

THE
WORKS
OF
THE REV . JOHN NEWTON

LATE RECTOR OF THE UNITED PARISHES OF
ST. MARY WOOLNOTH AND ST. MARY WOOLCHURCH-HAW,
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CONTAINING
AN AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE, &C., LETTERS ON RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS, CARDIPHONIA, DIS-
COURSES INTENDED FOR THE PULPIT,
SERMONS PREACHED IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF OLNEY,
A REVIEW OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY, OLNEY HYMNS, POEMS,
MESSIAH, OCCASIONAL SERMONS, AND TRACTS.

TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED
MEMOIRS OF HIS LIFE, &c.

BY THE REV. R. CECIL, A. M.

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LETTER XXXI.

ON LOVE TO THE BRETHREN.

DEAR SIR,

THE apostle having said, “Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you,” immediately subjoins, “We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren.” By the manner of his expression, he sufficiently intimates, that the want of this love is so universal, till the Lord plants it in the heart, that if we possess it, we may thereby be sure he has given us of his Spirit, and delivered us from condemnation. But as the heart is deceitful, and people may be awfully mistaken in the judgment they form of themselves, we have need to be very sure that we rightly understand what it is to love the brethren, before we draw the apostle’s conclusion from it, and admit it as an evidence in our own favour, that we have passed from death unto life. Let me invite you, reader, to attend with me a little to this subject.

There are some counterfeits of this love to the brethren, which, it is to be feared, have often been mistaken for it, and have led people to think themselves something, when, indeed, they were nothing. For instance:

There is a natural love of the brethren. People may sincerely love their relations, friends, and benefactors, who are of the brethren, and yet be utter strangers to the spiritual love the apostle speaks of. So Orpah had a great affection for Naomi, though it was not strong enough to make her willing, with Ruth, to leave her native country, and her idol-gods. Natural affection can go no farther than to a personal attachment; and they who thus love the brethren, and upon no better ground, are often disgusted with those things in them, for which the real brethren chiefly love one another.

There is likewise a love of convenience. The Lord’s people are gentle, peaceable, benevolent, swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath. They are desirous of adorning the doctrine of God their Saviour, and approving themselves followers of him who pleased not himself, but spent his life in doing good to others. Upon this account they who are full of themselves, and love to have their own way, may like their company, because they find more compliances, and less opposition from them, than from such as themselves. For a while Laban loved Jacob: he found him diligent and trustworthy, and perceived that the Lord had prospered him upon Jacob’s account; but when he saw that Jacob flourished, and apprehended he was likely to do without him, his love was soon at an end; for it was only founded in self-interest.

A party-love is also common. The objects of this are those who are of the same sentiment, who worship in the same way, or are attached to the same minister. They who are united in such narrow and separate associations, may express warm affections, without giving any proof of true Christian love; for, upon such grounds as these, not only professed Christians, but Jews and Turks, may be said

to love one another. Though it must be allowed, that believers being renewed but in part, the love which they bear to the brethren is too often debased and allayed by a mixture of selfish affections.

The principle of true love to the brethren, is the LOVE OF GOD, that love which produceth obedience, 1 John v. 2. "By this we know that we love the children of God, if we love God, and keep his commandments." When people are free to form their connections and friendships, the ground of their communion is in a sameness of inclination. The love spoken of is spiritual. The children of God, who therefore stand in the relation of brethren to each other, though they have too many unhappy differences in points of smaller importance, agree in the supreme love they bear to their heavenly Father, and to Jesus their Saviour; of course they agree in disliking and avoiding sin, which is contrary to the will and command of the God whom they love and worship. Upon these accounts they love one another, they are like-minded; and they live in a world where the bulk of mankind are against them, have no regard to their Beloved, and live in the sinful practices which his grace has taught them to hate. Their situation, therefore, increases their affection to each other. They are washed by the same blood, supplied by the same grace, opposed by the same enemies, and have the same heaven in view; therefore they love one another with a pure heart fervently.

The properties of this love, where its exercise is not greatly impeded by ignorance and bigotry are not such as prove its heavenly original extends to all who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, cannot be confined within the pale of a denomination, nor restrained to those with whom it is more immediately connected. It is gentle, and not easily provoked; hopes the best, makes allowances for infirmities, and is easily entreated. It is kind and compassionate; and this, not in words only, but sympathizes with the afflicted, and relieves the indigent, according to its ability; and as it primarily respects the image of Christ in its objects, it feels a more peculiar attachment to those whom it judges to be the most spiritual, though without undervaluing or despising the weakest attainments in the true grace of the gospel.

They are happy who thus love the brethren. They have passed from death unto life; and may plead this gracious disposition, though not before the Lord as the ground of their hope, yet against Satan, when he would tempt them to question their right to the promises. But, alas! as I before hinted, the exercise of this love, when it really is implanted, is greatly obstructed through the remaining depravity which cleaves to believers. We cannot be too watchful against those tempers which weaken the proper effects of brotherly love, and thereby have a tendency to darken the evidence of our having passed from death unto life. We live in a day, when the love of many (of whom we would hope the best) is, at least, grown very cold. The effects of a narrow, suspicious, a censorious, and a selfish spirit, are but too evident amongst professors of the gospel. If I were to insist at large upon the offences of this kind which abound amongst us, I should seem almost reduced to the necessity, either of retracting what I have advanced, or of maintaining, that a

great part (if not the greatest part) of those who profess to know the Lord, are deceiving themselves with a form of godliness, being destitute of its power: for though they may abound in knowledge and gifts, and have much to say upon the subject of Christian experience they appear to want the great, the inimitable, the indispensable criterion of true Christianity, a love to the brethren; without which all other seeming advantages and attainments are of no avail. How is this disagreeable dilemma to be avoided?

I believe they who are most under the influence of divine love, will join with me in lamenting their deficiency. It is well that we are not under the law, but under grace; for on whatever point we try ourselves by the standard of the sanctuary, we shall find reason to say, "Enter not into judgment with thy servant, O Lord." There is an amazing and humbling difference between the conviction we have of the beauty and excellence of divine truths, and our actual experience of their power ruling in our hearts. In our happiest hours, when we are most affected with the love of Jesus, we feel our love fervent to-wards his people. We wish it were always so; but we are poor, inconsistent creatures, and find we can do nothing as we ought, but as we are enabled by his grace. But we trust we do not allow ourselves in what is wrong; and, notwithstanding, we may, in particular instances, be misled by ignorance and prejudice, we do in our hearts love the brethren, account them the excellent of the earth, and desire to have our lot and portion with them in time and in eternity. We know that the love we bear them is for his sake; and when we consider his interest in them, and our obligations to him, we are ashamed and grieved that we love them no better.

If we could not conscientiously say thus much, we should have just reason to question our sincerity, and the safety of our state; for the scriptures cannot be broken; nor can the grace of God fail of producing, in some degree, its proper fruits. Our Saviour, before whom we must shortly appear as our judge, has made love the characteristic of his disciples; and without some evidence that this is the prevailing disposition of our hearts, we could find little comfort in calling him God. Let not this be accounted legality, as if our dependence was upon something in ourselves. The question is not concerning the method of acceptance with God, but concerning the fruits or tokens of an accepted state. The most eminent of these, by our Lord's express declaration, is brotherly love. "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye love one another." No words can be plainer; and the consequence is equally plain, however hard it may bear upon many professors, that though they could speak with the tongues of angels, had the knowledge of all mysteries, a power of working miracles, and a zeal prompting them to give their bodies to be burned in defence of the truth; yet if they love not the brethren, they are but as sounding brass or tinkling cymbals: they may make a great noise in the church and in the world; they may be wise and able men, as the words are now frequently understood; they may pray or preach with great fluency; but in the sight of God their faith is dead, and their religion is vain.

I am, &c.