

Simeon, Thornton, and Newton – Letters.

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The following letters were addressed to Mr Simeon when commencing his ministry at Trinity Church. They will be read with special interest, when it is remembered what trials he had then to encounter, and what that ministry was afterwards, by the grace of God, in its eminent faithfulness, wisdom, and devotion, and ever-increasing influence for more than half a century.

Charles Simeon was ordained on Trinity Sunday, May 26, 1782, by the Bishop of Ely on his fellowship at King's College, and began his ministry in St Edward's Church ("in good old Latimer's pulpit"), serving that parish for Mr Atkinson during the long vacation.

I have reason to hope (Mr Simeon writes in 1813) that some good was done then. In the space of a month or six weeks, the church became quite crowded; the Lord's table was attended by three times the usual number of communicants, and a considerable stir was made among the dry bones. I visited at the parish from house to house without making any difference between Churchmen and Dissenters; and I remember disputing (in a friendly way) with the Dissenting minister about the doctrine of election, not being able to separate it from that of reprobation; but I was not violent against it, being convinced, as much as I was of my own existence, that, whatever others might do, I myself should no more have loved God if He had not first loved me, or turned to God if He had not, by His free and sovereign grace, turned me, than a cannon-ball would of itself return to the orifice from whence it had been shot out. But I soon learned that I must take the Scriptures with the simplicity of a little child, and be content to receive on God's testimony what He has revealed, whether I can unravel all the difficulties that may attend it or not; and from that day to this, I have never had a doubt respecting the truth of that doctrine, nor a wish (as far as I know) to be wise above what is written. I feel that I cannot even explain how it is that I move my finger, and therefore I am content to be ignorant of innumerable things which exceed, not only my wisdom, but the wisdom of the most learned men in the universe. For this disposition of mind, I have unbounded reason to be thankful to God; for I have not only avoided many perplexities by means of it, but actually learned much, which I should otherwise never have learned. I was not then aware that this simple exercise of faith is the only way of attaining Divine knowledge, but I now see it is so.

In October my poor brother Richard died; and as there was then no one living with my aged father, it was thought desirable that I should leave College and go and live with him. To this I acceded: everything was settled; my books, &c., were just going to be packed up; and in a fortnight I was to leave College for good.

But, behold, in that juncture, an event took place that decided the plans of my whole life. I had often, when passing Trinity Church, which stands in the heart of Cambridge, and is one of the largest churches in the town, said within myself, "How should I rejoice if God were to give me that church, that I might preach His Gospel there, and be a herald for Him in the midst of the University!" But as to the actual possession of it, I had no more prospect of attaining it, than of being exalted to the See of Canterbury. It so happened, however, that the incumbent of it (Mr Therond) died just at this time, and that the only bishop, with whom my father had the smallest acquaintance, had recently been translated to the See of Ely. I therefore sent off instantly to my father, to desire him to make application to the bishop for the living on my behalf. This my father immediately did; and I waited in college to see the event of his application. The

parishioners of Trinity were earnest to procure the living for Mr Hammond, who had served the parish as curate for some time, and they immediately chose him lecturer, concluding that the living without the lectureship would not be worth anyone's acceptance, it being, even with the surplice fees, not worth more than forty guineas per annum. They all signed a petition to the bishop in behalf of Mr H., informing him at the same time that they had appointed him to the lectureship. . . . This brought me a letter from the bishop saying, that if I chose to have the living, it was at my service; but that if I declined it, Mr. H. should not have it on any account. The bishop's words were: "The parishioners have petitioned for Mr Hammond, and, unless gratified, insinuate their intentions of bestowing their lectureship on a different person than my curate. I do not like that mode of application, and if you do not accept it, shall certainly not license Mr H. to it. I shall await your answer.—Nov. 9th, 1782."

How little did the parishioners think what that letter of theirs would effect! It was that which irritated the bishop, and caused him to send me such a letter as relieved me at once from all embarrassment, and fixed me in a church which I have now held for about thirty years, and which I hope to retain to my dying hour. Truly, "the judgments of God are unsearchable, and his ways past finding out."

It was at this juncture that the following letters were written. Mr Simeon preached for the first time in Trinity Church, on Sunday, November 10, 1782; and three days afterwards, his affectionate friend, John Thornton, Esq., then in his sixty-third year, sent him this word of wise counsel on his entrance upon a ministry of such difficulty and responsibility. This letter, it will be observed, was written on November 13, and it is not unworthy of notice, that on November 13, fifty-four years after, Mr Simeon entered into his blessed rest!

Clapham, 13th November, 1782.

"DEAR SIR,—I was glad to hear the books came so timely, and that the Bishop of Ely had sent you the presentation to Trinity Church; may a gracious God guide, direct, and bless all your ministrations to the Redeemer's glory, and make you a blessing to many.

Permit me to use an uncommon freedom, and I hope you will forgive me, should you not be able to join issue in sentiment with me. What I would recommend is to set off with only the usual service that has been performed, as by that means I apprehend you will gain upon the people gradually, and you can at any time increase your duty as you see occasion, and I should, on the same principle, advise against exhorting from house to house as heretofore you did.

I assure you, a subtle adversary as often obtains his end by driving too fast as too slow, and perhaps, with religious people, oftener.

Remember it is God works, and not you; and, therefore, if you run before the pillar and the cloud, you will assuredly be bewildered.

The Lord ever was, and ever will be, with the small still voice, and therefore beware of noisy professors; they are far more to be dreaded than the worldly-minded.

Watch continually over your own spirit, and do all in love; we must grow downwards in humility to soar heavenward.

I should recommend your having a watchful eye over yourself, for, generally speaking, as is the minister, so are the people. If the minister is enlightened, lively, and vigorous, his word will come with power upon many, and make them so. If he is formal, the infection will spread among his hearers; if he is lifeless, spiritual death will be visible through the greatest part of the

congregation; therefore, if you watch over your own soul, you may depend upon it your people will keep pace with you generally, or, at least, that is the way to the blessing.

It is a sad, though too common a mistake, to be more regardful of others than ourselves, and we must begin at home; many regard watchfully the outward work, and disregard that within.

Your sermons should be written, well digested, and becoming a scholar, not over-long, but pithy, that those who seek occasion may find none, except in the matter of your God.

May the God of all grace grant unto us, and all that are dear to us, the repentance of Peter, the faith of Paul, and the love of John, and be with you at all times, and in all places, and with,

Dear Sir,

Your affectionate friend and hearty well-wisher,

JOHN THORNTON.

The Rev. Mr Simeon.

Ten days afterwards the Rev John Newton, then in his fifty-eighth year, who had for some time taken a very deep interest in Mr Simeon, wrote to him as follows, with all the affectionate concern of an elder brother for the profiting of a younger one in the ministry:—

Nov. 23rd, 1782.

MY DEAR SIR,—It gave me great pleasure to hear that the Lord had relieved you from the difficulties you were under respecting Reading, by appointing you to a Church in Cambridge. I doubt not but you accept it as His appointment, and consider the immediate donor as the instrument of His will. This is the most comfortable and scriptural way of viewing things—to see them all, and all equally (even to the falling of a sparrow or of a leaf), under the direction of Him with whom we have to do, and to whom we have entrusted our concerns. This event, compared with what you told me of your situation, has appeared to me very seasonable and providential. I hope it will be productive of great good to many, and of much comfort to yourself. The Lord sees fit to fix you in a noble stand, indeed! Were I a collegian, I think I should prefer a Church in one of our Universities (and perhaps Cambridge especially) to any station in the kingdom. And yet I over-rate myself in thinking I would dare to make such a choice were it in my power, for though it would be a post of honour, and affording a great prospect of usefulness, it would be attended with peculiar difficulties, and would require very peculiar gifts and talents.

In the present instance you have not chosen for yourself, but the Lord has chosen for you, and called you to this important service; on Him, therefore, you may confidently rely for every requisite supply and support; for all that patience, fortitude, and meekness of wisdom which you will need, especially in a place where so many eyes will be upon you to scrutinize every part of your conduct; so many tongues ready to circulate every report to your prejudice, and so many ears open to receive them.

Though I have had but little personal intercourse with you, it has been sufficient to interest me in your concerns, and as you thought proper to ask my advice when you were in town, this mark of your confidence encourages me to write with freedom, as though we were old acquaintances; and if I commit to paper without reserve such thoughts as occur to me while the pen is in my hand, I shall make no other apology than my sincere regard and the cordiality of my intentions.

I had heard the outlines of your story before I saw you. The Lord has done great things for you, you have felt your obligations to Him, and His love constrains you to devote yourself to His service. He has already encouraged and owned you in your setting out, and I trust He is now

opening you a scene of permanent and extensive usefulness. But you may take it for granted, dear Sir, that our Grand Adversary is aware of all this, and you may expect that he will not be an indifferent spectator, but will do everything that he is permitted to disturb and hinder you. You are engaged in the best cause; you will fight under the banner and the eye of the Captain of Salvation. You have, therefore, no just reason to be afraid of the enemy, yet it will behoove you to beware of his devices. In these he is so fertile and various, that no full enumeration of them can be made, nor, indeed, can the best description of them be well understood, but in proportion, as in a course of time they are realized to us, and brought home to our experience. He is a very Proteus, continually changing his ground, his approaches, his appearance, and the manner of his assaults, so as to adapt himself with the most advantage to every change in our circumstances. Hence the Word of God describes him by very different images—a subtle serpent, a roaring lion, and as sometimes assuming the semblance of an angel of light. Your sense of the Lord's great goodness, and the strong impression you have received of the power and reality of unseen things, have inspired you with a commendable zeal. Shall I advise you to repress your zeal? Far from it. It would better become me to wish to catch fire from you, than to attempt to chill you by the cold maxims which often pass for prudence. Yet there is such a thing as true Christian prudence; and perhaps at this time Satan himself may not attempt to damp your zeal. It may answer his ends, if he can take occasion by the warmth of your desire to do good, to push you to extremes, to make you grasp at too much, and to make you throw unnecessary difficulties in your own way, and thereby preclude your usefulness. If the heart be right with God, and dependent upon His teaching, the best means for avoiding this over-doing (not that we can really do too much in the right way) is a close attention to the *whole* Scripture. Detached texts or sentences may seem to countenance what by no means will accord with the general tenor of the *whole*. Particularly the spirit and conduct of our Lord in the days of His humiliation, furnish the best model. If I had thought that all His ministers were bound and called by His example to preach on mountains or the sea-shore, I ought not to have accepted a parochial cure; but His manner, His gentleness, His patient attention to the weakness and prejudices of those around Him (according to Isaiah xlii. 2, 3), we cannot imitate too closely.

Perhaps there are few generals who, if they were to fight a battle a second time, could not mark some mistake to avoid, which had been made in the first. Thus in our cooler moments, at least in time, we begin to be sensible that there has been some precipitancy in the honest emotions of zeal, some mixtures of our own spirit when our main end has been the Lord's service, and some of our designs better intended than conducted. When we make this discovery we are of course wiser than we were before. But it is an acquisition often attended with danger. I have known more ministers than one greatly hurt when they have been able to smile upon the well-meant indiscretions they committed when their hearts were warm and their experience but small. The enemy is ready at such a time to draw them insensibly towards the opposite extreme. He hides from them the *golden mean*, and prevails on them to think the reverse of *wrong* must be right. By degrees zeal, instead of being regulated, is extinguished. Remissness takes place and gains ground, till at length the love of the world and the fear of man prevail. Thus I have seen some frozen into mere lifeless images of their former selves, and some have not even retained a resemblance of what they once were. So many instances of this kind I have met, that I have almost by habit a fear and jealousy over those who are remarkably warm and active at their setting out. But when the heart is deeply impressed with a sense of its own wretchedness, when the law and the Gospel have combined under the influence of the Holy Spirit, to give a just and deep impression of the character of God, as a just God and a Saviour, when the Lord is pleased to give and maintain true humility, such a person will, I know, triumph over all the arts of Satan, and go on from strength to strength. These are my hopes for you. I trust and pray that He will guide you with His eye, and make you a happy instrument of winning many souls.

I have nearly filled my paper, and have left little room for an apology, if necessary. But I hope you will not expect one. I love you and wish you well, and shall be glad to hear from you whenever you are at leisure.

Believe me to be, dear Sir,
Your affectionate Friend and Servant,
JOHN NEWTON.

Hoxton, London, Nov. 23, 1782.

These wise and seasonable counsels from his affectionate and watchful friends were not lost upon Mr Simeon. They guided and cheered him at a time of peculiar trial; and encouraged him to pursue his ministry in patience and faith amidst the severe opposition he had to encounter from his new parishioners. He thus describes these trials: —

The disappointment which the parish felt proved very unfavourable to my ministry. The people almost universally put locks on their pews, and would neither come to church themselves nor suffer others to do so; and multitudes from time to time were forced to go out of the church for want of the necessary accommodation. I put in there a number of forms, and erected in vacant places, at my own expense, some open seats; but the churchwardens pulled them down, and cast them out of the church. To visit the parishioners in their own houses was impracticable; for they were so embittered against me, that there was scarcely one that would admit me into his house. In this state of things I saw no remedy but faith and patience. The passage of Scripture which subdued and controlled my mind was; “The servant of the Lord must not strive.”

The late revered Bishop McIlvaine, of Ohio, when writing to me respecting some trials he had to endure in his diocese, and alluding to the way in which Mr Simeon, in his early ministry, was enabled to meet his peculiar difficulties, said, that considering Simeon’s naturally ardent temperament and his intense zeal in the Lord’s service, he thought that the grace of God was never more conspicuous in him than in the patience and faith he exhibited when suffering so severely from the bitter opposition of his parishioners.

These letters, so full of valuable counsel from those eminent servants of Christ, John Thornton and John Newton, are now for the first time given to the public, with the earnest hope and prayer that, under the Divine blessing, they may still be profitable to young ministers when entering on new and perhaps difficult spheres of duty.

WILLIAM CARUS