prayer for Revival

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Erroll Hulse
Evangelical Press: Darlington, England (1991)
144 pages, paperback, \$9.95

To my knowledge, this is the first modern book, written from a Reformed perspective, which calls upon Christians to cooperate in prayer for a spiritual awakening in our day. Hulse is well qualified to write on this subject, not only because of his thorough acquaintance with the great revivals in history, but also because of his wide experience with the spiritual condition of churches, gained by traveling throughout the world.

This book is partly analytical and partly hortatory. Hulse discusses the meaning, need, and incentives for revival. The theology and revival experiences of Jonathan Edwards and David Brainerd are held forth as models. Some encouraging instances of powerful movements of the Spirit of God in our own day are cited, which would be unknown to most modern Christians.

Hulse is one of a growing number of Reformed preachers who believe that the “Latter Day Glory” promises of the Old Testament will be fulfilled during the present gospel age. This postmillennial outlook was predominant during the

early nineteenth century but faded during the twentieth century due, in part, to the deteriorating social and spiritual conditions in Europe and America. One might get the impression from reading Hulse that one cannot be premillennial in outlook and yet be a part of a serious movement for revival and reformation in our day. Yet one can hold to premillennialism in the classic, non-dispensational form (a la Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, J. A. Bengel, Henry Alford, the Bonars, John C. Ryle, Charles Spurgeon, Gordon H. Clark, etc.), and not rule out the possibility of great awakenings before the "end times." Since no one can know the "times or the seasons" which the Lord has put in His own power, there is no reason why any Christian, regardless of his or her eschatological outlook, cannot join in the "concern of prayer" which the book advocates.

Give Him No Rest is a significant book and deserves a wide distribution. It is hoped that it will stir up many believers throughout the world to besiege the throne of grace for a glorious ingathering of souls and an awakened church in the modern world.

John Thornbury

Lectures on the Revival of Religion

Ministers of the Church of Scotland
Richard Owen Roberts Publishers: P.O. Box 21, Wheaton, IL 60189
1980 reprint of 1840 edition, 444 pages, hardcover, \$17.50

This book is a reprint of an 1840 volume written by Scottish Presbyterian authors at the end of the period in America known as the Second Great Awakening. It could be considered a British counterpart to Sprague's *Lectures on Revival*,

which was formerly issued by the Banner but is now out of print. Both of these books defend the view that revivals are supernatural visitations of God which cannot be "gotten up" by mere human efforts. The need for such treatises arose because of superficial concepts of revival which were being promoted. This book is a helpful treatment of various aspects of the subject from a biblical perspective. *The Revival of Religion* is chiefly valuable for pastors and historians who are developing a theology for spiritual awakening. Like all such volumes, the quality of each contribution varies. I found the lecture by William Burns fascinating because it reveals some of the problems Scottish evangelicals were having in the mid-nineteenth century. This good man looked upon the growing Baptist movement as somewhat of a menace. Fortunately, the controversy over baptism is now being carried on, in both camps, in a more irenic manner.

Although the teaching in *The Revival of Religion* is solid, the style is heavy, and the content is repetitious, pointing up the need for modern treatments of the subject, such as that of Hulse.

John Thornbury

God Sent Revival

John Thornbury
Evangelical Press: Darlington, England (1977)
238 pages, paperback, \$13.95

The year was 1812. America had just declared war on Great Britain in June and lost its first battle in October. In the midst of that climate a young, unimpressive minister, on his

way to an assignment in New York, stopped at a church in the community of South Britain, Connecticut. When he was invited to preach, no one could have anticipated the impact his ministry would have, not only on this small church, but also on all of the East Coast over the next three decades.

As this visiting preacher spoke, the congregation became aware that something unusual was happening. His probing questions seemed to penetrate each heart, peeling back layer after layer, showing the reality of its sin. Many in the congregation wondered how he knew them so well. As he continued, he warned the audience of its desperate need for repentance and the danger of any delay. Many in the congregation were brought to a deep conviction of sin.

After the message the congregation dismissed without any formal invitation. The people returned home to deal with God regarding their sin. During the week conversion came mightily to many. The revival that began that week spread throughout New England, spilled over into New York, and resulted in a deep work of regeneration that lasted until the mid-1800s. During that span of time, God graciously used this man to bring more people to Christ than any man since George Whitefield came to America a half-century earlier. Who was this man?

Mention the names of Finney, Moody, Sunday, or Graham, and visions of great evangelistic ministries are brought to mind. But mention Asahel Nettleton, and few will have any idea about whom you are speaking. It is here that John Thornbury's book, *God Sent Revival*, provides a much needed treatment of the life and ministry of Asahel Nettleton.

Thornbury's book is important for many reasons. Nettleton is a significant figure in the history of revivals and evangelism who, sadly, has been forgotten. Yet his ministry may have been one of the most effective ever. Though he never wrote a book, pastored a church, or led an organization, Nettleton's preaching led directly to the conversion of

well over 25 thousand people at a time when our nation's entire population was only 9 million. Those figures, though large in comparison with most evangelists, are even more startling when one considers that his ministry encompassed little more than Connecticut and its bordering states. According to Thornbury, the number of conversions in modern times "proportionate to the success of Asahel Nettleton" would be well over 600 thousand!

Thornbury is not alone in his assessment of Nettleton's significance in history. His own contemporaries, who had heard such giants as Edwards, Whitefield, and Finney, counted Nettleton's ministry unusually successful. In 1844, the *New York Observer* said that Nettleton was "one of the most extraordinary preachers of the gospel with whom God has ever blessed this country." The *New York Evangelist* agreed, saying, "Few men, since apostolic days, have been honoured with such a signal success in preaching the word, and in the conversion of sinners as he" (p. 226). Francis Wayland, the founder of Brown University, said of Nettleton, "I suppose no minister of his time was the means of so many conversions" (p. 94). Even Lyman Beecher, who had both Nettleton and Finney in his pulpits, said of Nettleton, "Considering the extent of his influence, I regard him *as beyond comparison*, the greatest benefactor which God has given to this nation" (p. 23, italics mine). Surely one who influenced so many for Christ ought to be better known among our generation.

Perhaps what is most significant about Nettleton's ministry is not the sheer number of conversions but the number who remained faithful to Christ many years later. Most evangelists today would be delighted to even "find" a small percentage of their converts, much less to see them still living for the Lord. Nettleton's converts were surprisingly solid. For example, of the 84 converts in an 1818 revival at Rocky Hill, Connecticut, all 84 had remained faithful accord-

ing to their pastor's report *26 years later*. Similarly, only three spurious conversions out of 82 professors were noted in a similar pastor's report on a revival in Ashford, Connecticut. False conversions were the exception rather than the rule in Nettleton's ministry. In contrast, toward the end of his life, "after reflecting on the many who had claimed conversion [under his ministry] but had since fallen away," the great evangelist Charles Finney "had mixed thoughts on the genuine results of his work." In a letter to Finney, one of his co-workers, Jim Boyle, raised some interesting questions about their work:

Let us look over the field where you and I have laboured as 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 groaned in spirit to see the sad, frigid, carnal, contentious state into which the churches have fallen and fallen very soon after we first departed from among them.

These factors lead John Thornbury to conclude that Nettleton "very well may have been, next to George Whitefield, the most effective evangelist in the history of the United States" (p. 233).

The study of Nettleton's life also has much to teach us regarding the importance of preaching and teaching doctrine to the lost. Most of Nettleton's major themes, the sovereignty of God, the total inability of man, the reality of hell, true and false conversion, and the election of believers, are totally avoided today for fear that such doctrines will lead to fewer conversions. Nettleton's ministry shows that, rather than hindering conversions, teaching doctrine so thoroughly destroys any self-confidence that sinners are forced to cast themselves solely on the mercy of a sovereign God. As a result, real, lasting conversions become the norm

rather than the exception. Should we not return to preaching doctrine as did Nettleton, Edwards and Whitefield? Would such a return actually hinder true conversion? A study of the life and ministry of Asahel Nettleton cannot be overlooked in examining this important issue.

Likewise, Nettleton has much to teach us regarding the use of "methods" to achieve evangelistic results. What will be most surprising to the modern reader is to discover that Nettleton's tremendous evangelistic effectiveness occurred without any of the methods that modern evangelicals seem to think are essential in evangelism. For example, in all his ministry, thousands came to a solid, lasting faith in Christ, though Nettleton never once gave an "altar call." In fact, one of the greatest struggles in Nettleton's life occurred as he led the stand against such New Measures employed by Charles Finney.

Without a doubt, Finney's methods were effective in attracting large crowds and in securing large numbers of "conversions," but they involved many questionable aspects. These included publicly pointing out "sinners" by name during the meetings and calling them to be converted, and allowing women to pray publicly and to counsel men.

One innovation that was particularly alarming was the practice of calling upon people to make some kind of physical movement in public meetings to assist them in securing salvation. Some were told to "rise up" from their seats. At other times an "anxious seat" was arranged in the meetings, and sinners were urged to "come forward" to the seat in order to become Christians (p. 155).

According to Thornbury, all of "this created a sensational atmosphere" that attracted crowds, but also caused alarm among many sincere believers.

Finney's followers also developed that practice of com-

ing to communities without invitation from local pastors. In fact, whenever these intrusions were not accepted, the local pastors were publicly criticized as “dead” and “enemies of revival,” and the local people were encouraged to rebel openly against their pastors. While the revivals by Finney’s followers attracted great crowds, the community itself was often left torn and divided after a series of meetings. The great contrast between the lasting effects of Nettleton’s revivals and Finney’s is observed by contemporary Bennet Tyler:

These revivals [Nettleton’s] were not temporary excitements [like Finney’s], which like a tornado, sweep through a community, and leave desolations behind them; but they were like showers of rain, which refresh the dry and thirsty earth, and cause it to bring forth “herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed.” These fruits [of Nettleton’s revivals] were permanent. By them the churches were not only enlarged, but beautified and strengthened, and a benign influence was exerted upon the community around.

(From *New England Revivals As They Existed at the Close of the Eighteenth and the Beginning of the Nineteenth Centuries* (Boston: Massachusetts Sabbath School Society, 1846, reprinted by Richard Owen Roberts, 1980, p. vii)

Such methods, while attracting some ministers, greatly alarmed others.

Thus, in the summer of 1826, while preaching in Jamaica, New York, (on Long Island) Nettleton was visited by a group of ministers from Oneida County, New York, where Finney had been most active. They expressed their concerns about these New Measures and appealed to Nettleton to help. As he listened to their concerns, he was reminded of the great destruction caused by the methods of James Davenport during the First Great Awakening. As the autumn ap-

proached, Nettleton received letters of concern almost daily from pastors and friends in the Oneida area.

Nettleton struggled greatly over whether he should become involved in the conflict. He felt his main concern should continue to be the winning of souls, not the solving of conflicts. However, in late 1826, seeing that the preservation of true conversion and real revival were at stake, Nettleton entered the fray. In a letter to a friend, he explained his decision:

Irregularities are prevailing so fast, and assuming such a character, in our churches, as infinitely to overbalance the good that is left. These evils, sooner or later, must be corrected. Somebody must speak, or silence will prove our ruin. Fire is an excellent thing in its place, and I am not afraid to see it blaze among the briars and thorns; but when I see it kindling where it will ruin fences, and gardens, and houses, and burn up my friends, I cannot be silent (p. 145).

Thus began the one incident in Nettleton’s life for which he is remembered: his confrontation with Finney at the New Lebanon Conference. In reality, as Thornbury aptly chronicles, the conflict between the two evangelists occurred before the conference through the publication of a sermon by Finney and some letters by Nettleton. This section of Thornbury’s work is one which should not be overlooked by pastors and evangelists today. In it, Thornbury demonstrates that Nettleton’s concern over the New Measures was not primarily methodological but doctrinal. Thornbury shows how Finney’s New Measures focused on “success” and “effectiveness” rather than doctrinal correctness. The result was a “weakened theology” that accommodated his methods. Such lessons ought to be carefully examined today, especially in light of our excessive interest in church growth methodology.

Thornbury's book, written in a warm narrative style, tells of the conversion, revivals, theology, and friendships of Asahel Nettleton. Best of all, it is replete with moving examples of the power of his preaching and ministry. In chapter after chapter he gives stirring case histories of persons brought through heart-rending conviction to confident conversion. Perhaps one of the most interesting stories told by Thornbury illustrates the humility of Nettleton. Thornbury calls it *The Case of the Missing Preacher*. It occurred in 1816 in the Connecticut town of Bridgewater. The congregation was one of the worst around, according to neighboring minister Bennett Tyler. There existed a great deal of animosity and bitterness that had separated the church into feuding factions.

Nettleton had come to the pastorless church, and had preached for several weeks "about the importance of unity and brotherly love as a means of successfully promoting God's kingdom." These teachings had little effect on the people, who seemed to feel that "the mere coming of the evangelist to the community, like some magical charm, would solve their problems and bring revival."

On the day of the Annual State Fast, the people arrived as usual to hear Nettleton preach, but he was nowhere to be found. Nettleton had left the community the previous evening for a neighboring town. The impact of his absence from such an important service and his departure from them brought a great "heart-searching" among the members and time of repentance. Nettleton sent another minister to preach in his place the following Sunday. The minister reported to Nettleton that the situation in the congregation had greatly changed. It was pervaded by a "deep solemnity" and many were under conviction. At this news, Nettleton returned and spent several months of very fruitful labors, seeing many dramatically brought to faith.

One conversion at Bridgewater illustrates the power of

God in Nettleton's ministry. "Mr. C." was an antagonist of the gospel in every way. At the height of the meetings in a schoolhouse, Mr. C. came to the meeting out of curiosity but refused to go inside, not wanting to "ruin" his reputation as an infidel by being seen listening to an evangelist. Instead, as he stood at the door listening, what he heard "pierced his soul like 'an arrow from the Almighty's quiver.'"

In the days that followed, he tried desperately to get his mind off "the subject of religion." A voice in his soul constantly told him that he must repent or perish. Even this he resisted. "I, pray!—no, never. I'll perish first," was his reply. Listen as Thornbury completes the story of his conversion:

The struggle continued till this once proud rebel wilted into a heap of contrition. His mental agony became such that no longer could it be hidden from the townsfolk that he was under conviction. One night he reached a stage curiously like that which the evangelist himself had once experienced. He was in such misery that he thought he would die. Neighbors and acquaintances came to his house to sympathize; others watched in amazement. "To see this bold blasphemer, bewailing his sinfulness and crying for mercy, in distress and anguish which seemed too great for human nature to sustain, was a most affecting sight."

The next day he received the assurance of salvation and "seemed to be in a new world." The old blasphemer became a preacher to his former associates. . . . Even the most skeptical in town could hardly deny that something inexplicable had happened to Mr. C. "It must be the finger of God" was the opinion of many (p. 76).

Nettleton's ministry produced similar results wherever he preached.

In all, Thornbury's treatment provides an insightful biog-

raphy of one of America's greatest evangelists. Through it, he shows how much "revival" changed as more and more evangelists moved away from the methods and theology of Nettleton to embrace the methods of Finney. Today, Nettleton is all but forgotten. Even the seminary he founded in 1834 (Hartford Theological Seminary today) no longer displays the picture of its founder. "To look at this portrait today, one has to go to the attic of one of the buildings on the campus. There, leaning against one of the roof supports, is the portrait of Asahel Nettleton, seeming to stare sadly into the darkness. The fate of his picture seems almost symbolic of what happened to his testimony in America" (p. 229).

Since the 1800s, no other book has been written about Nettleton. (Banner of Truth has reprinted Bennett Tyler's, *The Life and Labours of Asahel Nettleton*, but it is presently out of print). Today, Thornbury's *God Sent Revival* stands alone as a testimony to America's forgotten evangelist.

Jim Ehrhard