

I. John Newton

1. *His personal life.* "John Newton was born in London, July, 1725. His father was for many years master of a ship in the Mediterranean trade, and in 1748 went out as Governor of York Fort, Hudson's Bay, where he died in the year 1750" (Bull).¹ Of his father, Newton said: "There was a sternness and severity about my father's manner, which induced a feeling of fear rather than of love, and which overawed and broke my spirit."² Of his mother he said: "I was born, as it were, in the house of God, and dedicated to Him in my infancy. My mother (as I have heard from many) was a pious, experienced Christian. I was her only child, and almost her whole employment was the care of my education."³ Newton's mother died before he was seven, and his father remarried. "My father was a very sensible and moral man, as the world rates morality; but neither he nor my step-mother was under the impressions of religion: I was therefore much left to myself, to mingle with idle and wicked boys; and soon learnt their ways."⁴ "When he was eleven years of age, his father took him to sea and before he had reached his fifteenth year, young Newton had made several voyages. During this period old impressions of religion would sometimes revive, but they passed away, and he learned to curse and blaspheme, and was exceedingly wicked" (Bull).⁵ He joined the navy when eighteen years old. "Here a new scene of life was presented; and, for about a month, much hardship endured. As a war was daily expected, his father was willing he should remain in the navy, and procured him a recommendation to the captain, who sent him upon the quarter-deck as midshipman. The companion he met with here completed the ruin of his principles: though he affected to talk of virtue, and preserved some decency, yet his delight and habitual practice was wickedness" (Cecil).⁶ In December of 1744, while stationed off the coast of the East Indies, he deserted and was eventually arrested. "Full of indignation, shame, and fear, he was confined two days in the guard-house; then sent on ship and kept a while in irons; next he was publicly stript and wipt, and degraded from his office" (Cecil).⁷ After two years, Newton persuaded the captain to trade him to another ship bound for West Africa. "I well remember that while I was passing from one ship to the other, I rejoiced in the exchange, with this reelection, that I might now be as abandoned as I pleased, without any control; and, from this time, I was exceedingly vile indeed."⁸

Newton decided to remain on one of the small islands off the coast of West Africa (Plantain Islands), and enter the service of a slave trader. "But unfortunately, before he was able to render his employer any service he was seized with severe illness, and was treated with the greatest neglect and cruelty" (Bull).⁹ During this year, Newton was treated as a slave, both by his employer, but especially his employer's mistress. "My mistress, a black woman, who lived with my master as his wife, and who was a person of some consequence in her own country – from the first took a prejudice against me. She lived in plenty herself, but hardly allowed me sufficient to sustain life, except now and then, when in the highest good-humor, she would send me food from her own plate after she had dined; and this I received with thanks and eagerness."¹⁰ Eventually, Newton was able to write his father and ask for deliverance. In February of 1747, a trading ship arrived whose captain was commissioned by Newton's

¹ Josiah Bull, *The Life of John Newton*, 4

² John Newton, *The Works of John Newton*, 1:1

³ John Newton, *The Works of John Newton*, 1:1

⁴ John Newton, *The Works of John Newton*, 1:2

⁵ Josiah Bull, *The Life of John Newton*, 5

⁶ Richard Cecil, *The Works of John Newton*, 1:9

⁷ Richard Cecil, *The Works of John Newton*, 1:10

⁸ John Newton, *The Works of John Newton*, 1:11

⁹ Josiah Bull, *The Life of John Newton*, 11

¹⁰ John Newton, *The Works of John Newton*, 1:16

father to retrieve him. "The ship in which he embarked as a passenger was on a trading voyage for gold, ivory, dyer's wood, and bees' wax. Having retrieved Newton, they travelled further from England to Cape Lopez. Finally, having finished their business, they began the more than seven-thousand-mile trip to England" (Cecil).¹¹ To pass the time, Newton began to read one of the few books on board, Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*. This book, along with a severe storm that nearly sank the ship, aroused within Newton a concern for his soul. He arrived at Liverpool, England in May of 1748, a new man. Though his faith was small, it was genuine. "My spiritual light was then as the first faint streaks of the early dawn."¹²

I thought, allowing the Scripture premises, there never was or could be such a sinner as myself; and then, comparing the advantages I had broken though, I concluded at first, that my sins were too great to be forgiven.; The Scripture, likewise, seemed to say the same: for I had formerly been well acquainted with the Bible, and many passages, upon this occasion, returned upon my memory...But as I began to see, beyond all probability, that the ship would survive the storm, 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 does not disdain to hear. I now began to think of that Jesus whom I had so often derided: I recollected the particulars of His life, and of His death; a death for sins not His own., but, as I remembered, for the sake of those who, in their distress, should put their trust in Him.¹³

No sooner did Newton arrive at Liverpool, he travelled the two-hundred miles to Kent, to visit Mary Catlett. They had met seven years before and continued a relation through letters. On February 12, 1750 they married, and then later that year, Newton accepted the charge of a ship as captain and returned to the sea. From 1750-1754, he made three trips to Africa. During these years, Newton wrote several letters to his wife, which reveal a deepening religious experience, as well as provide specific details of his travels (they were eventually printed with the title, *Letters to a Wife*). It has often been asked, why did Newton return to the slave-trade if newly converted. Later in life, Newton himself provided the following answer: "The reader may perhaps wonder, as I now do myself, that, knowing the state of this vile traffic to be as I have described and abounding with enormities which I have not mentioned, I did not at the time start with horror at my own employment as an agent promoting it. Custom, example, and interest, had blinded my eyes. I did it ignorantly, for I am sure had I thought of the slave trade then as I have thought of it since, no considerations would have induced me to continue in it."¹⁴ Following his trips to Africa, Newton repented from and openly opposed the African slave trade. In 1788, he published his, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*, wherein he made clear his views on the subject. Newton described the treatise as "a public confession, which however sincere, comes too late to prevent or repair the misery and mischief to which I have, formerly, been accessory."¹⁵ He continued: "I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders."¹⁶ Beginning in 1785, Newton began a friendship with William Wilberforce (1759-1833). This led Wilberforce to attend St. Mary (the church Newton pastored in London). Newton was not only instrumental in helping Wilberforce's spiritual struggles (he mentored him for 20yrs), but he encouraged him in his effort to abolish the slave trade. In 1787 he helped Wilberforce found the Anti-Slavery Society. "When Wilberforce was seriously

¹¹ Richard Cecil, *The Works of John Newton*, 1:12

¹² John Newton, *The Works of John Newton*, 1:28

¹³ John Newton, *The Works of John Newton*, 1:27-28

¹⁴ John Newton, *The Works of John Newton*, 6:523

¹⁵ John Newton, *The Works of John Newton*, 6:521-522

¹⁶ John Newton, *The Works of John Newton*, 6:522

considering leaving politics, Newton convinced him that God had placed him there. And so, because of Newton's advice Wilberforce remained in politics, eventually fighting the slave trade in Parliament" (Pollock).¹⁷

Though Newton and his wife had no children (they adopted two of his nieces), they had a happy marriage of 42 years. Mary died on December 15, 1790. Newton responded to her death: "I am supported, I am comforted, I am satisfied. The Lord is good indeed! The Bank of England is too poor to compensate for such a loss as mine. But the Lord, the all-sufficient God, speaks, and it is done. Let those who know Him and trust Him be of good courage. He can give them strength according to their day. Though I believe she has never yet been (and probably never will be) out of my waking thoughts for five minutes at a time; though I sleep in the bed in which she suffered and languished so long; I have not had one uncomfortable day, nor one restless night, since she left me. I have lost a right hand, which I cannot but miss continually; but the Lord enables me to go on cheerfully without it."¹⁸ Newton lived seventeen years after his wife's death. His mental faculties, general health, and sight, gradually declined. "On the evening of Monday, December 21st, Mr. Newton died, in his eighty-third year. He was buried in his church of St. Mary Woolnoth, in the vault which contained the remains of Mrs. Newton. He composed the following epitaph for himself, which he wished to be inscribed on a plain marble tablet in the church" (Bull).¹⁹ JOHN NEWTON, CLERK, ONCE AN INFIDEL AND LIBERTINE, A SERVANT OF SLAVES IN AFRICA, WAS, BY THE RICH MERCY OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST, PRESERVED, RESTORED, PARDONED, AND APPOINTED TO PREACH THE FAITH HE HAD LONG LABORED TO DESTROY.

2. *His pastorates.* Newton's transition to pastor was difficult. From 1755, he came under the influence of George Whitefield, which gave him the label "Methodist" and brought the disdain of the Church. Eventually in 1764, after many years of lay-ministry, Newton was ordained a minister in the Anglican Church. He pastored two churches for a total of forty-two years. The first was at Olney, Buckinghamshire (1764-1779), the second at London (1780-1807). While at Olney Newton influenced Thomas Scott and William Cowper. Scott pastored the church in the bordering parish while unconverted. Newton visited two of his dying members. This brought Scott to conviction and eventually conversion. Cowper, a poet prone to depression, relocated to Olney in 1767. Newton encouraged him to write hymns eventually co-authoring a hymn book in 1779 (Olney Hymns). Newton preached three sermons a week (two on Sunday and one on Wednesday). "With respect to his preaching, 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. He possessed, however, so much affection for his people, and so much zeal for their best interests, that the defect of his manner was of little consideration with his constant hearers; at the same time, his capacity and habit of entering into their trials and experience gave the highest interest to his ministry among them" (Cecil).²⁰ Perhaps his most popular sermons, consist of a series of sermons preached in 1784 and 1785, entitled, *Messiah: Fifty Expository Discourses, on the series of Scriptural Passages Which Form the Subject of the Celebrated Oratorio of Handel*. He stated his purpose in the first sermon: "I mean to lead your meditations to the language of the Oratorio, and to consider in their order the several sublime and interesting passages of Scripture, which are the basis of that admired composition."²¹ He stated at the end of the final sermon: "Permit me to hope and to pray, that the next time you hear the *Messiah*, God may bring something that you have heard in the course of these sermons, nearly connected with the peace and welfare of

¹⁷ John Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 52

¹⁸ John Newton, *The Works of John Newton* 5:624-625

¹⁹ Josiah Bull, *The Life of John Newton*, 310

²⁰ Richard Cecil, *The Works of John Newton*, 1:92

²¹ John Newton, *The Works of John Newton* 4:2-3

your souls, effectually to your remembrance. I would humbly hope, that some persons, who were strangers to the power and grace of Messiah when I entered upon this service, are now desirous of seeking Him with their whole hearts."²²

What then, it may be asked, was the source of Mr. Newton's power in the pulpit? It might perhaps suffice to say that he was possessed in large measure of the two great elements of all such power. His whole soul was in sympathy both with the truth and with his hearers. He spoke that which he believed, and because he believe; and he spoke with the conviction that it was the great truth of God he was uttering. He appealed to sinners with the loving compassion of one who had been in like peril with themselves, and who longed that they might share in his happy deliverance; he was a restored prodigal, and they too might be reconciled to their Father. Again, in addressing his fellow-travelers to the heavenly Canaan, he gathered lessons from the stores of his own rich and varied experience, and thus showed them all the way which His God and their God was leading them through the wilderness.²³

3. *His letters and hymns.* Newton wrote hundreds of personal letters and authored hundreds of hymns. The letters were written to friends, acquaintances, and young ministers, and the hymns were based on Biblical passages and themes. Some of his most famous hymns are *Amazing Grace* (402), *Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken* (269), *Approach, My Soul the Mercy-Seat* (423), *Behold the Throne of Grace* (530), *Come, My Soul, Thy Suit Prepare* (531), and *How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds* (544). "Over five hundred of the letters written by Newton were published during his lifetime or shortly afterwards. His correspondents in these letters stretched from the tip of Cornwall to the north of Scotland. It is difficult, however, to extract a coherent body of teaching on the spiritual life from this collection, for most of Newton's letters were by definition ad hoc compositions reflecting the specific needs of the correspondents, occasions within Newton's personal context, or issues of immediate topical relevance" (Hindmarsh).²⁴

(1) Pastoral. Newton's letters are filled with pastoral care. This is especially evident in several letters to young pastors. In a letter *To a Student in Divinity*, Newton said: "The chief means for attaining wisdom, and suitable gifts for the ministry, are the holy Scriptures, and prayer. The one is the fountain of living water, the other the bucket with which we are to draw. And I believe you will find, by observation, that the man who is most frequent and fervent in prayer, and most devoted to the word of God, will shine and flourish above his fellows."²⁵ He then went on to commend meditation, good books, the Scriptures in their original tongues, and the study of preachers used by God. He ended with a final exhortation: "One thing more I must mention as belonging to the subject: that a comfortable freedom for public service depends much upon the spirituality of our walk before God and man. Wisdom will not dwell with a trifling, an assuming, a censorious, or a worldly spirit. But if it is our business, and our pleasure, to contemplate Jesus, and to walk in His steps, He will bless us: we shall be like trees planted by a constant stream, and He will prosper the work of our hands."²⁶

(2) Practical. Newton's letters address practical issues such as temptation, controversy, sincerity, candor, dreams, female dress, family worship, feasting, covetousness, the comforts and snares of social affections, and the advantages of a state of poverty. Newton began a letter *On Hearing Sermons* by saying: "To hear sermons is a great privilege; but, like all other outward privileges, it requires grace

²² John Newton, *The Works of John Newton* 4:582

²³ Josiah Bull, *The Life of John Newton*, 318-319

²⁴ Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Life and Spirituality of John Newton*, 5

²⁵ John Newton, *The Works of John Newton* 1:141

²⁶ John Newton, *The Works of John Newton* 1:147

and wisdom to make a due improvement of it; and the great plenty of ordinances you enjoy, though in itself a blessing, is attended with snares, which, unless they are carefully guarded against, may hinder rather than promote your edification."²⁷ Newton went on to say, in order to hear sermons rightly we must recognize that ministers are but servants of God with various strengths and weaknesses. "Alas! How often has Satan prevailed to infuse a spirit of envy or dislike in ministers towards each other; to withdraw hearers from their proper concernment, by dividing them into parties, and stirring them up to contend for a Paul, an Apollos, or a Cephas, for their own favorites, to the disparagement of others, who are equally dear to the Lord, and faithful in His service."²⁸ Newton then provided four basic counsels: "In the first place, be cautious that you do not degenerate into the spirit of a *mere hearer*, so as to place the chief stress of your profession upon running hither and thither after preachers."²⁹ "Again, as it is our trial to live in a day wherein so many contentions and winds of strange doctrine abound, I hope you will watch and pray that you may not have *itching ears*, inclining you to hearken after novel and singular opinions, and the erroneous sentiments of men of unstable minds, who are not sound in the faith."³⁰ "Farther: I advise you, when you hear a Gospel sermon, and it is not in all respects to your satisfaction, be not too hasty to lay the whole blame upon the preacher."³¹ "Lastly: as a hearer, you have a right to try all doctrines by the word of God; and it is your duty so to do. Faithful ministers will remind you of this: they will not wish to hold you in an implicit and blind obedience to what they say, upon their own authority, nor desire that you should follow them farther than they have the Scriptures for their warrant. They would not be lords over your conscience, but helpers to your joy."³² And yet, Newton ended this letter with a strong warning: "There are hearers who make *themselves*, and not the Scripture, the standard of their judgment. They attend not so much to be instructed, as to pass their sentence. To them, the pulpit is the bar at which the minister stands to take his trial before them; a bar at which few escape censure, from judges at once so severe and inconsistent. For, as these censors are not all of a mind, and perhaps agree in nothing so much as in the opinion they have of their own wisdom, it has often happened, that, in the course of one and the same sermon, the minister has been condemned as a Legalist and an Antinomian, as too high in his notions, and too low, as having too little action, and too much action. Oh! This is a hateful spirit, that prompts hearers to pronounce *ex cathedra* (from the chair) as if they were infallible, breaks in upon the rights of private judgment, even in matters not essential, and makes a man an offender for a word."³³

(3) Doctrinal. Newton's letters are full of sound theology. They address doctrines such as man's depravity, faith, assurance, the Trinity, election and final perseverance, union with Christ, communion with God, and the right use of the law. In his letter *On Man in his Fallen Estate*, Newton said: "Man, with all his boasted understanding and attainments, is a fool: so long as he is destitute of the saving grace of God, his conduct, as to his most important concernments, is more absurd and inconsistent than that of the meanest idiot; with respect to his affections and pursuits, he is degraded far below the beasts; and for the malignity and wickedness of his will, can be compared to nothing so properly as to the devil."³⁴ In a letter *On Communion with God*, he said: "Communion presupposes union. By nature we are strangers, yea, enemies to God; but we are reconciled, brought nigh, and become His children, by faith in Christ Jesus. We can have no true knowledge of God, desire towards Him, access unto Him, or gracious communications from Him, but in and through the Son of His love. He is the medium of this

²⁷ John Newton, *The Works of John Newton* 1:218

²⁸ John Newton, *The Works of John Newton* 1:219

²⁹ John Newton, *The Works of John Newton* 1:222-223

³⁰ John Newton, *The Works of John Newton* 1:223

³¹ John Newton, *The Works of John Newton* 1:224

³² John Newton, *The Works of John Newton* 1:224-225

³³ John Newton, *The Works of John Newton* 1:225

³⁴ John Newton, *The Works of John Newton* 1:363-364

inestimable privilege: for He is the way, the only way, of intercourse between heaven and earth; the sinner's way to God, and God's way of mercy to the sinner. If any pretend to know God, and to have communion with Him, otherwise than by the knowledge of Jesus Christ, whom He has sent, and by faith in His name, it is a proof that they neither know God nor themselves."³⁵

(4) Experimental. This is likely the best way to describe his letters. Over and again, Newton masterly describes the diversity of Christian experience. For example, he used Jesus' words, "First the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear" (Mk.4:28), to describe "the several stages of a believer's experience" in three letters. He identifies these as A (the blade), B (the ear), and C (the full corn in the ear). "By A, I would understand a person who is under the drawings of God, which will infallibly lead him to the Lord Jesus Christ for life and salvation. The beginning of this work is instantaneous. It is effected by a certain kind of light communicated to the soul, to which it was before an utter stranger. The eyes of the understanding are opened and enlightened. The light at first afforded is weak and indistinct, like the morning dawn; but when it is once begun, it will certainly increase and spread to the perfect day." "It is spring-time with A: he is in bloom, and, by the grace and blessing of the heavenly Husbandman, will bear fruit in old age. His faith is weak, but his heart is warm. He will seldom venture to think himself a believer; but he sees, and feels, and does those things which no one could, unless the Lord was with him. The very desire and bent of his soul is to God, and to the word of His grace. His knowledge is but small, but it is growing every day. If he is not a *father* or a *young man* in grace, he is a dear *child*. The Lord has visited his heart, delivered him from the love of sin, and fixed his desires supremely upon Jesus Christ."³⁶

"I suppose state B to commence, when the soul, after an interchange of hopes and fears, according to the different frames it passes through, is brought to rest in Jesus, by a spiritual apprehension of His complete suitableness and sufficiency, as the wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption of all who trust in Him, and is enabled by an appropriating faith to say, 'He is mine, and I am is.'"³⁷ "A, like Israel, has been delivered from Egypt by great power and a stretched-out arm. He has seen his enemies destroyed, and has sung the song of Moses and the Lamb upon the banks of the Red Sea. Then he commences B. Perhaps, like Israel, he thinks his difficulties are at an end, and expects to go on rejoicing till he enters the promised land. But, alas! His difficulties are in a manner but beginning; he has a wilderness before him, of which he is not aware. The Lord is now about to suit his dispensations to humble and to prove him, and to show him what is in his heart, that He may do him good at the latter end, and that all the glory may redound to His own free grace."³⁸ "If we assign to A the characteristic of *desire*, to B that of *conflict*, we can describe C as *contemplation*. State C, having had his views of the Gospel, and of the Lord's faithfulness and mercy, confirmed by a longer experience, his assurance is of course more stable, than when he first saw himself safe from all condemnation. Neither has C, properly speaking, any more strength or stock of grace inherent in himself than B, or even than A. But C's happiness and superiority to B lies chiefly in this, that, by the Lord's blessing on the use of means—such as prayer, reading and hearing of the word, and by a sanctified improvement of what he has seen of the Lord, and of his own heart, in the course of his experience—he has attained clearer, deeper, and more comprehensive views of the mystery of redeeming love; of the glorious excellency of the Lord Jesus, in His person, offices, grace, and faithfulness; of the harmony and glory of all the Divine perfections manifested in and by Him in the church; of the stability, beauty, fulness, and certainty of the Holy Scriptures; and of the heights, depths, lengths, and breadths of the love of God in Christ."³⁹

³⁵ John Newton, *The Works of John Newton* 1:306

³⁶ John Newton, *The Works of John Newton* 1:197-203

³⁷ John Newton, *The Works of John Newton* 1:204

³⁸ John Newton, *The Works of John Newton* 1:205

³⁹ John Newton, *The Works of John Newton* 1:210-211