

LECTURES

ON

REVIVALS OF RELIGION;

BY

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WITH AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

BY LEONARD WOODS, D. D.

ALSO

AN APPENDIX,

CONSISTING OF LETTERS FROM THE REVEREND DOCTORS ALEXANDER, WAY-
LAND, DANA, MILLER, HYDE, HAWES, M'DOWELL, PORTER, PAYSON,
PROUDFIT, NEILL, MILLEDOLER, DAVIS, LORD, HUMPHREY, DAY,
GREEN, WADDEL, GRIFFIN, AND REV. C. P. McILVAINE.

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LETTER III.

FROM THE REVEREND DANIEL DANA, D. D.

Newburyport, Massachusetts.

Newburyport, March 22, 1832.

REVEREND AND DEAR SIR,

I rejoice that you have been led to preach at large on the subject of "Revivals;" and still more, that the instruction you have given your people, is likely, through the press, to become the common property of the religious public.

The unparalleled mercy with which God has visited, and is still visiting, his American churches, excites our increasing wonder. It should pour a tide of holy gratitude and joy into every heart.

Still we have reason to "rejoice with trembling." Spiritual prosperity, not less perhaps than temporal, has its peculiar dangers. Should those revivals which seem to be over-spreading our land, lose their heavenly character; should they degenerate into mere animal, or enthusiastic, or artificial excitements; they would cease to be blessings. Their progress would be marked with desolation and spiritual death. To preserve them, then, in all their genuine, unsullied purity, should be the first object. This, I know, is your favorite object; and in its pursuit, you have the concurring wishes and prayers of every enlightened friend of God and man in the community.

On this most interesting point, you have been pleased to request some thoughts from me. And though I have little sanguine hope of meeting your expectations, yet as your request has the force of a command, I will offer a few desultory hints.

If all genuine religion is based on *truth*, it follows that every departure from truth, and every admixture of error, in religious instruction, tends to undermine the foundations of piety. Nor can it be denied that even the concealment of truth has a similar general tendency. These remarks are of universal application. But to no subject do they apply so forcibly, as to our protracted meetings. To these scenes multitudes resort to learn more of religion than they ever knew before. Numbers bring with them an

unwonted seriousness and candor. Others are softened on the spot ; and for the first time, begin to hear without prejudice. All are liable to receive impressions which will attend them through life, and accompany them to the eternal world. From the bare statement, this is the time which pre-eminently demands a plain, energetic, undisguised exposition of scripture doctrines. This is the time to pour TRUTH in all its effulgence, and in all its fulness, on the mind. Shall we refuse to these immortal listeners, the gospel ; the pure gospel ; the whole gospel ? This, we assuredly know, is just what they need ; and is all they need. Other things may amuse the fancy ; but this will save the soul. Other things may be more palatable ; but they may be poisonous too. Shall we, in inculcating religion, suppress any thing, either of its humbling doctrines, or its arduous duties, or its costly sacrifices ? Shall we for a moment suspect that any part of our Master's message will be improved by any curtailment, or addition, or modification of our own ?

Does not a disposition prevail, to depart from the simplicity of gospel truth ; to fritter away its substance ; to soften down its harsher lineaments ; and to give it a form and features less offensive to the fastidious taste of the age ? Do not many who value themselves on their orthodoxy, coalesce with latitudinarians in their grand error ; and make reason the final umpire in matters of religion ? Is not a *false philosophy* exercising a most baneful influence on Christian doctrines—repeating, in fact, the old experiment of Procrustes, and stretching or mutilating them into an agreement with its own model ? That between genuine philosophy, and the doctrines of the gospel, there can be no real discrepancy, is perfectly obvious. Both emanate from the same eternal fountain of truth. But the philosophy of the mind, it is truly observed, is yet in its infancy. And no attempt to make an accurate and rigid application of its principles to the doctrines of the gospel, has hitherto succeeded. This, however, proves not that the attempt is utterly impracticable. Some master spirit may yet arise, deeply studied in the human mind, and deeply studied in the Bible ; powerful enough to seize the best truths of philosophy, and to grapple with its errors ; and humble enough to learn every thing anew at the feet of Jesus. Such a spirit might do much to pour light on

the long-gathering darkness of Christian metaphysics, and to reduce the chaos to order. To such a teacher we might listen with safety, and with delight.

While the enterprising spirit of the age is accomplishing such wonders in art, and even in science, numbers seem to anticipate corresponding improvements in theology. But with little reason. If any essential truths are to break out from the Bible in the nineteenth century of Christianity, the Bible has been given in vain. It has failed to accomplish its grand object. We hope, indeed, that many of its great doctrines will be better understood. In other words, we hope that the darkness with which a false learning and a false philosophy have shrouded them, will be dispelled, and they will be *seen by their own light*. Improvements in religious knowledge come in a different way from most other improvements. They are the fruit, not of ambitious toil, or of bold speculation; but of humility, of self-distrust, of calm reflection, of ceaseless inquiry at the Heavenly Oracle, and of fervent prayer to the Father of lights. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of *this* wisdom. To approach the Bible, or any of its sacred truths, without reverence, without a holy, trembling caution, is to be disqualified, not only to *teach*, but even to *learn*. Here, men are ordinarily bold and self-confident in proportion to their ignorance.

Where men of judgment creep, and feel their way,
The positive pronounce without dismay.

How disastrous is it for religion, when men of this stamp become the oracles of the day; teaching what they have not learned; condemning what they have never understood; confident, where a little reflection would teach them to doubt; and breathing their own spirit into their admiring, deluded followers.

A special cause of doctrinal error and corruption is found in that *excitement* which frequently attends revivals of religion; and particularly, lengthened religious meetings. In these cases, the imaginations and feelings of men being powerfully roused, the plain truths of the gospel pall upon their ears, and they demand something more novel, more startling, more overwhelming. The contagion reaches the preacher. His own imagination and feelings are kindled; and he longs to utter something which shall irresistibly

bly seize every heart. In the ardor of the moment, and perhaps with the best intentions, he utters a sentiment which his cool judgment would have condemned, and which the Bible condemns. But it enkindles thought and feeling. It thrills a whole assembly. Thus sanctioned, it flies forth on every wind ; and it remains to trouble the church for ages.

If doctrinal errors are to be deprecated, as hostile to the purity of revivals, errors in experimental and practical religion are still more immediately dangerous and fatal.

In the extraordinary meetings to which we have alluded, the preaching generally assumes the hortatory character. Undoubtedly it ought to embrace powerful and affecting appeals to the conscience, and the heart. But this is not enough. It should abound in instruction respecting the distinguishing nature and evidences of genuine piety. Such instruction, so far from being, as is sometimes supposed, unsuited to the occasion, is eminently appropriate and needful. If men are to be urged to religion with unusual energy, let them know what religion is. If the very circumstances under which they assemble, expose them to mistake mere natural *excitement* or *sympathy* for piety, let the mistake not be cherished, but counteracted. Religion should, indeed, be exhibited in all its beauty and loveliness ; in all its divine and attractive charms. But we may not conceal its spirituality, its difficulties, or its self-denials. We may not depress its high demands, nor narrow its broad requisitions. We cannot speak to sinners too emphatically of their obligation to immediate repentance ; of the guilt and danger of delay ; nor of their encouragement to give themselves to religion ; nor of the absolute certainty that if they truly seek, they shall obtain its blessings. Nor can we employ too much pains to wrest from them their ten thousand excuses for impenitence. Still, we may not suffer them to forget their deep depravity ; their insufficiency ; their dependence on sovereign mercy ; nor the necessity of divine influence to change their hearts. True ; these things are regarded by many, as *over-statements* of gospel doctrine ; points which the Christian preacher is called, not so much to expound and enforce, as to explain away. But the great majority of the Christian church have ever viewed them as simple Bible truths ; and they have considered it as most honorable to the Bible to re-

ceive them in their simplicity, and open their hearts to their influence. Others, too, who cannot but confess that these are plain and prominent points of scripture, are much disquieted as to their *tendency*; and think that, if inculcated at all, they should be inculcated with much caution, and much qualification. But is it not safe to declare the gospel message? Is there any danger like that of concealing or distorting it? If truth *may* be perverted to men's ruin, is not error *necessarily* destructive? If, from the very doctrines which should alarm, and rouse to action, they will draw argument for sloth, or despondence, or presumption, will not the error be voluntary and criminal on their part, and their destruction entirely of their own procuring?

Are there not certain characteristics of the age, which threaten, in a greater or less degree, the purity of religion?

It is eminently an age of *action*. On every subject, in every department of science, and of life, the human mind seems roused to an unwonted energy; an almost unparalleled activity. The religious world has awoken from a long and most lamentable slumber. Not content with barren wishes and prayers for the conversion of the impenitent, and of the heathen world, it puts its faculties to the work. It vigorously employs the appropriate means. This is matter of the liveliest gratitude and joy. Yet even here, there arises danger. If, through multiplied active engagements, ministers or private Christians shall be drawn away from their closets; from communion with their hearts, and their God; their piety will languish and decline. With new converts; with those whose characters and habits are in the forming state, the case is still more critical. They too must prepare for action; vigorous, benevolent, holy action. And this preparation must be made in the closet. It must be the fruit of retirement, of meditation, of self-converse, of prayer. Without these, they may have the form, the features, and apparently the activities, of living Christians; but the informing, animating spirit will be absent. Without these, they may do something to save the souls of others; but too probably, they will lose their own.

This is likewise an age of *display*. Almost every thing new pushes itself into notice, courts the public gaze, and claims the public admiration. But religion, genuine religion, is modest, un-

obtrusive and humble. It seeks not public applause. It is content with the notice and approbation of God. These characteristics constitute not only its beauty, but in some measure, its very essence. A vain, ambitious, popularity-seeking Christian is almost as great a solecism as a profane, or prayerless Christian. Should this spirit once enter our churches, it will sadly mar their beauty, and consume the very vitals of their religion. Let us beware of it in all its forms, and all its approaches. Let us especially, in all the arrangements of our protracted meetings, and in all our treatment of inquirers, and young converts, avoid and discountenance, as much as possible, the pernicious spirit of display.

In adverting to the causes by which religious revivals are corrupted, I intended to have noticed the evil of precipitate admissions of supposed converts into the church. But I have already protracted my remarks beyond my intention; and this topic, as well as some others, must be waived.

In reviewing what I have written, I perceive that the spirit of *animadversion* has been somewhat freely indulged. Yet I humbly hope that nothing has been marked with disapprobation, which the great Head of the church approves. If any thing is to be found on earth, which has much of heaven in it, it is a genuine revival of religion. But in this imperfect state, nothing can pass through human hands entirely unsoiled. It is a delightful thought, that He who loved the church, and gave himself for it, will finally present it to himself, a glorious church, without spot or wrinkle. It is my prevailing hope and belief, that the great things which God has already done for his American Israel, are precursors of still greater things. May He cleanse our Zion "by the spirit of judgment, and by the spirit of burning." And may He "purify the sons of Levi, that they may offer to the Lord an offering in righteousness." May our beloved land, and may the whole earth, soon behold the glory of the Lord, and rejoice in his salvation.

Adieu, my dear Sir. Accept my sincerest wish, that all your efforts to do good, and especially the present, may be crowned with an abundant blessing.

With much esteem and friendship, I am

Your brother in the gospel,

D. DANA.

REV. DOCTOR SPRAGUE.