

WISE COUNSEL



Your affectionate friend &
brother John Newton.

WISE COUNSEL

John Newton's Letters
to John Ryland, Jr.

Edited by
Grant Gordon



THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

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FRONTISPIECE

This portrait of John Newton has never been published and was unknown to the public. The inscription on the back of the original reads, 'Revd John Newton Drawn by W W Waite from memory'. William Watkin Waite (1778–1856) was an artist in Abingdon. He specialized in portraiture and was principally a miniaturist. Some of his work was shown at the Royal Academy.

Newton did not sit for this drawing; neither was it copied from any other published portraits of Newton. Taking into account Waite's age, it is the latest portrait of Newton and shows him a little heavier than he appears in earlier portraits.

It is uncertain where Waite saw Newton. It may have been during the former's apprenticeship near London. The fluted column in the background is similar to those that dominate the interior of the church of St Mary Woolnoth, London, where Newton served. Alternatively, it is possible that Waite saw Newton on one of the preacher's visits to his married sister who lived near Abingdon.

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FOREWORD

IN A GROUND-BREAKING ARTICLE on the way that letter-writing connected the various streams of the eighteenth-century Evangelical awakening in its early years, Susan O'Brien has identified ten ministers who were central to this network of letters, including Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Isaac Watts, and Philip Doddridge.¹ If her study had taken in the latter half of the eighteenth century, she would have found a similar network of Evangelical ministerial letter-writers, and central among them John Newton. By the 1780s Newton was regularly devoting a significant amount of time every week to letter-writing, using it as a means of spiritual direction and mentoring.

Now, among Newton's major correspondents was the younger John Ryland, a fact that has been frequently overlooked in studies of Newton's life.² Though belonging to different ecclesial communions—Newton was an Anglican, while Ryland was a Baptist—and separated in age by more than twenty-five years, the two men became the closest of friends. The importance of Newton and his letters for Ryland's growth as a Christian and a pastor can be found in the following statement made by the Baptist pastor in 1824, the year before he died: 'Mr Newton invited me to visit him at Olney in 1768; and from thence to his death, I always esteemed him, and Mr Hall of Arnsby³ . . . as my wisest and most faithful counsellors, in all difficulties.'⁴

¹ Susan O'Brien, 'A Transatlantic Community of Saints: The Great Awakening and the First Evangelical Network, 1735-1755', *The American Historical Review*, 91, No. 4 (October 1986), p. 819.

² An exception in this regard is the recent work of Bruce Hindmarsh on John Newton's life and thought.

³ The Baptist pastor Robert Hall, Sr. (1728–91) of Arnesby, Leicestershire.

⁴ 'Remarks on the *Quarterly Review*, for April 1824, relative to the Memoirs of Scott and Newton', in John Ryland, *Pastoral Memorials: Selected from the Manuscripts of the Late Revd. John Ryland, D.D. of Bristol* (London: B. J. Holdsworth, 1828), II, p. 346.

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Here then we see a concrete illustration of G. R. Balleine's remark that Newton was 'the great spiritual director of souls through the post'.¹

It has been my distinct privilege to be acquainted with this work of my dear friend Grant Gordon since the late 1980s when I was deeply involved in researching a circle of Baptist friends that were central to Ryland's life—Andrew Fuller, John Sutcliff, William Carey, and Samuel Pearce. It has been a thrill to watch it develop and mature to the point that it can now be launched into the world. For Grant, it has been truly a labour of love. And this is only right: for if these letters are about anything, they are about the joy of a friendship rooted in the love of Christ. In reading this book of the correspondence of Newton and Ryland—though we only have one side of the conversation, since none of Ryland's letters to Newton appear to have survived—we see afresh the truth of John Donne's remark that 'letters mingle souls'.

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August 2009

¹ Cited D. Bruce Hindmarsh, 'Newton, John' in H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: The University Press, 2004), 40, p. 728.

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN IN PROCESS for twenty years. While completing a Master's thesis on John Newton's letters, I came across Dr Champion's journal article describing many Newton letters to John Ryland that are in the archives of Bristol Baptist College (see p. xiii). I contacted Stella Read, then librarian, who graciously provided photocopies. I began transcribing them and Mary Unger patiently typed the first batch of letters. Later I twice visited the College, and again the staff was most helpful. This resulted in finding copies of more letters, as well as the transcript that Champion had made of many in the archives. By that time, I had already made my transcript but his was helpful for comparison.

Through the Internet and with a whetted appetite, I began searching archives around the world for more letters and related documents. Consequently, I not only located more letters, but also found the large Volume Two of Newton's unpublished diary that had been missing to researchers for about one-hundred-and-forty years. This was at the Morgan Library, New York, and Christine Nelson was most gracious in providing a copy and in making my two visits there so productive. I also located a previously unknown portrait of Newton.

Many recent published works have been valuable resources. These include the two Newton biographies by Bruce Hindmarsh and Jonathan Aitken, as well as Marylynn Rouse's edited revision of Cecil's early classic biography of Newton. The two-volume *Dictionary of Evangelical Biography 1730-1860*, by Donald M. Lewis has been a constant companion. In order not to make the book too large, a separate bibliography is not included. Instead, the sources are in the footnotes, with first inclusion having the more complete reference.

I express my deep gratitude to Roger Hayden, Michael Haykin, and Barbara Hill for reading the full manuscript, catching glitches, making valuable comments, asking probing questions and offering suggestions. Alan Wong came to my rescue when I struggled with computer issues, Jeremy Trevett helped with the

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Latin quotations, and Timothy Underhill deciphered the shorthand Newton used (sparingly) in his diary. Marylynn Rouse, the director of The John Newton Project, was constantly resourceful and provided some pictures, as well.

Thanks are due to the following libraries and archives for permission to publish material in their holdings: Lambeth Palace (London), Northamptonshire Record Office, Princeton University, Yale University, The Morgan Library and Museum (New York), and Regent's Park College (Oxford). Rene Vlug in Holland gave permission to publish one letter in his possession. I am very grateful to Bristol Baptist College (where Ryland served as president) for giving permission to publish their extensive holdings of Newton letters, as well as for allowing quotations from the diaries of John Ryland, Jr., and Frances Ryland, his wife.

I have so much appreciated Michael Haykin, as a scholar and my friend, who has given me encouragement and counsel all along the way. Without this, the book would not have seen the light of day.

I want to express my thanks to Banner of Truth for their interest in publishing this book, and for the work of Jonathan Watson and Douglas Taylor in preparing it for publication.

Last, but furthest from the least, I express my loving gratitude to my wife, Margaret. She has been very supportive and a patient listener during this project. Though, no doubt, she will be relieved that it is finally completed and that now our daily conversations will no longer be about my research or latest find.

I am thankful that Newton saw that through his personal letters he could significantly minister to others and that I have had the privilege of preparing these letters for a wider audience. It is fitting therefore that I end by quoting his hymn of praise for the harvest:

Let the praise be all the Lord's,
As the benefit is ours!
He, in season, still affords
Kindly heat, and gentle showers:
By his care the produce thrives,
Waving o'er the furrow'd land;
And when harvest time arrives
Ready for the reaper stands.¹

So, glean through the following Newton letters and enjoy the harvest.

¹ Newton, *Olney Hymns*, Book Two, Hymn 36.

Introduction—1

OVERVIEW OF THE LETTERS

TODAY MOST KNOW JOHN NEWTON (1725–1807) primarily as the author of hymns, especially *Amazing Grace*. However, those more familiar with him have long agreed that letter-writing was his greatest gift. In fact, Newton himself came to the same conclusion, though reluctantly. When he saw how much people valued his letters and how they shared them with their friends, he gathered up some letters he had sent, as well as those he had already printed in magazines, and published them for a wider audience. In 1780, he published *Cardiphonia*, containing over one-hundred-and-fifty letters to twenty-four different recipients. The letters were filled with spiritual wisdom and practical insight. It became quite popular and is now considered a spiritual classic. It included ‘Nine letters to the Rev. Mr R.’ As with all the letters Newton published, he concealed the name of the recipient. However, years after Newton’s death, his biographer Josiah Bull revealed the names. ‘Mr R.’ was John Ryland, Jr. (1753–1825), a Baptist minister serving as assistant pastor to his father in Northampton near Olney, where Newton served as curate. Other than these nine letters, little was known of the connection between Newton and Ryland.

No biographer was aware that a large collection of Newton’s letters to Ryland was stored in the archives of Bristol Baptist College where Ryland eventually served as president. However, that changed a little over thirty years ago when Leonard G. Champion published a brief summary of that rare collection of fifty-eight original letters.¹ Fortunately, it turns out that there are even more copies of Newton’s letters in the College archives that Champion did not mention. A hitherto unknown volume contains Ryland’s handwritten copies of twenty-four Newton letters to him, of which only eight were in Champion’s list.²

¹ Leonard G. Champion, ‘The Letters of John Newton to John Ryland’, *Baptist Quarterly*, 27 (1977), pp. 159–74. Also at http://www.baptisthistory.org.uk/bhs_articles/NewtonRyland.pdf.

² I am grateful to Stella Read, then librarian at the College, for bringing this document to my attention and providing me with a copy.

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Through research in many archives, as well as 18th- and 19th-century journals, the present writer has located additional letters. In the 1800s, Ryland and his son published some in the *Baptist Magazine*, a journal with limited circulation and hence largely unknown. More original letters were found at Yale University, Princeton University, Lambeth Palace (London), Regent's Park College (Oxford), and in a private autograph collection in Holland. In addition, external and internal evidence reveals that two published letters to anonymous recipients were actually written to Ryland. These two letters show Newton at his finest. In the first,¹ he sympathetically answers Ryland's questions about the struggles busy pastors have in remaining spiritually alive. The second² is a profound statement on marriage written to Ryland when he was about to get married. In both these letters Newton obviously thought his words were applicable to a wider audience so he chose to publish the letters, instead of mailing them. All together, in this present volume, we now we have eighty-two full letters, and a portion of an eighty-third, to Ryland.

Because these letters span four decades – 27 from 1771–9, 19 from 1780–9, 31 from 1790–9, and 6 from 1800–3 – they provide a rare first-hand glimpse of 18th-century evangelicalism in England and a unique opportunity for present-day readers to read about events and challenges as Newton and Ryland experienced them. The letters also reveal the special relationship between the two. Ryland was only fifteen when he first met Newton and was a guest in his home. Despite Newton being almost three times young Ryland's age, the two developed a close friendship that lasted until Newton's death. In many ways, it was something of a father-son relationship, for Ryland often turned to Newton for advice and counsel. Newton became Ryland's personal confidant, spiritual mentor, theological advisor and close friend. Much of this was by correspondence.

Though we do not have any of Ryland's letters to Newton, we are able to learn of his perspective by consulting other unpublished material. This includes his general correspondence, his diary, his wife Frances' diary, and the Record Book of College Lane Baptist church where he grew up and served as pastor. From Newton's extensive unpublished diaries (hereafter Diary), we gain further insight into the mind and heart of Newton.

¹ Letter Five, April 1773, p. 33.

² Letter Twenty-eight, January 1780, p. 137.

Overview of the Letters

By comparing the unpublished letters with the published versions, we are now able to fill in many blanks in the latter. Understandably, when Newton published letters he deleted personal information and private comments to protect the identity of his recipients and others he mentioned. Since that is no longer necessary, we can now include interesting and valuable information not previously available.

To allow readers to understand and appreciate the letters better, information on events of the day, as well as unpublished Newton and Ryland material is provided. Extensive footnotes also give information on all persons, books or events that Newton mentions. Web addresses for related rare books or articles (some available only on the Web) have been included in the footnotes.

Some letters deal with *theological* issues argued at the time, including the conflict between the champions of the views of John Wesley and of George Whitefield. In addition, there was much debate within Calvinism itself over how preachers were to proclaim the gospel and apply it. In this connection Newton helped Ryland move towards a more evangelical Calvinism. Throughout, he also recommends books for Ryland to consult and comments on their value. Some of the finer distinctions may be difficult for today's readers to appreciate fully. Nevertheless, even in these, Newton's answers are wise and beneficial today.

Many of the letters deal with *personal* matters. As a young man, Ryland sought guidance about his courtship and the numerous complications that arose. Newton's comments about these and marriage in general are helpful. Some of the most touching letters deal with Ryland's deep personal losses and pain. The death of his first wife and the illnesses of his infant children weighed heavily on him and he found comfort in Newton's words. Smallpox was a constant threat and there was controversy over the new process of vaccination. This was in its infancy and sadly, while it protected some, it mortally infected others. Newton commented wisely on the practical and ethical issues.

Sometimes Ryland ventured to ask for Newton's *practical* assistance. When William Carey was a poor struggling pastor, Ryland sought Newton's financial aid, asking him to approach his wealthy friends on Carey's behalf. On more than one occasion, Ryland asked him to help his brothers find employment in London. These requests caused Newton some difficulty, because he was reluctant to pester his friends. Yet he did what he could, even from his own pocket. There was also

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the very delicate and awkward matter of how much Ryland should do to assist his elderly father who had serious financial problems.

As a young pastor, Ryland had a number of *church* crises that required Newton's counsel. One concerned how best to deal with a few complaining families in the church, and then how best to respond to public criticism by the pastor they preferred over Ryland. On another occasion, Ryland had a major dilemma about accepting a call to another church. This lasted almost two years and was complicated by some surprising twists and turns.¹

These letters include fascinating details of the emerging modern *missionary movement*. Ryland helped launch the Baptist Missionary Society which sent out his friend William Carey to India. Newton supported the interdenominational London Missionary Society and helped found the Anglican Church Missionary Society. Newton therefore shared what he was hearing from his many connections and responded to Ryland's concerns. Because Newton was well acquainted with the leaders of the East India Company and of the Sierra Leone Company, Ryland often asked him to intervene for the Baptist missionaries when they experienced opposition in both fields.²

Both Ryland and Newton loved poetry and writing *hymns*. Newton, in particular, wished congregations to follow the lead of Isaac Watts and not restrict themselves to the Psalms. This meant writing new hymns. Newton teamed up with his friend William Cowper to write many and published a hymn book that soon became a beloved standard. This shared interest naturally crops up in the letters.

The letters also deal with various *current events*, especially major world issues. These include news of the American and French revolutions, as well as looming threats of other wars. There was also the effort to abolish the slave trade. Newton had been much involved in the trade but now, having turned against it, became a key person in the abolition movement. This was especially true because of his friendship with, and counsel to, William Wilberforce. Newton kept Ryland abreast of the developments.

¹ For details, see Grant Gordon, 'The Call of Dr John Ryland, Jr.', *Baptist Quarterly* (hereafter *BQ*), January 1992, pp. 214-27.

² For issues related to the Baptist mission to Sierra Leone, see Grant Gordon, *From Slavery to Freedom: The Life of David George, Pioneer Black Baptist Pastor* (Nova Scotia: Lancelot Press, 1992).

Overview of the Letters

Though the letters deal with events and questions specific to Ryland's life, readers will find much wisdom in Newton's responses which is just as applicable today. Of course, Newton did more than answer Ryland's questions. On more than one occasion, he raised issues himself and challenged Ryland to consider them. This is seen, particularly, in the first letter. He could be tender, but he did not shrink from giving a strong word, even a rebuke, when he thought it was needed. Throughout his letters, Newton is surprisingly transparent about his own weaknesses, disappointments and challenges. This is a mark of true friendship.

These letters include subtle details omitted previously. For example, when Newton published the 'nine letters to the Rev. Mr. R.', he changed the greetings to 'Dear Sir' to hide Ryland's identity. But the original letters, now published in their entirety, show that, while the early greetings were more formal ('Dear Sir'), as the friendship grew the greetings became more expansive ('My Dear Lad', 'My poor dear lad', 'Dear and Rev. John', 'My Dear Friend', 'Dear brother John', 'My dear friend and Doctor').

In April 1803, the feeble and almost blind Newton begins his final letter to Ryland with 'My dear old friend' and describes himself as 'Old Seventy-Eight'. He closes with the tender words, 'Your affectionate friend and brother, John Newton'. As will be seen in the letters that follow, that phrase aptly epitomizes the two men's thirty-two-year correspondence.

EDITOR'S NOTE

OLDER SPELLINGS HAVE GENERALLY BEEN MODERNIZED and short forms have been spelled in full. Most of the underlining and capitalization used by Newton for emphasis has been dropped. In addition, punctuation has been modified where sentences are long and many semi-colons have been changed to full-stops. Long paragraphs have occasionally been broken up. Words added by the present editor are indicated by square brackets. Some words that may be less known today are explained in the footnotes. Where Newton revised the letters for publication I have followed his revised spelling and punctuation, and referred to the original in the footnotes. But sections, additional words, and names that were omitted or modified for publication have been restored to their original place in the text.

Newton often quoted or alluded to verses and incidents from Scripture. I have indicated many of these in the footnotes, using the King James Version, as Newton would have done. But no attempt has been made to identify all the allusions.

Sources cited are generally identified in full the first time they are mentioned. 'Originals' referred to in the footnotes are the autograph letters signed by the author. *Reminiscences* means 'Manuscript Autograph Reminiscences by Dr John Ryland' dated 24 October 1807 in the archives of the Bristol Baptist College. That year Ryland re-read his early diaries and wrote this one-volume condensed summary covering 1766–76 to pass on to his family. The location of unpublished material is generally indicated in the footnotes at the first mention of the material. Where documents are said to be in Bristol, the reference is to the archives of the Bristol Baptist College. As to Newton's Diaries, there are three major unpublished volumes. Volumes 1 (1751–6) and 3 (1773–1805) are in the Firestone Library, Princeton University. Volume 2 (1756–72) had been lost to researchers since 1868, but as mentioned in the Preface, I am pleased to report that I found it last year in the holdings at the Morgan Library and Museum, New York.