

# LECTURES

ON

## REVIVALS OF RELIGION;

BY

WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

PASTOR OF THE SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN ALBANY:

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 X.

FROM THE REVEREND ALEXANDER PROUDFIT, D. D.

Pastor of an Associate Reformed church in Salem, New-York.

*Salem, April 4, 1832.*

MY ESTEEMED FRIEND,

I received your letter, and agreeably to your request, venture to communicate my views on the nature of revivals of religion—a subject which so deeply involves the peace and prosperity of the American churches.

This is the thirty-eighth year of my ministerial labors in Salem. We have uniformly been in the habit of dispensing the ordinance of the Supper four times in the year, and so far as I recollect, have never had a sacramental occasion without some accession to our numbers. But during this long period we have enjoyed, at different intervals, what would now be pronounced “a revival of religion.” The refreshing influences of divine grace descended silently and softly upon the heritage of the Lord, like the showers of spring after the dreariness and barrenness of winter. A genial warmth appeared to pervade the whole church, to the joy of the generation of the righteous, and at the same time, multitudes were added to the Lord by an external profession of his name. One of these occasions occurred in the year 1796, when a very unusual influence apparently accompanied the outward dispensation of the word, sealing it upon the souls both of sinners and saints. A similar season occurred about six years afterwards; and another and still more memorable visitation of the Spirit was enjoyed in the year 1815. During all these seasons of enlargement to myself, and of spiritual joy to the children of adoption, under my immediate care, and of the “espousals of others to Jesus as their husband,” no extra efforts were used; no brethren from other towns were called in to our aid, but the work advanced silently and regularly, promoted exclusively under the divine blessing by the ordinary administration of ordinances, private and public. Yet, during the whole course of my ministry, I have never been favored with seasons more delightful in their recollection; none the results of which I

anticipate with more joy in that day when the final account of my stewardship will be required. Contemplated in a moral or spiritual light, the work on those occasions might be compared to that gradual yet perceptible reanimation, which pervades the vegetable world amidst the vernal showers, and the refreshing influences of the returning sun, when the face of nature is clothed with fresh verdure, and the trees which had stood barren, are adorned with blossoms and fruit. These might emphatically be called "times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord;" and yet I know of no particular cause, except on the last occasion, the revival of the Lord's work appeared to come as an answer to extraordinary importunity in prayer. Few churches during this period, perhaps, have been more honored for raising up young men to adorn the ministerial office;—men full of the "Holy Ghost and of faith," who now appear as "burning and shining lights" in various parts of our country. On one occasion in the autumn of 1815, six youths took their seats together at the sacramental table, who are now exercising the ministry of reconciliation, and some of them with more than ordinary success. These facts I feel constrained particularly to notice, for the purpose of correcting that novel and prevailing opinion, that religion cannot flourish without some special and unusual effort.

In the year 1824, a revival of a different character from those I have already mentioned, appeared. Several persons residing in different parts of our town, were suddenly and almost simultaneously struck with deep convictions of sin. This arrested the attention of the friends of religion; meetings for prayer and conference were held almost every day in the week, and generally crowded to overflowing. These meetings were usually attended by the Rev. Mr. Tomb or myself, with private members of the church, who assisted in the religious services: ministers and private Christians from other towns were called in, and afforded their aid. So far as I recollect, there was rarely any instance of disorder, although I have seen multitudes melted in tears, and during the year great numbers were added to the fellowship of the two churches.

In May 1831, during my absence, a protracted meeting, as it is generally termed, was held in Mr. Tomb's society, which was at-

tended by a variety of ministers from different parts of the country. A great excitement was produced in almost every part of the town, which has resulted in the addition of a large number to our churches.

With respect to the fruits of these revivals, on which you desire information, I have almost uniformly remarked that where the subjects had been early and competently instructed, the impressions have been permanent: those of this character who assumed the profession of religion have been enabled to persevere; but in other instances the excitement has too often been transient as “the morning cloud and the early dew:” the latter class, like those in the parable of the sower, I have frequently seen receive the word with joy, but not having root in themselves, endured for a time, and afterwards returned to the world. From these facts, founded on long observation, I have been particularly impressed with the importance of early instruction. I feel more strongly attached to *the good old way* trodden by the venerable fathers of the Reformation in Scotland, and Holland, and England, and afterwards by our Pilgrim fathers, who brought the “light of immortality and life” to our western wilderness. With them the instruction of youth in the elementary doctrines of religion, by catechising and family visitation, constituted an important part of ministerial labor. It cannot be uninteresting to your readers, nor foreign from the nature of your publication, to incorporate the sentiments of the revered Flavel, in a sermon which he preached to the Puritans after their restoration in 1688. “Prudence,” he remarks, “will direct us to lay a good foundation among our people by catechising, and instructing them in the principles of Christianity, without which we labor in vain. Unless we have a knowing people, we are not like to have a gracious people. All our excellent sermons will be dashed on the rock of their ignorance. You can never fall on a better way for securing success to your labors, than the fruitful way of catechising. What age of the church has produced more lively and steadfast professors than the first ages; and then this duty most eminently flourished in the church. Clemens, Optatus, Austin, Ambrose and Basil, were catechists.” Such were the sentiments of this distinguished servant of Christ, delivered on a most memorable occasion, and before an assembly of divines little

inferior to any that ever adorned our world. With these observations of Flavel in *Old*, let us compare those of Doctor Mather, a character equally eminent in *New*, England—"That catechising is an ordinance of God few will doubt, when they consider that apostles thus laid the foundation of religion by feeding babes with milk, teaching them in this manner the first principles of the oracles of God. This hath therefore been a constant practice in the church, and in the first ages of Christianity they had a particular person appropriated to this exercise. All well governed churches have still maintained this practice, knowing the necessity of it for youth, to inform them in the principles of that religion into which they were baptized, and for the establishment of the more aged." With these sentiments of the Puritans in the *old* and *new* world, correspond the following remarks of the Presbyterians in Scotland, as expressed in a preface to the Shorter Catechism: "It has been acknowledged in all ages that the catechetical way of instruction is the most speedy and successful method of conveying the knowledge of divine things: the truths of God are thus made level to the weakest capacity, being separately proposed with plain and distinct answers to each."

We cannot appreciate too highly the establishment of sabbath schools and bible classes. They may be considered as constituting some of the brightest features of our distinguished age, and forming a new era in the religious world. Through the instrumentality of the former, many have been raised from the lowest degradation, mental and moral, who are now ornaments to the church; and by means of the latter the seed has been sown in ten thousand youthful hearts, which will spring up to life eternal: yet in connexion with these I wish to see revived that system of catechetical instruction, which prevailed so extensively among your ancestors in England, and mine in Scotland. I wish to see means every where in operation which shall secure to the juvenile mind *profound* instruction in the doctrines of religion. No period since the Apostolic has been adorned with a generation of professors more intelligent and stedfast, than during the administrations of Owen, and Flavel, and Baxter, and Boston, and the Erskines; and at that time, catechising in the week was considered scarcely less essential to the "fulfilment of the ministry," than preaching on the sabbath.

A comparison of those who composed the ranks of the spiritual soldiery in their day, with those who compose them in the present, would certainly, in many respects, be much to our disadvantage. Nevertheless, there are many of our modern converts doubting even the piety of some of those illustrious men, although during their lives they shed around them the lustre of every Christian grace, and died in the triumphs of faith, and some of them martyrs to the truth. With mingled emotions of surprise and sorrow, I have heard some in the ministry who claim to be distinguished for zeal and spirituality, affecting to represent as lifeless and even graceless, many of the clergy of that age, who occupied their talents in the illustration of divine truth, and “preached the gospel with the Holy Ghost sent down from Heaven,” and clad in the panoply of God, drove the enemy from the field. I do not pretend that these men were perfect, or that the progress of things in coming ages might not require that with their studious habits there should be joined an increased degree of active enterprise; but I do say that if those who regard them so lightly would consent to stand up with them in a comparison as it respects solid attainments in literature and theology, and holy heroism in their Master’s cause, it would be like bringing the shrub beside the cedar, or the infant beside the full grown man.

With respect to *extra* or *protracted* meetings, which are becoming so common in our country, I entertain no doubt that they have been blessed for the conversion of souls to the Saviour. Many, I believe, are sealed on these occasions to the day of redemption, and as gems will adorn forever the Mediatorial crown of our Master; yet I think, considering the extent to which they are now multiplied, there are connected with them serious and obvious disadvantages. They serve too often to derange the regular order of the church; to cherish a gossiping disposition on the part of professors, and render them dissatisfied with the ordinances of grace, unless dispensed in an extraordinary manner. They interfere with those duties which ministers owe to their immediate charge; they leave them little time for digesting their discourses in private, that they may afterwards give to every man a portion of meat in due season;—little leisure for the improvement of their ministerial gifts, by reading and reflection, and conversation; and what-

ever diverts the attention of the spiritual steward from a course of study, although it may promise immediate advantage, must, in the issue, militate essentially against the interests of religion. There is no injunction of the great Apostle more imperative than the following:—"Give attendance to reading; neglect not the gift that is in thee; give thyself wholly to them, that thy profiting may appear unto all." Without suitable preparation in the week, no uninspired man ever did, or can preach the gospel for any considerable time to the same people, either with acceptance or success; and he cannot make this preparation without suitable opportunity. Did he possess the intellectual resources of an angel, they must be exhausted by continual expenditure, unless they are replenished by painful and laborious application to study. The present, perhaps, more than almost any preceding age, calls for active exertion on the part of the clergy. Our Tract, and Missionary, and Bible and other kindred societies are probably the means by which the gospel is universally to be diffused, and the nations converted to the Saviour; and in the support of these and every other benevolent enterprize, the ministers of religion ought always to appear prominent. It is, however, incumbent upon us to persevere, as much as possible, in habits of study, and thus improve those spiritual gifts which are requisite for the profitable discharge of our ministry.

But the great, shall I say the fatal error in the management of revivals, is the hasty admission of the subjects to the privileges of the church. Convictions, we have reason to apprehend, are often mistaken for conversion;—a momentary impulse for "the renewing of the Holy Ghost," without which no man can see the Lord. Under the influence of this excitement, application is made for the seals of the covenant; and when an unregenerate man obtains a name in the visible church, his condition may be considered as almost desperate: he feels entrenched in his profession, and without a moral miracle, is invulnerable: there is more hope of reaching with the arrow of conviction, the conscience of the "harlot or the publican," than the conscience of the formal professor. There is an analogy in all the works of Jehovah, and the *incorruptible* seed, like the *natural*, requires time to vegetate in the soil, before it can be expected to spring up, and present "the blade and the ear."



Having taken this deliberate survey of the subject presented for consideration, and noted some points of difference between the past and the present, I am constrained to express my conviction, that however much we have to be grateful for in the present state of the church, there is much that needs to be corrected ; and that even *pure* revivals of religion would be far more prevalent, if we were willing, in some respects at least, to walk more closely in the footsteps of our revered fathers. Let the true doctrines of the gospel be held up with great prominence ; and let the minds of the young, by catechetical instruction and private visitation, be imbued with the knowledge of God's word ; and our spiritual heritage, under the dews of divine grace, would appear " fair as Eden," and the trees of righteousness would present in due season their fragrant blossoms and ripening fruits. But when I see the wanton, visionary speculations indulged by some, to the neglect of a religion founded on the Bible, and the open dereliction and even renunciation of their standards by others, who had solemnly subscribed and sworn to defend them ; when I see these appalling facts, I cannot help trembling for the Ark. May the God of our fathers disappoint our fears, and purify our American Zion, and fill the earth with his glory.

Yours in the Saviour's love,

ALEXANDER PROUDFIT.

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