

THE  
**WORKS**  
OF  
**THE REV . JOHN NEWTON**

LATE RECTOR OF THE UNITED PARISHES OF  
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CONTAINING  
AN AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE, &C., LETTERS ON RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS, CARDIPHONIA,  
DISCOURSES 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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**COMPLETE IN ONE VOLUME.**

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**EDINBURGH**

*Printed at the University Press, for*

**PETER BROWN AND THOMAS NELSON.**

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1830.

## LETTER VII.

### ON THE PROPRIETY OF A MINISTERIAL ADDRESS TO THE UNCONVERTED.

SIR,

IN a late conversation, you desired my thoughts concerning a scriptural and consistent manner of addressing the consciences of unawakened sinners in the course of your ministry. It is a point on which many eminent ministers have been, and are not a little divided; and it therefore becomes me to propose my sentiments with modesty and caution, so far as I am constrained to differ from any, from whom, in general, I would be glad to learn.

Some think that it is sufficient to preach the great truths of the word of God in their hearing; to set forth the utterly ruined and helpless state of fallen man by nature, and the appointed method of salvation by grace, through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; and then to leave the application entirely to the agency of the Holy Spirit, who alone can enlighten the dark understandings of sinners, and enable them to receive, in a due manner, the doctrines either of the law or the gospel.

And they apprehend, that all exhortations, arguments, and motives, addressed to those who are supposed to be still under the influence of a carnal mind, are inconsistent with the principles of free grace, and the acknowledged inability of such persons to perform any spiritual acts; and that, therefore, the preachers who, avowing the doctrines of free grace, do, notwithstanding, plead and expostulate with sinners, usually contradict themselves, and retract in their application what they had laboured to establish in the course of their sermons.

There are others, who, though they would be extremely unwilling to derogate from the free grace and sovereign power of God in the great work of conversion, or in the least degree to encourage the mistaken notion which every unconverted person has of his own power; yet think it their duty to deal with sinners as rational and moral agents; and as such, besides declaring the counsel of God in a doctrinal way, to warn them by the terrors of the Lord, and to beseech them, by his tender mercies, that they receive not the grace of God in a preached gospel in vain. Nor can it be denied, but that some of them, when deeply affected with the worth of souls, and the awful importance of eternal things, have sometimes, in the warmth of their hearts, dropped unguarded expressions, and such as have been justly liable to exception.

If we were to decide to which of these different methods of preaching the preference is due, by the discernable effects of each, it will, perhaps, appear in fact, without making any invidious comparisons, that those ministers whom the Lord has honoured with the greatest success in awakening and converting sinners, have generally been led to adopt the more popular way of exhortation or address while they who have been studiously careful to avoid any direct application to sinners, as unnecessary and improper, if they have not been altogether without seals to their ministry, yet their labours have been more owned in building up those who have already received the knowledge of the truth, than in adding to

their number. Now, as “he that winneth souls is wise,” and as every faithful labourer has a warm desire of being instrumental in raising the dead in sin to a life of righteousness, this seems at least a presumptive argument in favour of those who, beside stating the doctrines of the gospel, endeavour by earnest persuasions and expostulations, to impress them upon the hearts of their hearers and entreat and warn them to consider “how they shall escape, if they neglect so great salvation.” For it is not easy to conceive, that the Lord should most signally bear testimony in favour of that mode of preaching which is least consistent with the truth, and with itself.

But not to insist on this, nor to rest the cause on the authority or examples of men, the best of whom are imperfect and fallible, let us consult the scriptures, which, as they furnish us with the whole subject-matter of our ministry, so they afford the perfect precepts and patterns for its due and orderly dispensation. With respect to the subject of our inquiry, the examples of our Lord Christ, and of his authorised ministers, the apostles, are both our rule and our warrant. The Lord Jesus was the great preacher of free grace, “who spake as never man spake;” and his ministry, while it provided relief for the weary and heavy-laden, was eminently designed to stain the pride of all human glory. He knew what was in man, and declared, that none could come unto him, unless drawn and taught of God; John vi. 44-46. And yet he often speaks to sinners in terms, which, if they were not known to be his, might perhaps be censured as inconsistent and legal; John vi. 27.; Luke xiii. 24-27.; John xii. 35.—It appears, both from the context and the tenor of these passages, that they were immediately spoken not to his disciples, but to the multitude. The apostles copied from their Lord: they taught, that we have no sufficiency of ourselves, even to think a good thought, and that “it is not of him that willeth, or of him that runneth, but of God who showeth mercy;” yet they plainly call upon sinners (and that before they had given evident signs that they were pricked to the heart, as Acts iii. 31.) “to repent, and to turn from their vanities to the living God;” Acts iii. 19. and xiv. 15. and xvii. 30.—Peter’s advice to Simon Magus is very full and express to this point: For though he perceived him to be “in the very gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity,” he exhorted him “to repent, and to pray, if perhaps the thought of his heart might be forgiven.” It may be presumed, that we cannot have stronger evidence, that any of our hearers are in a carnal and unconverted state, than Peter had in the case of Simon Magus; and therefore there seems no sufficient reason why we should hesitate to follow the apostle’s example.

You have been told, that repentance and faith are spiritual acts, for the performance of which, a principle of spiritual life is absolutely necessary: and that therefore, to exhort an unregenerate sinner to repent or believe, must be as vain and fruitless as to call a dead person out of his grave. To this it may be answered, that we might cheerfully and confidently undertake even to call the dead out of their graves, if we had the command and promise of God to warrant the attempt; for then we might expect his power would accompany our word. The vision of Ezekiel, chap. xxxvii. may be fitly accommodated to illustrate both the difficulties and the encouragement of a gospel minister. The deplorable state of many of our hearers may often remind us of the Lord’s question to the prophet, “Can these dry

bones live?" Our resource, like that of the prophet, is entirely in the sovereignty, grace, and power of the Lord: "O Lord, thou knowest, impossible as it is to us, it is easy for thee to raise them unto life; therefore we renounce our own reasonings; and though we see that they are dead, we call upon them at thy bidding, as if they were alive, and say, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! The means is our part, the work is thine, and to thee be all the praise." The dry bones could not hear the prophet: but while he spoke, the Lord caused breath to enter into them, and they lived, but the word was spoken to them considered as dry and dead.

It is true the Lord can, and I hope he often does make that preaching effectual to the conversion of sinners, wherein little is said expressly to them, only the truths of the gospel are declared in their hearing; but he who knows the frame of the human heart, has provided us with a variety of the topics which have a moral suitableness to engage the faculties, affections, and consciences of sinners, so far at least as to leave themselves condemned if they persist in their sins, and by which he often effects the purposes of his grace; though none of the means of grace by which he ordinarily works, can produce a real change in the heart, unless they are accompanied with the efficacious power of his Spirit. Should we admit, that an unconverted person is not a proper subject of ministerial exhortation, because he has no power in himself to comply, the just consequence of this position would, perhaps, extend too far, even to prove the impropriety of all exhortation universally: For when we invite the weary and heavy-laden to come to Jesus, that they may find rest; when we call upon backsliders to remember from whence they are fallen, "to repent and to do their first works;" yea, when we exhort believers "to walk worthy of God, who has called them to his kingdom and glory;" in each of these cases we press them to acts for which they have no inherent power of their own; and unless the Lord the Spirit is pleased to apply the word to their hearts, we do but speak to the air; and our endeavours can have no more effect in these instances, than if we were to say to a dead body, "Arise, and walk." For an exertion of divine power is no less necessary to the healing of a wounded conscience, than to the breaking of a hard heart; and only he who has begun the good work of grace, is able either to revive or to maintain it.

Though sinners are destitute of spiritual life, they are not therefore mere machines. They have a power to do many things, which they may be called upon to exert. They are capable of considering their ways; they know they are mortal; and the bulk of them are persuaded in their consciences, that after death there is an appointed judgment. They are not under an inevitable necessity of living in known and gross sins; that they do so, is not for want of power, but for want of will. The most profane swearer can refrain from his oaths, while in the presence of a person whom he fears, and to whom he knows it would be displeasing. Let a drunkard see poison put into his liquor, and it may stand by him untasted from morning to night. And many would be deterred from sins to which they are greatly addicted, by the presence of a child, though they have no fear of God before their eyes. They have a power likewise of attending upon the means of grace; and though the Lord only can give them true faith and evangelical repentance, there seems no impropriety to invite them, upon the ground of the

gospel-promises, to seek to him who is exalted to bestow these blessings, and who is able to do that for them, which they cannot do for themselves, and who has said, "Him, that cometh unto me, I will in no wise cast out." Perhaps it will not be easily proved, that entreaties, arguments, warnings, formed upon these general principles, which are in the main agreeable and adequate to the remaining light of natural conscience, are at all inconsistent with those doctrines which ascribe the whole of a sinner's salvation, from first to last, to the free sovereign grace of God.

We should, undoubtedly, endeavour to maintain a consistency in our preaching; but unless we keep the plan and manner of the scripture constantly in view, and attend to every part of it, a design of consistency may fetter our sentiments, and greatly preclude our usefulness. We need not wish to be more consistent than the inspired writers, nor be afraid of speaking, as they have spoken before us. We may easily perplex ourselves, and our hearers, by nice reasonings on the nature of human liberty, and the divine agency on the hearts of men; but such disquisitions are better avoided. We shall, perhaps, never have full satisfaction on these subjects, till we arrive in the world of light. In the mean time, the path of duty, the good old way, lies plain before us. If when you are in the pulpit, the Lord favours you with a lively sense of the greatness of the trust, and the worth of the souls committed to your charge, and fills your heart with his constraining love, many little curious distinctions, which amused you at other times, will be forgotten. Your soul will go forth with your words; and while your bowels yearn over poor sinners, you will not hesitate a moment, whether you ought to warn them of their danger or not. That great champion of free grace, Dr. Owen, has a very solemn address to sinners, the running title to which is, "Exhortations unto believing." It is in his Exposition of the 130th Psalm, from p. 242, to 247. London edition, 1609, which I recommend to your attentive consideration.

I am, &c.