

Chapter Eight: John Newton and William Cowper - A Gospel Companionship with a Lasting Hymnal Legacy

Latter-day Saints are familiar with the concept of missionaries preaching as a companionship - likewise the missionaries of the New Testament. Such gospel companionship is rarely noted outside these two circles, but one of the first great English-language hymnals was the result of one such ministry. Together for only a brief twelve years, John Newton and William Cowper penned a poetic path through Life's troubled waters that all seekers of Gospel Peace can follow.

John Newton was born in 1725 in London, England, to a God-fearing mother and a sea captain father.¹ His mother died when he was seven, and at eleven years of age he took to the sea as a captain's boy with only two years of formal education and a very basic knowledge of Latin. He made six voyages with his father before his father's retirement, at which time he signed on with another captain. He deserted one ship, for which he was flogged, and was held as a slave aboard another ship. For fifteen months he was a slave in North Africa until a friend of his father bought his freedom. He eventually went on to captain his own ship - a slaver that marketed between the African coast and the Americas.

Although he received early religious instruction from his mother, he gave up all such convictions and gained a public reputation as a vile and evil man. But on one homeward voyage, while attempting to steer through a violent storm, he experienced what he would forever call his "great deliverance." He recorded that when all seemed lost he had exclaimed, "Lord, have mercy upon us." Later he reflected on his words and the ship's quick deliverance, and he began to believe that God had in fact answered him. From that time on he commemorated May 10, 1748 as the day of his conversion, which he defined as the day he subjected his will to that of God's Will - and the day that God's grace entered his life.

And all this occurred before his twenty-fourth birthday!

Newton married a childhood sweetheart and, due to illness, gave up the sea and spent nine years as surveyor of tides in Liverpool Harbor. He met and learned from George Whitefield, a deacon in the Church of England and evangelical leader of the Calvinistic Methodist Church. He met and came to admire John Wesley, founder of Methodism and an avid hymnist. During this time he also schooled himself in Greek, Hebrew, and Religion.

Newton decided to become a minister - he applied to the Archbishop of York for ordination, but a mere nine years from the sea was not enough to dispel the reputation of his youth, and the Archbishop refused. Newton persisted and was finally ordained by the Bishop of Lincoln. He accepted a post in the town of Olney, in Buckinghamshire, in 1764, at the age of thirty-nine. Newton's preaching so touched the citizens of Olney that several times meetings had to permanently move to larger quarters. He preached not only in Olney but in other parts of the countryside, holding worship services and prayer meetings wherever he could.

Meanwhile, William Cowper was born in 1730 in Hertfordshire, England. It's known that he was severely accosted by other boys while in boarding school, but details of these attacks were never recorded. He was admitted to the bar as a solicitor (lawyer) at twenty-three years of age, but due to poor physical and mental health (relating to the violence of boarding school) he never practiced law. After

1 - Much of the information in this article was gleaned from the Cowper and Newton Museum webpage at: <http://www.cowperandnewtonmuseum.org.uk/>

one particular severe bout of depression, during which he attempted suicide and was then hospitalized for a time in an asylum, he found room and board with the family of the Reverend Morley Unwin, and he spent the rest of his life living with various members of this family. After the death of the Reverend in 1767, he moved with the family to Olney, where they lived until 1786 and where his association with John Newton took place.

Having been converted to the Christian evangelical movement, Cowper was fast to embrace the gospel as taught by John Newton. Both men were avid poets, and Cowper found comforting companionship in Newton and his ministry. He came to accompany him and help organize and conduct meetings. Together they eventually established the goal of writing a new poem/hymn text for every meeting held. The combination of assisting with the ministry and the shared interest in poetry helped ease the horror of depression for Cowper, and his years in Olney were the healthiest and sanest in his life.

Between Cowper's 1767 arrival and the 1779 publication of the Olney Hymnal, the two men wrote hundreds of poems which became the hymns utilized in the ministry. In an age when hymns were chanted by the congregation and not sung, it was easy to write and introduce a text to a congregation without waiting for music. Of the 348 hymns in the Olney Hymnal, Cowper wrote sixty-six of the hymns between 1772 and 1774, and the remaining 282 hymns were penned by Newton before and during his association with Cowper.

Of the great hymns first published in the Olney Hymnal, one of the greatest is Newton's simple declaration of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It speaks of his personal knowledge of the healing power of Jesus' name when the Lord is invited into one's life to heal and renew the seeking soul. It also speaks of the sure foundation and the companionship the Messiah gives to one too long adrift in the storms of sin and darkness and, in the case of his companion's life-long struggle against suicidal depression, the storms of despair. Here is the original text of what has become my favorite hymn:

"Name of Jesus"²

How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds
In a believer's ear!
It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds,
And drives away his fear.

It makes the wounded spirit whole,
And calms the troubled breast;
'Tis manna to the hungry soul,
And to the weary, rest.

Dear Name, the Rock on which I build,
My Shield and Hiding Place,
My never failing treasury, filled

2 - All hymn texts quoted in this article are the original Olney Hymnal versions and may vary from versions edited for newer hymnals.

With boundless stores of grace!

By Thee my prayers acceptance gain,
Although with sin defiled;
Satan accuses me in vain,
And I am owned a child.

Jesus! my Shepherd, Husband, Friend,
O Prophet, Priest and King,
My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,
Accept the praise I bring.

Weak is the effort of my heart,
And cold my warmest thought;
But when I see Thee as Thou art,
I'll praise Thee as I ought.

Till then I would Thy love proclaim
With every fleeting breath,
And may the music of Thy Name
Refresh my soul in death!

An example of poetry written for a specific story and sermon is Newton's masterful retelling of the story of the Prodigal Son. Still a highly-popular text in folk and country gospel as well Sacred Harp hymnals, it celebrates the truth that we can repent and return to the Lord, who will gracefully accept us back into His kingdom:

"The Prodigal Son"

Afflictions, though they seem severe;
In mercy oft are sent;
They stopped the prodigal's career,
And forced him to repent.

Although he no relentings felt
Till he had spent his store;
His stubborn heart began to melt
When famine pinched him sore.

"What have I gained by sin," he said,
"But hunger, shame, and fear;
My father's house abounds with bread,
While I am starving here.

"I'll go, and tell him all I've done,
And fall before his face
Unworthy to be called his son,
I'll seek a servant's place."

His father saw him coming back,
He saw, and ran, and smiled;
And threw his arms around the neck
Of his rebellious child.

"Father, I've sinned—but O forgive!"
I've heard enough, he said,
Rejoice my house, my son's alive,
For whom I mourned as dead.

Now let the fatted calf be slain,
And spread the news around;
My son was dead, but lives again,
Was lost, but now is found.

'Tis thus the Lord His love reveals,
To call poor sinners home;
More than a father's love He feels,
And welcomes all that come.

One of Newton's Olney hymns is familiar to many Latter-day Saints is 'Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken'. Writing about the future day when the Messiah would establish His earthly kingdom, Newton penned these words, which were included by Emma Smith in the first LDS hymnal in 1835 and faithfully remains in today's LDS hymnal. Written decades before Joseph Smith's First Vision and the first preaching of the Restored Gospel, it sets a remarkable picture of the future city of Zion that became the early Latter-day Saints' goal. Although there are minor changes to the original Olney text, the concept of Zion as a city of the Living God was set firmly in place by Newton's own pen:

One of the best-loved of Cowper's contributions to the hymnal is another song familiar to Latter-day Saints and is included in the current LDS hymnal – 'God moves in a Mysterious Way'. Faith-promoting stories - most of which contradict each other - have been told and retold concerning the writing of this text, and my personal research shows Cowper did not live in any of the places these stories took place during the time they supposedly occurred. So, we may never know what actually inspired the text, but there is no doubt as to the truthfulness of the message. Knowing the author spent a lifetime battling suicidal depression only adds to the depth of the message - awe in the Lord's workings and hope in the courage available through Him:

Without doubt the greatest and most-beloved of all Olney hymns was written as the poem to accompany his New Years Day sermon in 1773; a sermon based on First Chronicles 17:16-17, which is

the beginning of King David's reaction when the Lord denied him the privilege of building a temple to replace the tent of the Tabernacle:

"...Who am I, O LORD God, and what is mine house, that thou hast brought me hitherto? And yet this was a small thing in thine eyes, O God; for thou hast also spoken of thy servant's house for a great while to come, and hast regarded me according to the estate of a man of high degree, O LORD God."

After referring to King David's struggle to right himself before the Lord, and undoubtedly with thoughts of his own youth at sea and subsequent reformation, John Newton first read these simple but profound lines to his congregation; a poem he titled -

Faith's Review and Expectation

Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, hut now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believed!

Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

The LORD has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.

Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess, within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
The sun forbear to shine;
But GOD, who called me here below,
Will be for ever mine.

This hymn was included in the 1841 Nauvoo Hymnal (#118).

John Newton, like King David and many, many others through the ages, struggled "through many dangers, toils and snares" to right himself with the Lord. Through his poetry he continued the plea made upon the stormy seas years before - "Lord, have mercy upon us", and by doing so gave to us a great legacy of hymns to worship with as we in turn celebrate the Lord's mercy for us.

One man was in turn an ungodly sailor, a slave, and a slaver - who remembered his mother's teachings and found his way back to his Master's harbor to become a gospel minister whose written testament has stood like a lighthouse to guide mortals into the safe harbor of the Master. The other man spent a lifetime steering himself through the storms of suicidal depression, receiving brief rests in the Master's peaceful waters between the awful Storms of Life - his writing stands as a monument to the hope many search for as they make the same fearful voyage. The companionship of these two men in composing their hymnal echoes the prophetic words of Isaiah while speaking of the future Messiah:

"Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows ... he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." (Isaiah 53:4-5)

Together, through the creation of the Olney Hymnal, they reinforced the simple scriptural truth of turning to the Lord Jesus Christ for Aid, Forgiveness, Strength, and Comfort. They gave the English-speaking world one of its first great hymnals, which is literally a journal of their faith, understanding, and testimony of the Lord Jesus Christ and His power to change and save lives. Let us accept the gift of their legacy while following the course they set and finding the same refuge they found in the still waters of the Gospel harbor.

NOTE:

"Olney Hymns in Three Books" (LONDON: W. Oliver, No 12, Bartholomew-Close, 1779.) All hymn texts quoted in this article originally carried this same copyright but are currently in the Public Domain. You can find the entire text of the Olney Hymnal at:
<http://www.ccel.org/n/newton/olneyhymns/olneyhymns/TOC.htm>