

---

SPURIOUS REVIVALISM

---

By Robert L. Dabney, D.D.<sup>1</sup>

**B**efore the Rev. Wm. Stoddert, D.D., left Virginia for Missouri, he published in the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, an essay on Campbellism. This admirable piece was as remarkable for its fairness and courtesy as for the power of the discussion. The writer began by saying that there was a deep historical reason which forbade his treating Campbellism with either levity or asperity. He was constrained to regard it as a natural, and a morally necessitated protest against the spurious revivalism of the first third of our century. The powerful and beneficent religious movement which ushered it in had been perverted. Those human devices, known as "The New Measures," were applied by rash and intemperate men to give an impulse to the work. Like all human devices, they had marred it, while professing to help it on. These ill starred manipulators added to the legitimate excitement wrought by the divine word and Spirit, the hot stimuli of natural remorse, fear and fancy, instinctive sympathy and the social affection; and then insisted on confounding these natural agitations with spiritual and divine influences.

The so-called revivalists, seeing the Scriptures declare regeneration and saving faith to be a supernatural act and grace, incontinently claimed that new exalted origin and quality for all the passions and new resolves which they infused by their human arts into their favorite subjects. Either ignorant of the first principles of psychology or disdaining its lessons and even those of common sense in their own lust of excitement, and the ambition for the show of great success, they called any gust of natural remorse, or hysterical, instinctive or irrational sympathy, by the sacred name of the new birth.

But the time soon refuted their claim. It was inevitable that intelligent minds should revolt; and they could not be blamed for such protest, grounded as it was in reason, history and Scripture. But according to the weakness of human nature, it was easy for another extreme to result from the first; the pendulum pushed so violently to one side, swung too far towards the other. In the form of Socinianism; in the Southern States, in the form of Campbellism. As the spurious revivals had so outraged the good sense of thinking men by asserting a supernatural source for emotions merely human and carnal, so many yielded to the tendency to extrude the supernatural as much as possible from their new theory of redemption. Hence the new theory would be too rationalistic, as the popular revival had become too fanatical. Thus, Mr. Campbell was tempted to offer as his antidote for the religious disease of the time his Pelagian scheme, which rejects the distinction between saving and historical faith, reduces the faith which saves us to mere logical credence, the result of evidence, reduces the new birth to a mere rational change of purpose, wrought in human ability, limits justification and adoption to a baptismal remission of

---

<sup>1</sup> From *Christian Observer* 81:11 (Nov. 15, 1893): 5-6.

past sins, and gives no place to the work of the Holy Spirit until after all these works of self conversion and justification.

Years before Dr. Stoddart wrote this, his philosophy had received a startling confirmation by an authentic incident. In one of the old counties of a Southern State, lived J.T., a successful merchant and business man, of very fair worldly character, and much engrossed in the pursuit of wealth. His friends were startled to hear that he had recently joined the Campbellite Church,—the more because his family connection was Baptist; he had a brother in the ministry of that Church, and the wife of his bosom, a woman admirable for her domestic virtues and piety, was also a Baptist.

J.T. was entertaining at his fireside a Presbyterian missionary, his wife's relative. He said to this minister: "I suppose my orthodox friends are surprised and perhaps offended by my late step in joining the communion of Mr. Campbell."

The Presbyterian politely conceded J.T.'s right to his honest convictions, but he continued that as he valued the good opinion of his friends, he wished to use the occasion for giving his explanation. This he did in nearly the following words:

"I suppose my friends regarded me as a man in worldly pursuits, and indifferent to God's claims on me. I was far from being as much as so as I appeared. How could a man of good sense, with any conscience in him, be indifferent to duties of such supreme and infinite importance to himself and to those he loved? And how could I have lived so many years with that lady (pointing to his wife) witnessing her consistent piety, and blessed by its fruits, without seeing that Christianity was precious? No, I had long cherished a serious anxiety, and promised myself that my duty to God should not be always neglected. I was no infidel; I raised no doubts about the gospel; but whatever the practical question arose, how a man sets about being a Christian, I found myself very ignorant. I saw I had no distinct conception of the gospel way. Then my common sense always said to me, 'J.T. if you wish to walk in it, you must learn it. And you have to learn it just as you learn penmanship or book-keeping or farming, by applying your rational understanding to the facts.'"

"Well, last summer, news kept coming to the village, that the camp-meeting over on G. creek, was resulting in a great revival; that the Spirit of God was powerfully at work there, converting many sinners. I said to myself, 'Now perhaps is a time for me to learn something; I will go over; I will observe for myself; I will learn this work of the Holy Spirit in the same rational way in which I have learned everything else that has been valuable to me.' So, on Saturday morning I rode over. Arriving a little late, I found the services already begun. There were two long rows of canvas tents or board shanties, with temporary tables before them. The area between was occupied by a vast arbor and temporary seats, in front of which was the preachers' stand, sustained by the trunks of two shady oak trees; while between them this and the seats was a space covered with clean straw and enclosed by a neat railing of pine poles smoothly peeled. This space I afterwards hear called 'the altar.' In the stand were five or six ministers, and before them an audiences of many hundreds.

"The sermon was by a young minister, who was from the first fervent, and towards the close intensely excited. No one could doubt the good man's sincerity: he gesticulated and shouted violently and shed many tears. All that I could make out from his instructions, was, that we sinners were dreadfully guilty, in terrible danger, and under the strongest obligations to escape it by 'coming to Jesus.' But as to any definite conception of what that was, he seemed to be as much in a fog as I was. He sat down exhausted.

"Then a stout, elderly minister, who seemed to be chief manager, took up his prophecy and vehemently urged the sinners to come to the 'alter of prayer,' while the brothers and sisters sang a hymn. A voice began a stirring hymn of invitation which was passionately sung, during which some twenty or more young people came forward into the area, males and females, and knelt upon the straw. The old preacher thanked the Lord, and assured the brethren that this was the manifest work of God's Spirit.

"I said to myself, 'Ah! this is precisely what I came here to learn!' so I drew up near with the greatest respect and stood to observe the proceedings. After a short, fervent prayer, all the ministers, except the old manager, descended into the alter, and being joined by several experienced 'alter hands,' male and female, they mixed with the penitents to instruct and pray with them. The scene then grew into an indescribable tumult. Many prayers and exhortations were heard at the same time. The penitents began, some to sway backwards and forwards, some to weep, some to sob aloud, some to scream, and some to prostrate themselves on the straw; while the mothers in Israel, with sympathizing smiles, busied themselves in keeping the skirts of the prostrate female penitents in decent position. Meantime, the old leader in the stand, leaning upon the desk, looked down approvingly and kept up from his side a continual fire of ejaculations, prayers, and hymns, after this fashion: 'Bless the Lord, brethren, for this glorious work of His Spirit!' 'Brother -- , lead us in prayer, that the Lord will bring these precious souls through' (which Brother -- did in a stentorian voice)! 'Sing, brethren.'" 'Sister -- here, will start the tune,' The singing was equally vociferous. One may judge what a confusion all this made.

"But just when it was at its height, I was startled by the loud and long blast of a horn. I looked around and saw a scullion, a Negro fellow, quite greasy and dirty, blowing a long tin horn in front of the tents. It was the signal for dinner. The tumult at once ceased; the preacher announced that every one in the congregation was cordially invited to go to the tables and help themselves to the cold dinner generously provided by the brothers and sisters. Thereupon the penitents arose from the straw, the good mothers searched in it for the tuck combs and assisted the female penitents to put up their hair and arrange their robes, while the male penitents flicked the straws off each other's coats with their handkerchiefs. Everybody went to the tables. I went also to see what I should see. You know the people of our country are very hospitable, and I receive sundry kind invitations to a plate, knife and fork, but I excused myself with thanks, and, accepting a cold biscuit and leg of fried chicken, I walked around, nibbling at them.

"And this was what I saw. The preachers and their penitents were making a very good dinner; many of the latter with quite smiling faces, and some were seasoning it with quiet flirtation. The dinner seemed to have arrested the Almighty Spirit's works!

"Now, sir, I had to draw my inference as a reasonable man. I was compelled to say to myself, this revival is all a mistake, for were it the work of an almighty divine Agent, a greasy Negro scullion could not stop it by blowing upon a twenty-five-cent tin horn, sold, most probably, out of my own store. I concluded that there was nothing more for me to learn there. I untied my horse and rode back home.

"Sir, that lesson made me a Campbellite. What else could I conclude? These preachers solemnly asserted that the faith, repentance and conversion they manipulated were a supernatural work. I had a perfect proof that they were not. The only thing left for me was a rational faith and change of life; you may say, a rationalistic one, but I see no room for any other."

The Presbyterian missionary tried to explain, to discriminate, to apologize, but J.T. could see no distinction, and could not be moved. The narrator would humbly request some Christian more competent than himself to draw the proper line of separation, and show us wherein the rash

revivalists were wrong, and wherein J.T. was wrong. Was not the first extreme partly responsible for the second, as Dr. Stoddart stated?

This incident admirably illustrates in the concrete the frightful evils of spurious revivalism. In genuine revivals I believe with all my heart; I was the subject of one; I have labored in them with all my might; I have seen churches gloriously built upon them. But I regard this revival machinery, with all of Sam Jones' apparatus, etc., as an unspeakable curse to American Protestantism. This curse in the South, and abolition and practical politics in the North, have so debauched and degraded Protestantism in the United States, that, if we take in the whole membership, we get an average as low as that of Popery in the United States (not as low as Popery in Brazil). "Our manna has bred worms and stinks."

A leading secular citizen of Charlotte, VA., once asked a famous presiding elder, Parson Skidmore, if he was blind to the enormous percentage of spurious conversions under the camp-meeting system. (Mr. Skidmore was known as the shrewdest business man in the country.)

He replied, "Of course we are not blinded to it."

"Why then do you continue to use these methods?"

Skidmore answered, "For a very sound practical reason, sir; because out of these revivals we get a certain small percentage of sound, stable church members, and the multitudes who go back are no worse off than they were before."

The old lawyer asked me what I thought of that. I replied that Mr. Skidmore made two utter mistakes. That his churches were not indebted to the spurious system for the gain of a few sound members; for their conversion was due wholly to the influence of family religion and didactic preaching; and the only result of the hurrah meeting had been to hurry them into the church mare hastily and less healthily; even as half-ripe fruit is harvested earlier by shaking the trees violently, but is less sound than if suffered to ripen on the trees.

It is a frightful error to say that the spurious converts after they go back are just where they were at first. They are miserably hardened; they have grieved the Holy Spirit, they have defiled and weakened their own consciences by the breach of a most solemn vow, and *wounded pride makes nine tenths of them infidels*.

If you inquire as to the infidel young men found in our colleges, I could safely aver that every man of them, when brought to the candid truth, would ascribe his own infidelity to his passing through the flint mill of a spurious revival. Earnest Renan, Herbert Spencer and Bob Ingersoll only came along after to fix them up with sham pretexts.

Here is a danger which will supervene in our recent evangelistic movements. If we do not watch we shall be reaping a poisonous harvest. There are powerful motives for using the spurious measures, latent in the spirit of every preacher, in every denomination, except a very few old, experienced, and deeply sanctified ones. These motives are: 1. Well-meaning zeal overturning prudence. 2. Instinctive love of excitement, just as natural to the preachers as to the populace, and perhaps the most powerful of all the irrational instincts of man: witness his love for theatricals, passionate fictions, hangings and fights; anything from a dog- up to a duel. 3. The preacher's own unhallowed ambition to boast big results. Just as surely as courting will go on between young men and maidens, whether vulgar or genteel, as long as they are human, just so surely this temptation is going to beset our ministers. Hence it is, I feel that we older men ought to be building the barriers now, by widely discussing these dangers.