

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-87131-0 - The New Measures: A Theological History of Democratic Practice
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Excerpt
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THE NEW MEASURES

The Flyer: A Preface for Theologians, Ethicists, Historians, and Homileticians

We are treated as imposters, and yet are true.
 2 Corinthians 6:8

Revival preacher Jedediah Burchard often sent out young men as “flyers” to gather the crowds before he took the stand to deliver sermons using sensational techniques people called the “new measures.” A flyer for Burchard was a living leaflet, the ad made flesh. In 1837 an anonymous critic reported from Poughkeepsie, New York, how these advance agents worked the audience into a fever pitch of anticipation. “Mr. B. is a persecuted, Godly man,” shouted one. “I, myself, attended him in sickness, and found calluses on his knees as big as a hen’s egg! formed by praying for sinners!!” The flyers told stories like this for almost an hour, until the people tottered on the edge of impatience – “when lo! the conquering hero came!” Burchard burst onto the scene, gathered up the detailed prayer requests that scoffers called “pious gossip,” and promised to win conversions in a mere two minutes’ time with his “steam-powered” preaching. He led the crowd in his “training process,” drilling them in closely coordinated bodily movements. “Up, up!” he cried, raising a hand, and people stood – only to kneel when he dropped his hand and shouted, “Down, down!” As the crowd drilled together, up and down, the flyers became fuglemen, modeling in exaggerated form the correct motions for everyone else to follow. In time, drill dissolved into the ecstasy of redemption. People streamed forward to confess their sin and celebrate their salvation. Converts experienced what the young men promised as flyers and modeled as fuglemen.¹

These opening two chapters act as flyer and fugleman for a constellation of essays in eschatological memory, a bundle of attempts to remember the practices of preachers like Burchard as they might appear in the light of

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redemption. The next chapter in this book will go through the motions of method slowly and self-consciously, like a fugleman. But this opening flyer tries to gather together a diverse crowd of people around a new measures revival. It calls out to theologians and ethicists who might wonder why they should bother with a history of practices for preaching in the United States in the 1820s, '30s, and '40s. It seeks to lure historians to read one more book on the subject of revival rhetoric – itself a burned-over district – and even to endure theological gestures from the author. This flyer addresses homileticians wary of a history of preaching that includes analyses of phrenology and celebrity but not a proposal for reform of method for preaching. It offers no new definitions of practical theology, but it promises practical theologians a set of tentative models for relating empirical studies of church life to social ethics and constructive theology. But most of all it promises careful, hopeful, eschatological attention to the lived stuff of democracy in America.

THE NEW MEASURES AND DEMOCRACY

The new measures invite attention from scholars and citizens who care about the moral and theological dimensions of democracy as it actually exists in the United States. Deliberation about democracy cannot be entirely abstract; it requires at least some attention to the ways women and men bring it to life. This is true for any complex moral, political, or theological system, but it is especially fitting for democracy. And so this book engages conversations about democracy through a history of practice.

In telling a history of the new measures, I hope to get at what Jeffrey Stout called “the ethical inheritance of American democracy.” This inheritance, Stout wrote, “consists, first of all, in a way of thinking and talking about ethical topics that is implicit in the behavior of ordinary people. Secondly, it also consists in the activity of intellectuals who attempt to make sense of that way of thinking and talking from a reflective, critical point of view.”² Stout’s own close readings of writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and James Baldwin did much to open up this second, self-conscious mode of ethical life in American democracy. There is still work to be done in understanding that mode – Stout’s book made no pretensions to be complete. And there is even more work to be done in understanding the primary mode Stout described: the visions and virtues, rules and roles, judgments and hopes implicit in everyday activities like preaching and responding to sermons. This study of the new measures will attend to both modes, considering both self-conscious reflection on revival practices and the performance of those practices. And, because the practices that came to be known as the new measures are entangled with

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and constitutive of so much of democratic culture, a study of those practices becomes a partial and precise study of democracy as it is lived in the United States.

The new measures play such an important role in so many spheres of life that they can be difficult to bring into critical perspective. Long taken for granted, they can fade into the background against which self-conscious moral action occurs. This hazy visibility is further blurred by the new measures' resistance to definition. No definitive list of the new measures exists, and they cannot be defined by reference to some essential quality. New measures preachers felt empowered (and even obliged) to pick and choose among practices, and then to revise the chosen practices for maximum effectiveness. Their desire for novelty – the “new” – led them to endless change in an effort to keep the practices sensational. Their commitment to effectiveness – to “measures” – led them to make still more revisions to adapt the practices to particular occasions. Together the ideals of novelty and instrumental action broke up any kind of essence or singular, solid tradition. The new measures appeared instead in multiple forms and in various combinations. The fluid practices of new measures preaching resist definition, but they invite illustration.

Edwards A. Park, a professor at Andover Theological Seminary, heard Charles Finney preach at the seminary in 1831. Fifty-eight years later, Park could still produce a lengthy and vivid account of those one hundred minutes. “[Finney’s] discourse was one which could never be printed, and could not easily be forgotten,” he wrote. The sermon held “the unremitting attention” of every hearer. It mixed together rigorous logic and dramatic flair. But while it was “dramatic,” it was “too earnest to be called theatrical.” “The eloquence of it cannot be appreciated by those who did not hear it,” Park wrote. No description could give an adequate idea of it. But still he offered one:

[Finney’s] text was 1 Timothy ii.5, “One mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” . . . He was illustrating the folly of men who expect to be saved on the ground of justice; who think that they may, perhaps, be punished after death, but when they have endured all the penalty which they deserve they will be admitted to heaven. He was appealing to the uniform testimony of the Bible that the men who are saved at all are saved by grace, they are pardoned, their heaven consists in glorifying the vicarious atonement by which their sins were washed away. He was recalling the *jar* which the songs of the saints would receive if any intruder should claim that he had already endured the penalty of the divine law. The tones of the preacher then became sweet and musical as he repeated the words of the “ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands; saying with a great voice, Worthy is the Lamb that hath been slain to receive the power, and riches, and wisdom, and might, and honor, and glory, and blessing.” No sooner had he

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uttered the word “blessing” than he started back, turned his face from the mass of the audience before him, fixed his glaring eyes upon the gallery at his right hand, and gave all the signs of a man who was frightened by a sudden interruption of the divine worship. With a stentorian voice he cried out: “*What* is that I see? What means that *rabble-rout* of men coming up here? Hark! Hear them shout! Hear their words: ‘Thanks to *hell-fire*! We have served out our time. Thanks! *Thanks!* WE HAVE SERVED OUT OUR TIME. THANKS TO HELL-FIRE!’” Then the preacher turned his face from the side gallery, looked again upon the mass of the audience, and after a lengthened pause, during which a fearful stillness pervaded the house, he said in gentle tones: “Is this the spirit of the saints? Is this the music of the upper world? ‘And every created thing which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and on the sea, and all things that are in them, heard I saying, Unto him that sitteth on the throne, and unto the Lamb, be the blessing, and the honor, and the glory, and the dominion, for ever and ever. And the four living creatures said, Amen.’” During this dramatic scene five or six men were sitting on a board which had been extemporaneously brought into the aisle and extended from one chair to another. I was sitting with them. The board actually shook beneath us. Every one of the men was trembling with the excitement. The power of the whole sermon was compressed into that vehement utterance. It is more than fifty-eight years since I listened to that discourse. I remember it well. I can recall the impression of it as distinctly as I could a half-century ago; but if every word of it were on the printed page, it would not be the identical sermon of the living preacher.³

Park’s indelible memories illustrate some of the most important practices of new measures preaching. The sermon cast aside traditional rhetorical forms for the sake of effectiveness. The preacher used variable tones, shocking language, and theatrical gestures to keep the congregation’s attention. An “anxious bench” held people the preacher called on to make a free decision. “The mass of the audience” heard itself addressed as a collection of equals. The preacher made eye contact to project sincerity. Homespun but rigorous logic blended seamlessly with a wide range of emotional appeals. A vivid illustration sealed the main points in the hearts of listeners. Park did not remember everything that people called new measures. He did not, for example, describe Finney demanding an immediate decision. And Park did not here recall the new measures that went beyond the preaching moment: “protracted” public meetings that lasted several days, private meetings with sinners on the verge of conversion, and prayer meetings in which the faithful – especially women – gathered to pray up a revival. But Park surely remembered an illustrative new measures sermon.

While Finney became the new measures’ biggest star, he did not invent the measures. No single individual did. The new measures were a loose collection of practices hammered out in different ways by different preachers over

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the course of many years. Whitney Cross's classic study of American revivalism in this period suggested that the new measures emerged along the Erie Canal and thrived in the "twelve crowded years" from the completion of the canal in 1825 to the financial panic of 1837.⁴ But these measures for revival started much earlier and from a much richer variety of sources. New measures preachers drew upon nationwide memories of the tours of George Whitefield. They also drew upon more localized traditions like the ecstatic exhortation that marked camp meetings in Kentucky and Tennessee, the ring shouts of African-American and white Methodists in Maryland and Virginia, the protracted meetings and lay visitation programs of urban preachers like James Patterson of Philadelphia, the successful altar calls of Methodists like Jesse Lee in New York City, the hot exhortation of itinerants like James Davenport in New England, and the free preaching of spiritualists like Jemima Wilkinson, the "Universal Friend" in the Finger Lakes region of New York.⁵ New measures preachers also borrowed back-and-forth from journalists, novelists, phrenologists, lawyers, politicians, and actors. Overlapping regional (and sometimes national) networks facilitated the movement of publications, preachers, and other travelers, and so allowed the measures to spread and to assume more or less standard forms subject to extensive local and individual adaptation. While the Erie Canal certainly helped create conditions ripe for the spread and success of new measures in preaching, and while western New York served as one important center, the measures developed from many centers as a complex national phenomenon. They came from many regions as the work of many people.

The new measures arose with and pushed on a number of important shifts in religious practice in the United States after the Revolution. The freedom to choose one's own religion without penalty had slowly spread, in statute and in fact, from Protestants in Rhode Island to more and more people in more and more colonies. In 1787 the new Constitution banned "religious tests" for holding office; by 1791 the First Amendment blocked establishment and secured free exercise of religion. Waves of migration to and within the country helped create more options on the ground. Endless individual ingenuity generated still more. Remnants of legal establishment held on in some New England states as late as 1833, but by the time Finney hit the revival trail in the 1820s almost all his hearers found themselves more free than ever before to choose between an array of preachers trying to persuade them. The new measures arose in response to these social shifts. New measures preachers, for instance, developed techniques for attracting attention in a contentious religious field. But new measures revivalists did not just respond; they also helped create a new set of social facts. They challenged established clergy, started new

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churches, and demanded that people make decisions. They displaced both traditional forms of religious authority and the radically populist styles that burst into prominence in the decades after the Revolution. They took the plain style of Puritans and made it personal, practical, and sensational. They took the buzz of the ecstatic exhorters of Cane Ridge and made it reliable, reproducible, and respectable. And so the new measures fit and furthered new social realities like disestablishment and religious freedom.

The new measures revivals emerged with a changing religious sphere, but historians have long traced their influence, for better and for worse, far beyond that sphere. Perry Miller concluded that the “one clearly given truth” of the era was the success of revival, and that it reached into every aspect of life. Paul E. Johnson saw it as “one of the great events in the moral history of Americans,” an event which secured evangelical Protestantism as “the faith of the urban and commercial middle class.” Revival values – and revival rhetoric – provided an identity that could unite the previously fragmented opponents of Andrew Jackson, solidifying a basic alignment of party politics in the United States which held for over one hundred years and is only now breaking up. Mary P. Ryan also linked early national and Jacksonian revivals to the emergence of a modern middle class, highlighting the active roles of women in the revivals to trace changes within and between households. Laurence Moore saw in these revivals the origins of mass culture in America – in the tracts, journals, meetings, and preaching appeared the “first, large-scale popular entertainments in the United States.” And William McLoughlin made clear that these “modern revivals” worked so well in part because they reflected a new consciousness of church practices as “measures” – actions taken for the sake of observable ends, and revised to accomplish those ends more effectively. New measures preachers not only used new technologies like mass printing but also shared and extended a growing faith in technology itself. Miller, Johnson, Ryan, Moore, and McLoughlin emphasized connections to different social spheres, but they all saw the new measures revivals as linked to the emergence of some important aspect of modern culture.⁶ The new measures therefore offer an especially rich site for contemporary cultural criticism. The measures arose hand in hand with disestablishment of religion, religious pluralism, greater social and geographic mobility, new kinds of individual autonomy, mass media, a culture of celebrity, an egalitarian ethos, new patterns of work and family life, the spread of instrumental reasoning, and new standards for white middle-class respectability.

In this book I gather such changes together under the term “democracy.” I mean the gathering to be loose and temporary, undertaken for the sake of conversation. And I mean to use language of “democracy” very broadly, as

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Alexis de Tocqueville did, to refer to a host of social phenomena that can neither be reduced to nor separated from one another. I do not mean to suggest a single, unified social process, and I do not mean to propose a word that might displace the complex realities I am trying to describe. Instead, I use the word as a caption for a bundle of changes that occurred together, as a shorthand that demands further elaboration in each case. In the chapters ahead I hope to draw six miniature sketches that reveal the new measures to be endlessly entwined with changes like the disestablishment of religion, the emergence of a white middle class, the development of an authority of celebrity, the move to new relations between men and women, and the creation of a mass consumer culture. These changes are not necessarily and abstractly constitutive of “democracy,” but they have often been part and parcel of democracy as people have enacted and experienced it in the United States. And they are all closely associated with new measures practices. Whatever democracy is, it is surely more and less than the new measures. But just as surely the new measures have helped constitute the lived stuff of democracy for many people in the United States.

The new measures for revival therefore offer an extraordinarily rich site for thinking through democracy in America. Tocqueville saw the ways in which the practices of preachers and other public speakers made especially clear the moral meanings of democracy. Tocqueville came to the United States in 1831, just as the revivals reached their greatest national prominence. He noted that *writers* in America were not so different from writers in Europe. American writers tended to be formed more through a written culture that had its center across the Atlantic, and so to “live more in England than in their own country.” But American speakers – those who practiced in the law courts, chambers of government, theaters, churches, and camp meetings – exhibited a much more distinctively democratic style. Speakers were formed through constant, immediate interaction with their listeners and tended to engage more directly the changing nature of their relationships with their listeners. Tocqueville concluded, “It is therefore not to the written language, but to the spoken language, that one must pay attention if one wants to perceive the modifications that the idiom of an aristocratic people can undergo in becoming the language of a democracy.”⁷ The language of democracy emerged in the speeches people gave to win court cases, entertain crowds, persuade voters, and convert sinners to the saving grace of God. Rhetorical change extended throughout every sphere of society in the decades around Tocqueville’s visit. But no form of public speaking saw more sustained or heated deliberation than did preaching. The issues of democratization became especially clear in the controversies around the new measures.

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In stressing the centrality of the new measures to a wider web of social phenomena, I do not mean to argue that they served as primary causes of every other change. Nor do I mean to reduce them to mere effects, epiphenomena we might study to get at some really real social or economic process underneath them. I do want to argue that the new measures became sites of great contention, places where social and economic changes became condensed, incarnate, visible – and so subjects of public deliberation. Especially in their *forms*, the core structures of practice that people adapted in thousands of different ways, they expressed and materialized more abstract social changes. For instance, “individualism” and “freedom of religion” have little meaning apart from concrete practices like the anxious bench. Revival planners used the anxious bench in many different ways, and people took their turns on the bench in many, many more. But whatever else happened, the structure of the practice cast the person on the bench as a chooser, even about her own eternal destiny, and whether she wanted to become a chooser or not. Of course “freedom” and “individualism” cannot be reduced to the anxious bench. People also made choices everywhere from the dance floor to the dry-goods counter. But a close reading of the forms of the new measures can open out into rich, particular reflection on some of the most characteristic features of democratic culture in the United States.⁸

Like a new measures preacher, I have picked the practices that I think will best accomplish my purposes. I hope to write a theological commentary on a small but important set of practices of democratic culture in America. With that end in mind, I attend to six particular measures: organizing worship so that it achieves measurable results in this world (chapter one); using novelty to compete in an economy of attention (two); demanding that people make free decisions (three); proclaiming the formal equality of all people (four); representing private selves in public spaces, and so speaking with the authority of celebrity (five); and telling stories to illustrate points (six). These six chapters each work from a close reading of some revival practice to a critical, theological engagement with some preoccupation of contemporary social criticism: instrumental reason, novelty, freedom, equality, sincerity, and secularization. In connecting the practices with these *topoi*, I do not mean to hide my activity of selection and arrangement. I have chosen to focus on the new measures that open into the most fruitful conversations.

The new measures displayed elective affinities with many important elements of modern cultures, and those affinities helped them to thrive in the intensified competition between churches for adherents. The new measures became so powerful over time that they ceased to be an issue in most white Protestant churches that were not part of Pentecostal movements. Even

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northern Presbyterians, who split bitterly over new measures practices and theology in 1837, came together around a new measures agenda in 1869 so obvious to all parties that they could agree to call it “pure and simple.” Practices now so familiar as to escape notice were once so jarring as to be unrecognizable. When Finney started preaching in the 1820s, his style seemed so different that some people did not even recognize it as preaching. By the time of his death in 1875, the new measures style had become the invisible instinct of most white Protestant preachers.⁹

Today both “evangelical” and “mainline” churches rely on versions of the new measures. They cross more and more lines of race, class, region, and religious tradition. They have shaped the rhetoric of preachers as diverse as William Sloane Coffin, Michael Lerner, T. D. Jakes, Joyce Meyer, Daniel Berrigan, Rick Warren, and Barbara Brown Taylor. They are used in worldwide television broadcasts and in tiny rural congregations. If the details of techniques like the anxious bench exist only in echoes, the structures of practices like closing sermons with demands for decision remain widespread. Practices like seeking to be effective, trying to hold the congregation’s attention, calling for individual decision, addressing hearers as a mass of equals, purposefully displaying sincerity, and telling stories seem so obvious that they rarely merit explicit discussion except in the most rarefied homiletical circles. It is difficult, for instance, to imagine a serious conversation about whether it is important to retain the hearers’ attention; despite abundant circumstantial evidence to the contrary, it is even harder to imagine a sermon in any religious tradition that deliberately sets out to be boring. The staying power and dominance of the measures have depended in part on their flexibility. For example, the same practice of calling for individual decision might ask people to make a decision to accept Christ as savior, live their best lives now, join a march against an imperialist war, commit themselves more fully to liturgical practices, or contribute to the capital campaign. By fitting closely with other social practices and retaining the ability to be adapted to a variety of ends, the new measures have spread more and more widely even as they have become less and less visible to critical consciousness.¹⁰

While the new measures gained both widespread use and commonsense status, they never became a fully hegemonic system of practice. They do not determine all preaching, and they do not seamlessly reproduce themselves – nor even coexist easily with one another. Not all preaching in the United States today uses variations of the new measures. The musings of the best monastic homilies, the celebration of classic African-American preaching, the spontaneity of Pentecostal tongues, and the strictly expository style of some Korean-American sermons only begin the list of important alternatives.