



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Anne Dutton as a
Spiritual Director
(*Women and the Church*, pp.
30-36)

What do you think?

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study? Please send your
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Christian Reflection

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Anne Dutton as a Spiritual Director

In the great Evangelical Revival that spread from Great Britain to Europe and America, laypeople and clergy turned to Anne Dutton (1692-1765) for counsel. Perceived by readers as remarkably wise, loving, and sensitive to the Spirit, she shared insights on watchfulness for sin and the Christian journey toward joy.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Meditation†

Amma Syncretica said, “We have no security in this world. The Apostle said, ‘Let him that thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall.’ We are sailing on uncharted seas, as the psalmist David said, ‘Our life is like a sea.’ Yet some seas have dangerous reefs, some are full of sharks, some seas are calm. It seems as if we are sailing in calm waters, while men of the world are sailing in rough weather. We are sailing in daylight, led by the sun of righteousness, while they are being driven along in the night of ignorance. Yet it often happens that worldly men, sailing in darkness and through storms, are so afraid of danger that they save the ship by calling upon God and by watchfulness, while we, in our calm waters, become careless, leave the proper course of righteousness, and are sunk.”

Reflection

Though her husband, a Baptist pastor, completely supported her ministry, others resisted Anne Dutton’s private teaching and writing letters of spiritual direction. She responded that she was a “private Christian” called to a “public work” to “preach Christ and his truths...both doctrinally and practically before all.”

“During her lifetime over fifty of her books appeared in print,” Michael Sciretti notes, offering counsel to individuals or congregations “uncertain about their salvation, worried about their progress in their faith, distressed over afflictions in their lives, or confused about specific doctrinal matters.”

He commends two themes that recur through her writings:

- ▶ *Watching our thoughts.* To keep our hearts directed toward God, Dutton recommended prayer, meditation on Scripture, and watchfulness. “Watch the first motions of sin, and kill them in the bud,” she wrote. “Beware likewise, that you go not to the string’s-end, as it were, that you go not to the utmost of that liberty you think you may have, and yet keep from the act of sin. Dallying with temptations is entering into them.” She distinguished immoral thoughts – blasphemous, angry, anxious, or unbelieving fantasies or ideas that come into our minds – and actions to which we willfully consent. The best response to temptation, she had learned by personal experience, is to “come to Christ, as a poor Sinner, just as I came at first.” Rather than fight against oppressive thoughts, we should “venture on Christ afresh.” Sciretti summarizes, “as soon as we become *aware* of the sensation, feeling, or thought, we should *ask* for transcendent assistance. This *awareness* and *asking* for help leads to interior freedom; we



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do not violently free ourselves but are freed by the Divine.”

- ▶ *Enlarging the soul.* Watching for sin helps make room in our hearts for enjoying God’s grandeur, “our Soul-satisfying all! our delightful center! and eternal rest!” Dutton called this the “enlargement” of soul that comes when we allow God to fill us. “When we would be something in ourselves, separate from God, we become nothing: nothing that’s good, nothing but evil,” she wrote. “When we are willing to be nothing in ourselves and all in God, we possess being, enjoy the great I AM, and in him possess our own souls.” Sciretti observes: “Have we not had the sensation of feeling interiorly lighter because of awe or because we did not collude with thoughts that were dissonant to our true identity before God? If so, we have experienced the sense of aliveness Dutton expresses.”

Study Questions

1. What does Anne Dutton mean by “watchfulness”? Why is it important in the life of discipleship?
2. How does Dutton describe the goal of the Christian life?
3. Dutton uses “themes from Israel’s story – being in captivity, experiencing the Exodus, wandering in the wilderness, entering the Promised Land, being sent into Exile, returning to the restored Jerusalem – to describe...spiritual growth,” Sciretti notes. Discuss how the Apostle Paul employs these themes in 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, and how William Williams uses them in “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah.”

Departing Hymn: “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah” (vv. 1, 2, and 4)

Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,
pilgrim through this barren land.
I am weak, but thou art mighty;
hold me with thy pow’rful hand.
Bread of heaven, Bread of heaven,
feed me till I want no more;
feed me till I want no more.

Open now the crystal fountain,
whence the healing stream doth flow;
let the fire and cloudy pillar
lead me all my journey through.
Strong Deliverer, strong Deliverer,
be thou still my strength and shield,
be thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan,
bid my anxious fears subside;
bear me through the swelling current,
Land me safe on Canaan’s side;
Songs of praises, songs of praises
I will ever give to thee,
I will ever give to thee.

William Williams (1745); trans. by Peter Williams (1771), alt.
Tune: CWM RHONDDA

† *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*, 11.34, translated by Benedicta Ward (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), 125.

Anne Dutton as a Spiritual Director

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

1. To introduce the spiritual writings of Anne Dutton.
2. To understand the central role of the practice of watchfulness in the life of discipleship.
3. To consider how Dutton employed a moral interpretation of Israel's story to interpret the Christian journey toward joy.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Women and the Church (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah" locate the familiar tune CWM RHONDDA in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

When Howell Harris, leader of the eighteenth-century Methodist revival in Wales, urged Anne Dutton to write a tract to strongly reprimand "backsliding" Christians, she accepted the commission but refused to write as sharply as he expected. When we give correction, she said, "there needs a great deal of spiritual wisdom, to cry aloud against sin without wounding the faith of God's dear Children, as to their interest in Christ and his salvation." "If we are too condemnatory, we might unintentionally wound "some of God's hidden ones that he would have comforted and helped."

When Christians sin, Satan seizes the opportunity to tempt them to "unbelief, to question their interest in Christ; and thereby drives them into more ungodliness," Dutton believed. In contrast, God "first commends what is good in them, and then shows them what is evil."

Michael Sciretti observes that Dutton "attempted to heal counselees' souls and strengthen their faith so as to lead them to obedience and holiness. Repentance, according to Dutton, must be grounded in one's relationship with God and should flow from faith and love, not fear and anxiety." (*Women and the Church*, p. 33)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking God for spiritual friends who give us guidance and correction in the life of discipleship.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study introduces two themes – watchfulness for sin and enlargement of soul – in the theology of Anne Dutton (1692-1765), the remarkable British Baptist woman whose private letters and tracts were very influential during the early years of the Evangelical Revival. A few samples of her writings are available online at www.gracegems.org/Dutton/Dutton.htm.

“I am drawn to Anne Dutton’s spiritual theology because, though it echoes the language of previous Christian mystics, it is always mediated by the words and images of Scripture,” Michael Sciretti reports. “In her spiritual direction, Dutton shared the knowledge that such mystical experience (with the aid of Baptist communities of interpretation) had taught her.”

Study Questions

1. The practice of watchfulness involves identifying, resisting, and through God’s grace removing the desires and thoughts that prevent us from experiencing joy in God’s presence in our lives. We become guilty (and we form enslaving habits) when we *consent* to blasphemous, angry, anxious, or unbelieving fantasies or ideas that come into our minds, and then we *act* on them by mistreating others or rejecting God’s love. Dutton does not encourage us to struggle against such thoughts and desires (because this indicates we are ‘going it alone’ without God), but to “venture on Christ afresh” and seek his gracious help.
2. The goal of discipleship is to make room in our hearts for enjoying God. Dutton sees sin as a *contraction* of the soul—a limiting of what we can know, love, and enjoy. Our happiness depends on the *enlargement* of the soul to welcome God and God’s glories. She describes this contraction as a form of self-limiting selfishness: “When we would be something in ourselves, separate from God, we become nothing....” The enlargement comes through humility that gets our focus off of ourselves: “the lower we sink to nothing in ourselves, the lighter we rise to Being in God, and the more our holiness and happiness increaseth.” Sciretti writes: “We should not quickly skip over these metaphors of contraction and enlargement of soul, possessing Being, or becoming lighter. They reflect visceral experiences. Consenting to a passing feeling of anger, jealousy, or sadness causes us to become passive to it, contracting something in us, causing us to feel heavy or burdened inside and seemingly possessed by the feeling. Have we not had the sensation of feeling interiorly lighter because of awe or because we did not collude with thoughts that were dissonant to our true identity before God? If so, we have experienced the sense of aliveness Dutton expresses.”
3. The Apostle Paul corrects a number of practices in the Corinthian church by the so-called “strong,” “spiritual,” or “wise” members, ranging from eating food offered to idols to sexual immorality. In 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, he indirectly alludes to symbols and incidents from Israel’s Exodus and wilderness experiences—crossing the sea (10:1), experiencing God’s presence symbolized in a cloud (10:1-2), and eating food and drink miraculously supplied by God (10:3-5). Biblical stories of these incidents are in Exodus 13:21; 14:22; 16:4-35; 17:6; and Numbers 20:7-11. Paul warns that even those people who were blessed to be led and cared for by God directly fell into idol worship, sexual immorality, and factional complaining, and he concludes, “Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did” (10:6). In the meditation, Amma Syncletica, a leading fourth-century Christian monastic woman, restates Paul’s point as a call to “watchfulness.”

William Williams (1717-1791) was a well-known singer and preacher in Wales during the Evangelical Revival. In verses 1 and 2 of “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah,” he alludes to the same wilderness episodes as Paul did. The Christian life of discipleship is like being a “pilgrim in this barren land.” In verse 4, he anticipates the consummation of the Christian journey on analogy with the people of Israel’s arriving at the River Jordan and crossing, once again with God’s miraculous help, into the promised land of Canaan. While Williams invites us to construe the Christian life as a perilous journey fraught with “anxious fears,” he focuses on God’s gracious help (“Bread of heaven” and “Strong Deliverer”) at each step along the way.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.