

Sing, My Tongue, the Glorious Battle

Venantius Honorius Clementianus Fortunatus (c. 540–600); tr. John Mason Neale (1818–1866)

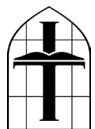
Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle;
Sing the ending of the fray.
Now above the cross, the trophy,
Sound the loud triumphant lay:
Tell how Christ, the world's Redeemer,
As a victim won the day.

Tell how, when at length the fullness
Of th'appointed time was come,
He, the Word, was born of woman,
Left for us His Father's home,
Blazed the path of true obedience,
Shone as light amidst the gloom.

Thus, with thirty years accomplished,
He went forth from Nazareth,
Destined, dedicated, willing,
Did His work, and met His death;
Like a lamb He humbly yielded
On the cross His dying breath.

Faithful cross, true sign of triumph,
Be for all the noblest tree;
None in foliage, none in blossom,
None in fruit your equal be;
Symbol of the world's redemption,
For the weight that hung on thee!

Unto God be praise and glory:
To the Father and the Son,
To th'eternal Spirit honor
Now and evermore be done;
Praise and glory in the highest,
While the timeless ages run.



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ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

In Praise of Ordinary Men, Part Five: David Nettleton

Kevin T. Bauder

Where is the line between ordinary and extraordinary men? A man may be quite ordinary in most aspects of life, yet quite exceptional in others. If the unique aspects of his life are seldom noticed, he may be remembered only as an ordinary person.

David Nettleton was such a man. I cannot claim that I was Nettleton's friend—he was already a college president before I reached my teen years. I met him when I was 13 years old, delivered his newspaper for a couple of years, and attended high school with one of his daughters. I later enrolled as a student in the college over which he presided. By the time I had matured sufficiently to appreciate Nettleton's perspective, geography had divided us. Our correspondence was sporadic and *ad hoc* (quotations in this essay are from his letters).

Still, I observed David Nettleton rather closely over a span of a quarter of a century. I saw him respond to both success and defeat. I watched him lead and I watched him follow. I witnessed his treatment of people during seasons of sweet agreement and upon occasions of sharp disputation. He embodied the essential qualities of Christian leadership more completely than almost anyone I've ever known.

David Nettleton never professed to be a scholar, but his study of the Scriptures gave him an exegetical depth and theological insight such as few pastors possess. He had a unique ability to communicate complicated ideas in simple ways. Those who chose to debate theology with him could rarely maintain the level of discussion that he set.

While Nettleton was not a scholar, he could recognize scholarship when he saw it. He valued the contributions that scholars could make. As president of a Bible college during a decade when student rebellion was widespread, he accepted the responsibility of turning muddleheaded teenagers like me into thoughtful people. He aimed to make his campus a stronghold for conservative Christian scholarship. The young professors that he recruited became the backbone of that institution for a generation.

Nettleton was a man of some culture. His appreciation of both creation and the human capacity for invention showed itself in his varied interests. He had a passion for chess and he collected chess sets. He loved sailing so much that he once planned to navigate the Bermuda Triangle alone (he was providentially hindered). One of my earliest memories of him involves his explaining some fine point of astronomy while allowing me to examine the magnificent telescope in his office. The fact that he played the saw (and played it well) did not preclude his communicating some sense of taste for serious music. At the very least he stood as convincing evidence that one did not have to be a yokel in order to be a good preacher.

Nettleton's greatest strength was his preaching. Early in his ministry he apprenticed himself to the eminent Presbyterian pulpiteer, Clarence McCartney. Expository preaching became his passion. To declare God's Word faithfully, to bring out the meaning of the text, to illustrate it gracefully, and to apply it so that it gripped listeners and led them to a decision—that was David Nettleton's great love. He had few peers among fundamentalists as an illustrator, and none for decorum in the pulpit.

The pastorate was Nettleton's life. Even when he was a college president he made himself a pastor to his students, and his special burden during those years was to equip men for pastoral ministry. He experienced the heartbreaks that come with leadership and ministry, but he never allowed those things to harden him. He somehow found ways to remain a gentle man even in the face of pressure, difficulty, and opposition. He learned from his failures and used them to make him stronger. After he left the academic world and returned to the pastorate, he became an effective counselor and encourager of younger pastors.

Rarely has fundamentalism produced a more irenic spirit. Nettleton prized the role of a peacemaker. He was grieved by the splintering of the various fundamentalist camps. He thought that leaders who believed the same great truths should learn to walk together peaceably, and he maintained that even the strictest fellowship could leave plenty of room for liberty. He refused to manipulate people or to abuse power to get his own way. That cost him the friendship of some who wished that he would exercise power in a fashion more favorable to their policies. His earnest endeavor was to behave himself as a Christian statesman rather than an ecclesiastical politician. He came near to succeeding.

That is not to say that Nettleton was irresolute in his beliefs. On the contrary, he held strong convictions and he argued for them eloquently. Yet he acted with such fairness and impartiality that he found himself repeatedly thrust into positions of leadership. As he put it, "I am strong on the sovereignty of God and wrote on it. Yet, they elected me as chairman of the [GARBC] council. I oppose cheap worldly music. . . . I try to make my speech as grace but not without salt."

While strong in his beliefs, Nettleton was temperamentally opposed to adopting extreme positions. When he was a college president, he tried very hard to keep his school "in the middle of the right-hand lane." But middle-of-the-road situations are hazardous, in whatever lane one travels. Nettleton knew as much. He recognized that a time might come when "healthy discussion is stifled and the only result will be more misunderstanding and even ignorance." In fact, he lived to see the whole highway lurch to the left. Only his death spared him from having to decide whether he would take the exit ramp.

It would not have been an easy choice. On the one hand, he argued in print that, by the nature of the case, a Christian must limit either his fellowship or his message. On the other hand, he was firmly convinced that Christians should not stand alone. The only way he knew of to avoid isolation was to become involved in some form of organized fellowship. He understood that such fellowships necessarily involved an element of compromise, and argued against some of his peers that *compromise* was not always a bad word. "We must find enough common ground," he wrote, "and then agree to disagree the rest of the way. But toleration does not mean silence. If something should be opposed, let us oppose it."

It was this combination of strong convictions and commitment to toleration within defined limits that made him exceptional as a leader within his generation of American fundamentalists. One need not always agree with such a man in order to respect him. Many did disagree with Nettleton over a wide range of issues, but he held the respect of his friends and his opponents alike.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
