

**Articles and Sermons :: A Guide to Godly Disputation - Newton****A Guide to Godly Disputation - Newton - posted by InTheLight (), on: 2011/2/26 10:04**

A Guide to Godly Disputation by John Newton

Dear Sir,

As you are likely to be engaged in controversy, and your love of truth is joined with natural warmth of temper, my friends hip makes me solicitous on your behalf. You are of the strongest side; for truth is great, and must prevail; so that a person of abilities inferior to yours might take the field with a confidence of victory. I am not therefore anxious for the outcome of the battle; but I would have you more than a conqueror, and to triumph, not only over your adversary, but also over yourself. If you cannot be vanquished, you may be wounded. To preserve you from such wounds as might give you cause of weeping over your conquests, I would present you with some considerations, which, if duly attended to, will do you the service of a great coat of armor; such armor, that you need not complain, as David did of Saul's, that it will be more cumbersome than useful; for you will easily perceive that it is taken from that great armory provided for the Christian soldier—the Word of God. I take it for granted that you will not expect any apology for my freedom, and therefore I shall not offer one. For methods sake, I may reduce my advice to three heads, respecting your opponent, the public, and 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 as a BELIEVER, though greatly mistaken in the subject of debate between you, 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 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.

But if you look upon him as an UNCONVERTED person, in a state of enmity against God and his grace (a supposition which, without good evidence, you should be very unwilling to admit), he is a more proper object of your compassion than of your anger! Alas! "He knows not what he does!" But you know who has made you to differ from him. If God, in his sovereign pleasure, had so appointed, you might have been as he is now; and he, instead of you, might have been set for the defense of the gospel! You were both equally blind by nature. If you attend to this, you will not reproach or hate him, because the Lord has been pleased to open your eyes—and not his!

Of all people who engage in controversy, we, who are called Calvinists, are most expressly bound by our own principles, to the exercise of gentleness and compassion. If, indeed, those who differ from us have a power of changing themselves, if they can open their own eyes, and soften their own hearts—then we might with less inconsistency be offended at their obstinacy! But if we believe the very contrary to this, our part is not to argue, but in meekness to "gently teach those who oppose the truth—if perhaps 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 of laying stumbling blocks in the way of the blind, or of using any expressions which may exasperate their passions, or confirm them in their false principles, (humanly speaking).

2. By PRINTING your article, you will appeal to the PUBLIC—where your readers may be ranged under three divisions:

First, such as differ from you in principle. Concerning these I may refer you to what I have already said. 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.

There will be likewise many who pay too little regard to true religion, who have no settled system of their own, and yet are biased in favor of those sentiments which are at least repugnant to the good opinion they naturally have of themselves. These are very incompetent judges of doctrine; but they can form a tolerable judgment of a writer's spirit. They know that meekness, humility and love are the characteristics of a Christian temper. And though they treat the doctrines of grace as mere notions and speculations, which, supposing they adopted them, would have no beneficial influence upon their conduct; yet from us, who profess these principles, they always expect such attitudes and dispositions as correspond with the precepts of the gospel. They are quick-sighted to discern when we deviate from such a spirit, and avail themselves of it to justify their contempt of our arguments.

The Scriptural maxim that "man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires," is verified by daily observation. If our zeal is embittered by expressions of anger, invective, or scorn—we may think we are doing service of 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 carnal, but spiritual. They are arguments fairly drawn from Scripture and experience, and enforced by such a mild address, as may persuade our readers, that, whether we can convince them or not—we wish well to their souls, 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 dissent from our opinions, they will be constrained to approve our intentions.

You will have a third class of readers, who being of your own sentiments, will readily approve of what you advance, and may be further established and confirmed in their views of the Scripture doctrines, by a clear and masterly elucidation of your subject. You may be instrumental to their edification, if the law of kindness as well as of truth regulates your pen; or otherwise you may do them harm.

There is a principle of SELF, which disposes us to despise those who differ from us; and we are often under its influence, when we think we are only showing a fitting zeal in the cause of God.

I readily believe that the leading points of Arminianism spring from and are nourished by the pride of the human heart! But I would be glad if the reverse were always true; and that to embrace what are called the Calvinistic doctrines was an infallible token of a humble mind! I think I have known some Arminians, that is, people who for lack of a clearer light, have been afraid of receiving the doctrines of free grace, who yet have given evidence that their hearts were in a degree humbled before the Lord. And I am afraid there are Calvinists, who, while they account it a proof of their humility, that they are willing in words to debase the creature and to give all the glory of salvation to the Lord—yet are of a prideful, harsh and bitter spirit. Whatever it is that makes us trust in ourselves, that we are comparatively wise or good, so as to treat those with contempt who do not subscribe to our doctrines, or follow our party—is a proof and fruit of a self-righteous spirit!

Self-righteousness can feed upon doctrines—as well as upon works! A man may have the heart of a Pharisee, while his head is stored with orthodox notions of the unworthiness of the creature, and the riches of free grace!

Yes, I would add—the best of men are not wholly free from this leaven; and therefore are too apt to be pleased with such caricatures as hold up our adversaries to ridicule—and by consequence flatter our own superior judgments. Controversies, for the most part, are so managed as to indulge—rather than to repress this sinful 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 article will savor of a spirit of true humility, and be a means of promoting it in others.

3. This leads me, in the last place, to consider your own concern in your present undertaking. It seems a laudable service to defend the faith once delivered to the saints; we are commanded to contend earnestly for it, and to convince gainsayers. If ever such defenses were seasonable and expedient, they appear 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 but very few writers of controversy who have not been manifestly hurt by it. Either they grow in a sense of their own importance; or imbibe an angry, contentious spirit; or they insensibly withdraw their attention from those spiritual truths which are the food and immediate support of the life of faith—and spend their time and strength upon matter

s that are at most but of a secondary value! This shows, that if the service is honorable, it is also 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 doubt not, is good, but you have need to watch and pray—for you will find Satan at your right hand to entice you. He will try to pollute your piety; 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, and will surely obstruct your communion with God! Be upon your guard against admitting anything personal into the debate. If you think you have been ill treated—this will give you an opportunity of showing that you are a disciple of Jesus, who "when reviled—He did not revile in return; when suffering—He did not threaten, but committed Himself to the One who judges justly." This is our pattern, thus we are to speak and write for God, and "not paying back evil for evil or insult for insult—but, on the contrary, giving a blessing, since you were called for this."

The wisdom that is from above, is not only pure, but also peaceable and gentle; and the lack of these qualifications, like the dead fly in the jar of ointment, will spoil the fragrance and efficacy 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 can be content with showing your wit, and gaining the laugh on your side—you have an easy task!

But I hope you have a far nobler aim; and that, sensible 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 Almighty, 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 unction of his Holy Spirit!

**Re: A Guide to Godly Disputation - Newton - posted by PaulWest (), on: 2011/2/26 10:39**

Quote:  
-----There is a principle of SELF, which disposes us to despise those who differ from us; and we are often under its influence, when we think we are only showing a fitting zeal in the cause of God.  
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What a fantastic find. The paragraph that follows this quote is superb as well. I refrained from quoting it, however, for obvious reasons. Thanks for the thread. Newton's letters of advice are a wellspring of tremendous wisdom.

**Re: A Guide to Godly Disputation - Newton, on: 2011/2/26 12:05**

This is a good post InTheLight ... thoughts to ponder with The Word of GOD wide open before us - as we read and think on how the Apostle Paul handled things - and know that, if anyone were dead-to-self and walking in the Spirit, it was our beloved Brother in Heaven, Paul --- as he had said: "follow me as I follow Christ", and that we have him for our example

The LORD Bless you!

**Re: - posted by UntoBabes (), on: 2011/2/26 12:25**

This is a quotation from an article by brother Frank that fits this post:

"The humanistic man gets his identity from his culture, his country-men. The religious man gets his identity from his denomination, his theology, his up-bringing, his pre-conceived notions. The religious man fits in to his surroundings. The man and woman of God get their identity before the throne of the Living God. Their identity is forged in the trials of life and from the cross on their back. They are identified as "peculiar," because they bear the cross with grace, a grace that they acquired before the throne."

**Re: A Guide to Godly Disputation - Newton - posted by InTheLight (), on: 2012/12/9 10:30**

In view of some of the recent threads here I wanted to review this exhortation from John Newton and search my own heart. I pass it along to you for consideration as well.

In Christ,

Ron

**Re: A Guide to Godly Disputation - Newton, on: 2012/12/9 12:10**

Dear Inthelight,

I was edified indeed by this article. Dear brother John gives the flesh no where to turn and exposes the many motivations of why men do what they do. We must always be on our guard against the wiles of the enemy who takes maximum advantage of the flesh, especially when our cause is just in our own eyes. Here is my favorite paragraph.....

"The Scriptural maxim that "man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires," is verified by daily observation. If our zeal is embittered by expressions of anger, invective, or scorn—we may think we are doing service of 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 carnal, but spiritual. They are arguments fairly drawn from Scripture and experience, and enforced by such a mild address, as may persuade our readers, that, whether we can convince them or not—we wish well to their souls, 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 dissent from our opinions, they will be constrained to approve our intentions." And .....

"But I hope you have a far nobler aim; and that, sensible 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!"

We live in a generation of empty applause. The only crowd that we should consider is the heavenly host and the Lord Jesus Christ.....bro Frank

**Re: A Guide to Godly Disputation - Newton - posted by Lordoitagain (), on: 2012/12/9 13:47**

Good article ...

It is interesting to note that the KJV translates this word:

G2054

εἰς

eris

er'-is

Of uncertain affinity; a quarrel, that is, (by implication) wrangling: - contention, debate, strife, variance.

as a work of evil that will bring a person to the judgment of God:

Rom 1:28 And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient;

Rom 1:29 Being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers,

Rom 1:30 Backbiters, haters of God, despiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents,

Rom 1:31 Without understanding, covenantbreakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful:

Rom 1:32 Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them.

In verse 29, DEBATE is put on the same level with MURDER!!!

It is also translated in this verse as DEBATES:

2Co 12:20 For I fear, lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I would, and that I shall be found unto you such as ye would not: lest there be debates, envyings, wraths, strifes, backbitings, whisperings, swellings, tumults:

These are all of the times that the word is found in the KJV:

G2054

eris

Total KJV Occurrences: 9

strife, 4

Rom\_13:13, 1Co\_3:3, Phi\_1:15, 1Ti\_6:4

contentions, 2

1Co\_1:11, Tit\_3:9

debate, 1

Rom\_1:29

debates, 1

2Co\_12:20

variance, 1

Gal\_5:20 (2)

"Gospel debaters" often base their "ministry" on this verse:

Jud 1:3 Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.

The word "earnestly contend" is translated thus:

G1864

epago;nizomai

ep-ag-o-nid'-zom-ahee

From G1909 and G75; to struggle for: - earnestly contend for.

It is the only time that the word is used in the New Testament.

TOO OFTEN we get this "earnest struggling" confused with the fleshly work of debate which will send "the most theologically correct" saint to a Pharisee's hell if he does not repent.

Another "support verse" for the "ministry of debate" is found here:

2Ti 4:2 Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.

Again, if you look at the definitions of "reprove" and "rebuke", you don't find the same thing as "debate" which is next to murder in Romans 1:29. Also, it is commanded to be done "with all longsuffering" which makes it even farther from the concept of "debate".

In the article, John Newton used the term "debate" several times. Obviously (by the context of the very reason for the article) what he meant was not "debate" as found in Romans 1:29, but the "struggling" found in Jude 1:3.

Paul's instruction to Timothy covers the subject quite clearly:

2Ti 2:23 But foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do gender strifes.

2Ti 2:24 And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient,

2Ti 2:25 In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth;

2Ti 2:26 And that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.

MUST NOT STRIVE:

G3164

μαχομαι

machomai

makh'-om-ahee

Middle voice of an apparently primary verb; to war, that is, (figuratively) to quarrel, dispute: - fight, strive.

This verse should be at the forefront of our minds in every discussion:

2Ti 2:25 In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth;

It is much harder for someone who is in error to resist the truth when it is coming from someone who is clothed in meekness.

#### Re: A guide to Godly disputation - posted by jeremylamar, on: 2012/12/12 22:08

I very much enjoyed these posts...thank you. As a recovering "disputer" and "quareller" I can attest to the truths that are found in these verses and in the original post. It really boils down to this: when the truth of God's word begins to change us from the inside out, it will become evident in how we engage all people, especially those within the body of Christ. It simply amazes me how many believe that truth somehow supercedes love, kindness, humility, grace, mercy, meekness, etc....

In fact so often the very ones that are "contending" in such a harsh fashion will try to re-define all these words so they line up with their approach to correcting others. I have said it myself and still hear it from others, that "the true meaning of love is when Jesus cleared the temple, or Paul rebuked Peter, etc, etc"....yet what about all the other examples of love in the scriptures? Is love always brutal? I hardly think so.

My wife and I had a child (Silas) that suffered a heart defect at the age of 6 weeks old. We were not aware of what was wrong even though many of the symptoms were becoming more and more evident. When the doctor gave us the horrible news about the defect, I cannot imagine him coming to us and saying "dont you know how the heart works? Didn't you study anatomy and physiology enough to know your son was about to die? Didnt you understand the symptoms?!" Of course not, the doctor came to us with a heavy heart, a soft tongue, and arm of comfort and said "We can fix this, but there a serious problem and it is going to take surgery to make it right, it is going to hurt....but it can be done." Yet we treat serious spiritual problems in others with such sloppiness at times as if our approach did not matter.

A verse that comes to mind is

2Cr 2:14 Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place.

2Cr 2:15 For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.

2Cr 2:16 To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life....

The thought came to me that as our flesh dies and we die more and more to self, that will put forth the smell of death to

those who are perishing and the smell of life to those who are being saved....but oftentimes when we are quarrelsome and have spiritual pride welling up in us, it puts forth the smell of death to everyone making it worthless and unprofitable for all.

**Re: - posted by jeremylamar, on: 2012/12/12 22:15**

I know it was not by accident that our Lord put "Truth" in between "Way" and "Life".

**Re: - posted by ccchhrrriiisss (), on: 2012/12/12 22:28**

What a good and timely reminder! Thanks!

**Re: - posted by sermonindex (), on: 2012/12/13 8:19**

On facebook re-posted this quote as an image quote also:

“If our zeal is embittered by expressions of anger, invective, or scorn—we may think we are doing service of the cause of truth, when in reality we shall only bring it into discredit!” - John Newton

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