

Writing to George Whitefield: A Letter from Anne Dutton on Sinless Perfection

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George Whitefield was a consummate “networker.” By the warmth of his personality and his penchant for friendship, he was able to not only traverse the Atlantic to yoke together like-minded evangelicals but also cross the great divide of denominations. In Great Britain and throughout the American colonies, for example, he built relationships with Baptists, who viewed Anglicanism with a significant degree of distrust and dislike, but who loved Whitefield, the “Grand Itinerant.” Among his English Baptist friends was Anne Dutton (1692–1765), who has been well described as “perhaps the most theologically capable and influential Baptist woman of her day”¹ and who regularly corresponded with Whitefield between 1741 and 1744.²

One of the key theological issues that occupied Whitefield during this very time was the matter of Christian perfection. The Wesley brothers, John and Charles, were maintaining that God bestowed a second blessing, as it were, which consisted of being free from sin in thought, word, and deed. While neither of the brothers ever claimed to have received this blessing

personally, and Charles later in the 1760s openly questioned the biblical legitimacy of his brother's position on this matter, in the early 1740s both Methodist leaders argued that as this doctrinal distinctive was preached, God honored the preaching and gave the gift.

Whitefield seems to have communicated his disagreement with this teaching to Dutton, who responded with this tightly packed and biblically reasoned letter on why sinless perfection was not at all correct theologically. Here we see why Whitefield once noted that Dutton's letters were weighty and how Dutton helped the great evangelist to think through this issue biblically and stand firm in his convictions.³

A Letter from Mrs. Anne Dutton to The Reverend Mr. George Whitefield

Right glad am I, that our dear Lord has brought you to Bristol, enables you so frequently, and successfully to labour in his gospel, and manifests his presence with you there. Now sir, you are in the heat of battle. But since Christ is with you, fear not. O poor Bristol! How have many there been deluded by sin and Satan, in such a manner, as to think they have no sin. For indeed sir, I can look upon it to be no other than a delusion of the enemy of souls, and a deceit of the heart, for any to think, that there is such a thing attainable in this life, as an entire, sinless perfection; and much more so, for any to think, that they themselves have attained it. Strange it is, that any should think, or affirm, that they have not sinned in thought, word or deed for months! And stranger still, and what I never before heard of, that any should imagine that the being of sin is taken out of their nature! But what blindness and hardness, will not Satan and sin cast upon our souls, if permitted! Surely this error is now come to its height, and the time come that the enemy shall proceed no further. Surely Satan shall fall like lightning from heaven. Our Lord suffers the enemy to go to the end of his chain, to drive on his designs so far till he thinks he has got souls fast enough in his snare; and then he delights to confound him, and let the captives go free! Verily our dear Lord, will redeem the souls of his children from deceit and violence, their lives being precious in his sight. Do your utmost, my dear brother, to disentangle the ensnared in Bristol. For the delusion which prevails, will have most pernicious consequences. And that it is a delusion, the Word of God most clearly manifests.

For "if we say that we have no sin," (says the Apostle John) "we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us," 1 John 1:8. And says the Holy Ghost by Solomon, "there is not a just man upon the earth that doeth good, and sinneth not," Ecclesiastes 7:20. The great work of the Grace of God, which

bringeth salvation to the saved ones is teaching them, that denying “ungodliness and worldly lusts, they should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world,” Titus 2:11–12. The word *teaching*, being in the present tense, denotes the constant work of divine grace upon the subjects thereof, while they are in this world. The word *denying*, denotes the constant duty, and business of Christians, so long as they are in this present world. And the teaching of grace to deny ungodliness, and the denying of the same, both being of equal duration with the stay of Christians in this present world: do necessarily imply, the being, and solicitations of ungodliness, and worldly lusts in their souls, even so long as they are in the body, or in this present world. To deny a person or thing supposes the being and solicitations of that person or thing. So to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts supposes the being and solicitations thereof. And as a Christian’s work, his constant work, lies in a continual denying of ungodliness, and worldly lusts; it must undeniably suppose the being, and solicitations of sin, so long as they are in this world. Thus, 2 Corinthians 7:1 “having these promises (dearly beloved) let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit”, perfecting holiness in the fear of God: doth necessarily suppose our present impurity and imperfection, both in the soul and body, while in this life.

So also 1 John 3:3, “And every man that hath this hope in him, purifieth himself, even as he is pure,” doth necessarily imply his present impurity while he is in this world, or until he enjoys the hoped for blessing, of seeing Christ as he is, else there would be no room to say of him, that he purifies himself. So likewise, our imperfection in holiness, which arises from the being and working of sin in our corrupt nature, is necessarily implied, verse 2, where the Apostle says, “When he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.” He doth not say we are like him; (no not us Apostles) but we shall be like him. And [he] gives the great cause of this great effect: for we shall see him as he is. Sight of Christ is the cause of likeness to him. Sight of Christ partial in this life produceth partial likeness. Sight of Christ total in the life to come will produce total likeness to him. First in our souls, during a separate state, and then in our whole persons after the resurrection of the just. Then, and not till then, shall we be perfectly like Christ, in holiness and glory. Holiness, which is the glory of the soul, is the effect of us beholding the glory of the Lord, as 2 Corinthians 3:18. But we all with open face, beholding “as in a glass the Glory of the Lord, are changed in the same image, from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord.” Whence we may likewise note, that the change of the soul into the image of God, is imperfect, with respect to degrees, and a progressive work while in this life: it

is from glory to glory. The New Testament saints, if compared with the Old, have an open-faced view of the glory of God in Christ; and a more glorious change into his image. But if compared with that vision of God which we shall have in glory, we see but darkly. And an inspired Apostle says, “Now I know in part, but then (when that which is perfect is come, and that which is in part done away) shall I know, even as also I am known,” 1 Corinthians 13:12. “Thou canst not see my face,” says God to Moses, “for there shall no man” (let him be ever such a favourite) “see me and live,” Exodus 33:20.

Therefore no man can be perfect in holiness in this life. And in a word, a sinless perfection in this life thwarts the whole design of the Gospel with respect to the saints in the present state. For as soon as the Apostles had laid down the great doctrines of grace, the use they make thereof, to those interested in them, is holiness. From privilege, they press to duty; from grace to holiness, both in the mortification of sin and increase of grace, inward and outward, as is manifest in all their Epistles. So that I don’t see, but if we admit of sinless perfection here; we may even throw⁴ away our Bibles, certainly, if any persons had attained it, they would have no more need of ordinances. Nor can I see reason why such persons should be any longer out of heaven, when thus fully prepared for it.

That you may still increase with all the increases of God; both personally, and ministerially: And that all errors may fall before the rising glory of Truth is the hearty desire of,

Dear Sir, yours for ever in our Sweet Lord Jesus.

¹ Karen O’Dell Bullock, “Dutton [*née* Williams], Anne”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online ed., January 2009 (<http://www.oxforddnb.com.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/view/article/71063>, accessed July 9, 2014). Dutton wrote a significant number of works. Most of them have survived in only a few copies. Thankfully, the most important of her works are currently available in an edition being published by Mercer University Press: JoAnn Ford Watson, *Selected Spiritual Writings of Anne Dutton: Eighteenth-Century, British-Baptist, Woman Theologian* (2003–2010), 6 vols. For an excellent study of her life, piety, and influence, see also Michael D. Sciretti, Jr., “Feed My Lambs”: The Spiritual Direction Ministry of Calvinistic British Baptist Anne Dutton During the Early Years of the Evangelical Revival” (PhD thesis, Baylor University, 2009).

² See the detailed examination of their extant correspondence by Sciretti, “Feed My Lambs”, 241–273.

³ For JoAnn Ford Watson’s edition of the letter, see *Selected Spiritual Writings of Anne Dutton*, 1:1–4. In the edition that follows, I have followed *A Letter from Mrs. Anne Dutton to The Reverend Mr. G. Whitefield* (Philadelphia, PA: William Bradford, n.d.). The text has been modernized when it comes to capitalization, spelling, and the use of italics and punctuation. I have also added quotation marks for biblical quotes and updated the method of citing biblical texts.

⁴ At this point Dutton has “through,” a misspelling for “throw.”