



The Life of John Newton
with particular reference to his hymns and letters

From the explicitly Evangelical conversion of John Newton (1725-1807) in the late 1740s to his role by the end of his life as, in the words of G.R. Balleine, “the great spiritual director of souls through the post,”¹ Newton’s career is, in many respects, the quintessence of eighteenth-century Evangelicalism. His commitment to a moderate Calvinism, Christocentric piety and conversionist preaching was typical of the Evangelical movement in the latter half of the eighteenth century, a movement that helped re-fashion the manners and mores of Georgian England and prepared the way for the worldview of the Victorian era. Not surprisingly, the Victorian and Edwardian churchmen who celebrated his life at the centenary of his death in 1907 did so with a consciousness of their deep debt to the grace of God at work in Newton. “Of all the Fathers of Evangelical Churchmanship,” Eugene Stock of the Church Missionary Society noted at the time, Newton’s “story is the most remarkable; and it ought to be remembered with thankfulness to the omnipotent grace of God, which could transform such a man, given over as he was to wickedness, into a saint.”²

Now, among those who were asked to speak in 1907 at the various Newton celebrations held throughout England was Thomas Wright, regarded as an expert by the Victorians on all things relating to Newton and his friend William Cowper (1731-1800).³ On the afternoon of the Lord’s Day, December 22, 1907, Wright gave a talk at St. Mary Woolnoth, London, where Newton had pastored for the last twenty-seven years of his life. Speaking on the basis of research he had done

¹ Cited D. Bruce Hindmarsh, “Newton, John” in H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 40:728.

² “Introductory Note” to John Calls, ed., *John Newton: Sailor, Preacher, Pastor and Poet* (London: S.W. Partridge & Co., 1908), 5.

For other biographies of Newton, especially see Josiah Bull, *John Newton of Olney and St. Mary Woolnoth* (London, 1868); Bernard Martin, *John Newton: A Biography* (Melbourne/London/Toronto: William Heinemann, 1950); and Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2007).

See also the excellent sketch by Donald E. Demaray, *The Innovation of John Newton (1725-1807): Synergism of Word and Music in Eighteenth Century Evangelism* (Lewiston/Queenston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), 5-39 and the dictionary article by Hindmarsh, “Newton, John” in Matthew and Harrison, eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 40:725-729.

³ See, for example, Thomas Wright, *The Town of Cowper* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1886) and his *The Life of William Cowper* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1892).



on Newton's unpublished diaries and letters, Wright focused on Newton's relationships with three people: Cowper, Joshua Symonds (1739-1788), the pastor of Bunyan Meeting in Bedford, and his wife Mary (1729-1790). As Wright closed his talk, he brought together the various strands of his lecture by observing that there were three of Newton's works that were "imperishable" classics: his letters to his wife,⁴ Newton's own story of his conversion,⁵ and the *Olney Hymns* (1779).⁶

Wright had a good sense of the significant texts from Newton's pen. First, the story of his remarkable conversion, of which Newton had an "emblematic sense" that it was "a symbol of divine grace to hardened sinners."⁷ Then, there were his letters. Wright limited these to those of Newton to his wife Mary Catlett (1729-1790), whom Newton called Polly, and which Newton published after his wife's death from cancer. Wright could have widened the letters to include the 500 or so letters of spiritual advice that appeared in Newton's life-time, which confirmed his great gift as a spiritual mentor. With regard to the third of the texts mentioned by Wright, Newton's hymnal, A. Leaver, in his bicentennial study of it has noted that its publication "came at a turning-point in the development of evangelical hymnody." Up to this point, hymn-singing in Anglican circles had been confined to basically to family worship or home prayer-meetings.

⁴ *Letters to a Wife* (1793).

⁵ *An Authentic Narrative of Some Remarkable and Interesting Particulars in the Life of — (1764)*. This work has recently been reprinted as *The Life and Spirituality of John Newton*, introd. Bruce Hindmarsh (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 2003). For a study of it, see David Lyle Jeffrey, *People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1996), 288-300.

⁶ *Olney Hymns, in Three Books* (London, 1779). A facsimile edition of this work, which has been used in this paper, was published by The Cowper and Newton Museum, Olney, Buckinghamshire, in 1979. I am deeply grateful to Greg Meadows, now of Grand Valley, Ontario, for giving me a copy of this facsimile edition a few years ago. For the remark by Wright, see the summary of his "Address" in Calls, ed., *John Newton*, 91.

The last of these three books, the hymnal, was not merely Newton's work. Of the 348 hymns in this volume, William Cowper had written sixty-seven. On Cowper's hymns, see J.R. Watson, "Cowper's Olney Hymns", *Essays & Studies* (London: John Murray/Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1985), 45-65.

⁷ Hindmarsh, "Newton, John", 729.



The *Olney Hymns* played a critical role in bringing the hymn into the Lord's Day worship of the parish church.⁸

In what follows, I have decided to focus on two of these texts, Newton's hymns and his letters, and take note of their significance for contemporary Evangelicalism.

The origins of the *Olney Hymns*

The English Dissenters—the Particular Baptists and Independents—had been writing and singing hymns in public worship since the turn of the eighteenth century. Among the latter there were, of course, the hymns of the so-called “Father of English hymnody,” Isaac Watts (1674-1748).⁹ Among the former were some fine communion hymns by the Seventh-day Baptist Joseph Stennett (1663-1713).¹⁰ It is noteworthy that Newton's first exposure to biblical Christianity was in the circles of Dissent. Newton's mother, Elizabeth (d.1732), worshipped at the Independent chapel on Old Gravel Lane, Wapping, just outside of London, where she had become acquainted with Watts' hymns.¹¹ Newton remembered her as “a pious experienced Christian,”¹² from whom

⁸ “Olney Hymns 1779: 1. The book and its origins”, *Churchman*, 93, No.4 (1979), 327. Leaver's study provides the best reconstruction of the historical genesis of the *Olney Hymns*. See “Olney Hymns 1779: 1. The book and its origins”, 327-342; “Olney Hymns 1779: 2. The hymns and their use”, *Churchman*, 94, No.1 (1980), 58-66; and “Olney Hymns: a documentary footnote”, *Churchman*, 97, No.3 (1983), 244-245.

For other helpful studies of Newton's hymnody, see Erik Routley, *I'll Praise My Maker: A study of the hymns of certain authors who stand in or near the tradition of English Calvinism 1700-1850* (London: Independent Press, 1951), 145-178; D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition between the Conversions of Wesley and Wilberforce* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 257-288; J.R. Watson, *The English Hymn: A Critical and Historical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 282-299; William E. Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton: Slave-Ship Captain, Hymnwriter, and Abolitionist* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2001), 115-158.

⁹ For two excellent studies of his life that include discussion of his hymnody, see Arthur Paul Davis, *Isaac Watts: His Life and Works* (n.p.: n.p., 1943) and David G. Fountain, *Isaac Watts Remembered 1674-1748* (2nd ed.; Harpenden, Hertfordshire: Gospel Standard Baptist Trust Ltd., 1978).

¹⁰ For Stennett, see B. A. Ramsbottom, *Through Cloud and Sunshine. Four generations of faithful witness — the story of the Stennett family* (N. p.: Gospel Standard Trust Publications, 1982), 4-7. For his hymns, see *Hymns in Commemoration of the Sufferings of Our Blessed Saviour Jesus Christ, Compos'd for the Celebration of his Holy Supper* (3rd ed.; London, 1713).

¹¹ Watts was a friend of Elizabeth Newton's minister, David Jennings.

¹² *Life and Spirituality of John Newton*, 17.



he learned the rudiments of piety that he was never completely able to erase despite his later dissolute years.¹³ And among those rudiments were some of Watts' hymns.

Four years after the death of his mother in 1732, Newton's father, also called John Newton (d.1750) a captain in the merchant marine, took his son to sea with him. Over the next twelve years as a sailor, Newton sought to rid himself entirely of his mother's godly instruction. He embraced the viewpoint of a free-thinking Deist, came to be expert in ridiculing Christianity, and liberally peppered his speech with coarse language and blasphemies. In his words:

My whole life, when awake, was a course of most horrid impiety and profaneness. I know not that I have since met with so daring a blasphemer. Not content with common oaths and imprecations, I daily invented new ones...¹⁴

But during a fearsome storm on a ship homeward bound in 1748, Newton shocked himself by hearing a cry to God for mercy from his own mouth, his first prayer in many years. The ship did not sink and Newton would later remark: "About this time, I began to know for that there is a God, who hears and answers prayer."¹⁵ Set on the path of seeking God, it was not until 1754 that Newton was firmly committed to Evangelicalism. A providential meeting with Alexander Clunie (d.1770), a naval captain, in St. Kitts was critical in Newton's spiritual growth, for Clunie was

a man of experience of in the things of God. ...He not only improved my understanding, but inflamed my heart. He encouraged me to open my mouth in social prayer. He put me upon an attempt to make my profession more public, and to venture to speak for God.¹⁶

After Newton's conversion, he was re-introduced to hymns, including those of Watts, through his fellowship with Evangelicals in Liverpool, where he was residing at the time, and which involved singing at prayer-meetings in his home. Leaver suggests that in the early 1760s Newton may well have used a hymnal compiled by William Cowper's cousin, Martin Madan (1726-

¹³ Hindmarsh, *John Newton*, 52-54.

¹⁴ Bull, *John Newton*, 23.

¹⁵ Bull, *John Newton*, 27.

¹⁶ Bull, *John Newton*, 58.



1790).¹⁷ So convinced did Newton become of the importance of such meetings for Christian growth and maturity that he introduced similar prayer-meetings in his Olney congregation when he went there as the curate-in-charge of the parish church in 1764. These weekly prayer-meetings initially met at the vicarage on Tuesday and Sunday evenings.¹⁸ For instance, Newton observed in his diary for January 27, 1765, of one such Sunday meeting:

We have now a little company who come to my house on Sabbath evening after tea. We spend an hour or more in prayer and singing, and part between six and seven.¹⁹

The year following William Cowper's move to Olney in September, 1767, however, the numbers attending these prayer-meetings had grown to such a degree that they had to be held in what was called the Great House, that is, the vacant home of William Legge (1731-1801), the second Earl of Dartmouth, who was a decided Evangelical and the owner of the parish living at Olney.

Central to these meetings were hymns. Sometimes Newton would base his teaching on a hymn from other Evangelical authors. For example, on one occasion Newton noted in his diary that he had spoken from "a hymn in the *Gospel Magazine*, 'The God of Abraham Praise'."²⁰ This, of course, is the well-known composition of the Methodist preacher Thomas Olivers (1725-1799). More frequently, when Newton was expounding a Bible text, he composed a hymn to accompany his teaching and so encapsulate in hymnic form his teaching on that particular passage.

Here then is the soil from which the *Olney Hymns* sprang: Newton's prayer-meetings which marked his entire ministry at Olney from its inception till he left for London in 1780. It is noteworthy that in London, where Newton's ministry mostly centred on preaching and writing, and was not attended by weekly prayer-meetings, he all but ceased to write hymns.²¹ This would explain the reason why later generations found some of the hymns unsuitable for congregational

¹⁷ Leaver, "Olney Hymns 1779: 1. The book and its origins", 327-328.

¹⁸ Hindmarsh, *John Newton*, 198-200.

¹⁹ Cited Hindmarsh, *John Newton*, 258. For the date, see Hindmarsh, *John Newton*, 258 and n.4.

²⁰ Cited Phipps, *Amazing Grace*, 121. The *Gospel Magazine* first appeared in 1766 and was a monthly publication in which Newton regularly published various literary pieces.

²¹ Hindmarsh, *John Newton*, 259, n.7.



worship. They were unable to escape the context for which they were written, namely, the small fellowship of believers. Yet, it is also clear that Newton—and Cowper, who was Newton’s collaborator in the *Olney Hymns*—frequently wrote with a larger audience in mind and thus with the goal of wider dissemination and eventual publication.²²

Two final points regarding the origins of this hymnal need to be made. First, it appears that Cowper’s main period of hymn-writing had ended by 1773.²³ In Newton’s “Preface” to the hymnal he noted that the book would have appeared much sooner, but through a “mysterious providence of God” Cowper had been laid aside with “a long and affecting indisposition”—a prolonged period of mental instability that led to a failed suicide attempt in 1773—and Newton initially thought their joint project was at an end. In his own words: “My grief and disappointment were great; I hung my harp upon the willows, and for some time thought myself determined to proceed no farther without him.”²⁴ Eventually, though, friends—among them possibly his young friend John Ryland, Jr. (1753-1825), who was also engaged in writing hymn and verse at this time²⁵—prevailed upon Newton to complete the project.²⁶

Second, Newton’s reluctance to publish the hymnal without Cowper’s active involvement stemmed from the fact that he viewed the book as a testimony to his “intimate and endeared friendship” with Cowper. And he had “so few” of Cowper’s “hymns to insert in the collection.”²⁷ It is noteworthy that years later, when he delivered a funeral sermon for Cowper, he mentioned that the Lord had given him “many friends” over the years of his life, but “with none” had he had “so great an intimacy, as with [his]...friend Mr Cowper.”²⁸ Newton need not have worried.

²² Leaver, “Olney Hymns 1779: 1. The book and its origins”, 332-333; Hindmarsh, *John Newton*, 261-262.

²³ Leaver, “Olney Hymns 1779: 1. The book and its origins”, 329-330.

²⁴ “Preface” to *Olney Hymns*, vi.

²⁵ Leaver, “Olney Hymns 1779: 1. The book and its origins”, 329.

²⁶ Newton, “Preface” to *Olney Hymns*, vi-vii. On Ryland, see Michael A.G. Haykin, “John Ryland, Jr.—‘O Lord, I would delight in Thee’: The life and ministry of John Ryland, Jr. appreciated on the 250th anniversary of his birth”, *Reformation Today*, 196 (Nov-Dec 2003), 13-20.

²⁷ “Preface” to *Olney Hymns*, vi-vii.

²⁸ Hannah Jowett, “Mr. Newton’s account of Mr. Cowper in a Funeral Sermon” (1800) (Ms., Cowper and Newton Museum, Olney, Buckinghamshire).



Wherever Evangelicals have used hymns from the *Olney Hymns* to praise the Triune God of Scripture, the names of Newton and Cowper have been inextricably linked together.

Amazing Grace

Undoubtedly the most well-known hymn in the collection is what contemporary Evangelicalism calls *Amazing Grace*, which Newton originally had entitled *Faith's review and expectation*.²⁹ It was based on 1 Chronicles 17:16-17, David's utter amazement at God's favour over the course of his life.³⁰ Newton spoke on this text a number of times in his ministry, but it appears that this hymn was written to go with his morning sermon on this Old Testament passage, New Year's Day, 1773.³¹

In notes that survive of this sermon,³² Newton developed "faith's review" of "past mercies" in the first two main sections of the sermon, which were entitled "The frame of mind: humility and admiration" and "That thou hast brought me hitherto." Central to the first of these sections is David's question, "Who am I...?" (1 Chronicles 17:16). It is a question, Newton emphasized, which "should be always upon our minds." As we look back at who we were when God first began to work in our lives, we see that we were "miserable," "blinded by the god of this world" and resistant to God's call and so undeserving. This only changed because God "overcame us by the power of his grace." This means that the believer's frame of mind must constantly be one of humility—who is he that God has saved him—and "admiration" and awe at God's good grace. Or as Newton puts it in the first stanza of the hymn:

Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)
That sav'd a wretch like me!

²⁹ On this hymn, see especially Steve Turner, *Amazing Grace: The Story of America's Most Beloved Song* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002).

³⁰ *Olney Hymns*, Book I, Hymn 41.

³¹ Turner, *Amazing Grace*, 79-82. See also "Amazing Grace" in "The John Newton Project" (<http://www.johnnewton.org/Group/Group.aspx?id=32662>; accessed June 18, 2007).

³² For Newton's notes of this sermon, see "Appendix 7: Newton's Sermon Notes for *Amazing Grace*" in Richard Cecil, *The Life of John Newton*, ed. Marylynn Rouse (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2000), 365-368. The quotes of the sermon that follow come from this transcription.



This first stanza also embodies the first sub-heading of the sermon’s second main section (“That thou hast brought me hitherto”), which is simply “before conversion.” Before conversion Newton—and every singer of this hymn—was lost and blind: “I once was lost, but now am found/Was blind, but now I see.”

The second sub-heading of the second section is “at conversion,” in which Newton spoke of “the never to be forgotten hour when he enabled us to hope in his mercy.” This part of the sermon is well captured in the hymn’s second stanza:

’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears reliev’d;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believ’d!

The final sub-heading of this section is “since we first were enabled to give up our names to him” in which Newton spoke of the “mercy and goodness” that had kept him and his believing hearers thus far in their spiritual pilgrimage. Readily could they, therefore, sing:

Thro’ many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
’Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

The key word that links together these first three stanzas is “grace”—grace in the past and grace for the days to come. To those days—what he called “future hopes” in his sermon—Newton now turns in the final three stanzas of the hymn.³³

In these stanzas Newton reviews the believer’s own personal hope for the rest of his earthly journey and his translation into the presence of God—“within the veil,” an allusion to Hebrews 6:19-20 (KJV)—and also the prospect for the cosmos. They correspond to the third and final

³³ The alternative verse that often replaces these three stanzas and which begins “When we’ve been there ten thousand years” is a nineteenth-century addition that probably would not have been theologically acceptable to Newton. See Phipps, *Amazing Grace*, 128-129.



section of the sermon where Newton focuses on “eternity” and the believer’s “travelling home to God.”

The Lord has promis'd good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.

Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease;
I shall possess, within the vail,
A life of joy and peace.

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
The sun forbear to shine;
But God, who call'd me here below,
Will be forever mine.

The ending of the hymn is especially powerful as it moves from events attending the end of the cosmos to personal assurance of salvation.³⁴ The latter does, however, have a “cosmic” dimension, “God...will be *forever mine*.”

Glorious things of thee are spoken

Another of Newton’s well-known hymns is based upon an Old Testament passage. Newton called it “Zion, or the city of God.” Today we know it as “Glorious things of thee are spoken.” It is based, according to the *Olney Hymns*, on Isaiah 33:27-28.³⁵ This Scripture reference is clearly a typographical mistake since Isaiah 33 has only twenty-four verses. It is surely a reference to verses 20-21 of that chapter, for there it is stated:

Look upon Zion, the city of our solemnities: thine eyes shall see Jerusalem a quiet habitation, a tabernacle that shall not be taken down; not one of the stakes thereof shall ever be removed, neither shall any of the cords thereof be broken. But there the glorious Lord will be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams; wherein shall go no galley with oars, neither shall gallant ship pass thereby (KJV).

³⁴ See Hindmarsh, *John Newton*, 277.

³⁵ *Olney Hymns*, Book 1, Hymn 60.



These verses gave Newton the key theme of the hymn, which is the city of God's ultimate invincibility across the reaches of time since it is indwelt by the living God. As Madeleine Forell and Janet Todd have noted, the hymn has one of the key marks that distinguish Newton's better hymns—a trans-historical vision that fuses biblical truth with the believer's experience.³⁶

The first stanza of the hymn begins with a direct allusion to Psalm 87:2-3, "The Lord loveth the gates of Zion...Glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God" and goes on to describe this city as ultimately unshakeable. It is founded on the "rock of ages" and surrounded by the walls of divine salvation.

Glorious things of thee are spoken,
Zion, city of our God!
He, whose word cannot be broken,
Form'd thee for his own abode:
On the rock of ages founded,
What can shake thy sure repose?
With salvation's walls surrounded
Thou may'st smile at all thy foes.

Stanza two returns to the Isaiah passage for its depiction of Zion's God—"the glorious Lord will be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams"—who is the never-ending giver of grace throughout time and is thus more than able to meet his people's daily needs—"all fear of want remove."

See! the streams of living waters
Springing from eternal love;
Well supply thy sons and daughters,
And all fear of want remove.
Who can faint while such a river
Ever flows their thirst t'assuage?
Grace, which like the Lord, the giver,
Never fails from age to age.

³⁶ *English Congregational Hymns in the Eighteenth Century* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1982), 114. See also See Hindmarsh, *John Newton, 275-276*.

The analysis of this hymn by Marshall and Todd, albeit brief, has been very helpful. See Marshall and Todd, *English Congregational Hymns*, 114-116. See also Routley, *I'll Praise My Maker*, 172-174; J.R. Watson, ed., *An Annotated Anthology of Hymns* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 216-218;



In the third stanza Newton continues to think of his congregants' experience as he speaks of the individual homes of believers in Olney. But he has not forgotten the hymn's great theme, the city of God, for what marks out Zion, namely God's indwelling presence, also applies to his congregants' humble dwellings if they be believers—"the Lord is near" each home.

Round each habitation hov'ring,
See the cloud and fire appear!
For a glory and a cov'ring,
Shewing that the Lord is near:
Thus deriving from our banner
Light by night and shade by day;
Safe they feed upon the Manna
Which he gives them when they pray.

The fourth stanza uses Revelation 1:5-6³⁷ to explain what it means to be an inhabitant of this city of God: reliance on the Lord Jesus, who has cleansed his people from their sins, rulers over "self"³⁸ and worshippers.

Blest inhabitants of Zion,
Wash'd in the Redeemer's blood!
Jesus, whom their souls rely on,
Makes them kings and priests to God:
'Tis his love his people raises
Over self to reign as kings
And as priests, his solemn praises
Each for a thank-off'ring brings.

In this world, though, God's royal people are often the objects of derision and pitied as fools. But the truth of the matter is that all that the worldly delight in will fade away. Only those who are members of Zion, the eternal city that is founded on God the rock, can know corresponding pleasures—"solid joys" that will last forever.³⁹

³⁷ Christ has "washed from our sins in his own blood and hath made us kings and priests unto God" (KJV).

³⁸ This was a very important aspect of the Christian life for Newton, who, in his "Preface" to the *Olney Hymns*, spoke of his theological beliefs being "friendly to holiness" (*Olney Hymns*, x) and who was convinced, as he once put it, that "the worst pope" he had ever experienced was "Pope Self!" ("Newton's "Table Talk" " in Calls, ed., *John Newton*, 95).

³⁹ For similar thoughts, see also *Olney Hymns*, Book 1, Hymn 69, stanza 6.



Saviour, if of Zion's city
I thro' grace a member am;
Let the world deride or pity,
I will glory in thy name:
Fading is the worldling's pleasure,
All his boasted pomp and show;
Solid joys and lasting treasure
None but Zion's children know.

How sweet the name of Jesus sounds

What Peter Newman Brooks has described as Newton's "most successful hymn,"⁴⁰ *How sweet the name of Jesus sounds*, is also taken from Book I of the *Olney Hymns*.⁴¹ It was originally called "The name of Jesus" and had as its Scripture referent, Song of Songs 1:3.⁴² Newton accepts the traditional Christological exegesis of this portion of the Old Testament and thus sees "the name" that is comparable to ointment in Song 1:3 as being "the name of Jesus."

Why is Jesus' name sweet to the hearing of the believer? Well, Newton maintains in the first two stanzas, it is because of all that he does for his brothers and sisters. He is all-sufficient for their every need.

How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds
In a believer's ear?
It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds,
And drives away his fear.

It makes the wounded spirit whole,
And calms the troubled breast;
'Tis Manna to the hungry soul,
And to the weary rest.

⁴⁰ *Hymns as Homilies* (Leominster, Herefordshire: Gracewing, 1997), 110.

⁴¹ *Olney Hymns*, Book I, Hymn 57. For commentary on this hymn, I am indebted to Routley, *I'll Praise my Maker*, 149-151; Marshall and Todd, *English Congregational Hymns*, 97-99; Brooks, *Hymns as Homilies*, 110-112.

⁴² "Because of the savour of thy good ointments, thy name is as ointment poured forth, therefore do the virgins love thee" (KJV).



Stanza three continues the same theme but emphasizes also the strength of Christ. He is like a rock, a shield of defence, a place of shelter from the storm. One can meditate on the sweetness of Christ without descending into mere sentimentality.⁴³

Dear name! the rock on which I build,
My shield and hiding place;
My never-failing treasury fill'd
With boundless stores of grace;

Newton's fourth stanza has been regularly omitted by hymn compilers, possibly because of its realism about the believer's ongoing warfare with indwelling sin.

By thee my pray'rs acceptance gain,
Altho' with sin defil'd;
Satan accuses me in vain,
And I am own'd a child.

In the next stanza, we come, in one sense, to the heart of Newton's Evangelical Christianity: it is Christ-centred and Christ-exalting. Through the listing of the names of Christ, what amounts to a "cascade of divine attributes" in the words of Erik Routley,⁴⁴ Newton drives home the necessity of having Christ in every area of human life.

Jesus, my Shepherd, Husband, Friend,
My Prophet, Priest, and King;
My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,
Accept the praise I bring.

The final two stanzas deal with the reality of living as a Christian in this world. Stanza 6 speaks of the believer's struggle with indwelling sin, in this case dogging his steps as he seeks to worship. Stanza 7 is the appropriate response to such spiritual attacks: active service for the Lord, proclaiming him and delighting in him.

Weak is the effort of my heart,
And cold my warmest thought;
But when I see thee as thou art,
I'll praise thee as I ought.

⁴³ Marshall and Todd, *English Congregational Hymns*, 99.

⁴⁴ *I'll Praise my Maker*, 151.



'Till then I would thy love proclaim
With ev'ry fleeting breath;
And may the music of thy name
Refresh my soul in death.

“With ev'ry fleeting breath”

The year after the publication of the *Olney Hymns* Newton left Olney for London. At the time there was only one other Evangelical Anglican clergyman pastoring in the city and that was William Romaine (1714-1795). While sharing a commitment to Evangelical Calvinism, Newton and Romaine nevertheless were quite different in temperament and in certain theological convictions. One of those convictions had to do with the singing of hymns in worship. Romaine was opposed to such and had expressed himself quite forcefully in *An Essay on Psalmody* (1775).⁴⁵ Romaine had had a copy sent to Newton while the latter was still in Olney to make sure presumably that the Olney pastor was familiar with Romaine's arguments. Not surprisingly Newton disagreed with Romaine. He was concerned, he wrote his friend John Thornton (1720-1790) that a means of grace, singing hymns, which God used to strengthen his people, should be neglected.⁴⁶

I have received (I suppose from the author) a book Wm. Romaine has lately published on the subject of Psalmody. I wish he had treated it in a different manner. I do not feel myself hurt, by his censure of modern hymn-makers, but I am afraid it will hurt some weak well-meaning people, who consider him as little less than infallible, to behold, that whatever comfort they may think they have received from singing hymns in public worship were only imagination and he has...left himself very open to those who do not love him. He seems to ascribe the deadness that is complained of in many places where the gospel is preached (I suppose he chiefly means the London Dissenters) to their not singing Sternhold and Hopkins. Strange that a wise man can advance such paradoxes. This judgement involves not only the Dissenters, and the Lock, but the Tabernacle, Tottenham Court...and many other places where I should think he knows...the Lord has attended his blessing. The Curate of Olney and his poor people may be content to be ranked amongst so much good company. I think many of his friends must wish this book had not appeared. What a mercy is it, that we are not to stand or fall by man's judgement. Some of us here, know that the

⁴⁵ For a brief discussion of this work and the controversy it aroused, see Tim Shenton, *'An Iron Pillar': The Life and Times of William Romaine* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2004), 275-281.

⁴⁶ See Shenton, *'An Iron Pillar'*, 279.



Lord has comforted us by hymns, which express Scriptural truths, though not confined to the words of David's Psalms. And we know by the effects we are not mistaken. I believe Dr. Watts's Hymns have been a singular blessing to the Churches, notwithstanding Mr. Romaine does not like them.⁴⁷

Ultimately for Newton, hymns, including his own, were an appropriate way of responding to God's overwhelming grace, and a way, among others, of proclaiming God's love "with ev'ry fleeting breath."⁴⁸

A network of letter-writers

In a ground-breaking article on the way that letter-writing connected the various streams of the eighteenth-century Evangelical awakening in its early years, Susan O'Brien identified ten ministers who were central to this network of letters, including Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), Isaac Watts, Philip Doddridge (1702-1751), and George Whitefield (1714-1770).⁴⁹ If her study had taken in the latter half of the eighteenth century, she would have found a similar network of Evangelical ministerial letter-writers and central among them Newton. By the 1790s he was regularly devoting significant amounts of time to letter-writing, though he seemed to be perpetually behind in answering letters, usually having, he estimated, fifty to sixty unanswered pieces of mail at any given time.⁵⁰ And it was through this medium of the letter that Newton realized a central part of his calling as a minister and spiritual guide. Consider, for instance, his mentoring of William Wilberforce (1759-1833), well-known for the key role that he played in the abolition of the slave trade.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Letter to John Thornton, August 3, 1775 [Dr. G.K. Thornton's Collection of Letters; cited Donald E. Demaray, *The Innovation of John Newton (1725-1807): Synergism of Word and Music in Eighteenth Century Evangelism* (Lewiston, New York/Queenston, Ontario: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), 264-265].

⁴⁸ From the hymn "How sweet the name of Jesus sounds"

⁴⁹ Susan O'Brien, "A Transatlantic Community of Saints: The Great Awakening and the First Evangelical Network, 1735-1755", *The American Historical Review*, 91, No.4 (October 1986), 819.

⁵⁰ Hindmarsh, *John Newton*, 249-250.

⁵¹ For two older studies of the life of Wilberforce, see especially Robin Furneaux, *William Wilberforce* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1974) and John Pollock, *Wilberforce* (1977 ed.; repr. Eastbourne: Kingsway, 2001). In a review of Pollock's book, Richard V. Pierard judged it to be a slightly better biography than that of Furneaux: "The Greatness of Wilberforce", *Christianity Today*, 24, no.1 (January 4, 1980), 36.

For more recent biographies of his life, see Kevin Belmonte, *Hero for Humanity. A Biography of William Wilberforce* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 2002); Eric Metaxas, *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007); and



Mentoring William Wilberforce

Newton's mentoring of the English politician began when Wilberforce, shortly after his conversion, approached Newton about the rectitude of a Christian being in politics. In the fashionable circles in which Wilberforce moved Newton and Evangelicals like him were regarded with utter disdain and contempt. Writing to Newton on December 2, 1785, Wilberforce stressed that any visit to the well-known Evangelical minister had to be kept secret.⁵² In fact, when Wilberforce went to call on Newton, he walked around the block twice before knocking on Newton's door. The meeting between the two men would be a true turning point in the social and political history of Great Britain. Wilberforce was contemplating leaving the realm of politics. For a number of eighteenth-century Evangelicals, particularly the Methodist followers of John Wesley (1703-1791) and those outside of the Anglican fold like the Baptists, politics was a "worldly" occupation from which the believer was best to separate himself or herself.⁵³ Anglican Evangelicals like Newton, however, did not view their Christian discipleship in such a counter-cultural light and Newton wisely encouraged Wilberforce to stay in the world of politics. Some words that Newton wrote to him a couple of years later well capture the essence of his advice to the young convert: "It is hoped and believed that the Lord has raised you up for the good of His church and for the good of the nation."⁵⁴ Newton was well aware of the challenge of being a Christian and a politician. As he wrote of Wilberforce to his good friend William Cowper the year after Wilberforce came to see him: "I hope the Lord will make him a blessing both as a Christian and a statesman. How seldom do these characters coincide!! But they are not incompatible."⁵⁵

Nor did Newton simply direct Wilberforce into the calling God had chosen for him, but over the next couple of decades Newton proved to be the ablest and most devoted of spiritual mentors. For example, in 1785, after they renewed their acquaintance with one another, Newton stated that he hoped and trusted that Wilberforce would derive his wisdom "from your attention to the Word of

William Hague, *William Wilberforce: The Life of the Great Anti-Slave Trade Campaigner* (London: HarperCollins, 2007).

⁵² For the letter, see Metaxas, *Amazing Grace*, 56-57.

⁵³ See, for example, Murray Andrew Pura, *Vital Christianity: The Life and Spirituality of William Wilberforce* (Fearn by Tain, Ross-Shire: Christian Focus/Toronto: Clements Publishing, 2003), 37-38.

⁵⁴ Cited Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 38.

⁵⁵ Cited Hague, *William Wilberforce*, 88.



God and the throne of his Grace.”⁵⁶ Nevertheless, when pressed by Wilberforce, he did give Wilberforce advice on matters such as how far a Christian might accommodate himself “to the prejudices of those about us, with a hope of winning upon them.” He warned Wilberforce that “an upright, conscientious man” could not wholly avoid “the censure and dislike of the world, so far as his religious principles are concerned,” but urged him “to square his life according to the precepts and spirit of the Gospel,” outlining the areas of godly living from which he perceived a believer in a public position dare not recede.⁵⁷

As the years passed, Newton continued to encourage Wilberforce in this calling. For example, in 1796, Newton wrote to Wilberforce: “I believe you are the Lord’s servant, and are in the post which He has assigned you; and though it appears to me more arduous, and requiring more self-denial than my own, I know that He who has called you to it can afford you strength according to your day.”⁵⁸ Newton also helped Wilberforce by recalling those in Scripture who had served in the political realm.

May the wisdom that influenced Joseph and Moses and Daniel rest upon you. Not only to guide and animate you in the line of political duty—but especially to keep you in the habit of dependence upon God, and your communion with him, in the midst of all the changes and bustle around you.⁵⁹

Wilberforce in turn acknowledged his dependence on the support of this faithful friend and mentor. For instance, he asked Newton in September 1788, “O my dear Sir, let not your hands cease to be lifted up, lest Amalek prevail—entreat for me that I may be enabled by divine grace to resist and subdue all the numerous enemies of my salvation.”⁶⁰

⁵⁶ John Newton, Letter to William Wilberforce, November 1, 1787 (MS Wilberforce c.49, fols. 14-15; Bodleian Library, Oxford University).

⁵⁷ John Newton, Letter to William Wilberforce, November 1, 1787.

⁵⁸ Cited Hague, *William Wilberforce*, 88.

⁵⁹ John Newton, Letter to William Wilberforce, 18 May [1786] (MS Wilberforce c.49, fol. 9; Bodleian Library, Oxford University).

⁶⁰ William Wilberforce, Letter to John Newton, September 6, 1788 (MS Wilberforce c.49 fols. 19-20; Bodleian Library, Oxford University).



Mentoring John Ryland, Jr.

For a second example of Newton's spiritual mentoring we turn to his friendship with the Calvinistic Baptist, John Ryland, Jr. (1753-1825). Newton's friendship with Ryland dates from 1768, a few years after the former had become the curate at the parish church in Olney and when the latter was living not far away in Northampton.⁶¹ "We began," Newton wrote to Ryland in 1795, "when you were a lad & I a Curate & we have gone on till you are grown into a Doctor & I am dignified with the title of Rector."⁶² Though belonging to different generations, both men deeply valued their friendship. Near the end of his life, Newton could write to his friend:

If, as is possible, this should be my last letter to you, keep it as a Memorial of the love I bear you, and of my thankful remembrance of past times, when being within a few miles, we could see each other often, rake sweet counsel together, and go to the House of our God in company.⁶³

And in 1824, the year before Ryland died, the Baptist pastor recalled:

Mr. Newton invited me to visit him at Olney in 1768; and from thence to his death, I always esteemed him, and Mr. Hall of Arnsby⁶⁴...as my wisest and most faithful counsellors, in all difficulties.⁶⁵

The truth of Ryland's assertion is readily seen even by a cursory examination of the letters he received from Newton. Frequently, he consulted Newton about a variety of matters, some theological, some personal, the latter ranging from prospective marriages (Ryland married twice) to his decision to leave his pastorate in Northampton for one in Bristol. One of the matters in

⁶¹ John Ryland, "Remarks on the Quarterly Review, for April 1824, Relative to the Memoirs of Scott and Newton" in his *Pastoral Memorials: Selected from the Manuscripts of the Late Revd. John Ryland, D.D. of Bristol* (London: B.J. Holdsworth, 1828), II, 346. There is no major biographical study of the younger Ryland.

For a discussion of his friendship with Newton, see L.G. Champion, "The Letters of John Newton to John Ryland", *The Baptist Quarterly*, 27 (1977-1978), 157-163; *idem*, "The Theology of John Ryland: Its Sources and Influences", *The Baptist Quarterly*, 28 (1979-1980), 17-18, 26.

⁶² Letter to John Ryland, July 28, 1795.

⁶³ Letter to John Ryland, January 16, 1801.

⁶⁴ The Baptist pastor Robert Hall, Sr. (1728-1791). On his life and ministry see Graham W. Hughes, "Robert Hall of Arnesby: 1728-1791", *The Baptist Quarterly* 10, (1940-1941), 444-447.

⁶⁵ "Remarks on the Quarterly Review", 346.



which Newton was a great help had to do with Ryland's father, John Collett Ryland (1723-1792).⁶⁶

The elder Ryland was one of the leading Calvinistic Baptist pastors of the eighteenth century, and throughout his life maintained cordial relations with Anglican evangelicals such as George Whitefield and James Hervey (1714-1758), a one-time member of the Oxford "Holy Club." According to William Jay (1769- 1853), the Congregationalist preacher, John Ryland, Sr. was

much attached to many other preachers less systematically orthodox than himself; and laboured, as opportunity offered, with them. He was, indeed a lover of all good men;...while many talked of candour, he exercised it. Though he was a firm Baptist, he was no friend to bigotry or exclusiveness.⁶⁷

Yet, the elder Ryland was also very candid man, often quite impetuous, and sometimes very unwise in his choice of words, all of which gave his son much anguish of heart. It was Ryland, for example, who, at a meeting of the ministers of the Northamptonshire Association in 1785, asked William Carey (1761-1834), who had just become the minister of the Baptist cause in the village of Moulton, Northamptonshire, to offer the meeting a subject for discussion. Carey proposed a subject on which he had been long ruminating: "Whether the command given to the apostles to teach all nations was not binding on all succeeding ministers, to the end of the world, seeing that the accompanying promise was of equal extent." Carey's question grew out of his reflection on Matthew 28:18-20. The promise Carey had in mind is clearly that given by the Lord Jesus in verse 20, and the command that in verse 19a. If, Carey reasoned, Christ's promise of his presence is for all time (verse 20), what of his command (verse 19a)?

There is considerable debate about the older Ryland's response. According to John Webster Morris (d.1836), pastor of Clipston Baptist Church in Northamptonshire, who was actually present, Ryland responded thus to Carey:

⁶⁶ On Ryland, see Peter Naylor, "John Collett Ryland (1723-1792)" in Michael A. G. Haykin, ed., *British Particular Baptists, 1638-1910* (Springfield, Missouri: Particular Baptist Press, 1998), I, 184-201.

⁶⁷ *The Autobiography of the Rev. William Jay*, eds. George Redford and John Angell James (2nd ed.; London: Hamilton, Adams & Co., 1855), 297.



You are a miserable enthusiast for asking such a question. Certainly nothing can be done before another Pentecost, when an effusion of miraculous gifts, including the gift of tongues, will give effect to the commission of Christ as at first. What, Sir! Can you preach in Arabic, in Persic, in Hindustani, in Bengali, that you think it your duty to send the gospel to the heathens?"

John C. Marshman, the son of Carey's respected co-worker in India, Joshua Marshman (1768-1837), reported that Ryland, Sr. told Carey: "Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, he will do it without your aid or mine!" John Ryland, Jr., the son, on the other hand, strongly asserted that his father never uttered such sentiments.⁶⁸

Though the younger Ryland denied the historicity of this particular outburst of his father, which most students of this era acknowledge to have taken place, other similar incidents could not be denied. What should he do about his father? Newton's advice was especially helpful to the younger Ryland. In a letter dated March 26, 1791, Newton advised Ryland:

I have always admired him [i.e. Ryland Sr.]: his love to the truth and to souls; his zeal and benevolence, have appeared to me, exemplary. His eccentricities and failures have likewise been great, but I think they were constitutional chiefly. He will leave them behind him, with the mortal part, and perhaps the blemishes may be more visible, and his excellencies more clouded the longer he lives.

Again, the following year, on January 31, 1792, when Ryland, Jr. was still disturbed by some of his father's behavior at times, Newton told him:

Poor man, I love and pity him. I am persuaded his most conspicuous failings are strictly constitutional. He acts according to the impetus of his spirits, is hurried away, and I believe he cannot help it.

⁶⁸ For discussion of this incident, see especially John Ryland, Jr., *The Work of Faith, the Labour of Love, and the Patience of Hope Illustrated; in the Life and Death of the Rev. Andrew Fuller* (2nd ed.; London: Button & Son, 1818), 112, note; S. Pearce Carey, *William Carey* (8th ed.; London: The Carey Press, 1934), 54; F. Deaville Walker, *William Carey: Missionary Pioneer and Statesman* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1925), 54-55; Iain H. Murray, *The Puritan Hope. A Study in Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1971), 139 and 280, n.14; *idem*, "William Carey: Climbing the Rainbow", *The Banner of Truth*, 349 (October 1992), 18-21; Ruth Tucker, "William Carey: Father of Modern Missions" in John D. Woodbridge, ed., *Great Leaders of the Christian Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 308; Brian Stanley, *The History of the Baptist Missionary Society 1792-1992* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), 6-7.



Consider one further example of Newton's wise counsel to Ryland, namely, the Ryland's controversy with the Antinomian author William Huntington (1745-1813) who helped foment a dissension in Ryland's church. Huntington—who regarded himself as a prophet—had viciously attacked Caleb Evans (1737-1791) and the elder Ryland in pamphlets. A Mr. Adams from Ryland's congregation supported Huntington and invited him to Northampton to preach. Huntington even had the effrontery to ask Ryland if he could speak from his pulpit! When Adams was eventually disfellowshipped, Huntington wrote an 84-page booklet against the younger Ryland and the latter's congregation ended up losing slightly more than 20 members—it decreased from 206 in 1782 to 183 in 1792⁶⁹—due to the controversy.

What should Ryland do—should he respond to Huntington's pamphlet? Newton's advice was sage and sound. On January 25, 1792, he wrote to Ryland:

[W]hen you speak, as not being fully determined whether to answer this doughty pamphlet, or not, I am a little alarmed. And as it seems there are some who advise it, I am willing to throw my mite into the opposite scale. But I think if you regard your own character you will pity and pray for the writer in silence. If a chimney-sweeper insulted you in the street, would you demean yourself so low as to fight him? Let him alone, and he will expose himself more effectually than you can expose him. And his performance will soon die and be forgotten, unless you keep the memory of it alive, by an answer. I believe scarcely any thing has conduced [i.e. contributed] so much to perpetuate disputes and dissensions in the professing church, as the ambition of having the last word.

His fan is in his hand [cp. Matthew 3:12]. He has sent a fan to Northampton, to rid you of some chaff. Why should this grieve or displease you? If any simple people whose hearts are better than their heads are drawn away at first, give them time, and the Lord will shew [*sic*] them their folly, and deliver them. He knows them that are his.

The following week, Newton gave further advice about the matter:

The embers at Northampton will soon go out, if you do not keep them alive, and blow them up. I have such a love for you and for peace, that, if money would prevent it, I would give something out of my pocket rather than see you degrade yourself, and perplex your people, by answering a performance which deserves no other treatment than silent contempt.⁷⁰

⁶⁹College Lane Churchbook, 134 (Northamptonshire Record Office, Northampton, England).

⁷⁰Letter of January 31, 1792.



A concluding letter

What was it like to get a letter from Newton? Well, consider the one that he wrote to Sarah Pearce (d.1805), the widow of Samuel Pearce (1766-1799), the Birmingham Calvinistic Baptist pastor, the close friend of Ryland and William Carey, and for whom Newton had great respect.