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Andrew Reed and James Matheson

Excerpt

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## NARRATIVE,

*&c. &c.*

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### LETTER XXIX.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

I HAVE now disposed of all that I have to communicate in the form of narration. In this portion of the report it has been no part of my intention to exhaust my notes or my memory; but to limit myself in subject, and in detail, to those statements which, as they were most interesting to myself, I might hope would be most acceptable to you. There are some subjects which have been glanced at, and partially illustrated in the course of the narrative, which you will, perhaps, consider as worthy of further notice. These subjects, to avoid unsuitable digression, and to give them the attention which their high importance demands, I have reserved

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for separate consideration. Let me hope that your interest is so far awakened that you will not be the less inclined to follow, because the subject assumes a graver and more settled aspect.

I can readily suppose, that, on turning your thoughts in this direction, your first inquiries would be anxiously connected with that great religious phenomenon of this country—the Revivals; and it is, therefore, to these I would, in the first instance, direct my remarks. It was a frequent lamentation that we were not making our visit in the time of a general revival; but, while it would have been a source of great personal pleasure to have seen and felt more of the presence of religious influence, I think we could hardly have been placed in more favourable circumstances than we were, for the purposes of candid and calm observation. One of the most remarkable and extensive revivals ever known had passed over this people; it was sufficiently remote to mark the reaction which might attend it; and it was sufficiently near, to be assured of its character and its history. My notices, though not wholly, will be mostly governed by either a silent or expressed reference to it.

I believe it is now well understood that the term Revival has become conventional, and that it describes the fact, that within a limited and comparatively short period, a church is greatly renovated in pious feeling, and a considerable accession is made to it from the classes of the

formal and ungodly. Usually there is a previous state of spiritual depression amongst the religious people; and of irreligion and increasing wickedness in the neighbourhood. The minister, perhaps, and some few Christians, in the recollection of better days, lay it to heart. They converse of it; they agree to submit it to prayer; they influence others; other means are adopted; and in proportion to the diligent and wise use of just and scriptural methods, is the blessing.

I feel that these simple remarks, without designing it, have nearly disposed of what has been deemed the mysteriousness of this subject; but I must endeavour to place it in other lights, and surround it with more exact information. You are ready to ask, how it happens, if true religion is to advance, that it advances in this particular form? My reply is twofold; first, that they expect it, and, secondly, that they labour for it, in this form.

First, *They expect it.* All who have some acquaintance with human nature, will easily perceive how greatly this must contribute to the end. Man, under religious influence, is still a free agent, and the influence that governs him takes its form from the current through which it flows. Suppose two persons to be equally earnest for their salvation, and the one to have become so under the ministry of Whitefield, and the other under that of Wesley. The likelihood is, that the disciple of Wesley would put out with

his conversion some physical expressions, because Wesley made them a test of conversion; while the disciple of Whitefield would show no such signs, because they were not demanded.

These expectations are created partly by habit, and partly by circumstances. Their habits are entirely on this side. They have not to acquire a taste for revivals; their difficulty would be to destroy it. They are mostly the children of revivals; their churches have been mostly raised or nourished in revivals; their whole history, and that of their country, is greatly the history of revivals. Their seasons of revival are only a variation on the approved and constant practice of their pilgrim fathers. They had, if Presbyterians, their four-day sacraments, which were protracted meetings; and, if Puritans, their solemn seasons of fasting and prayer, which were usually, in the highest sense, periods of revival. While, therefore, a revival, exactly after their type, would be deemed a novelty in a church with us; with them, a church that knew no revival would be the exception from the rule. Custom, then, which is second nature, feeds their expectation.

Then, their circumstances are favourable to these expectations; and in several ways. Sympathy is no inconsiderable agent in a revival; and sympathy has freer play with them than with most. They have fewer lines of distinction in society; and those few are much fainter; so

that there is far less difficulty in coming together. And even the distinctions which do exist, are often deemed invidious and hateful; so that those who are, by any circumstance, distinguished, are glad of an occasion to place themselves on a common footing. In consequence, the churches and the classes which compose them, have more association. What is done in one is quickly known to all; and the report of a revival at New York will vibrate, till it reaches Cincinnati; and the churches there, true to the fellow-feeling, will desire to possess its counterpart.

Especially, the circumstances of the people are those of uniform and great emergency. With a population advancing at the rate of one thousand a day, and a large part of this increase of unpromising character, the church would soon be overwhelmed, if she did not make some extraordinary efforts for her proportionate advancement. Then, the great passion of this people, in these buoyant and progressive circumstances, is hope; you might sooner destroy thought and action than depress them. But when this hope is found in alliance with religious character, it becomes christian hope; and animates the christian community as it does the commercial community, to high endeavour and irrepressible exertion.

This conducts me to the remaining portion of the explanation, which is, that *they labour* for

the revivals they expect. As far as I could learn, this is uniformly the case. I know of no individual who would expect a revival independent of means; and I know of no church which has enjoyed a revival without the use of means. The means may be proximate or remote, more or less apparent, but always they do exist. Undoubtedly the most delightful change might happen, by a special communication of grace, without the intervention of any means; but I am now speaking only to the fact; and after carefully obtaining extensive information on the subject, I am prepared to say, that I know of no case in which means have not been employed.

There were, indeed, some cases which were reported to me before I visited the country, and some, also, while there, that were spoken of as unconnected with all means to the end. But I am now satisfied that the parties making such statements had too limited conceptions of the order of means; and, led away by the natural love of the marvellous, reported things to have happened without an instrumentality, when, in truth, it was only an instrumentality which they were too short-sighted to discern. It has been represented, for instance, that some revivals have begun quite suddenly, and before any means had been adopted to the end; and even when existing means were unfavourable. That, in some cases, even the minister has been taken by

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## REVIVALS.

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surprise; and that a revival has sprung up when the whole design of his frigid discourse was to keep it down. But on looking into these cases, it is found that less visible, though not less potent, means have worked to the issue. In a church so influenced, there has, perhaps, been a salutary sense of its depressed state resting upon it, and a desire for change; or there has been a striking revival in a neighbouring town, which has awakened expectation to the event; or the papers, which they read in abundance, may have reported revivals at a distance, and thus have impressed some with desire and prayer for the like advantages. And in the instance of the good minister, who was labouring to cool down his people, is it not evidence that he thought them predisposed to catch at the flame; and if this was their state, is it difficult for any one, who is conversant with the human heart, to perceive that the course he took was the very means to bring on an explosion?

These means, then, which imply a preparedness of mind, are always acting, with more or less force, on this people; and they are of the first consideration. They place them, in regard to the more ostensible means, in the relation of conductors to the electric fire; while, without this readiness for excitement, the ordinary means might be used and repelled. Frequently it has happened, and does happen, therefore, that the mere notice, that a revival has occurred

in the vicinity, or that a revival preacher is about to visit the town, supervenes a revival on the one part, and a hostile combination to resist it on the other.

These observations may dispose of what is anomalous. But the general rule is, that, with whatever causation Divine influence may be, at first, connected, an approved revival advances in the regular use of regular means; and that its advancement is mostly in proportion to the discreet, humble, and persevering use of those means. You will expect that I should glance at them.

1. I would name *the preaching of the gospel with earnestness and fidelity*. It is generally admitted, that the momentous truths which concern our salvation are made very prominent in these periods of extraordinary effort; and that on this circumstance the soundness of a revival greatly depends. The sovereignty of God; his righteousness, in condemning the world for sin; and his free election of any to eternal life. The holiness, the spirituality, and the inflexibility of the moral law; the entire alienation of the heart from God; the complete obligation of the sinner, as a moral agent, to repent and do all that God requires, without delay; his voluntary and inexcusable disobedience, and his certain rejection of the gospel, till his heart is subdued by Divine influence; his need of an infinite Saviour, to make atonement for his sin, and an infinite



Sanctifier, to renovate him in the love of God ; and his entire dependence on Divine grace to accept, and justify, and save him. These are the truths which are then delivered with life, and carry life to the soul.

The preaching exercises, at such a time, are *more frequent* than is usual. Their occurrence is suggested by convenience and necessity. The extra services are taken, perhaps, on one or two evenings of the week, or other parts of the day, as may suit the attendants. Sometimes a whole day, or more, in connexion with the Sabbath, is set apart for the purpose ; and, in that case, it would receive the modern appellation of a protracted meeting.

2. *Visitations.*—These frequently take the lead ; as you will remember they did in the case of Morriston, in revivals. The pastor ; or the pastor and a brother minister ; or the pastor with his elders ; or the elders, two and two, acting under his arrangements ; are usually the persons making these domiciliary visits. They are short, serious, and devotional, and are kept to the single object they have before them.

3. *Special Meetings for Prayer.*—They are regulated by the call there is for them ; and are often attended by fasting. They are, when rightly used, the soul of revivals, and animate all the services. The hand of God has, by them, been most directly acknowledged ; the offence of man most freely confessed ; and the blessing

that was devoutly sought, was abundantly granted.

4. *Conference or Inquiry Meetings.*—These are instituted for those persons who have become anxiously concerned for their salvation; and who need the more exact guidance and encouragement, which discreet conversation can best supply. The pastor, with assistance, if the numbers require, passes amongst the inquirers, and in an under voice, invites them, in turn, to express their state of mind, and seeks to advise them in their difficulties. Exhortations and prayers are connected with these exercises. These meetings are often continued beyond the period of revival, and are carefully used in favour of young converts, that they may be confirmed in the faith and experience of the christian life.

The instruction, which is regularly given in the Sabbath schools and in Bible classes, should, though not of a periodical character, be considered as contributing, in an important degree, to a sound and extensive revival. The young persons, who have been thus trained in religious knowledge, are in a state of preparation to admit and feel the power of the truth; and when they are placed in new circumstances in relation to it, and it is applied with unwonted force to the conscience, it is usually with the happiest result. Their previous knowledge facilitates the introduction of life, and regulates it when introduced.