

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

John Newton and His Baptist Friends.

HAVING had cause recently to delve into the records of the life of John Newton, slave-trader and clergyman, I have been interested to discover many references to Nonconformists, and in particular to Baptists. John Newton met some of the foremost Baptists of his day, or indeed of any day. To gather together his comments upon them may not be without interest.

First, a word or two about John Newton (1725-1807). He will always be remembered for two things, his extraordinary career, and his hymns. In the *Olney Hymns* there are sixty-eight hymns from the pen of William Cowper, and two hundred and eighty from the pen of John Newton. Some of the two hundred are prosaic and halting, but certain of them have an immortal appeal; "Glorious things of thee are spoken," and "How sweet the name of Jesus sounds," are two for which we shall always be indebted to Newton.

Newton's life was a dramatic one. He went to sea at eleven years of age. He had many narrow escapes from death. He fell a prey to evil companions. He was seized by the press-gang, and suffered all the barbarities of life on a man-of-war. His father purchased for him the rank of midshipman, and then he deserted. He was caught, arrested, put in irons, and then flogged and degraded in rank. He got his discharge from the Navy, came to utter destitution, and in despair entered the service of a slave-trader. He was treated with appalling cruelty by his master; his bed was a mat, and a log of wood his pillow. His mistress, a coloured woman living with his master as wife, made Newton beg for food from her plate. All this time he lived a life of utter Godlessness. But one day, on board ship in a terrible storm, Newton began to pray. And, "About this time I began to know that there is a God who hears and answers prayers." Also he saw that "there never was or could be such a sinner as myself."¹

John Newton's circumstances improved; he became a slave-trader himself. But gradually he was led to give up his evil ways and the foul trade of a slaver, and was led into the ministry of the Church of England. At the first the way was blocked, and for a while he thought of taking the pastorate of a Nonconformist church; many offers were made to him by Independent churches. But finally he was ordained by the Bishop of Lincoln, and received the living of Olney, and then later that of St. Mary Woolnoth, London. Newton exercised a great evangelical influence, by his

¹ Except where mentioned the quotations are from *John Newton, an Autobiography and Narrative*, edited by Rev. J. Bull, 1868.

example, his preaching and his writings. He did much to raise the standards of the ministry of the Church of England; he was the Anglican Wesley.

In the interval between giving up the slave-trade and entering the ministry, Newton held the post of tide-surveyor at Liverpool. Here he came under the influence of a Baptist. At first Newton could not find any satisfactory preacher in Liverpool, the state of the churches was to his mind deplorable. Then he met John Johnson, a Baptist. And he says, after hearing him preach, "It was with regret I reflected that, through inattention or prejudice, I had deprived myself of his preaching for so many years as I have been in this town." Johnson was remarkable in that, in a day of decline, he was a fervent evangelist who sustained and multiplied the Cheshire churches.

Newton, from that date, attended Johnson's church with great regularity, not only on the Sunday, but also on the Wednesday evening.

The B.B.C. once founded an interesting series of talks upon the entertaining, if rather useless, theme of the course of history *if* certain things had happened. If it is permissible to speculate upon what would have happened if, say, Alexander the Great had not succumbed early in life to a fever germ, then it is permissible to speculate upon what would have happened if Newton had become a Baptist. He very nearly did join the Baptist Church at Liverpool. But, at last seeing that this could only be done on what he calls "full terms," meaning believers' baptism, he rejected the idea. He wrote in his diary, "As I do not see the necessity myself, I cannot at present submit. However I desire thankfully to receive so much of the ordinances under him (Johnson) as I can obtain. Oh, that the happy time was come when all the sincere worshippers of God were of one heart and mind!"

Although Newton did not become a Baptist it appears that his views on baptism were for ever modified by his friendship with Johnson. In writing to a clerical friend, in 1792, Newton says, "I cannot undertake to vindicate every expression in our baptismal service. . . . The rubric tells us gravely that those who die in infancy may be saved if baptised; I believe they may be and are saved whether baptised or not; for I cannot think that the salvation of a soul depends upon a negligent or drunken minister, who cannot be found when wanted to baptise a dying infant. . . . The Fathers, or some of them did indeed speak of baptism and regeneration or the new birth as synonymous; but while Scripture, experience, and observation contradict them, I pay little regard to their judgement."

Whitefield visited Liverpool, and greatly attracted Newton. On January 2nd, 1756, Newton wrote to Whitefield a long letter

in which he gives a survey of the religious condition of Liverpool. Of the Baptists he says, "It is true we have the truth preached in the Baptist meetings; but I believe you know the particular disadvantages they are both under, so that, though they are useful to their own people (I trust, through grace, to me also), yet they seem not calculated for general usefulness."

When Newton settled at Olney he commenced to meet, within the Northamptonshire Baptist Association, many of the foremost Baptists of the day.

The first famous Baptist Newton met was John Collett Ryland. He wrote in his diary, "Our first interview an agreeable one. After dinner we had a little congregation. I began with prayer. He preached, from Matthew iv. 16." From this time the two men saw much of each other, even preaching for each other. Robert Hall, of Arnsby, author of *Help to Zion's Travellers*, called on Newton twice in 1766, and Newton wrote in his diary after the first visit, "A man of richest spirit."

Dr. John Ryland (John Collett's son) had many opportunities of meeting Newton, and many letters passed between them. In 1773, Dr. Ryland wrote to Olney in a very depressed mood. He wrote of error on every hand, and lukewarmness on the part of God's servants. He wondered if Christ was asleep, and cared not that the ship was going to the bottom. To this letter Newton replied, "The ship was safe when Christ was in her, although He was *really* asleep. . . . You are too anxious, and I am too easy in some respects. Indeed I cannot be too easy when I have a right thought that all is safe in His hands; but if your anxiety makes you pray, and my composure makes me careless, you have certainly the best of it. However, the ark is fixed upon an immovable foundation, and if we think we see it totter, it is owing to a swimming in our heads. Seriously, the times look dark and stormy, and call for much circumspection and prayer; but let us not forget that we have an infallible Pilot, and that the power, wisdom, and honour of God are embarked with us."²

In 1775 the Northamptonshire Association met at Olney. Now this Association was destined to infuse new life into the denomination, and its leaders were to include John Sutcliff, of Olney, who settled there in 1775. How then did these men, and these meetings, impress Newton? He wrote of one sermon, "The Lord was pleased to give me some softenings and relentings of heart. It is long since I had such an opportunity. O Lord, soften me yet more, and enable me to rejoice in Thy peace." Four Baptist ministers dined with Newton during those meetings.

In 1802 Newton was in correspondence with William Carey. Newton had a very high opinion of Carey. Dr. Buchanan, friend

² Cardiphonia, ii., 160.

of Newton, expressed himself in a slighting fashion on the subject of the Baptist missionaries, and Newton wrote a strong letter to him accusing him of looking down from his own position of ease and eminence upon men who were devotedly bearing the heat and the burden of the day. Newton added, "I do not look for miracles; but if God were to work one in our day, I should not wonder if it were in favour of Dr. Carey."

It will be realised that Newton's views on Dissent were very liberal. In a letter to a Presbyterian friend Newton sums up those views of his which enabled him to have rich communion with his Baptist friends, "How does Christ receive us? Does He wait till we are exactly of a mind? . . . Is He the God of the Presbyterians or the Independents alone? Do not some amongst you, and some amongst us, know with equal certainty that He has received them? Do not they, do not we, know what it is to taste that He is gracious? Does He not smile upon your ordinances and ours? Are not the fruits of true faith the same on both sides of the Tweed, and in every corner of the land? And shall zeal presume to come in with its ifs and its buts, and to build up walls of separation?"

It was no common man who could include in his circle of friends such men as Lord Dartmouth, Wilberforce, the poet Cowper, Robert Hall, Dr. Ryland, William Carey and the lowliest and poorest in his parish.

R. W. THOMSON.

Harry Wyatt of Shansi, by Ernest A. Payne, B.A., B.D., B.Litt.
(Carey Press, 1s.)

Harry Wyatt's forty-three years were crowded with activity. Scouting, Dentistry, R.A.M.C., Cross Sheet, Medical Training, China—the China stricken by war. His tragic death on the Kuohsien Road last May removed a medical missionary of outstanding character and devotion. His story is well told in this little volume, which is enriched by a photograph, three illustrations, and a map of North China.

My Guided Life, by J. Scott Lidgett, C.H., M.A., D.D. (Methuen and Co., Ltd., 5s.)

Originally published in 1936 at a somewhat prohibitive price, many will welcome this cheaper edition of a book which tells in a plain, straightforward way of the author's long and busy life. His interests have taken him into many fields of social, municipal and national life, and prominent figures constantly flit across the pages of this volume.