
A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

John Newton.[1]

By the Rev. JOHN CALLIS, M.A.

WE are commemorating the life and ministry of one who finished his work on earth one hundred years ago—*i.e.*, on December 21 (St. Thomas's Day), 1807.

John Newton was a remarkable man as to his character and life-story. But he was more remarkable for his goodness than for his greatness; his moral qualities, rather than those of intellectual power, superiority, and brilliancy. He was a Londoner by birth, the only son of a sea-captain in the merchant service, the master of a ship trading in the Mediterranean; a motherless boy at seven; a pupil of a schoolmaster whose treatment of him was harsh, and failed to educate him to the development of his better qualities; a sailor boy at ten, he accompanied his father on his voyages. For a short time, he became a trafficker in slaves; then, failing in this, he became himself as a slave to a hard master and more brutal mistress. Being brought back to England by his father's interposition, he was again engaged on a trading-vessel, which was overtaken by a terrific storm, and narrowly escaped shipwreck. More voyages followed, again in the slave trade; until, after a sudden illness, his seafaring life terminated, and he obtained the situation of tide-surveyor in the port of Liverpool.

Newton had become a married man before he ceased his voyages; and now, in the more stationary life of his appointment on land, he turned his thoughts to another calling—that of the ministry. What induced him, after so many years of a rough, seafaring life, to think seriously of such a change of occupation? It was from no sudden impulse, and the result proved that there was a distinct calling of God to the work of His Gospel and of His Church. His past life, with all its strange vicissitudes, had been a disciplinary training for his future work.

[1] The substance of a sermon preached at St. Mary Woolnoth, Lombard Street, December 22, on the occasion of the Newton Centenary.

Newton had the inestimable privilege of the tender, loving care, teaching, and training of a godly mother. She laboured to store his mind with a knowledge of those Holy Scriptures able to make wise unto salvation. But at seven her blessed influence, in life at least, was withdrawn, and he became a motherless boy at an age greatly needing the continuance of such maternal care. Indifference to his religious training on the part of the father, who had received his own education at a Jesuit college in Spain, the evil influences of school-life of those days, and his early association with sailors during several voyages before the age of fifteen, seemed for a time to efface the impressions of his childhood. He tells us he had learned to curse and blaspheme, and was exceedingly wicked. There were, however, occasional returns of desire to amend. His last reform was remarkable; how like Luther (in his monastery), and Bunyan, under the strivings of their souls after peace and satisfaction! Newton says of this time: "After the strictest sect of our religion, I lived a Pharisee." He read the Scriptures, meditated and prayed through the greater part of the day, fasted often, abstained from all animal food for three months, almost renounced society, scarcely spoke lest he should speak amiss, and, in short, became an ascetic. He went about to establish his own righteousness, and so continued for more than two years. Then, through reading an infidel book, a change took place; faith wavered, and was on the point of vanishing. "At last," he says, "I renounced the hopes and comfort of the Gospel, when every other hope was about to fail me." But for a period the admonitions of conscience, from successive repulses, had grown weaker and weaker, and at length almost entirely ceased for months, if not for years.

It is often darkest just before dawn. On the voyage in which came the great crisis in his spiritual life, he says his daily course was one of most horrid impiety and profaneness. "I know not that I have since met so daring a blasphemer."

In March, 1748, sailing towards England, the ship was

overtaken by a terrific storm. The sea breaking over, the cry was raised that it was sinking. The crew worked desperately at the pumps. "March 21," he says, "I laboured at the pump from three in the morning till near noon." About six in the evening the hold was free from water, and there came a gleam of hope. "I thought," said Newton, "I saw the hand of God displayed in our favour. I began to pray. I could not utter the prayer of faith. I could not draw near to a reconciled God and call Him Father. My prayer was like the cry of the ravens, which yet the Lord Jesus does not disdain to hear."

The truth in its fulness was gradually unfolded to him. Nevertheless, this was the beginning of his return to God, or, rather, as he says, of God's return to him. There were fluctuations in Newton's spiritual life, but, as with the incoming tide, the movement was ever onward and higher.

At the conclusion of his seafaring life Newton used his spare time chiefly in increasing his knowledge of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, in reading theological works, and in seizing every opportunity of spiritual culture by attending services in various places of worship and hearing preachers of various denominations. His were the days of the religious revival of the eighteenth century. He became acquainted with John Wesley and George Whitefield, whose ministry he found most helpful. At length, after eight years at Liverpool, Newton himself resolved to seek to enter Holy Orders in the Established Church, and after some disappointments was ordained deacon by the Bishop of Lincoln, April 29, 1764. He was licensed to the curacy of Olney, in Buckinghamshire, the Vicar being non-resident. Lord Dartmouth, who nominated him for the curacy, also built a new vicarage for his residence. Mr. John Thornton, of Clapham, gave him £200 a year for hospitality and assistance to his poor. At Olney Newton laboured fifteen years—1764 to 1779. His earnest and faithful ministry was greatly blessed of God. In addition to the public services in the church, devotional meetings were held in a large old manor-house, formerly a residence of the Earl of Dartmouth. For

these prayer-meetings many of the well-known Olney hymns were composed by Newton and Cowper. Through an attack of mental depression, incapacitating him from continuing this work, Cowper contributed only 67, whilst Newton wrote 281. As might be expected, those of the well-educated, gentle, and refined poet showed superior excellences from a literary point of view. But many of Newton's are really noble poems. The following are found in most of our popular hymn-books, and are beautiful expressions of a devout and adoring spirit:

"How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds," "Begone, unbelief, my Saviour is near," "Approach, my soul, the mercy seat," "Quiet, Lord, my froward heart," "One there is above all others," "Rejoice, believer, in the Lord," "Glorious things of thee are spoken," "May the grace of Christ our Saviour."

The most remarkable circumstance of Newton's residence and ministry at Olney was his intimate friendship and association with the poet Cowper. They were men of very different temperament; the earlier years of their lives were spent in such different scenes—Newton, amid the stern, rough associations of a sailor's life; Cowper, the child of the Parsonage at Berkhampstead, the Westminster scholar, the student of law, the young barrister of the Temple, the welcome guest of literary and refined society. And yet, for ten years at least out of those passed in each other's daily companionship, and in co-operating in the pastoral work of Olney, the most sincere regard and the deepest affection bound them together in delightful Christian fellowship and affection. It is most unjust to charge Newton with exercising a deleterious influence on Cowper. The one was like the sturdy oak to the ivy which clings to it for strength and support. Their mutual influence was helpful, and blessed. Cowper has been regarded as one of the greatest of English letter-writers. But many of Newton's letters—and they were numerous—bear a favourable comparison for their raciness and admirable tone. He looked upon letter-writing as one of the greatest channels by which he might do good. A large number of Newton's letters were published by him. A volume to which he gave the title of "Cardiphonia"—heart-breathings

or voices, consisting of letters to individuals who sought his help on spiritual matters—has been widely read and greatly valued. Canon Overton says :

"John Newton's 'Cardiphonia' and 'Omicron' (another volume of letters) well deserve to be ranked amongst the devotional literature of the Evangelical School. The writers all felt so intensely the importance of practical religion that they would have deemed the time wasted if spent on any other kind of writing than that which would affect, directly or indirectly, the spiritual life" (p. 110).

In an interesting volume entitled "The Later Evangelical Fathers" (Seeley), there is an admirable sketch of Newton. As the writer says, when Mr. Newton began his work in London, it was just ten years before the French Revolution.

Few at that date were those who faithfully preached the truth which Newton in his first sermon declared that he was resolved, by the grace of God, to preach in this church—the truth, which, as he firmly held, was that of the Gospel of Christ in its purity and simplicity. Romaine, at this time the honoured Rector of St. Ann's, Blackfriars, appears to have been the only pronounced Evangelical incumbent in London, though there were several lecturers of Evangelical principles in various parishes. The Tabernacle and Tottenham Court Chapel, which were in the hands of Whitefield's trustees, were served by whatever Evangelical men offered, whether Churchmen, Dissenters, or laymen. Lady Huntingdon's very large chapel was always well supplied, and old John Wesley often ministered in the chapel in the City Road.

When John Newton came to town, he was an influence throughout the Metropolis; and he was just the man there wanted. A John the Baptist London had in old Wesley, who had not only his one large chapel, but several smaller ones. A learned and accurate preacher it still had in Romaine; but a genial, approachable, familiar, and lovable man was yet greatly needed for other and still larger classes of men; and so John Newton, that man with a history strange enough to draw attention of itself, was brought to St. Mary Woolnoth, a church in the very heart of the City, close to the Royal Exchange and

close to the Bank of England; and for parishioners he had wealthy merchants and substantial tradesmen, who lived for the most part, according to the custom of those times, at their own houses of business.

A man with learning, but not the learning of the college; a self-taught man; a man with plenty of literary tastes, yet one who had known rough life in the world, and who understood, too, what business was; a man who had been recovered from a very low condition indeed, yet who had been given time to make full proof of his recovery, and who himself could stand forth therefore as a manifest evidence of the grace of God—all this was John Newton.

Newton's peculiar talent was in parochial visitation. He was a sociable man, and one who loved to have personal intercourse with his people. He loved to have troubles and difficulties brought before him. Being of the most friendly and communicative disposition, his house was open to Christians of all ranks and denominations. Here, like a father among his children, he used to entertain, encourage, and instruct his friends, especially young ministers and candidates for the ministry.

Looking at his ministry as a whole, it was Mr. Cecil's opinion that he appeared to least advantage in the pulpit. He did not generally aim at accuracy in the composition of his sermons, nor at any address in the delivery of them; his utterance was far from clear, and his attitudes ungraceful. But then (says Mr. Seeley) he was so full of zeal and affection for his people that his regular hearers scarcely noticed those defects; and, besides, he had such a happy way of illustrating his subjects, and such a power of adapting his preaching to the trials and experience of his people, that many preferred him to any other preacher. His heart went forth to all men, whether Churchmen or Dissenters; but he loved order, and he loved his own Church, so that he could not always act with some whom he esteemed excellent persons. And is not this the true Catholic spirit—recognizing all who hold the fundamental doctrines of the Christian religion as true members of Christ's Holy Catholic

Church? Evangelicals like Newton make the plain teaching of the Gospels and Epistles the basis of their faith, at the same time admitting the right of Christian liberty to others in questions of Church government, organization, and forms of worship, as matters of secondary, and not of essential, importance.

Newton was one of the first members of the Eclectic Society. This was instituted in the year 1783, by a few of the London clergy and ministers, with a few laymen, for mutual religious intercourse and improvement and for the investigation of religious truth. This Society, though small in numbers, is chiefly remarkable as giving birth to the Church Missionary Society, which was founded at a meeting in 1799.

Newton appeared for the last time in the pulpit in October, 1806, when he preached for the benefit of the sufferers from the Battle of Trafalgar. Calmly and cheerfully the good old pastor waited for the call home. A few last sayings it may be well to notice here: "I am like a person going a journey in a stage-coach, who expects its arrival every hour, and is frequently looking out of the window for it." "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Saviour."

A well-written and deeply interesting entry by the clerk of Mr. Newton's death and burial is found in the register of this church.

Thus ended a noble life, the latter half of it, at least, spent in such devoted service of Christ and His Church. It was a life which has indeed left its mark upon both the Church and the world.

It is difficult to estimate perfectly the result of the influence of such a life and work as that of Newton. Wakeman, in his "History of the Church of England," says:

> "The intense and simple piety of the Evangelical revival never succeeded in leavening the solid mass of English Churchmanship. Great as was its influence upon individual souls, it did not seriously affect the current of life either of the Church or of the nation."

I must beg to differ from this statement. Here is that author's sketch of Church life in Newton's day:

"The Bishops were still amiable scholars, who lived in dignified ease apart from their clergy, attended the King's Levée regularly, voted steadily in Parliament for the party of the Minister who had appointed them, entertained the country gentry when Parliament was not sitting, wrote learned books on points of classical scholarship, and were occasionally seen driving in state through the muddy country roads, on their way to the chief towns in their dioceses to hold confirmations. Of spiritual leadership they had little idea. Church patronage, which was mainly in the hands of the land-owning class, was largely used to make a provision in life for the younger sons of the patrons."

Thank God, we have lived to see happier times—times of religious and philanthropic activities such, probably, as were never known in the history of the Church before. Whatever may be credited to the great Oxford Movement of the middle of last century in the restoration and beautifying of churches, more ornate ceremonial, multiplied Church services and functions, and organizations for the promotion of ecclesiastical principles and work, the great activity and true success of the Church of England during the last half of the century lay in the adherence to and promulgation of those fundamental truths and Evangelical principles of our faith which Newton and his contemporaries preached with such sanctified and self-sacrificing fervour. It was they who were the means, under the Holy Spirit of Christ, of quickening the soul of the Church, dead in formalism and latitudinarianism, and who made it a living spiritual power in the land.

On the title-page of Mr. Seeley's valuable book on the later Evangelical Fathers is a quotation from Sir James Stephen's "Essays on Ecclesiastical Biography." And with this I will conclude:

"It is because the Fathers of the Evangelical succession continually resorted to Holy Scripture as at once the ultimate source and the one criterion of all religious truth, that we reverently hail them as restorers and witnesses of the faith in their own and succeeding generations. After every allowance shall have been made . . . enough will remain to convince any impartial inquirer that the first generations of the clergy designated as Evangelical were the second founders of the Church of England."