

*I am of the opinion that the counsel of the Rev. John Newton, written nearly 300 years ago, is shockingly relevant to many of us at the present time.*

*We know John Newton as the author of "Amazing Grace" and one who labored in England for the abolition of the slave trade.*

*A friend of Newton's about to write an article criticizing a fellow minister for his lack of orthodoxy wrote to John Newton of his intention. Newton gave the invaluable advice noted below. Be aware that I have put Mr. Newton's remarks in more modern English and any misrepresentation of him is very unintentional.*

*Dr. Jerry Nelson  
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From: *John Newton's Works*; Letter XIX - *On Controversy*

A minister about to write an article criticizing a fellow minister for his lack of orthodoxy wrote to John Newton of his intention.

**John Newton replied as follows:**

Dear Sir,

As you are likely to be engaged in controversy, and your love of truth is joined with a natural warmth of temper, my friendship makes me concerned for you. I believe you are so very right in the position you hold on this matter that even someone without your ability to articulate and argue the position would have reason to expect to prevail. **I am not therefore concerned that you will lose the argument; but I want you to be more than a conqueror, and to triumph, not only over your adversary, but over yourself.** Even if you are so right that you can't lose the argument, you may be wounded. To preserve you from such wounds as might make you sorry you won, I present some thoughts for your consideration. If you attend to these I believe they will protect you as would a coat of mail and you will not complain that they are cumbersome as did David when presented Saul's armor. You will readily see that this armor, taken from the armory of God's Word will be useful to you. I have taken liberty in writing to you in a manner which, I think you will agree, needs no apology and thus I will give none.

To state them most clearly, **I reduce my advice to three ideas with respect to (1) your opponent, (2) others who may read what you write and (3) yourself.**

- (1) **As to your opponent,** I wish that before you set pen to paper against him, and during the whole time you are preparing your answer, you may **commend him by earnest prayer to the Lord's teaching and blessing.** This practice will have a direct tendency to conciliate your heart to love and pity him; and such a disposition will have a good influence upon every page you write. If you account him a believer, even though he may be

greatly mistaken on the subject of your debate, the words of David to Joab concerning Absalom, are very applicable: "Deal gently with him for my sake." The Lord loves him and bears with him; therefore you must not despise him, or treat him harshly. The Lord bears with you likewise, and expects that you should show tenderness to others, from a sense of the much forgiveness you need yourself. In a little while you will meet him in heaven; he will then be dearer to you than the nearest friend you have upon earth is to you now. Anticipate that period in your thoughts; and **though you may find it necessary to oppose his errors, view him personally as a kindred soul, with whom you are to be happy in Christ forever.**

**If, on the other hand, you suppose him to be a non-Christian, looking upon him as an unconverted person,** (a supposition which you should not make without considerable evidence), **he is a more proper object of your compassion than of your anger.** For as Jesus said it, "He knows not what he does." Don't ever forget that it is only by God's grace that you are not in his position arguing his point and he in yours, defending the gospel. If you think about this, you will not reproach or hate him just because the Lord has been pleased to open your eyes, and not his. Of all people who engage in controversy, we, who are called Christians, are most expressly bound by our own principles to be gentle and moderate. If, indeed, a non-Christian could change himself, open his own eyes and soften his own heart we might have more reason to be offended at his/her stubbornness. But if we believe the very contrary to this, our part is, not to strive, but in meekness to instruct those who oppose, "in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth." If you write with a desire of being an instrument of correcting mistakes, you will of course be cautious not to lay stumbling blocks in the way of the blind or of using any expressions that may exacerbate their passions, confirm them in their principles, and thereby make their conviction, humanly speaking, more impracticable.

2. By writing what you intend to write, you will also likely be read by others; where **your readers may be ranged under three divisions:**

- A. First are those, like the individual to whom you are writing, who disagree with you. Concerning these I may refer you to what I have already said (see (1) above). Though you have your eye upon one person chiefly, there are many like-minded with him; and the same reasoning will hold, whether as to one or to a million.
- B. There are some (many?) who just don't care about theology. They are incompetent to judge doctrine but they are readily able to judge a writer's attitude. They know that meekness, humility and love are the characteristics of a Christian temper. And even though they treat true doctrine as irrelevant to their souls they still expect Christians to act

consistently with the Gospel. And **they are quick to see when we deviate from such a spirit, and they use our intemperance to justify their contempt of our arguments.** The Scriptural maxim, that “the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God,” is verified by daily observation. **If our zeal for the truth is contradicted by expressions of anger, invective, or scorn, we may think we are doing service in the cause of truth, when in reality we shall only bring it into discredit.**

The weapons of our warfare, and which alone are powerful to break down the strongholds of error, are not fleshly, but spiritual; arguments that are fairly drawn from Scripture and experience, and articulated with mildness, may persuade our readers, that, whether they eventually agree with us or not they know we argue for their sake, and contend only for the truth’s sake; if we can satisfy them that we act upon these motives, our point is half gained; they will be more disposed to consider calmly what we offer; and if they should still disagree with us, they will be constrained to approve our intentions.

- C. **You will have a third class of readers, who already agree with you and approve what you say,** and who may be further established and confirmed in their views of the Scripture doctrines, by a clear and masterly presentation of your subject. **You may actually be instrumental in their spiritual growth if the law of kindness as well as of law of truth regulates your pen, otherwise you may do them harm.** We are humanly disposed to despise those who differ from us; and we are often under that influence even when we think we are only showing a spiritual zeal in the cause of God. The truth is that I have known many Christians with whom I disagree on matters of theology who are none-the-less gracious in their spirit. And I’m afraid there are some with whom I have much doctrinal agreement who are lacking in grace. It is not just a matter of being right. We must remember that **self-righteousness can feed upon doctrines as well as upon works;** and a man may have the heart of a Pharisee, while his head is stored with orthodoxy. Yea, I would add, **the best of men are not wholly free from this leaven; and therefore are too apt to be pleased with such representations as hold up our adversaries to ridicule, and by consequence flatter our own superior judgments.** Controversies, for the most part, are so carried often carried out so as to indulge rather than to repress a person’s wrong disposition; and therefore, generally speaking, they are productive of little good. They provoke those whom they should convince, and puff up those whom they should edify. I hope your performance will evidence a spirit of true humility, and be a means of promoting it in others.

### 3. **This leads me, in the last place, to consider YOU.**

It seems praiseworthy to defend the faith once delivered to the saints; we are commanded to contend earnestly for it, and to convince those who contradict the

truth. If ever such a defense of the gospel were needed it appears to be so in our own day, when errors abound on all sides and every truth of the gospel is either directly denied or grossly misrepresented. And yet we find that many who enter controversy are hurt by it. Either they grow in a sense of their own importance, or take on an angry, contentious spirit, or they unconsciously withdraw their attention from those things which are most important to a life of faith, and spend their time and strength upon matters which are at most but of a secondary value. This shows that even if the service is honorable, it may still be dangerous. **What will it profit a man if he gains his cause and silences his adversary if at the same time he loses that humble, tender frame of spirit in which the Lord delights, and to which the promise of his presence is made?** Your aim, I know, is good; but you have need to watch and pray for you will find Satan ready to make evil come out of good; and though you set out in defense of the cause of God, if you are not continually looking to the Lord to keep you, it may become your own cause, and awaken in you those tempers which are inconsistent with true peace of mind that will surely obstruct communion with God.

**Be upon your guard against admitting anything personal into the debate. If you think you have been ill treated, you will have an opportunity of showing that you are a disciple of Jesus, who “when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not.”** This is our pattern, thus we are to speak and write for God, “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called.” The wisdom that is from above is not only pure, but peaceable and gentle and anything which lacks that, like the dead fly in the pot of ointment, will spoil the taste and effectiveness of our labors. **If we act in a wrong spirit, we shall bring little glory to God, do little good to our fellow creatures, and procure neither honor nor comfort to ourselves.** If you are content with showing how clever you are you have an easy task; but I hope you have a far nobler aim, and that, conscious of the solemn importance of gospel truths, and the compassion due to the souls of men, you would rather be a means of removing prejudices in a single instance, than obtain the empty applause of thousands. Go forth, therefore, in the name and strength of the Lord of hosts, speaking the truth in love; and may he give you a witness in many hearts that you are taught of God, and favored with the fervor of his Holy Spirit.

I am, &c.

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