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JOHN NEWTON AND SLAVERY

By David Streater

The name of the Revd. John Newton must be one of the best known names in the secular world of any Church of England clergyman of the eighteenth century. There are two reasons for this popularity. The first is the well known Hymn, 'Amazing Grace', which has been sung by many who have little idea of the meaning of God's grace which Newton experienced and put into verse for his mid-week meetings in the homes of his parishioners in Olney. The second reason is his opposition to the wickedness of the Slave trade in which he was occupied for a number of years.

EARLY DAYS

Few today would readily understand that the reason for his hymn writing was to confirm the scriptural teaching which he had been giving to his congregation, and the opposition to the slave trade did not arise primarily from a humanistic philosophy but from the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Newton's life is by any criterion full of interest. He was born in 1725 in London when the morals of England were appallingly low, even by present day standards. The Great Ejection of 1662 of the Puritans from the Established Church had left, as J. C. Ryle puts it, 'The Church of England asleep in the dark and the Non-conformists asleep in the light.' The result of this loss of the proclamation of the Gospel and the teaching of the whole counsel of God led, as it always must, to the moral disintegration of society.

Newton's father was a merchant navy sea captain who rather unusually had been trained in a Jesuit College in Spain. Such training had made Captain Newton an aloof figure. Newton Senior's profession had done nothing to soften his character in those authoritarian days at sea, when a captain had the power of life and death over a crew. John Newton always remained convinced that his father loved him but that he was totally unable to show this.

By contrast, John's mother was a converted Christian woman from a non-conformist background, who took great pains to educate him from the age of three, so that by the age of four, he could read fluently. But she also took care that he should be taught in spiritual matters. Newton says that, 'She stored my memory . . . with many valuable pieces, chapters and portions of Scriptures, catechisms, hymns and poems.' She also taught him to pray.

John's mother died in 1732 when he was only seven years old. The shock of her loss and the harsh treatment which he received was a severe blow to one so young. Although his step-mother treated him reasonably after his father remarried, no further steps were taken to instruct him spiritually and Newton began to mix with some very bad company. At the age of eleven, Newton went to sea with his father and completed six voyages before his father retired in 1742.

In that same year Newton, now aged seventeen met Mary Catlett, aged fourteen. It is no exaggeration to say that he fell head over heels in love with her and remained so all the days of his life. He also became a free thinker, taking every opportunity to ridicule the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. As Newton turned his back on the Gospel, he began to prove that the way of a transgressor is hard.

Newton was press-ganged into Royal Naval service, which was an iniquitous method of conscription. Through his father's influence, he was promoted to mid-shipman but his arrogance

made him overstay his leave and he was demoted. At length even the Royal Navy was pleased to be rid of him by transferring him to a merchant ship, plying the West Coast of Africa in the slave trade. Once again, he proved to be an arrogant nuisance with a foul mouth, and leaving the ship, he joined the employ of a slave trader with a black wife. The wife treated him severely, especially so during a bout of serious illness. At this time, Newton's conduct had become so despicable that even the slaves despised him

CONVERSION AND ORDINATION

Newton was rescued from this situation by the arrival of another ship whose captain was a friend of his father. Newton Senior, concerned for John's safety, had asked this friend to look out for him and to take him aboard as a member of the crew. John Newton returned to sea and became mate on a trading vessel. Although John Newton had given up God, God had not given up John Newton.

In 1748, Newton's ship was returning to England from a very long voyage which had rendered it very unseaworthy. On March 9, 1748 Newton writes, 'I took up Stanhope's *Thomas à Kempis* as I had often done before, to pass away the time. I read it with complete indifference as if it was entirely a romance. However, while I was reading an involuntary suggestion arose in my mind: What if these things should be true? He retired to sleep uneasy, only to be woken by the noise of a storm which had broken without warning upon the ship.

The storm lasted for many days and all hope was given up on several occasions. During this time Newton called upon the name of the Lord as the God of his mother. It was a feeble call, a prayer almost of despair but it was heard. Not only did the ship reach the Irish coast but Newton had been granted true repentance towards God, a lively faith in the Lord Jesus Christ leading to a new obedient walk.

Newton's new employment was as captain of a slaver. Although Newton took great care of the slaves, refusing to allow members of the crew to interfere or mistreat them, it was only gradually that Newton came to perceive the intrinsic evil and horror of such a trade in human beings. He began to pray for alternative employment, and ill-health forced him to give up his sea-faring. He became tide-surveyor of Liverpool. During this time, his life was providentially saved. Newton was a man of extreme punctuality but one day he arrived five minutes late to inspect a merchantman recently arrived in the harbour. As he and the boat crew began to row towards this vessel, a trip of several minutes, the merchantman exploded before his eyes, killing all on board.

In Liverpool, Newton had been introduced into the evangelical circles. His gifts were such that the subject of his ordination was proposed by both Church of England friends as well as non-conformists. Although there would have been little difficulty for him to have been ordained into the non-conformist Church, Newton declined in favour of the Church of England even though there were more difficulties in the way. His greatest problem was in the fact that he had not been to university. John Wesley commented on Newton's case that, 'Our Church requires that clergymen should be men of learning and to this end have a University education and yet no learning at all!'

OLNEY AND LONDON

After refusals by York and Chester, Newton was ordained by Lincoln to the Curacy of Olney. There he laboured in the ministry of the Word for sixteen years. The former incumbent had gathered, during his time, a small group of praying people. With this small nucleus, Newton began and as he laboured so the work began to prosper. He was soon joined by William Cowper, one of the greatest, but probably one of the least regarded of English poets.

Cowper suffered from mental illness and had come to Olney for his health's sake. In Newton he found a true pastor and friend, full of sound common sense allied to both a Biblical and experiential

knowledge of the Lord's dealings with the soul. The two became great friends and fellow labourers in the Kingdom. The fruit of that friendship still lives today in the Olney Hymns which are some of the best evangelical hymns in the English language. Where ever genuine evangelicalism exists, there will be found a place of honour and use for such hymns as, 'Hark, my soul! it is the Lord' by Cowper, and by Newton, 'Come, my soul, thy suit prepare.' Spurgeon regularly used this hymn before the Long Prayer in the Metropolitan Tabernacle.

By 1780, trouble had begun to break out in Olney between Newton and some of the more lawless elements that could be found in most rural villages. While Newton was ready to meet the trouble, Mary, his wife, whose health had never been good, was so affected, that he feared for her and accepted the Rectory of St. Mary Woolnoth in the City of London. There, Newton, became a well known figure with much influence in high circles through the influential men of the Clapham Sect. This brought him into close touch with William Wilberforce and the Abolition of Slavery.

In 1790, John Thornton who had been a great supporter of his for years died and that same year his beloved Mary also passed away after forty years of marriage. But Newton did not give up. He laboured on in word and sound doctrine for another seventeen years. Newton was never a great preacher but rather a greatly loved preacher. He was valued for the spiritual warmth of his life more than for just his oratory. And Newton's great task was to preach the Bible as the Word of God and the Holy Spirit as the interpreter of the Word, pointing men to Christ Jesus and Him Crucified.

We could spend much more time with profit on Newton's life but space forbids. Newton was one of the founders of the Church Missionary Society. He was instrumental in the conversion from deism of the Revd. Thomas Scott who wrote what is still a very worthwhile commentary on the whole Bible. Newton's letters are still a mine of doctrinal and pastoral wisdom. Newton's works have been republished by the Banner of Truth and are well worth buying and reading if you would see what manner of life and doctrine were practised in the noon tide of Revival.

John Newton is probably remembered best for his opposition to slavery, made all the more powerful by his knowledge of its cruelty and excesses. But we feel sure that in days when physical slavery is largely a thing of the past John Newton would want to be remembered for his opposition to the slavery of sin and the abolition of that slavery by the proclamation of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and His righteousness.

David Streater (at the time of publication) was Director of Church Society.