

LETTERS OF  
JOHN NEWTON



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With Biographical  
Sketches and Notes by

JOSIAH BULL



THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

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## PUBLISHER'S NOTE



THIS volume is not to be confused with the *Letters of John Newton* first published by the Trust in 1960 and reprinted several times since. That paperback edition contains a small selection of thirty-nine letters, seventeen of which were taken from letters signed *Omicron* (1774) and *Vigil* (1785), and the remaining twenty-two drawn from Newton's best-known work *Cardiphonia* (1781). While a few from that small volume may be found here, this much larger selection contains many more letters, including several that had not been previously published, as well as valuable biographical sketches and illustrative notes supplied by the editor and Newton's biographer, Josiah Bull.



## INTRODUCTION



IN the first half of the eighteenth century, England was in a state of religious and moral decay. For many years the land had been sinking into darkness and paganism. Intemperance and immorality, crime and cruelty were increasingly becoming the characteristics of the age. The national church was in such a dead condition that instead of being salt, preserving the nation from corruption, she was only adding to the immorality by weakening the restraints which Christianity imposed on the lusts of men. The teaching from the pulpit consisted of natural theology and cold morality, which were utterly impotent to awaken the church or to stem the flood of iniquity. If the nation were to be saved the church would first have to be revived. And that is what took place. What the arm of flesh could not do the arm of omnipotence accomplished. God was pleased to send a mighty revival, which in the course of fifty years transformed the religious and moral life of England.

Although this great awakening was entirely the work of the Holy Spirit, God was pleased to use human instruments to effect the change. Some of the leaders of the movement are well known to us, such as George Whitefield and John Wesley. They were the early leaders in the awakening and, because of their widespread labours, overshadowed such eminent contemporaries as William Grimshaw, John Berridge, Daniel Rowland, and William Romaine. As the revival movement spread, a second generation of leaders emerged. Chief among them was John Newton, the once infidel mariner and servant of slaves, who became, through the grace of God, a humble Christian and devoted minister of Christ.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit to the church are various and many so that all members have not the same office. This was clearly seen among the leaders of the Evangelical Revival. Each had his own position to fill and each had his special gift from God. Newton's gift was that of dealing with individual souls, and he accordingly became the great spiritual director of souls in the evangelical movement. Writing to one of his correspondents, he speaks about ministers, according as their gifts differ, being led to consider some particular branch of the system of divine truth; he then goes on to say:

So far as I can judge, anatomy is my favourite branch; I mean the study of the human heart with its workings and counter-workings as it is differently affected in a state of nature or of grace, in the different seasons of prosperity, adversity, conviction, temptation, sickness and the approach of death.

There is no doubt that Newton had been peculiarly prepared for this aspect of the ministry by the course of his early life. Born in London in 1725, deprived of the godly influence of his mother before he was seven years old, he was but two years at school before he went at the age of eleven on his first voyage with his father, a sea captain. From that time till the age of thirty, when his health was broken by a stroke, Newton endured the wild rigours of a life before the mast. The vicissitudes of his maritime career are well known. How he was press-ganged aboard a naval vessel; how he was flogged when captured after desertion; how his love for the youthful Mary Catlett preserved him from suicide; how he was released from the navy only to join in the slave traffic across the Atlantic; how he was reduced almost to death on the Guinea coast and delivered by a friend of his father's – these are all things with which the reader of Newton's biography will be familiar. Throughout these sad events there ran a divine purpose; while Newton forgot the Saviour whom his mother had so often commended to him in childhood, and while he became, like one of old, a 'blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent', it was all leading to a day when he was brought to say:

*Bow'd down beneath a load of sin,  
By Satan sorely pressed,  
By wars without, and fears within,  
I come to Thee for rest.*

After Newton ended his seafaring days he became a tide-surveyor in Liverpool, at that time a thriving slave

port with a population of 22,000. It was here that he first heard the great evangelist, George Whitefield, and soon he came to know other leaders of the Evangelical Revival such as William Grimshaw and Henry Venn. His own thoughts were now turned to the ministry, and after several disappointments he was at length settled in 1764 in the Buckinghamshire parish of Olney—a name immortalized by the hymns which he and William Cowper wrote for their mid-week meetings. Such facts as these ought to be borne in mind by the reader of these letters. The dreadful condition from which he had been saved, the long struggle through which he went before he came to a clear understanding of the gospel, and the years of patient waiting for an opening in the Church, all served to prepare Newton for this work. He was given a thorough knowledge of the workings of the human heart and of the Lord's dealings with his people.

In his sixteen years at Olney, Newton found a good field for exercising his gift. The people of that country district were simple folk and ready to speak all their heart. With the publication of his *Authentic Narrative* (in his first year at Olney), giving an account of his early life, conversion, and call to the ministry, his fame became more widespread and people came from far and near to seek his counsel and help.<sup>1</sup> His friendly and hospitable home at Olney, and

<sup>1</sup> On one occasion he was even visited by an Indian chief who had been converted under George Whitefield in North America, and who became a preacher among his own tribe, the Mohicans.

<sup>2</sup> He became minister of St Mary Woolnoth in 1779, where he continued to preach until almost the end of his life in 1807. Being advised by Richard Cecil in 1806 to discontinue preaching, he gave the memorable reply, 'I cannot stop. What, shall the old African blasphemer stop while he can speak?'

later in London,<sup>2</sup> was a place to which the troubled and tempted resorted. They found in him one who had been a worse sinner than themselves and who could enter into their experiences with tenderness and sympathy.

Those who could not come to see him sought his help by letter, and it was this that brought the best out of Newton. Marcus Loane describes him as ‘the letter writer *par excellence* of the Evangelical Revival’ and says that ‘this was his distinctive contribution to that great movement.’ He was not unconscious of his gift and of his usefulness in this department, and his diligence was prodigious. ‘It is the Lord’s will’, he says, ‘that I should do most by my letters.’

Newton’s letters are the expression of his inmost being; he speaks of his correspondents as those to whom ‘when I can get leisure I send my heart by turns’. But while they thus reflect the work of grace in his own life, they are at the same time a mirror of the evangelical thought and practice of his day. This is particularly helpful to us, for the spiritual life of the church of Christ is not always at the same level of power and purity, and it is all too easy in such an age as our own to forget the true nature of vital evangelical religion. In this connection there are certain things which the pages of this book bring forcibly to light and of which we need to be reminded today.

The first is that *true evangelical religion is intensely personal*. It does not consist in the mere attachment to certain doctrines and opinions that were held by Christians in past generations, still less does it consist in belonging to a party. Rather it is something which must be experienced in one’s own soul. ‘We may grow wise apace in opinions, by books and men’, writes Newton, ‘but vital experimental religion can only be received from the Holy Spirit.’ Because Newton

held to the system of biblical doctrine which received its formulation in the writings of John Calvin, some might be ready to think that it was from the great Reformer that he received his beliefs. This would be totally to misunderstand the nature of true evangelical faith. 'I should have much to answer for had I invented it myself, or taken it upon trust from Calvin', writes Newton; 'but as I find it in the Scripture I cheerfully embrace it.' He had, like every Christian, a personal experience of the truth of Scripture implanted in his soul by the Spirit of God. He could speak of the sovereignty of God as one who had witnessed it in his own experience; he could speak of the grace of God as one who had tasted that the Lord is gracious; and he could speak of the power of God as one who was experiencing it in his own life.

The second truth of which Newton's letters constantly remind us, is that *true evangelical religion produces intense exercise of soul*. Where the life of God has been implanted in the soul of man, a warfare begins between the good and the evil, between the new nature and the old. If there is one thing outstanding in Newton's letters, it is, perhaps, the happy combination between spiritual mourning and spiritual rejoicing. Like the apostle Paul he could cry with one breath: 'Wretched man that I am' and, with the next, 'Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!' Writing to one of his correspondents he exhorts thus: 'You say you are more disposed to cry, Miserere! than Hallelujah! Why not both together? When the treble is praise and heart-humiliation for the bass, the melody is pleasant and the harmony is good.' The purpose of God in showing believers the evil of their own hearts is to make them prize more highly the grace and all-sufficiency of Jesus. In this way they go

through life ‘sorrowful, yet always rejoicing’.

Soul exercise is evidence of a healthy spiritual condition. It is at times when religion has been in a flourishing state that soul exercise has been most prominent in the professing church of Christ. It is the barometer by which we may read the prevailing condition in the church, the spiritual pulse of the church indicating the strength or weakness of vital evangelical religion. This should give us some light on the state of the church today. When we consider that soul exercise is a term that has almost passed out of our religious vocabulary, and that more attention is paid to the outward actions of the Christian life than to the state of the heart, we cannot but come to the conclusion that vital godliness is at a low ebb.

Newton’s letters serve to show us in the third place that *true evangelical religion is intensely practical*. He opens up the truth to his correspondents, not in order that they may admire his wisdom, but that it may influence their hearts and lives. It is only as the doctrines of God’s Word are received and believed by us that we can practise Christianity. Many of the problems and difficulties with which his correspondents confronted him were delicate and complicated, and we cannot but be struck with his manner of dealing with them. His replies are characterized by practical down-to-earth instruction and sanctified common sense.

All who love to trace the work of God in the soul of man, all who are troubled with sin and temptation, all who are seeking guidance in the Christian life, will find a deep mine in the letters of John Newton. There are riches abounding here for the poor of Christ’s flock. Written in simple flowing language, the letters are *easy* to read. What Dr Alexander Whyte said of John Newton’s letters is indeed a fair esti-

mate of their worth – ‘a volume of the purest apostolical and evangelical truth, written in a strong, clear, level and idiomatic English style.’

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