CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 81: John Newton: Author of "Amazing Grace"

John Newton: Did You Know?

Interesting and unusual facts about John Newton's life and times

Newton the muse

Did Newton inspire the writers of Europe's Romantic movement? Various critics have seen him as anticipating Blake's prophetic vision, or as a source for Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" or for episodes in Wordsworth's "Prelude."

Man in the middle

Even John Wesley recognized the role Newton played in forging a "center" for evangelical Christianity. He wrote to Newton, "You appear to be designed by Divine Providence for an healer of breaches, a reconciler of honest but prejudiced men, and an uniter (happy work!) of the children of God that are needlessly divided from each other."

Yes, that's 216 welts

When caught attempting to leave the Royal Navy, into which he had been impressed against his will, Newton was whipped 24 times with a cat-o'-nine-tails (similar to the whip in the eighteenth-century scene above). This was actually the lighter punishment for going absent without leave. He could have been hung for desertion.

Those ... blessed Yankees

In June of 1775, after news of the first shots of the War of American Independence broke, Newton's Olney parishioners held an impromptu early-morning prayer meeting. Newton reported to Lord Dartmouth, Olney's Lord of the Manor and Secretary of State for the American Colonies, that between 150 and 200 people turned out at five o'clock in the morning. Newton spoke about the state of the nation, and for an hour the group sang and prayed together.

Savage on a chain of grace

Newton knew he had no grounds for spiritual pride. He once described in a letter having seen a lion at a county fair. The animal, usually docile and obedient with its keeper, at times turned surly and untouchable. Newton saw himself in this lion: "I know and love my Keeper and sometimes watch His looks that I may learn His will. But oh! I have my surly fits too—seasons when I relapse into the savage again—as though I had forgotten all." To his correspondent he added, "I got a hymn out of this lion."

Amazing hymn

Newton wrote what would become his best known hymn to accompany a sermon on 1 Chronicles 17:16, 17 (the first page of Newton's manuscript is shown at right). In these verses, David responds to God's promise that he will maintain David's line and his kingdom forever: "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is mine house, that thou hast brought me hitherto?"

The original title of Newton's most famous hymn, as it first appeared in his ***Olney Hymns***, was "Faith's review and expectation." Not quite as punchy as "Amazing Grace"!

John Newton: From the Editor - New life-and a "new" magazine

Everybody has had this thought at some point: ***I've wasted too much time already—it's too late for me to use the gifts God has given me to the full.*** Though John Newton's mother had taught him Christian faith as a boy, he repudiated it as a teen and spent his young adult years in "riotous living," destroying the faith of others with his arguments and example.

Then God got hold of him and began, albeit gradually, to him his heart back to Him. This was amazing enough to Newton. But more amazing still was the realization that, far from disinheriting him as a prodigal, his Lord now had work for him to do. Like Paul before him, he who had once persecuted Christ would now become his ambassador.

From his thirty-ninth year on, Newton preached the gospel at every opportunity; visited and prayed with distraught parishioners; wrote wise letters of spiritual counsel; and composed and published hymns resplendent with gratitude and praise to God. Through a long, full life of pastoral ministry, his wasted years were more than redeemed.

Blaspheming, ribald scoffer at religion. Self-sacrificial, eloquent minister of the gospel. Both were one and the same person. The difference was conversion—and the "new life" that comes with it. Doing this issue has been a reminder to me that when Jesus gets hold of a person—at no matter what age—he does wonderful things with the years that follow. The new life he brings is abundant—more than we can ask or imagine.

A stammering start

As I got to know John Newton, I felt I was in the presence of a quintessential pastor. He had known the misery of sin at close hand and delighted in bringing what the Puritans termed "soul cure" to all around him. That he strove for seven years to enter a church ministry that didn't seem to want him suggests how deeply rooted this motive was.

Newton's first preaching experiences didn't bode well—a less committed man might well have given up. Biographer Bruce Hindmarsh tells the story: "At the end of September 1758 Newton visited Yorkshire, then enjoying a time of religious revival. A friend there, John Edwards, persuaded him to make his first attempt at public preaching to Edwards's congregation at White Chapel in Leeds. Newton decided to speak without prepared notes—and found himself becoming increasingly nervous, until in the middle of his sermon he came to a speechless stop. To his intense embarrassment Edwards had to come into the pulpit to finish the discourse."

His second attempt was hardly more auspicious. Again, Hindmarsh tells it well: "On his Yorkshire joumeys in 1760 Newton continued to have opportunities to test and develop his gifts for ministry. In April he sought to make amends for his previous embarrassment in the pulpit by sticking closely to a prepared text when invited again to preach. But he found that he simply erred in the opposite extreme and appeared fixed like a statue, as he huddled over his notes like a boy learning to read, barely looking up until he was finished."

It's hard not to like this brash, purposeful, big-hearted man, who knew how much he owed to God, and was willing to make himself vulnerable and allow himself to be embarrassed in the quest to pay back some small part of that debt.

The story of this ex-slave captain who experienced "more than he could ask or imagine" is an appropriate one for this, our first issue under the new name of ***Christian History and Biography.*** As you can see, we have set out to bring you more of what you have enjoyed in ***Christian History*** over the years, with new features added to spice the pot. We hope you will find the resulting meal a full, varied, and satisfying one. Please let us know what you think!

Newton's is a story we would not have been able to tell nearly so well without the help of a special colleague—this issue's consulting editor, D. Bruce Hiridmarsh. Bruce, who is James Houston Associate Professor of Spiritual Theology at Regent College, Vancouver, Canada, has written what will stand for some time as the definitive biography of Newton, ***John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition*** (Oxford, 1996). The book is not only a revealing account of Newton's life, but also an excellent introduction to the dynamic landscape of evangelicalism in the years between John Wesley and William Wilberforce.

Bruce's guiding hand has made this a better issue, at every level, from story ideas to authors' research to fact- checking and revision.

We have also benefited from the knowledge and resourcefulness of Marylynn Rouse, the researcher behind a project based at Samford University, Birmingham, Alabama, to publish Newton's complete works.

Now we hope you will enjoy hearing Newton's story, and the other stories here, as much as we did preparing them.

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Living History

From Bede's world to Whitefield's thumb

Compiled by Ted Olsen

Whose tomb is this, anyway?

A Jerusalem monument thought for millennia to be the tomb of King David's rebellious son, Absalom, may actually be the burial site of key Gospel figures, according to recently uncovered inscriptions from around A.D. 350. Joe Zias, a retired curator for the Israel Antiquities Authority, and Dead Sea Scrolls scholar Emile Puech discovered faded Greek writing only visible by sunlight at certain times of the day: "This is the Tomb of Zacharias, martyr, very pious priest, father of John." Nearby was a reference to Simeon, the Jewish priest who hailed Jesus as Messiah.

While the ascetic biblical scholar Jerome (c.345-420) recorded that Zacharias and Simeon were buried together, along with Jesus' disciple and brother James, most scholars say the finding tells us something about the beliefs of early Christians, but it's probably not the actual burial site. It probably wasn't Absalom's Tomb, either—archaeologists have dated the site to the first century B.C. "We don't know if it actually is Zacharias's tomb ... but it is clear someone in the 4th century was convinced it was," University of South Florida religion professor Jim Strange told ***The Christian Science Monitor***.

The find may prompt work on other neglected sites that will yield further insights. Absalom's Tomb itself had been of little archaeological or historical interest lately—Zias found it used at times as a drug den. Meanwhile, Zias is looking for an inscription mentioning James. "There are three burial niches, so it certainly fits," he says. But after the heated controversy over the last James find—the "son of Joseph, brother of Jesus" ossuary—he may be better off without it.

Bring me the thumb of George Whitefield

The archives at Drew University, in Madison, New Jersey, has the relics of many Methodist founders. Among them: Francis Asbury's glasses, upholstery from a chair that once supported John Wesley, and a peg that once held up Asbury's coat. The most shocking item is the thumb of evangelist George Whitefield (1714-1770), though no one knows how it got there. It's not the oddest thing about Whitefield's postmortem life, according to Bangor Seminary's Clifton Guthrie. In 1775, two Continental Army officers (one of them Benedict Arnold) reportedly stole the clerical collar and wristbands from Whitefield's corpse and carried them into battle. In 1829, his arm made a 20-year sojourn to Britain before returning to his Newburyport, Massachusetts, burial vault. Two thousand people joined the procession for its return.

Shining light on Rembrandt

Museumgoers may experience déjà vu upon viewing "Rembrandt's Journey: Painter, Draftsman, Etcher," an exhibit that includes more than 20 paintings, 35 drawings, and 150 prints. The collection emphasizes changes made by the Dutch painter (1606-1669) as he returned to a theme or subject. For example, notes the Associated Press, "In three prints—each from a different decade—depicting the presentation of the baby Jesus in the temple, Rembrandt progressively zooms in on the central subject, culminating in the 1654 version, when light and shadow dominate the print." Such variety "provides deeper insight into the inventive, subtle, and complex way he brought new life to traditional biblical themes and how he projected himself into them," says an exhibit press release. Other items include a rare print of "Christ Preaching" and an early sketch of "Christ Carrying the Cross," where a finger smudge guides viewers' eyes to the detailed faces of Christ and his mother. The exhibit, which also has a companion book, will be at the Art Institute of Chicago through May.

Petrarch uncovered

Italian scientists have exhumed 14th-century scholar Francesco Petrarch, considered the first modern poet. "This investigation could show something new about the poet and his personality," Claudio Bellinati, director of the historical archives of Padua, told ***Discovery News***. "We will know what he looked like and we will be able to understand whether painful events, such as accidents and diseases, might have affected his life."

For example, tradition says that Petrarch fell from his horse. However, archeologists found his skeleton largely intact. Save, that is, for the missing right arm, messily swiped by a drunken monk about two and a half centuries after Petrarch's death. While Petrarch is today largely remembered for his romantic poetry (and then known for his hunger for fame and pagan knowledge), he also produced great Christian treatises, including essays on solitude and the contemplative life.

In the three volumes of Secretum (1342), he imagined Augustine of Hippo trying to convince him to reject the ways of flesh for eternal life. Augustine seems to have won out: Petrarch's last poetic work, ***Trionfi***, is an allegory telling of the successive triumphs of Love, Chastity, Death, Fame, and Time—which is finally defeated by Divinity. The researchers hope to report their findings by July 20, Petrarch's 700th birthday.

Back to Bede

If you want to see how the father of English church history lived, don't go to his writings. The Venerable Bede (c. 673-735) left very little about himself. All he says is that in 680, at age 7, he was entrusted by his parents to a monastery at Jarrow, Northumbria, and "spent all the remainder of my life in this monastery and devoted myself entirely to the study of the Scriptures." But today, a British museum has brought the historian's world to life. At Bede's World (www.bedesworld.co.uk), on the site of his monastery, visitors can see the life of a monastery recreated in buildings, archeological finds, and a working farm. Interpreters demonstrate the arduous way such crafts as silversmithing and calligraphy were done 1,300 years ago. The disciplines of medieval faith may also be tasted at many contemporary monasteries in the U.K. that offer contemplative retreats for the modern Christian.

Engraven images

It's called the Word of God, but artists and evangelists have long sought to add images to the text of the Bible. Among the more notable examples are the famous woodcuts of Gustave Doré (1832-1883) and ***A Curious Hieroglyphick Bible***, published by American printer Isaiah Thomas in 1788 for children (only four copies remain). Now other artists are taking up the approach of these two men. Barry Moser spent four years on his Pennyroyal Caxton Bible, which contains 232 fine engravings that many critics say surpass Doré's famous work. "Doré didn't bother with four of the five books of poetry," admits Moser. Initially intended for only 400 handprinted copies, Moser's Bible was published in a 2002 paperback edition by Viking Press. More closely following Thomas's approach is Patrick Hembrecht, the artist running the Flaming Fire Illustrated Bible project (www.flamingfire. com/bible.html). The multiple-artist effort, launched in 2002, hopes to illustrate all 36,665 verses of the King James Bible—and has about 35,000 to go. "I love reading the Bible and talking about it," he told Religion News Service. "And I wanted to do it in a way that seemed like sharing and not like I was being preachy."

Librarian, don't throw away that old box!

That final scene from ***Raiders of the Lost Ark***, where the relic is packed in a box and filed away, never to be seen again, may not be too far from the truth. Just ask George Stewart, the retired director of the Birmingham (Ala.) Public Library. Since the 1940s and 1950s, boxes containing as many as 10,000 books donated to the state archives have sat unopened, uncatalogued, unrecorded, and unused. Three years ago, the bibliophile's equivalent of Christmas came, and he began opening the boxes. Among the treasures inside: a four-centuries-old copy of the Geneva Bible. First published in 1560, with more than 200 editions over the following years, the Geneva Bible, widely popular in Britain, was produced by staunch Protestants and was the first English Bible to include verse numeration. Alabama's edition is from 1611, a year marking the Geneva Bible's eclipse with the publication of the King James Version. "It is a treasure that was neglected," Stewart told ***The Birmingham News***. "It's not anybody's fault. It's just that [archives officials] never had money to have the staff to do it."

El Greco's echo

Religious painter and sculptor El Greco, less well-known as Domenicos Theotocopoulos (1541-1614), had many fans and followers among later artists, including Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Jackson Pollock. This year, he's gaining even more admirers as a major retrospective of his work travels from New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art to London's National Gallery. "El Greco's religious paintings are really about the world of the imagination," curator Keith Christiansen told the Associated Press. But, he added, "you feel that the artist is in touch with the world of everyday experience."

Reviewers were particularly struck by the contrast between the portrait of a cardinal inquisitor (probably Cardinal Niño de Guevara), and a young monk/preacher, Fray Hortensio Félix Paravicino. The former's "mirthless eyes scan through rimmed glasses to another part of the room. He's not looking at you, but you know he sees you," wrote ***Commonweal***'s Patrick Jordan. The latter, meanwhile, is painted to represent "what was best in seventeenth-century Spanish Catholicism: intelligence, purity, and mystical awareness marshaled in service of the good." The 80 or so pieces constitute the first major U.S. El Greco exhibit in two decades, and the first ever in the U.K. Those who miss it can still find the virtual version of the exhibit online at the two museums' web sites or in the companion book published by Yale University Press.

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Eyewitness

Wesley's word to a condemned malefactor.

Life in eighteenth-century England was not for the faint of heart. Thugs ruled the night streets. Lacking an organized police force, royal authorities substituted harsh penalties ruthlessly carried out in dramatic public ceremonies. More vigilante justice than due process, the system condemned even petty pickpockets to hang.

Economic conditions worsened crime. London streets teemed with 20,000 to 30,000 hungry, disaffected apprentices—some reduced to stealing bread.

In a William Hogarth engraving from 1758, one such "idle 'prentice" prepares to meet his fate. But riding along in the cart, a follower of John Wesley exhorts the man to repent and believe in Christ.

Wesley himself had begun preaching to condemned criminals during his Oxford years, under the influence of his friend William Morgan, a devout and compassionate Irishman.

In a 1745 tract, "A Word to the Condemned Malefactor," Wesley writes as he preached to such men: "WHAT a condition you are in! The sentence is passed; you are condemned to die; and this sentence is to be executed shortly! You have no way to escape ... therefore, die you must. But must you die like a beast, without thinking what it is to die? You need not; you will not."

A journal entry from the early 1760s describes one of Wesley's many encounters with a condemned man:

"On Thursday, Patrick Ward, who was to die on that day, sent to request I would administer the sacrament to him. He was one-and-twenty years of age, and had scarce ever had a serious thought, till he shot the man who went to take away his gun. From that instant he felt a turn within, and never swore an oath more. His whole behaviour in prison was serious and composed: He read, prayed, and wept much; especially after one of his fellow-prisoners had found peace with God.

"His hope gradually increased till this day, and was much strengthened at the Lord's Supper; but still he complained, 'I am not afraid, but I am not desirous, to die. I do not find that warmth in my heart. I am not sure my sins are forgiven.' He went into the cart, about twelve, in calmness, but mixed with sadness.

"But in a quarter of an hour, while he was wrestling with God in prayer (not seeming to know that any one was near him), 'The Holy Ghost,' said he, 'came upon me, and I knew that Christ was mine.' From that moment his whole deportment breathed a peace and joy beyond all utterance, till, after having spent about ten minutes in private prayer, he gave the sign."

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Story Behind

The original Christian bumper sticker

Collin Hansen

Bold and clichéd, profound and kitschy, the Christian fish symbol has achieved international celebrity one bumper at a time. Its detractors have ridiculed the message by adorning their own bumpers with walking Darwin fish and "No god but Allah" sharks. Yet for many Christians, the rudimentary design remains one of the faith's most enduring and treasured symbols, second only to the cross.

Watery wordplay

Long before the fish swam the streams of metropolitan traffic jams, Greek and Roman pagans used the design to symbolize feminine fertility and deity. They created the fish symbol by interweaving two crescent moons, which is the heavenly body often associated with goddesses.

The fish's spawning as a Christian symbol during the first century is similarly esoteric. Using the Greek word for fish, ***Ichthys***, the compilers of a collection of religious teachings called the Sibylline Oracles created an acrostic: ***Iesous Christos theou huios soter***, or "Jesus Christ Son of God Savior." This acrostic is now commonly embedded in modern fish symbols.

The fish gained increased prominence when early church leaders, with eyes and ears tuned to allegory, promoted other creative usages. Tertullian (c. 160-c. 225) taught that just as water sustains fish, "We, little fishes, after the image of our Ichthys, Jesus Christ, are born in the water." This aquatic birth is baptism, God's promise of new life and sustaining power.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) believed the symbol suited Jesus well because "he was able to live ... without sin in the abyss of this mortality as in the depth of waters."

Mark of the subversives

As persecution of Christians became more frequent and intense in the Roman Empire, the fish symbol became a password shared among underground believers. They used the fish to mark secret gathering places, especially within the catacombs. In this catacomb art the symbol was frequently coupled with communion imagery—the fish is depicted swimming with bread and a cup of wine on its back. The fish symbol also appeared on Christian gravestones and jewelry, and marked the homes of believers. After the threat of persecution had passed, the fish was inscribed on the Constantinian Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

Since the fish symbol was known among pagans, it remained a more discreet and thus effective identifier for the persecuted Christians than a cross. Secrecy often meant the difference between life and death for believers, or even the church's very survival. One story recounts how the fish symbol enabled fellow Christians to work together even when they didn't know each other. When meeting a stranger on the road, Christians would sometimes draw one arc of the fish in the dirt. If the stranger reciprocated by drawing the other arc, the believers could reveal their faith to each other without alerting Roman authorities and spies.

Go fish!

The symbol's widespread dissemination has been aided through the years by the many scriptural references to fish, not to mention their place as a nutritional staple. In Jesus' time, the Jews often celebrated important feasts by eating fish—a practice depicted in some artistic renderings of the Last Supper. And Jesus chose fish to multiply miraculously and feed to the multitudes.

Not only were fish frequently present at Jesus' dinner table, they also provided him with teaching illustrations. He apparently so amazed John that the apostle noted how, at Jesus' behest, Peter dragged ashore a bursting net filled with exactly 153 fish. And of course, when calling the fishermen Peter and Andrew to follow him, Jesus said they would become "fishers of men." Evangelistically motivated Christians of all ages have readily adopted this commission as their own.

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The Amazingly Graced Life of John Newton

His was a tale of two lives, with God at the pivot point.

Chris Armstrong

The "old African blasphemer." This was how John Newton (1725-1807) often referred to himself in later life. Such a self-characterization may seem like false humility. After all, by 1800 no evangelical clergyman had gained more fame or exercised more spiritual influence than Newton. He was loved and trusted by thousands; he preached in one of the most prestigious parishes of London; young ministers competed to stay with him and learn under the master. But Newton knew well the darkness at the heart of every person.

A fair beginning

Newton was born in London, an only child, in 1725. His mother, a pious Dissenter, taught him to read Scripture and memorize Reformed catechisms and hymns. Together they attended an Independent (Congregational) church in London, at a time when barely 1 percent of that city's population went to churches associated with that Puritan-derived group.

At age 7, however, Newton's mother died, and he fell under the less religious and more distant care of his sea-captain father. From age 11 to 17 John accompanied his father on five sea voyages that proved a stern and thorough education in seamanship. In the long interims between these trips, he was allowed by his stepmother to run free, and he got himself into ample adolescent trouble.

Though he fell repeatedly into temptation, he always rose again, resolved to live the life his mother had shown him.

On each of these occasions, he turned for a time to such Christian disciplines as prayer, pious reading, and the keeping of spiritual diaries. In all of these activities, he later remembered, his chief aim was not to please God but to escape damnation.

The lure of fortune

In 1742, soon after John's father retired from the sea and took a shore job with the Royal Africa Company, he announced the good news that John would soon make his fortune. Captain Newton had arranged for his son to go to Jamaica with a Liverpool ship-owner who had interests in slaves and sugar, there to act as a slave overseer. From this humble beginning the rise to a planter's estate would not be far—in the fond father's estimation—and from there, a seat in Parliament.

His father's dreams for John hit a snag, however, when the impulsive 17-year-old sailor met Mary Catlett, the daughter of family friends, at the Catletts' substantial estate in Kent. John not only fell hopelessly in love with Mary, but decided on the spot to miss his ship to Jamaica in order to stay and woo her.

When John returned home, weeks after the Jamaica-bound ship had left, his father resolved that his son would learn discipline. So he sent him on a months-long voyage as a common sailor, without his own paternal protection from the harshness of the seaman's life.

In the company of the rough crew, Newton soon lost the last of his former religious resolve. He took up smoking and swearing, and indulged his lusts at the journey's destination—Venice.

The God he had learned to worship at his mother's knee seemed a distant being with no claim on his life.

His "precious"

On the way back from Venice, Newton dreamed that he was pacing on deck when a stranger gave him a valuable ring, cautioning him to guard it well, for it was the key to all happiness. Newton slipped on the ring but soon faced another stranger, who ridiculed his faith in the trinket.

As he listened to this second man's persuasive words, the young sailor became embarrassed and pulled off the ring and dropped it overboard. The instant he had done so, the tempter told him he had in fact cast away God's mercy, and must now be consigned to fire.

Terrorized, Newton awaited his fate. But another stranger—or perhaps the first—came and recovered the ring for him. But the stranger would not give it back, saying he must now keep it in trust, for the young man was still too foolish to have it.

For a few weeks after the dream, Newton was shaken enough to separate himself from the rough and tumble of the other sailors and resume something of his earlier religious observance. But by landfall, in December 1743, he had once again put such disciplines aside.

Hard-pressed and broken

In the following months Newton missed a second voyage—on which he would have been an officer—again by overstaying a visit to Mary. Then on March 1, 1744, John was traveling to see Mary when his life took an unexpected turn. With the unmistakable gait of a sailor but no papers as a legitimate merchantman, Newton fell prey to a naval press-gang.

Within days, despite his father's intervention, he found himself a lowly crewman aboard a man-o'-war of the Royal Navy, the ***Harwich***. From the first, he was driven, half-starved, and "broken" from dawn till night. In short, he was treated as were all young men in the eighteenth-century navy, for such severe discipline seemed the only way young sailors could be prepared for the extreme hardships and dangers of life in England's floating military.

Bad as were the physical privations aboard this ship, the voyage's effect on Newton's spirit was worse. The captain's clerk, a man named Mitchell, was a free-thinker only too happy to share his convictions with a young friend. Life, said Mitchell, was for the taking. God was a phantom invented by killjoy religious types. We must eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die and pass into extinction.

Newton had long desired to escape the constraints of his mother's religion. Now, under Mitchell's influence, he took the precious ring of his dream from his finger and threw it overboard.

Enjoying the heady release of his new creed, Newton struck up a friendship with a younger man, midshipman Job Lewis, who still clung to enough religion to keep him steady against the low morals of the crew at large. Newton was a clever and persuasive speaker and a forceful personality, and he had soon driven from young Lewis the last of his compunctions.

Just deserts

At Christmas, 1744, the ***Harwich*** moored north of the straits of Dover, preparing for its next voyage.

With horror, Newton learned this would take them not, as before, to the Mediterranean for a year, but instead to the East Indies, for five long years. In that time, John was convinced, his Mary would belong to another.

Distraught, driven by passion, and unchecked any longer by scruples born of faith, Newton resolved to find some way off of this ship. When the opportunity came, on a trip to the market for provisions, he slipped away, determined to quit the navy forever.

Unfortunately, a party of marines he encountered the day after his escape had other ideas. He was arrested and dragged back to his ship in chains, where the captain had him stripped and flogged with a cat-o'-nine-tails.

Newton now faced the universal scorn of the crew, five years of misery, and the near-certain loss of Mary. Only the secret hand of God, he later claimed, kept him from killing either the captain or himself.

By a remarkable coincidence, however, Newton was soon able to secure a transfer to another vessel—the ***Greyhound***—bound for the Guinea coast and the slave trade. The captain of this vessel was a friend of his father's, and before long Newton found himself well-established in the trade, working under the ship's part-owner, a Mr. Clow, at a slave "factory" on the Plantain Islands near Sierra Leone.

Servant to the slaves

The arrangement proved disastrous. As biographer Bruce Hindmarsh tells it, "during the next two years [Newton] suffered illness, starvation, exposure, and ridicule as his master's black mistress used him poorly, and as he lost his master's trust." In what was scarcely better than rank captivity to this mistress, Newton became lower than a slave, a "servant" to the human chattel in which his master traded. A few of the slaves, taking pity on him, snuck food to him and ferried a series of desperate letters to his father onto ships bound for England.

Miraculously, a captain deputized by his father did actually find Newton at the end of these two years of misery. But by that time, the younger Newton had found a new master and was set again on a course to financial success as a future owner of his own slaving operation. His father's friend had to lie, claiming Newton was to come into a handsome inheritance back home, before John would return to England with him.

Aboard the ***Greyhound***, Newton surpassed his earlier immorality and impiety, blaspheming to a degree that shocked even the older men and narrowly escaping death by drowning as he fell overboard during a party.

Just as Newton seemed irrevocably lost to the faith, he picked up, for lack of other shipboard reading material, Thomas a Kempis's ***Imitation of Christ***, a Catholic devotional guide that had also deeply influenced John Wesley. At first, the book's words meant little to him. But then came the first pivot point of his life's voyage.

A cry in the dark

The ***Greyhound***'s voyage from Brazil to Newfoundland, laden with slaves, led them on March 21, 1748 (by the later, "new style" calendar), into a violent storm. In poor repair, the ship soon began to split and take on water, and Newton was awakened from sleep to find that the first crewmember had been swept away in the raging sea.

"Tied to the ship to prevent being washed away," relates Hindmarsh, Newton "pumped and bailed all night until he was called upon to steer the ship. All the while he reviewed his life: his former professions of religion, the extraordinary twists of past events, the warnings and deliverances he had met with, his licentious conversation, and his mockery of the Gospels."

At first Newton was convinced that he had sinned too much to have any hope for God's forgiveness. Yet when the storm did not recede and he really felt he would soon meet his God, he at last clung to Scriptures that taught God's grace towards sinners, and he breathed his first weak prayer in years. As he was later to recall it, this was "the hour he first believed."

Yet Newton's new faith would not find a solid footing for some months. Indeed the very next year, on a voyage as mate of the slaving ship ***Brownlow***, Newton backslid entirely, giving his lust free license. It was only when, on a visit to the place of his previous captivity—Clow's Plantain Island "factory"—he fell ill with a violent fever, that he came to himself.

Feeling that, as biographer John Pollock puts it, he had "crucified the Son of God afresh and thus had shut and locked the door of hope," Newton nevertheless mustered enough faith to creep to a "remote corner of the island," where, "between the palm trees and the sea he knelt upon the shore and found a new liberty to pray."

After this episode, Newton never again went back on his faith. He developed a consistent habit of prayer, and his watchword became humility: "What a poor creature I am in myself, incapable of standing a single hour without continual fresh supplies of strength and grace from the fountain-head."

A series of miraculous rescues from death by storm, starvation, mutiny plots, and slave uprisings reinforced his sense of that grace.

On the matter of slavery, Newton's progress was slow. Though he disliked the inconvenience and dangers of the trade, he still accepted it as an honorable profession, as did the rest of "polite" eighteenth-century society. But in most other respects, Newton was clearly a changed man.

Just before he received his first command as captain of a slaving vessel, with a bright future ahead of him, Newton at last succeeded in winning Mary, whom he had now loved for seven years.

They were wed on February 1, 1750, and were soon devotedly attached to each other. Indeed Newton came near to idolizing her, as their relationship began to overshadow his nascent faith. He still found it embarrassing to talk about faith with Mary or her relatives, and he could not yet bring himself to pray with her.

In the years following his marriage, Newton captained two slaving vessels, the ***Duke of Argyle*** and the ***African***, on three voyages. During the long months he began to pray for his slave cargo—distaste for the trade was beginning to dawn into something more.

The sad return of an old acquaintance

As Newton prepared for his second voyage as captain, aboard the ***African***, he encountered the young man he had once "deconverted" from Christianity—Job Lewis. Reforging their acquaintance, he invited Lewis aboard as "Volunteer and Captain's Commander."

This was a decision he would soon regret, for the once clean-living young midshipman was now a hardened sinner. He not only fouled the air with his cursing and inflicted his cruel bad temper on the crew, but also flouted Newton's authority.

When in January, having reached the Guinea Coast, Newton found a way to get for Lewis another ship—a small "snow"—he did so, with orders to trade on the ***African***'s account. Before this ship, the ***Racehorse***, was launched, Newton came aboard and gave Lewis some final advice, both commercial and spiritual.

But nearly as soon as he left Newton, Lewis began indulging himself in every vice, from drinking to fighting to sleeping with the native women. When his dissipated lifestyle and the local climate felled him with a fever, Lewis's body could offer little resistance.

As Newton soon heard of it from other sailors on the ***Racehorse***, Lewis died enveloped in despair and rage, screaming that he was going to hell, but unable or unwilling to seek God's mercy. Newton's remorse was acute and long-lasting.

When, a few weeks later, Newton himself contracted a similar fever, he had much to think about. His own death no longer held for him the terror it once had. If recovery were denied him, he felt ready to face his end. But he did pray for two things: first, for better understanding of the faith so that he could turn unrepentant sinners onto the path of righteousness, and second, for freedom from the slave trade and the seafaring life.

In the spring of 1754, Newton met at St. Kitts a true friend—a Scottish captain, not engaged in the slave trade, by the name of Alexander Clunie. This was the first close Christian friend Newton had, and he was overjoyed. The two spent weeks together in May and June, with Newton drinking in the things of God as Clunie imparted them.

"I was all ears," he wrote, "and what was better, he not only informed my understanding but his discourses inflamed my heart." As Pollock put it, until now "Newton had thought of God as a distant potentate whom he must obey. Now he discovered that God could be very near and his love be warmer than Newton had dreamed."

Newton's prayers as he recovered from the fever were soon answered: after he arrived safely back in England that summer, he never sailed for a living again. Instead, he took a post as a "Tide Surveyor" in Liverpool, a well-paid government shore job that involved boarding vessels as they entered port and searching for smuggled goods.

When in 1756 the Seven Years' War broke out, maritime traffic fell off to the point where Newton had a great deal of free time on his hands. In effect, this allowed him to become the most active layman in the land, touring widely and enjoying the preaching and fellowship of the day's leading evangelicals.

"Little Whitefield"

One of his favorite contacts was the famed evangelist George Whitefield. In fact, Newton himself became known as "Little Whitefield"—not because he preached like the better-known man (for though he was beginning to speak publicly, he was still a far from polished orator), but because he shadowed the great preacher, even attending meetings at 5 A.M. in the bitter cold of winter, and dining with him when he could.

Newton's contact with Whitefield gave him an exciting vision of how far "Gospel preaching" could go in British life. It seemed that evangelical Christianity would soon cease to be, as it had been in the Independent churches of his childhood, a hidden thing involving a minuscule percentage of the populace. It was on its way to gaining a new and significant public profile. And Whitefield, along with John Wesley, was leading the way towards this dream. (In actuality it would take until about the 1780s for this to really begin happening.)

When not tagging along with Whitefield, Newton spent much of his Liverpool phase attending both the small "religious societies" that met across England for preaching, testimony, and mutual edification, and any Dissenting or Established church he knew to have a "Gospel message." He drank in the fellowship and spiritual knowledge with bottomless thirst. At home, he began teaching himself the biblical languages and reading books of divinity.

His own Seven Years' War

Slowly there dawned on Newton the knowledge that God did not intend for him to remain in the civil service for his whole life. In 1757, he began formally to seek a "living"—that is, a ministerial appointment in an Established Church parish—and the ordination to go with it. Thus began his own "Seven Years' War"—his struggle, between 1757 and 1764, to become an ordained minister in the Church of England.

To achieve that dearly desired goal, Newton had to press on through the flat refusal of several bishops to ordain him. They wanted no "enthusiast" or "Methodist" in one of their pulpits. When he met with his first refusal from the Anglican hierarchy, he began looking seriously at invitations from a variety of Dissenting churches. When none of these seemed right for him, he began to preach to friends in his own house.

Then at last, in the spring of 1764, through the influence of a powerful patron, Lord Dartmouth, Newton found himself the ordained curate of a congregation in the English midlands town of Olney, Buckinghamshire.

At home with the lowly

Although the largest town in its area, Olney was still fairly small. In 1712, the whole parish had comprised about 500 houses and 2,000 inhabitants within its 3,000 acres of land. Newton's first impression was of a "low and dirty" country whose inhabitants mostly dwelt in poverty.

The town itself was a center of craft and trade for the surrounding area, and no craft was more important to its economy than the manufacture of bone-lace—lace woven on bone bobbins and used, by those who could afford it, for costume and interior decorating. Unfortunately, the price of lace fluctuated wildly, leaving the majority of these craftsmen (and -women and -children) cyclically on the brink of starvation.

In the midst of these folk, Newton found himself very much in his element. Not a man given to pretension, he once wrote of his far-flung correspondence, "I get more warmth and light sometimes by a letter from a plain person who loves the Lord Jesus, though perhaps a servant maid, than from some whole volumes, put forth by learned Doctors."

From the beginning he did his work of soul care with the love born of a true "pastor's heart," preaching, singing, visiting, and establishing mid-week meetings of every description. He especially labored for the children of the parish, not only catechizing them personally, but also instituting annual three-day meetings during which the ministers from the surrounding area joined to preach and teach especially for the benefit of the area's youth.

Newton was known for his open, emotional manner in the pulpit. Into the middle of a sermon recorded in one of his notebooks from the Olney years, he interjected an impassioned prayer, "The Lord ... proclaims a free pardon, ... and will you ... refus[e] to hear his voice? O Lord God prevent, & rend the heavens & come down, [and] touch the stoney heart, that it may stand out no longer."

We can imagine him turning his gaze on his hearers as he delivered the next line: "Let us chide our cold unfeeling hearts & pray for a coal of fire from the heavenly altar to send us home in a flame of love to him who has thus loved us."

Newton's ministry extended beyond the borders of his parish. Having friends in both Established and Dissenting pulpits across the land, he traveled and preached regularly, relishing the fellowship as well as the exercise of his Gospel calling. Back home, he welcomed visitors from all over the country to his own home, where many stayed to dine and talk long into the night.

The Remarkable Life of Mr. ********

To his contemporaries, probably the key moment of Newton's long career was the publication in 1764, just after his thirty-ninth birthday, of his spiritual autobiography, ***An Authentic Narrative of Some Remarkable and Interesting Particulars in the Life of ***********.

The ***Authentic Narrative*** told of his early life, with all its adventures and divine mercies. Throughout, its theme was God's amazing grace. And despite the coy omission of his name, everyone soon knew whose "interesting particulars" were recorded here. Thereafter, Newton's fame only grew. (The book is available today in a reprint of the 1841 edition titled ***The Life & Spirituality of John Newton*** [Regent College, 1998].)

During his Olney period, Newton also wrote many hymns. These he often wrote to accompany sermons for the whole church or for one of the mid-week meetings, and he particularly liked to teach hymns to the children and sing along with them. Often he would write a hymn to address the specific need of some member of his congregation.

In 1767, Newton was joined in this enterprise by the brilliant but mentally unstable poet William Cowper. In 1779, as a testament to their friendship, Newton published the ***Olney Hymns*** hymnal. That collection included the hymn that would attain, in the colonies soon to be lost to them, a fame never grudged it by the English: "Amazing Grace" (see p. 2 and p. 25 of this issue).

Years of influence

Not everyone in Olney remained pleased with their curate's ministry. If Newton had a significant fault as a pastor, it was a failure to protect his ministerial authority. He so encouraged his parishioners to engage in lay ministry in the mid-week prayer groups and other meetings he instituted, that some became restive under his leadership.

When on one occasion Newton spoke out against the reckless behavior typical of Guy Fawkes Day celebrations, many in the town—even Christians—set themselves against his authority. When the festivities on that day did indeed get out of hand, Newton found himself having to bribe the mob to avoid having his house burned down around him.

Following this incident, Newton perceived that the townspeople were increasingly afflicted by spiritual deadness. He even complained once to a friend that they had become "sermon-proof." The independent-minded artisans of the town felt they had grown beyond their minister. So when in 1779 the bluff, warm-hearted ex-captain found himself invited by England's richest merchant, John Thornton, to become rector of one of the most prestigious parishes in London, St. Mary Woolnoth, he accepted and was installed that December.

Newton served Christ in London until his death in 1807, influencing not only Wilberforce but such luminaries of early nineteenth-century evangelicalism as the Cambridge pastor Charles Simeon, the leading clergyman Richard Cecil, and the author and philanthropist Hannah More (in whose conversion he was instrumental).

By the end of his life, Newton was widely beloved in England and beyond. During his years of ministry, evangelicalism began slowly to move out of its "hidden years" in the Established Church's lectureships and private chapels (see p. 40), and into the limelight of prominent churches and reforming agencies. In this fertile period for "Gospel" ministers, "Gospel" hymns, "Gospel" books and meetings, Newton was everywhere—a trusted father and counselor in the young movement. His hymns were sung, his sermons well attended, and his letters of spiritual advice passed from hand to hand (see p. 37), with more than 500 of them eventually seeing publication.

An old sinner to the very end

Through all the years of ministry and fame, Newton never forgot how far he had come. Over the fireplace in his vicarage study at Olney, where he would always see it as he prepared for Sunday services and mid-week meetings, he placed a plaque reading, in large letters, as follows:

"Since thou wast precious in my sight, thou hast been honourable (Isa. 18:4), BUT Thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the Lord thy God redeemed thee (Deut. 15:15)."

When he died, Newton left behind the epitaph that remains today on his gravestone. It returns to this same twin theme of slavery from sin and unmerited redemption:

"John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy."

In a funeral sermon for Newton, his friend and fellow minister Richard Cecil quoted him late in life, "Whatever I may doubt on other points, I cannot doubt whether there has been a certain gracious transaction between God and my soul."

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Inside Informer

It was many years before the moral vileness of the slave trade dawned on Newton. When it did, he played a key role against it.

That Newton continued in the slave trade after his conversion is often considered evidence of hypocrisy. And to our sensibilities, it is certainly troubling. As biographer Bruce Hindmarsh puts it, when at mid-life Newton wrote his ***Authentic Narrative***, he listed blasphemy as his chief sin, while "participation in the cruelty of the slave trade did not yet seem even to trouble his conscience."

"The most disturbing aspect of Newton's typical imagery," says Hindmarsh, "was the correlation of blackness and bondage with alienation from God while, at the same time, these ideas were so closely associated with the enslaved African peoples, to whose suffering he remained largely unsympathetic throughout his narrative. In describing his state during the two years in Africa, he recounted how, after some success in business under a new master, he desired perhaps to stay there, adding, 'There is a significant phrase frequently used in those parts, That such a white man is grown black. It does not intend an alteration of complexion, but disposition. ... I entered into closer engagements with the inhabitants; and should have lived and died a wretch amongst them, if the Lord had not watched over me for good.'"

Newton thus made his spiritual deliverance parallel to his escape from the presence of Africans themselves. We see here the presumptive racism of Newton's age, which also made it easy for his contemporaries to treat slaving as just another genteel occupation.

To be sure, Newton found the trade distasteful and resented the long separations from his Mary that it entailed. But it was only later that, through the conviction of the Holy Spirit and the help of his young protégé Wilberforce, Newton came to see the depth of the slave trade's sinfulness.

Newton's chance to fight the practice came in 1788 when, after years of debate over the issue in Parliament, Prime Minister William Pitt at last struck a committee of his Privy Council to investigate the slave trade. The "star witness"—the only man in England who was both able and willing to paint the harrowing details of that trade "from the inside"—was John Newton.

—Chris Armstrong

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 81: John Newton: Author of "Amazing Grace"

The Life and Times of John Newton 1725-1807

1725 Newton is born in London to John & Elizabeth Newton.

1732 Elizabeth Newton dies.

1744 Newton is impressed on board ***H.M.S. Harwich***.

1745 Newton attempts desertion and is whipped and degraded to rank of seaman.

1748 Near-shipwreck of ***Greyhound*** provokes spiritual crisis.

February 1750 Newton marries Mary Catlett, daughter of George & Elizabeth.

May 1754 Newton meets fellow believer, Captain Andrew Clunie.

November 1754 Epileptic seizure convinces Newton to leave the slave trade.

June 1755 Newton listens to George Whitefield preach in London.

August 1755 Newton begins his work as tide surveyor in Liverpool.

June 1764 Lord Dartmouth achieves ordination for Newton in the Church of England; Newton accepts curacy at Olney.

August 1764 Publication of ***Authentic Narrative*** makes public Newton's life story.

1767 William Cowper arrives at Olney.

January 1773 Newton preaches on 1 Chronicles 17:16, 17, and writes Amazing Grace to accompany the sermon.

1774 Publication of "The Omicron Letters" offers some of Newton's finest teachings on the spiritual life.

1779 Publication of ***Olney Hymns*** establishes Newton's reputation as a hymn-writer.

December 1779 Church of England inducts Newton as rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London.

1780 Publication of ***Cardiphonia*** makes Newton's extensive correspondence available to the public.

January 1783 Newton calls the first meeting of the Eclectic Society.

December 1785 William Wilberforce visits Newton's home.

1788 William Pitt calls Newton before the Privy Council on the subject of the slave trade.

December 1807 Newton dies in London.

1726 Jonathan Swift publishes ***Gulliver's Travels***.

May 1735 George Whitefield comes to a "full assurance of faith."

May 1738 John Wesley feels his heart "strangely warmed."

1742 George Frederick Handel composes ***Messiah***.

1756-1763 France and England vie for American possessions during the Seven Years' War.

1770 Captain James Cook explores Botany Bay on the shoreline of Australia.

1776-1783 American colonies revolt and form independent nation.

1782 Charles Simeon appointed as curate-in-charge of Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge.

1783 King George III appoints William Pitt as prime minister of Britain.

1787 Freed slaves found the British colony of Sierra Leone in West Africa.

1788 English convicts found British colony in Sydney, Australia.

1789 French mob storms the Bastille and begins a revolution.

1797 Prominent evangelicals found the Church Missionary Society.

1807 Britain abolishes the slave trade in her colonies.

1834 Parliament passes the Abolition of Slavery Act.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 81: John Newton: Author of “Amazing Grace”

Forging Britain's Gospel Era

Newton joined those who laid the groundwork for British evangelicalism—from within the Established Church.

Mark Smith

The evangelical movement in eighteenth-century England, which emphasized a "new birth" in Christ and an active ministry of outreach, was overwhelmingly an Anglican phenomenon. From George Whitefield to biblical commentator Thomas Scott, to John Wesley, who declared his determination to live and die a member of the Church of England, the movement's leading clergy were members of the Established Church.

So, too, were the movement's leading laity, including men like Admiral Barham, the organizer of the British Navy, and the influential Earl of Dartmouth. There were also women like author and educationalist Hannah More, and Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, who devoted her considerable private fortune and formidable organizing ability to spreading the revival, especially among the leaders of English society.

What, me separate?

When viewed from a twenty-first century perspective, it seems inevitable that the congregations organized by Whitefield would become Independent Calvinist churches and that 80,000 of John Wesley's followers would leave the Church of England in the 1790s. It is easy to lose sight of the movement's Anglican context.

When viewed from the perspective of the 1730s, too, it must have seemed exceedingly improbable that evangelical strength would emerge from within the Church of England. The inheritors of the Puritan tradition, which in America gave birth to the evangelical revivals, were in England to be found primarily in small dissenting churches such as the Presbyterians, Baptists, and Independents (Congregationalists).

The clergy of the Established Church, by contrast, had largely rejected reformed theology, which was widely associated with political, ecclesiastical, and moral anarchy during the civil wars of the 1640s and the military dictatorship of Oliver Cromwell.

The dominant theological trends in Anglicanism in the early eighteenth century took two distinct forms.

First, an emphasis on the benevolence of God and the practice of self-conscious moderation (as opposed to religious enthusiasm) and practical virtue on the part of Christians—a program easily evolved into mere moralism.

Second, a rigorous High Churchmanship, stressing the exclusive claims to religious authority of the Established Church and encouraging its followers to a determined pursuit of personal holiness (often most visible in extended periods of self-examination and preparation before receiving Holy Communion). It also emphasized practical charity and good works.

The latter could be seen at its most intense in the religious societies that grew popular after 1700. These were small groups usually made up of young men meeting under clerical supervision for mutual encouragement in the practice of piety—like the Holy Club, established by John and Charles Wesley in

Oxford.

Born-again pioneers

It was against this apparently unpromising background that a number of Anglican clergy, starting in the 1730s, began to articulate an experience of conversion (the "new birth"). Their routes to this experience were varied. For John Wesley, whose heart was famously "strangely warmed" while attending a meeting of a religious society, a rigorous High Church piety that stirred a desire for personal holiness, which it apparently failed to satisfy, seems to have been a major factor.

Thomas Scott, a close friend and neighbor of John Newton, converted gradually over a period of at least two years in the mid 1770s. It was dissatisfaction with the rationalist tendencies of Anglican moderation and with his own pastoral laxity as curate that provided the starting point.

Others, like John Fletcher, a friend of Charles Wesley, might catch the contagion from an established evangelical. Charles Simeon, later the most influential of the evangelical parish clergy, experienced grace in preparing to receive Holy Communion while a student at King's College, Cambridge in 1779.

A divided reformation

Evangelical clergy within the Established Church were not numerous before 1800—probably around 300-500 out of a total of 10,000 Anglican clergy at the turn of the century. Neither were they united.

From the beginning there were differences over theology, especially over whether salvation was best understood within a Calvinist or Arminian framework. Notable Arminians included John Wesley; John Fletcher, the incumbent of Madeley in Shropshire; and John Crosse, the blind vicar of Bradford in Yorkshire. Notable Calvinists included not just the maverick George Whitefield, but more conventional clergymen including Thomas Scott and Augustus Toplady, the author of "Rock of ages, cleft for me."

Each of these camps itself, however, comprised a broad spectrum of views.

Some Arminian evangelicals, for example, accepted Wesley's characteristic doctrine of Christian perfection; others, like Thomas Adam, did not.

Similarly, among the Calvinists there could be found both moderates like John Newton and extremists like Robert Hawker, minister of Charles Church near Plymouth. He refused to preach the necessity of holiness of life and was labeled by his opponents a hyper-Calvinist or Antinomian, but he nevertheless exercised a considerable influence on evangelical clergymen in the West of England.

At times these differences could flare up into serious controversy, as in the 1770s when a flurry of pamphlets by such authors as Toplady and John Berridge on the Calvinist side, and Fletcher and Wesley for the Arminians, threatened to create a deep, acrimonious division in the evangelical world.

Relations, however, never entirely broke down, and there were always moderate figures such as Richard Conyers and Henry Venn who maintained an appeal to both camps.

Gospel affinity

Although there were significant clusters of evangelical clergy in the West country, parts of Yorkshire, and London, their relatively low numbers and thin spread across the country should warn us against any assumption that they formed a kind of party within the Church with a clearly worked-out body of doctrine or program. Anglican Evagelicalism, at this stage, was much less hard-edged than this—more of an affinity than a party. This was rooted in a shared spirituality (especially an emphasis on the new birth) and shared attitudes to ministry (especially an emphasis on the importance of Gospel preaching). Many issues, including apparently central doctrines such as the nature of the inspiration of Scripture, remained yet to be argued over and worked out.

Something of this process of the making of the evangelical mind can be glimpsed in the surviving records of the clerical societies founded by evangelicals to draw together like-minded clergymen for mutual counsel and support. The most famous of these were the Elland Society, which was founded by Henry Venn in 1767 and catered for Yorkshire evangelicals, and the Eclectic Society, which was based in London and to which Newton belonged (p. 40).

God's irregulars

Although theological difference provided the most prominent source of division among evangelicals, more significant in the long term were to be differences in their approaches to ministry. At one end of the spectrum were the "irregular evangelicals," like Wesley and Whitefield, who abandoned the traditional Anglican parochial model in favor of free-wheeling itinerancy.

This disregard for church order might be driven primarily by a pragmatic interest in evangelistic effectiveness, but it could also reflect underlying theological concerns. As Wesley famously noted, "In plain terms, wherever I see one or a thousand men running into hell ... I will stop them if I can ... were I to do otherwise, were I to let any soul drop into the pit, whom I might have saved from everlasting burnings, I am not satisfied God would accept my plea, 'Lord, he was not of my parish.'"

Perhaps rather more numerous in the second half of the eighteenth century were the semi-regulars—men who combined settled pastoral ministry in a single parish with a more limited local or occasional itinerant activity, often described as "Gospel rambles." Prominent semi-regulars included not just John Newton during his period at Olney but also Henry Venn, who set aside a portion of each year to itinerate, and the indefatigable John Berridge, who on a weekly basis travelled around 100 miles and delivered an average of 10 sermons in other parishes in his own and adjacent counties. By 1780, however, Venn, who had moved to become Rector of Yelling, near Cambridge, had abandoned limited itinerancy for what was to become the dominant pattern of evangelical practice—that of regular parochial ministry.

Fishers of parishes

Some evangelicals, like Thomas Adam of Wintringham or Samuel Walker of Truro in Cornwall, had followed this pattern of ministry from the beginning. While less immediately spectacular than irregular ministry, the working of a parish—especially if it were large or heavily populated—was often equally strenuous.

Such evangelical pastors regularly exceeded the customary requirements for the number of services and sermons held in their parish churches, but this was only the beginning of their labors. They would be assiduous in visiting their flocks and in teaching the basics of the faith to children, first by catechizing and later by the establishment of Sunday schools—an evangelical pastoral innovation of the 1780s.

For the more advanced in the faith they might, like Conyers at Helmsley, establish domestic prayer meetings and occasions for private exposition of Scripture, or, like Walker at Truro, establish religious societies for mutual conversation and encouragement.

Regular evangelicals might also adopt measures more commonly associated with their less regular colleagues. William Grimshaw, for example, faced with the difficulties of ministering to the large moorland parish of Haworth— whose people lived in a multiplicity of scattered settlements—supplemented his ministry at the parish church with a form of itinerancy ***within*** his own parish, preaching at 12 different places on a monthly basis.

A hierarchy running scared

Exemplary, devoted, innovative, and effective parochial ministry did not necessarily render the evangelical clergy popular with the leaders of local society or with the Church authorities. The threat to church order and especially to the stability of the parish system represented by irregular and semi-regular ministries tended to blacken the reputation of the movement as a whole.

Suspicion of evangelical theology and "enthusiasm" also remained strong throughout the century. In 1764, for example, the Archbishop of York, who had heard Conyers preach, told him, "If you go on preaching such stuff, you will drive all your parish mad. Were you to inculcate the morality of Socrates, it would do more good than canting about the new birth."

Despite the opposition, it was as a regular parochial movement with a new generation of leaders (like Charles Simeon among the clergy and William Wilberforce among the laity) that Anglican evangelicalism was to secure its place within the Established Church, face up to the challenges of the industrial revolution and claim a role in shaping the great Victorian expansion of the Christian world.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 81: John Newton: Author of “Amazing Grace”

The Captain & the Castaway

The tempest-tossed friendship of John Newton and William Cowper

Jennifer M. Trafton

In his preface to the ***Olney Hymns*** (1779), John Newton explained the larger purpose of the collection: "A desire of promoting the faith and comfort of sincere Christians, though the principal, was not the only motive to this undertaking. It was likewise intended as a monument, to perpetuate the remembrance of an intimate and endeared friendship." This friend and co-author of the hymnbook was the poet William Cowper (1731-1800).

At first, Newton was in awe of this sophisticated gentleman who would later become known as one of the great English poets of the eighteenth century. But the author of such well-known hymns as "God moves in a mysterious way" and "There is a fountain filled with blood" was also a man of deep struggles.

Newton witnessed his role model undergo an emotional collapse that left Cowper completely dependent for a time upon him. The former sea captain who had braved his own storms faced the difficult—perhaps impossible—task of steering his dear friend through an even fiercer tempest of the soul.

Inner turmoil

Unlike Newton's own turbulent past, full of literal "dangers, toils, and snares," William Cowper's trials were almost entirely interior. Pushed by his family into a law career in London, the intensely shy Cowper had tried to escape the terror of a public bar examination by committing suicide. Though his attempt failed, he became obsessed with the fear that he was guilty of the unpardonable sin.

While being treated at an asylum, Cowper came gradually to a belief in the mercy of Jesus and converted to an evangelical faith. His new religious fervor kept him from capsizing again into mental illness for another ten years.

Cowper moved to the village of Olney in 1767, with only a garden and an orchard separating his house from Newton's. The two became inseparable companions, taking walks together and engaging in theological discussion. Newton also urged Cowper to help conduct weekly prayer services, visit the poor, and accompany Newton on preaching tours. This partnership spawned a prolific period of hymn writing for both men, and they made plans to publish a hymnbook for the Olney congregation as a celebration of their spiritually fruitful camaraderie.

The project was interrupted, however, when Cowper sank into another debilitating depression in 1773. Wracked by terrifying nightmares prompting more suicide attempts, he moved into the vicarage under the vigilant care of Newton. After 14 months Cowper recovered and returned to his own house, but depression plagued him for the rest of his life, and he never again attended public worship.

Newton continued to write hymns during this period and eventually published the hymnbook, despite having fewer hymns from Cowper's pen than he wished. He described the relationship later: "The Lord who had brought us together had so knit our hearts and affections that for nearly 12 years, we were seldom separated for 12 hours at a time when we were awake and at home. The first six I passed in daily admiring and trying to imitate him; during the second six I walked pensively with him in the valley of the shadow of death."

Though the exact nature and causes of Cowper's condition have been long debated, Cowper interpreted his own feelings solely in religious terms and became convinced that he was experiencing God's rejection. He was an anomaly both to his friends and to himself: a doctrinally orthodox Christian who proclaimed the gospel of grace to others yet believed himself to be uniquely condemned by God. Even in the midst of despair over his own salvation, Cowper firmly believed that there was no possibility of happiness or healing apart from God, and to his dying day he waited for a divine word that would cure his misery.

Castaway on a troubled sea

One of the things Cowper gained from his friendship with the ex-seafarer Newton was a propensity for describing the spiritual life using nautical imagery. Though Newton's hymns about sailing through tempests always ended with the certainty that Jesus would pilot him safely home, Cowper's were more tentative and self-accusatory, pleading for mercy and clinging to hope as to an unseen anchor:

> Amidst the roaring of the sea,
> My soul still hangs her hopes on thee;
> Thy constant love, thy faithful care,
> Is all that saves me from despair.

Yet he could also pen awe-inspiring descriptions of God's incomprehensible providence:

> God moves in a mysterious way,
> His wonders to perform;
> He plants his footsteps in the sea,
> And rides upon the storm.

Though he did not lose the objective belief in God's sovereignty and love that shines through his best hymns, for the rest of his life Cowper saw himself as a "castaway," banished from grace.

Newton's hidden muse

Newton and Cowper shared a Calvinist preoccupation with self-examination and the need for assurance—though in Cowper it rose to the level of an obsession. According to biographer Bruce Hindmarsh, Newton had passed safely through these introspective waters many years before and had come to believe that, while at one level a Christian could always be at peace with the certainty of his redemption in Christ, emotional assurance and sense of communion with God came and went like the tide. Newton's somewhat cautious attitude toward assurance made him, perhaps, more sympathetic to Cowper's bouts of doubting and despair than other evangelicals would have been who saw assurance of salvation as a hallmark of true faith. In return, Cowper was a living test of Newton's theological convictions. Newton expressed amazement, both in his letters to Cowper and in a sermon he preached after Cowper's death, that a man whose virtues were so obvious to everyone around him could question his own place in God's heart.

The strong pastoral tone in Newton's hymns dealing with doubt and affliction probably owes much to these circumstances. Surely, given his constant presence at the time, Cowper was never out of Newton's mind as he wrote. Indeed, some of Newton's hymns seem addressed directly to Cowper, such as one entitled, "To the Afflicted, tossed with tempests, and not comforted." In it Jesus says to the listener,

> "Though afflicted, tempest-toss'd,
> Comfortless a while thou art,
> Do not think thou canst be lost,
> Thou are graven on my heart:

All thy wastes I will repair,
Thou shalt be rebuilt anew;
And in thee it shall appear
What a God of love can do."

The apprentice surpassed the master

Newton also acted, in the beginning, as Cowper's literary mentor, encouraging him to write hymns, poetry, and moral satires, and even serving as editor and liaison with Cowper's publisher. Cowper's literary vocation became one of the most important pillars of strength that kept him from toppling under the weight of depression, and his poems owed a great deal to Newton's encouragement.

This literary collaboration eventually failed, however, since Cowper soon grew beyond Newton's more limited aesthetic vision. As Cowper's authorial career gained momentum and he branched into new areas, such as an English translation of Homer, he found it increasingly difficult to share this aspect of his life with Newton.

To the preacher he defended his writing as a therapy for his depressions, a distraction from the "terrible tempests" that struck "the most turbulent voyage that ever Christian mariner made."

After Newton moved to London the relationship encountered rough waters and cooled over the years, but the two maintained an extensive written correspondence, and as late as 1795 Cowper could write, "There is no day in which you are excluded from my thoughts."

Perhaps the most poignant statement of the difference between the two men is a poem Cowper wrote to Newton in 1780:

That ocean you of late survey'd,
Those rocks I too have seen,
But I, afflicted and dismay'd,
You, tranquil and serene.
You from the flood-controlling steep
Saw stretch'd before your view,
With conscious joy, the threat'ning deep,
No longer such to you.
To me, the waves that ceaseless broke
Upon the dang'rous coast
Hoarsely and ominously spoke
Of all my treasure lost.
Your sea of troubles you have past,
And found the peaceful shore;
I, tempest-toss'd, and wreck'd at last,
Come home to port no more.

In Cowper, Newton found a living paradox of doubt, assurance, despair, and grace that tested his pastoral skills to their limit. In Newton, Cowper found a spiritual sounding board and an encourager of his literary skills—two things so necessary for keeping his head above the waves as long as possible. Newton was a limited and sometimes fallible guide for the tormented poet, and he never fully understood the dark depths in which his friend lived.

An apt image for their relationship might be that of Newton calling from the shore, "You'll make it, you'll make it," while Cowper is sinking deeper and deeper beneath the sea of his own misery. Nevertheless, out of this intense, treasured, and often troubled communion came hymns that are still beloved today, poems that have an important place in the history of English literature, and the incalculable personal impact of two men whose characters were forged in the furnace of a unique Christian friendship.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 81: John Newton: Author of "Amazing Grace"

Pastor to the Nation

Newton responded to thousands of requests for spiritual counsel with letters advising the lowly and the great.

Steven Gertz

On a cold December night in 1785, a young, fidgety man loitered outside a London clergyman's house in Charles Square, Hoxton. Passersby gave him little notice, but the rich, dashing, and well-connected William Wilberforce took great care that no one would recognize him here. For this was the home of John Newton—the man slandered in some quarters as an "enthusiast"—and hardly fit company for a promising young Member of Parliament.

But "enthusiast" or no, Newton was the man Wilberforce wanted to see. As a boy of eight years, he'd sat at the feet of the fascinating sea-captain, drinking in his colorful stories, jokes, songs—and perhaps most importantly, lessons of faith. Yet Wilberforce's mother disliked Newton's "methodism" and forbade her son to visit Newton in Olney. Newton feared he'd lost the boy. He wrote to his poet friend William Cowper that religious sentiments in Wilberforce "seem now entirely worn off, not a trace left behind."

Now, in a moment of spiritual crisis, wondering whether his reborn faith in God required him to leave politics, Wilberforce knew who could help him most. Rounding the corner for the second time, he mustered his courage and strode to the front door to call on his old friend.

For all his hesitation, Wilberforce had good reason to confide in John Newton. A man both experienced in the world and now a minister of the gospel, Newton stood uniquely poised to advise men like Wilberforce. He knew how to relate to and counsel many people, including politicians, clergy, middle-class bourgeoisie, and country artisans. How did Newton acquire such influence and ability? And what distinguished him as a "director of souls?"

Newton understood the importance of spiritual accountability and friendship. Early in his Christian life, he'd enjoyed the encouragement of men like Captain Alexander Clunie, who reinforced his newfound belief in Christ and connected him to other evangelical Christians in London.

In Liverpool, during his seven frustrating years of striving toward ordination, Newton thrived in the company of Calvinist Baptists and other Dissenters, and organized a regular Sunday evening meeting for a few select friends to discuss spiritual matters. He titled his first literary venture ***Thoughts on Religious Associations***.

Opportunities for spiritual counsel abounded in his parish at Olney. During the 1760s and 1770s, he hosted a continual stream of students, laymen, and clergy from surrounding areas eager for spiritual conversation. Newton traveled extensively as well, once making a three-month 650-mile circular tour preaching for old friends in Yorkshire and the West Midlands.

When he couldn't travel to visit friends, Newton wrote letters instead. He wrote with personal warmth, often addressing specific issues in friends' lives and sharing tidbits from his own life as well.

His thought-provoking letters advised friends on matters ranging from vocation to marriage to death. Occasionally he would address theological issues, particularly the Calvinist-Arminian controversy then troubling evangelical churches. These were often prompted by questions correspondents struggled with. Though himself a moderate Calvinist, he tried, as he once said, to "keep all shibboleths, and forms and terms of distinction out of sight, as we keep knives and razors out of the way of children," opting rather to "talk a good deal about Christ."

In the 1790s, Newton was at any one time working from a stack of 50 or 60 unanswered letters, spending hours each week at his desk. The postal system at the time expected recipients of letters to pay the postage. Newton's friends prized his advice highly. Many of his letters—in fact, over 500 of them—were published for a wider audience, particularly in his 1780 book Cardiphonia, or ***The Utterance of the Heart*** (the title was suggested by his friend, the poet William Cowper).

Cardiphonia did much to establish Newton's reputation as the "spiritual director" of England's evangelical community. Its letters date from his curacy at Olney (1764-1780), beginning with 26 to a nobleman, Lord Dartmouth—Newton's ecclesiastical patron and secretary of the American colonies—and finishing with 23 to other friends, many of them clergy.

In Cardiphonia, Newton's counsel consistently returns to the importance of experiencing Jesus over acquiring mere theological knowledge.

"It is to be lamented," wrote Newton to Lord Dartmouth, "that an increase of knowledge ... should be so generally attended with a decline of fervor."

To John Ryland, Jr., a young family friend just embarking on a ministerial career, Newton wrote, "I desire to grow in knowledge, but I want nothing which bears that name, that has not a direct tendency to make sin more hateful [and] Jesus more precious to my soul."

Newton worried especially that the fashionable Deism then popular in the universities was leading young men astray, and that Christianity was becoming more a religion of the head than of the heart.

Battling sin and spiritual dullness

The power of sin and the believer's struggle with it permeates much of Newton's thought. A moderate Calvinist, Newton frequently sorrowed over his sinful state and his spiritual dullness.

In a letter to his friend J. Foster Barham, he notes that early in his Christian walk, he imagined himself growing in sanctification, attaining "everything which I then comprised in my idea of a saint. ... But alas! these, my golden expectations, have been like South Sea dreams; I have lived hitherto a poor sinner, and I believe I shall die one." Yet, Newton points out, "I have every reason to be thankful ... if I shall sink yet more in my own esteem, and He will be pleased to rise still more glorious to my eyes."

Newton also happily gave counsel on personal matters. He advised John Ryland, Jr., then contemplating marriage and starting a family, to "think of money likewise." He wrote, "though the love of money be a great evil, money itself, obtained in a fair and honorable way, is desirable upon many accounts. ... Meat, clothes, fire, and books cannot easily be had without it."

He also gave his opinion on the controversial and still risky smallpox vaccine, siding with those who "neither run intentionally into the way of the small-pox, nor run out of the way, but leave it simply with the Lord."

As curate, Newton spent hours with the sick, and his letters frequently comment on the courage (or fear) of those facing death. As physicians specialize in medicine, Newton wrote to Lord Dartmouth, so "anatomy is my favorite branch—I mean the study of the human heart."

To those who harbor grave doubts about faith and God, "I know no better corroborating evidence for the relief of the mind under such assaults than the testimony of dying persons, especially of such as have lived outside the noise of controversy."

Newton goes on to describe one such woman, who lived out her days in relative confinement, knowing little of the world around her but living soberly, practicing common sense, and reading her Bible regularly.

An elite field of ministry

In 1780, Newton left Olney for London, serving as rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, church to a prestigious parish. Joining a strong company of evangelical preachers in that city, Newton soon exerted a tremendous amount of influence among clergy and politicians.

"My connections have enlarged," he wrote, "my name is spread." He received visitors twice a week at his home, and he founded the Eclectic Society, a like-minded group of clergy, to discuss the issues of the day.

He also offered spiritual counsel to such wealthy individuals as the Countess of Huntingdon (who in turn arranged opportunities for Newton to speak to the aristocracy) and William Wilberforce.

The proof of Newton's high talent and deep labor as a spiritual director may be seen in the lives of the men and women he molded for the kingdom of Christ.

In 1786, Newton wrote of Wilberforce, "I hope the Lord will make him a blessing both as a Christian and a statesman. How seldom do these characters coincide! But they are not incompatible."

To Newton's credit as a spiritual counselor and friend, few politicians have ever done so much as Wilberforce for the cause of Christ or the church.

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A Believer's Progress

In three short letters, Newton mapped out what he saw as the Christian's typical progress from conversion to maturity.

In the summer of 1772, the ***Gospel Magazine*** published three letters written by Newton under the pen name "Omicron." In these letters, he answers a question put to him by his friend John Thornton: How does divine grace typically progress in a believer? In answer, Newton turns to Mark 4:28—"First the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear"—and describes the Christian's progression from desire to conflict to contemplation. He admits that not all believers have the same experience, but that one ought to be able to discern a pattern nonetheless. The pattern to some degree parallels the ascetic Catholic theology dividing the spiritual life into the "beginner," "proficient," and "perfect."

Desire: The believer in this stage resembles a child, genuine in his zeal for Christ but susceptible to falling away when troubles come or he fails and sins. Still weak in his faith, he doubts the security of his salvation and fears the wrath of an angry God. Yet God gives him grace to fight against sin, and with time he leaves behind the spiritual milk for meat.

Conflict: In this stage, the believer enters manhood, though still young and untried. His trials are sharper and more difficult, and through spiritual warfare, this Christian comes to know the deceitfulness of his own heart-and consequently, prizes the greater mercy of Christ. (Newton felt that even as a renowned minister, he himself was in this stage: he pointed to his continued "stupidity, ingratitude, impatience, and rebellion.")

Contemplation: Having experienced the grace of God through trials and failure, the believer at this stage enters what Newton calls fatherhood. Here, the Christian no longer trusts his own heart, but dwells more fully upon the redeeming love and glory of God. His thoughts bear fruit among his friends and acquaintances, and he's marked by his humility of spirit and his longing for complete union with God in heaven.

—Steven Gertz

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Not a Synod but a Salon

The evangelical underground plotted England's and the world's salvation at a London pub.

Aaron Belz

Aldersgate Street, London. This was where John Wesley, who had launched Britain's Evangelical Revival decades before, had found his heart "strangely warmed" in May 1738.

But it was not only Wesley's Methodists who spread that revival. On a frozen Thursday evening in January 1783, in an upper room of the Castle-and-Falcon Pub on Aldersgate Street, John Newton met with fellow evangelical leaders Richard Cecil and Henry Foster, Anglican clergymen, and Eli Bates, an Anglican layman.

Though there is no record of what transpired at that meeting, it is a safe bet that the 57-year-old Newton had his pipe in hand and that he was exuding characteristic warmth and enthusiasm. The four of them agreed to meet on a regular basis—"fortnightly"—the beginnings of the Eclectic Society. As it expanded to include other attendees, Newton's meeting would gain a reputation as one in which Christian leaders from different strains of evangelicalism could discuss important issues in a relaxed setting.

It was an environment defined by Newton's signature conversation style, which William Jay remembers as "most easy, and free, and varied, and delightful, and edifying."

Newton himself called his meeting an "association," representing a much-needed alternative to the churches' beloved "assemblies, consistories, synods, councils, benches, [and] boards," which he cordially disliked. He was, after all, in the habit of receiving scores of parishioners and friends at least twice a week in his home, in the intimacy of his back room—sometimes 40 in a single day.

The Castle-and-Falcon meetings marked more than a change in style, however. Over the next three decades, the Eclectic Society would become a center of English evangelicalism, a place for London clergy and country parsons alike to hang their hats, discuss whatever was on their minds, and dream about reaching the unsaved masses in Africa. It would eventually birth the influential Church Missionary Society and the widely read ***Christian Observer*** magazine.

Making it official

Even after the first nine months, the meeting was still a nebulous gathering, which its founder referred to as "the society that bears no name, and espouses no party." Nevertheless it doubled in size, adding clergy and laity of various stripes, including (despite the fact that Newton had at first distrusted the Moravians) the noted Moravian composer Christian Ignatius LaTrobe, then only 26 years old.

By 1784 the group had adopted its name and grown to about 12 regular attendees. Rev. Cecil offered to host the meetings in a more accommodating venue—the vestry of his own church, St John's Chapel in Bedford Row.

The initial rules of the society are recorded on the inside cover of Newton's journal for 1791. The meeting time was every other Monday afternoon at 4:30 P.M. Tea was served from a silver teapot, followed by three or so hours of discussion—"Bible on the table." Each participant contributed a shilling for food. Potential new members were proposed by one member and admitted only by unanimous consent, though the number of members could not exceed 13.

The meeting's agenda was driven by a single question, submitted by one of the members at the end of the previous meeting. The members would take turns answering, and Newton kept minutes in a small journal.

Questions deep and wide

The questions were appropriately eclectic. Sometimes they dealt with a theological issue, such as "How should we reconcile Paul and James on justification?" Sometimes a cultural question arose: "What are the particular dangers of youth in the present day?" The inevitable presence of Newton—hymnist, pastor, and former slave trader—gave the evenings a unique character in which anything might be discussed.

In the early period of Eclectic Society meetings, most of the topics were practical rather than theological. Several were family-oriented. In response to the question for December 10, 1787, "What is the nature and obligation of conjugal duties?" the members recommended a "softening" of male headship. "Authority as the remedy" may prove to be the "disease" itself; instead, it is best to "leave some things to the Woman." "If we stretch our authority," Newton concluded, "we lose it."

In discussing "Parents and Children," the topic for December 24, 1787, the group began with a long list of duties of parents to their children, then turned to a shorter list of children's duties to their parents: "reverence, obedience, gratitude." The key to effective child-rearing, the gentlemen agreed, was "the tone and spirit of the family." Parents' private habits, tones of voice, and even body language must be the touchstones for effective child-rearing.

The Eclectics applied a similar ethic of gracious self-denial to ministry, response to theological error, dealing with enemies, and preaching style. The common theme in all of these discussions was that kindness always trumps sternness. Persuasion is preferable to browbeating.

In response to the January 22, 1798, question, "What may be done towards the interests of the children of a congregation?" Newton said, a bit impatiently, "What is agreeable to children is agreeable to children of six feet high. ... Talk to children abstractedly, and it is all in vain. Go through the life of Christ, and all the historical parts of Scripture."

On another occasion, Newton said, "For an old Christian to say to a young one, 'Stand in my evidence,' is like a man who has with difficulty climbed by a ladder of scaffolding to the top of a house, and cries to one at the bottom, 'This is the place for a prospect—come up at a step.'"

Newton's approach, which would become the approach of the whole Eclectic assembly, was to discern each person's needs and respond accordingly. Sacrifice should be on the part of the pastor, of the husband, the parent.

An eventful era

The founding years of the Eclectic Society were years of major political change, not only in England, but throughout Europe. In Paris, on January 20, 1783—four days after that first meeting at Castle-and-Falcon—England signed away one of its best colonial assets to the likes of John Adams and Ben Franklin.

It was also a time of religious change. A grassroots evangelical movement had been growing steadily in the Church of England since at least the 1760s (p. 30). Just two months before the Eclectics' first meeting, evangelical leader Charles Simeon was installed at Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge (p. 50). In London, evangelical lecturers and chaplains were becoming so popular that people brimmed out into the sidewalks and streets.

The Eclectic Society's chief importance was that it focused an ethos. In place of the old-fashioned ecclesiastical bureaucracy, here was a "back-room" meeting, an almost revolutionary event in which the Bible lay open on the table and each man had his say.

Instead of a synod, Newton hosted a ***salon***—the kind of intellectual club that had been so effective in focusing philosophical ideas in France during the previous hundred years.

Such meetings had formed the molecular substructure of the Enlightenment; and, with the subsequent rise of other informal gatherings, such as William Wilberforce's "Clapham Sect," they would serve the evangelical cause in a similar way.

Missionaries, magazines, and more

The practical effect of the Eclectic Society was first felt in—of all places—Australia. In addition to Newton himself, young zealots like Christian LaTrobe and John Venn had given the assembly a distinct air of missions-mindedness.

Newton had been instrumental in the appointment of Richard Johnson to establish a church in New South Wales, and in 1786 the Society considered the question: "What is the best method for planting and propagating the Gospel in Botany Bay?"

The Society discussed missions again in 1789, when the question was, "What is the best way of propagating the Gospel in the East Indies?"

One evening in 1792, discussion turned to the slave trade—a practice that Newton by then opposed as steadfastly as did his close friend William Wilberforce.

This stirred the group to an ongoing discussion of Africa, which led to the founding of Venn's Church Missionary Society for Africa and the East (CMS) in 1799. The CMS held its inaugural meeting at the Castle-and-Falcon, as had the London Missionary Society, founded in 1795. Wilberforce himself was asked to be the president of the CMS, though he refused, accepting instead vice-presidency.

Also in 1799, a young clergyman who had been recently recruited to the Eclectic Society, Josiah Pratt, proposed the following question: "How far may a periodical Publication be made subservient to the interest of Religion?" In 1801 Pratt founded the ***Christian Observer***, which throughout the nineteenth century served as a valuable organ for evangelical ideas.

The boom years for the Eclectic Society were really 1799 and 1800. According to Pratt's register, 24 different members were active at some point during that span.

As he entered his late 70s, however, Newton's health fell into decline, and after he died in 1807, his society also fell on hard times. Although there were still 16 members in 1814, Pratt resigned in that year because the "discussions were not made latterly with the same fulness [sic] as before." And the society disbanded.

Of course, the legacy of Newton, Wilberforce, Cecil, Pratt, Johnson, and others lives on, but not due solely to their accomplishments. These were friends, sitting at table, a pipe handy, significant questions to pursue, and a familiar manner of expression. Their lives were knit together not in public but in Newton's back room and in the pub on Aldersgate Street.

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People Worth Knowing

No Little Women here

Chris Armstrong

It is not much of an exaggeration to say that women made revivalistic Protestantism happen in the nineteenth century. For example, as historian Mary Ryan has shown, Charles Finney's New York revival meetings were organized, prepared, and prayed for by an extensive network of Christian women. Moreover, these women often brought the men in their lives—husbands, fathers, sons, and more distant relatives—to Finney's meetings.

Women's influence soon reached far beyond the prayer meeting and the revival, especially through their participation in social causes. It was in the crusades for educational reform, abolition, and temperance that three of nineteenth-century America's most prominent Christian women made their names and changed their nation: Catharine Beecher, Sojourner Truth, and Frances Willard.

Catharine Beecher (1800-1878)

The oldest of eight surviving children of the influential Connecticut minister and social reformer Lyman Beecher (1775-1863) and his wife, Roxana, Catharine Esther Beecher was trained from girlhood in the custodianship of her nation. At 16, her mother died and she took on the mothering role for her younger siblings—a training ground for her later influence as a founder of schools and trainer of teachers.

A woman described by one historian as "plain of appearance, with heavy features, dark hair worn in lank ringlets, and a sallow complexion," Beecher was frail, suffering "recurrent nervous collapses and attacks of sciatica," which slowed but never stopped her indefatigable reforming efforts. But she had no time for the "weaker sex" philosophy that assumed women were less capable of learning and leading than men.

Catharine saw America's female seminaries (quasi-colleges or academies focusing on subjects considered appropriate for women) as neglecting both physical education and the practical skills necessary to the middle-class Victorian woman who managed a complex household and provided the physical and moral care for the next generation.

In response, Catharine, herself a schoolteacher from early age, founded several schools for women.

The success of these schools was uneven, but Beecher placed her stamp on women's education and the arts of home management. Her widely read books, ***Treatise on Domestic Economy*** (1841), ***Domestic Receipt Book*** (1846), and ***American Woman's Home*** (1869), penned with sister Harriet, launched home economics as a respected science.

Even more significant, Catharine picked up her father's crusade to "Christianize" the West—through education. (At odds with her father's stern Calvinism, she eventually transferred her membership from a Congregational to the Episcopal Church.) In the 1840s, she began traveling and writing energetically in the urgent cause of sending women teachers to the frontier.

Her ***Duty of American Women to Their Country*** (1845) caught the attention of, among others, the ex-governor of Vermont, William Slade, who founded the Board of National Popular Education.

With Beecher as head recruiter and trainer, the Board sent more than 500 schoolteachers westward from New England. After Beecher divided the Board over disagreements, she continued the crusade through her American Woman's Educational Association.

During the decades before her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote ***Uncle Tom's Cabin***, and her brother Henry Ward Beecher began his Civil War-era rise to pulpit stardom, Catharine was America's most renowned Beecher.

Sojourner Truth (c. 1797-1883)

Sojourner Truth's deep-toned speech, marked by a Dutch accent absorbed during her youth as a slave in Ulster County, N.Y., challenged and captivated anti-slavery audiences across the country. Truth was born Isabella, and in her early years took the name Van Wagener in honor of a family that helped her escape slavery in 1827, one year before emancipation was declared in New York State.

Early an adherent of Methodism, Isabella's mystic personality made her susceptible to the magnetism of religious charlatans, and she spent several of her early years attached to the cultic New York ministries of Elijah Pierson (self-styled "The Tishbite") and Robert Matthews ("Matthias").

In 1843, Isabella took the name "Sojourner Truth" and began traveling East, spreading a simple gospel message of a loving God. In Northampton, Massachusetts, she joined a communal group and encountered abolitionism for the first time.

A singer and raconteur known for her homey wisdom and sharp repartee, Truth spent the late 1840s as a featured speaker on many anti-slavery platforms. In 1850 she traveled west again, attracting larger and larger audiences, sharing stages with such renowned abolitionists as Frederick Douglass. She sustained herself by selling her autobiography and was often opposed—sometimes violently—by Southern sympathizers.

Truth's tall frame and somewhat masculine features helped fuel rumors that she was not, as she claimed, the mother of many children who had seen difficult years under slavery—but rather, a man masquerading as a woman for his own political advantage.

When one audience member at an Indiana woman's rights convention shouted out this charge against her, Truth put an exclamation point to her withering rejoinder by baring her breasts before the stunned crowd.

After the outbreak of the Civil War, she traveled throughout Michigan, gathering donations of supplies for regiments of black volunteers.

In 1864 she was received by Lincoln at the White House, and soon after, she drew up a widely-signed petition for the founding of a "Negro state" in unsettled parts of the West. Though her proposal fell flat, many blacks did move west in the 1870s, likely under the influence of her encouragement.

Sojourner Truth's lasting influence has been as a symbol of woman's indomitable spirit and public achievements. She died in 1883 in Battle Creek, and her funeral there was said to have been the biggest ever seen in that area.

Frances Willard (1839-1898)

As Sojourner Truth was a symbol and rallying figure for abolitionism and woman's suffrage, so was Frances Willard—a fellow Methodist—for the cause of temperance. Born in New York, Willard grew up on the frontier, in the Wisconsin Territory.

From her earliest years, Willard coveted the educational opportunities that were given preferentially to males. When her father grudgingly consented to her attending the Congregationalists' Milwaukee Female College, she began on the path that would lead to her graduation in 1859 as a "Laureate of Science."

Frances, who cut her hair short and preferred to be called "Frank," soon grew into Frances the self-assured leader, with the skills and confidence necessary to pull together, in 1878, a petition asking that the women of Illinois be given the vote on liquor issues. In the years before the Civil War, drinking had risen to astronomical and socially disruptive heights. America was drinking itself to death.

Willard stood in solidarity with countless women who experienced in their own homes the negative impact of this largely male love affair with alcohol. She gathered the names of more than 100,000 women on her petition, and though it failed in its goal, it gained her the leadership of a new organization dedicated to eradicating the curse of drunkenness from America.

The Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was born in 1874 out of the momentum of a winter's campaign across New York and central Ohio in which women, professedly emboldened by the Holy Spirit, demanded that saloons in those states be closed. Willard became WCTU's president in 1879.

Capitalizing on the Victorian assumption that the woman's sphere was the home, Willard was able, under the slogan "home protection," not only to rally tremendous support on the issue of temperance, but to make strides on female suffrage. Voting for measures against alcohol, Willard argued, was the only way women would succeed in keeping its scourge from destroying their husbands and their homes.

Willard proved a masterful power broker, gathering the support of many constituencies. She built social networks and private relationships with the consummate care of the diplomat. In her public and personal relations, she was unfailingly caring even as she was firm—the iron fist in the kid glove.

Under her expert leadership, the WCTU became and remained, through the turn of the century, both the largest temperance organization and the largest women's organization in the country.

In the end, Willard succeeded where more strident, less careful women failed, because she deeply understood the role of gender images in nineteenth-century public life. The near-adulation her memory continued to receive after her death in 1898—including the placing of her statue in the Capitol at Washington in 1905—shows how effectively she was able to use this knowledge.

> Detailed, interesting critical biographies are available for each of these women:
>
> Kathryn Kish Sklar, ***Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity*** (W. W. Norton, 1976).
>
> Nell Irvin Painter, ***Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*** (W. W. Norton, 1996).
>
> Ruth Bordin, ***Frances Willard: A Biography*** (University of North Carolina Press, 1986).

—Chris Armstrong

The Feminine History of Humanity

In 1852, more than a century before scholars began unearthing the lives of significant "church mothers" to stand side by side with the traditional celebrations of the Church Fathers, the Irish novelist and biographer Julia Kavanagh (1824-1877) published perhaps the first survey of prominent Christian women, Women of Christianity, Exemplary for Acts of Piety and Charity (1852).

Born in 1824 in County Tipperary, Ireland, Julia early absorbed the literary passion of her father, poet and philologist Peter Morgan Kavanagh. Her first novel, Madeline, drawn from the life of a peasant girl of Auvergne, established her reputation. Nineteen others would follow, including Nathalie, Daisy Burns, and Rachel Gray.

When Kavanagh was still a young woman, her father deserted their family, and she remained unmarried, caring for her mother, for the rest of her life. Nonetheless, she was able to travel across Europe, and her experiences drew her to the writing of historical biography. This she began to do with Women in France During the Eighteenth Century (1850), which, with her French Women of Letters and its companion English Women of Letters (1862), was noted for its literary power.

In the 400 pages of Women of Christianity, Kavanagh told the stories of women from Dorcas in the Acts of the Apostles to the English prison minister Sarah Martin (d. 1843). In the book's introduction, she observed that while "men have filled [history's] pages with their own deeds," their focus on wars and governments has given us "the annals of nations, not the story of humanity." Her conclusion: It is in the untold stories of women, in their gentleness, courage, charity, and holiness, that we may begin to find the latter.

—James D. Smith III

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Issue 81: John Newton: Author of “Amazing Grace”

Turning Point: Luther's Lost Opportunity

At Marburg, the last hope of a united Protestantism ran aground on the Last Supper.

Bruce Heydt

Martin Luther's mind was unshakably fixed as he sat in the great hall of the medieval castle in Marburg, Germany, on the morning of October 2, 1529.

He had come to Marburg grudgingly, at the request of the Protestant Landgrave of the German state, Philip of Hesse, who had summoned Luther and other leading German and Swiss reformers to a meeting ostensibly of great theological importance. But the real impetus for the gathering was strictly political. That underlying fact made the outcome of this "Marburg Colloquy" a foregone conclusion.

To Luther, theological truth could never be allowed to take a back seat to political expedience. Indeed, if Luther had not had matters of greater concern on his mind as more than 50 of the most influential Protestant reformers in Europe met for this first day of public discussion, he might have appreciated the irony of the setting Philip had chosen—the foundations of the gothic hilltop fortress, much like his own convictions, were firmly set in stone, and could not be moved.

Whether religious or political, the Marburg Colloquy undeniably represented a watershed in the course of the Reformation, and Europe's Protestant princes had good reason to fear that its failure could doom the movement. Religion and politics of the sixteenth century co-mingled to a greater degree than Luther wanted to admit, and not everyone shared his scruples against manipulating one in order to influence the other.

The most immediate example of this, and the direct cause for the colloquy, was the resolution drafted by the second diet of Speyer, which had convened in April 1529. The resolution aligned the Holy Roman Empire firmly behind the Catholic Church in opposition to the reformers, thereby threatening them with effective suppression.

Communion as dis-union

Philip recognized the need for the disunited reformers in Hesse, Saxony, Strasbourg, Zurich, and Basel to form a common front based on a reformed theology on which all could agree. The chief obstacle, everyone knew, would be the divide over the Eucharist, the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Luther and Ulrich Zwingli stood far apart in their interpretations, and between them lay a great chasm, which neither, it seemed, could cross over.

Zwingli, the chief spokesman for the Swiss reformers, held firmly to the belief that the bread and wine offered through the Sacrament are symbolic of Christ's sacrifice and thus merely the outward signs by which the recipients acknowledge the grace that they have already received.

Luther vehemently insisted that Christ is literally present in the communion elements, which are the means by which grace is imparted to the faithful. The German reformer's position more closely resembled the Catholic doctrine than it did the Swiss, a point that earned him no little scorn from the more radical Protestants.

Philip had expended great energy just to persuade Luther to come to Marburg, and his presence in Marburg Castle must have been deemed a harbinger of good things to come.

But while for the next two days Luther and Zwingli drew close enough to look each other in the eye and launch invectives back and forth across a narrow table, the theological gulf between them remained unbridged.

Indeed, following a day of private consultations on October 1, Luther surely knew what the others only feared: as the public portion of the proceedings opened on October 2, the colloquy was not just beginning, it had for all practical purposes already ended. No compromise would emerge from this summit.

"You're being obnoxious"

Philip's chancellor opened the public discussion with an admonition to both parties to "[settle] the dispute over the Lord's Supper ... in a spirit of moderation."

Luther's response left little reason to expect such results: "Noble prince," he replied. "Undoubtedly this colloquy is well intentioned ... although I have no intention of changing my mind, which is firmly made up." As he spoke, Luther wrote on the table in chalk: "***This is my body***." Then he covered the quote from the Gospel of Matthew with a velvet cloth, and insisted that the Swiss reformers prove from Scripture that Christ's body is not physically present in the communion elements.

Zwingli and his supporters accepted the challenge, quoting the Gospel of John to support their own interpretation. Luther's reaction clearly demonstrated his unwillingness to engage in a meaningful debate. "You're being obnoxious," he countered.

Zwingli patiently tried to draw Luther into a more substantive discussion, calling his attention once more to John's Gospel. "You're trying to dominate things," Luther countered. "It serves no purpose."

Again Zwingli quoted John. "You're in Hesse, not Switzerland," Luther answered, refusing even to acknowledge Zwingli's reference to Scripture.

The "debate" progressed no further. In an effort to make a show of unity, Philip asked Luther to draft a statement of Christian doctrines on which all concerned could agree. The resulting 15 "Articles of Marburg" set out the German and Swiss reformers' agreement on such doctrines as original sin, atonement, the Incarnation, and baptism. Since none of these had ever really been disputed—indeed they had never been mentioned during the colloquy—the document did not reflect any real progress of the sort Philip had desired.

Better blood than wine

The verdict of history has been that at Marburg Luther missed the last best chance to unite the factious Protestants into a universal reformed church.

But such a judgment presumes that compromise represented a greater good than spiritual integrity. Luther himself would have vehemently disagreed.

In fact, in a cynical way Luther probably considered the colloquy a rousing success, precisely because religious conviction had not caved in to political necessity. If truth must bow to expediency, he surely would have argued, he might just as easily appease the Pope as Zwingli and Philip of Hesse. ("I would rather drink blood with the Pope, than mere wine with the Swiss," he observed caustically.)

In the long run, Reformation theology left Luther behind, and if the Marburg Colloquy were reconvened today, few would now side with his view.

But in another sense, events proved Luther was right: disagreement over the Lord's Supper was not fatal to the reform movement, and by resisting the temptation to value convenience more than conviction, he may in fact have reinforced the Protestant ethos—in all its varied forms.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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I am a "Sim"

Gordon MacDonald

Above my desk is an old lithograph of the sanctuary of Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge, England. At the bottom are the words, "Trinity Church in the Rev. C. Simeon's time."

After the Bishop of Ely appointed young Charles Simeon to be Trinity's priest in 1782, the wealthy pew-owners locked their pews and absented themselves for 14 years. But a purpose-driven Simeon preached to the poorer people who stood in the aisles and heard him gladly.

Simeon came to Cambridge as a student and was converted to Christ and spiritually mentored by Henry Venn, an early evangelical in the Church of England. Appointed to Holy Trinity after studying theology, he stayed for 54 years.

I "met" Charles Simeon when I was a young pastor and leading a New England congregation through an era when the church (in general) was seen as obsolete, irrelevant, and needing to get out of the way of the so-called parachurch organizations who were "really doing the work of Christ." Hugh Evan Hopkins, Simeon's most recent biographer (Eerdmans, 1977) was my introducer, and soon I was a "Sim," as his disciples were known.

The man's pastoral style encouraged me to believe and say that the church is the center point of God's saving work in the world and that a call to pastoral ministry is among the greater graces a person can receive.

Simeon was an evangelistic pastor. Stoutly evangelical, his sermons—though dry by today's standards—were powerful and compelling. Quickly his church bulged with converts, particularly students.

His conversation parties—Friday night gatherings of spiritually curious students—grabbed me. These parties accounted for scores of young men becoming evangelical pastors and missionaries under Simeon's mentorship. ***I could do parties like that***, I thought—and I did.

Simeon "small-grouped" his congregation long before the modern small group movement came on the scene, and that too tantalized me. When I read how he set out to support fellow-pastors (and their spouses), I birthed a dream to do the same through seminars and consultations at our church.

His commitment to the first modern foreign missions efforts convinced me to do the same.

I'm not sure he would have used the term ***leadership developer***, but that's exactly what Simeon was. William Wilberforce (Member of Parliament), John Venn (pastor at Clapham Parish), and the members of the Clapham Sect (the group that was at the epicenter of the Victorian revolution in nineteenth-century England) all looked to Simeon for spiritual direction. His influence was pervasive among those unusual people. I could hear Simeon saying to people like me: make sure your leaders are thinking, growing, connecting, and birthing big visions. And I tried.

Charles Simeon taught me spiritual discipline. Perceived by some as short-tempered and arrogant (his journal reveals his awareness that he hurt people with his lack of sensitivity), he was driven into God's presence every day to seek a humble spirit. I determined to follow him there so I could deal with my own impurities.

When Simeon died in 1836, the city of Cambridge closed down and gave him the largest funeral people had ever known.

Simeon's influence remains powerful today. You'll see it in the ministry of John Stott and modern evangelicals of the Anglican communion. And it reaches into the life of an ordained Baptist minister like me. Each time I look up at the litho of the sanctuary where he preached, I reaffirm that I am trying to carry on his vision.

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