

WORDS OF THE WISE.

ON CONVERSION.

The following is a letter of the celebrated John Albert Bengel :

Nov. 18, 1722.

" And now with the good hand of God upon me, I will endeavour to answer your inquiries. They are,

" 1. What is conversion, and what properly belongs to it? It is the turning and submission of a soul, hitherto sunk in self-ignorance, self-love, and idolatry of the creature, consequently hitherto alienated from God; it is the returning and submission of such a soul to Him, and to His good and holy will, for the sake of His honour and glory, and for the sake of its own health and salvation.

" 2. Whether conversion and awakening be the same? Conversion is more than awakening, as the fruit is more than the blossom; for God may awaken a man, and he may forthwith sink down again into the slumber of sin and death, so that though awakened thus again and again, he is still unconverted. But when he follows up the awakening, then he is converted.

" 3. Whether personal conversion is not to be understood somewhat differently now, from what it was among the primitive Christians; our circumstances under the Divine economy having become different from theirs? I answer, that "the mark," the object, the end of conversion, must ever be the same; though the point where conversion begins, or from which it set out, must vary with different classes of men, as idolaters, Jews, nominal Christians, &c.

" 4. When persons profess to be converted, how are they to be proved,—that we may distinguish real faith from a thousand other things which are either flattering and imposing, or perplexing and revolting? For instance, how shall we be able to distinguish bad spiritual symptoms from failings which are known sometimes to be owing to bodily disorder, bad training in childhood, natural temperament, education, &c.?

" Prevalent evil symptoms of a purely spiritual nature are easy to be perceived and as it were felt with the hand; for here persons go on boldly in sin, without any fear of God before their eyes; but a state of grace is not so easily discernible in those who have naturally a tender feeling about good and evil, nor in those who have a natural equanimity in sudden emergencies and in the presence of overbearing persons, when others would not be able to maintain their composure. Neither are persons who are converted always qualified to prove others; and it is very dangerous to imagine ourselves so qualified. It is far more safe to come to no opinion about the condition of many, than to deceive ourselves or be deceived by others in a single instance. For between the two classes in whom either a state of sin or a state of grace is clearly discernible, there are very ambiguous characters, whom we must leave entirely to the decision of God; many in whom what is good and what is bad are strangely intermixed or alternated; many who are really better or really worse than we should imagine from their exterior conduct. It is true, that we can speak abstractedly as to what is compatible with real faith, and what is not; but to pronounce upon the person of an individual is a very different matter. We should always be much more severe in examining ourselves, than in judging of others, &c.

" 5. May a fixed time ever be referred to as the commencement of true conversion? Yes; when a state of open sin has been exchanged for decided obedience to the grace of Christ, the very day of such a change, or even the hour, or perhaps moment, may be referred to. But when the transition has proceeded by slow degrees, and many false steps and backslidings have intervened, a person finds it very difficult with respect to himself, and still more