THE REVIVAL AND ITS LESSONS: A COLLECTION OF FUGITIVE PAPERS HAVING REFERENCE TO THE GREAT AWAKENING, 1858

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JAMES W. ALEXANDER

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PREFACE.

The short papers here for the first time gathered, had a certain measure of acceptance, less from their own merit, than from their having been struck off during the prevalence of an unusual interest in divine things. For the most part they were penned in the intervals of a hurried life, with the hope that scriptural instruction of the simplest kind might gain a hearing, at a time when every one's attention was drawn to the work of God in the land.

The occasion may be fitly seized for a brief retrospect of the scenes through which we have been led, and which, to a certain extent, surround us still; for we would fain speak of this Revival of Religion, not as past, but as present.

The greatest commercial alarm which our country ever experienced took place in the summer and autumn of the year 1857. It is unnecessary to rehearse what is imprinted on the hearts of thousands, or to open wounds which are still bleeding. Besides the great numbers who were utterly ruined, there were ten times as many whose earthly destinies seemed to be in libration. If we were to look no further than to the wear and tear of mind and brain, caused by pecuniary apprehensions and troubles in business, such as drove some to despair and madness, the evil could not be reckoned at the rate of millions of gold and silver.

The writer returned to his native country after a short absence, to find as it were a pall of mourning over every house. Visitations of this kind—the remark is common concerning pestilence—often produce a hardening effect. In the present instance, it pleased God, in his marvellous loving-kindness, by the ploughshare of his judgments to furrow the ground for precious seed of salvation, and to make distresses touching worldly estate to awaken desire for durable riches and righteousness. Out of the eater came forth meat and out of the strong came forth sweetness. From the very heart of these trials emerged spiritual yearnings, thirstings, and supplications after the fountain of living waters. We can not always trace the sequence of events, but it is certain that the meetings for prayer, which noted the dawn of this great Revival, had their beginning while we were still amidst the throes of our commercial distress.

It is believed that the first of those daily prayer-meetings which have now become general, was held on the twenty-third day of September, in the year just named. The place thus honored was the Consistory-room of the North Dutch Church at the corner of William and Fulton streets. The simple pious thought of Jeremiah Lanphier, and a few like-minded servants of God, was to gather a handful of business men, at the hour of noon, to confer, to read the Word, to sing, and to cry unto God for the outpouring of his Holy Spirit. But Revival was already begun. God had already poured out the Spirit of grace and of supplications. We doubt not there was a simultaneous effusion, on other

groups and in other places. Prayers long treasured up were beginning to receive copious answer; prayers, of which some, we have thought, may have been offered by those venerable ministers of Holland, whose portraitures still adorn the walls of the Consistory-room. It has been questioned who first conceived the project of these meetings. The problem is unprofitable; human plans looked forward to no such results; let God have the glory!

It is not the place for a history, nor shall any thing of the kind be now attempted.* Suffice it to say, this meeting so grew in numbers and interest as to demand increase of accommodation. Daily prayer-meetings had not been altogether unknown, during periods of unusual awakening; but here was a large congregation of worshippers, almost all men of business, near the very centre of trade, day after day, and—as the event has proved—without abatement for a twelve-month. The great attraction was Prayer. The great business was intercession. This, as springing from the "love of the Spirit" seems especially pleasing to God, who answers us more signally when we seek the good of others. As the meeting went on, solicitude for the conversion of sinners unto God became more apparent. Requests bearing this character were greatly multiplied. From curiosity, from inward anguish, from vague alarm, from the mingled motives in which religious concern has its beginnings, numbers of worldly visitors entered the doors. Conversion after

* Ample histories of the Revival may be expected from the competent pens of the Rev. Dr. Prime and the Rev. Dr. Chambers.