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JOHN NEWTON'S CHURCH HISTORY

It is commonly supposed that the eighteenth-century Evangelicals were uninterested in Church History. They had no doctrine of the Church, so it is alleged, and were not therefore concerned with its development. "The conception of the Church as a living visible society, teaching its creeds and celebrating its sacraments through a ministry which derived its powers in due historical succession from the apostles, was never grasped by them", wrote H. O. Wakeman. "Religion was treated as solely concerned with the personal relations of the individual soul with God. Its social and corporate duties were forgotten, and individual feeling made all-important. To the Evangelical party the Church of England was nothing more than one among many forms of Protestantism, and dated its religious life from the Reformation."¹ Similar charges have been laid by other prominent writers.² But these are assumptions which are repeated more often than they are examined. A candid enquiry reveals that they cannot be adequately substantiated.

The Evangelicals had a very definite doctrine of the Church, although it differed markedly from that held by the High Church party. The continuing bond of the Church was held to be evangelical rather than institutional. The true Church was invisible and spiritual: it was not necessarily coextensive with the bounds of the visible society. It was less an external organisation than an inward fellowship of the Spirit.³ Such a view of the Church inevitably affected the conception of Church History. And the Evangelical Revival was not lacking in Church historians. There was, in fact, quite a succession of them.

The most notable is undoubtedly Joseph Milner.⁴ His *History of the Church of Christ*, published in three volumes at

¹ H. O. Wakeman, *An Introduction to the History of the Church of England*, p. 451.

² E.g., V. F. Storr, *The Development of English Theology in the Nineteenth century*, pp. 66-7; S. Baring-Gould, *The Evangelical Revival*, p. 233.

³ The Evangelicals did not, however, overlook the existence of the visible Church. Following the Reformation tradition, they recognised both the *ecclesia visibilis* and the *ecclesia invisibilis*. Cf. H. Heppel, *Reformed Dogmatics*, pp. 664-5. The Evangelical conception of the invisible Church is not as vague as some would suggest (e.g. Storr, *op. cit.*, p. 67). Nor does it open the door to antinomianism; L. E. Binns (*The Evangelical Movement in the English Church*, p. 113) meets this point.

⁴ 1744-97. Headmaster of Hull Grammar School and Vicar of North Ferriby.

the close of the eighteenth century,¹ is in itself a sufficient refutation of the statement by Overton and Relton that "it is hardly exaggeration to say that no theological nor scholarly work was produced by them [i.e. the Evangelicals] at all."² "The Church History of Joseph Milner," claimed Sir James Stephen, "is one of those books which may perish with some revolution of the moral and religious character of the English race, but hardly otherwise."³ More recently J. T. Inskip and Yngve Brilioth have assessed it at its true worth and awarded it a place of honour amongst English Church Histories.⁴ After Joseph Milner's death, the *History* was continued on the same plan as far as the Diet of Augsburg by his brother, Isaac.⁵ Finally John Scott, son of Thomas Scott, the commentator, completed the work of the Milners in three successive volumes.⁶ Meanwhile another lengthy Church History had been published by Dr. Thomas Haweis,⁷ and in Nelson's Edinburgh edition of Milner extracts from Haweis are added to cover the period from 1530 to the eighteenth century.⁸ This remarkable sequence of Evangelical Church historians can hardly be interpreted as evidencing a lack of interest in the subject.

But one name must be added, or rather, prefixed. The first in this line was John Newton. In 1769—nearly thirty years before Joseph Milner's great work—he produced *A Review of Ecclesiastical History*. Admittedly it is no more than a fragmentary beginning, but it is the true parent of the rest. Newton made that claim himself. John Campbell once enquired why Newton did not continue his Church History, and the latter replied that he felt he had not read enough on the subject; but he added, "I was the remote cause of Milner writing his. He got the hint from me."⁹ In his Introduction Milner admits his indebtedness:

¹ Vol. i, 1794; vol. ii, 1795; vol. iii, 1797.

² J. H. Overton and F. Relton, *The History of the English Church from the Accession of George I to the end of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 249.

³ J. Stephen, *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, p. 438.

⁴ J. T. Inskip, *Evangelical Influence in English Life*, p. 11; Y. Brilioth, *The Anglican Revival*, pp. 35-6.

⁵ 1750-1820. President of Queens' College, Cambridge, and Dean of Carlisle. Vol. iv was published in 1803 and vol. v in 1809; cf. M. Milner, *The Life of Isaac Milner*, p. 231.

⁶ 1826, 1829, 1831.

⁷ 1734-1820. Rector of Aldwinckle and Chaplain to the Countess of Huntingdon. *An Impartial and Succinct History of the Rise, Declension and Revival of the Church of Christ, from the birth of Our Saviour to the present time, with faithful characters of the principal personages, ancient and modern* was published in 1800.

⁸ 1841.

⁹ J. Bull, *John Newton: An Autobiography and Narrative*, compiled chiefly from his Diary and other unpublished documents, p. 109.

The volume of Mr. Newton is well known, and its merit has been acknowledged by men of piety and judgment. I once thought of beginning where he ended. But as there is a unity of manner and style which belongs to every author who plans and executes for himself and as in some points I really found myself to differ in sentiment from this very respectable writer, I altered my opinion, contented in this place to acknowledge, that so far as I can recollect, the perusal of his instructive volume of Ecclesiastical History first suggested to me the idea of this work.¹

It may then, be worth while to examine this pioneer Evangelical Church History.

John Newton's History has a history itself. It was conceived in the period prior to his ordination and appointment to the curacy of Olney. This was a time of unusual literary activity. Newton's post as a tide surveyor at Liverpool allowed him a certain leisure which he assiduously occupied in preparing himself for his high calling to the ministry. He gave himself to the study of the Greek New Testament² and began what he called his *Critica*, an exposition of the principal words of the New Testament.³ He published his *Thoughts on Religious Associations*.⁴ He was asked to write notes and a preface to a new edition of the Homilies, to appear in weekly numbers.⁵ He penned a series of letters outlining his spiritual pilgrimage, which were later expanded into the well known *Authentic Narrative*.⁶ He started to write a commentary on the Gospels, but abandoned it on hearing that Thomas Adam of Winteringham was engaged upon a similar task, and turned instead to the Acts of the Apostles.⁷ When Newton learned that his friend Thomas Haweis, then assistant to Martin Madan at the Lock Chapel, was preparing an exposition of the New Testament, he generously offered him all his notes and papers, saying: "It will give me no pain, yea, it will give me pleasure to see that I am not needed."⁸

It was Thomas Haweis who suggested to Newton that he might undertake the writing of a Church History. In his diary for November 8th, 1763, Newton refers to his frequent correspondence with Haweis, and continues:

¹ J. Milner, *The History of the Church of Christ*; from the days of the apostles, till the famous disputation between Luther and Miltitz, in 1520 (one-volume edition), p. iv.

² J. Newton, *An Authentic Narrative*, in *The Works of the Rev. John Newton, to which are prefixed Memoirs of his Life*, by the Rev. R. Cecil, p. 32.

³ Bull, op. cit., p. 109.

⁴ 1756.

⁵ 1762. Bull, op. cit., p. 112.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁷ *Ibid.*; cf. also A. Westoby, *A Memoir of Thomas Adam*, prefixed to *An Exposition of the Four Gospels*, p. 63.

⁸ MS. Letter, January 7th, 1763; quoted by permission of Messrs. Maggs Bros., Ltd., London, in whose custody the Newton-Haweis correspondence is kept.

He has prevailed upon me to engage in an important and difficult work—an Ecclesiastical History, to trace the Gospel spirit, with its abuses and oppositions, through the several ages of the Church—a subject of my own pointing out; but I little expected to have it devolved on me, and I have desired to decline it, sensible how poorly I am furnished for the undertaking; but my friend will have it so, and the Lord can supply. I am collecting books for the purpose.¹

The Ecclesiastical History was, as Newton says, a subject of his own pointing out. He had impressed upon Haweis the desirability of an Evangelical Church History, probably in the hope that Haweis himself would undertake it. "You may be assured," he wrote, "that such a publication² will be opposed and scrutinized to the utmost; it will awaken enemies of all sorts and sizes; and especially such a history of the Gospel as we are thinking of. It ought therefore to be well done, or not at all."³ It was thus a matter of no little surprise to Newton when Haweis suggested that he might tackle the difficult task himself. Newton was at first reluctant, complaining that his "bow was unbent and his harp hung upon the willows."⁴ Eventually he determined to make the attempt and sent his friend a rough sketch plan as follows:

- I. The Character and Genius of the Gospel Doctrines as taught and exemplified by Our Lord . . . with the State of His Church and disciples previous to the Pentecost after His Ascension.
- II. The State and Progress of the Gospel from Pentecost till about the time of the death of John or the close of the Scriptural Canon.
- III. To Constantine.
- IV. The Decline of the Gospel to Gregory the Great.
- V. From the Waldenses to Wyclif.
- VI. Wyclif, Huss and Jerome.
- VII. Luther and the Reformation. The Reformation in England to Edward VI.
- VIII. The Death of Edward VI to the Revolution, and America.
- IX. The Revolution to the present.⁵

Newton proposed to apply the whole History to his own time to show,

- (i) That the doctrine which was opposed in the time of Our Saviour and His apostles was always opposed and hated by the world from that day to this.
- (ii) That the doctrine of Justification by Faith alone has been in all ages, as Luther styles it, *Articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae*.
- (iii) That a revival of practical religion was never effected or even attempted upon any other principle.
- (iv) That this principle has always been abused by some evil minded men.
- (v) That such abuses and offences as have formerly appeared were no just

¹ Bull, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

² Referring to a projected Evangelical Magazine in which the Ecclesiastical History was to appear in parts. The proposal did not materialise until 1793.

³ MS. Letter, September 26th, 1763.

⁴ MS. Letter, October 17th, 1763.

⁵ *Ibid.*

exceptions against a work of God, neither are they now. (vi) A comparison between the ancient and present state of the Protestant countries as to extent, doctrine, discipline and manners. (vii) That the Reformed countries so called need a Reformation now little less than the Popish countries did formerly. (viii) The great advantage of living when religion is on a revival if rightly improved, with the proportionable guilt and danger of opposing, rejecting or reviling the work or instruments of the Spirit of God.¹

Newton's next letter to Haweis² confirms the statement in the diary that he had begun to collect books to help him in his researches. The list is an illuminating one: it indicates the perhaps unsuspected depth of Evangelical scholarship. Newton was anxious not only to consult the most authoritative of the contemporary Church historians, but also to reach back to original sources. Here is his first bibliography: *The Histories of Eusebius, Socrates and Sozomen, Bede's Ecclesiastical History, Lives of the Popes* (Platinas), *Lives of the Fathers and Primitive Christianity* (Cave), *Origines Britannicae* (Stillingfleet), *History of the Council of Trent* (Polano), *History of the Reformation* (Burnet), *History of the Popes* (Bowyer), *Ecclesiastical History* (Du Pin), *Piedmontese Churches* (Allexis). Not satisfied with what he had already gathered, Newton asked Haweis for the following: *Piedmontese Churches* (Merland and Leger), *Succession of the Protestant Churches* (Usher), *The Reformation in Germany* (Sleidon), *Acts and Monuments* (Fox) and *History of the Puritans* (Neal). He sought the advice of his learned friend on the best history of French Protestantism to the revocation of the Edict of Nantes and an account of the Eastern Church. In view of the difficulties of gaining access to the requisite literature, he wondered whether he might continue his work in London. He does not appear to have taken this step, however, but later he announced his intention of travelling to Manchester in order to visit "a library of good repute."³ By November 15th, 1763, Newton was able to send Haweis an Introduction, and presumably he pursued his researches and possibly started to write his opening chapter during the ensuing weeks. Certainly further additions were made to his bibliography, as the letters reveal. A parcel from Johnson the bookseller included Cave's *Historia Literaria*, *A Critical History of the Creed* and his *Enquiry into the Constitution of the Primitive Church* previously mentioned.⁴ Dr. Andrew Gifford, of the British Museum, recommended

¹ MS. Letter, October 17th, 1763.

² November 1st, 1763.

³ MS. Letter, November 29th, 1763.

⁴ MS. Letter, December 16th, 1763.

Catilenius's *Patres Apostolici*. Newton enquired from Haweis about Fuller's *Ecclesiastical History*. He was greatly interested in a passage relating to Trajan and Ignatius in *Acta Martyrum vera et sincera*.¹

At this point Newton's studies were interrupted by his presentation to the curacy of Olney, his ordination and his departure from Liverpool to the parish with which his name is chiefly associated. For several years he was unable to resume his literary labours and the outline for his Church History lay buried in his desk. Happily, however, despite this intermission, he eventually found time to return to the task and in November, 1769, published his *A Review of Ecclesiastical History*.² This is but a fragment of the original and only covers the first two books of the sketch plan. Newton explains his purpose in the Introduction:

I judge it therefore a seasonable undertaking to attempt the apology of Evangelical Christianity, and to obviate the sophistry and calumnies which have been published against it; and this I hope to do, without engaging in any controversy, by a plain enumeration of facts. I propose to give a brief delineation of Ecclesiastical History from our Saviour's time, and, that the reader may know what to expect, I shall here subjoin the principal points I have in view.

1. I shall consider the genius and characteristic marks of the Gospel which Jesus taught, and show that, so long as this Gospel was maintained in its purity, it neither admitted nor found a neutrality, but that all who were not partakers of its benefits were exceedingly enraged against it. I shall make it appear that the same objections which have attended any reformations in later ages, were equally strong against Christianity, as taught by Christ and His first disciples, and that the offences and irregularities which have been known to attend a revival of evangelical doctrine in our time, were prevalent, to a considerable degree, under the preaching and inspection of the apostles.

2. When I come to the lives and conduct of those called the Fathers, whose names are held in ignorant admiration by thousands, I shall prove, on the one hand, that the doctrines for which the Fathers were truly commendable, and by which many were enabled to seal their profession with their blood, were the same which are now branded with the epithets of absurd and enthusiastic; and, on the other hand, that the Fathers, however venerable, were men like ourselves, subject to mistakes and infirmities, and began very soon to depart from the purity and simplicity of the Gospel.

3. The progress of our history will manifest that the accession of wealth and power to the Christian profession proved greatly detrimental to the faith, discipline, and manners of the churches; so that, after the Emperors publicly espoused the cause of Christ, the power and beauty of the Gospel was gradually eclipsed. Yet, in the most degenerate times, God had a spiritual people, who, though partaking in some degree of the general declension, retained so much of the primitive truth and practice as to incur the hatred and persecution of (what is called) the Christian world.

4. I shall treat of the means and instruments by which the Lord supported and revived His declining cause during several centuries: (1) In the valleys of

¹ MS. Letter, November 29th, 1763.

² Bull, op. cit., p. 169.

Piedmont, Provence, etc. by Berengarius, Waldo, and others. (2) In England, by Wyclif and his followers. (3) In Bohemia, by John Huss and Jerome of Prague. (4) In Germany, by Luther. Here I shall take occasion to observe, (1) that these successive reformations were all projected and executed, so far as God was pleased to give success, upon the same principles which are now so industriously exploded by many who would be thought champions of the Protestant faith; and (2) that Luther's reformation, the most extensive and successful, and of which we have the best accounts, was soon followed by errors, heresies, and a numerous train of abominations (as had been the case with primitive Christianity) which the Romanists, in imitation of their pagan predecessors, joyfully laid to the charge of the doctrine which Luther preached.

5. As it was not long before the Reformed countries needed a second Reformation, I shall give some account of the endeavours of many good men in Germany and other places in this view, their principles, success, and the treatment they met with from those who ought to have supported them, and then I shall briefly take notice of the similar occurrences in our own country, from the end of Queen Mary's reign to the present time, together with what has been most remarkable in the history of the gospel in our American settlements.

6. I shall occasionally consider the character and conduct of those persons whom God has honoured with eminent usefulness, in the different periods of His Church, point out the defects in their plan, and the mistakes which, through infirmity, in some degree blemished their undertakings.

7. Finally, to make it evident that the spiritual worshippers of God have always been a sect everywhere spoken against, I shall enumerate some of the reproachful names that have been successively fixed on them, as the mark of general contempt and abhorrence, such as Patarienes, Lollards, Huguenots, Gospellers, Puritans, Pietists, etc.¹

It is obvious that the Introduction refers to the whole scheme Newton had in mind and not merely to the two Books which actually appeared.

As to method, Newton refuses to confine himself to any rigid uniformity and studiously avoids what he calls "a dry detail of facts".² He has the ordinary reader in view rather than the expert. He contents himself with selecting from the voluminous materials already available those features which most forcibly substantiate his argument. His is Church History with a difference, he claims.

It must be confessed that the bulk of Ecclesiastical History, as it is generally understood, is little more than a history of what the passions, prejudices, and interested views of men have prompted them to perpetrate, under the pretext and sanction of religion. Enough has been written in this way; curiosity, nay malice itself, need desire no more. I propose to open a more pleasing prospect; to point out, by a long succession of witnesses, the native tendency and proper influence of the religion of Jesus; to produce the concurring suffrage of different ages, people, and languages, in favour of what the wisdom of the world rejects and reviles; to bring unanswerable proofs that the doctrine of grace is a doctrine according to godliness, that the constraining love of Christ is the most powerful motive to obedience, that it is the property of true faith to overcome the world,

¹ Newton, *Works*, pp. 426-7.

² *Ibid.*, p. 427.

and that the true Church and people of Christ have endured His cross in every age. The enemy has thrust sore at them that they might fall, but the Lord has been their refuge and support; they are placed upon a rock that cannot be shaken; they are kept (*φρουρούμενοι*), guarded and garrisoned by the power of God; and therefore the gates of hell have not, cannot, shall not prevail against them.

Per damna, per caedes, ab ipso
Ducit opes animumque ferro,¹

Book I covers the first period of Christianity, to the Ascension. It deals with the *præparatio evangelica* and meets the double query: "If Christ's appearance was so absolutely necessary, why was it so long deferred?" and "If mankind could do without Him for so many thousand years, why not longer, or for ever?"² Newton criticises those Christian apologists who have been too eager to make concessions in answer to these enquiries. His answer is along traditional lines, namely, that Christ's manifestation in the flesh was delayed "that the nature, effects, and inveteracy of sin might be more fully known, and the insufficiency of every other means of relief demonstrated by the universal experience of many ages",³ and also that time might be afforded for the full accomplishment of the prophecies concerning Christ.⁴ Newton proceeds to examine the character and genius of the Gospel as taught and exemplified by Christ. He does not attempt a biography of Our Lord. He prefers to state the nature of the doctrine preached by Him and implicit in Him. He defines the Gospel as "a Divine revelation in the person of Jesus Christ, discovering the misery of fallen man by sin, and the means of his complete recovery by the free grace of God, through faith, unto holiness and happiness."⁵ He lays down two premises before embarking upon an exposition of the Gospel. It should be remembered, first, that Jesus did not openly disclose His whole system of doctrine in express terms. He spoke to the multitude mainly in parables and was not always anxious to proclaim His Messiahship. And even in His more intimate conversations with His disciples He accommodated Himself to their limited understanding. The full explanation of many mysteries was referred to the post-Pentecostal period, when the Holy Spirit would guide them into all truth. Secondly, "the doctrine of the Gospel is not like a mathematical problem which conveys precisely the same degree of truth and certainty to every one who understands the terms."⁶ If this were so, all readers

¹ pp. 427-8.

² p. 429.

³ p. 430.

⁴ p. 432.

⁵ p. 433.

⁶ Ibid.

of the Bible would be equally enlightened. There is, however, an amazing variety in this respect. "Where this doctrine is truly understood, though in the lowest degree, it inspires the soul with a supreme love to Jesus, and a trust in Him for salvation. And those who understand it best, have not yet received all the evidence, comfort and influence from it, which it is capable of affording."¹

Newton then enlarges upon his previously stated definition of the Gospel. He stresses the revelatory basis of Christianity. Unassisted reason could never arrive at such sublime truths as the forgiveness of sins and the life everlasting. And since the subject matter of the New Testament is a Divine revelation, so it is only by Divine revelation that what is read there can be truly understood.² This revelation is personal. It is in and through Christ. Our Lord's divinity is adduced from a catena of passages from the gospels and the veiling of His glory is dwelt on. This revelation in Christ at once exposes man's sin and offers the means of salvation. It first diagnoses the disease and then prescribes the remedy. The seriousness of sin is inferred from the cost of its cure.

Would we learn the depth of the fall of man, let us consider the depth of the humiliation of Jesus to restore him. Behold the beloved of God, perfectly spotless and holy, yet made an example of the severest vengeance; prostrate and agonising in the garden; enduring the vilest insults from wicked men; torn with whips, and nails, and thorns; suspended, naked, wounded, and bleeding on the Cross, and there heavily complaining that God had, for a season, forsaken Him. Sin was the cause of all His anguish. He stood in the place of sinners; and therefore was not spared. Not any, or all the evils which the world has known, afford such proof of the dreadful effects and detestable nature of sin, as the knowledge of Christ Crucified. Sin had rendered the case of mankind so utterly desperate that nothing less than the blood and death of Jesus could retrieve it.³

But the same astonishing dispensation of Divine love reveals the means and certainty of a salvation proportionable to the gravity of sin. Christ's repeated promises are rehearsed and the efficacy of His proffered salvation evidenced from the Gospels.

Newton sees in this revelation the glory of free grace. It is the miserable and guilty, who find themselves without plea and without hope, who are invited without exception and received without condition. The vilest offenders are freely accepted in the Beloved. And, on the other hand, the most respectable character in the eyes of men cannot avail towards

¹ p. 433.² p. 434.³ p. 435.

acceptance with God. In this respect all men stand equal, involved in the same ruin, dependent upon the same Mediator. Newton recognises the scandal of grace.

This is an illustrious peculiarity of the Gospel, which the proud fallen nature of man cannot but resist and find fault with, till the conscience is truly affected with the guilt and demerit of sin. The whole tenor of Our Saviour's ministry was suited to depreciate the most specious attainments of those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and to encourage all who felt and confessed themselves to be miserable sinners: *Parcere subiectis, et debellare superbos*. This was a chief cause of the opposition He met with in His own person, and has awakened the hatred and dislike of the bulk of mankind against His doctrine ever since.¹

Newton is alive to the necessity of *sola fide* as well as *sola gratia*. By faith he not merely means a bare intellectual assent or an instantaneous assurance of forgiveness. Faith is, of course, founded on the strongest evidence and may often be accompanied by a special confirmation, but its distinguishing property is "a reliance upon Jesus Christ for all the ends and purposes for which the Gospel reveals Him."² Faith is wrought by the operation of the Holy Spirit and is built upon the person and word of Christ. Faith is always related to life. For Newton, as for Paul, faith is life and life is faith. To believe is to live and to live is to believe.

The great end and aim of the Gospel, in relation to man, is that holiness which spells happiness, "the complete restoration of the soul to the favour and image of God, or eternal life begun here, to be consummated in glory."³ Justification inevitably leads to Sanctification. The charge of antinomianism, so unjustly levelled against Evangelical theology, thus falls to the ground when *iustificatio* is seen to be indissolubly joined in *sanctificatio*.

Whenever and wherever the doctrines of free grace and justification by faith have prevailed in the Christian Church; and according to the degree of clearness with which they have been enforced, the practical duties of Christianity have flourished in the same proportion. Wherever they have declined, or been tempered with the reasonings and expedients of men, either from a well meant, though mistaken fear, lest they should be abused, or from a desire to accommodate the Gospel, and render it more palatable to the depraved taste of the world, the consequence has always been, an equal declension in practice. So long as the Gospel of Christ is maintained without adulteration, it is found sufficient for every valuable purpose; but when the wisdom of man is permitted to add to the perfect work of God, a wide door is opened for innumerable mischiefs.⁴

¹ p. 436. ² p. 437. ³ p. 438.

⁴ Ibid. For the charge of antinomianism, cf. Baring-Gould, op. cit., pp. 108-10.

Newton's exposition of the Gospel has been recounted at some length because it is determinative of his whole history. It was this measuring line that he proposed to lay against the doctrinal walls of the institutional Church in every age. Though he did not continue his review beyond apostolic times, the Evangelical canon here set out adumbrates, to some extent at least, the course he intended to follow. As Richard Cecil observes, in a footnote to the Introduction: "However much the prosecution of this subject might have been wished, either by his friends or the public at large, it is presumed the omission will be the more readily excused, when it is considered, that the observations made with respect to the first century seem to have been originally intended, and with very little variation will be found, to apply to every succeeding period."¹

Newton continues Book I with a consideration of the Jewish sects and parties ranged against Our Lord. He then examines the reasons for this opposition and the methods employed by Christ's enemies to prejudice the nation against Him. Remembering the uneven course of the Evangelical Revival and the determination of intolerant prelates to stamp out its newly-kindled flame, Newton adds, "To this time the Gospel of Christ is opposed on the same grounds, and by the like artifices, as were once employed against His person."² "Observations on the calling and characters of Our Lord's apostles and disciples previous to the Ascension" form the content of the concluding portion of Book I.³ After emphasising that the first apostles were an elect remnant, not faultless, but sincere, Newton closes with this comment:

We see Christianity divided into innumerable sects and parties, each supported by names, arguments, and books, and fighting for the credit of a denomination: but many forget that in a little time all these divisions and subdivisions will be reduced to two; the only real and proper distribution by which mankind, as to their religious character, ever was or will be distinguished, and according to which their final states will be speedily decided—the children of God, and the children of the wicked one.⁴

Book II is considerably longer than Book I. The opening chapter traces the progress of the Gospel from the Ascension to the end of the first century. Newton provides a chronological guide by dating the principal events according to the Roman imperial reign. His previous commentary on the Acts of the

¹ Newton, *Works*, p. 428.

² *Ibid.*, p. 443.

³ pp. 444–51.

⁴ p. 451.

Apostles probably formed the basis of this section, for he follows Luke's outline carefully, with suitable interpolations from the Epistles, and in the footnotes frequently alludes to the Greek text. His account of Paul's shipwreck is particularly vivid: Newton's own seafaring days were still near enough to supply an unusual touch of realism.¹ Passing beyond the period covered by Acts, Newton pauses to dispose of the Romanist claim concerning the episcopacy of Peter.² He quotes Tacitus's description of the Neronian persecution³ and refers to Pliny's letter to the Emperor Trajan.⁴ Newton analyses the reasons for the persecution of Christians. The prime cause, he claims, was "that enmity of the carnal heart, which cannot be brought to submit to the wisdom and will of God".⁵ This has been the real source of all the onslaughts on Christianity. Amongst the more particular reasons Newton includes the scandal of the Cross, the incompatibility of Christianity with other religions, the potential danger of the Christian community as *imperium in imperio*, the rapid spread of the Gospel, and the slanderous reports concerning the nature and practices of Christianity.⁶ Newton dismisses the literature of this period rather too summarily, perhaps, although it must be remembered that prior to the monumental work of J. B. Lightfoot the Apostolic Fathers were little valued in this country. But Newton is surely right in his estimate of the spirit of the age:

But though the first Christians were men subject to passions and infirmities, like ourselves, and were far from deserving, or desiring, that distinguishing admiration, and implicit submission, to all their sentiments, which were paid them by the ignorance and superstition of after times; yet they were eminent for faith, love, self-denial, and a just contempt of the world; multitudes of them cheerfully witnessed to the truth with their blood, and, by their steadfastness and patience under trials, and their harmony among themselves often extorted honourable testimonies even from their opposers. Could they have transmitted their spirit, together with their name, to succeeding generations, the face of Ecclesiastical History would have been very different from what it now bears; but, by degrees, the love of novelty, and the thirst of power, a relaxed attention to the precepts of Christ, and an undue regard to the names, authority, and pretensions of men, introduced those confusions, contentions, and enormities which at length issued in an almost universal apostacy from that faith and course of practice which alone are worthy the name Christianity.⁷

It is this theme that Newton intended to pursue in the remainder of his review.

¹ pp. 484-6.

² p. 488.

³ *Ibid.*, Tacitus, *Annales*, XV, xliv.

⁴ p. 490; Pliny, *Epp.* XX, xcvi. ⁷ p. 493.

⁵ p. 490.

⁶ pp. 490-2.

The prosecution of this subject, more especially with a view to the history of the favoured few who were preserved from the general contagion, and of the treatment they met with, who had the courage to censure or withstand the abuses of the times they lived in will be attempted in the following volumes of this work, if God, in Whose hands our times are, is pleased to afford opportunity, and if the specimen presented to the public, in this volume, should so far meet the approbation of competent judges as to encourage the author to proceed."¹

There follows next "An essay on the character of St. Paul as an exemplar and pattern of a minister of Jesus Christ",² which has the appearance of a separate composition inserted into the history rather than flowing from it.³ The characteristic excellence of St. Paul, which was the spring and source of every other grace, was his ardent love for Christ. Love is the key to all his thought and it was in the language of love that he proclaimed his message. The inseparable effect and sure evidence of love to Christ is love to men. Paul provides a striking example of pastoral affection and solicitude. Paul's inflexible attachment to the fundamental doctrines of the Gospel is then selected for attention. Paul knew the worth of evangelical truth: he had experienced its power in his own soul and he was aware that though it was unacceptable to the wisdom of the world it bore the unmistakable impress of the manifold wisdom of God. He preached the Gospel in its purity and simplicity, the sincere, genuine milk of the word,⁴ "neither weakened by water, nor disguised by any artful sweetening to render it more palatable".⁵ He pronounces an anathema on any one who dares to preach any thing less than the fullness of the Gospel, which, as Newton has already said, "like a bank opposed to a torrent, must be preserved entire to be useful".⁶ Every Christian minister must emulate Paul's passionate loyalty to the faith once delivered to the saints, declares Newton. He must not deviate from his instructions. He must keep to his brief. But though Paul was so insistent upon the essentials of the Gospel, he displayed a great tenderness towards weak consciences in circumstantial matters. Paul was completely disinterested. He had no other aim than the glory of God and the good of men. He could say with truth, We seek not yours but you. Zeal and humility are singled out as Paul's cardinal virtues. In an eloquent passage

¹ p. 493.

² pp. 494-505.

³ Newton himself confesses that it is somewhat of a digression (p. 494).

⁴ Ἀδολον γάλα (1 Pet. ii. 2).

⁵ Newton, *Works*, p. 497.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 493.

Newton distinguishes the "heavenly, gentle flame" of true Christian zeal from zeal falsely so called. "It shines and warms, but knows not to destroy: it is the spirit of Christ, infused with a sense of His love, into the heart; it is a generous philanthropy and benevolence, which, like the light of the sun, diffuses itself to every object, and longs to be the instrument of good, if possible, to the whole race of mankind."¹ Paul's humility is commended as a pattern for all Christians. To speak of oneself in abasing terms is comparatively easy, but to walk humbly and to be humble is hard, for "though the language of humility may be counterfeited, its real fruits and actings are inimitable".² But "an humble frame of mind is the strength and ornament of every other grace, and the proper soil wherein they grow".³ A proud Christian, argues Newton, is as much a contradiction in terms as a sober drunkard or a generous miser. And humility is especially requisite in a minister. The most outstanding abilities and unwearied diligence will prove futile without it. Newton's characterisation of St. Paul is both discerning and challenging. It is linked with the whole purpose of his review.

The design of our history is to show, in the course of every period of the Church, that those who have approached nearest to the character I have attempted to delineate from St. Paul have always met with such treatment [i.e. misrepresentation and opposition]; and from his declaration, that all who would live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution,⁴ we may expect it will always be so, while human nature and the state of the world remain as they are.⁵

Newton's fragment of Church History finishes with an examination of the irregularities and heresies of the apostolic age. The idyllic condition of the Jerusalem Church, described in the fourth chapter of Acts, was not long maintained. Faction and strife reared their ugly heads and all too soon disturbed the Pentecostal harmony. Likewise at Corinth the party-spirit split the Christian community and evoked the reprimands of Paul. The Galatians and Colossians were seduced by false teachers; the Churches at Thessalonica and Philippi included disorderly walkers and enemies of the Cross of Christ. In the apostolic Church there were many pretenders: the weeds grew amongst the wheat. It was not until later that persecution began to exercise its winnowing influence. St. John, in the next period, saw many of the doubtful Christians forsake the Gospel when it

¹ p. 501.

² p. 504.

³ Ibid.

⁴ 2 Timothy iii. 12.

⁵ J. Newton, *Works*, p. 505.

began to prove costly, and made the shrewd comment, "They went out from us, but they were not of us: for if they had been of us they would have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us."¹ Newton skilfully applies this train of reasoning to the Evangelical Revival. The whole movement had been criticised by the undiscerning because here and there some who were associated with it had been led away into error and fanaticism. The soundness of Evangelical theology had been questioned because of the renegade few. Newton leaps into the breach:

The doctrines we defend, which some (who cannot do it ignorantly) have the effrontery to misrepresent as novel opinions, are, we doubt not, the doctrines of Christ and His apostles; and in substance the doctrines taught from the Word of God by Wyclif, Luther, and the venerable reformers of our own Church. We preach Christ crucified, Christ the end of the law for righteousness, and the power of God for sanctification for every one that believeth; we preach salvation by grace through faith in His blood; and we are sure that they who receive this doctrine unfeignedly will, by their lives and conversations, demonstrate it to be a doctrine according to godliness; they are not indeed delivered from infirmities, and see more amiss in themselves than their worst enemies can charge them with; but sin is their burden; they sigh to be delivered from it, and they expect complete redemption. We cannot indeed say so much for all who outwardly avow a belief of this doctrine; there are pretenders who, while they profess to believe in God, in works they deny Him. But it has been so from the beginning. The miscarriages of such persons are charged indiscriminately upon the societies among whom they are mixed, and upon the truths which they seem to approve; but there is a righteous God, Who in due time will vindicate His own Gospel, and His own people, from all aspersions.²

Newton moves finally from irregularities to heresies. The parable of the tares teaches us to expect that Satan will insinuate errors into the very field of truth. Newton endeavours to prove "that the seeds of all error and heresies, the fashionable as well as those which are more generally despised, were sown in the first age, and appeared so early as to give occasion for the apostles' censures against them".³ He makes it clear that he is speaking in terms of generalities. As there is no new truth since the coming of Christ the Truth, so he thinks it probable that there can be no new errors. Newton is fully alive to the value of Church History in demonstrating that the latest perversion of Christianity, masquerading as a "modern" Gospel, is positively antiquated. There is nothing new under the heretical sun. Or, to employ Newton's own metaphor, "Truth like the sun, maintains a constant course; everything would stagnate

¹ 1 John ii. 19.

² J. Newton, *Works*, pp. 510-11.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 512-13.

and die if we were deprived of it for a single day; but errors are like comets; which, though too eccentric to be subject exactly to our computations, yet have their periods of approach and recess, and some of them have appeared and been admired, have been withdrawn and forgot, over and over again."¹ The only antidote to heresy is Christian truth. The apostles were able to refute the arguments of the unorthodox *viva voce*. The apostolic writings now bear the stamp of canonicity and must be our guide today.

Whoever is sincerely desirous to know the will of God, by attending to these lively oracles will be enabled to discern the path of truth and peace, through the midst of the maze of opinions wherein so many are bewildered and lost; but whoever is too wise or too indolent to search the Scriptures humbly and diligently for himself, would have paid as little regard to the authority of the apostles, if he could have conversed with them; nay, the advantage is on our side; for, as the Scriptures are held in professed veneration, we run no immediate risk of character or interest by consulting them; or they may be perused in retirement, unobserved by our nearest friends; whereas the apostles, though highly spoken of amongst us, were accounted while they lived the filth and off-scouring of all things; they were despised for their poverty and the meanness of their appearance, and detested as bigots and enthusiasts; so that it required some degree of faith and grace not to be ashamed of them.²

Newton concludes by entreating his readers "to reflect on the importance of having right views of the Gospel of Christ and of the spirit of Christianity".³ These are matters of universal concern. Newton pleads that they may be given universal consideration.

Newton's Church History received high praise from both Toplady and Cowper. Newton wrote to Toplady seeking advice on the continuation of his project, and had the following reply:

I am much indebted to your favour of the 12th inst., but much more for the profit and pleasure I have received from my revisal of the judicious, candid, and well-executed work of yours now in the press. The Lord breathe on what He has already enabled you to do, and give you health for the accomplishment of what remains.⁴

Cowper is even more laudatory. He says, in one of his letters:

The facts are incontestable, the grand observations upon them are all irrefragable, and the style, in my judgment, incomparably better than that of Robertson or Gibbon.

And again, later:

¹ p. 513.

² p. 519.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Letter, December 21st, 1769: Bull, op. cit., p. 169.

That you may not suspect me of having said more than my real opinion will warrant, I will tell you why. In your style I see no affectation. In every line of theirs nothing else. They disgust me always; Robertson with his pomp and his strut, and Gibbon with his finical and French manners. You are correct as they: you express yourself with as much precision; your words are arranged with as much propriety, but you do not set your periods to a tune. They discover a perpetual desire to exhibit themselves to advantage, whereas your subject engrosses you. They sing, and you say; which, as history is to be said, not sung, is, in my judgment, much to your advantage.¹

But however commendable Newton's literary style—and even so acute a critic as Edward Fitzgerald paid tribute to it²—it must be admitted that, despite the eulogies quoted above, Newton's Church History is too slight a volume to be regarded as in itself a considerable contribution to the subject. Although it contains valuable material and, at times, throws interesting light on the Evangelical Revival, it is in fact nothing more than an incipient history. It is as such that it must be judged. Had not Newton's modesty halted the enterprise, we may presume from his extensive bibliography that a work of some merit might have been produced. But, as it stands, Newton's Church History is of significance less for its intrinsic value than for its subsequent influence. It was the forerunner of other and more substantial Evangelical histories. It prescribed the route which the Milners, Haweis and Scott all followed. Newton was sufficiently discriminating to grasp the essence of Church History. He realised the limitations of the average contemporary specimens. They paid far greater attention to the abuses and distortions of Christianity than to its continuance in primitive purity. They tended to degenerate into little more than secular histories, giving special prominence to the Church, it is true, but treating it simply as a human institution. Newton saw that this could not be properly called Church History, and how far he succeeded in winning Joseph Milner to his view-point may be judged from the following passage from the latter's Introduction. Speaking of the normal run of Church histories Milner writes:

Malice has been fed, even to satiety, by the large display of ecclesiastical wickedness. The wildest and most visionary heretics have filled the historic page; and their follies, both in principle and practice, have been deemed worthy of a particular enumeration. The internal dissensions of churches have been minutely described. The intricacies and intrigues of popery, and indeed of every

¹ Bull, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

² Fitzgerald said of Newton: "His journal to his wife, written at sea, contains some of the most beautiful things I ever read—fine feeling in very fine English"; cf. Chambers's *Cyclopaedia of English Literature*, vol. ii, p. 614.

other secular system, which pretends to wear a religious garb, have been developed with a studious particularity. The connection between the Church and the State has afforded very ample materials of what is commonly called Church History; and learning and philosophy have been much more respected than godliness and virtue.

No doubt, some more ancient voluminous Church Historians, as well as Mosheim in his Compendium, have given us much useful information; and if one might look on them as *civil* historians altogether, there would not be much room for blame. Further, if they had incorporated into their secular narratives an account of the progress of godliness itself, I should not have dared to reprehend them as Ecclesiastical Historians. But they evidently gave a much larger proportion to the history of wickedness than to that of piety in general.¹

He later adds in a footnote,

A history of the perversions and abuses of religion is not properly a history of the Church; as absurd were it to suppose a history of the highwaymen that have infested this country to be a history of England.²

With Newton originated the peculiar choice of perspective which distinguishes the Church historians of eighteenth-century Evangelicalism. He set out to recount the story of the Gospel Church in every era. He aimed at tracing the faithful remnant of God's people which has persisted through even the darkest ages, and determined but to touch and glance upon the heresies and disputes which formed the stable of most Church Histories. Doctrinally Newton's criterion was Luther's article of a standing or falling Church, Justification by Faith. In the letters written to Haweis when he was preparing his bibliography Newton shows an exceptional interest in Luther. "I have a singular veneration for Luther's character," he confesses. "There is a warmth, weight and authority in his expressions, a noble share of victorious faith, and these not the less useful (perhaps the more so to me) for being set off with the foils of human infirmity."³ He regrets that so little of Luther is available in English and enquires where he can procure a collection of his Latin letters. Even though he may not have been able to lay hands on many of Luther's major treatises, Newton at least understood him so far as to recognise the centrality of Justification by Faith. He realised that it is not just one doctrine amongst many: not even the most important of all doctrines. It is the clue to and test of all theology: it is the very *Grundmotiv* of Christianity. Newton proposed to make it the doctrinal yardstick of his

¹ Milner, *op. cit.*, p. iv.

² *Ibid.*, p. v, n.

³ MS. Letter, December 16th, 1763.

History. This was the plan which Milner borrowed from Newton and made the basis of his *magnum opus*. The opening of Milner's Introduction serves to indicate the extent of his indebtedness:

In my proposals for printing this History of the Church of Christ, I promised "an Ecclesiastical History on a new Plan". The reader therefore will naturally expect some distinct account of a Plan, which, in a subject so generally known, lays claim to novelty, in order that he may judge for himself, whether it appears sufficiently interesting to engage his perusal of the whole work.

It is certain, that from Our Saviour's time to the present, there have ever been persons whose dispositions and lives have been formed by the rules of the New Testament; men who have been *real*, not merely *nominal* Christians; who believed the doctrines of the Gospel, loved them because of their Divine excellency, suffered gladly the loss of all things, that they might win Christ, and be found in Him. It is the history of these men I propose to write . . . genuine piety is the only thing which I intend to celebrate.¹

Milner, according to his brother, saw the finger of God in every step of the Reformation,² and accepted Justification by Faith as Newton did as the *sine qua non* of Christian theology. His incorporation of this standard into his plan led Bishop Brilioth to describe Milner's History as "one of the most important monuments we possess of Lutheran influence on English ground".³ Whilst it would be an exaggeration to say that in the case of Milner the plan makes the History, the unusual approach does nevertheless contribute in no inconsiderable measure to the success of the whole. Even the otherwise critical Overton can find no fault with it.

The excellence of his plan, to which he faithfully adheres, might atone for more faults than Milner is guilty of. We may well bear with a few shortcomings in a Church History which, instead of perplexing the mind with the interminable disputes of professing Christians, makes it its main business to detect the spirit of Christ wherever it can be found. It is a real refreshment, no less than a real strengthening of our faith, to turn from Church Histories which might be more correctly termed histories of the abuses and perversions of Christianity, to one which really is what it professes to be—a history of the good which Christianity has done.⁴

This worthy tribute is really due to Newton, for the plan here praised was originally his.

The deepest implications of the plan proposed by Newton were realised by Sir James Stephen. He describes Milner's

¹ Milner, *op. cit.*, p. iii.

² Preface to vol. iv, p. 8.

³ Brilioth, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

⁴ C. J. Abbey and J. H. Overton, *The English Church in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 392.

work as "the only extant attempt to deduce the theological genealogy of the British churches from those of which the apostles were the immediate founders".¹ It made a genuine effort to answer the question, Where was your religion before Luther? It traced the descent of Evangelical doctrine from the earliest days of the Church in unbroken continuity down to modern times. Justification by Faith is the thread of scarlet running through the centuries. Wakeman's charge, mentioned at the beginning of this article, that to the Evangelicals the Church of England dated its life from the Reformation, is patently unfounded. Following Newton, the Evangelical Church historians discovered the source of ecclesiastical authority in a true apostolical succession—that is, in the succession of those who have entered into the apostolical experience, preached apostolical doctrines and displayed the apostolical spirit. The relevance of such an approach to the contemporary situation is obvious. Newton may yet serve the present age, as he did his own, if he can inspire a twentieth-century Milner to attempt an Evangelical Church History from a similar angle.² The study of Church History, which is at an alarmingly low ebb in this country, might then be lifted to a new plane of usefulness and become, as indeed it ought to be, "a source of inspiration and guidance for present-day Christians".³

A. SKEVINGTON WOOD.

Airdrie.

¹ Stephen, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

² The only recent work on such lines known to me is E. H. Broadbent, *The Pilgrim Church*. The subtitle reveals its purpose: *An Account of the Continuance through succeeding Centuries of Churches practising the Principles taught and exemplified in the New Testament.*

³ *Training for the Ministry*. Final Report of the Archbishops' Commission, 1944, p. 84.