

**IN THE MIDST
OF THE YEARS**

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A HISTORY OF REFORMATION
AND REVIVAL IN AMERICA



THOMAS J. NETTLES



FOUNDERS

MINISTRIES

CAPE CORAL, FLORIDA

IN THE MIDST OF THE YEARS

A History of Reformation and Revival in America

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword.....	ix
Preface	xiii
Chapter 1: Introduction to American Revival.....	1
Chapter 2: Historical and Theological Foundations for American Expectations of Revival.....	21
Chapter 3: Jonathan Edwards and Revival: A Selective View of Biographical Data.....	37
Chapter 4: George Whitefield	77
Chapter 5: Second Great Awakening.....	95
Chapter 6: Asahel Nettleton	145
Chapter 7: A Summary of the Life and Influence of Charles Grandison Finney	171
Chapter 8: 1858 Prayer Revival	211
Chapter 9: Revival in the Civil War.....	233
Chapter 10: Dwight L. Moody.....	251
Chapter 11: Billy Sunday.....	283
Chapter 12: The Ends and Means of Revival.....	317

Appendix: A Summary of <i>Religious Affections</i> by Jonathan Edwards	325
Scripture Index	341
About the Author	345
Other Titles from Founders Press.....	348

FOREWORD

Any book that contains substantive scholarship, along with brevity and readability, is quite a task to accomplish. Dr. Tom Nettles has blended well all three qualities in his new book, *In the Midst of the Years: A History of Reformation and Revival in America*, which summarizes and analyzes American revival history from the middle of the eighteenth century into the first half of the twentieth century.

There have been many books written on the subject of revival in the last hundred years, and the publication of such literature continues to this day. Revival—what an important subject! But most professing Christians today are generally grossly ignorant of or indifferent to the word itself. It has lost all of its historical meaning in the twenty-first century. Yet what does our country lack more right now than a massive turning to Christ again across the land? Is it not the most important need America has in this hour? Therefore, a new and quality work on the subject of reformation, revival, and spiritual awakening in the context of American history is very timely for today if it is well sourced and well written. This book is both.

In the Midst of the Years is a quality and timely addition to the genre of revival literature. Dr. Nettles, a noted Baptist historian and author, reveals himself here also as an exceptional writer on the subject of revival, which requires the scholarship of a true historian, the accurate thinking of a trained theologian, and the kind of spiritual heart that sees the pastoral and moral importance of what revival would mean in our day.

The opening chapter is worth the price of the book, as Nettles develops a solid historical and theological foundation in defining the meaning of reformation and revival. Drawing from numerous historical authorities, the author provides not only a substantive definition of both realities, but shows their proper relationship one to another.

Beginning with the eighteenth century, Nettles provides a summary of the First Great Awakening, primarily connected with the names of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield during the 1740s in New England. He then proceeds to the Second Great Awakening fifty years later, which began in the 1790s and proceeded into the first half of the nineteenth century under the ministries of Asahel Nettleton and Charles G. Finney, including the phenomenon of the 1858 Prayer Revival which swept the nation. In addition, the lesser known but inspiring movements of God's Spirit on both sides of America's Civil War is accurately presented here as part of the Second Great Awakening.

Proceeding to the Third Great Awakening in the mid-nineteenth century, the names of Dwight L. Moody and Billy Sunday ring a bell for many Christians. They were very significant evangelists who labored in the more modern technique of crusade-like evangelistic meetings, both in America and in Great Britain. Rather than seeing significant outpourings of the Holy Spirit, as Edwards, Whitefield, and Nettleton witnessed, Moody and Sunday saw thousands brought into the kingdom through the basic fundamental preaching of Christ crucified. This period of awakening saw the formative beginnings of contemporary evangelism in the early stages of American evangelicalism, which had already departed from its formative roots of Calvinistic experiential theology.

The words of A. W. Tozer are more applicable today than when he first spoke them over sixty years ago: "True revival changes the moral climate of the community." If this is true, a genuine outpouring of the Holy Spirit, producing widespread moral reformation and spiritual change, is the primary need of America

today. This book deserves a wide reading. I heartily recommend it to any Christian leader or believer who not only wants to increase their understanding of revival and spiritual awakening, but also longs to see God rend the heavens again and come down in reviving power for His glory in America in the midst of our years.

Mack Tomlinson
Providence Chapel
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PREFACE

The title of this book, *In the Midst of the Years*, comes from a prayer of Habakkuk as he sees the holy purpose of God in the discipline of Judah by Babylon. Based on what he now senses about God's purpose with His people, and how the Lord has shown His faithfulness in the past, Habakkuk prays for a revival of that same kind of powerful and purposeful intervention in light of the coming disaster. "O LORD, revive your work in the midst of the years" (Hab. 3:2) seems to imply that he desires to see these things happen before the culmination of the ages. God's manifestation of His glory now, before the rolling up of all things at the final conflagration, is at the heart of Habakkuk's prayer. He knows that wrath is the proper response to evil, injustice, and idolatry, but mercy is a surprising display of wisdom and power and gives a marvelous symmetry to the revelation that God gives of Himself in this age. "In wrath remember mercy."

We have seen the perfect fulfillment of this prayer in the crucifixion of Christ (Rom. 3:26) and the historical verification of it in the resurrection (Rom. 4:25; 5:10). We know of the full application of its benefits because Jesus the Christ was received back into heaven, where He is our Mediator and our Advocate with the Father, "Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1). We have found in Scripture, in history, in our churches, and in our lives that times of spiritual declension and confusion may arise. We also know, in these same spheres of experience, that God's gracious extension of life-giving power can revive us and revive our churches from these struggling, almost-smothered frames. Though we await the "glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13) for the consummate manifestation of glory, we can pray, "In the midst of the years" make Your life-giving, transforming, sanctifying power operate in an accelerated and expansive way. Lord, give us hearts that seek You more purely and lives that reflect Your holiness more fully.

COVER DESCRIPTION

Christians yearn for rapid advances in the progress of conversion in the world, holiness in their lives, and fruitful labor for the cause of God and truth. They want God-sent revival. These twelve chapters explore the periods and persons in American history that saw observable advances in these pervasive Christian hopes. Some manifested greater doctrinal purity than others, some highlighted distinctive personalities more than others, and some generated impressive statistics in the number of persons affected. Readers are encouraged to consider the relation between zeal, doctrine, spirituality, prayer, preaching, experience, and attempts to discern evidence of a true work of the Spirit. I have sought to avoid authoritative judgments on the messengers and their movements while hopefully including enough information and analysis to provoke thought and productive discussion on the subject.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN REVIVAL

Martyn Lloyd-Jones defined revival as “an experience in the life of the Church when the Holy Spirit does an unusual work. He does that work, primarily, amongst the members of the Church; it is a reviving of the believers. You cannot revive something that has never had life, so revival, by definition, is first of all an enlivening and quickening and awakening of lethargic, sleeping, almost moribund Church members.” He went on to describe a sudden work of the Spirit that “comes upon them and they are brought into a new and more profound awareness of the truths that they had previously held intellectually, and perhaps at a deeper level too.” Such a work brings humility, conviction of sin, and terror at any notion of self-sufficiency. “Many of them feel that they had never been Christians. And then they come to see the great salvation of God in all its glory and to feel its power.” This quickening and enlivening power brings prayer. Also, “new power comes into the preaching of the ministers, and the result of this is that large numbers who were previously outside the Church are converted and brought in.”¹

In W. B. Sprague’s *Lectures on Revival*, he noted that he gave these lectures to his congregation to “vindicate the cause of genuine revivals of religion; and in doing this . . . to distinguish between a genuine revival and a spurious excitement.” He began by defining

¹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, “Revival: An Historical and Theological Survey,” in *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors: Addresses Delivered at the Puritan and Westminster Conferences 1959–1978* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 1–23.

religion in general and showed how the Christian religion fits that pattern but with peculiar distinctives.

Religion consists in a conformity of heart and life to the will of God. It consists in a principle of obedience implanted in the soul, and in the operation of that principle in the conduct. Religion is substantially the same in all worlds; though the religion of a sinner is modified, in some respects, by his peculiar character and condition. In common with the religion of the angels, it consists in love to God—to his law, to his government, to his service; but in distinction from that, it consists in repentance; faith in the merits of a crucified Saviour; resignation under trials; opposition to spiritual enemies. Moreover, religion in the angels is an inherent principle; it begins with their existence; but in the human heart it is something superinduced by the operation of the Spirit of God. Wherever there exists a cordial belief of God's truth, and submission of the will to his authority, and the graces of the heart shine forth in the virtues of the life, there is true religion.²

Sprague then gave a brief definition supported by an extended analysis. “Now, if such be the nature of religion,” he surmised, “you will readily perceive in what consists a *revival* of religion. It is a revival of scriptural knowledge; of vital piety; of practical obedience.” He went on to defend the use of the word, revival, when it included in its meaning the element of conversion. “The term,” he noted, “is to be applied in a general sense, to denote the improved religious state of a congregation, or of some other community. And it is moreover applicable, in a strict sense, to the condition of Christians, who, at such a season, are in a greater or less degree revived; and whose increased zeal is usually rendered instrumental of the conversion of sinners.” He then summarized

² W. B. Sprague, *Lectures on Revivals*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1958 [first published 1832]), 6–7.

his observation into an expanded definition: “Wherever then you see religion rising up from a state of comparative depression to a tone of increased vigor and strength; wherever you see professing Christians becoming more faithful to their obligations, and behold the strength of the church increased by fresh accession of piety from the world; *There* is a state of things which you need not hesitate to denominate a revival of religion.”³

In his introductory chapter to *Revival and Revivalism*, Iain Murray posits two historical phenomena concerning this subject. One was present in American evangelicalism from about 1620 through 1858—this period he views as the period of revival. The second dominates the last of the nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth century—this period he calls revivalism. After that, as Murray puts it, “the opinion became widespread that such revivals did more harm to the churches than they did good. In the outcome, revival was for many years a discredited subject and the study of it fell into abeyance.”⁴ He also looks at the historiography of revival.

One historical method seeks to discern the difference between those two approaches to revival. A second type of history does not discern any distinctive difference but sees all the phenomena of revival culture as the same. A third and more recent approach sees all so-called revival as explicable in purely sociological terms. Among these histories are the ones written by Bernard Weisberger (*They Gathered at the River*) and William McLoughlin (*Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham*).

Murray’s thesis, in light of these other approaches to revival, sought a more carefully developed integration of belief and skepticism, based on an acceptance of the reality of truly Holy Spirit-wrought revival as well as the reality of contrived, humanly generated excitements and religious confidence based on false

³ Sprague, *Lectures on Revivals*, 7–8.

⁴ Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), xviii.

doctrine. He stated his thesis this way: "American history was shaped by the Spirit of God in revivals of the same kind as launched the early church into a pagan world." Before 1858, a univocal understanding of revival sounded clearly by the untrained preachers of the frontier and those trained in Eastern universities. Murray argued that these men were "equally opposed to what was merely emotional, contrived or manipulated. They believed that strict adherence to Scripture is the only guard against what may be wrongly claimed as the work of God's Spirit." They saw within some aspects of revival the tendencies to revivalism "long before it became a respected part of evangelicalism, and they would have had no problem in agreeing with the criticism which has since discredited it."⁵

More recently, Jon Butler has argued in *Awash in a Sea of Faith* that the Great Awakening did not occur but might be thought of as "an interpretive fiction and as an American equivalent of the Roman Empire's Donation of Constantine."⁶ Earlier he had written "Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretive Fiction," in which he called the Great Awakening merely a "short-lived Calvinist revival in New England during the 1740's." It became a grandiose idea with massive historiographical power through the work of Joseph Tracy's *The Great Awakening*, written in 1845 to establish a pattern of divine visitations in the history of American Christianity. Frank Lambert also believed that the Great Awakening was a historical fiction, but a fiction invented on the spot, not a century later. Lambert wrote,

Revivals are not timeless universals; they are historically contingent. They are cultural formations constructed by persons who believe in and expect periodical outpourings of divine grace that supersede the ordinary means of salvation found in the Christian church. The

⁵ Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, xx.

⁶ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 165.

eighteenth-century Great Awakening was the creation of a particular group of evangelicals who viewed themselves as, first, discoverers of a “Work of God” and, second, instruments in promoting that work. They preached with fervor and prayed with expectation for an effusion of God’s Spirit. When scores of men and women came under “conviction” for their sins and seemed to undergo “conversion,” the revivalists declared the existence of revival. Then, they spread the news of local awakenings from community to community inspiring similar occurrences throughout America. By the early 1740’s, the revivalists, viewing events from the inside—that is, as active participants within a revival culture—declared that an extraordinary Work of God had overspread America.⁷

Lambert then crafts a story from the variety of publications of the day, driving his point that the “revival” is the conglomerate product of all the publicity, self-promotion, newspaper accounts, journals, periodical magazines, correspondence (including localized, inter-colonial, and trans-Atlantic), theologically driven historical analysis, and personal testimonies. From this interesting conglomeration of texts, Lambert infers that the Great Awakening was a literary promotion in which the defenders of the movement were able to overwhelm its opposers in affirming the genuineness and substantiality of the movement on a grand scale.

However, Lambert points to the “contestation” as evidence that the reality was only literary and not undeniably substantive. “Every assertion promoters advanced met with a counterassertion argued with logic as convincing and evidence as compelling.”⁸ Lambert drew three conclusions. “First, the colonial American revival was both regional and intercolonial.” It happened in two areas prone

⁷ Frank Lambert, *Inventing the Great Awakening*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 6.

⁸ Lambert, *Inventing the Great Awakening*, 252.

to revival expectation and rich in revival tradition. The progenitors knew how to “pray down” as well as “preach up” a revival. This event became known throughout the colonies with only sporadic movements outside the two areas of New England and the Middle Colonies. Second, “the Great Awakening was a religious invention.” In other words, it was a “fabrication,” developed by the use of means that were expected to produce it, and then given reality by reporting the success of the means. “Third, the Great Awakening was a contested event, part of a colonial culture war.” Some saw it only as “rank enthusiasm” generated among the “vulgar masses.”⁹

This generated a war of interpretation and counterinterpretation about the revival and its effects. Jonathan Edwards, according to Lambert, became moderate in his estimations of the extent of it, but still asserted its genuineness in many cases. Thomas Prince, in *Christian History*, believed that his own accounts had not done full justice to the extent of it but had only given a “specimen of the wondrous Work of God which has been in the midst of these years.”¹⁰

My own view will gradually unfold in the flow of this historical narrative. I do, however, want to set forth a major assumption about this issue and then attempt some definitions. I believe that reformation and revival go together. One is preparatory and the other executes. One establishes truth and the other breathes life into it. Michael McClymond generally endorses this observation in stating, “There is no way to disentangle the descriptions of revival experiences from Christian ideas and teachings.” After a description of Finney’s experience of justification by faith, he made the general judgment, “This sort of interplay between doctrine and experience, cognitive content and affective response, is common in the narratives within the documentary history.”¹¹

⁹ Lambert, *Inventing the Great Awakening*, 253–256.

¹⁰ Lambert, *Inventing the Great Awakening*, 257.

¹¹ Michael McClymond, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religious Revivals in America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), Vol. 1, xx–xxi.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones rejected the idea that reformation had any *necessary* connection as a prerequisite to revival. He believed that connection lapsed into “Arminian terminology and thinking,” and was “to deny the fundamental tenet of the Reformed position.” He went on to say, “If you truly believe in the sovereignty of God, you must believe that whatever the state of the Church, God can send revival.” He illustrated it by showing that the apologetic efforts of Butler, Warburton, and others did not effect any rescue of the church from its destitution in the opening decades of the eighteenth century. He pointed to the preaching of Whitefield, who “received his baptism of power” in 1737 before he adopted Calvinism as a theological system, and to the Wesleys, whom God used mightily in reviving large segments of the Church of England in spite of theological muddleheadedness in some vital areas.¹²

I have questions about the accuracy of the good doctor’s thinking in this matter.

Reformation and revival follow the Puritan pattern of preparation and conversion. Just as the mind must be fitted with certain perceptions and perspectives on human existence, sin, and destiny and certain views of God’s law, holiness, and mercy before faith can come, so revival assumes some degree of fitness—conformity of mind—to pivotal truths conformed to the Spirit’s work of glorifying Christ. In a very distilled fashion, Hebrews, in its discussion of faith, shows this connection clearly in pointing to Enoch as a man of faith, based on the biblical assertion that he “pleased God” (Gen. 5:24, LXX; in Hebrew “walked with God”) by saying, “And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Heb. 11:6). Certain spheres of cognition are necessary as ordained means for the infusion of faith. This is why Peter tied Christian faith, growth, and zeal to the operation of the Spirit through the Word, specifically the preached gospel:

¹² Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors*, 15.

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding world of God; for “All flesh is grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.” And this word is the good news that was preached to you. (1 Peter 1:22–25 ESV)

Note particularly such phrases as “obedience to the truth” as a synonym for faith; note the affective parts of the response intrinsically tied to the cognitive—sincere, love one another, earnestly, pure heart—as an assumption of what the entire transaction of truth, proclamation, Spirit (the “imperishable” seed), new birth, and continued growth in love necessarily involves. Just as conversion assumes the truth, so growth in fervency of love—certainly a component of revival—depends on the right negotiation of truth to the soul.

In general, I define reformation as the recovery of biblical truth that leads to the purifying of one’s theology. It involves a rediscovery of the Bible as the judge and guide of all thought and action; it corrects errors in interpretation and gives precision, coherence, and courage to doctrinal confession; and it gives form and energy to the corporate worship of the triune God. Though it should be an ongoing enterprise in all churches and in the body of Christ throughout the world, the most poignant displays of reformation come at times of great theological, moral, spiritual, and ecclesiological declension in the church.

This involves a recovery of the formal principle of the Reformation, the principle of *sola Scriptura*, and it reasserts the material principle of justification by faith with all the necessary attendant doctrines to that view of salvation. Among these are the doctrine of human sinfulness resulting in both condemnation and corruption and, in its most thoroughly biblical form, the doctrine of the bondage of the will. The doctrine of the new birth is important

to understand one's existential reliance on the intervention of God for the genesis of real spiritual life. The doctrine of imputed righteousness is necessary, not only as a matter of clear biblical teaching but as a part of the doctrinal coherence that eliminates the contribution of any human work to justification.

How then does revival relate to this concept of reformation? Revival is the application of reformation truth to human experience. It occurs one person at a time and may appear in individuals who become somewhat isolated from the more general apathy around them; or it may appear on a relatively massive scale, radically altering the spiritual face of an entire church, community, or even nation. Normally, therefore, revival involves three things: the presence of reformation doctrine either preached, read, or otherwise known; the experiential application of that doctrine accompanied by loving but careful investigation of the experience; and the extension of such an experience to a large number of people.

In Revelation, we find the church at Thyatira having good experience but in need of great doctrinal perception. They must work to maintain the purity of what they know. The church at Ephesus is doctrinally sound and mature and courageous in the application of truth against the specific threats in the church. They, however, stand in need of increased experience, that is, a heightened conformity of affection for the God of truth. A proper grasp of doctrinal truth always implies the reality of the experiential element in it. To have a true doctrine of Christ implies a heart that consents to the biblical exclamation, that "in everything he might be preeminent" (Col. 1:18). A biblical doctrine of sin implies that we sense the despair into which it brings its perpetrator so that in embracing its truth we also cry out, "Wretched man that I am!" (Rom. 7:24). The doctrine of faith cannot be grasped apart from the cordiality of our consent to the truths of the gospel, a personal sense of trust in Christ, and abandonment of soul to Him, all infused with a hope of future glory and a sense of the perfection of life only within the sphere of divine love.

Revival means to make live again. A person formerly alive in Adam before the fall, but now dead in trespasses and sin because “as in Adam all die” (1 Cor. 15:22), is raised from death to life. This is revival. A person who has true spiritual life has drifted in discipline and cooled in affection for biblical truth and the Lord Jesus Christ. But then he has an intensification of love, devotion, holy living, and intentional biblical orientation. This is revival.

Both of these examples arise from the consistent application of the biblically revealed use of means to propagate the Christian faith and promote its utterly transforming effect on individual lives and corporate harmony. This use of means is graced by a period of intensive and pervasive operations of the Spirit of God that gives rapid maturing of the goals pursued through these means. Thus, sanctification rapidly increases, and community life has substantial healing of remaining jealousies and divisions. Conversions occur at a more rapid pace, a vision for gospel expansion is given clarity, and means for its execution are developed.

McClymond, from his observation of the phenomena of various revival traditions, gives seven characteristics of revivals. Only the first, he noted, is essential to all revival, and it generally corresponds to my description above. The other characteristics may or may not be present or will be present in differing combinations and intensity.

1. Revival involves “intensified experience.” Participants in revival share a “vivid sense of spiritual things, great joy and faith, deep sorrow over sin, a passionate desire to evangelize others, and heightened feelings of love for God and fellow human beings.”¹³
2. Bodily manifestations often characterize these times of the intensification of feeling. The documentary history is quite profound on this. From sobbing, to

¹³ This list is derived from McClymond, *Encyclopedia of Religious Revivals*, Vol. 1, xxii–xxiii.

jumping for joy, to a sense of warmth and electrical impulses in the body, to fainting, to various impulses to speak in testimony, to prayer, to prophecy, to dancing or shouting, the effect of deeply moving spiritual and emotional perceptions frequently has a somatic effect.

3. Many revival expressions have resulted in, or even focused on, “extraordinary occurrences.” This is particularly true in many of the twentieth-century movements related to the rise of Pentecostal and Charismatic revival.
4. They give rise to the need for “spiritual discernment”—to distinguish between the true and the false in spiritual experience, between the merely natural human response to stimuli and the divine intervention in a person’s soul, between the operations of the Spirit of God and the counterfeiting activity of Satan, and between the true hortatory gift in preaching and evangelism and the manipulative techniques of a well-schooled tactician.
5. Revivals frequently lead to issues of “lay and clerical authority.” How freely should those who are immature in biblical knowledge and doctrine be allowed to testify and exhort others? How much guidance should trained and ordained clerics exert? Will a church body genuinely moved by spiritual truth in a powerful way turn on its leaders as unspiritual because they naturally approach such a phenomenon with a greater sense of critical interaction due to the particular stewardship that is on them?
6. Sometimes this gives rise to “conflict and division in church and community.” That tends to happen in the latter stages of a revival period as interpretations

have solidified and often have pivotal points of difference.

7. We find, therefore, the development of different associations, denominations, benevolent organizations, and educational institutions that emerge from the positive energy of a revival, as well as differences that emerge in the intensification of thought and emotion and the emphases that consolidate in the process of discernment.

In this book, I will propose that Charles Finney set in motion ideas and methods that greatly altered the American evangelical understanding of revival and, consequently, of Christian experience and truth. His emphases, which began to emerge in the late 1820s, had matured by 1835 and were published in a systematic theology in 1846. I will argue that there is a logical trajectory from the leading ideas of his thought into the silly narcissism of much that poses as evangelical religion today. Joel Osteen can be explained in terms of Charles Finney. In 1832, Sprague pointed to the reason for his lectures and for obtaining letters from many of his brethren of theological like-mindedness: “If the volume should, by the blessing of God, be instrumental, even in a humble degree, of promoting such revivals as those for which Edwards, and Dwight, and Nettleton, and a host of others among the living and the dead, have counted it an honor to labor, the best wish of the author . . . will be answered.”¹⁴

Before we start our historical journey into these storms of controversy and change, however, I want to point to several assumptions that Finney *shared* with those who initially opposed him.

First, in times of declension revival is needed. From Solomon Stoddard to Billy Graham, a commitment to a harvest of souls and the escalation of spirituality among Christians has been seen as a

¹⁴ Sprague, *Lectures on Revivals*, xiv–xv.

desideratum, except from those who oppose revival in principle. Lloyd-Jones noted, in an introduction to Sprague's *Lectures on Revivals*, "I am profoundly convinced that the greatest need in the world today is revival in the Church of God. Yet, Alas! The whole idea of revival seems to have become strange to so many good Christian people. There are some who even seem to resent the very idea and actually speak and write against it." Though revival was seen as a sovereign work of God in the earlier period while later it was viewed as the rational result of the employment of proper methods, both groups believed that it was legitimate to work for and pray for revival. In the Minutes of the Charleston Association for November 1825, after resolving to pray for the work in Burmah and among the Creek Indians, the Association, conscious of its depressed state due to the recent loss of Richard Furman, set aside a day for "fasting, humiliation, and prayer" for several objects, one of which was that God "may revive his work with power in the bounds of this Association, in our country generally, and throughout the world."¹⁵ This was then followed by a separate resolution on revival.

Resolved, While we greatly rejoice to hear of the many precious revivals of religion, which have been lately experienced in many parts of our country, and feeling earnestly desirous of witnessing similar gracious effusions of the Holy Spirit among ourselves, and being at the same time deeply sensible that extraordinary exertion on the part of the friends of Zion, are absolutely necessary: we do, therefore affectionately, earnestly and solemnly recommend to our brethren, that as far as practicable, they should set apart every Lord's evening as seasons of special prayer: that on these evenings they exert themselves to meet together as often as possible; but when this is impracticable they should then in their

¹⁵ *Minutes of the Charleston Association, 1825* (W. Riley; 125 Church Street, Charleston), 5–6.

families and in their closets supplicate Almighty God for the special out-pourings of his Holy Spirit on our churches and on the rising generation.

Second, Finney asserted, in the same energetic conviction of Jonathan Edwards, that spiritual life and the quest for eternal life infinitely exceeds in importance any status, comfort, or power one might pursue and achieve in this life. One must lay everything aside and press into the kingdom. Edwards enjoined his listeners to “count the cost of a thorough, violent, and perpetual pursuit of salvation, and forsake all, as Ruth forsook her own country, and all her pleasant enjoyments in it. Do not do as Orpah did; who set out, and then was discouraged, and went back. But hold out with Ruth through all discouragement and opposition.”¹⁶

In a sermon called “The Doom of those who Neglect the Great Salvation,” Finney pressed the conscience of his hearers with their lack of fitting seriousness about the task of seeking salvation.

This salvation is life’s great work. If not made such, it had best be left alone. To put it in any other relation is worse than nothing. If you make it second to anything else, your course will surely be ineffectual—a lie, a delusion, a damnation! . . . It is infinite folly to make the matter of personal salvation only a secondary matter; for to do so is only to neglect it after all. Unless it has your whole heart, you virtually neglect it, for nothing less than your whole heart is the devotion due. To give it less than your whole heart is truly to insult God, and to insult the subject of salvation.¹⁷

And in a sermon on “The Loss when a Soul is Lost,” Finney preached concerning this same urgency to those who would give

¹⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), 1:668.

¹⁷ Charles Finney, *The Way of Salvation*, (London: R. D. Dickinson, 1896), 214–215.

their energies to anything other than the task of saving souls from eternal perdition.

What is really worth living for but to save souls? You may think it is worth living for to be a judge or a senator but is it? Is it, if the price must be the loss of your soul? How many of our American presidents have died as you would wish to die? If you should live to gain the object of your ambition, what would be your chance of saving your soul? The world being what it is, and the temptations incident to office and worldly honor being as they are, how great would be your prospects of saving yourselves? Would it be wise of you to run the hazard? What else would you live for than to save souls? Would you not rather save souls than be president of this union? "He that winneth souls is wise." "They that turn many to righteousness shall shine as the stars forever." Will this be the case with the ungodly presidents who die in their sins? What do you propose to do, young man, or young woman, with your education? Have you any higher or nobler object to live for than to save souls? Have you any more worthy object upon which to expand the resources of a cultivated mind and the accumulated powers gained by education? Think, what should I live for but the gems of heaven, for what but the honor of Jesus, my master?¹⁸

Third, "excitements" without proper understanding were detrimental to revival. As Edwards called for light in the understanding commensurate with heat in the affections, so Finney felt that lack of sufficient instruction in converting doctrines was a fault of many revival preachers. He criticized them, as well as local church pastors, by observing, "They have failed to present the objects of faith, and to hold them before the mind until the

¹⁸ Charles Finney, "The Loss When a Soul is Lost," from *The Oberlin Evangelist*, July 2, 1851 (Lecture 1).

mind believes. They philosophized, perhaps correctly about the nature of faith, but they have not so forcibly arrayed before their minds the truth to be believed as to beget faith.” We will show, in fact, that though some contrivances seemed to present a false stimulation to the conscience in Finney’s methods, the real danger of his view was that it was too “rational.”

Although Finney had a robust philosophy of the human affections in relation to the mind and the will, his rearrangement of this relationship constituted one of the major points of his departure. Even on this, however, Finney moved more toward previous views of the theology of revival in some of his mature reflections on this issue. He believed that he had failed to emphasize human depravity with sufficient strength and, therefore, had a corresponding de-emphasis on the necessity for a work of the Spirit. He stated that “true Christianity is the law of love written on the heart by the Holy Spirit and of course necessarily acted out in practical life.” His explanation of each of the terms implied in this statement is not what Jonathan Edwards would mean by them, but it at least shows that, in his doctrinal perception, the work of the Spirit is vitally connected with the production of genuine Christian affections.

Fourth, like revival preachers before him and contemporary with him, Finney filled his sermons with doctrine. He set in motion certain ideas that gradually diminished the doctrinal content of messages, but for himself, the insistence on doctrine was a key element of his assault on the will of sinners to convince them to change their ultimate intention. Like those before him, he staunchly opposed Unitarianism, universalism, and any denials of the deity of Christ or of the doctrine of eternal punishment. The exclusivity of Christ and that His death constituted the only way in which God could remain just and justify the sinner were also themes that he shared in common with his predecessors among Reformed revivalists. We receive salvation only by means of repentance and faith—he shared this view with those from whom he departed. Though we will point to many details of these

doctrines that were altered significantly, it is important to see the elements of truth in order not to dismiss all response to his message as built on a faulty perception of gospel reality.

Fifth, another point of agreement, though harboring details of disagreement, was Finney's commitment to persuasion. One cannot read the sermons of Edwards, Whitefield, and Nettleton without being impressed with their persuasive passion. Whitefield, in a sermon called "The Folly and Danger of Parting with Christ," after aiming several thrusts at the sinner to persuade him to "open the door of your hearts and the King of Glory shall enter in," made a last urgent attempt:

What shall, I say, my brethren, unto you? My heart is full, it is quite full and I must speak, O I shall burst. What, do you think your souls of no value? Do you esteem them as not worth saving? Are your pleasures worth more than your souls? Had you rather regard the diversions of this life, than the salvation of your souls? If so, you will never be partakers with him in glory. But if you come unto him, he will give you a new nature, supply you with his grace here and bring you to glory hereafter. And there you may sing praises and Hallelujahs to the Lamb forever.¹⁹

Finney, though aligning it differently with the work of the Spirit and the place of the human will, still saw persuasion as one of the major elements of revival preaching and chastened ministers who did not seek to do so with sufficient tenacity. "They have made men understand what faith is," Finney noted, "but have not persuaded them to exercise faith." Only those who make a "lucid and forcible exhibition of appropriate truths such as makes its

¹⁹ George Whitefield, *The Sermons of George Whitefield*. ed. Lee Gattis (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 1:382.

appeal to the heart” will ever “be instrumental in begetting true religion.”²⁰

In the personal persuasion of sinners, he was vivid and forceful for the necessity of immediate decision:

How many times have you been called to decide, but have decided all wrong? You have been pressed earnestly with God’s claims, and many a time have prayers and groans gone forth from the Christian heart of this whole community; but ah! Where are you still? Not yet safe; and, in greater peril than ever! Often reprov’d, hardening your neck; and what next? Suddenly destroyed, and that *without remedy*. Suppose now the curtain should drop—*you are dead!* And whither, then goes the undying, guilty soul?²¹

Sixth, because he was committed to a doctrinal approach and to persuasion, he shared with the previous generations a deep commitment to rigorous thinking as a necessary aspect of arriving at original knowledge of truth. “It will do you good to think,” Finney proclaimed, “to develop your powers by study.” Because there was a complementary rather than a contradictory relation between matters of faith and a full engagement of the mind with the power of truth, Finney insisted, “I do not pretend to so explain theology as to dispose with the labor of thinking.” Neither a lost person nor a saved person should think that he will receive benefit from God’s truth apart from considering it a subject worthy of serious reflection. A person who would not *think*, so as to understand his doctrinal arguments, had no right to contradict, Finney posited, as he foreknew objections that might come his way. He professed to have little patience with mere cavilers but would welcome any honest inquiry. Previous generations of

²⁰ Charles Finney, “Letter 5: Erroneous Revival Preaching,” *Letters on Revival*, SermonIndex.net, <https://www.sermonindex.net/modules/articles/index.php?view=article&aid=15984>.

²¹ Finney, *The Way of Salvation*, 162.

pastor-theologians who prayed for and promoted revival also made strong mental demands on those who heard them preach, and they expected sincere engagement with their arguments for truth.²²

In light of these and other points of agreement, in seeking to sort out the wheat from the chaff in the religious development through the nineteenth century, one should labor with sincerity to discern the errors of a system without condemning its fruit. Much good fruit grows from systems that entertain some, or much, error. The fruit should not be identified with the error of the system or seen as developing from it. Rather, any good fruit should be seen as the result of those parts of a system that are vitally related to truth in general, and blessed by the Spirit of truth, much of which would be shared with those who opposed the distinctive departures Finney had made from his ostensible confessional heritage.

²² Charles Finney, *Finney's Systematic Theology*, ed. J. H. Fairchild (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, INC., 1976), xi.