

**CONVERSION, WHAT IT
IS NOT, AND WHAT IT IS,
A SERMON ON REVIVALS**

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Conversion, what it is not, and what it is, a sermon on revivals by O. T. Dobbin

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A SERMON ON REVIVALS,

Delivered in the Parish Church of Ballivor,

ON SUNDAY, AUGUST 7TH, 1859:

BY

THE REV. O. T. DOBBIN, LL.D. AND B.D.

INCUMBENT OF KILLOONSHIGAN.

WITH A

LETTER TO HIS EXCELLENCY THE EARL OF CARLISLE,

LORD LIEUTENANT OF IRELAND.

" See the regenerating dawn arise!
Return, ye ransom'd, to your promis'd home!
Feet, that are baseborn on the mountain, come!"

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1859.

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HIS EXCELLENCY THE EARL OF CARLISLE

MY LORD,

Having known for years your Lordship's regard for evangelical religion, I could not suppose that so remarkable a phenomenon as that in the province of Ulster, called a Revival, could have escaped your observation, even had not your hint thrown out at a recent meeting of the Royal Agricultural Society for Ireland made it certain that it had not. The phenomenon to which I refer must have attracted the thoughtful attention of every lover of his kind ; and won his approval, to the same degree in which it has been attended by an improvement in the habits of the people. Spectators of all classes vouch for a great change in the demeanour of society ; that swearing has been supplanted by praise, drunkenness by sobriety ; that the Bible is revered, and the use of prayer prevails ; while party demonstrations (as on the late Twelfth of July) have been superseded out of deference to the law of charity. These are results of the reported Revival over which the Christian

must rejoice, springing, as they have done, in some quarters at least, out of a deepening sense of religious responsibility.

But as nothing is perfect on earth, it has so happened that partly the agents and partly the subjects of this wide-spreading excitement have imported into it more or less of human alloy, making what is unquestionably divine in one of its aspects less divine than it would otherwise be. It is the part therefore of kindness, as it is of "the wisdom which is from above," to endeavour to discriminate between what is essential and what is accidental in this movement, and to remove unscriptural accretions from a work which these tend to discredit with all sober-minded persons. That the dross may disappear, and the pure ore of spiritual conversion remain, is the object of this address, as far as the humble ability of the writer can accomplish it, and as wide as his narrow influence may extend. He ventures to believe that in the following positions your Lordship will be found to yield your unhesitating acquiescence :—

In the first place, That that religious experience, which is called Conversion, is not convulsion or spasm, syncope or deliquium, cries of distress and copious tears, although by some persons these are identified with it, or considered essential to it.

Secondly, That conversion is not a mere intellectual apprehension of truth, however vivid and fresh it may prove in an individual's experience.

Thirdly, That it is not a punctilious attendance on sacraments, prayer-meetings, and other means of grace, formerly neglected, but now earnestly observed.

Fourthly, That neither are fluent gifts of prayer or exhortation to be assumed as conclusive proof of genuine conversion, although these have been boasted of as characterizing the recent converts.

Nor, fifthly, and finally, can a newly-awakened sectarian zeal—concern for a church rather than for catholic Christianity—be deemed convincing evidence that a man has received from on high the unction of the Holy Ghost. If the Revival scheme be worked with a view to aggrandise a particular sect, more than to win sinners to Christ, it must fail of attaining its highest end ; for a person may be an ardent Episcopalian, Presbyterian, or Methodist, and yet be a very unworthy disciple of our Lord. The conduct of those zealots, who in old time would compass sea and land to make one proselyte, is not commended by the Redeemer of mankind to Christian imitation.

If I have succeeded so far in securing your Lordship's acquiescence in what CONVERSION IS NOT, may I hope you will follow with like approval my attempted exposition in the following sermon of what true CONVERSION IS. That sermon has derived its more immediate suggestion from the letter of the venerable Bishop of Meath to his clergy, which is subjoined, and which is as frank as his disposition, while at the same time as cautious as his years

and ripe experience would naturally enjoin it to be. Of his Lordship's hesitations as well as of his hopes, we partake in regard to periodical Revivals. We look upon their machinery with more or less distrust on the two grounds, first, that they tend to disparage the ordinary means of religious edification, and lead the community to rely on the Revival season and minister, for the incentives to conversion, rather than on their own pastors and stated ordinances; our second ground is, that persons may be induced to look for conversions in sympathizing multitudes, instead of feeling the duty of instant personal submission to Christ, entirely regardless of the procedure of others.—Joshua, xxiv. 15. These are evils which we fear will develop themselves in the course of the movement, however little we may feel disposed to question the assurance that it has done a certain amount of good already, and may with God's blessing do much more. In making these observations, our design has been to point out the sides from which mischief may be apprehended, that as wisely as possible the hand of Christian faithfulness may be applied to the task of eliminating the evil, and guarding and establishing the good.

A forecasting prudence, moreover, bids us look at the future which is to follow this movement, so that we cannot but ask, what will be the spiritual condition of the professed converts a year hence—an arid waste, or a field that the Lord hath blessed? We view this aspect

of the matter with lively apprehension, because the stability of the catechumens will depend much upon the means whereby they have been made the subjects of religious impression. When very young persons, barely in their teens, who have been "struck," and on their own report converted, become exhorters, detailers of their own experience, and comforters of others, we must confess that we feel considerable uneasiness for the after well-being of such neophytes.—1 Tim. iii. 6. They may become the comfort of their pastors, and an honour to revealed religion; but they may also prove thorns in the side of their spiritual guides, and the promise of their budding goodness may dissipate like the morning cloud and the early dew.

Be the result of the present movement what it may, neither issue can more than remotely affect your Lordship in your exalted position, or myself in my obscure one; nevertheless, no friend of Zion can contemplate an unfavourable result without deep concern. The devout Jewish harper's declaration of loyalty to his mother city: "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning!"—must find an echo in every believer's heart. These words—that feeling—will more than justify my launching this present venture of caveat and commendation, of doubts and beliefs, of hopes and fears on the agitated sea of a Revival movement. May a merciful JEHOVAH pardon the imperfections of His ser-