CONCLUSION.

HAVING thus gone through the subject, according to the method first laid down, nothing remains but to close with a few practical observations.

I. I would observe, from what has been discoursed, that every species of religion, in which repentance forms no prominent part from first to last, is justly to be suspected, yea, certainly to be condemned as unscriptural and destructive. There is a great deal of this religion in the world, which often comes recommended by extraordinary zeal for some peculiar doctrines of Christianity, and is distinguished by unwarranted confidence and high affec­tions. Men hearing the gospel, are superficially alarmed on account of their sins, and eagerly look out for comfort. Through inexperience they lie open to Satan’s artifice, and are easily imposed on with false comfort, deduced from false principles, exactly suited to their carnal unhumbled hearts. Thus they presume that their sins are pardoned, and their state good; and with this presumption self-love is delighted, and high affections produced: these, ex­pressed in earnest fluent language, create them injudicious admirers: this flatters and affects them the more, and confirms them in their confidence; so that they think, after such experiences, they must never more, on any ac­count, doubt of their own salvation. Yet all this is only a land-flood, and soon subsides. They gradually experience a decay of affection, and grow lifeless, indolent, and worldly; with their affection their confidence declines, but they struggle hard to exclude doubtings: they call themselves back­sliders; allow themselves to have forsaken their first love; and groan out Job’s complaint, though not at all in Job’s meaning: “Oh that it were with me as in months past!” And would a wish suffice, something might be done: but they have no heart for greater exertion. To close all, they abuse the doctrine of final perseverance; take it for granted that they are saints; ex­pect to be restored as it were by miracle, whilst they turn a deaf ear to the voice of Christ, commanding them to “be zealous, and repent;” till at length, perhaps, a suitable occasion and temptation presenting, they throw aside their profession of godliness.

This is exactly the religion of the stony-ground hearers, who had faith, confidence, and joy, such as they were, but no repentance or humility,**[[1]](#footnote-1)** and therefore no root in themselves: for it is only by renewing our hearts unto repentance, that the ground is prepared for the reception of the seed, and the production of true faith and holiness, as hath already been demonstrated.

“Let no man deceive you by vain words.” Except you are partakers of re­pentance, and bring forth fruits meet for repentance, all your religion is vain, your hopes presumptuous, and your destruction inevitable; whatever other attainments, gifts, or experiences, you may have to boast of, or to buoy up your confidence. Satan can transform himself into an angel of light, and as effectually ruin souls by false religion, as by open ungodliness; and far more unsuspectedly.

II. I observe from what hath been discoursed, that great care is requisite in distinguishing betwixt true repentance, and that which is superficial and merely natural.**[[2]](#footnote-2)** This is of vast importance, as numbers of those who die impenitent, have at times judged themselves, and been thought by others to be penitent. Let it then be remembered that true repentance, though ge­nerally accompanied with terror, tears, confessions, and outward reformation, good words, fair promises, and earnest resolutions, doth not consist in, or uniformly attend upon all or any of them. But true repentance is a change of judgment, inclination, and affection, in respect to sin, immediately: ac­companied, preceded, or followed by a change of judgment, inclination, and affection, respecting God and his law, Christ and his gospel, ourselves and our conduct, this world and the next. From this change springs sorrow for sin, self-abasement and condemnation; sole dependence on God’s mercy; supreme valuation of Jesus and his salvation; love to God and holiness; ten­derness of conscience; zeal for good works; all holy tempers; holy conver­sation, and holy conduct; accompanied with continual humiliation for re­maining imperfections and defilements. Where these effects have been evi­dently produced, though with little or no terror, no effusions of tears, or seasons of peculiar melting, but gradually and silently, the repentance is yet sincere and genuine, by this rule,—it leads to Christ and holiness. But all other appearances, whether of terror issuing in self-dependence and neglect of Christ; or of supposed evangelical humiliation inducing professed depen­dence on Christ and free grace, whilst sin is not abhorred and avoided, nor holiness loved and practised, are superficial and hypocritical. Herod might have passed for a true penitent, if John would have allowed him his Hero­dias: yet John shall lose his head rather than Herod (notwithstanding pro­mising appearances,) will part with his beloved lust; and human nature is just the same in other men as it was in Herod. Let no repentance therefore satisfy any man which doth not endear Christ and universal holiness; and divorce the heart from every sin, especially that which heretofore was the customary and beloved sin.

III. I would, from what hath been discoursed, take occasion to consider in few words, the nature and necessity of regeneration. No other religion but that which hath been described, requires that entire change which this term, and a variety of similar expressions in the sacred Scriptures, imply. A Pha­risee’s reformation, morality, and outward worship, require no entire inward renovation; and having no experience of it, nor seeing any occasion for it, with Nicodemus, he exclaims, “How can these things be?” The evangelical or antinomian self-deceiver also may have his opinions, affections, and con­fidence, without becoming a new creature; and will, therefore, whilst he uses the terms, mistake their import, and signify by them some of those enthusiastical impulses and revelations, which he experiences and boasts of.

But self-admiring, self-justifying man, will never exercise that self-loath­ing and self-condemning repentance which hath been described, except he be born again. Insensible to the attractions of heavenly objects through inor­dinate love of worldly things, he never will renounce and abhor all sin, mor­tify every lust, die to all carnal objects, and delight in God and universal ho­liness, except he be changed into a new creature, by the efficacious influences of the Holy Spirit; except “old things pass away, and all things become new.”

This is the new birth so frequently spoken of in the sacred Scriptures. A new principle of divine life implanted in the heart, purifying the various powers of the soul. Hence proceed an enlightened understanding, a sound judgment in divine things, holy affections, a pure imagination, a sanctified memory, and a well-informed, tender, but not superstitious, conscience. Hence proceed new fears, new hopes, new joys, new sorrows, new aversions and desires, new dispositions, and a new life. Yet as these are in this life only imperfect in their degree, this imperfection of grace and remainder of corruption, extort from the true Christian bitter complaints: “Oh wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” They put vigour into his prayers: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and re­new a right spirit within me:” they still find him employment for repentance and watchfulness, and endear free forgiveness through the blood of Christ.

Sinners should therefore be addressed in terms like these: All your aver­sion to this thorough repentance, and all your delays about it, only demon­strate your need of being born again. Should God implant in your heart such a new principle of holiness, as would make you relish and take pleasure in divine things, you would find it natural and easy to abhor sin, to mourn over it, and forsake it; to repent and do works meet for repentance. Have you then a real desire after this invaluable gift? If you have not, but prefer the quiet satisfaction of your carnal inclinations; you are justly left without that which you so despise. If you have, “Ask and it shall be given you, seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth, and he that seeketh findeth, and to him that knock­eth it shall be opened.”

IV. I now take my leave of impenitent sinners with a serious expostula­tion. I mean such as are living, secretly or openly, in covetousness, injus­tice, lewdness, drunkenness, profaneness, or any known sin; who remember not to hallow the Sabbath, to read the Scriptures, to worship God, to relieve the poor, or to do any other known duty: or who proudly trust in themselves that they are righteous, and despise others, and neglect Christ and his sal­vation. Oh, make no more excuses or delays: “Flee from the wrath to come.” “Evil pursueth sinners:” if it overtake you in impenitency, eternal misery is your dreadful portion. Yet, yet a long-suffering God has patience with you: the gospel invites, and Jesus stands with open arms to receive you; complains that you “will not come to him, that you may have life affirms with an oath, that “he hath no pleasure in the death of a sinner,” and, as with tears of compassion, adds, “Turn ye, turn ye,why will ye die?” Do you then love death? Will you slight such warnings, such expostulations, such invitations, such compassion? Well, if this prevail not, I must with reluctance leave you, as Paul did the Jews: “Your blood be upon your own head, I am free.”

V. I now turn to thee, poor weeping penitent, who art almost inconsolable, and sinking in despondency. Thou scarcely canst hope that God will par­don so great a sinner; the expectation seems to border on presumption: yet still thy humiliation appears to thyself slight, and thy repentance super­ficial, and thy heart insensible: yea, though it is almost melted within thee, it feels like a very stone; and still thou pleadest, “Oh! take away the heart of stone, and give the heart of flesh.” Behold, I bring thee glad tidings of great joy; and I shall share thy joy, if I may but be the instrument of administering peace and comfort to thee: “Come unto me,” saith Jesus, “all ye that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Behold, he calleth thee; be of good courage. All who will, may come; he hath given thee the willing mind, and will “in nowise cast thee out.” He will bind up thy broken heart, and “give thee the oil of joy for mourning, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.” Only wait his time; let him probe thy wounds to the bottom; catch not impatiently at comfort; beg for still deeper humiliation: use every means of increasing thy abhorrence of sin and watch­fulness against it; and it shall not be very long before “he will shed abroad his love in thy heart,” and cause thee “to abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost.” In the meantime reflect that whilst thou art mourning on earth, heaven resounds with joyful acclamations and praises on thy account: wait then and pray, and thou shalt ere long rejoice and praise too, and that for ever.

VI. But some perhaps will say, I have not this work to do now, I repent­ed many years ago. What, art thou still a sinner and hast thou no need to repent! The true Christian can indeed thankfully say, My repentance is effectually begun: but only the saint in glory can truly say, My repentance is finished. The more a true believer knows of God and Christ, and the law and gospel; and the larger his experience is of his own depravity, and of the Lord’s goodness, the more he hates sin; the more he recollects of his former sins, the quicker sense he hath of present sinfulness, and the deeper and purer is his repentance. He rejoices in the Lord with penitent joy, and mourns for sin with sweet and joyful mourning. His humility increases his thankfulness and admiration of the love of Christ, and enhances his consola­tion: for “it is a pleasant thing to be thankful.” But if the thought that thy sins were pardoned, finished thy repentance, and dried up thy tears, thy repentance needs repenting of, and thou art awfully deceived.

Finally, My fellow Christians, let us frequently renew our recollection of former sins, our self-examination, our meditations on those subjects, which first excited our abhorrence of iniquity; especially our meditations on a bleeding Saviour. Let us daily renew our acceptance of Christ, in all his offices, seeking forgiveness of our daily transgressions through his blood; and exercising ourselves to have a conscience void of offence towards God and man. Thus, as true penitents, endeavouring to glorify God, adorn the gospel, and serve our generation, we may hope to live in comfort, die in peace, and have “an entrance ministered to us abundantly, into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

1. It is very observable how often the words, “Every one that exalteth himself shall be abased, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted” are repeated by our Saviour; and how many similar expres­sions are used by his apostles. This infallibly teaches us, that all appearances of religion are fallacious, so long as the heart remains unhumbled. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Some will, perhaps, be disposed to inquire, why I have not adopted the common distinction between *legal* and *evangelical* repentance. As these expressions do not occur in Scripture, every one is at liberty to use them or not; and the distinction did not appear to me sufficiently exact or comprehensive, for my purpose. True repentance has more respect to the law, as transgressed by sin, and justly condemning the sinner, than any false repentance can have. Whilst, on the other hand, men are more frequently se­duced into a dependence on a superficial repentance, by unwarrantable presumptions of mercy, and false apprehensions of evangelical truth, than by slavish regard to the law. *Natural* and *spiritual* repentance seems to me a preferable distinction. By *natural repentance,* Iwould understand every sort of repent­ance of which a mere natural man is capable; by *spiritual repentance,* that which springs from true grace in the heart. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)