

LECTURES  
ON  
REVIVALS OF RELIGION.

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WITH

AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY,

BY THE

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AND THE

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## APPENDIX.

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### LETTER I.

FROM THE REV. ARCHIBALD ALEXANDER, D.D.

Professor of Theology in the Theological Seminary, Princeton, New-Jersey.

*Princeton, March 9, 1832.*

REVEREND AND DEAR SIR,

In compliance with your request, I send you a few thoughts on revivals. I am gratified to learn that you are about to publish some Lectures on this interesting subject. I hope they will be extensively useful; and if you should judge that anything which I may write would subserve a valuable purpose, you are at liberty to make use of this letter as you may think best.

1. A revival, or religious excitement, may exist, and be very powerful, and affect many minds, when the producing cause is not the Spirit of God, and when the truth of God is not the means of the awakening.—This we must believe, unless we adopt the opinion, that the Holy Spirit accompanies error by his operations as well as truth, which would be blasphemous. Religious excitements have been common among Pagans, Mahomedans, Heretics, and Papists. And in our own time, there have been great religious excitements among those who reject the fundamental doctrines of the gospel; as, for example, among the *Christ-ians*, who are Unitarians, and the *New-lights*, or Schismatics of the west, and the Campbellites, who deny the proper divinity of our Lord, and the scriptural doctrine of atonement. The whole religion of the Shakers, also, consists in enthusiastic excitement. Hence it is evident, that revivals ought to be distinguished into such as are genuine, and such as are spurious. And the distinction should depend on the doctrines inculcated, on the measures adopted, and the fruits produced.—“Beloved” says the apostle John, “believe not every spirit, but try the spirits, whether they are of God.”

2. Again, a revival, or religious excitement, may take place when a few persons only are under the saving operations of the Holy Spirit; but when many are affected by sympathy, and by the application of extraordinary means of awakening the feelings. I have seen a powerful religious impression pervade a large congregation at *once*, so that very *few* remained unaffected, and most expressed their feelings by the strongest signs; and yet, as it afterwards appeared, very few of them became permanently serious. Besides, when the Spirit operates savingly on some,

there is reason to think that his common operations are experienced by many. The minds of the people *generally* become more serious and tender; and many are deeply convinced of the necessity of religion, and *engage* earnestly in prayer, and in attendance on other means of grace. Now, while so many are affected, but few may be truly converted; and no human wisdom is adequate to discern between those who are savingly wrought upon, and those who are only the subjects of the common operations of the Holy Spirit. The tree which is covered with blossoms often produces little fruit. The wind which agitates the whole forest, may tear up but few trees by the roots. Thus there may be great and promising appearances, and yet very little fruit. Temporary believers may use the same language, and exhibit to others precisely the same appearance as true converts. This consideration should be sufficient to prevent the practice, lately introduced, of admitting persons to the communion of the church at the very meeting at which they were first awakened. There may be cases in which well-instructed persons, of known good character, may be received to the Lord's table, as soon as they profess a hope of acceptance with God, but these should be considered exceptions to the general rule. Often the impressions produced at a public meeting, where strong excitements are applied to awaken the feelings, are as evanescent as the morning cloud or early dew. And many of those who become truly pious, entertain, for a while, hopes which they afterwards are convinced to be unfounded; and to pronounce such persons converted at once, and hurry their admission to the Lord's table, would be the most effectual method of preventing their saving conversion. There may be an error on the other side, of too long a delay, and of discouraging real believers from approaching the table of their Lord; but the error is on the safest side. As to apostolical precedent, it is just as strong for a community of goods; and, after all, there is no undoubted case of any convert being immediately received to the Lord's Supper. They were baptized instantly on their profession, but this, in our view, is a different thing; for we admit infants to baptism, but not to the other sacrament. And the fact is, that in every part of the world, the plan of placing young converts in the class of catechumens, to be instructed even prior to their baptism, was adopted. God often leaves his servants to find out by experience what is most expedient, and does not teach everything by inspiration; as in the case of Moses in judging the people of Israel. And if experience has uttered her monitory voice clearly on any point, I think she has in regard to this; and I have no doubt that future experience will fully corroborate the lessons of the past.

3. A real work of the Spirit may be mingled with much enthusiasm and disorder; but its beauty will be marred, and its progress retarded, by

every such spurious mixture.—Thus, also, individuals who are the subjects of special grace, may, for a while, be carried away with erroneous notions and extravagant feelings. We must not, therefore, condemn all as deluded souls, who manifest some signs of enthusiasm. But under the same revival or general excitement, while some are renewed and engrafted into Christ, others may be entirely under the influence of error, spiritual pride, and delusion. When the Son of man sows good seed in his field, will not the enemy be busy in sowing tares? And doubtless it often happens, that by the rashness, fanaticism, and extravagance of a few persons, especially if they be leaders, an ill report may be brought up against a work, in which the Spirit of God has been powerfully operating. The opinion, that it is dangerous to oppose fanaticism, lest we hinder the work of God, is most unfounded. We cannot more effectually promote genuine revivals, than by detecting and suppressing fanaticism; which is their counterfeit, and injures their reputation among intelligent men, more than all other causes.

4. Often, also, there may be much error mingled with the evangelical truth, which is preached in times of revival; and while God blesses his own truth to the conversion of men, the baleful effects of the error which accompanies it, will be sure to be manifest.—It may be compared to the case, where some poisonous ingredient is mingled with wholesome food. I might here, perhaps, refer to some sections of our own church, where the truth is not clearly inculcated; and it might be shown that there is danger of error on both extremes. But I choose rather to refer to those churches which we all think to be erroneous in certain points. No denomination among us has had more frequent and extensive revivals than the Methodists; and we have no doubt that multitudes have been truly converted under their ministry; but the effect of their errors is manifest to an impartial observer. The same remark holds good respecting the Cumberland Presbyterians, who greatly resemble the Methodists in their doctrines, and modes of promoting and conducting revivals. And, as an example from the opposite extreme, I would mention that portion of the Baptist church which is tinctured with Antinomianism. They have revivals also; but their mode of treating the subjects is widely different from that of the sects last mentioned.

5. But I come now to speak of genuine revivals, where the gospel is preached in its purity, and where the people have been well instructed in the doctrines of Christianity.—In a revival, it makes the greatest difference in the world, whether the people have been carefully taught by catechising and where they are ignorant of the truths of the Bible. In some cases revivals are so remarkably pure, that nothing occurs with which any pious man can find fault. There is not only no wildness and extrava-

gance, but very little strong commotion of the animal feelings. The word of God distils upon the mind like the gentle rain, and the Holy Spirit comes down like the dew, diffusing a blessed influence on all around. Such a revival affords the most beautiful sight ever seen upon earth. Its aspect gives us a lively idea of what will be the general state of things IN THE LATTER-DAY GLORY, and some faint image of the heavenly state. The impressions on the minds of the people in such a work, are the exact counterpart of the truth; just as the impression on the wax corresponds to the seal. In such revivals there is great solemnity and silence. The convictions of sin are deep and humbling; the justice of God in the condemnation of the sinner is felt and acknowledged; every other refuge but Christ is abandoned; the heart at first is made to feel its own impenetrable hardness, but, when least expected, it dissolves under a grateful sense of God's goodness, and Christ's love; light breaks in upon the soul, either by a gradual dawning, or by a sudden flash; Christ is revealed through the gospel, and a firm and often a joyful confidence of salvation through Him is produced; a benevolent, forgiving, meek, humble, and contrite spirit predominates; the love of God is shed abroad; and with some, joy unspeakable and full of glory fills the soul. A spirit of devotion is enkindled. The word of God becomes exceedingly precious. Prayer is the exercise in which the soul seems to be in its proper element, because by it, God is approached, and his presence felt, and beauty seen: and the newborn soul lives by breathing after the knowledge of God, after communion with God, and after conformity to his will. Now also springs up in the soul an inextinguishable desire to promote the glory of God, and to bring all men to the knowledge of the truth, and by that means to the possession of eternal life. The sincere language of the heart is, "Lord what wouldst thou have me to do?" That God may send upon his church many such revivals, is my daily prayer; and many such have been experienced in our country, and I trust are still going forward in our churches.

6. But it has often occurred to me—and I have heard the same sentiment from some of the most judicious and pious men that I have known—that there must be a state of the church preferable to these temporary excitements, which are too often followed by a deplorable state of declension, and disgraceful apathy and inactivity.—Why not aim at having a continuous lively state of piety, and an unceasing progress in the conversion of the impenitent, without these dreadful seasons of deadness and indifference? Why may we not hope for such a state of increasing prosperity in the church, that *revivals* shall be no longer needed: or, if you prefer the expression, when there shall be a *perpetual revival*? Richard Baxter's congregation seems for many years to have approximated to

what is here supposed; and, perhaps, that of John Brown of Haddington, and Dr. Romaine of London. And in this country, I have known a very few congregations, in which a lively state of piety was kept up from year to year.

7. We cannot, however, limit the HOLY ONE, nor prescribe modes of operation for the Spirit of God.—His dispensations are inscrutable; and it is our duty to submit to his wisdom and his will, and to go on steadily in the performance of our own duty. If He, the Sovereign, chooses to water his church by occasional showers, rather than with the perpetual dew of his grace, and this more at one period, and in one continent, than at other times and places, we should rejoice, and be grateful for the rich effusions of his Spirit in any form and manner; and should endeavour to avail ourselves of these precious seasons, for the conversion of sinners, and the edification of the body of Christ. In the natural world, the cold and barren winter regularly succeeds the genial and growing seasons of spring and summer; and there may be an analogy to this vicissitude in the spiritual world. One thing we are taught, that believers stand in need of seasons of severe trial, that they may be purified, as the precious metals are purged from their dross in the heated furnace. Paul says, “For there must be heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest.”

8. As genuine revivals are favourable to truth and orthodoxy, so spurious excitements furnish one of the most effectual vehicles for error and heresy.—The church is not always benefited by what are termed revivals; but sometimes the effects of such commotions are followed by a desolation, which resembles the track of the tornado. I have never seen so great insensibility in any people, as in those who had been the subjects of violent religious excitement; and I have never seen any sinners so bold and reckless in their impiety, as those who had once been loud professors, and foremost in the time of revival. If I had time, I might illustrate this remark, by a reference to the great revival of the *West*, which commenced about the close of the year 1800, in the south part of Kentucky; and by which the Presbyterian church in that region was for so many years broken, distracted, and prostrated—but I must forbear. When people are much excited, their caution and sober judgment are diminished; and when preachers are ardently zealous in revivals, serious people do not suspect them of holding errors, or of entertaining the design of subverting the truth. It is also a fact, that the teachers of false doctrine, do sometimes artfully associate their errors with revivals, and by continually insinuating, or openly declaring, that revivals only take place in connection with their *new* theology, they succeed in persuading those who have more zeal than knowledge, that all who oppose their er-

rors, are the enemies of revivals. This artifice has often been played off with much effect; and they have sometimes gone so far as to deny the genuineness of great revivals, which occurred under the ministry of those holding opinions different from their own, or who neglected to bring into operation all the newly-invented apparatus of revivals.

You may perhaps expect me to say something respecting what are called *new measures*; but as I am out of the way of witnessing the actual operation of these means, I will not venture on a discussion which is both delicate and difficult, farther than to mention some general results, which, from a retrospect of many facts, I have adopted, in regard to revivals of religion. On each of these I might largely expatiate, but my prescribed limits forbid it.

All means and measures which produce a high degree of excitement, or a great commotion of the passions, should be avoided; because religion does not consist in these violent emotions, nor is it promoted by them; and when they subside, a wretched state of deadness is sure to succeed.

The subjects of religious impressions ought not to be brought much into public notice. It ought not to be forgotten, that the heart is deceitful above all things, and that strong excitement does not prevent the risings of pride and vain-glory. Many become hypocrites when they find themselves the objects of much attention, and affect feelings which are not real; and where there is humility and sincerity, such measures turn away the attention from the distinct contemplation of those subjects which ought to occupy the mind.

On this account, I prefer having the anxious addressed and instructed as they sit undistinguished in their seats, rather than calling them out to particular pews, denominated *anxious seats*; and if the pastor can visit the awakened at their houses, it would be better than to appoint meetings expressly for them. But as this cannot be done when the number is great, these meetings may be necessary; but instead of attempting to converse with each individual, let the preacher address suitable instruction and advice to all at once; and if any are in any great trouble and difficulty, let them come to the minister's house, or send for him to visit them.

All measures which have a tendency to diminish the solemnity of divine worship, or to lessen our reverence for God and divine things, are evidently wrong; and this is uniformly the effect of excessive excitement. Fanaticism often blazes with a glaring name, and agitates assemblies as with a hurricane or earthquake; but God is not in the fire, or the wind, or the earthquake. His presence is more commonly with the still small voice. There is no sounder characteristic of genuine devotion, than reverence. When this is banished, the fire may burn fiercely, but it is un-

hallowed fire. Fanaticism, however much it may assume the garb and language of piety, is its opposite: for while the latter is mild, and sweet, and disinterested, and respectful, and affectionate, the former is proud, arrogant, censorious, selfish, carnal, and, when opposed, malignant.

The premature and injudicious publication of revivals, is now a great evil. There is in these accounts often *a cant*, which greatly disgusts sensible men; and there is an exaggeration, which confounds those who know the facts; and it cannot but injure the people concerning whom the narrative treats. But I must desist.

I am, respectfully and affectionately, yours,

A. ALEXANDER.

REV. W. B. SPRAGUE, D. D.