

LECTURES
ON
REVIVALS OF RELIGION.

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WITH
AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY,

BY THE
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LETTER IV.

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REVEREND AND DEAR BROTHER,

The pious and devoted Mr. Baxter somewhere remarks—"The word of God is divine; but our mode of dispensing it is human: and there is scarcely any thing we have the handling of, but we leave on it the prints of our fingers."—The justness of this remark we shall probably all acknowledge. And although the contemplation of the fact which it expresses, ought by no means either to discourage the Christian, or lead him to depreciate the real importance of human instrumentality in extending and building up the church; it ought to lead us all to "cease from man" as an ultimate guide in divine things; to "search the Scriptures daily;" to walk with a scrupulous care in their light; and to pray fervently and unceasingly, that both those who administer and those who receive the ordinances of God, may constantly go "to the law and to the testimony" for guidance in everything.

As the remark in question applies to every department of sacred things, in which men act, so it may be considered, perhaps, as applying particularly to Revivals of Religion. In those precious seasons, so dear to every pious heart, and so much to be desired by everyone who loves the prosperity of Zion—when the graces of Christians are revived—when many who have been slumbering in sin are awakened, for the first time, to a sight of their guilt and danger—when the awful realities of eternity begin to be revealed to the minds of multitudes who never saw them as realities before—when human sympathies and passions, as well as gracious feelings, are called into exercise, and sometimes into very powerful and morbid exercise—and when those who are yet "babes in Christ," and who, of course, have no experience, are ready to listen to every suggestion which may indicate some new method of "winning souls," and of extending the Redeemer's kingdom,—can it be wondered, that, in such a season of deep interest and powerful excitement, feeling should often predominate over judgment; and enthusiasm, fanaticism, and various forms of spurious emotion, mingle with genuine exercises; and, in the view of superficial observers, throw a suspicious appearance over the whole work? In many instances, there can be no doubt, that

genuine effusions of the Holy Spirit, by means of which large additions have been made to the church of Christ, have, in their progress, been tarnished by human management, and unhallowed mixtures; and, in not a few cases, arrested by transactions and appearances, which pained the hearts of intelligent Christians, disgusted and alienated serious inquirers, grieved away the Spirit of God, left the state of the population, thus graciously visited, perhaps less favourable than it was found; and greatly strengthened the hands of the enemies of the revival cause.

This is so far from being a rare occurrence, that it is presumed, an extensive and strongly-marked revival of religion has seldom occurred, in any age or country, and even under the ministry of the most prudent and pious pastor, in the course of which some things did not take place adapted to grieve the enlightened friends of the cause of Christ. Public services, perhaps, have been, with the best intention, so inordinately multiplied, as, in a measure, to defeat their own object. Means have been resorted to, in the fulness of ardent feeling, which scriptural wisdom and experience could not justify. Irregularities and excesses have insensibly crept in, which, though meant for the best, and promising, at the time, to be useful, proved far otherwise in their influence. Expression has been given, in public and private, to feelings, which, though sincere and unaffected in those in whom they were first witnessed, were by no means of a similar character in all subsequent imitators. A few, perhaps, who were deeply impressed with the importance of religion, and with the danger of the impenitently wicked, began, without permission, to give vent to their honest zeal in warm public addresses. Those whose zeal and knowledge were less, and whose vanity was greater, soon imitated their example; until lay-preaching became prevalent, and extravagance and folly were the most prominent features in the scene. Meetings for prayer were protracted to an unseasonable hour. Judicious and sober-minded Christians were grieved to see plans adopted, and practices indulged, which, though intended for good, were by no means adapted to promote it. Many who saw and lamented these evils were backward to oppose them, lest they should be thought unfriendly to what was really excellent and commendable in the passing scene. Thus revivals have lost some of their lustre with all, have been altogether discredited in the eyes of many, and have, perhaps, been succeeded by long seasons of prevailing carelessness, and even of hardened opposition to the special work of the Holy Spirit.

But not only are the seeds of human infirmity and corruption, to which I have referred, quite sufficient to produce and to explain the evils which have been mentioned—not only are the honest mistakes, and the remaining im-

perfections, of the best men apt to betray them, in seasons of excitement, into language and plans which will not stand the test of enlightened reflection,—but there can be no doubt that the great adversary of souls makes it his constant study, by working on the minds of hypocrites and fanatics, and by leading good men, as far as possible, into his snares, to counteract and to discredit revivals of religion.—“If we look back”—says the eminently wise and experienced President Edwards—“If we look back into the history of the church of God in past ages, we may observe that it has been a common device of the devil, to upset a revival of religion; when he finds he can keep men quiet and secure no longer, then to drive them into excesses and extravagances. He holds them back as long as he can; but, when he can do it no longer, then he will push them on, and, if possible, run them upon their heads. And it has been by this means chiefly that, he has been successful, in several instances, to overthrow most hopeful and promising beginnings; yea, the principal means by which the devil was successful, by degrees, to upset that grand religious revival of the world that was in the primitive ages of Christianity; and, in a manner, to overthrow the Christian church through the earth, and to make way for and bring on the grand anti-christian apostacy, that masterpiece of all the devil’s work, was to improve the indiscreet zeal of Christians; to drive them into those three extremes of *enthusiasm*, *superstition*, and *severity towards opposers*; which should be enough for an everlasting warning to the Christian church. And though the devil will do his diligence to stir up the open enemies of religion, yet he knows what is for his interest so well, that, in a time of revival of religion, his main strength shall be tried with the friends of it, and he will chiefly exert himself in his attempts upon them to mislead them. One truly zealous person, in the time of such an event, that seems to have a great hand in the affair, and draws the eyes of many upon him, may do more (through Satan’s being too subtle for him) to hinder the work, than a hundred great, and strong, and open opposers.”¹

One would think, at first view, that a single series of mischievous disorders, strongly marked, exhibited in a day of great public interest, and distinctly recorded, would be sufficient to instruct and warn the church in all succeeding times. But, unhappily, this is by no means found to be the case. Human nature being the same in all ages, the tendencies, infirmities, and temptations of men, are the same. One generation forgets the experience of

¹ Some Thoughts concerning the present Revival of Religion, &c. Part IV. page 333, of the new edition, lately published in this series of Select Christian Authors, with an Introductory Essay by the Rev. Dr. J. Pye Smith.

that which preceded it. Few read the record of that experience, and fewer still are qualified to profit by it. The consequence is, that every few years the same occurrences take place. Good men are ensnared and led astray in the same manner. Hypocrites manifest the same arts and unhallowed ebullitions. Similar mistakes are made, and similar irregularities are indulged, without recollecting, or perhaps knowing, that they were ever witnessed before; and, of course, without being admonished by the painful instructions of former times. Thus it is that children profit so little by the experience of their fathers. It were well, indeed, if the fathers themselves always profited as they ought by their own.

The truth of these remarks has been exemplified, in a greater or less degree, in almost every age of the church, from the day of Pentecost until the present hour. Even under the eyes of the inspired apostles themselves, some of the evils of which we have spoken occurred, and were formally reproved as disorderly and mischievous. For example, no one can read the fourteenth chapter of the Epistle to the Corinthians, without perceiving that the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit were greatly abused by some of the members of that church, and the exercise of these gifts connected with much disorder. It is perfectly evident that there was a considerable excitement among the people; and it is quite as evident, that this excitement was not conducted with decorum and wisdom. The following paraphrase of Dr. Doddridge, on the twenty-sixth verse of that chapter, is decisive as to his view of the subject.—“I might also urge, upon this head, the great disorder which is introduced into your assemblies by this ostentatious manner of proceeding; for, indeed, if you think seriously, what a shocking thing it is, my brethren, that when you come together for the purposes of social worship, in which all hearts should unite, each of you is desirous himself to officiate publicly, in such a manner as best suits his present inclination, without any regard to decency and order? Everyone of you hath a psalm to read, hath a doctrine to inculcate, ‘hath a tongue’ in which to preach or pray, ‘hath a revelation’ of some mystery to produce, ‘hath an interpretation,’ which perhaps he immediately begins, while the person for whom he is to interpret hath but begun to speak; and thus five or six, if not more, may be speaking at the same time, in consequence of which no one can be distinctly heard, and the assembly degenerates into a kind of tumultuous riot. I beseech you, my friends, to rectify this, and to proceed upon the general canon, which I would recommend to you upon all such occasions,—‘Let all things be done,’ not for ostentation, but ‘for edification;’ in such a manner as you do in your consciences believe will be most like to do good to the

souls of men, and to build up the church of Christ.” To this paraphrase the pious author adds, in a note—“It seems probable, that some of these Christians were so full of themselves, and so desirous of exercising their respective gifts, that, without waiting for the permission and direction of him who presided in the assembly, several began speaking, or singing in the same minute, and some began while others were speaking. The manner in which discourses were carried on in the schools of the philosophers, where several little knots of disputants seem to have been engaged at the same time, and what happened in Jewish synagogues after worship was completed, might possibly have given some occasion to an irregularity which to us seems so shocking.” So much for the case of the Corinthian church. The diligent reader of the New Testament will see in the accounts given of other churches, indications of similar disorders, evidently spoken of as offensive to infinite wisdom.

Concerning the partial or more extensive revivals of religion which took place, in different countries, from the apostolic age to the Reformation, we know so little in detail, that we cannot undertake to speak particularly of the disorders with which they were attended. But that there *were* such disorders, in a number of instances, cannot be doubted by those who read ecclesiastical history with the smallest share of either attention or discernment. I have no doubt, that many of those serious people, who are represented by Mosheim and others, as having fallen into irregularities, and who are set down by these historians as “heretics” or “schismatics,” were really among the “Witnesses of the Truth;” who connected with their testimony some wildness in opinion, or disorder in practice, which tarnished their profession, and virtually threw their influence into the scale of the enemy. The fact is, we seldom read of the minds of men being roused and excited, even by a good Spirit, without some testimony that pride, vanity, enthusiasm, and fanaticism, in various degrees and forms, mingled with the good work, and produced effects which grieved the hearts of intelligent and solid Christians. It seems to have been the lot of “the sons of God,” in all ages, that whenever they assembled in greater numbers, and with greater zeal than usual, to “present themselves before the Lord,” “Satan came also among them.”

The glorious revival of religion which we are wont to designate by the emphatic title of the reformation, can never be too highly estimated, or too gratefully acknowledged, by those who love the purity and prosperity of the Redeemer’s kingdom. That wonderful impulse from the Spirit of God, which electrified Western Christendom, and which, at once, convulsed and purified so large a portion of the church, was made productive of blessings

in which we yet rejoice, and which will be matter of fervent thankfulness to the end of time. But even the lustre of *that* scene was tarnished by various disorders, which deeply grieved intelligent and judicious Christians, and, in some places, for a time, greatly hindered the progress of the good cause. When I see Carolostadt, the friend, and, for a time, the affectionate coadjutor of Luther, a man of respectable talents and learning, who had exposed the tyranny and superstition of the Pope with great effect, and who has been pronounced to have deserved well of the Protestant cause,—when I see such a man acting the unwise and turbulent part which history reports of him, I could almost sit down and weep over poor frail human nature. When I see him entering the churches of the Romanists, breaking in pieces their images, throwing down their altars, and trampling their crucifixes under his feet,—when I find him denouncing human learning as useless, if not injurious, to the student of the Holy Scriptures; going into the shops of the lowest mechanics, and consulting them about the meaning of difficult passages of Scripture, ostentatiously renouncing the title of “doctor,” and all names of ecclesiastical distinction, insisting that ministers ought not to study, but to support themselves by the labour of their own hands; filling the minds of young men with his eccentric and mischievous opinions; persuading the students of the University of Wirtemberg to abandon their studies, and even the boys, in the lower schools, to throw aside their books, and enter immediately on the business of religious teaching,—and when I find him, in addition to these irregularities, declaring that he had not the least regard for the authority of any human being, but must pursue his own course, and that no man could be a real Christian who disapproved of that course,—I say, when I find him acting thus, amidst the entreaties and the tears of far wiser and more pious men than himself—I cannot help exclaiming, “Lord, what is man!” These proceedings, it is unnecessary to say, were matter of great grief to Luther, and all his judicious friends, and evidently injured the cause of the Reformation. But, in spite of all the remonstrances and entreaties which could be presented to Carolostadt, he persevered in his unhappy course for several years. And although he afterwards came, in a great measure, to his senses, acknowledged his fault, and professed to mourn over it, still the cause of truth had been dishonoured, and incalculable mischief done, which it was impossible to recall.

The revival of religion which took place in the former part of the eighteenth century, in this country, is generally considered, I believe, and with great justice, as the most extensive and powerful that American Christians ever witnessed. The labours of the apostolic Whitfield, and his coadjutors,

the Tennents, &c. and also of the venerable Stoddard, President Edwards, and others, in New England, were connected with triumphs of gospel truth, which the friends of vital piety love to remember, and which they can never call to mind without gratitude and praise to Him who has “the residue of the Spirit.” Many thousands of souls, there is reason to believe, were brought into the kingdom of Christ, during that revival, and a new impulse and aspect given to the church in the American colonies.

Yet, here again, some of the managers in this heart-elevating scene—to recur to the expressive language of Baxter—“left upon it the prints of their fingers,” and thus created unsightly spots in a “blaze of glory.” He who will take the trouble to consult the fourth part of the venerable Edwards’ treatise on that revival, as well as some other contemporaneous publications, will find evidence of this fact as painful as it is unquestionable. He will find, that amidst the most gratifying evidence, that good seed, and good fruits predominated, the enemy was permitted to “sow tares,” which sprung up with the wheat, and, in some cases, almost “choked it.” The disorders of *lay-preaching* well-nigh brought the ministry, in many places, into contempt. The outcries, the praying and exhorting by *females* in public, grieved the hearts of judicious Christians. The language of *harsh censure* and of uncharitable *denunciation*, as “unconverted” persons—as “blind leaders of the blind”—as “devout leaders to hell”—was directed towards some of the best ministers of Christ in the community, because they disapproved of these irregularities. Public *confessions* of secret sins were warmly urged, and actually made, and crimes altogether unsuspected brought to light, to the disgrace of Christian character, and the destruction of domestic peace. Thus scenes which were no doubt intended to make a deep and salutary moral impression, were made the subjects of unhallowed speculation, and the themes of a thousand tongues. All these things were urged with the confidence of oracular wisdom; and whoever ventured to lisp anything like doubt or opposition, was publicly stigmatized as an enemy to revivals, and an opposer of vital piety.

Among those who took the lead in this fanatical and disorderly conduct, one individual obtained such an unhappy eminence, that his case ought to be kept before the public mind as a salutary warning. I need not tell you, that I refer to the Rev. Mr. James Davenport, great-grandson of the venerable and excellent John Davenport, the first minister of New Haven, and at that time pastor of a church at Southhold, on Long Island. Mr. Davenport was then a young man, and had been for some time esteemed a pious and faithful minister. Hearing of the signal effusions of the Holy Spirit with which God had

been pleased to favour many parts of New England, he, about the year 1741, made a visit to Connecticut, and shortly afterwards to Massachusetts; and everywhere preached abundantly, and entered with warmth into the spirit of the prevailing revivals. Soon, however, becoming animated by a furious zeal, and imagining that he was called to take a *special lead* in the work, he began to set at nought all the rules of Christian prudence and order, and to give the most unrestrained liberty to his fanatical feelings. He raised his voice to the highest pitch in public services, and accompanied his unnatural vehemence, and cantatory bawling, with the most violent agitations of body. He encouraged his hearers to give the most unrestrained vent both to their distress and joy, by violent outcries in the midst of public assemblies. He pronounced those who were thus violently agitated, and who made these public outcries, to be undoubtedly converted persons. He openly encouraged his new converts to speak in public, and brought forward many ignorant and unqualified persons, young and old, to address large assemblies, in his own vehement and magisterial manner. He led his followers in procession through the streets, singing psalms and hymns. He claimed a kind of prescriptive right to sit in judgment on the character of ministers of the gospel. He went from place to place, undertaking to examine ministers as to their spiritual state, and to decide with confidence whether they were converted or not; and when his judgment was unfavourable, he would often in his public prayers denounce them as graceless persons, and call upon the people to pray for their conversion. Those who refused to be examined by him, he, of course, placed on the reprobated list. He made his public prayers the medium of harsh, and often indecent attack, on those ministers and others whom he felt disposed, on any account, to censure. He taught his followers to govern themselves by impulses and impressions, rather than by the word of God; and represented all public services in which there was not some visible agitation, or some audible outcry, as of no value. He warned the people against hearing unconverted ministers, representing it as a dreadful sin to do so; and on more than one occasion, publicly refused to receive the sacramental symbols in particular churches, when he had an opportunity of doing it, because he doubted the piety of the pastors.

Mr. Davenport's elder and more judicious brethren, who trembled for the interests of religion, and who were especially anxious that no dishonour might be cast on the revivals which were going on around them, remonstrated against these proceedings, warned him of their consequences, and begged him to examine whether he was not under the influence of a wrong spirit. But he was deaf to all their remonstrances and entreaties; encouraged bodies

of people, in a number of places, to withdraw from their pastors, and establish separate societies, in which all his peculiarities and extravagances might be freely indulged; scattered division and strife in every direction; increased the number of the enemies of the revival; discouraged and disgusted not a few of its friends; and, in a word, created disorders, alienation, bitterness, and division, the consequences of which remain, in many parts of that country, to the present day.

In this deplorable state of things, some of the most eminently wise and pious ministers in the land, raised a warning voice against extravagances which seemed likely to bear down all before them. They were heard by some, and their preaching and writings did much good. But they were denounced by many as enemies of the revival; and, in spite of everything they could say or do, the infatuation of Davenport and his followers could not be arrested. Like other diseases, it ran its course, until the virulent matter which gave it aliment was in a measure expended. The Holy Spirit, in the meantime, was grieved, and took his departure; and a spirit of discord, contention, and animosity, took the place of his hallowed influence.

It is true, Mr. Davenport, in 1744, became sensible of his folly and sin, and published an humble confession and recantation; in which he acknowledged that he had been actuated by a wrong spirit, lamented many parts of his conduct, and was in some measure restored to the fellowship of his injured brethren. But to repair the mischief which he had done was beyond his power. The friends of Zion had been clad in mourning. Her enemies had triumphed. Truth lay bleeding in the streets. Congregations had been torn in pieces and scattered. New societies had been established upon fanatical principles, and could not be reclaimed. Immortal souls had been disgusted with what claimed to be religion, driven from the house of God, and probably lost for ever. The enemies of real revivals of religion, who were many and powerful, had become confirmed and hardened in their hostility. And many personal and ecclesiastical desolations had been produced, over which their author might mourn and weep, but which he could not remedy.²

Scenes in some measure similar have been repeatedly exhibited since that time. Of these, I have neither time nor inclination to speak of more than one.—The case to which I refer is that of the remarkable revivals which took place in the years 1800, 1801, and 1802, in the western country, and more particularly within the bounds of the Synod of Kentucky. My impres-

² See Prince's Christian History, Nos. 82, 83, 103, &c. Trumbull's History of Connecticut, Book II. Chapter VIII.

sion is, that the most enlightened and sincere friends of vital piety, who had the best opportunity of being intimately acquainted with the revivals referred to, believe them to have been a real work of the Holy Spirit; or at least, to have been productive of a number of genuine conversions. But that this work of grace was attended, and finally overshadowed, disgraced, and terminated by fanaticism, and disorders of the most distressing character, will not probably now be questioned by any competent judges. This excitement began in Logan county, in Kentucky, but soon spread over all the state, and into the neighbouring states. Besides increased attention to the usual seasons, and the ordinary means of religious worship, there were, during the summers of the years just mentioned, large *camp-meetings* held, and a number of days and nights, in succession, spent in almost unceasing religious exercises. At these meetings, hundreds, and, in some cases, thousands of people might have been seen and heard, at the same time, engaged in singing and prayer, in exhortation and preaching, in leaping, shouting, disputing, and conversing, with a confusion scarcely describable. This wonderful excitement may be considered as standing related, both as cause and effect, to several other deplorable irregularities.³ A love of excitement and of agitation seemed to take possession of the people. They began to suppose, that when these were absent nothing was done. A number of hot-headed young men, intoxicated with the prevailing element of excitement, and feeling confident of their own powers and call to the work, though entirely destitute of any suitable education, assumed the office of public exhorters and instructors. These were soon afterwards licensed to preach; a majority of the Presbytery hoping, that although not regularly qualified, they might be useful. When once this door was opened, it was found difficult to close it. Candidate after candidate, of this character, and on this plan, were licensed, and subsequently ordained, until this description of ministers threatened to become a majority of the whole body. As might have been expected, a new source of trouble now appeared. A number of these raw and ignorant young men, and a few of the older ministers, began to manifest great laxness as to their theological opinions. And a new Presbytery having been set off, consisting chiefly of those who were friendly to the new opinions and measures, became a sort of mint, for issuing, in great abundance, similar coin. Candidates were freely licensed and ordained, who declined adopting the Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church, in the usual form. They were received on their declaring, that they adopted that Confession “only so

³ See President Bishop’s Outline of the History of the Church in Kentucky, p. 117.

far as they considered it as agreeing with the word of God.” On this plan, it is manifest, subscription was a piece of solemn mockery. Persons of all conceivable sentiments might freely enter at such a door. The consequence was, that Arminians and Pelagians actually entered the Presbyterian Church, and went on rapidly to multiply, until the decisive measures of the Synod of Kentucky, and of the General Assembly, arrested the progress of the evil. By means of the measures referred to, these disorderly intruders, with their pertinacious adherents, were finally separated from the Synod of Kentucky. A majority of them formed the body known by the name of the “Cumberland Presbyterians,” now consisting of a number of Presbyteries; professing to adopt the Presbyterian form of government, but avowedly embracing Semi-pelagian principles in theology. Another, but smaller portion, formed a new body, denominated “Chrystians,” and sometimes “New Lights,” or “Stoneites,” (from the name of their principal leader,) and became a kind of enthusiastic, noisy Socinians. While the remainder, under the same lawless impulse, took a third course, and fell into all the fanatical absurdities of “Shakerism.”

In this case, indeed, as in some of those before recited, several of the ministerial brethren, more advanced in life, who had lent their names and their influence to these deplorable disorders, became, after a while, sensible of their mistake, acknowledged their fault, and were restored to the bosom of the Presbyterian Church. But, as in former cases, not until mischiefs then beyond their control had been consummated. The mournful results of their course had been predicted, and they were entreated to guard against the division and corruption to which it could not fail of leading. But they would not be prevailed upon to pause, until the church had been rent in pieces—until heresies of the grossest kind had been engendered and embodied—and until they had effectually scattered, in that country, the seeds of deep and extended ecclesiastical desolation. No intelligent Christian, it is believed, who has any adequate acquaintance with the course of the events in question, has any doubt, that these revivals, on account of their sad accompaniments, *left the churches in the west in a far worse state than they had been before*. Anterior to the occurrence of these scenes, their state had borne chiefly a *negative* character. There was a lamentable *absence* of religious knowledge, privileges, and feeling. But now there was generated a bitter hostility to revivals of religion; a systematic, bold, and widespread infidelity; and such a division and alienation of the sound materials for ecclesiastical organizations which were left, as to throw them back for many years, as to any desirable religious order. As to the disorders which have marked

some revivals of still more recent date, I dare not trust myself either to recount or discuss them. But enough, I trust, has been said to answer my purpose. I have stated the facts of other times just as they are recorded by the pen of impartial history, without allowing myself, to the best of my knowledge and belief, to disguise, or to caricature, a single feature in any portrait. Every discerning reader will be able to apply the past to the present, and to see, in the errors and sufferings of our fathers, some of those mistakes which we ought carefully to avoid. God grant that we may none of us reject the lesson, until it shall be too late to profit by it!

It was remarked, on a preceding page, that the disorders which occurred in the Synod of Kentucky, were early connected with *camp-meetings*—It is my impression, that camp-meetings began in the Presbyterian Church; that they were first adopted from a kind of *necessity*, in a country where houses for public worship were few, and of small size, and, of course, altogether insufficient for receiving the great crowds which collected on particular occasions, and who were in a state of mind, which prompted them to remain a number of days at the place of meeting. In such circumstances, encamping in the open air seemed to be unavoidable. But what was begun from *necessity*, was afterwards, in many cases, continued from *choice*. Camp-meetings were found to furnish admirable means for the propagation of strong excitement. The evils, however, to which they naturally led, soon diminished their popularity with calm and impartial observers. Our Methodist brethren, it is believed, took this plan from us, and retained it for many years, as one of their favourite methods of conducting worship for the purpose of effect. But, although not yet wholly discarded from that body, it is no longer so great a favourite, or so extensively employed as formerly. Hence a pious and judicious minister of that denomination lately said to a friend of mine—“I am a little surprised at you Presbyterians. *We* tried the machine of camp-meetings for a number of years, and have but recently dismounted from it, scarcely escaping with whole bones; when, lo, you are disposed to mount again, and once more to venture on the perilous experiment.”

I confess I deeply regret that the use of camp-meetings should be resumed in our body. Where they are *necessary*, that is, where an assembled multitude cannot be accommodated in any other way—as was evidently the case with some of the audiences of John the Baptist, and afterwards, in some cases, with those of our Lord—and as, doubtless, has happened in a number of instances since,—let them be freely employed. I am far from supposing that they are necessarily, and always injurious. Far less, that all the converts, which have been numbered on such occasions, were of a spu-

rious character. By no means. Wherever the word of God is faithfully and powerfully presented, it never fails, I believe, of doing some good. It has never been my lot to see a Presbyterian camp-meeting. But I have had an opportunity of personally witnessing the effects of such a scene, as they appeared among our Methodist brethren. And the general impression which they made upon me, was, I acknowledge, by no means favourable. To say nothing of the irregularities and abuses which it is difficult, if not impossible, in ordinary cases, wholly to avoid, on the skirts, and sometimes in the interior, of such camps—they have always appeared to me adapted to make religion more an affair of display, of impulse, of noise, and of animal sympathy, than of the understanding, the conscience, and the heart. In short, they have always struck me as adapted, in their ordinary form, to produce effects on our intellectual and moral nature, analogous to those of strong drink on the animal economy; that is, to excite, to warm, and to appear to strengthen for a time, but only to pave the way for a morbid expenditure of “sensorial power”—as we say concerning the animal economy—and for consequent debility and disease.

Some of my brethren, I am aware, honestly, and I have no doubt piously, entertain a different opinion. I judge them not. “To their own Master they stand or fall.” I have merely ventured to pour out on paper the fulness of a heart intensely solicitous, if I do not deceive myself, for the extension and the honour of true religion; and desiring, as sincerely as any friend of camp-meetings in the land, the multiplication and the universal triumph of genuine revivals. I claim no particular skill, or extent of information on this subject, and am cordially willing to sit and learn at the feet of any brother who has lessons of sound and adequate experience, and, above all, of inspired wisdom, to offer on this subject. But until such can be produced to my satisfaction, I must be allowed, as a commissioned and sworn “watchman on the walls of Zion,” (however incompetent,) to give warning, “according to the best of my knowledge and understanding.” While I speak thus candidly on the subject of camp-meetings, allow me to volunteer a word in relation to what are commonly styled *anxious seals*.—They are connected, and not very remotely, with the subject I have undertaken to discuss. Far be it from me, to undertake to pronounce on those brethren who have thought it their duty to countenance them, a sentence of condemnation, or to question that good has sometimes been done where they have been used. But this, I must insist, is not in all cases a safe criterion of duty. Men may be savingly benefited by the instrumentality of means which all would unite in condemning. The decisive question is, Can this method of proceeding be considered as

the best mode, nay, as a really eligible mode, of drawing to a point, and ascertaining, the exercises of serious inquirers? Is it the best way of deciding on the digested feelings, the deliberate purpose, of persons whose attention has been aroused, it may be for the first time, and perhaps only a few minutes before, to the great subject of religion? If, indeed, I were called upon to address one or more individuals on a journey, as Philip was, in the case of the Ethiopian eunuch—individuals whom I never expected to see again, after the passing hour—I might, without impropriety, call them to declare their decision *within that hour*, and baptize them, as Philip did. Or, if I had occasion to speak to a mixed multitude, the greater part of whom could only remain a few days in the place where the gospel was preached to them—as was the situation of many in the city of Jerusalem, on the day of Pentecost—it would strike me as proper to call them, not merely to an *immediate decision*, between the claims of God and the world—which indeed *ought always to be done by every minister*—but also to an *immediate manifestation of that decision*, that they might be conversed and prayed with accordingly, in the few hours of opportunity which they were permitted to enjoy. But it would by no means occur to me as the most judicious way, in ordinary cases, of drawing the line between the careless, and the truly anxious inquirer, to request all who were disposed to think seriously, to rise and present themselves before a public assembly, in the character of persons who had resolved, or were desirous, to devote themselves to the service of Christ; and this, perhaps, at the close of the very sermon by means of which it was hoped they had, for the first time, begun to feel and inquire about salvation, and, of course, in a few minutes after they thus began to feel. If I were to make such a request, I should expect to find the persons rising and presenting themselves in compliance with it, to be, for the most part, the forward, the sanguine, the rash, the self-confident, and the self-righteous; and that many, who felt more deeply, and yet hesitated about announcing themselves so suddenly as anxious inquirers, and, of course, kept their seats, would prove to be the modest, the humble, the broken-hearted, who had a deep impression of the deceitfulness of the heart, and who considered the importance of pondering well the solemnity of every step on a subject of such unutterable moment.

I am aware that the advocates of the system of “anxious seats,” urge, with some plausibility, that, in consideration of the natural tendency of the impenitent to stifle convictions, and to tamper with the spirit of procrastination, it is desirable that they should be prevailed upon, as soon as possible, to commit themselves on this great subject. That a decisive step in relation

to this subject is *desirable*, and that it ought to be taken *without delay*, is certain. But, at the same time, that it ought to be taken without rashness, with knowledge, with due consideration, and with sacred care not to mistake a transient emotion, for a deep impression, or a settled purpose, is equally certain. Suppose, after a solemn and pointed sermon, an invitation to be given to all present who felt the importance of an immediate attention to “the things which belong to their peace,” to come forward and take the seats provided for them near the pulpit. Suppose two hundred individuals to avail themselves of this invitation, and to present themselves before the church as objects of attention and prayer. And suppose, at the end of three months, fifty of these to unite themselves with the professing people of God, on the ground of “a good hope through grace—fifty more to take the same step, not because they were satisfied of their Christian character, but because they had committed themselves, and did not wish to appear fickle, or apostates—and the remaining hundred to return, with greater obduracy than before, to their former careless and sinful course. I say, suppose such steps, and such a result as I have stated to occur,—would it be deemed, by judicious Christians, a result, on the whole, more favourable for the best interests of the Redeemer’s kingdom, than if, in pursuance of what are called the “old measures,” in such cases, none but the fifty genuine converts had ever been brought forward to public view at all, and not even those until they had enjoyed an opportunity to bring their exercises to the test of time, to gain and digest the elements of Christian knowledge, and to “count the cost” of their undertaking? The church indeed, in the latter case, might not grow in numbers quite so rapidly, and her movements might not be quite so audible and imposing,—but, methinks, her growth would be more likely to prove healthful. She would be less burdened with spurious members. She would be more likely to escape the multiplied evils, naturally arising from the fact of a large portion of her members being hurried forward in such a school of agitation, immature training, and noisy excitement; and much less in danger of placing both the fifty who insincerely took upon themselves the vows of Christ, and the hundred who “drew back,” in a state far more perilous than ever, with regard to their final salvation.

Let it not be said, that inviting to “anxious seats” is the only effectual method of ascertaining who are under serious impressions, and who are not. Why is it not quite as effectual to give a public invitation to all who are in any degree seriously impressed, or anxious to remain after the congregation is dismissed, or to meet their pastor the next evening, in some convenient apartment, for the purpose of disclosing their feelings, and of being made

the subjects of instruction and prayer? Nay, why is not the latter method very much preferable to the former? It surely gives quite as good an opportunity to ascertain numbers, and to distinguish persons and cases. It affords a far better opportunity to give distinct and appropriate instruction to particular individuals. It prevents the mischief of dragging into public view, and even into the highest degree of publicity, those whose exercises are immature, and perhaps transient. And it avoids the danger, which to many, and especially to young people, may be very formidable—I mean the danger of being inflated by becoming objects of public attention, and by being forthwith addressed and announced, as is too often the case, as undoubted “converts.” Surely the incipient exercises of the awakened and convinced, ought to be characterized by much calm self-examination, and much serious, retired, closet work. If there be any whose impressions are so slight and transient that they cannot be safely permitted to wait until the next evening, it will hardly be maintained that such persons are prepared to “commit themselves,” by publicly taking an anxious seat. And if there be any whose vanity would dispose them to *prefer* pressing forward to such a seat in the presence of a great assembly, to meeting their pastor and a few friends in a more private manner, the church, I apprehend, can promise herself little comfort from the multiplication of such members.

I have just said, that, among those who came forward on such an extemporaneous invitation, I should expect to find the sanguine, the self-confident, the superficially informed and exercised, as a matter of course. On a late occasion, and in a house of worship, not very far distant from this place, when, after a solemn discourse, a request was made, that all who were anxious, or resolved to attend to their spiritual interests, should immediately arise, and signify their determination; the first person that arose was a young man in whom the odour of strong drink was very offensive; who was evidently more than half drunk at the time; and who never, before or afterwards, manifested any serious concern on the subject. In another place, and on another occasion, when a similar request was made, the *only* person that arose was a woman of very dubious character, who is not supposed, I believe, by anyone, to have been, either then, or since, under anything that deserves to be called real anxiety of mind. The great Searcher of hearts is my witness, that I do not mention these facts for the purpose of casting any unfair odium on the practice to which I refer; but merely for the purpose of exemplifying the principles which I wish to inculcate, and of showing that the dangers which I deprecate are not the mere phantoms of a disordered fancy.

In fine, I suppose the truth concerning both camp-meetings and “anxious seats,” to be about this: That however useful they may have *really* been in a few cases, of very peculiar character, and however they may have *appeared* to some honest, but ardent minds, to operate favourably in a still greater number of cases, yet, as means of stated and promiscuous use, or, in fact, as means to be *used at all*, unless in very special circumstances, they are eminently adapted to generate fanaticism; to give a taste for ostentatious display in the service of the sanctuary; to favour the rapid multiplication of superficial, ignorant, untrained professors of religion; and to prepare the way for almost every species of disorder.

I have been acquainted with more than one church in which the extemporaneous mode of introducing members, of which I am speaking, has been extensively practised. And I must say, the result has been in no degree adapted to recommend the practice. The great numbers, thus added, made a most animating figure in the religious periodicals of the day; but, after a year or two, a large portion of them were not to be found. Their goodness, like the morning cloud and the early dew, had passed away. They had, in a great measure, withdrawn from the house of God, and from all attendance on sealing ordinances, and needed as much as ever to be gathered in from the “highways and hedges,” and to be made the subjects of a new conversion. The truth is, any plan, in the house of God, for separating the precious and the vile, for drawing a line between the church and the world, which does not provide for an intelligent and deliberate, as well as serious entrance into the body of Christ—which does not make some good degree of knowledge, as well as feeling, necessary in the candidate for admission—however it may gratify one whose “ruling passion” is to multiply professed converts to the greatest possible extent, and however plausibly it may appear in the public journals of the day,—will disclose miserable results in the end, as to any genuine building up of the Redeemer’s kingdom.

But I will not run the risk of wearying your patience by farther enlarging on this subject. I shall, therefore, after two or three general remarks, which appear to me to be suggested by the foregoing facts, close this long letter.

The *first* remark is, that there is a *striking similarity* in the disorders which have attended and marred revivals of religion in all ages.—As in *doctrine*, what is thought by many a new opinion, is frequently found, upon inquiry, nothing more than the revival of an error long ago exploded, so in *measures* of practical disorder, what wears to many all the attraction of novelty, is a repetition, perhaps the fiftieth time, of some old contrivance for producing a sudden and strong impression on the feelings of a popular as-

sembly. In fact, as real religion is the same in all ages, so its counterfeits are the same, human nature is the same, and the symptoms and morbid results of enthusiasm, superstition, and fanaticism, are substantially the same. We need not be surprised, then, to find ancient irregularities so remarkably resembling the modern. We have seen that whenever masses of men became excited, and especially when this excitement seized the minds of those who had been bred in ignorance and thoughtlessness, as they were brought into a new world, so they were apt to think, as a matter of course, that some new and bold measures must be adopted; that exigencies, which are as old as human nature, but which appear to them new, call for new modes of proceeding; and that the counsels of age and experience, like the exploded theories of bygone days, are no longer seasonable or adequate. Hence the inordinate love of novel contrivances for arresting the popular attention, and impressing the popular mind; the spirit of rash and uncharitable denunciation; the remarkable fact, that, in all ages, *young, and of course inexperienced ministers*, have commonly taken the lead, and discovered the most headstrong obstinacy in commencing and pursuing measures of an innovating character; a tendency to undervalue the settled order of the church, and to usurp the functions of the sacred office; yielding the mind to impulses and enthusiastic impressions, denouncing all who refused to concur in these things as graceless formalists; encouraging *females* to take the lead in social prayer; calling upon penitents to make *public confession* of their private sins, as indispensable to forgiveness, and spiritual prosperity; claiming to have a gift, unknown to others, of promoting genuine revivals, to be the only real friends of true, spiritual religion.—These are some of the fruits of human corruption which attended and marred revivals of religion centuries ago; and which have appeared every few years since, in similar connection, and with endless repetition. It is an undoubted fact, that most of those well-meant irregularities, on which some truly pious people now look with approbation and interest, as means pre-eminently adapted for promoting religion, have been confidently proposed, tried, found in the end to work badly, and exploded, over and over again; and yet there are those who still dream that they can be made to accomplish what all experience has pronounced to be impossible.

The *second* remark which I would make, as the result of the whole, is, that, as we may confidently take for granted that *enlightened and stable Christians* will not be shaken, either in their faith or hope, by the occasional and even prominent exhibition of these disorders in connection with revivals of religion; so it is important to put *inquirers* on their guard against “stum-

bling at this stumbling-stone.”—Some, when they see what claims to be religion, and even a genuine and precious revival of religion, tarnished by management, or extravagances which they cannot approve, are apt hastily to conclude, that vital piety and revivals of religion are all a dream. I fear that this fatal delusion is often adopted; and cannot but also fear that the disorders which often attend revivals frequently minister to it. But it *is* a delusion. The very existence of counterfeits shows that there is true coin. In every department of affairs, temporal or spiritual, in which men are called to act, they discover their imperfection. The Bible teaches us to expect this. And if we did not find it so, the Bible representation of human nature would not be verified. When, therefore, any are tempted to doubt the reality or the importance of what are called, by intelligent Christians, revivals of religion, because they have been often tarnished by unhappy admixtures or accompaniments, they adopt a conclusion which does as little credit to their scriptural knowledge, and their historical reading, as it does to their Christian experience. The work of the Holy Spirit, in renovating and sanctifying the heart, is the glory and hope of the church. That there should be seasons in which this work is made to appear with peculiar lustre and power, so entirely falls in with all the works and ways of God, that the only wonder is, that anyone who reads the New Testament, or looks abroad on the face of Christian society, should cherish a remaining doubt. And although the Spirit is a Divine Person, and all his influences infinitely pure and holy, yet, when we recollect that its subjects are sinful men, who remain, after they become the subjects of his power, but imperfectly sanctified and that those who preside over the dispensation of the various means of grace, are also sinful, fallible men,—though we may mourn and weep, we certainly cannot wonder, that marks, sad marks, of our weakness and fallibility should appear in our most precious seasons, and in our holiest services.

The *last* remark with which I would trouble you, is, that we ought to guard against undertaking to condemn, as of course lacking piety, those who favour some or all of the disorders to which reference has been made.—We have seen that one of the characteristics which seldom fail to mark those brethren, is a disposition to anathematize as unfaithful or graceless, all who cannot adopt their views, and pursue their plans. It is important that we guard against imitating this unworthy example. While we avoid, with sacred care, all participation in their faults—while we bear testimony faithfully and openly against whatever we deem unfriendly to the cause of genuine religion,—let us remember that some zealous and active servants of Jesus Christ, brethren whose piety we cannot doubt, and whose usefulness we can

have no disposition to undervalue or abridge, have appeared, for a time, as the patrons of these mistakes. Let us honour their piety, rejoice in their usefulness, forgive their mistakes, and pray that they may be brought to more correct views.

That you and I, my dear friend, may have grace given us to love and promote, with our whole hearts, genuine revivals of religion, and to guard against everything which tends to impede or mar them, and that we may speedily enjoy the unspeakable pleasure of seeing the power of the gospel, in its choicest influences, pervade our land and the world, is the unfeigned prayer of your affectionate brother in Christ,

SAMUEL MILLER.

Princeton, March 8, 1832.