

**Romans (63):
What the Law teaches about Faith and Works (3)**

This is the third Lord's Day in which we are considering the teaching and the implications of the paragraph of **Romans 10:5-13**. The apostle quoted from the Old Testament law to show that God saves His people not through the works of the law, but through faith. Although the law teaches what God requires of those who would seek to be saved through the works of the law (cf. 10:5), the law taught that God requires faith of those who would be saved from His wrath upon sin (cf. 10:8).¹ Let us read our passage once again:

⁵For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that "the person who does the commandments shall live by them." ⁶But the righteousness based on faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷ or "'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); ⁹because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. ¹¹For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in Him will not be put to shame." ¹²For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing His riches on all who call on Him. ¹³For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Let us first consider precisely what the apostle was asserting, then we will address further some implications of the passage for our practice of evangelism.

As we have pointed out previously, Paul's intention of this paragraph is to declare that the blessing of God's salvation from sin is available to all people everywhere. You need not be of Jewish birth to receive the blessings of salvation, for He has also promised to save Gentiles through faith. The gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is of God's grace not of man's race.

Righteousness before God on the Day of Judgment is through faith alone. The believing sinner may know that he/she will be exonerated on the Day of Judgment, escaping God's wrath upon sin. Salvation is not the result of doing superhuman achievement. The apostle has clearly shown in his epistle that no one since Adam, except for the Lord Jesus, is capable of achieving righteousness through what he does. He is incapable of achieving righteousness by attempting to keep God's law. God sent His Son into the world to do for them that which they could not do. He achieved for sinners the means of forgiveness of sins and made available to them the gift of righteousness through faith in Him. People are called upon to entrust themselves solely and wholly to Jesus Christ as Lord for their salvation.

The message is evident and before the sinner. "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim)" (v. 8). Verses 9 through 13 explain the nature and content of this faith that results in the salvation of guilty sinners. In verses 9 and 10 specifically we read of the content of saving

¹ To be more precise, the law of God (as given through Moses) was a covenant of works for all those who did not believe. God requires complete obedience to all of His commands with the penalty of death for transgressors. "The soul that sins shall die" (Ezek. 18:20). The law of Moses made provision for God's mercy through the system of substitutional sacrifices offered when transgression against God's law was committed. Faith in Christ, for the Old Testament saint in the coming of Christ and for the New Testament believer in the crucified and risen Christ, brings an end to the law as a covenant of works. Romans 10:4 states, "For Christ is the end (both terminus and goal) of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." Consider the examples of Abraham and David in cited in Romans 4; they were both justified from their sin through faith alone. This was true for Abraham who lived before the law had been given through Moses and for David after God had given His law to His people.

faith. “Genuine faith involves confession of Jesus as Lord and belief that God raised Him from the dead.”² In verse 9 it appears that confession precedes faith: “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” Paul here used the order from Deuteronomy 30:14 that he has quoted. But lest there be any misunderstanding, verse 10 is stated but reversing the order, showing that confession flows from faith that is in the heart. Confession is not the cause of faith. Faith is the cause of true confession. Verse 10 reads, “For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”

In verse 9 confession with the mouth precedes believing in the heart, but one would expect the former to be the result of the latter. The order of “mouth-heart” in verse 9 is drawn from the citation of Deuteronomy 30:14 in verse 8, indicating that verse 9 functions as a further commentary on the OT text. Now in verse 10—probably to remove any ambiguity—belief with the heart precedes confession with the mouth, demonstrating that a genuine confession is rooted in heart conviction... Believing “results” in righteousness.³

This fact alone, if understood and embraced, would convince people of the invalid use of the sinner’s prayer for salvation and the invitation system as commonly practiced. Salvation is through faith as demonstrated through confession; salvation is not through confession void of faith. Confession does not produce faith or result in faith. Faith must be present then legitimate confession of Christ as Lord may be made.

By the way, verse 9 teaches clearly the biblical teaching of Lordship salvation. Again, verse 9 reads, “if you confess with your mouth *that Jesus is Lord* and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” One must understand and recognize and live knowing that God the Father raised Jesus Christ from the dead and enthroned Him in heaven as Lord over all of creation and all of history. The true Christian believes, confesses, and lives in faith and obedience to King Jesus. Faith that does not believe that the risen Jesus is the enthroned Lord of heaven and earth is not the faith that confesses true Christianity that results in salvation. Jesus must be believed and submitted to as Lord over all. True confession that results in salvation is born of faith that has this understanding.

Verse 11 speaks of the believer’s present justification before God through faith alone. The believer is fully forgiven and is regarded and treated as righteous by God (v. 10). But verse 11 shows that the salvation that is possessed is a salvation that will be realized on the Day of Judgment. “For the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes in Him *will not be put to shame*.’” “Those who put their faith in Jesus as the resurrected Lord will be vindicated by God on the day of judgment.”⁴ Verse 12 claims that because Jesus Christ is Lord over all, meaning all people whether Jew or Gentile, then He bestows the same richness of salvation on any and all who call on Him as their Lord.

¹²For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing His riches on all who call on Him. ¹³For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Now verse 10 is applied by virtually everyone as if it were the one-time “decision” of a sinner’s prayer. To pray and ask Jesus into your heart is assumed to fulfill the detail of verse 10-- “If you call upon Jesus to save you in this sinner’s prayer, you will then immediately become saved.” But that is not what this verse is stating. It declares that the one who calls upon the Lord Jesus—“calls” is present tense, continuous action—*that one will be saved on the Day of Judgment*—he “will be saved.” Calling upon the Lord is a the way of life of a believer, not a onetime confession at the end of an evangelistic appeal. It might be likened to what is said of people in the days of Seth “And as for Seth, to him also a son was born; and he named him Enosh. Then *men* began to call on the name of the LORD” (Gen. 4:26).

Now, when we were addressing this passage last time, we made some remarks about how this passage is commonly used in personal evangelism; I would say, commonly abused in its use in personal evangelism. It is used to argue that people become saved when they pray a single, one-time sinner’s prayer. Used as such, literally

² Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker Academic, 1998), p. 550.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 561.

hundreds of millions of people world-wide have been assumed and declared to have become Christians, who have been promised that they have the forgiveness of sins and that the gift of eternal life is theirs because of this sinner's prayer. It has resulted in contributing to the plague of nominal Christianity in which so many assume that they are Christians, but their lives are not characterized by holiness. It is often the case that repentance from sin and obedience to Christ have never been pressed upon their conscience as necessary for salvation. But the Scriptures declare, "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14).

This method of evangelism that presses for one-time "decisions" for Christ or to "accept" Christ had its origin in the early 19th century through the ministry of **Charles Finney**. Although he is regarded by many evangelicals to have been a great evangelist who was blessed of the Lord to develop the modern method of doing evangelism, in actuality he was heretical in several essential doctrines and he was instrumental in leading a great shift of evangelicalism to adopt a spirit of pragmatism that continues to this day.

What do we mean by the term, *pragmatism*? We might first describe it from a non-Christian philosophical perspective, and then seek to describe it as it exists in Christendom.

(1) As a philosophical tradition, *pragmatism is the belief that the content of "truth" can be determined by examining its effects, or the usefulness or positive benefits of its effects*. In other words, the perceived ends determine the means. This tradition emerged in the 19th century and continued through the 20th century, with its effects are still with us. The American philosopher **Charles Pierce** was attributed to having first articulated the idea, although **Henry James** is the one who developed it. James became the chief proponent and popularizer of the teaching. **John Dewey**, the "father" of American public education, took the matter one step further, emphasizing "technique" as the all important matter.

(2) We may define *Christian pragmatism as the unabated and uncritical development of techniques and unhealthy reliance on methods and management in order to fulfill the will of God and to do the work of ministry*. In evangelicalism the beginnings of this spirit of pragmatism can be traced to the ministry of Charles Finney.

Who was Finney? Charles Finney was born in 1792 and raised in a non-Christian home. He was trained as a lawyer. He was converted at the age of 28 or 29 after a period of deep conviction of sin. He claimed that the evening of his conversion that he was baptized of the Holy Spirit. Immediately, his witness saw great changes in people. He spoke to everybody he encountered, and everyone seemed to be effected deeply by him.

Immediately after being converted, he gave himself to preaching. He was trained to think logically, which is good in itself, but his presuppositions of the content of the faith were all shaped by his legal training. These included his views on "justice, guilt, righteousness, transgression, forgiveness, responsibility, sovereignty"⁵ He was semi-pelagian in his view of man's ability and God's grace. In other words, man could save himself through his own ability and will, albeit with the help of God. He denied the Reformed doctrines of the total depravity of man and justification through faith alone. He was a heretic; he taught another gospel other than that which God has delivered to us through His written Word, the Holy Bible.

He did not obtain any formal ministerial training. Finney reacted to the presence of non-evangelistic hyper-Calvinism that was present in his region of New York State. In doing so, he cast away orthodox teaching. He became an outspoken Arminian in his doctrine. But many of his views were of his own making. "*He studied doctrine only superficially and invented a unique system of theology that satisfied his own sense of logic. He applied nineteenth century American legal standards to every biblical doctrine.*"⁶ His theology influenced his methodology, and this is where pragmatism comes to the forefront. He developed methods designed to produce desirable effects. They came to be called "new measures." He used manipulative speech, crafting the atmosphere of his evangelistic meetings, in order to produce an emotional response of his hearers. Here is a description of his ministry set forth by the reformed 19th century and early 20th century theologian, **Benjamin B. Warfield**:

⁵ John F. MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church becomes Like the World* (Crossway Books, 1993), pp. 230.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

The phenomenon, however, will admit of another explanation, especially when we learn that in propagating these revivals everything was bent to the production of the excited state of feeling that was aimed at, and all ordinary Christian duties were in abeyance—absorbed in the one duty of exaltation of feeling. Thus, for example, Josephus Brockway tells us that it was noted by all during the revival excitement at Troy in 1826-1827, that the whole charitable work of the churches fell away and even the Sabbath Schools were neglected: all manifestations of Christian love stopped: there was nothing, he says, but “a machine put in motion by violence, and carried by power.” Even the Bible was thrust aside. “For a long time, during the high state of feeling,” he writes, “(when indeed, feeling was made a substitute for every Christian duty,) the Bible must not be introduced at all, into any social meeting, from one month’s end to another. And while the exhortation was often reiterated, ‘come, brethren, pray now, but don’t make any *cold* prayers,’ it was evidently held, although I do not say it was publicly expressed, that reading of the Bible was too cold a business for a Revival spirit. No time must be wasted in reading or singing, but the whole uninterruptedly devoted to praying with this faith and particularity, so vastly important.” We are witnessing here a sustained effort to push excited feeling on to the breaking point.

To the breaking point, or course, it came, all over the region which the revivals covered; and despite those who had been brought into a sure hope of eternal life—absolutely a large number, let us believe—the last stage of the region as such was worse than the first. It is the calm judgment of a man of affairs and of letters, seeking to put on record an observed social and religious phenomenon, which we have in the following statement of facts by the editor of *The New York Commercial Advertiser*: “Look at the present condition of the churches of Western New York, which have become, I truth, ‘a people scattered and peeled.’ The time has not come to write the ecclesiastical history of the last ten years. And yet somebody should chronicle the facts now, lest in after times the truth, however correctly it may be preserved by tradition, should not be believed... The writer entertains no doubt, that many true conversions have occurred under the system to which he is referring. But as with the ground over which the lightning has gone, scorching and withering every green thing, years may pass away before the arid waste of the church will be grown over by the living herbage.” If any corroboration of this testimony were needed, it would be supplied by that of workers in these revivals themselves. James Boyle writes to Finney himself in December 25, 1834: “Let us look over the fields where you and others and myself have labored as revival ministers, and what is now their moral state? What was their state within three months after we left them? I have visited and revisited many of these fields, and groaned in spirit to see the sad, frigid, carnal, contentious state into which the churches had fallen—and fallen very soon after our first departure from among them.” No more powerful testimony is borne, however, than that of Asa Mahan, who tells us—to put it briefly—that everyone who was concerned in these revivals suffered a sad subsequent lapse: the people were left like a dead coal which could not be reignited; the pastors were shorn of all their spiritual power; and the evangelists—“among them all,” he says, “and I was personally acquainted with nearly every one of them—I cannot recall a single man, brother Finney and father Nash excepted, who did not after a few years lose his unction, and become equally disqualified for the office of evangelist and that of pastor.”⁷

Finney’s philosophy of ministry and some of his methods have become the common practice of much of evangelicalism. As I see it, the way the defection occurs as follows. Originally, (1) evangelicals viewed the biblical *message* as pre-eminent. The goal was to proclaim that message faithfully. (2) The *method* was viewed as the means to make known that message as fully and effectively as possible. (3) The *result* was a work of God that was either greater or lesser depending on whether He chose to work powerfully and mercifully. However, after a spirit of pragmatism was embraced, (1) the *results* became the preeminent matter. The desired results became viewed as *goals*. “What are we trying to produce in people’s lives” was the question. (2) The *methods* were developed from the goals. (3) The *message* is shaped by the goals. And so, it may be seen in this way:

- Historically and biblically, the order was: (1) the Message, (2) the Method, (3) the Results.
- Pragmatism shifted the order to: (1) the Goal (desired results), (2) the Method, (3) the Message

⁷ Benjamin B. Warfield, *Perfectionism*, vol. 2 (Baker Book House, 1932, reprinted 1981), pp. 25-27.

The problem is this: whenever the order is reversed, then the message suffers. The focus is on the people and their responses. The question that drives “the work” is, “what can we do to get them to be responsive?” In this way the message becomes shaped by the people being reached rather than by the Bible. The content of the message becomes fluid and then modified, and then corrupted. The terms are retained. A form of godliness exists, but it is void of the power of God. When the authority and sufficiency of the Bible is surrendered, the Bible no longer shapes what is being proclaimed, rather the culture itself shapes the church. The church becomes worldly, accepting the world’s values and methods for doing the work of God.

From the time of Finney onward, the major emphasis in evangelicalism has been the development of methods to do the work of God. When evangelicals attend seminars today, little is said about the content of the message. The technique is the central matter. Programs are designed and devised and promised to be the secret to turn your church around. “*If you really want to have an impact on the people of this culture,*” we are told, “*you must do this or that...*” And there is always a new program.

The problem really lies here: **What is biblical evangelism?** Biblical evangelism, in contrast to what is commonly assumed today, is always seen to be *the faithful proclamation of the message* of the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. Evangelism is not to be defined as the securing of results, in other words, professions of faith. If we faithfully proclaim the gospel to our community, we will have evangelized this community, even if no one appears to have been converted.

J. I. Packer once wrote a book some years back entitled *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, which is an excellent book on the subject. The first subject he addressed was the definition of evangelism. Here are some of his words:

What is evangelism? It might be expected that evangelical Christians would not need to spend time discussing this question. In view of the emphasis that Evangelicals always, and rightly, lay on the primacy of evangelism, it would be natural to assume that we were all perfectly unanimous as to what evangelism is. Yet in fact much of the confusion in present-day debates about evangelism arises from a lack of agreement about this point. The root of the confusion can be stated in a sentence. It is our widespread and persistent habit of defining evangelism in terms, not of a message delivered, but an effect produced in our hearers. . . .⁸

The point is this: when evangelism becomes defined as winning people to Christ, a shift takes place. The emphasis is no longer on the *message*, but on the *method*. Again, J. I. Packer set the issue forward quite clearly.

While we must always remember that it is our responsibility to proclaim salvation, we must never forget that it is God Who saves. It is God Who brings men and women under the sound of the gospel, and it is God who brings them faith in Christ. Our evangelistic work is the instrument that He uses for this purpose, but the power that saves is not the instrument: it is in the hand of the One who uses the instrument. . . . And if we forget that only God can bring faith, we shall start to think that the making of converts depends, in the last analysis, not on God, but on us, and that the decisive factor is the way in which we evangelize. And this line of thought, consistently followed through, will lead us far astray.

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

⁸ J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 1961, p. 37).

would become terrifyingly similar to the philosophy of brainwashing. And we would no longer be able to argue, when such a similarity is asserted to be a fact, that this is not a proper conception of evangelism. For it would be a proper conception of evangelism, if the production of converts was really our responsibility.⁹

The point is this: when evangelism becomes defined as winning people to Christ, a shift takes place. The emphasis is no longer on the *message*, but on the *method*.

Now in contrast to J. I. Packer's position that was set forward above (and mine in this study), consider the book by **George Barna**, *Evangelism that Works*. The title itself suggests that Barna views evangelism not principally as a message to be proclaimed faithfully regardless of the kind of response that may come; rather, for Barna evangelism is a method to be employed that he assures gets results. This book was written by an author who has been significantly shaping the way that evangelical pastors and churches do ministry. Amazingly, if you scanned this book you would not find one section devoted to the content of the message. There are references to the "gospel" throughout, but there is no substance of teaching respecting its content. So here is a book on evangelism in which the content of the gospel is not defined, but claims it is a book setting forth a strategy for a kind of "evangelism that works." Barna published this book in 1995 setting forth a view of evangelism that Packer sought to correct in his book in 1961. It would seem that evangelicals have not heeded the voice of warning and correction. It is not my intention to take shots at Barna; rather, I mention his book because it reflects so clearly the outlook of evangelicals in general including many evangelical leaders. The issue is this, stated first positively: *The true biblical gospel is a message that is contained in the Scriptures that is to be proclaimed fully and faithfully to every generation. It has been the same message since the first days of Christianity. It needs to be understood fully by Christians and made known fully to every creature possible.* Stated negatively, *the gospel is not a method by which decisions for Christ are secured. The nature or content of the gospel is not to be shaped by the hearers of any individual societal setting.*

Since the gospel is a message that is contained in the Bible and is to be proclaimed faithfully, then the content of that gospel must be understood clearly. This means that Christians, who desire to be soul-winners, must be avid students of doctrine. For the gospel of Jesus Christ is a message of doctrines, that is, biblical teachings about subjects of God's Triune and holy nature, God's Law, His justice, and His wrath, as well as an understanding of His love, His mercy and grace. In addition, there must be understanding of who Christ is, His deity and humanity, redemption through His blood, His resurrection, His present ministry of mediation as Prophet, Priest, and King. Furthermore, there must be an understanding of doctrines of repentance, faith, perseverance, as well as an understanding of the Kingdom of God, of Christ's coming and the Day of Judgment. These are doctrines that are part of the gospel. To neglect doctrine drains the gospel of substance. Strip the gospel of substantive doctrine and you end up with another gospel. Departure from the biblical gospel can occur quite easily and quickly. Paul could write to the churches of Galatia, "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ" (Gal. 16f). They had departed from the gospel to a substitute because they had departed from the doctrine that Paul had left with them.

We affirm that *the Bible alone is the rule by which all matters of faith and practice are to be assessed, and that we are always to be assessing the content of our message as to whether or not it is a balanced Bible-based message.* The concern that I have respecting the message of evangelicals is that it does not fully reflect what the Bible sets forth as the way of salvation. May the Lord help us to understand the gospel of salvation better so that God may bless our efforts of proclaiming the gospel to the salvation of souls, for it is "the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). Let us faithfully proclaim the gospel and pray and trust God to convert sinners unto Himself.

We have portrayed a very poor history due to the effects of Finney's theology and philosophy of ministry. But it would benefit us if we learned of the ministry of a man who was contemporary to Finney who withstood Finney and his new measures. **Asahel Nettleton** (1783-1844) was an evangelist with reformed principles and convictions. He was born in Connecticut, living in Windsor Locks. In contrast to the methods and message of Charles Finney, Nettleton served as an evangelist after the manner of George Whitefield, who ministered a

⁹ Ibid., pp. 27f.

century before. His ministry resulted in many true revivals taking place the effects of which continued for many decades afterward. Here is a description of this aspect of his ministry:

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 "find" even a small percentage of their converts, much less to see them living for the Lord. Nettleton's converts were surprisingly solid. For example, of the eighty-four converts in an 1818 revival at Rocky Hill, Connecticut, all eighty-four had remained faithful according to their pastor's report twenty-six years later. Similarly, only three spurious conversions out of eighty-two professors were noted in another pastor's report on a revival in Ashford, Connecticut.¹⁰

Here is a letter written by Nettleton in which he described the work of God through one period of his ministry. This took place in Middleton, CT:

There has been an increasing solemnity for some time past. Meetings were crowded and solemn... One young man seized my hand exclaiming "I am a sinner. I am a sinner. What shall I do?" They [the people at the meeting] left the house and went home sighing, & sobbing in every direction. I came home & found a number around the door of Mr. Williams' house, in the most awful distress. Some were standing, some sitting on the ground, & some on the door steps exclaiming, "What shall I do." "I shall die. I shall die." "I can't live." This alarmed the neighbors who called to witness the awful scene. With much ado I got them into the house, about eight or ten in number. The fact was, the young man aforementioned, who left the meeting house in such distress, was walking in company with them, when all at once he found relief and exclaimed, "I have found the Saviour." He was now very joyful. He sat clothed and in his right mind: and they were afraid. My first business was to warn them against a false hope. Prayed with them and enjoined it particularly on them not to go home together, but to go alone, & be alone, for the business must be settled between God and their souls. Maria (a young woman living in this family) was one of the number. She retired to her chamber, sighing and sobbing, and crying for mercy, and exclaiming "I shall die, I shall die." She came down and went out doors and returned in the same awful distress to her chamber. And suddenly all was still and hushed to silence. I sat still below and said nothing. I soon heard the sound of her footsteps descending the chamber stairs. She opened the door and with a joyful countenance exclaimed "O, Sir, I have found the Saviour." I continued to warn her of the danger of a false hope. She exclaimed "I love Christ. I do love him. O how sweet." In the morning, early, she called to see one of her anxious mates, who was so distressed the night before; and Lo: Barsheba exclaimed "I have found the Saviour." That was a happy meeting. The young man aforementioned resided in the same family (this was John Towner's house). On Saturday evening about midnight another, equally distressed, found relief. Within a few days 8 or 10 are rejoicing in hope. What will be the end, I know not. Do pray for us, and your friend, A. Nettleton.

Finney and Nettleton opposed one another in both their message and method. In contrast to Finney, Nettleton preached doctrinal sermons. They were plain, powerful, and practical. They were expositions of Scripture. He offered no appeal of invitations at the end of service, a practice that Finney had developed and employed. He spoke directly and powerfully. Nettleton appealed to the mind and the conscience with the truth of God's Word. Finney sought to move the emotions and made appeals for people to take control of their lives and resolve to keep God's law. Here is a description of Nettleton and Finney's ministries contrasted:

The need for revival today is as great as it has ever been. But it is not just any kind of revival that is needed. The need is for a revival clearly based upon the work of the Holy Spirit rather than on the methods of man. Nettleton's ministry, when compared with that of Finney, shows that real revival was not always dependent upon certain "laws of revival" popularized by Finney. It came simply upon the faithful and fearless preaching of God's Word. Nettleton's ministry testifies to the power of God's Word in bringing sinners to faith. Most of all, it reminds all that revival, like conversion, is truly a work of a sovereign God among His people.

¹⁰ Jim Ehrhard, an essay: *Asahel Nettleton: The Forgotten Evangelist*.

Jim Eliff described Nettleton's ministry this way:

The chief excellence of his preaching seemed to consist in great plainness, and simplicity, and discrimination—in much solemnity and affectionate earnestness of manner^{3/4}in the application of the truth to the heart and conscience—in taking away the excuses of sinners, and leaving them without help and hope, except in the sovereign mercy of God. Nettleton is noted for his use of “meetings of inquiry.” They were usually done in the following way:

After a short address, suited to produce solemnity, and to make all who were present feel that they were in the presence of a holy and heart-searching God, he would offer prayer. Then he would speak to each individual present in a low voice, unless the number was so large as to render it impossible. When that was the case, he would sometimes have one or two brethren in the ministry to assist him. He would converse with each one but a short time. The particular object of this conversation is to ascertain the state of each one's mind. He would then make a solemn address, giving them such counsel as he perceived to be suited to their condition; after which he closed the meeting with prayer. He usually advised them to retire with stillness, and to go directly to their closets (i.e. private places for prayer).¹¹

Perhaps the most significant legacy of Charles Finney is **the invitation system** that is conducted at the end of most evangelical church services and virtually all evangelistic crusades. Invitations are viewed by most as essential to doing true evangelism. Many believe that if you do not have invitations at the end of your church service, it is because you do not care about souls. You simply are not evangelistic minded if you do not conduct an invitation. But the invitation system is beset with serious problems. We would argue that the manner of conducting invitations is actually counterproductive to true evangelism. **Iain Murray** identified 10 major problems with the practice in his little pamphlet entitled, *The Invitation System*.¹² These include:

- (1) The invitation system, because it represents an outward response as connected with ‘receiving Christ’, institutes a condition of salvation which Christ never appointed.
- (2) Because the call to come forward is given as though it were a divine command, those who respond are given reason to believe they are doing something commendable before God, while those who do not are falsely supposed to be disobeying Him.
- (3) By treating two distinct issues, ‘come to Christ’ and ‘come to the front’ as though they were *one*, the tendency of the invitation is to mislead the unconverted in regard to their duty.
- (4) A willingness to come to the front on the part of the unconverted may be due to various reasons—natural love, seeking for happiness, a disturbed conscience seeking relief by a religious act, the conditioning influence of a large meeting where others respond.
- (5) Because the invitation system itself precludes the possibility of discrimination between individuals during a public service, the sincere outward response of those who are *still* unconverted is calculated to lead to further unbelief and hardness of heart when they find no real change has taken place in their lives.
- (6) There is reason to believe that the number who do go through the form of ‘receiving Christ’ after an appeal, and who then fall entirely away, is not inconsiderable. ‘The thing is so well known,’ wrote a last-century observer, ‘that in many regions the public coolly expect about forty-five out of fifty, or even a higher ratio, to apostatize ultimately.’

¹¹ Jim Eliff, review of R Tyler, Bennet, and Bonar, Andrew, *The Life and Labours of Asahel Nettleton*, Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, reprint 1975, 454 pp.

¹² Iain Murray, *The Invitation System* (Banner of Truth), 30pp.

- (7) Those who do come to a knowledge of Christ through evangelistic services would lose nothing by the omission of ‘the invitation’, while the hurrying of them into a public act, with its inevitable prominence, may well prove a disservice.
- (8) The invitation system inevitably directs attention primarily to the outward and the immediately observable, and in so doing serves to support a false standard of judgment.
- (9) When the invitation system is employed with apparently great success in crusade meetings, and yet not used in local congregations where ministers can point to no such immediate results after service, the impression is effectively conveyed either (i) that the ministry of the churches is not the most effective way of evangelizing or (ii) that the churches should also employ the same program and methods as are used in crusade meetings.
- (10) The invitation system misconceives the role of an evangelist. The gospel preacher is not a ‘spiritual obstetrician’ appointed to supervise the new birth of sinners; still less is he called to propose ways which, if complied with, will accomplish new rebirth.

Charles Spurgeon addressed the invitation system and the effort to gain professions of faith from people who seemed to be concerned for their souls. In his book entitled *The Soul Winner*, Spurgeon wrote:

But, still, all hurry to get members into the church is most mischievous, both to the church and to the supposed converts. I remember very well several young men, who were of good moral character, and religiously hopeful; but instead of searching their hearts, and aiming at their real conversion, the pastor never gave them any rest till he had persuaded them to make a profession. He thought that they would be under more bonds to holy things if they professed religion, and he felt quite safe in pressing them, for “they were so hopeful.” He imagined that to discourage them by vigilant examination might drive them away, and so, to secure them, he made them hypocrites. These young men are, at the present time, much further off from the Church of God than they would have been if they had been affronted by being kept in their proper places, and warned that they were not converted to God. It is a serious injury to a person to receive him into the number of the faithful unless there is good reason to believe that he is really regenerate. I am sure it is so, for I speak after careful observation. Some of the most glaring sinners known to me were once members of a church; and were, as I believe, led to make a profession by undue pressure, well-meant but ill-judged. Do not, therefore, consider that soul-winning is or can be secured by the multiplication of baptisms, and the swelling of the size of your church. What mean these dispatches from the battle-field? “Last night, fourteen souls were under conviction, fifteen were justified, and eight received full sanctification.” I am weary of this public bragging, this counting of unhatched chickens, this exhibition of doubtful spoils. Lay aside such numberings of the people, such idle pretence of certifying in half a minute that which will need the testing of a lifetime. Hope for the best, but in your highest excitements be reasonable. Enquiry-rooms are all very well; but if they lead to idle boastings, they will grieve the Holy Spirit, and work abounding evil.”¹³

May our Lord give us complete confidence in Him to bless His message of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the true conversion of sinners unto Himself. May He enable us not to succumb to the current trend of pragmatism, but to trust Him to use us in furthering His kingdom through the teaching and proclamation of His Word.

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began ²⁶ but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith-- ²⁷ to God, alone wise, *be* glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen (Rom 16:25-27)

¹³ Charles Spurgeon *The Soul Winner* (Eerdmans, 1963), pp. 18f.