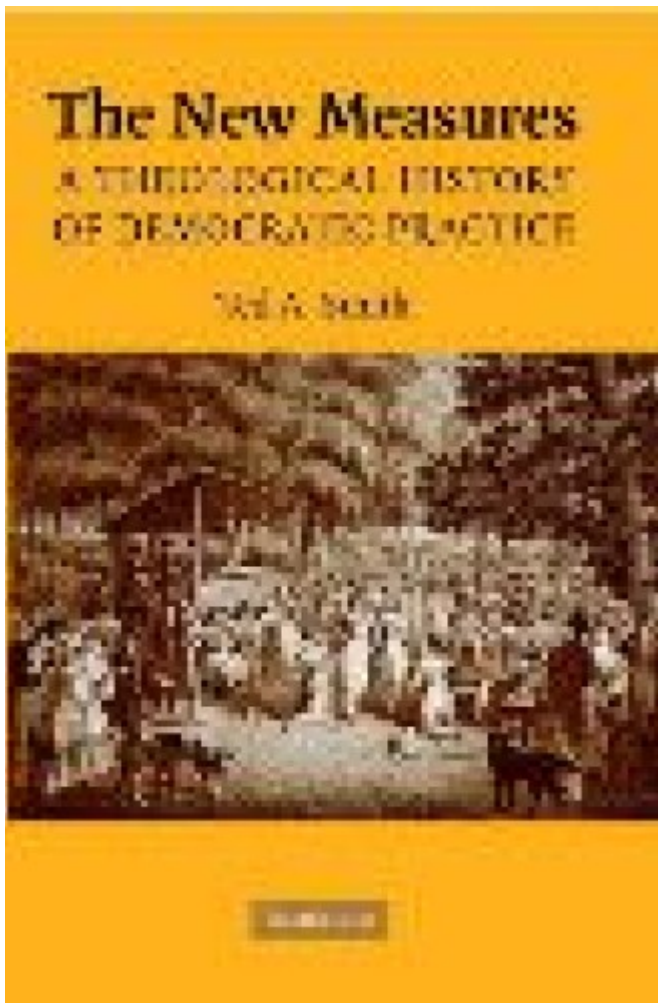


The New Measures: A Theological History of Democratic Practice

reviewed by [Richard Lischer](#) in the [June 3, 2008](#) issue

In Review



The New Measures: A Theological History of Democratic Practice

Ted A. Smith

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Not long ago the *New York Times* carried a story about a California congregation that maintains three separate bands: one specializing in soft rock, one in hard rock and one in classic rock. It effectively recruits its members, all 8,000 of them, according to their taste in Christian rock music. The writer of the article seemed unable to decide what was most interesting about this church—its departure from traditional practice or its phenomenal success. When it comes to the growth of megachurches, music is, of course, only the tip of the iceberg. Beneath the music lies a sophisticated use of demographics, communication, focus groups and marketing. And it works.

For early-19th-century American evangelists, “What works?” was the essential question. And when one considers what worked in that era, one thinks of Charles Grandison Finney. In the 1820s and 1830s Finney and his associates dismissed the notion of miraculous conversions and reconceived revival as the use of effective technique. They called their innovative methods the New Measures. “The object of our measures is to gain attention,” he said, “and you *must have* something new.” Finney did not invent the New Measures; no single person did. But he exemplified them as no other. The measures were designed to capture a larger share of an audience that was no longer amenable to Puritan theology and practice. Even as Finney downplayed old-style Calvinist theology, his New Measures mastered Puritan qualms over techniques and instrumentalities of conversion.

In *The New Measures*, Ted A. Smith offers a rich narrative of the intellectual and material culture of early evangelicalism in America. Much of the story is told through the lens of the unconquerable Finney, who serves as the touchstone for Smith’s discussion of an expansive new age. The New Measures were developed as a series of strategies and practices for achieving observable goals on the revival circuit. There is no comprehensive list of the measures, but Smith, who teaches ethics and preaching at Vanderbilt Divinity School, gives a thick description of some of the more important ones. Taken together, they verify the turn in American religion from divine to human agency in conversion. One hundred years after Jonathan Edwards waited for the Spirit to descend on Northampton, Massachusetts, Finney wrote these words: “Religion is something we do, not something to wait for.”

Smith shows us how the revivalists made it happen: New Measures preachers became experts in the art of self-promotion, a practice that would have horrified their Calvinist predecessors. In the 1830s evangelists such as Jedediah Burchard

sent out “flyers,” local men who were paid to hawk the skills of traveling preachers. Smith calls them “the ad made flesh.”

Other measures included the demand that listeners merge their newfound political freedom with their religious free will in order to decide on the truth for themselves; replacement of the ideals of gentility and respectability with populist, Jacksonian notions of equality; and “personal preaching” that eschewed the “O, Drunkard” genre of sermon in favor of one that offered salvation to all classes.

The preachers skillfully traded on their own celebrity and put their personalities on public display—for the sake of winning souls. Finney taught ministers how to project sincerity, and, as the saying goes, if you can fake that, you’ve got it made. The preachers padded their sermons with entertaining stories or “cases”—not merely the biblical typologies approved by the Puritans, but freely drawn appeals aimed at imaginations already stoked by popular novels.

Even the briefest summary of the revivalists’ innovations clarifies the reference to democracy in the subtitle of Smith’s book. It is impossible to miss the political content and implications of the New Measures, for the New Measures nurtured democracy, and democracy nurtured the New Measures. By democracy Smith means what Alexis de Tocqueville meant—a skein of inseparable egalitarian impulses, practices and ideologies, including but not limited to those of politics and religion.

If the New Measures seem unremarkable to us, it is because, as Smith points out, we are all New Measures people now. We all preach along the religious frontier—if not against crude frontier vices, then amidst sophisticated forms of secular indifference. Virtually all the items on Smith’s list of measures are on our list, too, but they are so tamed and institutionalized that they have become second nature to us.

What began as a set of experimental methods of revival in the 1820s hardened into conventional wisdom by the 1850s. Many of the means of evangelization eventually failed—or, in Smith’s vocabulary, were “mortified”—and the effects of that rigor mortis are with us today. Finney and his fiery friends gave birth to the protocols of the church-growth movement; the first uproarious storytellers have been reincarnated as a guild of narrative theologians; the self-promoting evangelists went on to become today’s self-promoting televangelists.

While many cite Christianity's ability to reinvent itself as the key to its survival in the secular West, others decry that malleability as a betrayal of something original and therefore unalterable in the Christian faith.

As a theological historian, Smith does have a problem. He knows that the best way to ruin a story is to use it as grist for theological debate. Once the so-called spirit of an age is identified and duly moralized, what is left but a few broad-brushed judgments about progress or decline? When a theologian reads history, the first impulse is often to separate the wheat from the chaff, to weed out the messy details and exceptions to the rule in order to expose larger theological themes. But Smith refuses to make the usual critical separation because to the social historian there is no wheat and there is no chaff. One does not write a credible history of the United States by separating democratic impulses from religious fervor. Smith thus critiques both the liberationists and the postliberals whose theories of community have no historical or social referents in the real world.

As a theologian, however, the historian cannot overlook the deformations of the gospel that are intrinsic to entrepreneurial religion. There *is* something offensive about marketing the Holy Spirit. When does self-promotion ever serve the cross of Christ?

Smith doesn't exactly solve the problem, but he creatively resolves it in the spirit of the New Measures themselves. He patches together a hermeneutic of evangelicalism from unlikely sources. His method owes its greatest debt to the early-20th-century critic Walter Benjamin, whose decades-long study of the once-beautiful Paris Arcades led him to the notion of the mortification and redemption of material culture. Like Benjamin, Smith meticulously evokes the tangibility of early religious and cultural practices. He makes them live in all their tarnished splendor. He knows that many of the measures were nothing more than the expediences that our generation has come to despise—and adopt. He refuses to use such practices as a set-up for theological critique. Nor does he hearken to a purer historical period or a golden age of theology against which the New Measures will be found wanting.

In the very mortification of the New Measures, Smith finds the possibility of redemption. Since we have inherited them, perhaps we should not cast them off before examining how we have benefited from them and made them our own. Instead of presenting each new measure as nothing more than a platform for the next new thing, Smith pastorally invites us to meditate on the content of ordinary

Christian practices and to discover the Spirit's work within them.

Who is to say that the simple stories used by small-town evangelists and abolitionist preachers might not contribute to a larger and more redemptive narrative, especially in a digitalized and commodified culture like our own? Who is to say that one of Finney's "cases"—the story of a woman who was so sure a revival was coming that she had bleachers built in her house—might not inspire new expressions of faithfulness that Finney never dreamed of?

Smith brilliantly transcends his detailed historical narrative by adopting an eschatological perspective on it, as if to remind the reader that the work of the Spirit did not grind to a halt in 1830 and is not likely to climax in 2008. Most historians look back on their material from the only vantage they have—their own time and place. The theologian dares to do history from God's perspective, in which everything is preserved but in a different form and to another end that is unknown to us. Such a method is not without its own dangers, and Smith understands them well. For all the fascinating history in *The New Measures*, the story is redeemed—and eloquently so—by the theologian's silence.