

# Anne Dutton as a Spiritual Director

BY MICHAEL SCIRETTI

**During the Evangelical Revival, laypeople and clergy enthusiastically turned to Anne Dutton for spiritual 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.**

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**D**uring the early years of the great Evangelical Revival in eighteenth-century Britain, both laypeople and leading clergy enthusiastically turned to the letters of Anne Dutton (1692-1765) for their spiritual depth and counsel. Perceived by her readers to be remarkably experienced and wise, loving and sensitive to the Spirit, Dutton was generous with her spiritual direction: “Fear not *troubling me*, my dear Brother, with *your Complaints*, nor that any of the dear Children of God should do so,” she wrote to Reverend Jonathan Barber. “It is our Privilege, a Part of the Communion of Saints, to unbosom our Souls to each other, to bear each other’s Burdens, to see each other’s Good, to rejoice with them that rejoice, and to mourn with them that mourn. The more *free* you are with me, the more *kindly* I take it, the more my Spirit runs into yours, and interests itself in your Concerns. God grant me a Bosom large enough, to embrace all his Children, and to receive all their Cases with the greatest Sympathy!”<sup>1</sup>

As one of the earliest Calvinistic Baptists to support the burgeoning revival, Dutton held correspondence with men and women not only in her native England, but also in Wales, Holland, Scotland, and the American colonies. Howell Harris (1714-1773), leader of the Methodist revival in Wales, initiated a correspondence with her in the late 1730s. She exchanged

letters with the innovative Anglican preacher, George Whitefield (1714-1770), and encouraged his ministry in the early 1740s. Whitefield, in turn, promoted her publications in *The Weekly History*, the original evangelical magazine edited by John Lewis (d. 1755), who became a long-time correspondent and spiritual friend of Dutton's.

In 1740, she published the first volume of her *Letters on Spiritual Subjects*, which would reach twenty-two volumes of counsel, encouragement, and direction to various family members, friends, ministers, and religious communities. During her lifetime over fifty of her books appeared in print. In these she offered spiritual counsel to specific individuals (or, on occasion, congregations) who were uncertain about their salvation, worried about their progress in their faith, distressed over afflictions in their lives, or confused about specific doctrinal matters.

In the face of great resistance to a woman writing to guide others (although she was completely supported by her husband who was a Baptist pastor), Dutton defended her ministry of private teaching and writing letters of encouragement. She considered herself a "private Christian" called to a "public Work" to "preach CHRIST and his Truths...both doctrinally and practically before all."<sup>2</sup> On the title page of each collection of her letters, she included the Apostle Paul's instruction: "Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do" (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

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. She had heightened experiences of the sacred, including a "sealing in the Spirit" two years after her conversion that led her to faithful trust in divine love rather than anxious fear of the unknown. Faced with constant illness, frailty of body, and death—she lost her first husband at age twenty-seven and her second husband at fifty-five—Dutton surrendered herself into "Mercy's Ocean," trusting that God had taken the "curse" out of all her tragedies and would use such crises of faith to "exercise [her] graces" and conform her to Christ. While she believed the Triune God was known most acutely in Jesus Christ, she attested one could experience communion with each divine person. Through rich images of God as an "Ocean of Love," the Son as the "Royal Bridegroom," and the Spirit as "Comforter," she reached language's limit to describe her mystical experience of being enveloped in divine love.<sup>3</sup> In her spiritual direction, Dutton shared the knowledge that such mystical experience (with the aid of Baptist communities of interpretation) had taught her.

## **GIVING DIRECTION IN THE FAMILY**

While other spiritual directors have variously conceived their role as being the master to a disciple, parent to a child, or spiritual friend to a friend, Dutton's model of spiritual direction was grounded in her egalitarian interpretation of the Church as the body of Christ and the family of God.

The liberating truth, she believed, is that while the members of Christ's Body are "*empty, mere Vacuities,*" Christ as the "*Head, filleth all in all!*" One is reminded of Paul's testimony, "It is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). Because of her "emptiness," she wrote, Christ "*flows thro' me, little me, into the other and greater Members of the Body!*"

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**Dutton attempted to strengthen counselees' faith so as to lead them to obedience and holiness. Repentance, she thought, must be grounded in one's relationship with God and flow from faith and love, not fear and anxiety.**

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All Glory to my Lord, the *filling Head*, for all that *satisfying Joy*, with which thro' *me*, he has filled any, and so many of his dear Members." Although some of her fellow members of Christ's Body were superior to her in public renown and ministerial calling, they nevertheless could not say "*to inferior me, we have no Need of thee!*"<sup>4</sup> Each part of

the Body has a part to play, and Dutton's part was spiritual writing and counseling.

Dutton followed the common practice in her day of referring to correspondents as "Brother" or "Sister," and in other ways she alluded to the biblical concept of the Church as God's family. For example, she counseled George Whitefield to remember that Christ was his "Brother" who understood all of his trials and could have compassion upon him with a "*Brother's Heart.*"<sup>5</sup> The familial model of spiritual direction led her to initiate a correspondence with those with whom she disagreed, like John Wesley (concerning doctrine) and James Robe of Kilsyth, Scotland (concerning practice). Seeking to correct a revival practice used by Robe, Dutton wrote to him as a "fellow Citizen" in "another room" of "the Household of God" in order to have a little "Paper Converse" with him concerning "our Lord's Family Affairs."<sup>6</sup> The familial basis of her spiritual direction ministry served as a theological reason why she freely corresponded with evangelical leaders such as Harris, Whitefield, Wesley, and Robe. In the body of Christ there is only one "Head," Jesus, and in the family of God there is only one "Father," God. All believers therefore are equal brothers and sisters. Dutton took this theology seriously, and as a spiritual guide she related to counselees as an elder sister guiding the younger "Babes" who were ignorant or forgetful of the contours of the Christian pilgrimage.

### **COMFORTING BEFORE EXHORTING**

Because he believed "our Lord has entrusted [her] with a Talent of Writing for Him," Howell Harris entreated Dutton to produce a tract that would firmly reprimand "backsliding" Christians.<sup>7</sup> Dutton accepted the

commission, but she refused to write as sharply as Harris expected. Her rationale was that both foolish and wise “virgins” were “sleeping” and therefore “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.”<sup>8</sup>

With a great concern for weak and wounded Christians, she worried that a strong judgment of “Hypocrites that at this Day are sadly under the Prevalency of Sin” could lead to the wounding of “some of God’s Hidden Ones, that he would have Comforted and Helped.” At the same time, she appreciated the need to reveal to true Christians their sins and how it was their duty to become Christ-like. Dutton believed that if either pole was neglected – “comforting the Saints, and strengthening their Faith” or “warning them against Sin, and exciting them to Holiness” – then she and Harris were neglecting their “Duty of Love which we owe them.”

Dutton believed that when people sin, Satan tempts them to “Unbelief, to question their Interest in Christ; and thereby drives them into more Ungodliness.” In contrast, when God reproves people for their sins, “He first Commends what is Good in them, and then shews them what is Evil.” Comforting and strengthening, Dutton concluded, should precede and be the basis for her warning and reproving. This pattern, used by the Apostle Paul in his letters, is the one she wished to follow. She 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.<sup>9</sup>

### **WATCHING ONE’S THOUGHTS**

In a letter to a “Mr. H. T.” who lived in George Whitefield’s Bethesda community in Georgia, Dutton described several spiritual practices as the “means to keep your Heart in a holy Bent against Sin.” In addition to “secret prayer” and meditation on God’s Word, she suggested “watchfulness.”

Once more, another Means I intreat you to make Use of, is, Watchfulness. Watch the first Motions of Sin, and kill ‘em in the *Bud*. 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. Converse with Satan is the ready Way to be overcome. If we wou’d not yield to any Act of Sin; let’s beware that we yield not to a pleasing Thought about it.<sup>10</sup>

Elsewhere she refers to this practice of watchfulness as the “Art of War,” suggesting that trained vigilance is required on the battlefield of one’s heart.<sup>11</sup>

Dutton drew a distinction between immoral thoughts – blasphemous, angry, anxious, or unbelieving fantasies or ideas that come into our minds – and actions to which we willfully consent. To a sister struggling with “athe-

istical Thoughts," Dutton first consoled her by suggesting that this obstacle was a common one on the Christian journey. She told the woman to cast the thoughts out "with Lothing; but be not distressed: For they are not your Sins, any further than consented to." Even if she did consent to the thought, Dutton noted, she had no reason "to be distressed with a desponding Fear, as if there was no Help for thee in God." Finally, Dutton counseled the woman that on "the first Onset" of the thought she should immediately "*flee for Refuge to the Hope set before you; and to haste away to Christ.*"<sup>12</sup>

Even simple acts of yielding to temptation are not inconsequential, because they can lead to sinful habits. "As every Act of Grace, immediately tends to the *Increase* of that Grace which is acted; so every Act of Sin, *strengthens* the Habit of Sin," Dutton wrote. "Every yielding to a *Temptation*, by an Act of *Sin*, whether more inward, or outward, is as it were an *Opening the Floodgates*, to let in a mighty *Torrent of Corruption* to overflow the Soul."<sup>13</sup> The inner war is difficult, for while progress in the spiritual life is slow and by incremental degrees, one act of sin in yielding to temptation can easily overpower the soul and seemingly cancel out whatever progress has been made.

The best response to temptation, as Dutton learned by personal experience at the tender age of fourteen, is to "come to Christ, as a poor Sinner, just as I came at first" whenever she became aware of some oppressive thought. "Parleying" with Satan was pointless. We should not do battle with our oppressive, negative thoughts, but instead "venture on Christ afresh."<sup>14</sup> That is, 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 do not violently free ourselves but are freed by the Divine. As the desert father Abba Macarius said, "If the battle is fierce, say, 'Help!' [God] knows what is suitable for you and [God] will take pity on you."<sup>15</sup>

### **ENLARGING THE SOUL**

We must "watch the heart" for sin, according to Dutton, in order to make room within our souls for enjoying the grandeur of God — "our Soul-satisfying ALL! our delightful CENTER! and eternal REST!"<sup>16</sup> Sin is "the setting up of wretched *Self* and *Creatures*, in any, and every Form," which only "contracts" and ruins the soul, making us miserable. Our happiness depends on the "enlargement" of the soul that comes when we fill it with God and God's glories.

When we would be *something* in ourselves, *separate* from God, we become *nothing*: nothing that's *Good*, nothing but *Evil*. 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*. And the *lower* we sink to nothing in *ourselves*, the *lighter* we rise to Being in God, and the *more* our Holiness and Happiness increaseth.<sup>17</sup>

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.

## CONCLUSION

In this brief review of her teachings on watchfulness for sin and the enlargement of the soul, we can discern the central themes of Dutton's spiritual direction. First, the Christian journey involves development through successive phases. When she narrated her life story, she borrowed 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 the phases of her spiritual growth.<sup>18</sup> Dutton intended her autobiography as a teaching tool: by reading her text, one could learn the core soul gestures necessary for deeper intimacy with the Trinity. Elsewhere, as we have seen, she used the Johannine typology of *babes*, *young men*, and *fathers* to name the stages of growing in faith and grace (cf. 1 John 2:12-14).

Dutton certainly did not think the Christian journey is without difficulties and even setbacks. If space allowed, we could mention her helpful teaching concerning “dark nights” and “winter seasons” of the soul, the experience of the “sealing of the Spirit” whereby God granted a full assurance of faith, and how “faith...can pierce the cloud” veiling God's presence. Yet this brief introduction to her spiritual counsel may encourage further reading in her work, which is not only historically important, but spiritually insightful.<sup>19</sup>

## NOTES

1 “Letter 9,” Anne Dutton to Jonathan Barber, *Letters on Spiritual Subjects, &c. Divers Occasions, Sent to the Reverend George Whitefield, and others of his Friends and Acquaintance...* (London: printed by J(ohn) Hart and sold by John Lewis and Ebenezer Gardner, 1745), 50.

2 “Letter 30,” Anne Dutton to J(ames) E(rsphine), Esq., *Letters* (London: J. Hart, 1743), 157; and *A Letter to such of the Servants of Christ, Who may have any Scruple about the Lawfulness of Printing any Thing Written by a Woman: To Shew, that Book-Teaching is Private, with Respect to the Church, and Permitted to Private Christians; Yea, Commanded to those, of either Sex, Who are Gifted for, and Inclined to Engage in this Service* (London: J. Hart, 1743).

3 Dutton employs these images in her accounts of a severe personal illness and the death of her first husband, Thomas Cattell, in her autobiography, *A Brief Account of the Gracious Dealings of God...*, Part II (London: J. Hart, 1743), 26-32.

4 “Letter 34,” Anne Dutton to John Lewis, *Letters II*, 200.

5 “Letter 3,” Anne Dutton to George Whitefield, *Letters III*, 10.

6 Letter to James Robe from Anne Dutton, *The Christian History, Containing ACCOUNTS*

of the *Revival and Propagation of RELIGION in Great-Britain & America. For the Year 1743*, edited by Thomas Prince, Jr., 1, no. 5 (April 2, 1743). By the time he received the letter, Robe had already changed his mind, but he thought the letter so good that he included it in his *Narrative of the revival in Kilsyth, Scotland*.

7 "Letter 888," Howell Harris to Anne Dutton (June 4, 1743), The National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, UK.

8 "Letter 921," Anne Dutton to Howell Harris (July 13, 1743), The National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, UK. The tract she wrote for Harris was soon appended to *The Hurt that Sin Doth to Believers* (1743) as "A Word of Intreaty to All Those that Name the Name of Christ, to depart from Iniquity" (London: printed by John Hart and sold by John Lewis and Ebenezer Gardner, 1743; 1749).

9 "Letter 921," Anne Dutton to Howell Harris (July 13, 1743), The National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, UK. "And when He calls upon his sinful People to Return to him, He put them in Mind of their Relation, to Move them. 'Turn, O backsliding Children, saith the LORD, for I am Married unto you.' And we know by experience, that Gospel-Repentance, flows from Faith and Love. And to this End, the Faith and Love of poor Backsliders must be strengthened, or they will not Return unto the Lord."

10 "Letter 4," *Letters I*, 17-18.

11 "Letter 30," Anne Dutton to Mrs. E. B., *Letters I*, 211.

12 "Letter 29," Anne Dutton to Mrs. E. G., *Letters I*, 192-195.

13 *The Weekly History, or, An Account of the Progress of the Most Remarkable Particulars Relating to the Progress of the Gospel* (London: printed by John Lewis, 1741-42), lxviii. This basic principle reflects the practicality of much of her spiritual counsel: acts of faith and grace lead to habits of faith and grace, just as acts of sin lead to habits of sin.

14 *A Brief Account, Part I*, 37-38.

15 Benedicta Ward, translator, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, revised edition (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987), Macarius 19.

16 "The Guilt of a Believer's departing from God," in *Meditations and Observations upon the Eleventh and Twelfth Verses of the Sixth Chapter of Solomon's Song* (1743), 60.

17 "Some Thoughts about Sin and Holiness," *Meditations and Observations*, 61-62.

18 See especially *A Brief Account II*. Dutton perceives her call to spiritual writing as a "return" to the Promised Land when she is finally "planted in the House of the Lord."

19 JoAnn Ford Watson has edited three short volumes of Anne Dutton's writings under the title *Selected Spiritual Writings of Anne Dutton: Eighteenth-Century British-Baptist, Woman Theologian* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003, 2004, and 2006). Volume one, *Letters*, includes a selection of letters and Watson's introduction to Dutton's life and work. The second volume, *Discourses, Poetry, Hymns, Memoir*, features Dutton's most lucid description of the landscape of the Christian spiritual pilgrimage, *A Discourse on Walking with God*. The final volume, *The Autobiography*, includes all three parts of Dutton's spiritual autobiography that recounts her life up to 1750.



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