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LETTER

TO

THE REV. ANSEL D. EDDY,

OF CANANDAIGUA, N. Y.

ON THE NARRATIVE OF THE

LATE REVIVALS OF RELIGION,

IN THE

PRESBYTERY OF GENEVA.

BY EDWARD D. GRIFFIN,
PRESIDENT OF WILLIAMS COLLEGE.

Williamstown:
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1832.

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LETTER.

Williams College Aug. 6, 1832.

REV. AND DEAR SIR,

I have received and attentively read the Narrative of the late Revivals of Religion in the Presbytery of Geneva, drawn up by a Committee of Presbytery, and founded on reports made by the different Sessions in February last. I have not before had leisure to fulfil my promise of sending you some remarks on that Narrative. It is a noble paper, and exhibits, in a most gratifying and instructive manner, the mighty power of God. That central and elevated Presbytery, we are told, was never visited with so great an influence before; an influence extending, with two exceptions, to all the congregations supplied with pastors, and producing a result, in less than a year and a half, of twenty two hundred added to the churches; and the work still in glorious progress in several congregations when the Narrative went to press the last of March.

This is enough to show that powerful revivals are not dependant on the new measures, and that it is unjust to stigmatize as enemies to revivals all who do not fall in with these measures.

It is highly gratifying to see so large and respectable a Presbytery, centrally located in the western part of New York, take so dignified a stand, with a unanimity almost unbroken; and still more to see the blessed fruits of these revivals in sixty or eighty youth studying for the Gospel ministry, and their benignant influence on the cause of temperance and sabbath schools and charitable contributions. The church in Castleton, not yet four years old, and heretofore sustained by the Home Missionary Society, gave last year more than sixty dollars for foreign missions. The church in West Dresden, organized in 1830, an equal sum for the same object. The church in Galen has three Sabbath Schools, a Tract Society, a large Temperance Society, a Bible Society which the last year supplied every destitute family in the town, and has given forty dollars for foreign missions. The church in Penn-Yan has formed "an auxiliary to almost every benevolent society in the land." The church in East Bloomfield gave the last year for different objects more than nine hundred dollars, and the church in Geneva more than forty seven hundred dollars. A society auxiliary to the A B C F M has just sprung up in the Presbytery, which has contributed at once thirty four hundred dollars. In view of these results every friend of revivals may kneel and look up and with a trickling tear thank the Author of all benevolence.

The cautious and prudent and truly evangelical

course which this Presbytery have pursued, is worthy of all praise. They have not adopted the opinion that some of those truths which Paul and Calvin and Watts and Edwards and Brainerd preached, must now be suppressed, or rarely taught, lest they should check revivals. "In all the services," says one, "a special prominence was given to the doctrines of the Gospel." "In no year," says another, "since my connexion with this church, have the distinguishing doctrines of the Gospel been so often exhibited and so much insisted on as during the last year; and the divine blessing has evidently sanctioned this course." Another says of his own congregation, "I am afraid that the sovereign efficacy of divine grace and the reason of its necessity were presented with less frequency and plainness than I now think should have been done." And yet it is testified by others that they were enforced there with great frequency and plainness. The Committee say of the whole Presbytery, "The doctrines which have held a prominent place in the preaching generally, are the plain and humbling doctrines of the orthodox faith.—These have been exhibited, not as matters of controversy or as problems, but as matters of fact and of faith.—The doctrine of divine sovereignty and divine decrees, the doctrine of election and effectual calling, of regeneration by the Holy Spirit,—have been constantly kept in view." On the other hand, one of the Presbytery tells us, "The preaching was designed to urge upon sinners the

duty and the reasonableness of immediate repentance and the renunciation of every self-justifying excuse." Another says, "The means which have been owned and blessed of God in promoting this work, have been—the exhibition of divine truth, enforcing the sinner's obligation immediately to submit to God, keeping constantly in view the necessity of the Spirit's influences, and the ability and the obligation of the sinner to yield to them and to choose without delay the Lord Jesus as his God and Saviour."

This is as it should be. Though the doctrines of sovereignty, election, and dependance may be disproportionately urged, yet I have found them, in the revivals of forty years, of great efficacy in causing the sinner to die to all hope from himself and casting him wholly upon God. His obligations to immediate repentance ought certainly to be urged with the most imperious decision; but to confine the preaching to this and neglect the other doctrines, is to turn the whole into declamation and to encourage that destructive self-dependance which it ought to be our constant labour to oppose. It is in short withholding an essential part of that body of truth which unitedly is "the sword of the Spirit."

That sword is divine truth addressed to the understanding and conscience, and not mere devices to work on the imagination and passions. As far as divine truth, in all its affecting attitudes and relations, is calculated to move the passions, let them

be moved. I would not confine myself to cold speculations for fear of moving the passions. They were made to be moved by divine truth. But mere tricks which have no other object than to move the passions, and convey no light at all, are to be avoided as producing nothing but an animal religion which will fill the Church with unsanctified members, delude millions to death, and bring forward multitudes of unqualified pastors to turn away the people from the truth. A preacher who feels authorized to address dry bones because God has commanded him, and who relies for success on nothing but the sovereign power of God, will be contented to present truth, in all its nakedness and pungency, to the understanding and conscience, and there leave it, while he retires to pray. But he who depends on no ally,—who feels that he must accomplish the work alone,—at least that motives must do the whole,—will not stop here. If sinners do not submit at once, he will go in among their passions, and seize their imagination, and work upon their animal spirits, by every art in his power, until perhaps he has driven his audience, not to Christ, but to the wildest excesses. I am glad therefore to hear that in your Presbytery, with scarcely an exception, there is no calling upon sinners to rise up in public assemblies, either to desire prayers or to proclaim their determination to submit at once. Besides the power which these measures have over the imagination and passions, (and which by management may be indefi-

nately increased,) they promote a boldness and forwardness which deform religion, give an injurious warp to the character, (especially of young females,) and greatly encourage false hopes. If more show is made and greater numbers are counted, it is no proof that more are prepared for heaven.

As might have been expected, among you have appeared few or no disorders. "All the services," says one, "have been characterized by perfect order and regularity, both as to time and manner. No public meetings have been continued after 9 o'clock in the evening." "The meetings," says another, "were characterized by great stillness and solemnity." "No irregularities," says a third, "were witnessed, no crying out in public worship, no boisterous expressions of joy, no audible sighing or groaning." The Committee say of the whole Presbytery, "The religious services generally have been orderly, still, and solemn; never interrupted by loud and boisterous expressions, either of grief or joy; never rendered offensive to the ear of refinement by low allusions or coarse and vulgar expressions, nor painful to the ear of piety by an irreverent and affected familiarity with sacred things. No quaint and questionable expedients have been resorted to for the purpose of effect; no audible praying of females in promiscuous assemblies."

While passionate and disorderly revivals produce fatal delusions without number, your Presbytery have guarded with most commendable cau-

tion against false hopes. This they have done in three ways. First, by substituting knowledge for high excitement. "Many," says one, "whose hope at first was strong and sanguine, were, on being instructed in the nature and evidence of a change of heart, induced to relinquish their hope entirely, and have since given conclusive evidence that it was at first but a delusion. This course of instruction and personal examination has in all cases been previous to their presenting themselves for admission to the church." Secondly, by inuring the subjects of the work to reserve and humility, instead of boldness and forwardness and rashness, which serve to hurry others into a passionate, showy, headlong delusion. Their exertions, we are told, were "generally in a way of individual influence. This influence was exerted, not in the public meeting, but in the private interview. The young converts did not become exhorters, nor arrogate to themselves the prerogatives of teachers." Thirdly, by holding them off for a considerable time from a profession. Instead of urging them forward in a week, under all the excitements of the recent change, the churches have kept them back "in most cases for two or three months." I wish it had been said, for three months as a settled rule.

As a consequence of all this caution, we are told by more than one, the subjects of the work wear well.

In these matters much depends on using lan-

guage according to truth and calling things by their right names. In some places it has become common to speak of conversions with a confidence which hides the deceitfulness of the heart and assumes that every apparent change is real. They say, Such a man was converted on such a day; so many were converted at such a meeting. In this Narrative a more cautious language for the most part is used. I wish it had been uniform. In a still more important respect your language is highly exemplary. With you there are no *anxious meetings* or *anxious rooms* or *anxious seats*. This is not a point of mere grammatical criticism; it involves the honour of revivals and the salvation of men. Let a low and barbarous cant be generally connected with revivals, and you drive men of learning and taste from them and plunge them in perdition. This slang of *anxious meetings* and the like, is an unwarrantable departure from the analogy of the language. In no other case do we denominate a meeting from the internal feelings of its members; (we do not say a repenting meeting, or a believing meeting, or a rejoicing meeting;) nor do we name a meeting even from the outward marks of its members; (we do not say a white meeting, or a handsome meeting, or a homely meeting;) but we take the appellation from the business done at the meeting. Thus we say a prayer meeting, a conference meeting, a singing meeting, a missionary meeting. And in the present case we ought to say an *inquiry* meeting; not

an *inquiring* meeting; that is like *praying* meeting, *conferring* meeting. We are *obliged* to say *singing* meeting, because we have no other word to employ.

It is a subject of heartfelt congratulation that your distinguished Presbytery do not give up their dependance on God for holiness and cast themselves on an arm of flesh. Christians, says one of them, “manifested a deep sense of their dependance and unworthiness. In the early stages of the work, and while the church seemed relying on an arm of flesh, a desire was expressed by some to call in the aid of some itinerant evangelist, and that a course of measures might be introduced which had been said to have been employed with success in other places. But the people of God were soon brought to see and to feel that in God alone was their hope; and no wish was afterwards expressed for any other means than the means of God’s own appointment, nor any other aid than the aid of the Holy Spirit.” Says another, “There was indeed much *conversation* about a revival previous to this, and a solicitude was often expressed to call in such foreign aid as some imagined would secure the desired result. At one period the solicitude on this subject was considerable: but in all this it could be distinctly seen that there was little or nothing of that deep self abasement, that humility and dependance upon God alone, which are ordinarily the first indications of a work of grace. They did not go directly to the throne of God, and

with the Psalmist exclaim, ‘Wilt *thou* not revive us again that thy people may rejoice in *thee*?’ but there was manifestly an unwarrantable reliance upon an arm of flesh. It was going ‘down to Egypt for help, staying upon horses and trusting in chariots,’ instead of looking ‘to the Holy One of Israel and trusting in the Lord.’ And it was not until all expectations of this description were cut off, and the church brought to realize that all their strength was in God, and all their hope was in his mercy, that the work of divine grace actually commenced.”

In the same spirit the Committee say, “In some instances the labour of itinerants was employed, but, (with few exceptions,) with no very obvious success. Seldom perhaps has the case been known in which God has so obviously honoured the means of his own appointment, in distinction from those of human invention, and the labours of a stated ministry, in distinction from those of itinerant evangelists.” In “a few” of the churches the new measures were attempted. “These churches however were, with perhaps one exception, without pastors, and the innovations” were “introduced by itinerant preachers who do not belong to this Presbytery. But few if any of these innovations are now regarded as improvements; and facts have shown that generally, if not universally, the revivals have been the most powerful, of the longest continuance, and most desirable in their results, in those places where there has been the

least departure from the ordinary methods of conducting revivals in the Presbyterian Church." In one congregation where the new measures were introduced, "since the revival the state of religion —has been on the decline, and there is much to be deplored in the present state of things."

I fear this will be the effect of those measures in every place where ignorance prevails. I have long hesitated to express this opinion lest I should be found fighting against God. But events have fixed my judgment, and pressed me with the obligation to declare it openly, earnestly, and continually. My daily prayer is that I may not feel uncharitably towards my brethren who differ from me. I think I do not : and certainly nothing shall extort from me railing or recriminating language ; for there is no better evidence of a bad cause than that it is supported by an unchristian and unmannerly style. I am,

Dear Sir,

With sincere regard,

Your friend and brother.

E. D. GRIFFIN.

Rev. ANSEL D. EDDY.

